

Robin Wright on Making Her Directorial Debut With *Land*

"I wanted to make a film about kindness and human resilience."

By Elena Nicolaou
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Focus Features

- Robin Wright made her directorial debut with *Land*, about a grieving woman who retreats to the Wyoming Rockies.
 - *Land* is available to watch in theaters and stream at home starting on February 12.
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The mountains were calling Edee Mathis, the protagonist in Robin Wright's feature directorial debut, *Land*, and she decided to go. Whether or not she was prepared for the mountains was another story. Out February 12, days after its Sundance premiere, *Land* is the sparse, surprisingly hopeful tale of a woman who retreats into a glimmering and cruel Wyoming Rockies after her life collapses.

For an actor who has played steely women like *House of Cards*'s Claire Underwood and *Wonder Woman*'s Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, *Land* is a fitting directorial debut: The movie explores a more understated, but no less extraordinary, form of fortitude than the other works' fight scenes and power plays. Edee demonstrates the strength to keep living in the face of unimaginable grief. When the movie opens, Edee has lost her husband and son.

"It's very difficult when you're seeing the people you love be in pain because you're in pain," Wright tells OprahMag.com of Edee's decision to retreat to the woods and throw away her phone. After Miguel (Damien Bichir), a fellow off-the-gridder, saves her from a near-death experience, Edee learns she may not be able to make it on her own after all. Based on Jesse Chatham and Erin Dignam's screenplay, *Land* is about "kindness and human resilience," Wright says.



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Wright has directed herself previously, stepping into a leadership position in *House of Cards* when her co-star Kevin Spacey was fired from the show for sexual assault allegations.

Even with that experience, *Land*, which was filmed over the course of 29 days atop Moose Mountain in Alberta, Canada, posed extreme challenges. "We lived the movie that we shot," Wright says. She slept in a trailer on the top of the mountain, near Edee's cabin. "It was so cold in that cabin. All the breath you see, that's the real deal." Since nature was an integral part of Edee's arc, Wright says, filming there was necessary.

Speaking to OprahMag.com, Wright tells us about bears visiting the set, communing with nature, and whether or not she'd recommend Edee's lifestyle.

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You said that you "lived the movie" you made. What was it like switching between actor and director in that environment?

I had three great female producers on the set all day every day that were my backbone. Could not have done it without them. When I'd get in front of the camera and do the job of acting, they would take the reins. I would get in the emotional place needed, do a take or two, and then lean out the cabin door and say, "Should I do it again? Do you think we need something different?" They would give me notes. They were very helpful.

Much of this movie is about trust—trusting other people and letting them in. Did it feel like you had that kind of environment on set?

Completely. You're blessed to feel that trust because it takes half of the weight off of your shoulders. It's a lot to direct—a lot of questions are being posed to you all day, every day. Then, you switch hats and become an actor. My hats go off to *them*. We're all directing the movie. It's not just one person ever. Everyone's a participant and that's the beauty of it. It's the collaboration.

