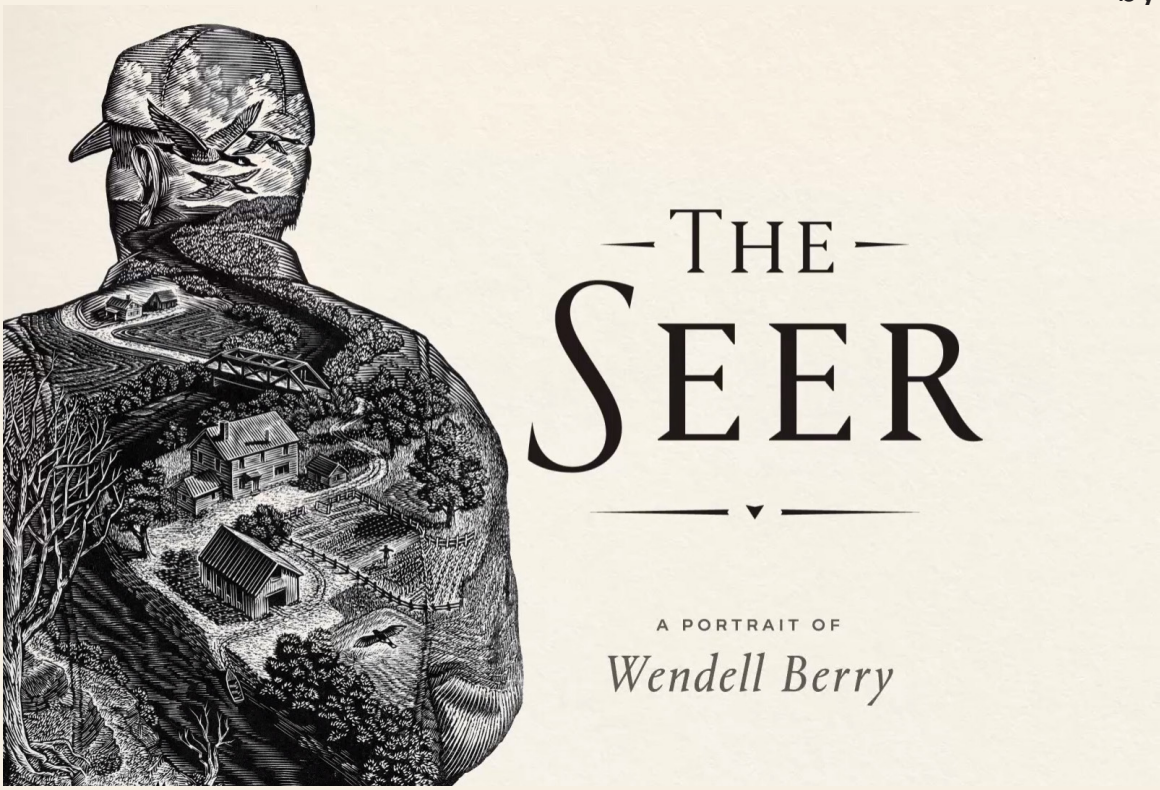
Film Review

by Dan Grubbs



The lament is a forgotten, but legitimate genre for literature of creative expression. I mention this because I see Laura Dunn's new film, "The Seer: A Portrait of Wendell Berry," as a kind of lament. As such, it is a worthy film deserving of our attention and consideration as a significant piece of art to get our attention.

Those who are unaware of who Wendell Berry is will likely underappreciate what Dunn has created in "The Seer" as a biographical documentary about the life and work of the famous Kentucky farmer and man of letters; someone I call the profit of our time. But, similar to the profits of scripture, Berry is likely to go unheeded in his time. Some, however, are taking note of Dunn's work. In the initial tour of film festivals, "The Seer" won the grand jury prize for best documentary at the Nashville Film Festival.

