



[Vimeo link for this week's film and ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

The film is available for streaming on Amazon Prime.

**Directed by** Chloé Zhao

**Writing Credits** Chloé Zhao adapted Jessica Bruder's nonfiction book for the screen.

**Produced by** Mollye Asher, Dan Janvey, Frances McDormand, Peter Spears, and Chloé Zhao, also Jessica Bruder was a consulting producer.

**Music by** Ludovico Einaudi

**Cinematography by** Joshua James Richards

**Film Editing by** Chloé Zhao

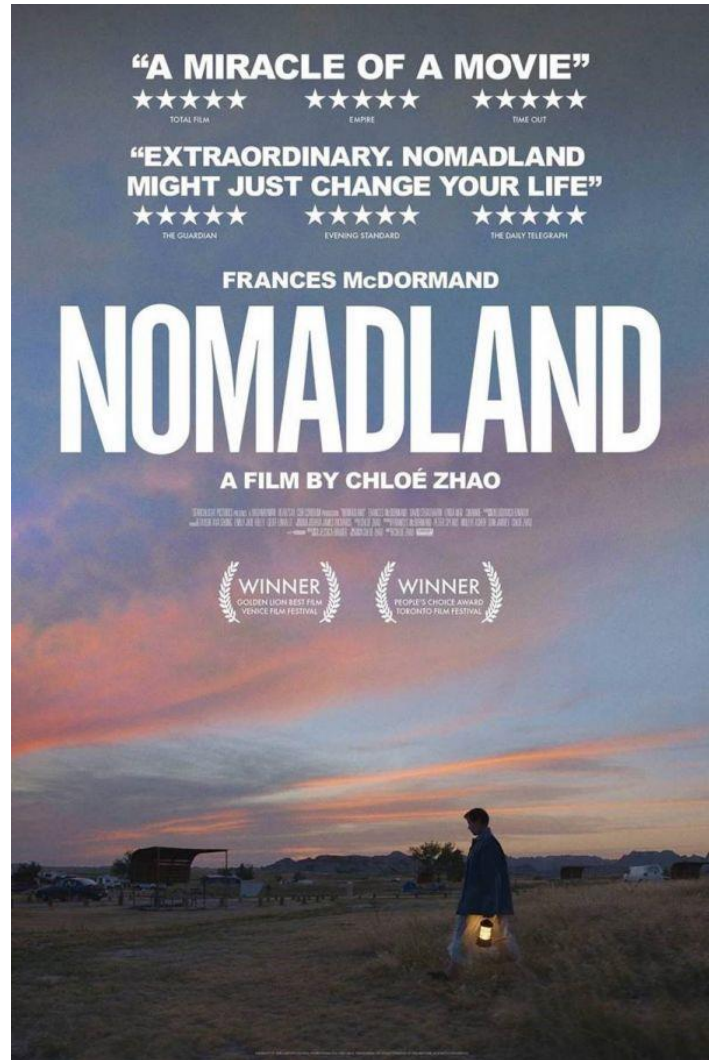
The film won three Oscars for Best Picture, Best Achievement in Directing, and Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role and was nominated for three other Oscars at the 2021 Academy Awards.

### Cast

Frances McDormand...Fern

David Strathairn...Dave

**Chloé Zhao** (31 March 1982, Beijing, China) is a Chinese-born filmmaker, known primarily for her work on independent films. Zhao's debut feature film, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), premiered at Sundance Film Festival to critical acclaim and earned a nomination for the Independent Spirit Award for Best First Feature. Her second feature film, *The Rider* (2017), was critically acclaimed and received nominations for the Independent Spirit Award for Best Film and Best Director. Zhao gained further



success with her third film, *Nomadland* (2020), which attracted international recognition and won many awards, including the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, the People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, and numerous Best Picture awards. Zhao won awards for directing at the Academy Awards, Directors Guild of America Awards, Golden Globe Awards, and British Academy Film Awards; at each body, she was the second woman to win. Earning four Academy Award nominations for the film, Zhao won both Best Picture and Best Director, becoming the second woman in history to win the latter after Kathryn Bigelow in 2010, and the first woman of color to win the category. Zhao's latest film is the Marvel Cinematic Universe superhero film *Eternals*, which she wrote and directed, and was released on 5 November 2021

**Jessica Bruder** is an American journalist who writes about subcultures and teaches narrative writing at Columbia Journalism School. For her book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First*

*Century* (2017), she spent months living in a camper van named Van Halen, documenting itinerant Americans who gave up traditional housing to hit the road full-time. The project spanned three years and more than 15,000 miles of driving, from coast to coast and from Mexico to the Canadian border.

**Ludovico Einaudi** (23 November 1955, Turin, Piedmont, Italy) is an Italian pianist and composer. Einaudi has composed the scores for a number of films and television productions, including *This Is England* (2006), *The Intouchables* (2011), *I'm Still Here* (2010), the TV miniseries *Doctor Zhivago* (2002), and *Acquario* (1996), for which he won the Grolla d'oro. His music was used as the score for the Golden Globe and Academy Award-winning films from 2020 *Nomadland* and *The Father*. He has also released a number of solo albums for piano and other instruments.

**Joshua James Richards** has done cinematography for Zhao's first three films—*Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), *The Rider* (2017), and *Nomadland* (2020), as well as camera operation for her *The Eternals* (2021). He also did cinematography for Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (2017).



**Frances McDormand** (b. June 23, 1957 in Gibson City, IL). For nearly 40 years Frances McDormand has played women who are often the supporting player in a man's story. To this day, she is best known for her role as Marge in the cult classic *Fargo* (1996). A peculiar number of McDormand's early roles were female accessories to men with violent tendencies such as in *Darkman* (1990), *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Chattahoochee* (1989). Her first starring role was in *Blood Simple* (1984), in which she worked with filmmaker Joel Coen, whom she married that year. Frequently collaborating with the Coen brothers, she has brought a depth to many of her roles. Yet,

