

Film Review: "*Land*"

Robin Wright's directorial debut, *Land*, is a moving and intelligent film that failed to receive the critical acclaim it richly deserves. Apparently, film criticism has regressed to the point where critics now pan any film that doesn't feature *zombies* or *Bigfoot*. Allegories seem to pose a problem, as well.

This may explain the tepid reviews on certain clueless websites that make a mockery of critiquing and rating films. What this film does offer are the Christian themes of **forgiveness** and **redemption**, folded into the allegory of the "*Good Samaritan*." *Land* is an emotionally stirring film that deftly manages to avoid wallowing in sentimentality.

I was initially wary of this film because of reservations about Robin Wright, herself. She was a scene-stealer as *Jenny* in *Forrest Gump*, but I had nagging doubts about her judgement because she was once married to Sean Penn, one of the most loathsome of Hollywood creatures. However, *Land* exemplifies the kind of art that talented filmmakers in small and independent studios can still occasionally produce.

Edee (Robin Wright) is an attorney who once had a loving family, but the mystery of her tragic past is withheld until the very end of the film to create dramatic tension. In an early scene, *Edee* concedes to her therapist that "***It's difficult to be around people.***" In their last meeting, she confides to her close and loving sister *Emma* that she plans to move away and live "*off the grid.*"

Emma intuitively recognizes *Edee's* intentions, and begs her not to carry out her plan. *Emma* holds onto *Edee* and there is a brief scuffle that causes *Edee* to let out a primal scream from deep within her tortured soul. She blurts out that *Emma* can't begin to understand her pain.

In the next scene *Edee* is driving a rented car and trailer and is being led up into the Alaskan Mountains to be shown the cabin and land where she intends to live. Its panoramic view of wild Alaska is hauntingly beautiful, but the real estate agent who brokered her purchase is just as apprehensive as the viewing audience. He tries to warn her of the dangers of living in such a remote and desolate locale without the benefit of a vehicle or telephone, but she brusquely dismisses his concerns.

She has few survival skills and has grossly underestimated the difficulty of such a life. In addition to being without a vehicle or telephone, she has little skill at fishing or cutting and splitting wood, nor does she initially recognize the need to protect her garden from the deer and elk she can't bring herself to shoot for food. After a black bear enters her cabin and consumes or destroys most of her winter food store, she is devastated and truly in desperate circumstances. Hunger and hypothermia make even simple tasks difficult and in despair, she lays down on the floor of her cabin to die.

Initially, it's difficult to sympathize with *Edee*, who seems to be just another arrogant feminist lawyer, whose *hubris* makes her unwilling to recognize the limitations of her gender. However, she becomes increasingly sympathetic and pitiable after the loss of her food stores, as she gamely but hopelessly attempts to replenish them. Sometimes her will to live is restored through loving memories of her family and sister, who appear to her in visions that inspire her to persevere.

Her intentions are somewhat ambiguous, but it becomes increasingly evident during this first winter that she will likely die there. She seriously contemplates suicide with her rifle, but a vision of her sister dissuades her from completing the act. Her plight is discovered by a hunter named *Miguel*, who finds *Edee* on the floor of her cabin and on the verge of death from starvation, dehydration and hypothermia. This **Good**

Samaritan soon returns with a nurse named *Alawa* from the nearby town of Quincy, located at a lower elevation.

With instructions from *Alawa*, *Miguel* slowly and painstakingly nurses *Edee* back to health. He learned from *Alawa* how to give her IVs, he builds fires to keep her warm, and makes broth to replenish her electrolytes. *Miguel* visits her regularly to bring her food and split wood for her, and offers her companionship without conditions attached. He chivalrously rejects her offer to reimburse him for the nursing care and supplies which he clearly purchased, because he tells her he couldn't take money "**for doing the right thing.**"

After she recovers significantly, *Miguel* offers to continue his visits and teach her how to hunt so she won't starve to death. As he pointedly told her after sensing her intentions, "**Only a person who has never been hungry would think that starving is a good way to die.**" *Edee* has only one request of *Miguel* if he is to visit on a regular basis: that he not bring any news from the outside world. She tells him only that "**I'm here because I choose to be.**"