Yet, what Dunn has done as filmmaker is craft a delightfully creative lament, if that's not too oxymoronic, serving as an amplifier of Berry's message. Lest people think a lament is dreadful and dark, Dunn dispels that and punctuates her film with jewels of hope. In Dunn's own words in an interview for the Montclair Film Festival, "Wendell's writing soberly points at the painful realities around us while, through an artful lens, inspiring us to hope, perhaps against all odds, for something better." I claim Dunn's film is similar to Berry's work in that it achieves what she claims Berry's work to do.

"The Seer," which is appearing in festivals across the U.S., including SXSW, allows the Kentucky landscape and its people – along with some very appealing art sprinkled throughout the film – to help paint the picture of the life of a visionary and in the painting of it, also conveys the message of the visionary himself.

Yet, to tell of Berry's life is also to tell of others' lives whose families have been stewards of the land at one time and then forced to make a polarizing choice to either industrialize or continue with a stewardship approach. This is well illustrated by the interviews of those farmers who describe their lives in the past and the present and share their trepidation for the future. "Family farmers, young and old, reflect both a love for land and the complex economic/ideological struggle to stay there," Dunn said in that earlier interview.

Dunn has constructed the lament in a way that gives intentional structure, not arbitrarily or even just chronologically, but in blocks of content that are reflective of time and place and progression. I believe, as Berry says in the film, that Dunn has been able to put singu-

Audiences can request a screening of The Seer via the film's website.

Laura Dunn
director, producer, editor

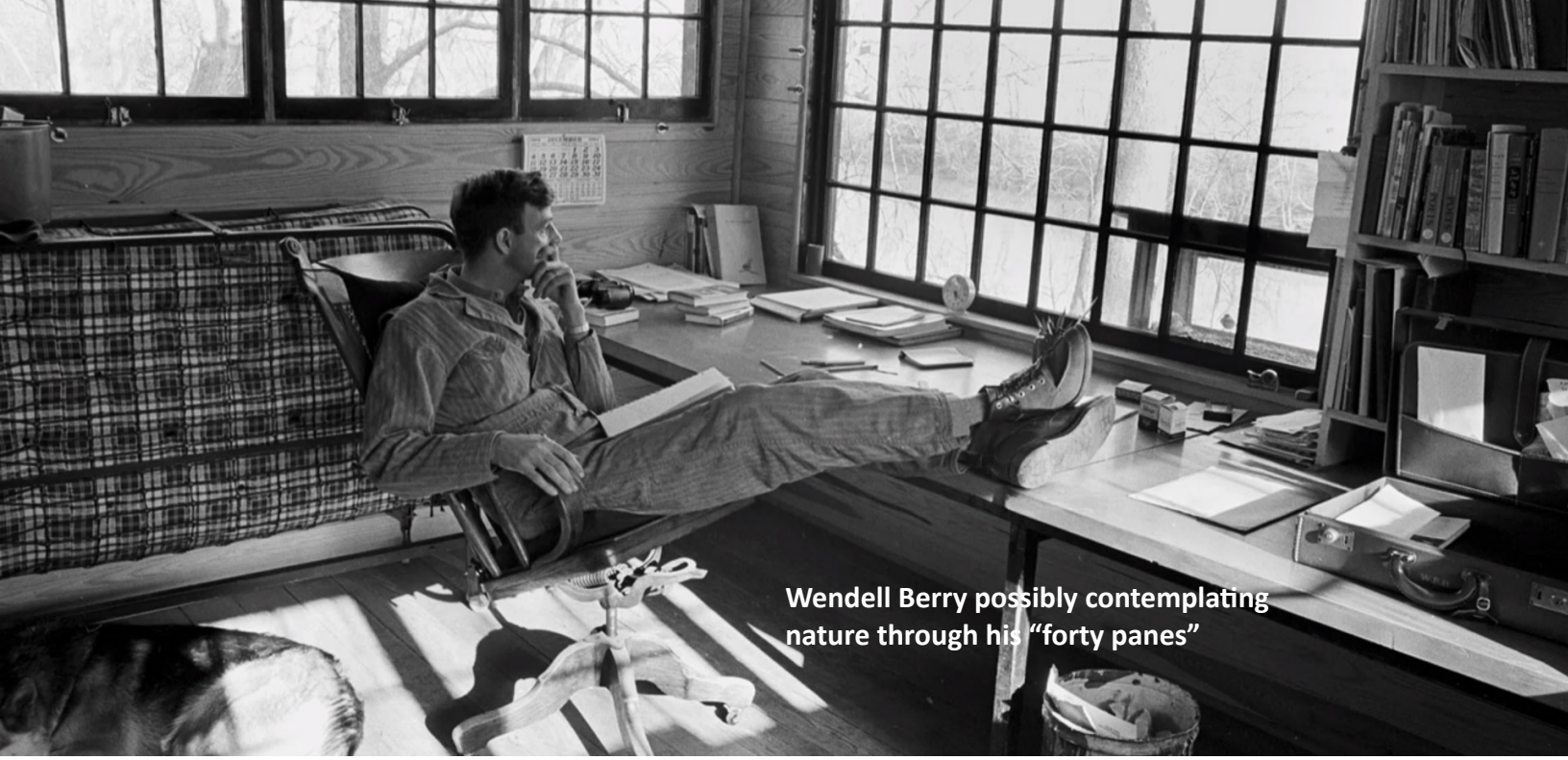
Jef Sewell
co-director, producer, graphics

