

## Love rules in the apocalyptic Z for Zachariah

When the world is devastated by a catastrophic nuclear event in the rousing independent Australian film *Z for Zachariah*, a solitary young woman (Margot Robbie), thrives on the farm she once shared with her family in a single idyllic valley spared from the radioactive fallout.

 By [Daniel Dercksen](#) 11 Apr 2016



Living on her own for some time, her fears that she may be the event's only survivor prove unfounded when she encounters John Loomis (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a pragmatic scientist turned refugee, searching for a safe haven. Forming a delicate if powerful bond, their budding relationship – and, with it, the tenuous promise of a better life – begins to unravel when a mysterious stranger (Chris Pine), enters their world.

Her faith in divine providence is put to the test by the two men who enter her life.

Inspired by the posthumously published 1974 novel, *Z for Zachariah*, by award-winning author Robert C O'Brien, the film is written by Nissar Modi (*Breaking at the Edge*) and directed by Craig Zobel (*Compliance*).

"I was very taken with the idea of doing something that, even though it had sci-fi and post-apocalyptic elements, was really a 'desert island' situation in which you could study the relationship dynamics of a small group of people," says Zobel.

### The lifecycle of a relationship

"The screenplay was studying the lifecycle of a relationship, but told in a very finite amount of time - progressing from the phase of first encounter, to learning who your partner is, attaining that sense of 'normalcy', and that conflict that takes you to the next level. In this film, that conflict is having another person come into the relationship, which tests them in certain ways. For a lot of relationships that's a pretty normal thing, but here it heightens it to a kind of operatic level in the sense that it's potentially the last three people on Earth."

A graduate of the North Carolina School of the Arts, Zobel got his start working alongside fellow NCSA alumnus David Gordon Green (Pineapple Express) and marked his directorial debut in 2007 with *Great World of Sound*. He garnered further industry attention in 2012 with the critically acclaimed *Compliance* (for which he also wrote the screenplay), the story of a prank caller posing as a police officer who convinces a restaurant manager to interrogate an innocent employee.

## Previous collaborators

For his new film, *Z for Zachariah*, Zobel turned to several previous collaborators for the key positions on his production team. They included Matthew Munn, the film's production designer, film editor Jane Rizzo, and Heather McIntosh, who wrote the movie's score.

"Heather did the score to my last film and we just had a blast doing that," explains Zobel. "Jane Rizzo worked with me on *Great World of Sound* and *Compliance*. Matt Munn is an old friend who also worked on *Compliance* - when I was getting ready to make this film I couldn't wait to call him up. He has a great eye and was able to do ambitious, difficult things and always with a smile on his face. I'm very lucky that they were willing to participate, because their contributions were invaluable."

For his director of photography, Zobel turned to fellow NCSA alumnus Tim Orr, whose films as a cinematographer include the comedies *Pineapple Express*, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, and *Your Highness*. "Tim and I have known each other for a long time," says Zobel. "We both went to the same school and we'd worked together before, often where I was a production manager or a producer on films that he had shot. When the opportunity came up to do this it was very exciting - doubly exciting, because it really felt like the right project for him."

"We've run in the same circles for quite a while," says Orr, who jumped at the opportunity not only to work with an old friend, but also the chance to work on a challenging character-driven drama. "I not only found myself in beautiful New Zealand where we ended up shooting, but also part of an interesting project with a great director and a great cast."

## Ultimate allure

For Zobel, the chance to work with an ensemble limited to three characters - in roles populated, no less, by three of the most sought-after actors working today - proved the project's ultimate allure. "I thought it would be an interesting experiment," says the director. "I knew it would be exciting to collaborate with Chiwetel, Margot and Chris, and really find what the story could be in addition to what was on the page. I feel that we lucked out massively in that three of my favourite actors, people that I've highly respected before and thought were amazing, were all down to play, and that they came out to do this."

For Robbie (who also stars as Jane in David Yates's forthcoming *Tarzan* and takes on the role of Harley Quinn in the eagerly anticipated, DC Comics supervillain film *Suicide Squad*), the more down-to-earth role Ann Burden, a self-reliant farm girl in *Z for Zachariah*, was both surprisingly (for those who don't know her) and fortuitously (for the production itself) a seamless fit.

"Some people may see Ann as a bit of a pushover, but she has a lot of strength," says Robbie of her character. And while Burden herself is deeply religious, a view which, according to Robbie, informs her view of the new world in which the character finds herself, she is never overbearing, instead presenting a quiet counterpoint to John Loomis's determined pragmatism."