Edee slowly begins to appreciate *Miguel's* companionship, because of his generosity and the respect he shows her by not asking about her past or bringing her news from the outside world. It reminds her that good can still be found in some people. As she is healing, she tells *Miguel* that she is once again able to appreciate life's simpler pleasures and the beauty of the world around her. *Edee* also finds that she is now able to look at family photos which were too painful to view for a long time. During her recovery she becomes less self-absorbed and preoccupied with her tragic past.

As *Miguel* teaches *Edee* how to hunt and trap, he becomes her mentor. *Edee* even calls him "Yoda" at one point, but *Miguel* has never seen any of the **Star Wars** films. They rarely talk about their past, but the one thing

they have in common is an appreciation for 1980s "pop tunes," whose lyrics they sometimes sing together. In one of the few conversations they have about the past, *Miguel* volunteers to *Edee* that his wife and daughter were killed in an auto accident. That is the tragedy from his own past. She indicates to him only that she "*had a family, once.*"

Without necessarily recognizing it at first, they have saved each other. They have given each other a renewed reason to live, despite the great tragedies in their lives. *Edee* enjoys *Miguel's* company and looks forward to it, even his singing. He visits regularly, but one day he informs her that he won't be back for awhile, and asks if she would look after his German Shepherd-mix that he always brings along on his visits? To this she readily consents. *Miguel* is clearly conscious of the fact that caring for his dog will force *Edee* to think less about herself and the mysterious tragedy in her past.

After several months, *Edee* begins to worry about *Miguel*, who has never been away this long. She and the dog hike an entire day's journey to Quincy to find *Miguel*. In the town's small hospital she locates *Alawa*, the nurse who helped *Miguel* save her life. *Alawa* is astonished to see *Edee* restored to health and drives her to *Miguel's* home when she gets off work. *Edee* discovers the reason *Miguel* has not returned to visit her is because he is now bed-ridden and near death from throat cancer. He never informed her of his illness because she had insisted on "*no news from the outside.*"

After some initial small talk at his bedside, *Miguel* thanks *Edee*, who is overcome with emotion and tells him that it is **SHE** who is indebted to **HIM** for saving her life. In this, the most moving scene in the film, he tells her that "*You offered me a way to die in a state of grace.*" To this *Edee* tearfully replies, "*You made me want to live again.*" His last gift to her is his cell phone, supposedly because it has all his 1980s tunes in it, but

really because Miguel recognizes it may be the only way she will ever renew contact with her surviving family members.

As *Edee* is about to leave, *Miguel* tells her the dark tragedy in his own past: He confesses to her that he used to drink too much and that he was responsible for killing his wife and daughter in a drunk-driving accident. *Edee* then divulges her darkest secret to him and tells him that her beloved husband and son were murdered at a concert hall by a random assailant with a gun.

I don't know if Robin Wright has any religious convictions, but the Christian themes of *forgiveness* and *redemption* are evident throughout this film. The generosity and kindness *Miguel* showed *Edee* by saving her life and nursing her back to health gave his own life meaning and a renewed purpose. At one point in his mentorship, *Edee* asks him why he helped her, to which he replies "*You're my project.*"

Saving *Edee* helped *Miguel* redeem himself in his own eyes for the tragedy and losses he caused. In saving *Edee*, he was able to forgive even himself. His wife's family has also forgiven him, because it is at his sister-in-law's house that *Edee* finds Miguel bed-ridden and dying when she comes to visit him.

Likewise, *Miguel's* generosity and altruism allowed *Edee* to forgive humanity for its many faults and help her to recall that not all people are evil and dangerous and to be avoided. She has also forgiven herself, despite suffering from what is often called "*survivor's guilt.*" As she told *Miguel*, his generosity made it possible for her to want to live again. In the final scene, she uses Miguel's phone to call her sister.

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