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## More Mayhem? You Betcha



Billy Bob Thornton in the new series “[Fargo](#),” based very loosely on the 1996 film by Ethan and Joel Coen. The show begins Tuesday on FX. Matthias Clamer / FX

By MIKE HALE - April 9, 2014

CALGARY, Alberta — The first question about “[Fargo](#)” the television series is: What is it?

Noah Hawley, who wrote the 10 episodes of the show’s first season, says, “You could call it an homage to the movie.” John Landgraf, the president of FX, where the show begins on Tuesday, says, “I guess it’s another movie, really, just a long one at 10 hours.”

For something less cautious, if even less helpful, we turn to Billy Bob Thornton, the show’s star: “The end of a sentence. When someone doesn’t finish the sentence and it’s got the three dots? An ellipsis.”

Let's try this ourselves. "Fargo" is a series with no direct narrative connection to the [1996 movie](#) "Fargo," written and directed by Ethan and Joel Coen. The story and characters in what's intended as an anthology series are all new. But there are enough links — Minnesota, a fake true-crime conceit, a fateful auto accident, an intrepid female cop, "uff da" — to make the two productions close cousins, at least.



[Martin Freeman in "Fargo."](#)

[Chris Large / FX](#)

"I was hired to create something that fits a feeling you get from watching their work," said Mr. Hawley, whose writing credits include "Bones" and "The Unusuals." "But I was given no guidelines and no limitations, and I got excited about the idea that under the auspices of making a Coen brothers movie, I could do a lot of things that you can't normally get away with in television. You can add in moments of magical realism, you can have a character-driven show with a crime at the heart of it that isn't about that crime all the time."

Noting the wide tonal range of the Coens' films, from the farce of "Raising Arizona" to the dark comedy of "Fargo" to the stern brutality of "No Country for Old Men," he said: "I feel like I exist somewhere in the middle. I like to say we're making 'No Country for Old Fargo.' "

Mr. Hawley was sitting in his office in a trailer on the dreary outskirts of Calgary in February. Inside a nearby warehouse — until recently the home of Vanteriors, "the leader in work vehicle modifications" — filming was proceeding on Episodes 5 and 6. Whenever the cameras rolled, crew members yelled, "Heaters off!" because the industrial-size ceiling units made too much noise. It was 11 degrees outside and it didn't feel much warmer inside.

Between scenes, Mr. Thornton retreated to his trailer, where he nursed a rasping cough. Calgary and its frigid environs are substituting for the towns, fields and forests of northern Minnesota, where Mr. Thornton's character, a malevolent, mischievous out-of-towner named Lorne Malvo, casually wreaks havoc on the locals.



[Frances McDormand won an Oscar for best actress for her performance in “Fargo.”](#)

[Michael Tackett / Gramercy Pictures](#)

“I thought back to ‘[A Simple Plan](#),’ ” Mr. Thornton said, referring to the 1998 thriller he made with Sam Raimi in Wisconsin and Minnesota. “That was colder than this, much colder than this. Much colder. I thought if I could do ‘A Simple Plan,’ I could handle this.”

Mr. Thornton's history with the Coens includes “[Intolerable Cruelty](#)” (2003) and “[The Man Who Wasn't There](#)” (2001), but he said he had not discussed the new “Fargo” with them. “I go way back with those guys, and we talk to each other from time to time, but there wasn't a need to call them up and say, ‘Hey, what do you think about this?’ ”

The Coens gave FX their blessing and receive executive producer credits but have no input in the show. (They declined to be interviewed about it.) “I believe the Coens said: Look, we'll read a script, but that's the level of involvement we really want to have,” Mr. Hawley said.

The brothers' interest in television in general appears to be slight. “When we explained to Ethan that it's going to be a 90-minute premiere, and we have 68 minutes of film, he said, ‘Well, what's the other 22 minutes?’ ” Mr. Hawley said. (Spoiler alert: It's commercials.)



[Allison Tolman and Shawn Doyle in FX's “Fargo.” The Coen brothers receive executive producer credits but have no input in the show. Chris Large / FX](#)

Mr. Hawley was brought into the project by the veteran producer Warren Littlefield, with whom he had worked on the short-lived ABC series "[My Generation](#)." Mr. Littlefield had the idea of turning films from the MGM library into TV series, but "Fargo" languished for several years before FX picked it up. Mr. Landgraf called Mr. Hawley's scripts "as good a piece of material as I've read in years," and when Mr. Thornton signed on, "an actor of real note had essentially ratified the quality." (It is the first TV series based on a Coen film, though there was an earlier "Fargo" pilot, in 2003, that starred Edie Falco.)

