

CULTURE LOCAL HISTORY FINNMARK

Film made about northern Norwegian life: The landscape and the nuances of humanity



Rebekah Wilkins-Pepiton, Charles M. Pepiton and Damon Falke have gotten under the skin of people in Northern Norway. - The stories from here speak loudly all over the world, and what is happening here now we have seen happen elsewhere, says Charles.

By [Brita Bølgen](#)

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Two filmmakers and a writer have worked to tell the stories of people in the North, and say the stories from the Arctic regions should be heard around the world.

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The newspaper Hammerfestingen met the creators of the film "Without them I am lost" to find out why the Americans keep making films about people in northern Norway. It became a conversation about connections, humanity and carrying stories on.

- One of the first things we learned in this documentary was to always let the camera roll. It's amazing how much of what went into the film was shot when people weren't quite sure if they were being filmed, says Charles M. Pepiton, the film's director.

- The point where they relax, wife Rebekah Wilkins-Pepiton interjects. She has the artistic responsibility for the film, and is the one who has filmed detailed nature scenes throughout the project.

Together with Damon Falke, they have worked with theater, literature projects and film for 15 years. And when Falke moved to Norway, the trio's artistic focus followed suit.

- Many of the questions in our work come back to being about landscapes, explains Charles. He thinks twice before elaborating:

- Questions about what connects us to the landscape we live in, how fragile and fleeting that connection can be. And not least how people are in conversation with the landscape and history, both individually and collectively.

School children and penguins

Charles says that the conversation between man and nature is particularly clear in the Arctic Circle, and that people's character and imagination are shaped by what he believes to be a strong connection to the landscape in the north.

He gets support from Falke, with his experiences as an immigrant to Troms.

- I wrote an essay about the school children in the north. Where I am an assistant, the children pull themselves up on their bellies to slide on the ice, and pretend they are penguins. There are not many places in the world where you can do that as a schoolchild, and the children really live in the countryside, he says.

He moved to Norway several years ago, after undergoing a kidney transplant. That experience has also left its mark on the film.

- I moved here five years after the transplant, and thought I took far too long to recover. Coming here gave me a feeling of being in a place where there was care. And by that I don't just mean their healthcare, he says.

For Falke, integrating into Norway was a deliberate, deliberate project, where he opted out of international schooling for his sons, among other things.

- I felt I had to take an active responsibility when I came here, and learn about nature and people. So I've eaten my share of mølje, pinnekjøtt and all the hideous Norwegian food. Now my family are Norwegian citizens, and very happy to pay taxes, he says.

Sense of community

The American has settled outside Tromsø, after spending a few years in Bergen.

According to him, the meeting with district Norway was decisive.

- I think this feeling I'm talking about has a lot to do with the fact that we live in the district, where there is still a sense of community. I know the teachers at the village school, and they know me and my sons. Soon they will discover all my mistakes, now that we work together, he jokes.

Falke emphasizes that, for his part, the film is a project of gratitude towards the northern Norwegian people he has met.

- Because I am genuinely, sincerely grateful that my children get to have a life here. They speak perfect Norwegian and are well integrated. And here I have been allowed to both find my way back to my life and continue to develop. Not least creatively, says the screenwriter.

- **Must protect the stories**

Another thing Falke is grateful for is the trust he has received from the film's interviewees.

- The fact that I made an active choice to integrate myself, and participate in the story here, is one of the reasons why it could become a film. These people have let me into their homes. They have told me their family stories and shown me their heirlooms. They know me, he says.

Falke emphasizes that it is no easy matter to reach out to the people of Northern Norway, and says that the trust he has received comes with a great sense of responsibility.

- I must honor their stories, protect them and actively appreciate them.

It's not enough to just talk, we have to show that we value people's trust. I think that is important.

The film has deliberately omitted all place names where interviews and recordings have been made. There is a reason for that, Falke is to be believed.

- If we name one of these beautiful places, people will show up with their Instagram accounts. It makes the landscape a commodity, but we cannot actually sell the connection with the landscape. And we can't show them to everyone without it being diluted, he says seriously.

- **Unthinkable in Northern Norway**

And the reactions the film has garnered at screenings have given him confirmation that the trio has proved worthy of trust.

- It has been a success, and the last two evenings before we came here, people have cried when they have seen themselves on the screen. They came up to me afterwards and wanted to give me a hug. It is almost unthinkable in Northern Norway, he says, and continues:

- But they cry their tears and want to see the film again. Because they have been honored, because they see that their stories are taken care of.

Charles points out that what Falke has done stands in contrast to many immigration stories, not least in the USA.

- Integrating into a community is about learning about the landscape, what the people and the place require of you. The book "Braiding Sweetgrass" talks about how white immigrants to the US didn't do this, and just took ownership without the lessons, he says.

- Without thinking about what the people, the plants, the things in a place mean, we are lost, he adds, referring to the film's title.

- No clear answers

The war, and how it brings human complexity to light, was also a theme that occupied the trio as the film's interviews were conducted.

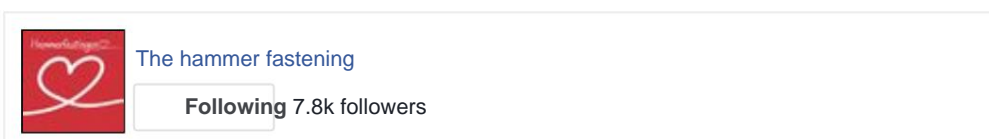
- We actually got reactions when we showed the film in Seattle. Charles got into a heated discussion about the one story about German soldiers, says Rebekah.

The audience believed the film humanized Nazis, because a family told of a good relationship with two German soldiers who were sent to the farm during the war.

- We humans like things to be black and white, and that we know who the good and the bad are. But war blurs such sharp lines, because it is about relationships between people. And there, the northerners have all kinds of stories about the Germans, she says, and rounds off:

- That complexity plays into the film, and the conversations do not provide clear answers. We as Americans need to see it, because it challenges our distance and our hard distinctions between right and wrong.

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