

Frozen River

By: Owen Gleiberman

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Rating A-

In **Frozen River**, the veteran actress Melissa Leo has one of those faces that's all creases and hollows and weather-roughened valleys. As Ray, who lives in a dingy, broken-down trailer home in upstate New York with her two sons (and, when he's around, her louse of a husband), Leo looks as if life has been beating her up from almost the moment she was born. She's desolate, all right, but she isn't weak. Her don't-mess-with-me glare, all bones and sinew, is that of a woman who can't afford femininity, whose existence has been melted down to pure survival. (She's like a [Bonnie Raitt](#) who has been around the block more times than the real one.) I first saw Leo playing a teenage hooker in the grubby little 1985 exploitation picture [Streetwalkin'](#), and even there (she was in her mid-20s), she had a sullen charge that pierced the film's phony surface. In *Frozen River*, Leo's acting has a brittle severity and power. Every moment of her performance feels torn from experience, and so does the movie, which finds a suspense in broken lives that are hanging in the balance.

Frozen River, which took the Grand Jury Prize at [Sundance](#) this year, has the festival's imprimatur of social relevance — it's a tale of hardscrabble economic woe — yet as written and directed by Courtney Hunt, the movie is no somber, medicinal downer. It takes the form of a thriller you can believe in. Ray's husband, a gambling addict, has run off to Atlantic City with the down payment Ray had planned to use for a new double-wide trailer home. (To save up, she's been feeding her kids popcorn and Tang.) When Lila (Misty Upham), a Mohawk Indian from a local reservation, tries to steal her car, Ray discovers a moneymaking scheme: The blankly morose and pitiless Lila smuggles illegal immigrants (mostly from China) at \$600 a pop, driving them across a nearby frozen river that's an unchecked U.S./Canada border. Ray, weary of slaving away as a dollar-store cashier, agrees to be Lila's driver (she'll attract less attention because she's white), and for everyone involved these trips are perilous potential death rides of hunger and fear. Ray couldn't care less about the people she's transporting; her lack of piety makes the movie sting — and gives it life. So do Ray's run-ins with a local trooper. *Frozen River* is a tale of ordinary Americans scraping bottom, yet there's a redemption in that. The film asks: If you were this desperate, wouldn't you do the same?