

Emmy Spotlight: Showrunner/Creator Noah Hawley on the ‘Existential Exercise’ of Adapting *Fargo* For TV

📅 18 Jun 2014 By [Dina Gachman](#)



Over the years, Joel and Ethan Coen’s body of work has cemented their status as two of the most revered filmmakers in history. *Fargo* earned them a slew of awards, including an Oscar win for star Frances McDormand, and quickly became a cinema classic. Only an incredibly self-assured writer would take on the daunting task of adapting such a film for the small screen, which is where Noah Hawley comes in.

A former *Bones* writer and creator of *The Unusuals* and *My Generation*, Hawley penned several novels but [wanted to be a rock star](#) before he started writing fiction.

When approached about turning *Fargo* into a TV series, he jumped at the challenge, but not without enduring a few sleepless nights. The risk paid off – the show is an Emmy frontrunner for Best Miniseries.

April’s first episode drew 2.65 million viewers, and two repeats of the show that same night brought total viewership to 4.1 million. Hawley has been praised for his ability to create a show that shares the tone of the original film but manages to be entirely unique. It boasts a stellar cast that includes Billy Bob Thornton, Martin Freeman, Allison Tolman, Colin Hanks, Kate Walsh, and Oliver Platt.

SSN spoke to Hawley about getting the Coen Brothers’ approval, the challenges of taking on a classic, and what all the Emmy talk means to him.

SSN: The show has been incredibly well-received, but you must have felt some trepidation before agreeing to take on the project.

Hawley: I’d have to be an egomaniac to not feel some trepidation. I grew up on the Coen Brothers’ movies, as so many filmmakers of my generation did. When the idea of making *Fargo* as a TV show came up, the first thought was fear that you’re going to take something so quirky and unique and turn it into *Picket Fences*. In other words, a light show about small-town crime. It’s fine to be *Picket Fences*, but that’s not what the Coen Brothers set out to make. The fear was that we would have some show with a plucky Marge character out there solving odd cases.

SSN: Did the network have any mandates up front?

Hawley: When FX and MGM said they wanted to do this they said they wanted to do it without Marge, and they wanted to keep the tone and the setting, which was not something I'd been asked before. It was a fascinating challenge. How would I create a story that would give you the same feeling you had watching *Fargo*, but was not that movie at all. It became a bit of an existential exercise.

SSN: What were your first encounters with the Coens like?

Hawley: They signed on before I did. They said, 'we'll only put our names on it if you make it good.' They were going to decide after reading the first script. I did a draft for FX and then we sent it to Joel and Ethan to read. It was a bit of a nerve-racking weekend. They called and they were really complimentary. I won't say exactly what they said but they were happy to put their names on the project and they said, 'it's not our medium; we don't know television and you should go make your show, and you may never hear from us again.'

SSN: Did you meet them in person?

Hawley: I did meet them in New York a few months later. I had some casual waffles with them and then I went off to go make the show.

SSN: Did knowing that the Coens were going to read the script affect your writing at all or were you able to block out that anxiety?

Hawley: It didn't bother me during the writing. For better or worse I've reached the point in my career where I can do what I can do, and try to tell the story as best I can. Certainly when it was sent to them it was intimidating. I started as a novelist and I always saw novel writing as having a dialogue with the great books you've read and it's the same here.



SSN: Was it going to be a miniseries from the start?

Hawley: They wanted to make a television series and I went in and said it wasn't a series. What made the movie great is that at the end of the movie, Marge solved the crime and gets into bed with her husband and you know that tomorrow morning she's going to wake up and go back to life as normal. If we did a 'case of the week' show it would stop feeling like a true story, and she wouldn't be that

character anymore. I pitched them an anthology or a limited series. In order to sell the idea of a true story it has to be the worst case the character ever saw, and that's why we're telling the story. It used to be that the story was dictated by the length of the series, and now the length of the series is dictated by the story, which is a much better way to do it.

SSN: And what about a second season?

Hawley: I think it would be a new story in the Fargo universe. Right now I'm just enjoying the fact that I survived the winter.

SSN: How does it feel having so much Emmy buzz surrounding the show?

Hawley: It's very meaningful. You always wonder, 'when the moment comes am I going to recognize it,' but the reality is that there's no mistaking it. To have a show that's so critically well-received and getting buzz is humbling. No one can predict what's going to happen but it's nice to be considered this far out.



By [Dina Gachman](#)

Dina Gachman is Studio System News' Senior Staff Writer. Her writing has appeared in Forbes, Ask Men, The Hairpin, Salon, and the Los Angeles Review of Books.