

## Leave No Trace

Eight years ago, writer/director Debra Granik gained recognition with her first feature “Winter’s Bone” (2010), which was set among the marginalized folks of the Ozarks and made a star of Jennifer Lawrence. Granik has now completed her second fiction film, which shares with “Winter’s Bone” a stern outdoor setting and a central role for a promising young actress. And, while the new picture plays in a softer, quieter mode, the director has produced another winner.

Widower Will (Ben Foster) and his 13-year-old daughter, Tom (newcomer Thomasin Harcourt McKenzie), have lived undetected for years in Forest Park, a woods on the edge of Portland, Oregon. Their shelter consists of crude tarps and wet sleeping bags, their food is variable and often raw, but their bond is strong. There are hints about his troubled past in the military, but we gain little backstory. Tom’s world is utterly defined by her father, she never having known her mother. They dip into the outside world occasionally for food and supplies, but Will distrusts civilization and fiercely treasures his independent life, a value he projects on to his daughter. Yet their situation is illegal--trespassing on public land—and local police ultimately find and uproot them before turning them over to a local social service agency.

They must adapt to their new surroundings in a modest trailer, and though Tom is intrigued by their new setting and Will is offered a job, he still finds this more settled life confining. His frustration leads him to escape that community to return with Tom to the wilderness. But their situation, in a forest at higher altitude, is even more forbidding than before and leads to a serious accident. Helped by medical personnel, they are eventually taken in by a woman running a van and RV park for a motley collection of independent forest dwellers. It is here where Tom’s new sense of community is fostered and her relationship to her father finally tested. As she asserts near the end of the picture: “The same thing that is wrong with you isn’t wrong with me.”

The screenplay is by Granik and Anne Rosellini (co-writer of “Winter’s Bone”) and was adapted from Peter Rock’s novel “My Abandonment.” It adopts the first-person perspective of the novel, taking Tom’s point of view, but without a narrative over voice, and that presentation from the child’s viewpoint—we see almost everything through Tom’s eyes--provides a large part of the film’s power. Thus, Will is seen from the outside, a man hard to read or comprehend, while we come to realize that Tom’s life in a community with others may offer promise of a different future.

The demeanor of “Leave No Trace” recalls Granik’s earlier film: rugged and palpably real locales populated by utterly believable actors. The cast simply inhabits their roles, such as the sympathetic social worker (Dana Millican), and the welcoming RV manager (Dale Dickey), who proves a kind of stand-in grandmother. Ben Foster’s Will is appropriately terse and tense, a tortured soul taking on the skittish life of the animals he lives among. Yet, even with his grimness and insecurity, you sense his love for Tom.

Young McKenzie is the revelation here. Aged 17 when the film was made, she comes from an acting family in her native New Zealand (her mom is a film actress), and this is her first starring role and the first time she has worked out of her country. Her presence, as a soft-spoken but ever aware young woman, captivates, with a wonderful

mix of plain-faced naiveté and burgeoning curiosity. Granik has found just the right visage and voice to adorn another melancholic but worthy effort.  
*(The film is rated "PG" and runs 109 minutes.)*

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