



Melissa Leo as Ray Eddy and Michael O'Keefe as Trooper Finnerty in *Frozen River*

PRODUCTION PHOTOS: JORY SUTTON
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On Frozen River

Writing *Frozen River* was a long process, with many twists in the road. I started with an image of two women driving on a frozen river across the U.S./Canadian border.

All I knew for sure was that one of them was a Mohawk Indian and the other lived in a trailer.

I had read about women smugglers at the border of New York State running cigarettes in the trunks of their cars via a Mohawk Indian Reservation that straddled the border. I followed this story in the news and over the next few years, there was a shift from cigarettes to other “commodities” like illegal immigrants. I got to know some Mohawk people, and I learned that smuggling had been going on at this border since before Prohibition. I wrote a draft of the script focusing on cigarette smuggling, but was not convinced I had found the story. I stuck the thing in a drawer and wrote another script hoping the smuggling story would go away, but it did not.

Meanwhile, I had a baby, 9/11 happened, and we ended up moving up the Hudson River to Columbia County north of New York City. One day, out of nowhere, while I was scratching down a few lines during my baby’s nap, the voice of one of the characters from that first image of the women crossing the frozen river started spilling out on the page. It was the trailer mom. Her voice was so clear and distinct that it became the basis for a short film. What I heard went like this:

*Border life is different
From life Within Territory.*

*A “Paki” baby dropped along the
way with the Mounties on our tail
and we kept going with*

*every intention of coming
back for it—if it doesn’t freeze, first.*

*A long invisible like bisecting
fields, rivers, and sometimes a house
or barn. Living room in Quebec,
bathroom in uppermost New York State.*

*My partner isn’t saying much,
again. Her mother-in-law stole her baby
right out of the hospital
and now she’s all torn up about
the “Paki”—wants to go back
and dig around in the snow.*

*But we’ve run the load and
there was no mention of a baby
in the fee—anyway the Mounties
probably picked it up thinking
it was a case of cigarettes
dumped in the chase.*

*No backtracking: I’ve got
my own two at home—if they haven’t
burned it down—an AWOL husband,
an eviction notice, and a double-wide dream
with wall-to-wall carpet if I can just
get enough for the deposit—so no*

*backtracking across to Cornwall Island
the frozen path marked with X-mas trees
left over from Santa-stained Mohawk Christmases
—a half-hearted effort, mostly for the sake of the
kids who get the idea from the Mall in
Massena or TV.*

*Mohawk don’t know enough to get artificial trees
And save the cash for something good like*

*Siding to cover up the tarpaper!
And my partner still isn’t saying much. I say
Just go and get your own damn baby from
Your mother-in-law: walk in the front door
And take him. Borrow my gun if you need to.*

*But she’d rather face the Mounties, the
Troopers, the Border Patrol, and the FBI than
Look the old woman in the eye knowing
Her husband, the old woman’s son, is
Tangled in weeds at the bottom of the river.
His car went through the ice on a run.*

*So we’re going back to look for the little “Paki”
Cause I can’t take it when my partner stops
talking.*

After writing this, my first thought was, oh, my God, I’ve turned into a poet—now I’ll never make money! However, I soon realized that this was the blueprint for a short film, and that the most important traits of the trailer mom, Ray, and the Mohawk girl, Lila, as well as the main action of the feature script were all contained in it. I converted it into a short script and shot it two months later. Soon after, I expanded it into the feature screenplay.

As for the strange form the monologue took, all I can say is that after my baby was born, I developed a hatred for writing complete sentences, for writing prose. (I’m struggling with it at this very moment.) I think breaking out of this obligation to write in complete sentences with grammar and commas somehow freed me to get out what my characters had been trying to say.



The Groundwork

When I began to write the feature script of *Frozen River*, I took notes for about three months and wrote mostly in fragments with lots of spaces. This was slow, but I wanted to know all I could about each of the characters before I started writing in script form. I kept (and still keep) a pen with me at all times so I can jot down random things that may occur to me out in the world. Often, these occurrences

would happen while I was driving; somehow the motion of the car set the camera in my mind rolling, as hokey as that sounds.

I was quite open during this part of the process. However, one thing I was very strict about was forcing myself to make choices about the characters. I never wrote down questions about aspects of the characters like: Does she have a job? Instead, I chose something like: She works part-time at a dollar store. For me, it is better to

commit to something and then change it if it doesn't work further down the road. Staying on the fence about what a character does or wants slows me down. Committing to a course, even if it's ultimately the wrong direction, keeps the writing process going and saves time.

Now that I knew the broad shape of the story, I made a list of everything that happens in it. For *Frozen River*, it looked like this:

1. Ray discovers her husband has taken the money for their double-wide from her car.
2. Her young son hears the trucks coming to deliver the double-wide.
3. She lies to the dealer to get him to leave the double-wide, etc.
4. The dealer leaves with the house and her son chases after it ...

I wrote all character actions in active verbs to keep the story moving. The list included everything the character does and emotional moments as well. This list became the scene list. When I could tell the story in roughly 60 scenes, I knew I was close to writing. However, I wanted to make sure I knew the guiding question first.

For me, every script asks some big, bad-ass question. Finding out what that question is keeps me on track while I am writing. In *Frozen River*, the question was: Can two women from different cultures stick by each other when their own survival is threatened? In discovering this question, I tried to stay away from do-gooder themes like "love conquers all" and "crime doesn't pay," and I made no attempt to answer this big question until the end of the first draft. I learned this from Toni Morrison who has talked about finding the question when writing a novel.

The Process

Once the scene list was done and I knew my guiding question, I started writing from the beginning of the story. From this point on, I basically turned the thing over to the characters. I just tried to keep up and not interfere with them or overprotect them. I knew my characters were going to get banged up and I had to stay out of it. It was really hard, but my motto is: If walking into the unknown, led by desperate people that you've made up in your head, doesn't sound like fun to you, screenwriting may not be your true path.

I got the first draft done in about six

Writer-director Courtney Hunt



PHOTO: BARBARA NITKE

