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Jell-O Salad, Snow and Savage Murders

‘ Fargo,’ a TV Series Riffing on the Film, Begins on FX

By [ALESSANDRA STANLEY](#) APRIL 14, 2014



Fargo Allison Tolman as a sheriff's deputy in this adaptation of the film, beginning Tuesday on FX. Credit Matthias Clamer/FX

“Original adaptation,” like “instant classic” and “jumbo shrimp,” is an oxymoron that makes sense.

That's what FX is calling "[Fargo](#)," a series beginning on Tuesday that has the same title as a 1996 Coen brothers movie and is more of a riff than a rip-off. [Ethan](#) and Joel Coen are among the executive producers, so they obviously sanctioned the venture. The writer, Noah Hawley, [invented new characters](#) immersed in a different array of murders without losing what was so distinctive about that droll, enigmatic film in the first place.

This "Fargo" is also set in the frozen desolation of rural Minnesota, where whiteout blunts the most savage murders and fevered emotions. It's the kind of place that is so far from Hollywood that it almost seems exotic. "Northern Exposure" was a television sitcom about whimsically eccentric people in Alaska. "Fargo" finds humor in the stunning ordinariness of Midwestern small towns, where people are uniformly even tempered and mild, bringing Jell-O salads to potlucks and saying "aw jeez" and "heck" when bad things happen.

The snow tamps down so much: In Minnesota, even some of the killers have placid miens and pleasant manners.

Like the [movie](#), the series is peculiar, with an irregular rhythm and lots of black humor, and it is also oddly winning. The story is presented as a true crime, though it isn't. Stretched over 10 episodes, the suspense lies less in whodunit than in the strange ways these quirky characters react to violence.

Martin Freeman, who plays Watson on the BBC series "Sherlock," is Lester Nygaard, a meek, clumsy insurance salesman in Bemidji, a small Minnesota city (not the North Dakota town of the title). Lester is a disappointment to his family, particularly to his wife. But Lester's dull, dutiful life careens wildly after he encounters a stranger with a menacing smile, Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton).

Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman), a sheriff's deputy, is heavysset, slow moving and bashful, but inwardly smart and ambitious. Molly has suspicions about Lester, but her boss, Bill Oswalt (Bob Odenkirk), thwarts her investigation.

The one person who shares her misgivings is a police officer in Duluth, Minn., Gus Grimly (Colin Hanks), who has his own unsettling encounter with Malvo. But he has his reasons for not asking too many questions, which leaves most of the real investigative work to Molly.

And there are quite a few mysteries in these quiet parts, including a blackmail threat against Stavros Milos (Oliver Platt), the power-mad owner of a grocery store chain.

Some kind of organized crime racket operates out of Fargo, and there are several hit men on different assignments in Bemidji. When Molly is summoned to a crime scene and finds a local businessman dead, with a knife plunged into the back of his head, she wonders if it is a mob killing. Or, as she puts it, "Well, jeez, do you think this could be, like, an organized crime thing, you know, a hit or the like?"

The Coen brothers, whose films include "The Big Lebowski" and "A Serious Man," are known for creating oddball characters and also brutally stupid ones, and this series has plenty of both, so

many, in fact, that Molly is vital as a rudder. She isn't a freak or an idiot, and her rough-hewed valor steadies a series that could otherwise veer into coy preciousness.

Molly is only superficially similar to the pregnant police chief played by Frances McDormand in the movie. This plain, cordial heroine is young, single and lonely: Her father, Lou (Keith Carradine), a retired cop who runs the town diner, appears to be her only real friend. But Molly loves her work, is intent on doing things right, and she trudges through an indifferent world with a summoned good cheer that is heartbreaking.

"Fargo" isn't the movie; it's a television adaptation that lives up to the spirit of the original by straying.

Fargo

FX, 10 on Tuesday nights, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time.

Produced by MGM Television and FX Productions. Written by Noah Hawley; Mr. Hawley, Warren Littlefield, Joel Coen, Ethan Coen and Geyer Kosinski, executive producers.

WITH: Billy Bob Thornton (Lorne Malvo), Martin Freeman (Lester Nygaard), Colin Hanks (Gus Grimly), Allison Tolman (Molly Solverson), Bob Odenkirk (Deputy Bill Oswalt), Oliver Platt (Stavros Milos), Kate Walsh (Gina Hess), Glenn Howerton (Don Chumph), Joey King (Greta Grimly), Peter Breitmayer (Lieutenant Schmidt), Tom Musgrave (Bo Munk), Josh Close (Chazz Nygaard), Russell Harvard (Mr. Wrench), Adam Goldberg (Mr. Numbers), Keegan-Michael Key (Bill Budge) and Jordan Peele (Webb Pepper).