



Fargo the TV series has arrived, with the Coen brothers and Billy Bob Thornton in tow

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The *Fargo* snow globe sat in his office for years, a reminder of the time Warren Littlefield flirted with bringing the frigid, folksy, murderous world of Joel and Ethan Coen's iconic 1996 film to television. Then president of NBC's entertainment division, he ended up "respectfully" passing, worried that a network TV adaptation might disappoint the audience that had deeply loved the dark comedy. Later, CBS made a *Fargo* pilot, which aired as a 2003 TV movie, starring Edie Falco as Marge Gunderson and directed by Kathy Bates – but it never became a series.

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Just over three years ago, Littlefield, by then head of his own production company, was looking at that snow globe, which he has always kept nearby, and thought, "Ah, it's time." The renaissance of television, he felt, would provide the opportunity to do a *Fargo* adaptation properly. Not that it would be easy: With a property like *Fargo*, there would be high expectations, and deep concerns about cheapening its Oscar-winning legacy. The TV series would have to hit just the right note.

Littlefield brought Noah Hawley (a novelist whose TV work includes *Bones* and the short-lived series *My Generation* and *The Unusuals*) on board as show runner. And MGM, which controlled the property, thought it might work for its FX network. But in an early phone call about the project, an MGM executive told Littlefield the studio wasn't sure if it was possible to do *Fargo* without the character of supersmart small-town cop Marge. "The word 'disappoint' again stuck with me," recalls Littlefield.

But, in fact, it was when he went back to Hawley and told him about that disappointing conversation that a new *Fargo* was born. "His mind just started to explode," says Littlefield.

“And he said: ‘So, all new characters, a new crime saga, all with *Fargo* as a state of mind: Honour the thematic, honour the world that the Coens created.’”

Hawley, you might say, was thinking outside the snow globe.

And soon enough, so were *Fargo* ‘s original creators. “The Coens read the script, and said, ‘We’re not big fans of imitation, but we feel like Noah channelled us,’” says Littlefield. ““And we would like to put our names on this.’”

Fargo the series – executive produced by the Coens – premieres on the just-launched FXX Canada specialty channel on April 15. (Described by Rogers as a younger-skewing, “funnier” extension of FX Canada, FXX is available only to Rogers customers; in fact, viewers in parts of Canada that don’t have access to Rogers cable – including Calgary, where the show was shot – will not see it.)

In the 10-part series, a mysterious man named Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton) finds himself in the small town of Bemidji, Minn. – there really is a Bemidji, by the way – where by chance he encounters local hen-pecked and down-on-his-luck insurance salesman Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman).

When bodies start piling up, various police officers – played by the likes of Colin Hanks, Allison Tolman and Bob Odenkirk (*Breaking Bad* ‘s Saul Goodman) work to solve the crime spree. Fans of the movie may be wary, but in early episodes, the series delivers with a smart script, intense performances and gorgeous cinematography.

From the opening shot, it is clear that this is an homage, not a rip-off. “Noah managed to do something very hard,” said Thornton, on set at a former medical facility in Calgary earlier this year. “Without copying the Coen brothers, he got their vibe and their tone and made a whole new animal.”

Still, some cast members had concerns about the project when they were initially approached. “When I got the call, I probably responded the way most people do when they hear about something like this: ‘Uh oh – that movie was amazing. What are they gonna do? How can they possibly live up to that?’ ” recalls Keith Carradine, who plays the father of Tolman’s character. “Well, let me just say that we haven’t lived up to it; we’ve lived beyond it.”

While it’s fair to say there are shared characteristics between Tolman’s Molly Solverson and McDormand’s Marge Gunderson, between Thornton’s Lorne Malvo and Steve Buscemi’s hapless criminal, Carl Showalter, and between Freeman’s Lester Nygaard and William H. Macy’s Jerry Lundegaard, the characters themselves are new inventions, albeit ones born in the spirit of their big-screen predecessors.

The series’ scripts, says Freeman, are also “strongly independent” of the big-screen *Fargo*. “So when you read them, I’m certainly not thinking of anything else other than our project,” adds the actor, best known for his work in *The Hobbit* and the TV show *Sherlock*. (Now just try to imagine his Watson or Bilbo Baggins with that “Aw jeez” accent – which Freeman nails.)

A number of members of the cast, including Freeman, said they went out of their way to avoid rescreening the film when they first embarked on this project. “I saw the film when it came out,” says Tolman, whose background is in comedy, and who seems bound to be the series’ breakout star. “Didn’t watch it while I was auditioning and while I was testing for the role, and waited about five weeks into filming before I Netflixed it. I wanted to give myself a little bit of distance.”

Odenkirk, who plays her partner, revelled in a different kind of distance: that between his role of trusting rube on the new show and his shamelessly oily lawyer in *Breaking Bad* and its upcoming spinoff, *Better Call Saul*: “Saul is mostly a cunning operator who is manipulating everyone around him and is very cynical in how he operates,” says the actor. “And this character, Bill Oswalt, is the polar opposite. He holds so tightly to his innocence and his belief in the sweetness and goodness of the community that he can’t see what’s in front of his face.”

Thornton, too, took pleasure in playing a less familiar role – Malvo, he says, “absolutely has no conscience whatsoever.” He calls the series “a dream” for an actor, but he and his cast mates will be playing these roles for a limited time.

“We have a beginning, middle and an end,” says Littlefield. While he doesn’t rule out a future *Fargo* with yet a different set of characters, “we want the audience to feel they had their time with these characters, and there’s a conclusion. There’s no cliffhanger. It’s a sense of a satisfying conclusion, and a lot of people are dead.”

Even if *Fargo*, at least in spirit, is once again very much alive.

Fargo airs Tuesdays on FXX Canada at 10 p.m. ET beginning April 15. The first episode only will also run on FX Canada.