within the last fourteen years McDormand has gone from strong supporting actor to leading star. At a time when many women are finding fewer roles, this sixty-four-year-old turned in an Oscar-winning tour de force 2017's *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. Additionally, in 2009 she adapted Elizabeth Strout's novel *Olive Kitteridge* for HBO. The project was the first work McDormand had ever produced for herself, after a long career working in her husband's films. McDormand has said, "I became interested in educating people in the variety of ways in which women can express their emotion. Which is much easier to do in a large role than in a supporting role to a male protagonist. In general, the women in a supporting role to a male protagonist—cry a lot." McDormand has also been a long-time member of the Wooster Group, a pioneer of avant-garde theatre in New York City (Buffalo Film Seminars co-director Bruce Jackson is also a member of the Wooster Group.). McDormand joined the group in 1999 after seeing one of their productions. She has been nominated for an acting Academy Award six times: *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Almost Famous* (2000), *North Country* (2005), *Fargo* (1996), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), and *Nomadland* (2020), winning the Oscar for the latter three, and, for *Nomadland*, as the film's producer, she won a Best Picture Oscar. She has also won a Tony in 2011 for her role in "Good People". Notorious for not doing interviews. McDormand told The New York Times Magazine, in a rare interview, that her publicist's job is to "politely tell people to go away." McDormand has said that she modeled her performance in *Three Billboards* on John Wayne. "I really latched onto John Wayne in a big way as my physical idea because I really had no female physical icons to go off of for Mildred," McDormand explained in an interview. "She is more in the tradition of the Spaghetti Western's mystery man, who comes walking down the center of the street, guns drawn, and blows everybody away — although, I think it's important that the only weapons Mildred ever uses are her wits." [Sic. She also uses Molotov cocktails, a dentist's drill, her knee, and her fist. BJ & DC] Early in preparation for the production, McDormand hit on an idea that soon became a part of her performance: to have Mildred wear a singular outfit all through the film — a kind of unadorned, blue-collar regalia she dutifully puts on each day. "Frances came up with Mildred wearing the same jumpsuit every day as a kind of 'war uniform,' and I thought it was a great cinematic idea," recalls

McDonagh. “I liked the idea that Mildred doesn't have time to think about what she's wearing; she's at war.” I wrote Mildred for Frances,” McDonagh said. “There wasn't any other actress I thought had all the elements that Mildred needed. She had to be very in touch with a kind of working-class sensibility, as well as a rural sensibility. She also had to be someone who wouldn't sentimentalize the character. All of Frances' work is fundamentally truthful. I knew she could play the darkness of Mildred yet also have dexterity with the humor, while staying true to who Mildred is throughout.” Discussing her most recent Oscar-winning performance as Fern in *Nomadland*, McDormand has said, “The point is there is a core in me that I share with all of my characters. It's in Mildred Hayes (“Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri”) and Marge Gunderson (“Fargo”), too. Now it's deeply embedded in Fern (“Nomadland”). During her ecstatic Best Actress Oscar acceptance speech for *Three Billboards* McDormand mentioned the term “inclusion rider” which is a clause that an actor can insist be included in his/her contract that requires cast and crew on a particular film to meet a certain level of diversity. The concept was discussed in a 2016 “TED” talk by Stacy Smith in which she determined that casting was not representative of the population, suggesting that an “equity clause” or an “inclusion rider” could be part of the solution. This winter, you will be able to see her, alongside Denzel Washington, in Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*.

**David Strathairn** (January 26, 1949 in San Francisco, California) has acted in many films and television series (138 credits). He was nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal of Edward R. Murrow in the 2005 film *Good Night, and Good Luck*. Other notable film roles include *Harrison's Flowers* (2000), *Memphis Belle* (1990), *Sneakers* (1992), *The Firm* (1993), *Dolores Claiborne* (1995), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), and *Eight Men Out* (1988). These are some of his other appearances: *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1979), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *Miami Vice* (TV Series) (1985), *A League of Their Own* (1992), *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Passion Fish* (1992), *Lost in Yonkers* (1993), *The River Wild* (1994), *Mother Night* (1996), *Blue Car* (2002), *The Sopranos* (TV Series) (2004), *We Are Marshall* (2006), *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), *Monk* (TV Series) (2008), *House* (TV Series) (2010), *The Bourne Legacy* (2012), *Lincoln* (2012), *Godzilla* (2014), *American Pastoral* (2016), *Darkest Hour* (2017), *Billions* (TV Series) (2017-2019), *Godzilla*:

*King of the Monsters* (2019), *The Expanse* (TV Series) (2018-2019), and *Nomadland* (2020).



**Anthony Lane: “Economic Ruthlessness on the Open Road in ‘Nomadland’” (*New Yorker*, November 27, 2020)**

One of the things we learn from the films of Chloé Zhao is this: bad luck is the stuff that happens before a story begins. As “[The Rider](#)” (2018) gets under way, the hero—a young fellow named Brady—already has an angry gash in his head, having tumbled from his horse at a rodeo and taken a hoof to the skull. And now, at the start of “Nomadland,” which Zhao wrote and directed, we meet Fern ([Frances McDormand](#)), who no longer has a husband, a regular job, or a home. Well, she *does* have a home, but it's a white van that she has adapted, with lots of storage space, to be her only dwelling. She calls it Vanguard.

Another takeaway from Zhao's work: no land is more fertile than the border zone between documentary and fiction. Brady, for instance, is played by a real-life rider, also named Brady, from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in South Dakota, and his wound is no invention. His sister, Lilly, who has Asperger's, plays a version of herself. In the same vein, most of the folks in “Nomadland” are, as it were, true to themselves—genuine wanderers, recounting their experience as birds of passage, and radiating a singular blend of stringency and warmth. Thus, Linda, a smiling and capable figure with silver hair, is played by Linda May Swankie, who has seven or eight months to live, and who hangs a skull and crossbones on the side of her van, is played by Swankie; and so on.

“Nomadland,” which won the main prize at this year's Venice Film Festival, is based on the

2017 [book of the same name](#), by Jessica Bruder. That *is* nonfiction, through and through: a deep delve, patiently researched, into the rising number of Americans for whom a stable existence is unaffordable. They may have been scathed by personal hardship, or spit out by the [financial collapse of 2008](#). Most of them are of riper years, weathered by a steady-humored stoicism, and they've shrugged off the burden of property ownership in favor of what's known as wheel estate. According to the jargon, you can be a vandweller or, more specifically, a workamper, which means that you travel around in your R.V. in search of temporary jobs, some of which come with a place to park, plus access to power and water. It was Bruder who came across Linda, Swankie, and other nomads, and reported in detail on the pattern of their endurance; now they have migrated into Zhao's movie and brought their weatherings with them. But what's so dramatic about it? Why is it not a documentary?

In a word, because of Fern. She is a fictional creation, and she's played by a bona-fide film star, albeit one with a hilariously low dose of airs and graces. (If McDormand receives an Oscar nomination for her pains, as she should, expect her to show up in Crocs.) One of the first actions that she is required to perform onscreen is to pee outside, in the middle of nowhere, on a freezing day. Later, an upset stomach forces her to excrete noisily into a bucket. At the other extreme, she gets to float naked in a creek, gazing up at the sky, with arms flung wide: a tranquil sight, though it doesn't look especially healing or transcendent. It looks cold.

