



[Arts](#) | [Entertainment](#)

The Bitter Tundra Returns As 'Fargo' Comes To Television

NPR | April 14, 2014 12:12 p.m. **Contributed By:** Linda Holmes



Martin Freeman as Lester Nygaard in FX's *Fargo*. FX, Matthias Clamer

There are a lot of ways to adapt a film to a TV show, and it's not as common as it was for a while there. For a while, you had strange experiments like TV telling the story of Ferris Bueller, TV telling the story of Baby and Johnny from *Dirty Dancing*, and TV revisiting *9 to 5*. Usually, it meant just moving the characters over to a series, having them played by new actors, and following new stories about them. (Melora Hardin as Baby Houseman!) Every now and then, it worked: you might have heard of *M*A*S*H*. Usually it did not: you might not have heard of *The Firm*, starring ... Josh Lucas. (Yes, a couple of those are also books. But ... still.)

It seemed, candidly, like an absurd idea when FX announced that it was making a TV series based on *Fargo*, the Coen Brothers film from 1996. That was a completed story that didn't lend itself to a lot of obvious "further adventures." It didn't seem like very much more activity could be ... afoot.

Furthermore, the film was full of performances surely no one would be dumb enough to try to do over, like Frances McDormand as Marge Gunderson and William H. Macy as Jerry Lundegaard. The Coens were on board as executive producers; what could these people possibly have in mind?

As it turns out, what they had in mind was a completely new story borrowing the tone, some of the dynamics, and some of the atmosphere of the film, but not the characters and not the story itself.

It seemed at first that Lester Nygaard, played by Martin Freeman, would be the same character as Jerry Lundegaard. And indeed, they have a lot in common. Lester is married, hapless, bullied, and profoundly frustrated. Instead of running a used car lot, Lester sells insurance, but he still

finds his job a terrible drag. A local bully is hassling him, his brother is better at everything than he is, and the walls are closing in. What's a guy to do?

There are good-hearted cops on the beat as well, but in the pilot, it's not a big pregnant lady cop and a lovably daffy helper. It's a guy, Chief Thurman (Shawn Doyle) whose wife is pregnant at home, who's training young Deputy Solverson (Allison Tolman). And like the film, the TV series doesn't take place in Fargo at all — the film was set in Brainerd, Minnesota; the series is in Bemidji.

One of the tricky things about the pilot is that you keep seeing scenes that do recall parts of the film, particularly as Thurman and Solverson trudge around in the snow to investigate the aftermath of a roadside incident and poke around a car that's gone into the ditch. If you're a fan of the film, you do feel a bit like you're watching Margie and Lou all over again.

The major exception, the person most quickly identifiable as someone with no clear *Fargo*-movie analog, is a man in a dark coat played by Billy Bob Thornton, who runs into Lester while both are in the same waiting room. There is something a little Hitchcockian about their meeting, as one immediately wants to remind Lester of one of the primary rules of Hitchcock: *never become entangled in any sort of plotting with anyone who is clearly a much worse person than you are*. But is that where they're going with this story? Maybe. Maybe not.

Before long, the story in the pilot diverges enough that it becomes clear you're looking at a different situation featuring different people, not a retelling. There's good cause in the first half-hour or so to wonder whether the people behind the show really understood the movie, and understood what it was getting at tonally and thematically. But by the time the first episode ends, those fears largely vanish.

The pilot isn't the end of it, either: more important characters join in the second episode, including a cop from another town (Colin Hanks) and a pair of mysterious guys who do actually come from Fargo, played by Russell Harvard (a deaf actor playing a deaf character) and Adam Goldberg. (Goldberg has knocked around for many, many years, in everything from *Friends* to *Saving Private Ryan*. This is an exceptionally good deployment of his gifts.)

There's a marvelously dark, droll, deadpan humor to the show, and as the four episodes I watched unspooled, I felt myself sink deeper and deeper and deeper into it, as I haven't done with a show in quite a while. It builds layer on layer of complication and foreboding, and the accents — which start off a little bit iffy — get much less distracting. The performances are wonderful, the writing is both clever and intelligent, and shockingly enough, the series does the thing that perhaps presented its greatest challenge: It earns its right to exist.

Copyright 2014 NPR. To see more, visit <http://www.npr.org/>.