

Nomadland: Forced out on the road (mostly) because of economics

David Walsh
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Directed by Chloé Zhao; written by Zhao, based on a book by Jessica Bruder

Directed by Chinese-American Chloé Zhao (*The Rider*, 2017) and featuring Frances McDormand, *Nomadland* is a semi-fictionalized reworking of Jessica Bruder's non-fiction work of the same title. (To be more precise, the full title of Bruder's book is *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*.)

The work premiered at the Venice film festival and was then screened at the Toronto film festival. It had a one-week streaming release in December and has already won a number of awards, and is expected to collect more. It is an affecting film, with a typically committed performance by McDormand, but, in our view, the universal critical accolades are overdone. There are elements here that need scrutinizing a little more carefully.

Jessica Bruder is a journalist who writes for *Harper's* magazine, the *Washington Post* and other publications, and teaches at Columbia University's Journalism School. In 2013, she was also one of the unwitting recipients of Edward Snowden's NSA trove.

In *Nomadland*, Bruder set out to examine the condition of older Americans whose lives were dramatically altered by the recession of 2008 in particular—and their various coping mechanisms.

"Many took to the road," she writes, "after their savings were obliterated by the Great Recession. To keep their gas tanks and bellies full, they work long hours at hard, physical jobs. In a time of flat wages and rising housing costs, they have unshackled themselves from rent and mortgages as a way to get by. They are surviving America."

McDormand plays Fern, a 60-year-old woman (and one-time substitute high school teacher) at economic and personal loose ends. She lived for decades in Empire, Nevada, a company town owned lock, stock and barrel by the United States Gypsum Corporation, for whom her late husband worked. In 2011, the firm shut the gypsum mine that had operated for 88 years and closed down the entire community. Empire became a ghost town—even its ZIP Code was discontinued.

The film, set largely in 2012, follows Fern as she falls in with other involuntary "nomads"—individuals who live in their vans or recreational vehicles (RVs)—and travels around the western US in pursuit of some degree of economic and personal stability. We see her first at Amazon, where she and many others work as temporary laborers during the holiday season. She tells a former student that she is not "homeless," but rather "houseless."

Many of the figures in the film are actual nomads, including Linda May, Bob Wells, Charlene Swankie and others. Linda admits she contemplated suicide in 2008. When she realized her Social Security payment would be only \$550 a month, she "couldn't believe it."

Fern is forced by dropping, freezing temperatures to drive south. "I need work...I like to work," she meanwhile tells someone. She attends, along with thousands of other nomads, the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), an annual event held in the desert on public land near Quartzsite, Arizona. Wells, its organizer, inveighs against the "tyranny of the dollar." Moreover, he says, "The Titanic is sinking." He and others offer tips "on how to live on the road."

Fern meets younger people too, like Derek, whose acquaintance she makes when he asks her for a cigarette. A second meeting, later on, is one of the most moving sequences in the film. Derek, a quiet, self-effacing young man, explains he has a girlfriend in the "north country," but his letters to her are not very consequential. Fern suggests he send her poetry and recites for his benefit (and ours) one of the most exquisite lyrics in the English language, Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? ...").

A series of dead-end, occasionally back-breaking jobs ensue, at a rock supplier, at Wall Drug (a tourist attraction in the Badlands of South Dakota), at Amazon again. Someone suggests the beet harvest in Nebraska. These are scenes reminiscent of the Great Depression years, when men and women wandered across the country, often in a daze, doing anything to keep their heads above water.

Charlene Swankie announces she has cancer and perhaps seven or eight months to live. She drives off to die on her own in the wilderness. Fern's van has engine trouble and needs \$2,300 worth of work. She borrows it from her sister, who leads a far more conventional life. Fern meets Dave (David Strathairn) and finds some companionship. He tells her, "I like being around you," and invites her to stay with him in the home of his son's family. She has a decision to make.

As noted, there are appealing aspects to *Nomadland*. McDormand, as always, is genuine and honest and unglamorous (the actress was apparently pleased in the course of doing research for the film when she was offered a job at a Target store in Nebraska). The real nomads are authentic and dignified.

Zhao has an eye for the Western scenery and also directs human

beings here with sensitivity, as she did in *The Rider*.

As a whole, however, *Nomadland* alternates between an implied criticism of the deplorable conditions it touches upon and an inappropriate celebration of the nomads' resilience, "stick-to-it-iveness" and "pioneer" lifestyle, with the latter approach unhappily winning out.