I tried to imagine another actress in the role, but soon gave up. Only someone as rooted and as resilient as McDormand, perhaps, can play so rootless a character. Fern used to live and to labor in Empire, Nevada, an old-school company town, owned by United States Gypsum. As we're told at the outset of the film, 2011 marked the end of Empire; the plant was shut, and the town effectively died. Fern was married to a guy named Bo, but he, too, passed away. They had no children, and now it's just her and Vanguard. At a sporting-goods store, she runs into a family she knows. "Are you still doing the van thing?" the mother asks, as if nobody could keep up such a life for long. "My mom says that you're



homeless, is that true?" her daughter says. Fern, unfazed, replies, "I'm just houseless. Not the same thing, right?"

Motion pictures, from their earliest days, have leaned toward people on the move. The medium is not made for staying still. It seems natural that [Chaplin](#), left alone in the final shot of "The Circus" (1928), on a patch of waste ground marked by a circle where the big top stood, should not linger long, in reflective mood, but turn and amble away. As the iris closes around him, we don't inquire where he might go next; what counts is the manner of his going. The same

applies to Jack Nicholson, as Bobby Dupea, at the bitter end of "Five Easy Pieces" (1970), abandoning his girlfriend at the gas pumps, beside the Red Rooster Café, and hitching a ride on a logging truck—no wallet, no plans, not even a jacket, although, as the trucker says, where they're headed will be colder than hell.

Fans of that film will recall that Bobby, whom we first see on a California oil rig, is a former classical pianist. It's an odd conceit, yet we buy it, because of Nicholson. Something similar occurs in "Nomadland," when Fern, in conversation with a shy young drifter, suddenly declaims a Shakespeare sonnet. The scene is both unlikely and sublime, and it compels us to reassess Fern's motives. She was once a substitute teacher; is that not a portable skill? Couldn't she search for a school that needs a new teacher, drive there, and begin again? Or—here's the rub—has she gradually grown allergic to social norms and addicted to the open road? "All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular." So says [Huckleberry Finn](#), in the opening chapter of his adventures, and it's as if his craving has filtered down to Fern.

No wonder the film is so tense. Fern is never attacked or robbed, thank heaven, yet the smell of possible danger hangs around. Notice how she stares ahead as she eats, like a guard on watch. In everyday dealings, her courtesy is a kind of armor, and, when she's offered the chance to settle, in a safe haven, she rebuffs it. One day, after her van has broken down, she visits her sister, Dolly (Melissa Smith), who lives on a pleasant suburban street—an alien planet, compared with the badlands and the wilderness where Fern prefers to roam. "You left home as soon as you

could,” Dolly says to her, remembering their childhood, and Fern, having borrowed cash, is soon gone again.

Then, there is Dave, a workamper, with too many miles on the clock. He’s played by David Strathairn, whom I initially failed to spot, not just because of his stiff white beard but also because of the diffidence with which he ducks in and out of the frame. Zhao is the foe of the meet-cute. Early on, Fern walks away from a whimpering dog and, contrary to the laws of cinematic gratification, does *not* go back to claim it; with Dave, who is in equal need of companionship, she proves no easier to sway. Now and then, their orbits intersect—in the kitchen at Wall Drug, say, in South Dakota, where he flips burgers and she scrapes grease off the grill. Like many nomads, Dave has fouled up his life. (How, exactly, we can’t be sure; but so expressive is Strathairn that we’re sure enough.) Not without trepidation, he is returning to his family for the birth of his grandson. Fern is invited to stop by, and so, at Thanksgiving, she rolls up, to the friendliest of welcomes. “You can stay,” Dave says. “Thanks, I need to do laundry,” she replies, though that isn’t what he had in mind. The bed in the guest room is so soft that Fern has no option but to go and sleep in her van. She leaves before anyone else is awake.

Somewhere, inside this lovely and desperate movie, there’s the ghost of a Western. Though people still gather around a campfire, their talk is of cancer and P.T.S.D. Instead of cowboys driving cattle to high pastures, Fern and her kindred spirits converge, in certain months, on an Amazon warehouse—still obeying the rhythm of the seasons, I guess, as they bubble-wrap junk and box it in time for Christmas. Bruder’s book called attention to the economic ruthlessness of the Amazon setup, and the effect of the toil on older employees; Zhao is more focused on Fern, as she greets her fellow-drones at lunch, and slices banana onto her peanut-butter sandwich.

“Nomadland” is not primarily a protest. Rather, it maintains a fierce sadness, like the look in its heroine’s eyes, alive to all that’s dying in the West. That is why Zhao so often films at daylight’s decease, catching enormous skies of violet and rose, and why her fable speaks to us, in 2020, as John Ford’s “The Grapes of Wrath” did to audiences eighty years ago. Fern’s needs and rights are as basic as those of the Joad family, yet there was a breadth and an uplift to their yearning that has since dwindled to a speck. “Fellow ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul,” Tom Joad said. “The one big soul that

belongs to everybody.” Some hope. Fern has her own soul, and it’s hers alone, packed away tight in the van, together with her toothbrush and her chicken-noodle soup. On she goes.



**“Nomadland: New Naturalism: Cinematographer Joshua James Richards and director Chloé Zhao achieve a poetic tone in this story of restless lives.” (American Cinematographer, January 25, 2021)**

Director Chloé Zhao has teamed up on three features with her partner, Joshua James Richards, who serves as cinematographer. The first two, *Songs My Brother Taught Me* and *The Rider*, star John Reddy and Brady Jandreau, respectively — people the director met on a Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge reservation — who play fictionalized versions of themselves. This mixture of real characters and scripted scenes gives her films a unique authenticity. Zhao used a similar approach on her latest production, *Nomadland*, which features struggling American senior citizens who live in vans on the road, but she added a fictional protagonist, Fern (Frances McDormand).

*Nomadland* follows Fern as she travels through the West after losing her husband and her home. She survives on odd jobs, meets a community of kindred nomads, and continues alone on her healing journey through powerful American landscapes. With its natural lighting and simply lit interiors, Richards’ cinematography renders the subtleties of sunlit Badlands, sunsets, and dusks, and reveals the dignity of humble faces. The picture earned Zhao the Venice Film Festival’s top honor, the Golden Lion, and Richards the Camerimage Golden Frog. Previously, Richards earned an ASC Spotlight Award nomination for his camerawork on *The Rider*.

Zhao and Richards’ collaboration could be

viewed as an extension of a cinematic movement that might be dubbed “New Naturalism,” in the spirit of the approach director Terrence Malick and cinematographer Emmanuel “Chivo” Lubezki, ASC, AMC pioneered with *The New World* ([AC Jan. '06](#)) — an informal “dogma” that they later refined on *The Tree of Life* ([AC Aug. '11](#)) and subsequent collaborations. New Naturalism is all about authenticity, and the rhythmic, poetic editing of Malick’s films is designed to eliminate any hint of artifice. For his actors, this implies working without a script, encouraging improvisation, seeking happy accidents, and including non-professionals in the cast.



