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By [Chris Harvey](#) 1:35PM BST 04 Apr 2014

## **Fargo, first look, review: 'dark and funny'**

**The remake of the Coen brothers' classic Fargo, starring Martin Freeman and Billy Bob Thornton, captures the intoxicating mix of black comedy and murder of the original, says Chris Harvey**

★★★★☆



Fargo: Martin Freeman as hapless Lester Nygard

It sounds like it shouldn't work. Taking the Coen brothers 1996 cult classic Fargo and turning it into a 10-part TV series with a new case and new characters. Not quite new characters either: a mild-mannered, perpetually bullied insurance salesman, Lester Nygard, played by [Martin Freeman](#), who is a dead ringer for the hapless car salesman made famous by William H Macy in the film; and a methodical young police deputy, Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman), who almost exactly doubles for Frances McDormand's painstaking, pregnant police chief.

Throw in the absence of either Ethan or Joel Coen in a writing or directing role (they're executive producers) and the confusion, for British audiences, of hearing Freeman trying to wrap his vowels around a Minnesota accent, and it ought to be an uncomfortable attempt to recreate the inimitable. But from the moment Billy Bob Thornton's sinister hitman Lorne Malvo enters the action, Fargo the TV series is an utterly absorbing pleasure, with the same intoxicating mix of murder and black comedy that marked out the movie.

Malvo bears little similarity to the bungling kidnappers played by Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare in 1996 (the same year, incidentally, that Thornton won a screenplay Oscar for Sling Blade). In fact, with his chilling talent for murder, Malvo could have wandered in from another Coen brothers movie, No Country for Old Men. He gets some of the best lines, though, as he preaches the gospel of revenge for personal insult and injury ("In my experience, if you let a man get away with breaking your nose, next time he'll try to break your spine").

That's how he first engages with Freeman's Nygard, in a hospital waiting room, with Nygard nursing facial injuries after an encounter with the bully who had tortured him at school. "If that was me, I would have killed that man," Malvo tells him. But when Nygard snaps back - why don't you kill him then, if you feel so strongly about it? - things begin their inevitable slide into darkness.

In the opener, Malvo also stakes a claim for taking over TV's resident nihilist philosopher slot from [True Detective](#)'s Rust Cohle ("Your problem is that you've led your whole life thinking there are rules. But there aren't. It's a red tide Lester.") He's going to be great company, you can tell.

One other character seems almost unchanged from the film. Those cold, white vistas of the Midwest in winter are as dramatically potent as ever. Other pleasures include [Breaking Bad](#)'s Bob Odenkirk as Deputy Bill Oswalt, a senior cop with a squeamish streak. In fact, once you get past Freeman's accent, Fargo, which arrives on Channel 4 on 20 April, five days after its US release, looks well set to be a must-watch, equal parts dark and funny.