

Outcast

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

Those who have seen *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* know that Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier tends to focus on issues of sacrifice and forgiveness, especially involving women. *Dogville* adds rage and revenge to the mix.

The tale is set during the Great Depression. A young woman with the allegorical name of Grace (Nicole Kidman, in a stunning, understated performance) is running away from some sort of trouble involving guns and gangsters. She stumbles into Dogville, Colorado, a slice of nowhere nestled in the Rocky Mountains that dead-ends at an abandoned silver mine.

Grace is befriended by Tom Edison (played with great complexity by British actor Paul Bettany), an aspiring writer who neatly avoids actual writing by assuming the role of town philosopher, organizing weekly meetings to preach morality and Christian values to the skeptical townsfolk.

Tom invites Grace to remain in Dogville, despite the occasional visit by curious policemen on the lookout for her, but he needs the assent of the other 15 members of the town. The townsfolk are played by an all-star cast that includes Lauren Bacall, Ben Gazzara, Philip Baker Hall, Chloe Sevigny, Blair Brown, Patricia Clarkson and the great Swedish actress Harriet Andersson, famed for her work with Ingmar Bergman. It is testament to Von Trier's standing that such actors would accept small roles just to work with him.

The drama concerns the way the townsfolk first accept Grace grudgingly, then embrace her totally, then start to have doubts about her, then turn her into a slave both physically (she must work for no pay) and sexually (she is violated on a nightly basis).

At one point, the desperate Grace tries to escape, but is soon returned to the town, given a collar, and chained to a weight she must drag behind her as she performs her daily chores. This treatment clarifies why the town is called Dogville: it is a place where a person can be reduced to an animal.

The film can be seen as a critique of American values and of the way the country treats immigrants. (The movie concludes with a montage of Depression-era photographs accompanied by David Bowie's rendition of "Young Americans.") The power of the film, which is played out on a blank soundstage with chalk lines to establish houses, stores and gardens, lies in the unsettling way the supposedly pious citizens of Dogville begin to snarl when they realize just how vulnerable and alone Grace is. They know she is in danger of being found out and hauled away, but instead of protecting her and appreciating what she has brought to the town, they take advantage of her. That they apologize for their indiscretions only heightens the sense of hypocrisy that permeates the film.

All the denizens of Dogville deserve contempt, including the nasty children who lie to their parents about Grace's behavior and playfully ring the town bell whenever the nightly rape has been completed. None is more despicable than Tom, who hides his fear of the mob behind a veil of ambiguity.

As a portrayal of small-town America, *Dogville* invites comparisons with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, especially with the wizened narrator (John Hurt). Like the stage manager in *Our Town*, Hurt points out the various foibles and flaws in the populace that lead to the town's rejection and humiliation of Grace. But here the narration has a cynical edge, suggesting that Dogville is more than earning its eventual comeuppance.

The bizarre conclusion turns the virtue of sacrifice on its head, which could be a first for Von Trier. While Bess in *Breaking the Waves* watched in awe as the heavens opened up, and Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* got her farewell song cut off as she was hanged, Grace is not content to suffer and die for others' sins. The ending has less to do with rebirth or resurrection than with apocalypse.