

# In 'River,' searching for hope at the bottom

By Ty Burr, Globe Staff  
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"Frozen River" does what too many independent American movies only pretend to do: Takes you to an unnoticed corner of our country and shows what it's like to actually live there.

The "there" in this case is upstate New York - way upstate by the Canadian border, where the town of Massena and the Mohawk nation of Akwesasne sit cheek by jowl along the St. Lawrence River. It's an area known by some as the country's "fourth coast," not least because of the illegal immigrants who can cross into this country through Native American lands unpatrolled by the INS.

It's also an area where poverty is so ingrained that every day is a scrape to get food on the table. When we first meet Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo), we almost don't see her at all, she's that ordinary. The face is a mask of extinguished hope, beady eyes over a tight-lipped mouth. Whatever youth she had once is long gone; somewhere north of 35, Ray's just old. She's the woman who gives you change at the rural truck stop or works the counter at the dollar mart. Yet by the end of Courtney Hunt's quietly stunning drama, Ray has become a worn saint out of a Depression-era Dorothea Lange photo.

We never do meet Ray's husband. He has taken the family nest egg and headed south to Atlantic City - again - and in the void, 15-year-old son T.J. (Charlie McDermott) tries to be the man of the family. His mother would prefer he stay in school and be a kid while he still can. Both are protective of younger son Ricky (James Reilly), who's too little to know that popcorn and Tang isn't breakfast.

"Frozen River" gazes levelly at these people, without the saving inflections of melodrama, and when it introduces Ray to Lila (Misty Upham), a stone-faced young Mohawk woman who has been smuggling illegals over the border, you're not sure at first which way the movie's going to go. Perhaps that's what social interaction is like in a world as frostbitten as this, each party waiting for the other to tip her hand. It doesn't make matters easier that Ray looks down her nose at Mohawks while Lily knows she's better than poor white trash.

They need each other, though, financially and ultimately in ways they'd never try to put words to. Lila sees Ray as a white woman with a car, which means the state troopers won't stop her. Ray looks at the \$600 that's her share for ferrying two strangers across the frozen St. Lawrence in her trunk and sees a way to get to next week.

"Frozen River" is about the panic that wars with pride at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and it's about women holding together what men have left them until their strength threatens to give out. Ray has her sons; Lila, a reformed party girl, quietly pines for the baby the

tribe has taken from her. Neither is expecting help from anyone, and the movie really doesn't ask us to see them with sympathy. It just asks us to see them.

Hunt also notices that the distinction between victims and victimizers, legals and illegals, wanted and unwanted gets awfully hazy down at this end of things. The immigrants the two women smuggle to America are destined for indentured slavery or, like the two Asian women brought over in one scene, probably much worse. A Pakistani couple (Rajesh Bose and Gargi Shinde) makes a foolish, possibly tragic choice that's then compounded by Ray; that this plays out over a snowbound Christmas Eve is one of the few times you feel the filmmaker's thumb on the scales. (A kindly trooper played by Michael O'Keefe is the other.)

Much of the press surrounding "Frozen River" since it won the top award at this year's Sundance Film Festival has focused on Leo's deglamorized playing of Ray, as if it's a miracle that a Hollywood actress could perform without makeup. That's nonsense: Leo has specialized in a unique no-nonsense weariness for years, and well before she starred in TV's "Homicide," she was playing teenage hookers in movies like 1985's "Streetwalkin' " with unbecoming rawness. She knows how to show us a smart, uneducated woman gritting her teeth as she asks a gas station attendant to put \$2.74 in the tank (then whooping with girlish glee on finding an extra \$5 at the bottom of her purse). She also knows there are a lot more Ray Eddys in America than there are in American movies.

Anyway, the triumph is Upham's as much as Leo's, since both actresses pare the fat from their characters until nothing's left but what they need to do. These aren't the sort of performances that win Oscars. They're too unshowy for that, and too good. The skill of the actors, and of Hunt as a filmmaker, is that you don't realize until you're walking home how far Ray and Lila have come - how much they've healed. Whatever chill the title promises, "Frozen River" is about the thaw.

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