

## PRAIRIE HOME DEATH TRIP

FARGO, by Ethan and Joel Coen

Our politicians perennially laud small town values as a wellspring of the republic's vigor. But American authors have also persistently dwelt upon the penchant for suicidal despair, lunacy, and criminality lurking beneath the placid facade of provincial life. Explosions of aggression in tranquil backwater locales have been variously attributed to social isolation, puritanical pressure for conformity, or frontier individualism gone daft. Notable past and contemporary descriptions of the dire results attendant upon blowing the lid off the provincial lid are found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, William Faulkner's Barn Burner, Edward Arlington Robinson's Spoon River Anthology, Shirley Jackson's The Lottery, and virtually every Stephen King novel. Hollywood meditations on the subject include East of Eden (1954), Peyton Place (1957), Psycho (1961), Blue Velvet (1986), and virtually every picture based on every Stephen King novel.

One's favorite non-fiction chronicle in this morbid vein is Wisconsin Death Trip, social historian Michael Lesy doctoral thesis. **(1)** Overviewing regional gazettes from the closing decades of the last century, Lesy found that homely descriptions of church picnics and visiting relatives regularly rubbed elbows with accounts of appalling murders, grisly suicides, and attacks

of gibbering madness one would have thought more likely fodder for the urban yellow press of that and our own day.

For instance, it was not unusual for the spring thaw to reveal that members of a shack-wacky farm family had slaughtered each other during the endless harsh winter. In retrospect, deep melancholy brought on by a surfeit of external gloom -- the entity known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD) -- perhaps meshed with latent depressive or manic-depressive illness to detonate ordinarily phlegmatic temperaments, precipitating such extravagant psychiatric catastrophes.

The surplus of Nordic surnames in those bygone accounts of the lunatic or violently deceased may not only have reflected the preponderance of Scandinavian immigrants in the prairie population (a majority of them Swedish), but could also have signified that a disproportionate number possessed the genetic predisposition for major affective disease. Beyond season or ethnicity or innate psychopathology, wine was a mocker and strong drink raged in the Midwestern hinterlands, providing further fuel for the latent spirit of misrule.

Joel and Ethan Coen's loopy riffs on genre (Joel directs, Ethan produces, both write their screenplays) are often set in small towns or heartland urban locales inflected by backwater mores (e.g. Blood Simple [1985], Raising Arizona [1987], Miller's Crossing [1990]). **(2)** Fargo, the latest product of the Coen's idiosyncratic talents, mines Wisconsin Death Trip's lurid

territory from the brothers customarily quirky perspective, construing both its Minneapolis and surrounding small town settings as resolutely provincial. But the Coens' usual scabrous wit and cool detachment are here leavened by unexpected sympathy, stemming from their evident abiding affection for Midwestern folkways (they hail from the Twin Cities area).

In a Coen picture, intelligence let alone common sense is regularly in short supply, and ethics tend to be situational at best. Most characters are impulse driven, exceptionally ornery numbskulls or naifs, who routinely pursue some crooked or cracked scheme with Three Stooges-like singlemindedness, including total incomprehension of its disastrous consequences (e.g., in Raising Arizona, a petty career criminal kidnaps a Phoenix used-car magnate's sextuplet in aid of redressing his ex-cop wife's barrenness, assuming that the magnate and his wife won't miss one kid more or less. They do, and hire a vicious bounty-hunter to hunt down the jury-rigged family).

When a Coen protagonist's harebrained plan thus turns awry, the resultant violence is likely to partake equally of low comedy and Grand Guignol horror. In a signature Coen device, the camera rushes headlong towards some scarifying act, then the screen goes abruptly black. It's as if one had descended into a punctate American gothic nightmare.

Coen films are elsewhere potently informed by the dream's uncanny alterity, the unsettling sense of Freud's "other locale".

The mise-en-scene is dark with menace or garish with comic-book color. Images are surreal or hyper-real, dense with overdetermined significations (one critic noted an abundance of weird haircuts and screaming fat men). Dialogue is correspondingly gnomic: "No one is so pitiful as a man who's lost his hat", avows the gangster hero of Miller's Crossing, as if his cockeyed contention were received truth (hats are another Coen obsession, for reasons known only to them).