**“I brought many aspects of Frances’ own life into *Nomadland*.”**

A recurring theme in Malick’s work is that human encounters with nature are transformational, transcendent events. Natural light is itself so important to these movies that it can be seen as a leading character, embodying the presence and diversity of nature. In an age of increasingly virtual, computer-generated images, New Naturalism offers an alternative cinema. Whereas many other filmmakers have adopted the visual language of New Naturalism, Zhao and Richards are evolving this movement with their inclusion of real people. With *Nomadland*, they invite viewers to experience the healing power of empathy in a scattered community of kindred souls and the mystery of a grieving woman’s epiphany in the desert.

***American Cinematographer*: You have a unique way of creating the screenplay. Instead of starting with a story, you meet real people, get to know them, write a screenplay based on them, and then ask them to play themselves.**

**Chloé Zhao**: That’s the way I explore. I was lucky enough to meet these unique individuals who became guides for me, and it would have undermined that process if I’d favored story over a portrait of them. On the reservation, I met a kid named John Reddy [for *Songs My Brother Taught Me*], and that’s when the character was created. Being a Lakota living on the reservation is only part of John’s identity. The most important thing to me is who he is as a unique individual, a young man coming of age. And it’s the same for Brady in *The Rider*, and for [the characters in] *Nomadland*. These are individuals with universal

human struggles.

**Joshua James Richards**: On *The Rider*, Chloé started by wanting to [immerse] an audience in this young, gifted horse trainer’s experience. She wrote the script with that idea in mind by delving into Brady’s life, taking me with her,

getting Brady used to the camera, to the filmmaking, to our collaboration. We’re not coming in as a film crew; we’re interested in having an experience with him. The psychologist Carl Rogers speaks of ‘unconditional positive regard’ — in other words, listening

with love. To me, that’s filmmaking.

**A key difference is that in *Nomadland*, you created a completely invented character played by an actor, Frances McDormand.**

**Zhao**: Invented, but at the same time there was a very strong collaboration with Frances, similar to how I collaborated with John and Brady. I brought many aspects of Frances’ own life into *Nomadland*. She and I agreed that was the only way we could work: to get her character into a world where everyone is playing a version of themselves.

**When you say that true filmmaking tries to get at the heart of a question, it’s not just about naturalist filmmaking, but also about the goal of your project.**

**Zhao**: For me to make a film, I have to know it will mean something to me, help me grow as a person. So that becomes a very crucial thing when deciding to do a project. It doesn’t matter what genre, because filmmaking is really a way of living, and life is short. [Laughs.]

**Can you discuss what these questions and themes are in *Nomadland*?**

**Zhao**: On a personal level, not just as a filmmaker, but as a viewer myself, it would be the importance of solitude. Solitude in nature. And also that feeling of being part of something much bigger than ourselves. Looking at a rock, a desert, a landscape — things that have been here way before us and will be here long after we’re gone. It’s the dirt underneath our feet; that’s where we come from, and that’s where we’ll end up. Sometimes we forget that these days, [as we sit at] our computers. When you’re standing in that landscape, nothing else defines you

except that you're part of it. Nothing matters because you're part of this cycle of life, it comes and goes, everything is decided. It's a very humbling feeling, and I think that's something we all need [to feel] as a species.

**How is the experience working as partners and collaborators?**

**Zhao:** To be honest, it's not always a sunny sky. [Laughs.] I know that the stronger the collaboration is, the more friction there will be. When you get comfortable with someone, it gives you the space to push yourself. Josh and I really pushed each other on the three films we did together. The most important thing is: Do you agree on how you want to conduct yourself in the world as a human being? Josh and I have always been on the same page regarding how we present ourselves when we go into people's lives, making films this way.

**With respect for the dignity of the people you shoot?**

**Zhao:** Yeah, because when you have that, it shines through in how you film them. I think an operator should have that kind of empathy for a person when their light shines. That's how they can see this individual even in the darkest times. Josh has that empathy, and that's what makes him a great cinematographer.

**Richards:** Chloé and I have formed a really close bond both personally and through the experience of making these films. We're on an exploration together. I really trust Chloé. I'm not sure I trust myself, but I do trust her. [Laughs.] She is digging a little deeper than other directors. The images need to give you a sense of Fern's inner world, but you also have to make the images sing. All of Chloé's films are really about identity. Who are you when you lose your town and all these things that society says are 'you'? When it's just you and the four walls of a van, you really find out who you are.

**What size crew did you have, and how do you approach the work on set?**

**Richards:** On *The Rider*, we were six. With *Nomadland*, we had about 25 key people. Chloé is very careful; we cast the crew in the same way she

casts the actors. I would like to mention my AC, Charles Bae; my gaffer, Matthew Attwood; and our art director, Elizabeth Godar.

Chloé does a broad shot-list, so there's a pretty solid plan at the beginning of every scene. We both know what she needs in the edit. Sometimes I don't even cut the camera, I just move quickly to get the moments Chloé wants. We're constantly looking at each other. It's unspoken — I kind of know [what she'll want].

**There's a lot of natural light in *Nomadland*.**

**Richards:** We used available light as much as possible and practicals inside. We stuck to that for 90 percent of the film. It was really fun to take the audience from those hundreds of miles of Badlands in either direction into the cocoon of Vanguard and the little paper lamp.

**Zhao:** From very early on, I made films so cheaply that we had nothing in our favor but the light in

the sky and the freedom of time. So if I can't put on a huge production, I'm going to wait for those 20 minutes [until the light is perfect]! No matter how much money you have, it's very hard to get that light right.

**Do you feel you are evolving Malick and Chivo's "dogma"?**

**Richards:** One-hundred percent. When I came out of *Tree of Life*, I collapsed on the sidewalk — I was making a show for my friends — and I was like, 'This is it!' I hope one day to have Chivo's kind of vision and sensitivity to light. But obviously, you have your own sensibility and your own aesthetic. Malick's world is pristine, a world in which God exists.

**Zhao:** Terry's films have such a huge influence on Josh and me. Beyond all these things we learn from him, like shooting at magic hour or with wide-angle lenses, the most important thing is what cinema really means to a filmmaker. Terry needs to explore something he wants to understand about the world, about human existence, and that shines through his cinema. In my first three films, I'm asking these questions as well.

***Nomadland* has real people with real wrinkles. Clearly, Frances McDormand was ready to play with the camera quite close.**



**Richards:** The film is really Frances' face, isn't it? One critic compared her face to a national park. Her face is lit every possible way in this movie. I shot all the close-ups with a 32mm [Arri/Zeiss] Ultra Prime [paired with Arri Alexa Mini and Arri Amira cameras], and I did get close. Fran was a collaborator all the way. There wasn't a makeup artist on set. Chloé and I are kind of challenging that approach to filmmaking. We want to see these people as they are because they're beautiful.

