



Lila (Misty Upham) and Ray (Melissa Leo) in *Frozen River*

Atonement

Ice marks the place she'll risk everything

FROZEN RIVER: Written and directed by Courtney Hunt. Cinematography, Reed Morano. Music, Peter Golub and Shahzad Ismaili. Starring Melissa Leo, Misty Upham and Charlie McDermott. Sony Pictures Classics, 2008. R. 97 minutes. ★★★★★☆

Dear L,
Where have you been? I haven't heard from you since our conversation about *Persepolis*, the prize-winning animated film from last year. You called it "beautiful" and "brilliant." I replied — I'm only paraphrasing here — that it was "bitterly disappointing," "full of suffering without pain" and "way too simplistic." I may have compared it, unfavorably, to *Peanuts*. Then you said — actually, it was a look, a sort of grimace I haven't seen you make before. Oscar nomination be damned, I said offhandedly, trying to change the subject, which must have been when you said "Who are you?" The way you emphasized each word, it was almost like you meant it.

For the record, I don't "hate" anything, let alone a French cartoon. The word just sort of slipped out.

If you're reading this, L, there's a film I think you should see. It's called *Frozen River*. It's neither beautiful nor brilliant. Nobody in it is nice to look at, and the location — the tiny Mohawk reservation along the New York-Canada border — isn't in the running for your next vacation. In other words, *Frozen River* is bleak material. But remember, you liked *Persepolis*. *Frozen River* has pain you can feel.

Just days before Christmas, Ray (Melissa Leo) and her two kids are abandoned by her husband, a gambling addict. Desperate, Ray lets Lila (Misty Upham), a surly Mohawk girl, talk her into driving them to Canada on a smuggling mission. The idea is that Ray, who's white, won't attract the glare of state troopers, who patrol the highways looking for people like Lila, whom they disdain merely for being Mohawk. What Ray doesn't realize is that Lila is smuggling *people*. Once

she understands, she can't turn back. What makes *Frozen River* so intimate and arresting is Leo's performance, which is both tender and steely, and in particular how Leo transforms ragged Ray from passive victim into willing participant. After a few smuggling runs, Ray has enough money for Christmas gifts; one more run, and she has a down payment on a home. Predictably, Ray's final smuggling run is a harrowing worst-case scenario of bad ideas and worse decisions. In other words, it's great cinema.

Frozen River is in many ways a poor man's *Jesus' Son*, another inspired if somewhat glazed-over story about addiction and its sibling, crime. If *Frozen River* is not directly about addiction, it's about the trials brought down upon the loved ones of addicts — and the way loved ones resort to measures nearly as desperate, and nearly as destructive, as the addicts do themselves. *Frozen River* won't win many awards, given that its best-known actor, Mark Boone Junior, plays the same small-time thug here that he did in *Batman Begins*. But *Frozen River* deserves an audience. Watch the way it cuts smartly to images of the frozen river, emphasizing the lure of it even when Ray is safe at home. (She isn't safe, not even from herself.) Or watch how Ray's kids interact with her and vice versa. There's such ease and familiarity, such devotion amidst base circumstances, that you might feel you're watching a documentary.

A story of courage and survival, *Frozen River* is harrowing but uplifting, which, come to think of it, is how people describe *Persepolis*. Maybe you describe it that way; I'm not sure you had the chance. Tell you what. If you see *Frozen River*, if only to watch Melissa Leo at work, I'll give the French animated film another try. Maybe I'll see something different this time.

Sincerely,
J

EW

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