The opening title asserts that Fargo is based on actual 1987 events. No one to date has been able to verify this, and the announcement that all names have been changed "out of respect for the dead" immediately manages to strike the apposite note of Coen weirdness. An oneiric milieu is then constructed out of the glacial essence of the unrelenting Midwestern midwinter, using a palette weighted towards dank greys and blinding whites. A rime of chill seeps into the skull, as one apprehends the numbing expanse of prairie emptiness, or encounters characters who seem emotionally congealed within their own skins. Their lingua franca is a surreal distillation of chipper heartland speak, with an odd, laconic Swedish lilt: *"Oh, yah...pretty good...you betcha...okey dokey...thanks a bunch...send it right over in a jiff...end of story!"*

In the stunning establishing sequence, a car materializes out of a primeval storm, the eeriness of its stately progress accentuated by foreshortened lensing, as it rolls towards a

roundevous in a sleazy Fargo roadhouse, where glowering men in mackinaws toss back shots of cheap booze and the juke box wails "Big city, turn me loose and set me free".

To this badland ambience, reeking with intimations of disinhibition, comes Jerry Lundegaard, a Minneapolis car salesman in vast financial trouble, in hope of hiring two thungs for a painless kidnap of his unsuspecting wife, Jean. Jerry hopes to redeem his tattered fortunes by having Jean ransomed by her rock stolid wealthy father, Wade Gustavson. The emotional toll the abduction might take on his wife (whose brittle chatter could drive one to drink); on his immensely tender-hearted teen-aged son; or indeed on himself, seems to have registered not one whit upon his desparate and utterly feckless soul.

The unwholesome conspirators are classic Coen no-brainers, ranging across the repellent psychopathic spectrum. In William H. Macy's keen impersonation, Jerry is a cornered ferret, oozing unreliable charm. His face is curiously split: haunted eyes dart wildly above his spurious smile and wagging tongue, as he tries to finagle his way out of an advance on the \$80,000 ransom he proposes splitting with the goons. Slimy Carl Schowalter (another of Steve Buscemi's hyperactive malefactors), clearly a mercenary legend in his own mediocre mind, speaks pompously of "tasking the mission". Gear Grimsrud, a huge blonde Caliban, takes in the chatter with ominous stony disapproval (noted Swedish actor/director Peter Stormare plays this monster from the id with

nearly wordless, ferocious intensity).

After the fashion of earlier Coen screenplays, Jerry's plan goes horridly awry. Jean nearly escapes from the clumsy yobbos before being trussed and tossed into their car. She will remain hooded and mute for the rest of the film, a familiar Coen figure ambivalently exciting both our pity and risibility.

On the way to their hideout, her captors are stopped near the hamlet of Brainerd by a local trooper, because Schowalter forgot to put registration tags on the plates of the car Jerry witlessly lent him from his showroom. Brainerd proclaims itself "the home of Paul Bunyan". At the town outskirts a bizarre statue of the giant woodsman with a toothy, obscene grin rears up in passerbys' headlights. It recurs throughout the film as an hallucinatory icon of companionable prairie home menace. Grimsrud could be its horrific double.

He mercilessly guns down the cop, then pursues a father and son who inadvertently witnessed the murder and slaughters them as well. Schowalter demands a larger cut of the profits from Jerry, obtusely reasoning that the body count warrants increased compensation. He doesn't know he's been working for chump change all along: from the first, Jerry planned to extort a million dollar payoff from his father-in-law, throwing its scraps to his cretinous confederates.

Amidst this bloody bumbling and conniving, the Coens introduce Fargo's marvelously unlikely heroine, Marge Gunderson,

Brainerd's police chief, in the seventh month of first pregnancy. Frances McDormand's performance as Marge deserves that tritest of cinema accolades: the actress (Joel Coen's wife) actually seems to light up the screen. McDromand's unusual, strongly dimpled face glows with serene intelligence and a fecund hormonal blush.

Rung awake by report of the multiple murders, Marge is instantly on the case, asking all the right questions as she struggles out of her nightclothes and into her uniform with fetching awkwardness (her outfit includes a standard piece of Coen haberdashery -- a goofily flapped, furry police hat). her gruff househusband Norm -- he carves bird decoys in his home studio -- solicitously prepares a big breakfast (Fargo keeps piquantly reminding one of Marge's gargantuan appetite for two). Marge nor Norm don't have many words at this or any hour, but their deep companionability is palpable, notably counterpoised against the glimpses of grating dysharmony between the Lundegaards.

At the scene of the double shooting, Marge stifles an urge to upchuck: It's evident she's afflicted by morning sickness rather than horror ("Well, that passed!" she exclaims equably), owns considerable experience of similar gruesome death trips. She shrewdly guesses the first murder is linked to the homicides down the road ("It's an execution type thing..."). Commencing with the slain cop's description of the car plates, she meticulously begins to develop a damning trail of evidence that will lead straight to Jerry.