## Creative challenges

For Ejiofor (*Amistad* and *12 Years a Slave*), the creative challenges in bringing Z for Zachariah to life would manifest themselves during the production itself – if not in the way the actor initially anticipated. “There’s something about this film that, on paper, seems almost sort of methodical in a sense. It seems straightforward because here you have these three people who are trying to rebuild their lives and so you think the drama is just about the nature of their interactions,” says Ejiofor. “But it’s more than that. There’s also an extraordinary physical aspect to the film, a strong physical world where they’re engaged in the process of staying alive. You sort of skip over that as you’re reading, as you’re so vested in these characters. But that’s the nature of farm work, the nature of trying to rebuild something, trying to reconstruct a world that you recognise.”

With the final and unexpected arrival of Caleb into his new-found valley paradise, Chiwetel’s Loomis must face his ultimate nemesis: himself. Forced with the prospect of competition, he begins to re-evaluate his romantic feelings for Burden, simultaneously confronting a potential suitor and his own, irrational, inner demon of jealousy.

“I first came upon this project thanks to my agents,” says Pine, (best known for his portrayal of James Kirk in JJ Abrams’ reboot of the popular *Star Trek* film series) “Craig had done a small movie called *Compliance* that I really enjoyed,” explains Pine. “I don’t know what you would call it – it’s almost a horror movie, but the psychology behind everything that’s happening is so complex. I asked him what he was doing next and he told me that he had this script: ‘But, you know, the part isn’t all that big and that the film isn’t all that big.’ Of course, I read it and I loved it. I knew that Chiwetel was going to do the lead and that to play opposite him would be a lot of fun. And I knew if there was one guy who could direct this kind of a psychological drama it was Craig Zobel.”

## Five-week shoot in New Zealand

On screen, Pine’s character, Caleb, enters the action well into the story, the point at which Burden and Loomis, while their romantic future remains uncertain, have begun to settle into a working routine. Similarly the actor himself joined the cast and crew some three weeks into the production’s five-week shoot in New Zealand. “It was weird for me to come into something that late in the game. Usually, I’m with a film for the duration,” says Pine, who, in conjunction with Robbie, Ejiofor and Zobel, ultimately turned the situation to his advantage.

“The scheduling was designed perfectly in the sense that we all got to this remote, isolated part of New Zealand where we had no one but each other - and by ‘we,’ I mean Chiwetel and myself, that was the entire cast at that point - and then the crew, which was very small,” explains Robbie. “We’d all hang out with each other after shooting because there was no one else to see. Suddenly Chris comes in and it was this new dynamic. It totally changed everything up, which was so perfect for the shoot, because that’s exactly what happens in the script.”

“Coming into that kind of equation is hard though,” says Pine. “Relationships have been established and, on top of that, you’re in the middle of nowhere in New Zealand, so the crew and the cast were super-tight. Fortunately, they made me feel incredibly welcome. I was able to move into their dynamic pretty easily. The crew was great and the director was great. The producers were really chill, and Margot and Chiwetel were welcoming - I just really lucked out.”

## Limited budget

As with any independent film production, Zobel found himself working under the familiar constraints of a limited budget and a tight shooting schedule.



“The great thing about a project like this for an actor is that it’s not motivated by big action set pieces,” says Pine. “You don’t have weeks of driving a car over a bridge to get the bad guy. This production was really about long expansive scenes in which we had room to explore. Often, Craig will come in and say: ‘I have no idea what the scene will turn out to be,’ and you kind of figure it out, together. He’s got a great way of working with actors.”

“One of the best things about working with Craig is that every take was different,” explains Robbie. “He really allowed for that work-shopping process, which is so much fun as an actor. There were endless possibilities and Craig always had these amazing ideas.”

“Craig demonstrated an attention to detail, an intelligence and forethought, to every aspect of the production,” adds Chiwetel Ejiofor. “He’s an incredibly exciting director to work with.”

“For me, making films is in some ways an experiment,” says Zobel of his process. “Certainly the last film I made and this one, absolutely, have pushed me to really explore the subject matter. That’s much more exciting to me than trying to make a film where I understood every action that every character took beforehand.”

“This movie has been quite a challenge, but it’s been quite a blast as well,” says Zobel. “A lot of that has to do with Margot, Chris and Chiwetel, but also the entire crew and, of course, coming to another country to make a film, which is certainly not something I’ve ever done before. It really was a special experience.”

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## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Derksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and the journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za) View my profile and articles...

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