

FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Winter's Bone

SPOILER WARNING
This article contains some spoilers



Left: Debra Granik
Above: Anne Rosellini

For better or worse, the rise of digital filmmaking has untethered moviemaking from reality. From *Gladiator's* Roman cityscape to *Avatar's* otherworldly Pandora, if writers and directors can visualize it, it can probably be put on the screen. This advance has ushered in an era of spectacles where story and character can seem an afterthought.

There's a good reason for that shift: As Pixar's John Lasseter has said, you can't throw too much that's new at an audience at once. When Pixar pioneered CG animation, they kept the stories simple. The same arguably applies to *Avatar*.

But there are still low-budget indies where filmmakers try to represent the world as they find it, not create a new reality. Such movies depend on character and story, happy accidents and authenticity, not images conjured out of pure imagination. Yet they, too, can sometimes take the audience to worlds that are no more familiar, or less strange, for being real.

So it is for *Winter's Bone*. Based on a "country noir" novel by acclaimed author Daniel Woodrell, *Winter's Bone* is set among the meth-ravaged hill clans of the Missouri Ozarks and was filmed entirely in the region.

Director and co-writer Debra Granik calls her movie "neo-realist." It earned the Grand Jury Prize and the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award for Granik and co-writer and producer Anne Rosellini at January's Sundance Film Festival. Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* said it "works with the kind of commitment to narrative truth and attention to regional authenticity that characterized the earliest movies in Sundance's long and lively history."

For Granik and Rosellini, that must have been sweet praise. The chance to go to the Ozarks to capture an authentic look at that hidden world excited the pair from the day they read the manuscript.

"It's not about building a fiction on a soundstage in a strange world," says Rosellini. "It was about being able to dive into the culture in this part of America we'd never been to and didn't know much about. That appeal was so high for us."

As they crafted the script, though, they found themselves having to curtail even their modest imaginings and plans, instead adjusting to practical realities in a time when money is scarce and the odds are stacked against most movie projects, especially indies.

Dangerous Quest

Woodrell's novel tells the story of Ree Dolly, a 16-year-old girl in the Ozarks who must solve an impossible mystery to save herself and her family. Ree dreams of making her escape from the Ozarks by joining the Army, but for weeks, since the night her father drove off and left her in charge, she has been looking after her two young brothers and her all-but-catatonic mother alone. Her father, Jessup, like most of the men in the Dollys' hill clan, is involved in cooking and selling meth, and he's facing drug charges. With winter setting in, money and food are running out.

Then a bail bondsman comes by looking for Jessup. The bondsman warns Ree that Jessup put up the house as bond for his court appearance. Now he's disappeared, the date is a week away, and if he doesn't show up, Ree and her family will lose their home.

"I'll find him," she declares. But even asking about Jessup is a violation of the clan's deepest codes. If Jessup has disappeared of his own will, no one is to look for him. If he has turned informant, then he's probably been killed for it, and for Ree to ask after him is to risk meeting the same fate.

Nonetheless, Ree sets out on foot to find Jessup—or at least enlist allies in her search. Her first stop, Jessup's older brother Teardrop, nicknamed for his prison tattoos, earns her only a menacing rejection and some token cash. Her best friend, Gail, married and already a mother at 16, helps out but is limited by having to look after her baby.

Ree calls on cousins and other relatives to honor their blood ties, but all mislead or stonewall her, warning her to stop. She realizes she won't find Jessup alive, but also learns that she can still save the home and family if she can turn up proof that he's dead.

Ree has a brush with death herself before her quest is through, but in the end, blood ties prove strong, especially with her uncle Teardrop, and winter does manage to throw her a bone, so to speak, as the title suggests.

The movie version of *Winter's Bone* is to be

distributed by Roadside Attractions. Its rising young actress Jennifer Lawrence plays Ree, John Hawkes plays Teardrop, and Dale Dickey plays Merab.

Sweat and Passion

Granik and Rosellini have a three-person working group, along with cinematographer Michael McDonough who has associate producer credit on the film. They have worked together before, most notably on the 2004 feature *Down to the Bone* with Vera Farmiga. They received *Winter's Bone* in manuscript form in late 2005 and were immediately taken with it, says Granik.

"Both of us read the book in one sitting," she says. "Both of us were like, when was the last time that occurred?"

"It's a very tightly spun tale, and [Woodrell] really knew what he was doing with the structure. It had a very intense time frame in which she had to solve something. It had a mystery. It had these obstacles. She had to go into alien lands, get lost, use her smarts, find something out. It had all the ingredients."

Ashlee Thompson as Ashlee, Jennifer Lawrence as Ree, and Isaiah Stone as Sonny in *Winter's Bone*



“Making a film in a place that’s so far away, distance-wise and also knowledge-wise, experience-wise, so far from where we were, felt really scary to us.”

—Anne Rosellini

John Hawkes
as Teardrop



They also took a shine to Ree, whom they felt embodies what Granik calls “the and.”

