

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
July 2018

Leave No Trace (dir. Debra Granik, 2018)

Cast

Tom (daughter): Thomasin Harcourt McKenzie: Native of New Zealand; just turned 18
Will (father): Ben Foster: excellent in *The Messenger* (09), *Hell and High Water* (16)
Jean (caseworker): Dana Millican: small role in a good, comparable movie, *Lean on Pete* (17)
Walters (sponsor): Jeff Kober: former Montana rancher who also appeared in *Sully* (16)
Dale (RV landlady): Dale Dickey: memorably mean to Jennifer Lawrence in *Winter's Bone* (10)

Off Camera

Director/Cowriter: Debra Granik: first fiction feature since *Winter's Bone*, eight years ago
Co-Screenwriter: Anne Rosellini: also a co-producer of all four of Granik's feature films
Author of Novel: Peter Rock: Creative Writing faculty at Reed College in Oregon since 2001
Cinematography: Michael McDonough: longtime Granik collaborator; also *Sunset Song* (15)
Original Score: Dickon Hinchliffe: *Little Men* (16), selected for Film Group two years ago
Film Editing: Jane Rizzo: best known for *Compliance* (12), a tense fact-based drama

Also directed by Debra Granik...

Down to the Bone (2004) – Vera Farmiga (*The Departed*, *Up in the Air*) launched her brilliant career as a single mother and retail worker in upstate New York combating a drug addiction

Winter's Bone (2010) – Sundance champ and multiple Oscar nominee about a teen girl (Jennifer Lawrence) trying to protect her Missouri family from a drug ring and from financial ruin

Stray Dog (2014) – Feature-length documentary about Ron “Stray Dog” hall, a motorcyclist and Vietnam veteran whom Granik met when she cast him as a shadowy villain in *Winter's Bone*

If you enjoyed *Leave No Trace*...

The Ballad of Jack and Rose (2005) – A lesser-known Daniel Day-Lewis vehicle, written and directed by his wife Rebecca Miller, about a dad and teen daughter living on a remote island

Old Joy (2006) – Quiet, poignant, 75-minute feature about two male friends reuniting after many years for a hike in the Pacific Northwest; one of them appears to have no actual home

Captain Fantastic (2016) – Viggo Mortensen earned a Best Actor nomination two years ago as a recent widower who insists on raising and teaching his six children in woodsy isolation

Lean on Pete (2017) – Brand-new on DVD and streaming services, this movie about a lonely teen who forms an intense bond with his horse in the Pacific Northwest was an overlooked gem

Facts about *Leave No Trace* you may appreciate...

Leave No Trace began when two female producers sent the novel to Granik. Still, she told MUBI she was equally inspired by *New York Times* articles about U.S. citizens living in national parks, in one case as traumatized veterans who found no comfort in the America to which they returned, and in another case because park-adjacent communities had become so expensive that local residents were priced out of their homes and turned to living outdoors. Another *New York Times* profile that influenced the story mirrored one that we briefly see in the film: a story about U.S. Army units facing high rates of suicide upon returning from battle. Further inspirations came from David Morris's book *The Evil Hours*, about PTSD; and an hour-long, UK-produced documentary called *Soldiers in Hiding* (available on [YouTube](#)) about Vietnam veterans living in the American wilderness. Granik and her collaborators also learned about a real-life case, with names redacted, of a father and daughter whose story resembled the film's.

As part of their research process, Granik and cinematographer Michael McDonough, close colleagues since meeting in NYU's film school in 1994, assemble hours of interview footage with residents of the areas where their stories are set, and make huge compendiums of photos that evoke the nascent movie's look. McDonough sometimes even shares producing credit.

McKenzie and Foster learned survivalist skills together for two weeks before filming, discovering their different aptitudes for the various tasks that Tom and Will would necessarily perform. Once Foster had been cast, he also collaborated with Granik to remove around 40% of his dialogue, believing that Tom and Will would be able to inclined to communicate silently.

McKenzie's mother is an acting coach in New Zealand who has worked with Nicole Kidman and Melanie Lynskey. She recently co-directed her first feature with her husband, filmmaker Stuart McKenzie, in which their daughter appears. When 13-year-old Thomasin got one of her first major acting jobs, playing a real-life adolescent who was raped by police, her parents showed her *Winter's Bone* as an example of the kind of committed acting and socially important storytelling that Thomasin might achieve if she took her craft seriously. To be hired as the star of the same filmmaker's very next feature is a remarkable case of things coming full circle.

Foster and his fiancée were expecting their first child while he made this film, lending a different intensity to his character's desire to bond with his child and his despair at possibly losing her.

Isaiah Stone, the boy who raises rabbits in the first community Tom and Will join, was a Missouri native Granik met while making *Winter's Bone*. Catching up after many years, he described to her how he was building a tiny house with his own hands, to evade the inaccessible cost of an existing one. She hired him to act a role close to his own life and to construct an edifice similar to his own, especially after learning many Pacific Northwesterners were doing the same thing.

Granik cites the kinds of movies she makes—extremely attentive to overlooked U.S. milieus, hard to finance given the lack of proven stars, and dependent on intensive research processes—as the main reason she goes so long between releases. Her research also tends to affirm the lack of happy, investor-pleasing endings in stories that interest her. This is not to deny a proven pattern by which women directors face higher hurdles in their careers even after major critical and commercial successes, but Granik sees other factors at work in the slow pace of her projects.

Broad conversation topics...

