

Colewell: The people and places in America that don't count

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Tom Quinn

A “modest proposal”:* Any community in the US above a certain size that doesn't boast a single billionaire, those job-creating heroes, those entrepreneurial geniuses, or at least a number of substantive multimillionaires among its residents—in other words, any community that doesn't *matter very much*—should henceforth be deprived of basic services, such as health care, education, public transit, mail delivery, etc. Why throw good money after bad?

[* Attention! This is irony!]

This bitter suggestion comes to mind in the context of the current coronavirus pandemic, which has sent the super-rich scurrying to their yachts, penthouse apartments and/or vacation getaways for safety, while others have not been so fortunate.

It also presents itself after a viewing of *Colewell*, released in 2019, written and directed by Tom Quinn. The film follows Karen Allen (who is thoroughly convincing) as Nora, a postal clerk in the fictitious rural Pennsylvania town of Colewell. This modest work about a modest person has warmth and sincerity, and a certain bite.

The one-person post office in Colewell is the center of Nora's existence and has been for several decades. It is also the central gathering place for the town's mostly aging population. Besides typical postal services, Nora provides candies for the humans and dog treats for the canines. She also keeps packages in her “safe,” a microwave oven, accessible after hours. People come to knit, gossip and generally commune. The atmosphere is friendly and familiar.

Nora starts off every morning with a routine regular as clockwork: making coffee, breakfast and clucking to her chickens. Her world may not be exciting, but it is safe and secure. Quarry trucks periodically intrude on

the pastoral setting.

Then, in what amounts to a blow to Colewell's solar plexus, postal service bureaucrats announce the closure of the town's post office. There is no recourse: “They think I'm old and don't have any fight left in me,” says Nora. But little comes of her threat. She feels too vulnerable, too isolated. The post office must go and Nora is offered a choice between retiring or applying for a job in another location, an impractical option for someone without a car. But it's more than that—it would mean her uprooting, the disruption of Nora's entire life.

When asked if she is afraid of retiring, she replies: “I just don't want to be lonely.” At another point, she says: “I don't know how to have a conversation once I close the window.” She has a limited ability to make contact with people outside her job. She is paralyzed by the trauma of losing her identity and purposefulness.

And there is no doubt as well of the issue of financial insecurity. One of her colleagues and sole friend, Charles (Kevin J. O'Connor), notes that people everywhere are fighting for jobs.

Quinn adds a surreal element to the generally sober realism. In a number of scenes, which seem at first viewing somewhat disconnected from the main body of the drama, we encounter the enigmatic Ella (Hannah Gross)—is she perhaps the younger version of Nora (whose full name is Eleanor)? Ella is a hitch-hiking, long-distance traveler. So was Nora until she met a quarry driver and settled in Colewell. (“Funny, never wanted to move here and don't want to leave.”)

In an interview, director Quinn elaborates on the genesis of his movie: “I was visiting a friend who had a vintage agricultural map framed on his wall. I asked about it and learned his childhood town was no longer on the map because the woman who ran their post

office retired. The office was in her home and once it closed their zip code and town name were retired as well. I was fascinated by the idea that her identity could be so tied to that of the town and began to outline a story. ...

“For Nora, it’s because she has a very clear role that means people must come to her house every day to get their mail and make small talk. We generally think of in-person communication as having more value than most virtual communication, but in Nora’s case I think it’s just as fleeting. Once the framework of her job breaks down, she doesn’t know how to call a friend or knock on their door. I think Hannah Gross’s character, Ella, is in a similar situation in that she felt surrounded by people while hitchhiking, but she isn’t making deep connections with people. There’s a vulnerability that can isolate us, whether we’re in an era of analog connectivity or virtual, and whether that is a constant in one’s life or triggered during certain chapters.”

Meanwhile, postal branches in the US continue to be shut down in great numbers.

Between 2008 and 2019, closings averaged 133 per year (more than one every three days)—more than 30 percent higher than the pace over the previous four decades.

There are two distinct but related developments in *Colewell*: one economic, the other psychological. On the one hand, regions of the country are stagnating or dying economically—with younger people in particular leaving as small businesses, industrial facilities and farms cease to function. There are desperate conditions in parts of rural and semi-rural America, a process the present crisis no doubt will only accelerate and deepen.

Then there is the issue of Nora’s personal “disappearance” or her fear of disappearing, which intersects with the danger of the community’s vanishing from the map. Both Nora and the whole area are fading away and receding into the background. Not even a zip code will be left to identify the eliminated person or town.

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