**The characters are often beautifully transformed by the sky, which is another character. In sunlit exteriors, you often resort to sidelight or backlight.**

**Richards:** Backlight separates people from the background, creating depth. In a natural environment, you get a blue bounce from the blue sky. To wrap that lighting, it feels more natural to use a blue bounce. That's probably something I learned from Chivo. It feels more organic than an eyelight [fixture, which this technique provides, but with natural light]. Those moments, when the sun is gone but is bouncing up into the sky, are special and precious. We try to be somewhere quiet and intimate, like following Fran [and her friend] Swankie through the desert as Swankie is talking about the twilight of her own life. These things feel spiritual to me, even though I'm not a spiritual person. Those are the best parts of life, when you find yourself in a moment where everything seems to come together.



**“Nomadland Is A Real Human Story That Is Not Over Yet” (Solarmovie)**

*[This is an interesting, but bizarre, interview with Jessica Bruder, who wrote the book on which the film was based. It was transcribed or edited by someone whose English was challenged: some words are clearly wrong, either misheard or mistranscribed. At one point, the interviewer refers to “Crimson Hook” in Brooklyn—the area is Red Hook. So some things are lost in translation. But enough of Bruder comes through to make this worth reading. BJ & DC]*

When Jessica Bruder was reporting Nomadland, her award-winning gonzo investigation of transient American seniors who comply with seasonal employment whereas dwelling out of their vans, she by no means imagined that the nomads with whom she was as much as her elbows in campground bogs would turn out to be film stars. Yet right here we're, almost 4 years out from the book's publication, and Nomadland has turned out to be a function film: an awards season darling directed by Chloé Zhao, starring Frances McDormand as a fictional protagonist alongside the real-life nomads featured in Bruder's book, who seem as themselves. For years, Bruder lived with and reported on these itinerant laborers, touring the American West in her personal van (christened Van Halen) and dealing grueling jobs alongside them all over the place from an Amazon success heart to a sugar beet harvesting plant. Nomadland is a contemporary Grapes of Wrath, depicting the dystopian financial dispossession of an ageing inhabitants for whom retirement is an out-of-reach dream.

Bruder's book focuses on Linda Could, a 64-year-old grandmother dwelling out of a secondhand Jeep who goals of constructing a sustainable “Earthship” dwelling. Different nomads from the book who seem in the film are Charlene Swankie, an skilled kayaker who's been dwelling on the street for over a decade, and Bob Wells, a well-known YouTuber and the founder of the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (an annual gathering of vandwellers in Quartzsite, Arizona). In Zhao's adaptation, McDormand performs Fern, a 61-year-old widow who embarks on the vandwelling life after the shuttering of Empire, the US Gypsum Company's firm city in Nevada, the place she and her late husband lived and labored. In her travels, Fern encounters a lot of Bruder's Real life nomads, together with Linda, with whom she works at a campsite in the Badlands; Swankie, with whom she spends time in Arizona; and Bob, who pours his coronary heart out to Fern on the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous.

On the conclusion of Nomadland, Linda had bought acreage in Douglas, Arizona, the place she supposed to construct an Earthship and stay a homesteading life-style. Solarmovie spoke with Bruder about the place the nomads featured in her book have ended up, in addition to how life on the street has modified in only a handful of years.

**Solarmovie: What did you consider the film adaptation of Nomadland?**



Jessica Bruder: I cherished it. Clearly I am not an impartial viewer, after all. I've been to so most of the places which can be in the film, reporting with people who are really in the film, so the sensation of déjà vu is overwhelming. In the very first scene, Fern hugs a gentleman I reported with about seven years in the past. For me, it was extremely poignant, and I assumed they did an unbelievable job with the feelings of the panorama. I simply cherished it. Seeing Swankie and Linda and Bob on the large display screen doing so properly, telling variations of their tales, and being validated was actually thrilling.

**ESQ: I found it so wonderful and surprising to actually see Swankie, Linda, and Bob playing themselves. What do you know about how that came to be?**

JB: Chloe Zhao has a convention of working with non-actors. In an odd approach, the problem wasn't the way to work with non-actors, but quite the way to combine Frances McDormand. I remember Chloe joking with me that she figured she'd be saying, "Linda, that's nice", and, "Frances, act much less." That stated, nothing was particular. I remember when Chloe first requested me if I assumed that Linda could be good on digicam, and my response was, "I do not know what makes somebody good on digicam." I do know what made her a wonderful topic for the book, as she's somebody I adopted for about three years—what made her a wonderful topic was that she did not ever flip it on for me. She by no means turned it on once I was recording her and following her round like a misplaced duckling. The way in which she was with me was the way in which she was with everyone, whether or not it was folks at a campsite or folks on the job elsewhere. That unselfconsciousness made her actually wonderful to comply with, as a result of she didn't have a whole lot of pretense and was snug in her personal pores and skin. These are issues that I imagined and hoped would translate properly to being in entrance of the digicam. I launched Chloe to Linda, they usually actually hit it off.

**ESQ: What makes Linda such a compelling topic in your book—it fully came across in the**

**film. Her heat, her generosity, her cheer—it's all there. It was enjoyable to see that person I fell for on the web page come to life as her Real self on the display screen.**



*Jessica Bruder*

JB: Linda is Linda, irrespective of the place she goes. She's remarkably unselfconscious, and from an author's perspective, she's a quote machine. I really like the way in which she holds herself. I really like the way in which she talks. I'm thrilled for different folks to see extra of that, as a result of it was wonderful for me once I adopted her round for 3 years.

**ESQ: What was the extent of your involvement with the film?**

JB: I do not know how this often goes, as a result of that is my first rodeo, but

formally I used to be a consulting producer. I needed to assist, so I sent Chloe a whole lot of analysis that did not make it into the book. I had a ton of fabric on Empire and the way it used to look, in addition to extra materials on folks I'd labored with. Sooner or later, somebody needed to listen to how folks they were contemplating for casting sounded, so I sent them some interview materials. I also made a whole lot of introductions, which is frightening as a result of Chloe seemed extremely proficient, but whenever you're making these introductions, you wish to actually feel you're sending your topics into good arms.

I used to be not the screenwriter, although; Chloe was the screenwriter. I used to be an additional on the set for a few week in Arizona, and that was a visit. I used to be on the market with my van, they usually were recreating the primary Rubber Tramp Rendezvous I went to, which was again in 2014 earlier than it was 1000's of individuals. Again then, it was round 75 folks, but they did not wish to take attendance, as a result of if it hit 75, they'd really must pay for a allow. This all appears comical now, as a result of it is gotten a lot bigger.