The TV show shifts the action north from Minneapolis and Brainerd, Minn., to the small cities of Bemidji and Duluth. (Fargo, N.D., is once again a supposed hub of criminal enterprise, this time as the headquarters for an outlaw trucking outfit.) Lester Nygaard, a henpecked insurance salesman played by the British actor Martin Freeman ("Sherlock"), parallels the movie's henpecked car salesman, Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy); the new story traces the spiraling consequences of a chance encounter between Nygaard and Malvo.

Investigating the inevitable deaths, abductions and strange dealings is Molly Solverson, a sheriff's deputy played by a previously unknown Texas-born actress, Allison Tolman. The levelheaded Molly lines up with the movie's most beloved character, the small-town police chief [Marge Gunderson](#), for which Frances McDormand won a best actress Oscar.

Ms. Tolman summed up the online reaction to her casting: "Not only is it going to be terrible, but if it doesn't have Frances McDormand in it, I'm not interested. And whatever woman they hire is going to pale in comparison." My boyfriend said, "Stop reading the Internet."

Referring to the producers, Ms. Tolman said: "They wanted people who read as real humans, which is nothing against the majority of actresses, but they are typically exceptionally beautiful and tall and thin. I'm none of those things, but I think I look more like a real woman than what you usually see when you turn on the TV."

Another thing the TV show has in common with the film is frequent and sometimes unpredictable bursts of brutality. "The violence you see in films like 'No Country' or 'Fargo,' it's not sensationalized," Mr. Hawley said. "It's very brutal and graphic, but dealt with in a very dispassionate manner. That's been our goal, not to sensationalize."

One of the film's most distinctive features, the Minnesota accent affected by the small-town characters, is also carried over into the TV show, although Mr. Hawley said it was being played down. Malvo, the outsider, is (mostly) accent free, and Ms. Tolman said that after years of doing sketch comedy, she had already developed "a pretty ridiculous Midwestern accent." Mr. Freeman, who had to stretch the furthest for a convincing "you betcha," said: "I don't take it lightly. I work on it every day."

The show's cast also includes notable performers like Colin Hanks, Oliver Platt, Kate Walsh and Keith Carradine, but it's clearly Mr. Thornton — in his first regular TV role since the political sitcom "Hearts Afire," with John Ritter, in the early 1990s — who commands attention. "I wasn't sure whether to get involved in a TV series, because I have a lot of movies I want to make," Mr. Thornton said. "Then I was told it was 10 episodes, and I go, hmm."

He said that he wasn't looking for a series, but that it was something he had thought about: "I saw friends of mine doing it, Kevin Bacon and Dennis Quaid. I was thinking about those guys, and thinking, you know, this is where it's headed, if you want to do really good stuff as a dramatic actor in this business now, you're going to have to do it on television."

For Malvo, Mr. Thornton dyes his hair and wears it hanging over his forehead in a modified bowl cut — "My manager says it looks like I'm channeling the dark side of Ken Burns" — and favors a lupine grin that shades into a smirk when he's tormenting a hapless Minnesotan. "He's not an evil-minded guy," he said of Malvo. "He's very methodical. It's as if the devil were an accountant. It's strictly business."

Like FX's "American Horror Story" and HBO's "True Detective," "Fargo" is an anthology series that will change its story and characters from season to season. "It could be 1950, 1980," Mr. Hawley said. "The idea would be to unearth the annals of Minnesota true crime. And we can jump around. It could be North Dakota. So in that way, Fargo becomes more than a place, it becomes a type of true crime case, where truth is stranger than fiction."

The anthology structure, in Mr. Hawley's formulation, is one more thing that makes sense in relation to the film.

"At the end of the movie, Marge goes home. She's seen the leg in the wood-chipper, she's seen all the mayhem and the death and the strange Coen brothers events, and she goes home, and she gets in bed with her husband. And you know when she wakes up tomorrow, it's back to life as normal, because if she woke up, and it was another crazy Coen brothers case, it wouldn't really be believable. And she wouldn't be the same person after a while, because she would be on 'Criminal Minds.'

"This was the worst thing she ever saw, and we were there when she saw it. And then she'd tell that story for the rest of her life."