

‘Leave No Trace’ is Emblematic of Our Times

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on July 6, 2018 - 3:41pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The temptation to “drop out” must weigh heavily on the minds of many Americans on a daily basis. “Leave No Trace” views this phenomenon through a prism of many factors, including materialism and mental illness. Ben Foster and Thomasin McKenzie are a father/daughter duo who drop out, then tune in.

The film was created by the writer/director team of Debra Granik and Anne Rosellini (and adapted from the Peter Cook novel “My Abandonment”), who worked on the Oscar-nominated film “Winter’s Bone.” There are similar themes to that film in “Leave No Trace,” but the main commonality is the depiction of the socio-economic class, which is poor to lower middle. They honor these noble survivors in their outward kindness, but never shy away from their problems as well, which is often associated with drug abuse and mental difficulties. Many of the characters just have a hard time “playing in the sandbox” of society, through their outer and inner conflicts, and dropping out has as much to do with not being able to fit in, and in the case of this story some ex-military issues.

We meet Dad Bill (Ben Foster) and 13-year-old daughter Tom (Thomasin McKenzie) in a state park in Oregon, where they have set up a home situation with tents, tarps and camping gear. The park rangers don’t know they are there, even as they occasionally go into town to stock up on goods. Bill deals pills for cash, mostly his own prescriptions for treatment of the aftereffects of post traumatic stress syndrome.



Tom (Thomasin McKenzie) and Bill (Ben Foster) Fight to Survive in ‘Leave No Trace’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

The pair are busted by a chance encounter with a runner, and the rangers bring in a phalanx of social services to rescue them. They are assigned work on a Christmas tree ranch, and Tom begins to assimilate to the structure of organization. Bill cannot abide, and convinces the girl to leave the ranch, and they begin to wander aimlessly. Another rescue is coming, and this one will change everything.

The one thing that is nicely evident in this film, as it was in "Winter's Bone," is Granik and Rosellini's admiration of the milk of human kindness. The "rescuers" take an immediate empathetic shine to the unlikely pair, and give them breaks in exchange for a few rules and labor. The character actor Dale Dickey has significant kindness in both films, and her weathered face is one of a survivor, who wants to share her survival fortune – though modest – with her fellow travelers.

The film is multi-layered in questioning our current "civilization." The father/daughter team rely on each other, and also have an extra sensory perception between them. The modern world of singular-person technology has little time for that type of connection, nor do the the lower middle class strugglers that the pair encounter. It's significant, for example, that Bill throws a television into a closet in one scene and in another his fellow campers lose their in-forest shelter when Bill and Tom are busted.



Father and Daughter On the Road in 'Leave No Trace'

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Like the filmmakers discovered Jennifer Lawrence in "Winter's Bone," so do they make a case for Thomasin McKenzie. She mostly works with the inner soul in expressing her connections, and like the characters experience in the film, there is an immediate draw to her. Ben Foster (the n'er-do-well brother in "Hell or High Water") is extraordinary as Bill. He has maybe a dozen lines of dialogue in the whole film, but his outsider desperation weighs in on every scene he has participation.

This film is an instance of the screen reflecting back to us, to express our lives today and how we may be using them. A two-person family living in the woods doesn't mean a hill of beans in this crazy world, but their connection means something. Maybe what we own and possess subtracts from the necessities of what we don't have.

"Leave No Trace" continues its nationwide limited release in Chicago on July 6th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Ben Foster, Thomasin McKenzie, Dana Millican and Dale Dickey. Screenplay adapted by Debra Granik and Anne Rosellini, based on the novel "My Abandonment" by Peter Cook. Directed by Debra Granik. Rated "PG"



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