**ESQ: So you continue to have Van Halen?**

JB: I do. I used to be imagined to go to Reno for some Nevada talking gigs in April 2020; I had the van staged and able to go in a buddy's yard. It hasn't

moved since then, and it had already been sitting there for about six months. My buddies are caring for it for me, but I am actually wanting to get again to the van when the world permits that.

**ESQ: I'm reminded of one thing you wrote in the coda of the book: "The story retains unfolding into the longer term, but sooner or later you step away." have you managed to step away for the reason that book came out in 2017?**

JB: I am nonetheless in contact with everyone, which is unbelievable, notably contemplating how issues are persevering with the film. After I was reporting the book, I needed to see the place folks were going; years later, I nonetheless wish to see the place they are going. It was undoubtedly bizarre the primary time that I did not attend the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous. I do not assume I've stayed unhealthily connected to it, but I am not documenting folks anymore—I am simply having conversations with them. At this level they really feel extra like folks I've shared this loopy journey with than they really feel like topics. When you consider that this went from a very random pitch to Harper's, a publication I'd by no means written for on the time, after which it turned a canopy story, which turned a book... none of this was assured or assumed. I could not have imagined it. Now it's a film, which is a complete thrill. I do know a bunch of individuals whose books were optioned but by no means made into motion pictures, so I attempted to take every part with a grain of salt. Then it occurred, and it occurred rapidly. At this level, I really feel like I've been on a wild journey with the folks I used to be reporting on. It's not a lot of a supply relationship anymore; it is a friendship cast in actually odd circumstances.

They really feel extra like folks I've shared this loopy journey with than they really feel like topics.

**ESQ: What have you heard from Linda, Swankie, and Bob about what it was wish to be film stars?**

JB: Linda obtained such a kick out of it. I remember speaking to her when she was heading to the set at Wall Drug. When you're dwelling in a van or trailer, you do not have a bath. She would usually take showers at different places. When she checked

into the resort for the shoot, she was tremendous stoked in regards to the bathtub. She sent me an image of her canine, Coco, sitting in the bathtub. She also sent me an image of her and Frances sitting at Wall Drug. It was actually cool as a result of, in direction of the tip of the book, I went out to Arizona and confirmed her the land she bought through video chat. I used to be her Mars Rover in that approach, transmitting data again to her. When she went into film land, she turned my Mars Rover.

I remember her being somewhat overwhelmed by how it's whenever you're on set and everyone is continually after you. Do you want this? Do you want water? Do you want a chair? Linda is so used to doing stuff on her personal that I feel being attended to in that approach was hilarious at first, after which pleasing. That was a kick in the pants. She was the person I used to be in contact with most intently across filming.

**ESQ: Talking of Linda's land—what are you able to inform us about what progress she's made homesteading on her land and attaining her dream of constructing an Earthship?**



JB: After I completed the book, I went again to Linda's land with my finest buddy, Dale Maharidge. Dale was the person I might name in the course of the night time

once I was reporting and questioning if this was actually a narrative. He and I took the van and headed out to Douglas, Arizona to satisfy up with Linda and her buddy Gary. She had constructed the PVC body for a very massive greenhouse, as a result of she was planning to homestead. We helped her put an enormous sheet of plastic on and fasten it on either side of the pipe; we also helped her with some jobs that were higher with extra arms. It was actually a blast, being on the market working together with her—working for her. She knew precisely what she needed. We were simply the muscle.

It will get actually scorching in Douglas. When Linda came again after being away, the PVC construction had melted. It's a quite common construction to make use of for greenhouses; it isn't like she made a mistake or did one thing unique. She had a swamp cooler arrange, and we might helped reduce a vent, but local weather management was actually tough. She figured that perhaps this wasn't her endlessly piece of land. She donated it to the

Houses on Wheels Alliance, which is a nonprofit Bob began to assist nomads in want. They were hoping to make use of it as some type of approach station for people who are new to the street. With cash from the film, she ended up shopping for a patch of land outdoors of Taos and is at the moment homesteading there with a couple of buddies. She hasn't constructed an Earthship; what she's actually centered on now are some fascinating greenhouse concepts. Dale and I, in addition to half of the film crew, volunteered to exit and pound tires to assist her construct an Earthship, Yet it surely's simply an enormous enterprise, and after the previous few years, Linda could also be prepared to relax out just a bit. Proper now she's specializing in smaller tasks, which I feel is nice. No matter makes her pleased. She's doing sustainable constructing planning, and he or she's good. Seeing that has been fairly unbelievable.

**ESQ: How do you anticipate that this would possibly change her life? Will she return to the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous and be welcomed as a hero? How is the group going to obtain this film, and the involvement of individuals like Linda?**

JB: I feel individuals are into it. When the film was being shot close to the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, the precise Rubber Tramp Rendezvous was also occurring. Speak about a mindfuck. We were recreating the 2014 tiny Rubber Tramp Rendezvous whereas the one with 1000's of holiday makers was also beginning up. After being on set for the pretend Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, we went over to the true one. All people was carrying title badges. They put one thing foolish on mine, like "Word Slinger." On Linda's, they put "Star." She really took it again and requested for one which simply had her title on it. I do not assume she actually needed that type of consideration. She definitely does not court docket it, but I feel that group has been supportive. When you consider that Bob Wells, who began the RTR, has such an enormous function in the film, I feel everyone's rooting for them.

**ESQ: In the years for the reason that book came out, a lot in regards to the world has modified, Yet a lot stays alarmingly the identical.**



**After all, the elephant in the room is the pandemic. How has the pandemic affected American nomads? Have they been uniquely imperiled?**

JB: It's horrible to be sick whenever you're on the street, notably if you happen to be on the market solo. Silvianna, who's in the book, informed me that she had COVID and convalesced in her van. That actually does not sound like enjoyable in any respect. Nevertheless it's humorous—lots of people I talked to fared higher than I anticipated, as a result of so a lot of them are staying in distant places and are introverts to start with. That was an odd benefit. They may also drive to wherever COVID circumstances were decrease, in the event that they needed to. but I feel the craziness with the financial system, and notably if this eviction wave occurs, may flood the ecosystem that they stay in, which may make issues tougher. Bob even shared a video on his YouTube channel about what to do if you happen to get evicted from your own home and also you're shifting right into a home on wheels. Proper now, everyone has their favourite spots, and folks need to have the ability to do stealth parking in cities typically, which is staying in a single day and remaining undetected. The extra

folks doing that, the more durable it might turn out to be for folks to remain under the radar. On the identical time, what was occurring in the course of the book continues to be occurring: there are such a lot of cities primarily criminalizing houselessness and making it against the law to sleep in your automotive. You could have that strain

going each methods.

