

Nomadland

The Grapes of Wrath (1940) follows Okies moving into California where they are attacked for taking local jobs but strike for half-way decent wages at fruit - picking.

Nomadland is not wrath but loss.

Its story lines trail around Fern, played by Frances McDormand (remember *Fargo*?) and an otherwise non-professional cast playing themselves.

Fern is absorbing the death of her husband, and the death of her community after the 2011 closure of the Nevada gypsum mine and associated processing works, to become a ghost town without so much as a ZIP Code.

She describes herself as 'houseless' not 'homeless' because she has the one-ton van that she and her husband drove. Her fellow nomads live in vans, rarely caravans and never Winnabagos.

Aware of how little she can take with her, Fern selects a china plate which her father had collected, as a link back to him. When it is dropped, she glues it together, a metaphor for how she is repairing her life.

No more bad things happen to her. She isn't raped, robbed, shot at or harassed by local police. No nomad exercises her or his right to bear arms.

Others tell Fern their paths to nomadland. A woman in her late '50s lost her job in 2008 only to learn that a lifetime of unskilled labour entitled her to \$550 a month: 'So, I'll have to work till I die.'

The storyline is striking for how much unglamorous work is shown, from packing for Amazon, cleaning lavatories, shoveling potatoes and flipping burgers.

The story is set long before Covid. How now in Nevada? No doubt it is safer on the road or working in a field than in the 'existential shithole' of Amazon.

The sole political comment is Fern's polite admonition of a real estate agent for drawing people into mortgages he knew they could never repay.

Nonetheless, it is not difficult to see how the fates that have befallen these people provide support for Sanders and for Trump, even swinging from one to the other.

Nomadland is a reminder to organise from where people are, not from megaphone marxists proclaiming where they ought to be.

The workers sustain each other but with no hint of resisting the bosses – not even in the hellscape that is Amazon. This is not *Salt of the Earth* (1952) where Mexican miners strike. To impose that level of organisation would be false. It would also devalue what this generation of nomads achieve.

A bushy beard arranges roadside camps to honour his son who had given himself to death five years earlier. He explains to newcomers that the system is sinking and we have to get as many of us as we can into lifeboats. That means joining forces to the build the boats, to row them and to keep them shipshape.

The nomads show each other how to repair a tyre, and how to take care of one's own shit – literally - with two buckets, a plastic one inside a metal one.

Nomadland is reminding us of a collectivist strand in North American life against the commodified libertarianism on anti-social media.

Fern's sister's well-intentioned comparison of today's nomads with the pioneers crossing the prairie suggests a rugged individualism. Yet they built each

others' houses and barns, along with schools and churches for their communities.

From the 1880s, the homesteaders organised against rail, grain and meat Trusts, encouraged by Laurence Gronlund's *Co-operative Commonwealth* (1891). Their agrarian socialism led to the Conference for Progressive Action in the mid-West, which won one vote in six at the 1924 Presidential poll.

These wanderers connect through music of all kinds, except there's no happy-clappies.

Fern recalls poetry from her years as a high-school teacher, reciting 'Shall I compare thee with summer's day' for a young feral missing his girl back home.

Although she cannot get past her own grief, she is never self-pitying. She flees the offer of a perfect match because it will mean saying that her first love is over.

This self-denial is in keeping with the nomads' parting company with the promise 'See you down the road,' never 'Good-bye,' not even when farewelling someone who has died.

The Grapes of Wrath is witness to agricultural practices which turned fertile soil into dust bowls. This time, encounters with the natural world, from the snow through deserts to the surf, are restorative. Should you live where you can see *Nomadland* on a cinema screen, do so for the panoramas.

The nomads gather to hear about geology and astronomy, as if at a road stop U3A. They find semi-precious stones, fossilized rocks and crystallised minerals to gift from empty pockets.

Don't expect *Nomadland* to lift your spirits as do *Women of Steel*, *Pride* and *White Riot*. Rather, two hours with these nomads honours sociability, restoring its place in our struggles for socialism.

[Directed and written by Chloe Zhao, based on a book, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the twenty-first century* by Jessica Bruder.]