Her men, dogged but dumb, stand quietly in awe of her deductive powers. Marge's hilarious deadpan rebuke of the dullard who thinks "DLR" is part of the plate number -- missing its crucial connection to an auto dealership -- is compassionately corrective. A considerate toughmindedness is Marge's trademark on and off the job, typified by her treatment of the college friend who heard about the crime, and wants to meet her in Minneapolis while she's investigating the killings. When he tries to seduce her with a tearful lament about his wife's death from leukaemia, she tactfully backs him off and offers gentle consolation. Later she discovers that he's been institutionalized, lives with his parents, and has never married -- an exemplar of the crazed masculine duplicity pervading the film.

Bloodshed escalates as Jerry's scheme continues unravelling. Wade Gustavson, bearing no high opinion either of his son-in-law's brains or courage, agrees to the payoff on condition that he deliver it himself, utterly dashing Jerry's hopes. Schowalter kills Wade, buries the loot in a frozen field a galaxy from nowhere (one surmises it will never be found), only to be axed to death by Grimsrud, who has just murdered and raped Jean offscreen. A sideways glimpse of her sprawled body, pitifully clad in her comfy housedress, instantly sours the jokiness of the botched abduction.

In this climate of unbridled male aggression, one's attentiveness is increasingly compelled by fear for Marge's

ungainly vulnerability, as she totters like a fertile Humpty-Dumpty towards an inevitable confrontation with Grimsrud's depraved malevolence. Schowalter has been chopped down to size at this point, and Jerry represents no threat, although his shallow narcissism and swiss-cheese superego indubitably constitute the prime movers for Fargo's chain of evil.

Cornered in his office, Jerry attempts to throw more dust in Marge's eyes with a puny tantrum. "Now there's not need to get snippy," she snaps, as angry as she will ever get, precipitating his flight from her inexorable justice. He's eventually arrested where the mischief began, at first shamelessly attempting to flee a Bismarck North Dakota motel, his motives as inexplicable to the viewer as perhaps to himself.

Marge's final encounter with Grimsrud, while he's preoccupied with loathsomely disposing of Schowalter's dismembered corpse in a roaring wood-shredder, is both frightening and mordantly witty. The scene generates an intense moral thrust never encountered in the Coens' work. It derives from Marge's reflexive goodness, her profound commitment to mindful law over raw blood-simpleness, exemplified by her carefully bringing Grimsrud down with a leg shot after a by-the-books warning. The conclusion of Ingmar Bergman's The Virgin Spring (1959) springs to mind -- Fargo seems otherwise curiously informed by that film's cold Nordic spareness -- sans the "justified" carnage wrought by its avenging father upon the outlaws who raped and killed his daughter. For Grimsrud

survives with the dim chance of being tutored into a semblance of humanity by Marge's mercy.

While it's likely his soul is too submerged in iniquity to seize the opportunity, this does not vitiate the impact of the policewoman's oddball grace, of her redemptive and civilizing force. Her calm rebuke after wounding when she could have killed -- "All this, just for a little money...Oh, my" -- speaks volumes against Grimsrude's insensate cruelty, as her staunch refusal to execute him speaks pointedly against the mindless vigilantism so widely recommended by American cinema today.

Later that evening, Madge comforts her husband when Norm glumly announces that one of his duck paintings has been selected for a three-cent stamp, rather than for the prized larger denomination. With the stoic cheerfulness, endearing wackiness, and inherent decency deemed by the Coens to embody the best of the Midwestern spirit, she assures Norm that every time the price of postage goes up a bit, his work is sure to be seen -- at least until the regular issue comes out.

Comfortably nested in bed, they murmur "*Love ya...only two more months...*" The moment is all the more touching, inutterably precious because one is aware of its fragility, spurred by having witnessed the prior slaughter of so many of Fargo's hapless innocents. With a thoughtful poignance one would never have anticipated from their previous disengaged stance, the Coens intimate how vulnerable our small purposes are before the baleful

forces in human nature and nature at large -- those harbingers of chaos stirring beyond the threshold throughout the long, bleak nights.

#### NOTES

1. Michael Lesy. Wisconsin Death Trip. New York: Bantam/Doubleday, 1978/1991.

2. By a stretch, the corporate setting of The Hudsucker Proxy (1994) and, most notably, the Hollywood of Barton Fink (1993) also qualify as weird Coen backwaters. In the latter, heartland values are hawked by hypocritical powers-that-be, and Fink's patronizing admiration for the common man is savagely exploited by John Goodman's satirical serial killer (prior to unmasking, the terrible Goodman passes himself off to Fink as a homesick traveling salesman, the very incarnation of small town virtue).