**ESQ: Has the pandemic affected nomads' employment prospects?**

JB: I do not know anyone who misplaced a job, but I learn the boards on-line and I've heard that some employers are hiring fewer folks. I am certain folks were impacted in that approach, as a result of a whole lot of nationwide parks and campsites were closed too. For individuals who like to remain in parks, that was difficult. The place are you able to go? The panorama completely shifted. There were web sites for nomads that had ongoing lists monitoring which parks were open and which parks were closed, as a result of it was an ever-evolving state of affairs that turned a patchwork. Some nomads stayed with buddies or leaned on folks they knew who didn't

thoughts them driving out the pandemic by parking close to a home.

**ESQ: I were fascinated about Amazon’s CamperForce, as there’s been a lot glorious reporting in regards to the horrible circumstances in Amazon success facilities in the course of the pandemic. Has the CamperForce been affected by these unsafe practices?**

JB: I do not know anyone at the moment in CamperForce. There’s a whole lot of attrition, so folks I knew doing the job a couple of years in the past are now not doing it. but once I was there, the identical security requirements that utilized to full-time Amazon staff also utilized to CamperForce staff. There was actually no distinction made. I do know that Amazon continues to be using CamperForce staff; In truth, when their map was on-line in the course of the hiring interval, they were hiring for extra states than I would ever seen, which I assumed was outstanding. I would think about CamperForce staff are coping with no matter different staff are coping with.

Individuals usually ask me: why do not these folks unionize? I feel the factor that’s usually ignored is that these are folks doing transient jobs; they’re plug and play labor. They’re there after which they’re gone. So a lot of them are used to ageism in the workforce, and since they’re somewhat older, it is a different

generational angle. Lots of people really feel that they need to be grateful to have the job. Even when they did not really feel that approach, they are not round lengthy sufficient to

arrange. Whereas I feel unionization spillover would affect the CamperForce, I by no means anticipated them to be main the cost on something like this.

**ESQ: Your book is basically about retirees, but in the years since Nomadland was printed, the hashtag “#vanlife” has taken off. have you adopted this motion?**

JB: Van life cracks me up. In order for you a fast giggle, Google “#vanlife and responsible unconscious”; there is a parody track about #vanlife

that’s simply chic.

Truthfully, I really feel like #vanlife is extra of a model than a motion at this level. I feel there are folks out on the street doing their factor, but I also assume there’s a slice of Instagram influencers really managing to search out sponsorship for his or her life-style. That’s such a small, aspirational place to be. It is simpler to speak about the way you’re into minimalism than to debate how the job market sucks, and scholar loans are Real, and the federal minimal wage is flat. Lots of these forces at work on older of us in the book are also at work on youthful generations. It is laborious to get a superb job now; the value of housing retains climbing, as properly. but we as a tradition are actually into positivity, which typically turns into what I wish to name weaponized positivity. I feel it is nice that individuals are doing their factor, but this branded expertise is mainly somewhat atoll of vogue in a panorama that is way more sophisticated. It’s extracting probably the most photogenic and aspirational elements of this life-style, thereby making everyone looks like they need to be dwelling this manner, when it is actually only a few folks.

**ESQ: To your information, do these younger influencer sorts combine in any respect with the nomads you knew? Do they go to the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous?**

JB: There were so many individuals on the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous; there may have properly been influencers there. The inhabitants has most likely turn out to be extra balanced between youthful folks and older folks in the years since I first attended. You undoubtedly see lots of people who’ve painted “comply with our weblog” on their autos. The factor that basically makes me roll my eyes are people who are sponsored. Loads of folks would like to stay off their blogs, but are combining it with different types of employment.

**ESQ: So is it possible to get rich on #vanlife?**

JB: I do not know anybody who’s performed it, but you see a couple of folks on the market portray very shiny pictures. Both they were rich earlier than or their sponsorships have taken off. I roll my eyes in any respect of it.

**ESQ: What these shiny pictures miss are the gritty realities you seize in the book, like utilizing a bucket in the van as a bathroom.**



JB: I used to be thrilled that the Nomadland film included that. I assumed it was fairly outstanding how the film captured the gritty realities of dwelling on the street. In the meantime, on the precise street, I remember when Swankie was out at a gathering of nomads, they usually were all sitting across the campfire. These were individuals who were in these shiny new rigs; they might were vacationers who lived part-time on the street. They stated, “The place’s your rig? What do you reside in?” She pointed to her van, and apparently they left their very own campfire, which is nuts. Even on this small group, you’ve got class hierarchies. It’s actually unhappy.

**ESQ: There is a part late in the book the place you think about how your white privilege formed your expertise whenever you tried out van life. You write, “In an period when unarmed African People are getting shot by police across site visitors stops, dwelling in a vehicle looks as if an particularly harmful gambit for anybody who would possibly turn out to be a sufferer of racial profiling.” Because you printed this in 2017, racist terror and violence have continued to escalate. Has it turn out to be extra unsafe to be a nomad of colour?**

JB: What I do know is that there are folks pushing to point out the tradition you could be an individual of colour on the street. I’ve seen extra folks on the market who’re running a blog and speaking about it. I really met a lady on the set with whom I talked lengthy hours about this. She informed me that at one level, she was stranded in the desert, and everyone again dwelling was apprehensive about her. She tried to clarify to them, “It’s identical to on the block. I’ll watch for folks to get up after which anyone will bounce my automotive.” I feel individuals are making an attempt to bridge worlds, Yet it surely’s not simply people who are Black If you consider Latinos getting hassled on the border, and the truth that there are inland checkpoints, which are not actually on the border, folks shall be profiled there.

I feel it is completely comprehensible that individuals are reticent. I feel the arbitrary cruelty and monstrosity of what occurred to George Floyd undoubtedly put that to the forefront of the dialog, though it was a reasonably large deal earlier than. I



have not heard of an individual of colour dwelling in a van and being shot by a police officer; I’m glad to not have an instance of such a horrible factor. but I can see how folks is likely to be extra reluctant to strive dwelling on the street if they’re extra weak to brutality.

**ESQ: Lots of this book takes place in Trump nation. States usually are not monoliths, after all, but most of the states that folks move by way of in the book are states that voted purple. To your information in the years following the book, how have the divisions in the nation affected or divided the nomad group, if in any respect?**

JB: Many of the instances once I was round folks, they weren’t speaking politics. It was a much less fraught time, but I did not see a ton of politicking on-line both. I attribute that to a couple issues. One is that when nomads get collectively, there’s usually a tacit settlement to not discuss politics. In a bizarre approach, they’re post-political in that they’ve misplaced religion in the quote unquote system; they do not assume the cavalry is coming anytime quickly.