Lee Daniel
cinematography

Robert Redford
executive producer

Terrence Malick
executive producer

Images and illustrations from the film are used with permission by Laura Dunn.



Wendell Berry possibly contemplating nature through his "forty panes"

lar pieces together simply, yet deliberately one piece to the next and so on until she had enough of something to be a new thing altogether. In this case, a portrait of Wendell Berry.

Lee Daniel, the film's director of photography, won a SXSW Award for the film's cinematography. He and Dunn and co-director Jef Sewell, have assembled portraits of people and place sewn together not only by the structure Dunn offers, but by a visual thread of a path through leafy woods, through an open gate and out onto an pleasant pasture. Like the evolving Kentucky River that flows past Berry's farm, the scene of the path helps the film progress in seasons and reassures us that we are headed somewhere, but not without change.

Her structure and visual metaphor give both conscious and context for what we see in each segment Dunn calls chapters. But, if we miss the conscience and context of the rural people of that part of Kentucky as Berry has described it for decades in his writing, we have only to listen to his daughter, Mary Berry who puts things plainly. "There was an economy out here. There was

Mary Berry

community out here. People knew how to take care of themselves. There was a lot to fall back on here. And it's gone."

With key archival images and sound, such as Berry's debate with Earl Butz, past U.S. secretary of agriculture, the film craftily shows this loss is not unique to Berry's Kentucky, but became the avoidable reality for nearly all of rural America where families made difficult choices when agriculture "went from art to industry," as Steve Smith said, an organic farmer featured in the film. "It had lost its beauty, it just lost its appeal. It was no longer farming, it was something industrial. It had no history."

Steve Smith

Several in the film point to this as a change that destroyed rural communities and rural America as a whole. Or as Berry himself puts it in the film, "The great cultural failure that we've made here in the United States is to mistake millions of individual small places with their own character, their own needs and demands. We've mistaken them for nowhere."

This mistake is at the heart of the film Dunn has made because it is at the heart of much of Berry's writings. In them we sense place is important to him, which Dunn has captured during all four seasons in Henry County, Kentucky. Place is a key theme to help Dunn overcome the challenge that Berry refused to be filmed. She included archival footage and still photography that likely tell Berry's story just as well as if she and her cinematographer shot him in some studio. Place has helped us understand who Berry and his neighbors are. Without that understanding, I suspect most of us will go on mistaking rural places as nowhere, and therefore of no consideration.

Though I'm sure many will miss seeing Wendell Berry filmed by Dunn, there is something of a congruity created by only hearing his voice over scenes both pastoral and horrific. As I see it, his absence accentuates the message his distinctive and identifiable speaking conveys. Berry's absence is parallel to the vanishing traditional farmer's voice who we only now hear somewhere in the back of our minds.

That echo is lamentable, for as Berry said in the film, "I think when the traditional people disappear, the traditional values disappear. How could they survive? I don't think that you can love those values and love what has come to be American agriculture at the same time." At risk of grossly oversimplifying Berry's body of work, in that series of statements we have Berry's lament.