“You can come from a very difficult family and you can have remarkably poignant family values. You can care very, very intensely about your siblings and your mom and even your most challenging, difficult, nihilistic uncle. Ree was the lioness of and.”

They contacted their manager at Anonymous Content, who started pounding pavement in search of option money—but found none.

That outcome really wasn’t a shock. Granik says, “It was so clear to us even before she started pounding, that we needed to do the option ourselves. And further, there was absolutely zero money for any kind of script to be written. There was no way this project was going to go forward unless it started from a place of sweat equity and passion.”

McDonough went so far as to challenge Granik and Rosellini with money from one of his paychecks. “He literally used it as a way to say, ‘You guys, stop ruminating on this, there’s no more discussion. These are the first few coins to throw in the pot, but everyone has to follow suit, and you guys have to pony up and we have to do this.’ It weighed heavily on us.”

So, they secured an option in 2006 and began working on the script. “On the bright side,” says Granik, “we had our own standards to live up to and no one else to please. I think it served this project very well to have that sort of freedom.”

The first draft, she remembers, was lifted very directly from Woodrell’s book. They did, though, discover a flaw in the structure they’d so admired: Ree’s journey consists almost entirely of going door to door, only to be rejected at each one. They were especially worried that the audience would get ahead of Ree and anticipate that each door would present a new obstacle, never a breakthrough.

“And that’s still kind of a vulnerable aspect of both the screenplay and the finished film,” says Granik. They partially solved the problem as shooting neared by limiting what Ree learns at each new stop “to make sure [the story] would catapult ahead” and not settle into a predictable rhythm.

They also realized that while the book is short and spare, it still needed to be simplified scene by scene to become a screenplay.

Says Granik, “For us it was a big part of the learning curve: In a novel, a scene can actually encompass three different, very diverse things. Ree can deal with her siblings and her mother and Gail and even go on and deal with Gail and Gail’s dilemmas with [her husband] Floyd.

“[But] oh my God, it’s so tyrannical what can be done in a film scene. You can’t have three competing cores to that scene and have it work.” In a movie scene, it was enough for a character to accomplish one thing.

That made exposition, which is presented quite smoothly in the novel, “a huge ordeal” for them. “Anne and I were like, ‘To keep catapulting toward her end, we can’t have any exposition, practically, in the script.’”

Hard Language

The chance to film in the Ozarks and explore Ozark culture had been a lure from

the start, but the financial concerns made that goal difficult. Much of today’s movie business, even for indies, revolves around the pursuit of production incentives. Louisiana, New Mexico, and even Michigan have generous production incentives. Missouri’s were less generous.

“We were very responsible,” says Granik. “We entertained various incentives in other locations. Because we wanted to make the film, of course, first and foremost.”

But they wanted the authenticity of the real locations, too, and from early development, spent time in the Ozarks to learn what life was really like there.

They travelled there to meet Woodrell, who grew up in the region and still lives there, who helped them learn about the area, the impact of meth, and more. They also picked Woodrell’s brain about the book’s dialogue, which they loved but weren’t sure they always

understood, as it was written in a local dialect that might not translate to the screen.

“One of the challenges was having to pare that [dialogue] down pretty dramatically,” says Granik. “Not only figuring out what information needed to be kept without being redundant, [but] how to strike these beautiful words and bring them into a manageable amount of dialogue for a script. It required a lot of passes, just slowly, slowly shaving away.”

At one stage, they had a script reading in Missouri and were “shocked at how doable the dialogue really was.” But, most of the cast weren’t natives, but actors hired from elsewhere. They relied on local people to help them shape the language, and if Woodrell’s original was too hard to speak, to give them a replacement an outsider could say more comfortably. “I as an East Coast person and Anne as a West Coast person wouldn’t have a clue,” says Granik.

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Juliet Aires Giglio is one of the instructors who will be participating in this year’s Cyberhouse.

An Actor's Scheme

Any movie needs a draft that becomes the basis for a budget, and in the case of *Winter's Bone*, they needed a spec draft and a budget before they could even pitch the movie to financiers. "So, optioning the book was on us, and the first draft was on us," says Granik.

Paring down also meant making the Ree/Teardrop relationship an even more central part to the movie than to the book—which in turn put Hawkes in a position to have important input into his character's dialogue.

In the book, notes Granik, "[Teardrop] had monologues that exceeded *Hamlet*." They worked on cutting that down and making it speakable, but by the time they were ready to shoot, Hawkes objected and began putting lines back in.

"He was very willful," says Granik, "but he had done his work so meticulously, he had written in this minute handwriting on every single page of the script. He worked so hard on his own backstory ... Anne and I felt like it was imperative to listen to his ideas. His commitment was as fierce as ours to this project, so it felt like okay, he's got a scheme in mind for this to come alive and we're going to roll with it."