Restraint: *Leave No Trace* makes several moves to ensure our limited access to its characters' exact thoughts and to constrain their emotions. For one, the Tom figure narrates the novel *My Abandonment* (where she is called Caroline), but Granik and Rosellini's screenplay avoids voice-over or any other devices that would place us inside her head. When it came time to shoot the end, Thomasin McKenzie asked to shoot a full take where her character breaks down in great sobs amidst her big, final decision, and Granik gave her that chance. Still, she and her editor opted for the more restrained take they initially had in mind. Did *Leave No Trace* become more or less moving for you by keeping us at some distance from the leads' thoughts and limiting emotional expression? How did you respond to the finale?

Local Color: Beyond making room for Tom and Will to interact memorably with many smaller characters, Granik cast several regional residents as themselves and encouraged them to put their own, authentic stamp on their scenes. For example, Tom's encounter with the bees got more developed when the real-life beekeeper who plays herself gravitated to McKenzie's energy and felt she would be able to handle holding dozens of the bees in her hand, and teaching Foster the same tricks on screen. Blane, the local medic who attends to Will's broken leg, served as a medic in Iraq. Even the [For His Glory Dance Troupe](#) is a real group in Klamath Falls, Oregon. You needn't choose one option over the other, but did *Leave No Trace* affect you more in its central relationship or in its portrait of the region at large?

Tone: A related point: given the obvious hurt and melancholy beneath the story, Granik and her collaborators have described their surprise at how many audiences report feeling warmed and inspired by the movie—mostly because so many characters, including the smaller ones, work so hard to take care of vulnerable people and to fulfill their jobs honorably. This includes everyone from the child welfare caseworkers at the beginning to the truckers who (as Granik discovered often in her on-site research) are so attuned to the problems of runaways and trafficking that they ask careful questions before allowing young hitchhikers, especially those accompanied by adults. Did you have this reaction, or did the movie make you feel blue?

Some specific touches worth contemplating...

Close Attention: The early camping scenes require our attunement so that we, like the characters, can distinguish natural sounds like twigs snapping or wild dogs barking from potential threats. Images can work the same way, like the wide shot of the static forest when Will challenges Tom to a “drill” of concealing herself; the movie pauses to see if we can discern them in the landscape. (I couldn't.) A version of this “close reading” skill persists around facial expression, since subtle tremors are often the first sign of Will or Tom about to make a major decision.

Costumes: The heavy, layered clothes that Tom and Will wear are practical and realistic responses to the damp chill of the Pacific Northwest but also serve as indicators of their many layers of guardedness. Tom eventually sports fewer layers, but Will remains pretty encased throughout.

Yellow: Tom mentions this is her favorite color (the exchange comes early in the novel, too) which makes it sadly ironic that the film, awash in greens and blues, features so little of it.

Dialogue: Will mentions to Tom that they need to visit the city because her appetite is growing but the first thing they actually do is take the long cable-car ride to the veteran's hospital. It's very likely Tom always knows this is part of the itinerary, especially since distributing pills for cash seems like a regular, required routine for Will, but it tells us something about his character that he cannot even verbalize this part of the agenda, linked to experiences he still finds painful.

Framing: When Jean, the caseworker, first interviews Tom on the leafy hillside where she and Will have been "burned," the two women are on opposite sides of the frame, separated in the exact middle by the trunk of a huge tree. This visual indication of massive barriers between them is unusual for *Leave No Trace's* shooting style, which often assumes a documentary or what Granik frequently calls a "social realist" style that calls little attention to its own framing.

Editing: As the government team removes Tom, she gets one long, downcast look backward at the campsite she loved, but the editor refuses to let us see it. From our vantage, it's already gone.

Sound: The loud, mechanical whirring of the helicopters at the Christmas-tree farm echoes the sounds that Will hears when he has his (unvisualized) nightmares of military service but also conjures the industrial rapacity of clearing old forests so that temporary trees can be grown.

Dialogue: The 4H trainer pointedly coaches the kids to look confident with their rabbits and cultivate a happy presentation. "Smile!" he encourages them. Not a single one of them does.

Sound: A quick shot on the bus Tom and Will take to Washington shows us a boy across the aisle compulsively snapping selfies. Unlike the rabbit kids, he's all about goofy grins! Even after we no longer see him, we hear six more camera snaps in short series, underscoring the joke of a narcissistic self-obsession and an addiction to technology from which Will has insulated Tom. These clicks also underscore the threat of visual surveillance the characters feel amidst their escape, especially after police board the bus to remove one passenger (an increasingly frequent move by ICE agents on Greyhound buses, even when no border is being crossed).

Lighting: Well beyond the difference between day and night, the photography of the Washington forest differs substantially from what we first saw in the Oregon woods. The lighting is so low-contrast (not just dim) that shapes and colors fade into each other; the blue-green image often looks as though the characters are under water. Near the end of this sequence, the vegetation looks backlit by an unnatural silvery light from behind, almost turning the characters' trek into a heightened, folkloric ordeal rather than a natural journey. The camera also denies us access to Tom's face throughout most of this sequence, escalating our sense that we are "losing" her.

Sound: As Tom hunts for Will in the forest, we hear isolated gunshots that are hard to gauge as distant or nearby. We also hear what sound like the chainsaws of teams cutting down trees, which turn out to be the loud motors of ATVs being driven through the woods. Not just in lighting but in sound, then, the film starts conjuring effects that foster a feeling of danger.

Production Design: As Tom rejects Will's suggestion that they depart ("The same thing that's wrong with you isn't wrong with me") she stands under a rack marked KEYS in large letters, emphasizing her desire for security but also her entrance into a world of semi-private property.