It is poignant then, as Berry is making that statement as one of the last great American apologists against industrial agriculture that a combine is shown harvesting corn leaving a remnant of a row standing as if in defiance and only to have the combine circles around to come back again and cut it off.

Is rural America forever cut off? The metaphor of that combine doesn't seem to give much hope. Except for Smith, one farmer after another, young and old, express the desperation of modern industrial agriculture as costs of operations continue to rise, sometimes many thousands of times, while what farmers are paid for their monoculture crops fails to keep up. Their usual options are increased debt or to get out of farming. This puts farmers into a vicious, enslavening cycle to purchase larger equipment to farm more acres to make up for thinner and thinner margins. "It's either expand or get out," as one family farmer in the film succinctly expressed.

Dunn does a tremendous job assembling a creative, visually appealing film, though it is impossible to speak for Wendell Berry any better than he can for himself. Thankfully, Dunn understands

this and lets Berry's words work for her as a filmmaker. One key example is just past the film's halfway point, she shares Berry's remark about one of the problems with modern agriculture. Berry said, "The mind of industrial agriculture long ago lost contact with the land and with the land's people and in the very real sense, it has no idea what it's doing." Dunn and her team have a film that reconnects people to the land.

In the film's chapter titled "It all turns on affection," also a title of a lecture by Berry, Dunn opens a window into Berry's life that is revealing, maybe as revealing as any of his writings. In this film chapter, Tanya Berry, Wendell's wife, tells of their young life together rearing a family while raising crops and being a member of an interdependent, yet independent community.

I think the film shows that Berry's relationship with Tanya has formed him as much as anything else. Tanya's self-proclaimed flexibility and desire to want to continue to learn a new way of life had to be foundational to Berry's own conscious and context. I come away from this part of the film firmly believing that as great an intellect I believe Berry to be, Tanya's impact on him is deep and broad and won't ever be fully imagined by his readers. Their love is transcendent not only to the Berry family and friends, but even to his writings and his passion and motivation to be fearful for rural communities.

How is the Berry's great love affair germane to agriculture in America? There is a connection for those who choose to see it. This affection presented in the film and in some rural lives should present us with hope, if we're paying attention and care. In fact, Berry said himself, "You can find it if you hunt up the people who are working on a scale that's human and humane enough, people who love doing their work, who do it out of great liking, great love for it. That's been my privilege as both a caretaker and user of a place. When you have that, that's beautiful to see."

Dunn's husband and collaborator, Jef Sewell, creates an expression of the frenetic modern existence as the film opens and in abrupt contrast, the camera moves from frenzy to the peace of wild places, as Berry might have put it. This is intentional to set us in context. Then, bookending the film with the camera moving down the same path with the same dog made me wonder if our future as humans will mean we end up in the same place if we do not heed Berry's, and thus, Dunn's lament. Yet, I only have to hear the words of Tanya Berry reassure me. Dunn, in good tradition of the lament, allows us to see the glimmer of hope when she includes Tanya's comment, "It just has to come back into people's consciousness, somehow, in this country, what's possible: to live a descent life on the land and not be a big industrialized farm but be a place where you make your life."

Mrs. Berry, to this viewer's satisfaction, encapsulates in this statement that there is a future for us that is wholesome and regenerative, giving us the hope that Dunn offers us

As one of the jewels that gleam hope, a young Phoebe Wagoner is shot standing among tall grass and flowers explaining her life on a homestead with her parents. "I like it, it seems more unique." She describes that her friends think it strange she has no mobile phone or television. "It gives me a reason to be outside more. I like that we do this for a living and that my parents are home a lot and that I can spend more time with them. I mean it's just a beautiful place. It's great to live here."

Will we realize that we really have gone far to destroying ourselves because we destroyed what made rural farming communities so right? Or will we see it as young Phoebe sees it and look through one of forty panes of glass and see this is a beautiful place to live and thus, steward this place we call Earth?

For the contemplative person not driven by avarice, Dunn's film should get them to the latter.