Rosellini notes, "Subsequent drafts were about making the film more production-friendly, once we did understand what the budget reality was. Simple things like getting dialogue out of cars. We knew we'd be working with a certain amount of days, and we knew we'd be working with a certain amount of money. Once reality set in about what certain scenes mean financially, you become much more open to changing them."

For example, one major element from the book was erased from the script entirely.

"Winter was such a character in the book," says Granik. That included snowstorms, melting snow, frozen ponds, and the like. But production designers and assistant directors kept warning them about how difficult it would be to shoot in snow, not to mention the risk they might not find that perfect weather on the day of shooting.

"There was a day that Anne and I just stared at each other and made a global adjustment in Final Draft: Take out the word 'snow.' We had talked to people about just a little bit of dusting through snow machines. But, we couldn't



Ree on the hunt to find her father

PHOTOS: SEBASTIAN MLYNARSKI

be prissy. We just had to be good sports. We had to say 'The trees do not have leaves. It is wintry here. People's breath does show. We're going with whatever nature can provide for us. That's the definition of being a flexible, low-budget production.'

The same applied to some of the details of place that create such atmosphere in the book. A bigger-budget production would have simply left a second-unit crew in place for months to shoot B-roll. "We filmed so much B because [the setting is] so intoxicating and it's just really bountiful. Even just a couple of nights with lighting through the naked branches got insane."

But their "David Lean fantasies" went by the boards simply because of the kind of movie they were making.

"[This is] a film that needs to be terse and needs to stick around the non-monumental mark. It can't be 2:02. It can't be 2:20. It can't be anything close to two hours, actually, when a film is this small. The feedback has always been that a smaller film has to be a terser film." It was all they could do to keep in some landscape shots of the Ozarks "so people knew what hills and hollers look like." But they kept the running time, including credits, to a lean 99 minutes.

Children and Animals

The movie appears to be filled with two elements that are the bane of low-budget

filmmaking: children and animals. Yet, neither proved to be a big problem. While animals are ubiquitous in the Ozarks, none had to "perform" in any way, so they could simply take advantage of whatever found moments they got.

They made Ree 17 instead of 16, then cast the 18-year-old Lawrence to play her. "It was imperative that we not cast Ree younger than 18," says Rosellini. "On our budget it would have never worked."

"And with the kids, it was really manageable, actually. They weren't in so many scenes, they didn't require so much time. That worked out fine."

They'd been warned that a crying baby on a set was a "time sink" so they'd all but cut Gail's baby Ned out of the script. Then, during shooting, Rosellini says, "We had to forcibly reinstate him. We were like, we're not going to carry around an empty carrier. We're not going to have somebody holding a doll."

And a happy accident turned one of Ree's little brothers from the book into a little sister for the movie. The girl who played the part, Ashlee Thompson, lived in the house they used as Ree's house and had befriended Jennifer Lawrence. "It just started to dawn on us, oh my goodness, we can't top this," says Granik. They tried auditioning young boys from surrounding cities, but, says Granik,

"The boys that weren't from the neighborhood stuck out. You'd know you'd imported a child actor. And Ashlee didn't feel that way at all."

Based on their experiences, Granik and Rosellini also changed Ree's arc with respect to the Army. In the book, Ree is a bright, ambitious girl, and in the way city girls might dream of college and a career, she hopes to join the Army. Eventually, over the course of the book, she gives up that notion and comes to embrace her role as the head of the family.

In the script and movie, we see Ree looking longingly at ROTC exercises at the local high school, which she no longer attends, but she's pretty much given up on the Army even early in the story. Later, in desperation, she approaches an Army recruiter, hoping to collect an advertised \$40,000 bonus for enlisting. But the recruiter explains that bonus

isn't payable immediately, and, recognizing her problem, warns her she wouldn't be able to take care of her family during training or combat. He gently advises her to focus on that for now.

"We were educated coming down there," says Granik. "We had coastal attitudes about the Army, about recruitment. Our first pass at that [scene] was that it was a very disingenuous encounter and it had the hallmarks of a recruitment that has half-truths in it. [We] found through talking to recruiters, that for my taste, and I think Anne's, they were extremely soulful individuals who are third or fourth generation Army and have a very different take than coastal people. It would be like a perjury to not let someone conduct a recruitment session the way that he thought would be accurate."

In the end, says Rosellini, filming in the Ozarks and building relationships there was

as rewarding as they'd hoped: "It wasn't easy and it took a lot of time to build trust there," she says. "We felt we had made substantial relationships with folks in a way that we could finally collaborate and make this film with them. That was something that felt really daunting to Deb and me, being from New York. Making a film in a place that's so far away, distance-wise and also knowledge-wise, experience-wise, so far from where we were, felt really scary to us. To have liaisons into this community and into this world made all the difference in being able to make this film." 🦋



DAVID S. COHEN, a features editor for *Variety*, has covered entertainment and business for publications around the world. A book of his "From Script to Screen" articles—*Screen Plays*, released by HarperCollins—is available in stores and online.