

Meek's Cutoff: Directed by Kelly Reichardt

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue

It's 1845, and three couples in rickety covered wagons are headed west on the Oregon Trail. To lead them they have hired Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), a cocky mountain man who has wooed the wide-eyed couples and the one child aboard with tales of his many accomplishments, his knowledge of the Indian tribes and his "let's do this" bravado.

But as *Meek's Cutoff* begins, things are not going well. The pioneers look exhausted and confused, their animals tired and sick. Any doubt about their grim situation is clarified once the boy scratches the single word *lost* on a sun-bleached boulder.

The film is based on a true story chronicled in bits and pieces over the years. It starts out quietly and slows down from there. In a perfect union of tempo and content, director Kelly Reichardt and writer Jonathan Raymond strive to suggest both the journey's difficulty and its tedium; it's filled with daily tasks undertaken as the pioneers' confidence in their chatty leader starts to drain away.

The laconic men, led by the wary Soloman Tetherow (Will Patton), are not quite sure what to make of Meek, whose daily reassurances that they are on the right path are beginning to ring hollow. The women, especially the strong and capable Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams), are less conflicted. They sense that Meek, like many of the men they have encountered over the years, is a charlatan, a first-class liar who is escorting them to their doom. Clad in tight bonnets that protect their faces from the sun and sand while also stripping away their individual identities, the women gaze at him with a combination of fear and contempt. They realize that even if Meek is a snake in the grass, he is the only hope they have of exiting the desert alive.

The equation changes, however, when the group captures a Cayuse Indian (Rod Rondeaux) who has been watching them from afar. Though initially terrified of him, Emily is forced to look beyond the gruesome tales of Indian brutality—fueled by the racist Meek—to wonder if this stranger from another world may be the answer to their prayers.

Meek's Cutoff has been labeled everything from a revisionist western to a feminist allegory. Shot by cinematographer Chris Blauvelt in an old-fashioned ratio that's more square than rectangle, it rejects the familiar big-screen conceit of a romanticized West. Instead, it questions the various roles and realities that accompanied the pioneers on their journeys.

The quasi-documentary style is mesmerizing in its own way. With the arrival of the native, the film suddenly morphs into a story about faith. Meek, like a father leading his children, has proved unfit for the arduous task at hand. But at least he is familiar and communicative and, most important, white. Just how desperate and alone must we be, the film seems to be asking, before we stop rejecting those who are alien to our culture and religion—and start examining how their own trials might have led them to this same crossroads?