The overall feeling and sensibility of the film correspond closely to one of the dictionary definitions of the expression, "to make a virtue of necessity," i.e., "to recast or portray an action or situation in which one has no alternatives as an action or situation which was deliberately chosen on its merits."

The comment of a reviewer, and it is a typical one, inadvertently catches at the film's most grievous weakness: "As much as *Nomadland* is haunted by death (one character tells a heart-wrenching story about a near-suicide), really, it's about life, about living, about moving forward. Even faced with the crushing reality of economic despair, as so many experienced in 2008, there is always another road you can take."

Another review suggests that Zhao's work is "a chronicle about something quintessentially American: life on the open road. A film about the beauty of the land, of the road, and of the people travelling along it, nomads who find a community out there in the deserts and the hills and the mountains of the American West. By necessity, but also by free will." *Variety*, in a headline, described the movie as a "Tender Ode to American Independence."

This is pretty miserable, in the face of the deprivation and hardship depicted. Why not revise the hitherto standard approach and present John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), focused on the suffering Joads—a family of poor tenant farmers—during the Depression, in a new light, as a "chronicle" about "life on the open road," a novel "about the beauty of the land, of the road, and of the people travelling along it," etc.?

It is a serious mistake, a terrible irresponsibility, to turn the socially determined (and alterable) into the "natural" and inevitable. Deliberately or not, one becomes an apologist for the existing state of affairs. However much the various nomads in Zhao's film may embrace—or attempt to embrace—their new lifestyle and endow it with pleasing, even "liberating" qualities, they remain, first and foremost, victims of America's social catastrophe.

Bruder begins her book in this manner: "In Drayton, North Dakota, a former San Francisco cabdriver, 67, labors at the annual sugar beet harvest. He works from sunrise until after sunset in temperatures that dip below freezing, helping trucks that roll in from the fields disgorge multi-ton loads of beets. At night he sleeps in the van that has been his home ever since Uber squeezed him out of the taxi industry and making the rent became impossible.

"In Campbellsville, Kentucky, a 66-year-old ex-general contractor stows merchandise during the overnight shift at an Amazon warehouse, pushing a wheeled cart for miles along the concrete floor. It's mind-numbing work and she struggles to scan each item accurately, hoping to avoid getting fired. In the morning she returns to her tiny trailer, moored at one of several mobile home parks that contract with Amazon to put up nomadic workers like her."

Bruder's work, which valuably details the brutal treatment of the vulnerable elderly, is also not exempt from efforts to find the uplifting "silver lining" in these conditions. She can go on like this: "And there is hope on the road. It's a by-product of forward momentum. A sense of opportunity, as wide as the country itself. A bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It's just ahead, in the next town, the next gig, the next chance encounter with a stranger. ...

"When someone's van breaks down, they pass the hat. There's a contagious feeling: Something big is happening. The country is changing rapidly, the old structures crumbling away, and they're at the epicenter of something new. Around a shared campfire, in the middle of the night, it can feel like a glimpse of utopia."

For a sobering look at the nomads' situation, it is also worth viewing *CamperForce*, a 16-minute film from Brett Story and Field of Vision (with Bruder's participation), which details Amazon's decade-long program of recruiting and exploiting thousands of RVers for its seasonal labor unit. The picture is not a pretty or "inspiring" one. It is grim and revealing. As a title explains, "Today one in five Americans older than sixty-five is working, almost double the rate from 1986" and "Nearly a third of households headed by people fifty-five or older have no pension and no retirement savings." The short also notes that Amazon's Jeff Bezos "became the richest man in the world in 2017."

Nancy Utley and Steve Gilula, the chairmen of Searchlight Pictures, a division of the multibillion-dollar Walt Disney Company, have touted *Nomadland* as "a true cinematic discovery." Zhao "reminds us," the studio executives continued, "that film has the power to connect us no matter how far apart we might seem. We hope this special film can move audiences across the world and further support global cinema."

It is certainly not the director's fault that Disney rules so much of the film and entertainment world or that its officials predictably mouth banalities. However, it is a matter of Zhao's own "free will" that the Beijing-born, Mount Holyoke College-educated "independent" filmmaker ("one of the most important new voices in American cinema," according to the 2020 Toronto film festival) has directed a superhero film, *Eternals*, the 26th entry in the wretched Marvel Cinematic Universe (also Disney property), now set to be released in November 2021.



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