They do not assume they’ll have that a lot of an effect on authorities. It doesn’t matter who’s in the White Home. I do know individuals who would say, “Identical puppet; different hand.”

Persons are getting social safety and different authorities advantages, after all; if that stopped, they’d be screwed. but I feel there is a approach through which they almost really feel a bit outdoors of it, to be sincere. When you’re dwelling in a van, it is such as you’re off the grid. I feel folks really feel a bit disconnected. Some folks do vote. I remember Lavonne voted for Hillary, and was speaking about it on-line. but usually the group cannot even try this, as a result of in case you have a pretend handle, which nearly everyone has to, or the handle of a mail forwarder, it is fairly doubtless that the handle will not be in the state the place you’re positioned when the polls open. Individuals on the street are sometimes disenfranchised.

**ESQ: Toward the tip of the book, you flip the lens to Brooklyn, writing about how individuals are stealth-camping in Crimson Hook. have you seen that development proceed to rise in American cities?**

JB: Completely. I am somebody who lives in

Brooklyn, so I've seen extra of it in Brooklyn. I remember firstly of COVID, in an space the place I hadn't seen folks earlier than, there was an RV, a trailer, and individuals who had arrange camp there. There are folks below overpasses. There are much more autos than I've seen earlier than. We get all of the reviews from California, the place an fascinating and really unhappy factor is going on. Lots of people who've stationary, dependable jobs are unable to afford housing. They're not hitting the street; they're simply shifting into autos which can be parked in the identical areas and commuting to work. You primarily have a metal tent. City nomads are undoubtedly on the rise.



**Jenny Kane: “Nomadland’s Empire is a real place in northern Nevada desert” (AP, March 6, 2021)**

Each morning, Brandy Wilber wakes up to a sweeping view of the desert and the sound of gypsum being crushed at the plant. This is life in Empire.

“It might not seem like much to other people, but this is our home. It’s a lot more than just home: It’s home, it’s work, it’s family,” said Wilber, who manages the general store in town.

In recent weeks, the town of Empire has been made famous by “Nomadland,” a film that won best picture and best director at the Golden Globes Awards on Sunday. The film is now in theaters and streaming on Hulu.

Wilber, who stars in the movie briefly with her daughters as a friend of the main character, acted as a town liaison for the crew.

Like many of the film’s cast, Wilber is one of the Northern Nevada locals that starred as herself. The director, Chloé Zhao, is known for blending fiction with reality in her films. “Nomadland” is no different.

Empire serves as the home in the rearview mirror of the main character, Fern, played by actress

Frances McDormand. As the movie opens, Fern is setting out on a journey to find a new lifestyle and purpose after the company town she lived in with her late husband is shutdown. Fern is fictional, though both her story and Empire’s are rooted in truth.

Empire is located about 90 miles (145 kilometers) north of Reno, just south of the Black Rock Desert where the Burning Man arts festival takes place.

Today, the town is home to a general store, a gas pump, a storage business and the gypsum mining operations, which -- true to the movie’s plot -- closed in 2011. The operations resumed in 2016, but not to the level of their heydays in the 20th century.

Travelers can best mark their arrival in Empire when they see the company factory. The plant “rises like a giant white frosted cake from the desert,” a journalist from the Nevada State Journal wrote in 1953.

In the early 1920s, the Pacific Portland Cement Company operated the gypsum quarry and mine. Gypsum is commonly used for plaster board, or Sheetrock, used in construction. Empire was said to be home to one of the “finest gypsum deposits in the world,” the Nevada State Journal reported at the time, and the U.S. Gypsum Company bought the operation for more than \$2 million in 1948.

By 1950, the town was booming with workers mining around the clock, the Journal reported, and adding housing to support about 200 people, including workers and their families. The town of Gerlach, best known today as the last stop before Burning Man, was just a few miles north. Gerlach townspeople called Empire simply “the camp.”

“Nearby Gerlach is experiencing a small boom of its own as a result of the growth of Empire, as is reflected in the advent of electric power and neon signs in that community during the last year,” the Journal reported in 1950. “Gerlach is Empire’s play town to some extent, although it is probable if things go on as they are now that Empire will be bigger than Gerlach soon.”

At the time, neither community had telephone service still, but residents were said to love life in Empire.

They described a tight knit community where the kids ran free and swam all summer in the community pool. The parents enjoyed golf at the course in town and tennis at the courts.

The entire community would gather for basketball tournaments, and the children would go rabbit hunting after school since the desert was only

“five feet 5 feet (1.5 meters) from our backyards,” a former resident, Steven Lambert, once told the Reno Gazette Journal.

USG shut down all operations, both mining and Sheetrock production, in early 2011 after the economic downturn tanked the construction industry. At the time, USG employed about 100 people and ran the town of Empire, which had about 300 residents when it closed.

In years past, the town’s population was as many as 800, but with an evaporated population, Empire lost its zip code: 89405.

The school in Gerlach struggled to keep enough students to stay open. Enrollment in recent years has hovered between 10 and 40 students, depending on the year.

The town of Empire lost much of its charm as well. While surrounded by a chain link fence, the facilities suffered neglect.

Two llamas -- named Tony Llama and Llama Bahama -- were placed inside the perimeter to keep the weeds at bay.

Bushes entirely engulfed basketball hoops, swing sets and laundry lines left behind by the former residents. Inside the homes, many which were left unlocked, walls had the faint outline of frames that once hung. Bedrooms still had glow-in-the-dark stars, murals and kitten-shaped light switch covers left behind.



“Some of the old mill offices, if you go over there, the calendar is still on that date, the day that it shut down in 2011,” said David Hornsby, president and chief operating officer of Empire Mining Co. when he moved to the site in 2016. “Still half-full coffee cups, all their files still on their desk. It’s kind of like a bomb just went off and they all evacuated. It’s pretty weird.”

Empire Mining Co., based in Las Vegas, bought the town, plant and mine in 2016 for nearly \$11.4 million. Unlike USG, Empire Mining Co. does not have manufacturing on-site. The gypsum is today shipped to companies that make fertilizer and cement.

Today, the town is home to about 70 residents altogether, including workers and their families. While many of the facilities have not reopened, about two dozen houses have been remodeled.

Wilber said, though the town still might look abandoned from afar during the winter, it regains some of its vitality in the summer. No matter the season, though, the llamas still roam the town and greet her each morning at her window for oats. She’s nicknamed them Mo and Jo.

The company last year additionally purchased the Empire Market, formerly known as the Empire Store.

“I would have loved to have seen the town back in the day, but I think a lot of people that live in Empire now have that same feeling: We love this place,” Wilber said.

### **JUST ONE MORE IN THE FALL 2021 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 43:**

November 30 Rob Reiner THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

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