



FILM: **NOMADLAND**

FDG RATING: 4.0 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Chloe Zhao: *director, writer*  
Frances McDormand: *actress, Fern*  
David Strathairn: *actor, Dave*,  
Swankie, Linda, Bob: *actor/actresses play themselves*

DATE: March 21, 2021

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **NOMADLAND**

Winning an Oscar (2021) for best film, best director, and best actress, Nomadland clearly resonated with the Academy as well as with our discussion participants. Fern, a woman in her sixties, has her life upended when the U.S. Gypsum facility in Empire, Nevada shuts down in 2011 as a result of the 2007 – 2009 recession. She and her husband, who recently died, worked there for years, living in company housing. With no opportunities for work in or near Empire, she sells off most of her possessions, puts the rest in storage, purchases a van which she makes as home-like as possible, and takes to road. Thus, begins her travels in Nomadland.

The film paints a slow moving portrait of itinerant life as she takes seasonal jobs, while living in RV parks and becomes friends with other vandwellers. They welcome her into their community. In a quasi documentary style, many of the people she meets are playing themselves in the film; non-professional actors who are real-life nomads such as Swankie and Linda May who help Fern adapt. Linda May, a grandmother living in her Jeep working temporary jobs to save money, dreams of building a sustainable “Earthship” home. One emotional scene is when Linda tells Fern about a time when she was in suicidal despair, in her trailer. Another memorable scene is when Swankie describes the breathtaking sights she has seen. She has six months left to live due to cancer and plans to make as many good memories as possible taking in nature’s amazing beauty on the road rather than waste away in a hospital. For Swankie, it’s the simplest things that can mean the most—the smile of a friend, a dip in a river, a kind gesture of a stranger. If movie theaters had not been closed, we would have relished the scenic cinematography on the big screen with gorgeous panoramic views of America’s west as Fern moves through Nevada, Utah, South Dakota, Nebraska, Arizona, and California.

The most poignant line in the film is when Fern states she is not homeless, just houseless which says a lot about misperceptions. Living a slower, simpler, more serene life, closer to nature can offer many comforts. It’s almost like a cocoon when you shut your van door, said the cinematographer during an interview. But one resident reviewer thought the film showed an excessively positive picture of that life style.

Another discussion participant noted that the book by the same title, focuses more on the sense of grief, loss, and poverty that these people are experiencing. They have no choice but to live in a van looking for work. But the film softens that aspect. Another discussion participant saw the film as a social commentary noting that people lose their homes after working all their life – there’s something wrong with society, a tragic underlying cause.

Fern seems comfortable staying on the move. Seeking seasonal work, she and some of the others get jobs at an Amazon warehouse during the Christmas holiday and in warmer weather at a beet harvesting plant in Nebraska. Dave, another nomad she met and danced with back at the desert community is working temporarily at Badlands National Park. Dave has taken a liking to Fern, and when she visits him at his son’s home after he has decided to stay with them long-term to be close to his grandchild, he invites her to stay with him permanently in a guest house. We see her discomfort as she stands in the room and we sense the claustrophobic aspect of being in one place. She leaves after a few days. Later in the film, when she revisits the Arizona RV site, she reconnects with Bob, an elderly nomad environmentalist, and confides to him about her loving relationship with her late husband.

We are drawn into the reality of their lives as these non-professional actors share their story. And Frances McDormand seamlessly merges into her character. Although the film lacks any real drama, most of us found the story fascinating and liked the idea that they don’t say goodbye when they part, but instead say “See you down the road”. The tone is reflective. One discussion participant observed that each character had a sad back story. Another commented that the execution is admirable but not sure there is much there.

After our own year and a half of sheltering in place due to covid, not being able to get together with friends and family, feeling deprived, isolated, a bit lonely and seeing on the news how people are losing their businesses due to lack of customers, we might identify with the sense of loss portrayed in Nomadland. But the film has a hopeful ending which we can also relate to. Nomadland gathered a propitious collective score of 4.0 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

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