

Wendy and Lucy

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue



Wendy Carroll (Michelle Williams) is a homeless woman driving cross-country with her dog, Lucy, and sleeping in her car at night to save money and stay warm. One morning, her car won't start. Her funds are limited, and she finds herself at the mercy of the local mechanic (Will Patton). She panics and shoplifts some dog food. She is caught and arrested. While she is paying the fine, Lucy disappears.

So begins the emotional sojourn that constitutes a small but moving film directed by Kelly Reichardt and co-written by Reichardt and Jonathan Raymond. We learn that Wendy is from Indiana, where her unsympathetic sister lives, and that she is on her way to Alaska, where she hopes to find good-paying work at a cannery. Beyond those details, she appears to be just one of the many faceless homeless people who sleep where they can, use gas stations' bathrooms to wash and dress, and try to maintain their dignity despite the sneers and stares of those around them.

Wendy and Lucy doesn't rely on plot to drive the tale forward. In fact, not much happens in the movie. In that respect, it is reminiscent of the great 1983 film *Tender Mercies*. We keep waiting for romance, violence or tragedy to emerge, but instead we are left with a series of quiet moments, many of them displayed on Wendy's face as she makes difficult decisions for herself and her dog. The beauty of the film lies in the glimpses it gives of the various reactions Wendy provokes during her brief stay in town.

When she is busted for shoplifting by an overzealous young stock clerk, for instance, it is clear that the owner of the store would like to give her a break, but he doesn't want to appear weak in front of his self-righteous employee. When Wendy goes to the pound in hopes of finding Lucy, the employee tells her to keep in touch just in case the dog shows up—but then he seems perturbed when Wendy continues to call. In a surreal scene, Wendy runs into a deranged man in the forest who ultimately doesn't seem to understand why he's in the middle of nowhere anymore than she does.

The only truly good man in the film is, ironically, the Wal-Mart security guard (Wally Dalton) who tells her she can't use the parking lot as her hotel. Not only does he lend her his cell phone to call the pound and impart a few words of wisdom when they occur to him, but he offers some compassion, reassuring her that Lucy will be found and letting her know that he hopes she makes it to Alaska, which is supposed to be "so beautiful." (The hopeful talk of canning work in Alaska echoes dreams about fruitpicking in California in *The Grapes of Wrath*.) The guard even slips her a little money that he can't afford to part with—not enough to make a difference financially, but more than enough to suggest that a shaft of light can penetrate the coldest and darkest of corners.

The simplicity of the tale and its quiet regard for those in need recalls the great Italian neorealist films of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In fact, the film is a kind of homage to two of that era's classics, both directed by Vittorio De Sica: *The Bicycle Thief*, about a man who loses his job when his bicycle is stolen, and *Umberto D.*, about a poor pensioner's desperate struggle to survive with his small dog. This is pretty classy company for Reichardt, who earlier directed *Old Joy*. Though she may not yet have mastered the camera work of De Sica or other neorealists, she displays the same sensitive eye for the human soul.