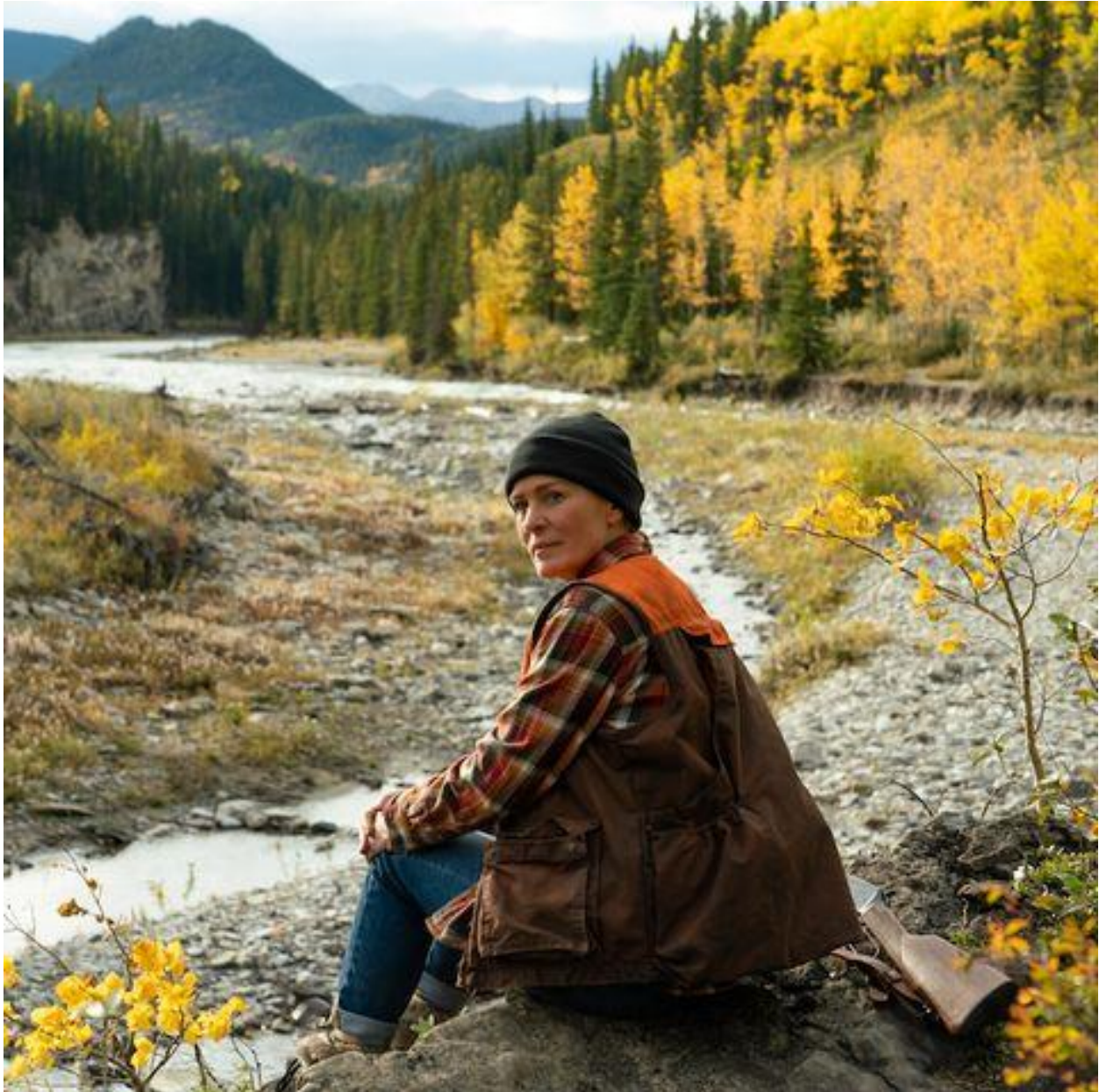
I heard bears visited the set. Have you been surprised by how much of the press conversation has revolved around them?

The bears were exciting and really scary too. Thank goodness we had our bear whisperer.

What was the most daunting part of filming *Land*?

I have to say the bears. The bear wanted to be our roommate. He showed up one day and got a hamburger off the craft services table and that was all she wrote. He wanted a hamburger every day so he returned every day. We would have to sometimes pause shooting and everyone had to be very still, no movement. Our bear whisperer would get out there with this little instrument that made this sound that would shoo him off.

We had a bear scene in the movie. We couldn't even have a real bear on set because the wild bears would have been a risk for the trained bear. Then we were laughing. We were like, "Maybe if we got the trained bear, maybe he wouldn't have come out of his trailer. Maybe he would have been a diva bear."



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There are moments in which Edee is quite unprepared. How self-aware is Edee about her mission?

It's not even a decision of survival versus suicide. It's, *I need to erase myself and become anew*. Because that person that *was*, the existence that I once knew will never be again. It is a

recreation. It is a rebirth—but when she gets up there, no matter how many manuals she read about how to survive in the wild, nature's a beast and it kicks her butt.

Then, what I keep calling an angel, comes into her life. She redeems herself. She's like, "Yes, I can see the light." That generally takes somebody else helping guide you to that realization.

While playing Edee, you had to learn survival skills. You literally skinned an animal.

I was trying to hold my stomach from being sick when I was skinning the animal. That was really tough. I don't think I could do that for real.

Edee lasts two years on the mountain. Did you give any thought to how long you might last in a cabin like that?

I did. I was thinking I could probably last a weekend or a week up there. I've always laughed during these interviews with Damien where I'm like, "I think I would be much more comfortable if I had my mountain man friend, Miguel, with me."

While watching, I thought of those stories of people who were in nature when the pandemic started and returned to a different world. Did you think of them?

Very much so. If we could all imagine disconnecting from our devices...what an *amazing* feeling that must be, to just not have any of that noise. You just bring your books that you love or music that you want to hear. It's incredible medicine to do something like that. But I know it's a necessity for our work, especially now with everything being from home.

The movie reminded me a bit of *Wild* or *Eat Pray Love*—women leaving their lives behind.

Everybody grieves in their own way. We were trying to get myopic with this one person's journey. We're not claiming to state that we know what everybody goes through in the end—if they come out on the other side. But the beautiful, empowering and uplifting ending of this movie spoke to where we are right now, what we've been enduring for the last four years and this last year in particular. There's light at the end of the tunnel. It generally happens with the help of the kindness and compassion of another human being. I wanted that movie to be made, that message to be shared because I feel like we as society need more of that and less ugliness.

Is that the reason you wanted to make this movie?

It was that very thing. I wanted to make a film about kindness and human resilience, because that's a much more positive message than all the tweets that we had to listen to for the last few years.