



Rolling Stone

Murder, Snow and Minnesota Nice: The Return of 'Fargo'

A new FX miniseries goes back to the Coen brothers' world of you-betcha accents and Midwestern noir



Billy Bob Thornton as Lorne Malvo on 'Fargo', Chris Large/FX

By [David Fear](#) April 15, 2014 10:30 AM ET

"I mean, the guy is a fucking Komodo dragon, but he has the bangs of Ken Burns?" The whole table laughs, and Billy Bob Thornton smiles, knowing he's just nailed it. The subject is a hired killer; specifically, the horrible, Moe Howard-ish bowl haircut that this professional hit man

sports. Sitting across from Thornton in a Midtown conference room, Colin Hanks stares up at the ceiling and then adds "He's like a human ficus plant. Put the guy in a corner, and you wouldn't even notice him."

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"Throw in the long jacket and the turtleneck sweater he likes to wear, and you'd think, Oh, that's the bass player from Buffalo Springfield," Thornton adds.

The descriptions that Thornton and Hanks bandy back and forth about the former's character on the new FX miniseries *Fargo* are spot-on, especially if you've seen stills of the *Sling Blade* actor from the show: He really does look like a man who lost a collective bet with a hair salon, a tailor and God. (Thornton claims the horrific 'do was the result of a haircut gone awry, something that he says turned out to be perfect for the chameleonic character.) Once you've watched any of the show's 10 episodes, however, most of your laughter regarding this guy — his name is Lorne Malvo — tends to get caught in your throat. When we first meet him, Malvo has an unlucky schlub [stuffed into the trunk of his car](#). By the time we find out how this unfortunate soul got there, we've already witnessed this "meek" gentleman shiv somebody in the neck, turn a shotgun on another person and help unleash the inner savage of a repressed insurance agent (played by *The Hobbit*'s [Martin Freeman](#)), among other things. "A stone cold killer," Thornton adds, "who just happens to look like Alfred E. Neuman."

When you get down to brass tacks, however, virtually everything about *Fargo* is deceiving, appearance-wise. Malvo is a predator whose lack of fashion sense throws his prey off the scent. Freeman's henpecked insurance agent Lester seems like a helpless, hapless victim of a house invasion — and guess who has blood on his own hands? Hanks' small-town cop comes off like an incompetent sad-sack but is actually what *The Wire*'s McNulty would call "good police"; his fellow law-enforcement officer, the dowdy Molly (Allison Tolman, the miniseries' stealth MVP) is an even keener detective than her male counterpart. And then there's the show itself, the one you think is merely cashing-in on the borrowed name, frosty Midwestern landscape and pitch-black humor of the acclaimed 1996 Coen brothers' movie, right down to the opening "this is a true story" disclaimer — and instead turns out to be one of the most compelling, slyly funny noirs to grace TV screens in a long time.

[Check Out Billy Bob Thornton and Martin Freeman in 'Fargo' Teasers](#)

"Well, I wanted to call it *Dallas*," showrunner Noah Hawley deadpans, "but I was told that title was already taken." A former writer and executive story editor on the detective show *Bones*, Hawley was approached by MGM and FX about adapting the property into a TV series. Whether or not Hawley remembered that the previous attempt to shrink *Fargo* to small-screen proportions back in 1997 (starring a pre-*Sopranos* Edie Falco as Marge) never made it past the pilot stage, he knew that he wasn't interested in rehashing the film or signing on for something like *CSI: Fargo*. "You guys want a cop show, but this isn't a cop show," he recalls telling the network. "What you want is a miniseries, and here's how you do it. You give it a beginning, a middle and, importantly, an end." Though he claims he chose the number 10 somewhat

arbitrarily, Hawley said it ended up being the exact amount of episodes needed. "Had I said '12,' I think I would have been dancing around things by the end."

The result isn't a retelling of *Fargo*'s storyline stretched out to 10 hours so much as a similarly pulpy, sick-humorously violent tale told in the vein of the original — a parallel riff in the exact same *Fargo*-verse. (While Joel and Ethan Coen aren't directly involved, Hawley confirms that their executive-producer status on the show doubles as a sign of their approval. "They read the script," he said, "and told us, oh, yeah, great, you can use our names on this.") Once again, an everyman finds himself in over his head with shady types, a female cop uses a sense of "Minnesota Nice" to find out information and the region's accents are blown up to exaggerated proportions, notably the British actor Freeman's you-betcha take on the North-Midwestern drawl. "Actually, that's my *real* accent," Freeman claims. "The English one is a fake; I just keep it up so people think I'm a proper actor."

[Martin Freeman's Next Adventure](#)

But what this *Fargo* really channels is the original's oddball marriage of true-crime storytelling, near-kitschy Americana and a keen sense of character development, the sort of mid-Nineties indie-filmmaking mojo that the Coen brothers' cracked noir had in spades — certainly in spirit, studio patronage or not — yet has become increasingly rarer to find on the big screen. "But that's the thing," Thornton says. "TV has become the place where you go to make *and* see the types of things you're talking about. What would have been a \$10 million to \$15 million movie in the Nineties is now something like this or *True Detective* on TV. When people go out, maybe they just want to go to the amusement park. But when they're sitting at home, I think they're more willing to watch something that might be heavier, that requires a bit more attention and nuance. TV is filling that void. This is really a 10-hour independent movie!"

As for whether there's life for *Fargo* beyond those initial 10 hours, Hawley responds, "Well, this story has been told. Whether there are other stories happening in the *Fargo*-verse, as you called it, remains to be seen." Thornton and his castmates all seem to be game to give it another go, and you can imagine the show coming back with the same cast as different characters, becoming the equivalent of an *American Horror Story* for the Minnesota Nice set. "I don't think any of us would rule it out necessarily," Thornton says slowly. "But it might depend on what my hair would look like."