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Coen Brothers Spotlight

Feature by [Matt Burch](#), Contributing Editor



It came from Minnesota. Not the Yeti, the Kraken, or Cerberus but the two-headed, Oscar-winning beast known as the Brothers Coen.

Dubbed the "two-headed director" for their dual-directing approach and credit-swapping tendencies, brothers Joel and Ethan Coen are not, in fact, co-joined Chang and Eng style. Nor are they even twins. In truth, it's very easy to tell them apart -- Joel's the slightly older one, a NYU film grad married to Frances McDormand, and Ethan's the one with a Princeton philosophy degree who occasionally writes books on the side. Also, one or both of them usually has some form of facial hair.

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OK, so you might confuse them in a line-up. But it's their movies that are unmistakable.

From their breakout indie effort, *Blood Simple*, in 1984, the Coen Brothers made a distinct impression, breathing new life into the tired suspense thriller genre and into a '80s mainstream scene dominated by carbon copy spring-break comedies and bloated Stallone/Schwarzenegger testosterone-fests. Those long, slow tracking shots. That ear for regional dialogue. That curious mix of irony and bloodshed. Something new was definitely afoot.

The Brothers soon cemented their reputation for quirk with a string of well-reviewed but modestly-performing films, all targeting a very specific genre (usually a dead one) for maximum tweakage. *Raising Arizona* was their take on the '40s screwball comedy. *Miller's Crossing*, the '40s gangster picture. And with *Barton Fink*, they got even more obscure -- the Wallace Beery wrestling picture.

All of these films achieved instant cult-status, but it wasn't until the Brothers went back to their Minnesota roots with 1996's *Fargo* that they had a bona-fide hit on their hands. The touchstone Coen plot points were all there -- kidnapping, blackmail, double-crosses, mistaken identity. But this time, instead of the barren yellow desert of the Lone Star State in *Blood Simple*, the murders were played out against the North Star State's frigid white expanse, the convoluted proceedings made all the more ironic by the uber-friendly Minnesotan colloquialisms masking the underlying menace. Lunch buffets and blood-spattered snow -- you betcha!



David Cronenberg Spotlight

With the success of *Fargo*, the Coens had snagged their first Oscar (Original Screenplay) and just enough industry cred to continue their risky genre experiments. Perennial favorite *The Big Lebowski* was perhaps the first marriage of detective movie and stoner comedy. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the first redneck road movie to name-check Homer's *Odyssey*. And how about *The Man Who Wasn't There*, their black and white ode to film noir and swell haircuts?

Admittedly, by the time the aptly named *Intolerable Cruelty* and the lackluster *Ladykillers* remake rolled out, the Brothers' shenanigans were beginning to test our patience. In short, we were starting to worry. Had the Coens lost their spark? Were they falling back on their screwball laurels?

Then came the answer -- a resounding "No!" As in 2007's *No Country for Old Men*.

To create this airtight philosophical murder thriller, the Brothers Coen once again returned their roots. Not Minneosta this time, but their cinematic roots -- the West Texas landscape of *Blood Simple*. But now their craft was honed to perfection, their style less showy and the source material (Cormac McCarthy's novel of the same name) a perfect fit. And let's be honest, that pressurized cattle gun just gets the job done.

They didn't even need to bring it with them to the Oscars.

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Resume

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The Coen Brothers: A Resume



To quote nearly every character from *Miller's Crossing*:
"What's the rumpus?"

Well, summing up the plot of a Coen Brothers movie can be a little like explaining Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle to a group of two-year olds, be they Arizona quints or otherwise. And don't even get us started on the tenets of Nihilism ("We are nihilists! We believe in nuzzing").

Though we may not be able to give you the complete "rumpus" on every film, we can take a quick look back at the career of everybody's favorite "two-headed director," their films, their influences and some golden bits of dialogue along the way.

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Blood Simple (1984)

Who's In It: Frances McDormand, M. Emmet Walsh, Dan Hedaya

Pays Homage To: Old school film noir, James M. Cain novels, slasher movie suspense

What's the Rumpus: Adultery, blackmail, sleazy private detectives in cheap yellow leisure suits. In other words, standard fare for a dime store pulp mystery novel or a late-night made for cable cheapie. But from the opening credits of a faceless couple set in silhouette against the steady whoosh-whoosh of wiping windshield blades to an ominously tracking camera moving up and over a sleeping barroom drunk, you know you're in for something a little different.

This is the film that first put the Coen Brothers on the map, and that map is located squarely in the empty honkytonks, the cheap hotels, and dark deserted highways of West Texas. Murder comes easy here, but this movie most certainly did not. The Coen Brothers reportedly raised funds for this film by lugging a film projector from house to house in Minnesota showing wealthy dentists and doctors a makeshift trailer comprised of key images from the film until they had enough investors for its 1.5 million budget.

Words To Live By: "Now, in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else... that's the theory, anyway. But what I know about is Texas, and down here...you're on your own."



Blood Simple (1984)

Crimewave (1985)

Who's In It: Louise Lasser, Brion James, Bruce Campbell

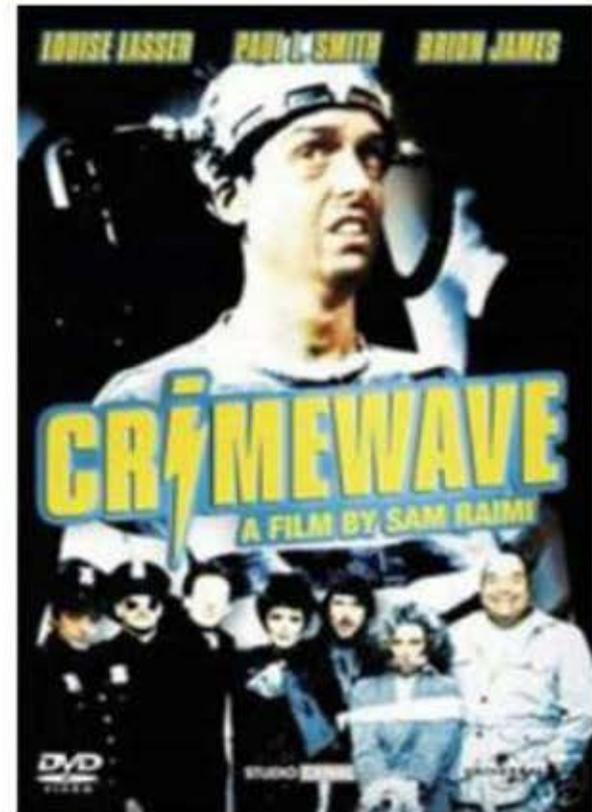
Pays Homage To: *Looney Tunes* cartoons, *The Three Stooges*

What's the Rumpus: After their directorial debut, the Coen Brothers let Sam Raimi take the director's seat filling in as writers on this little known and lesser seen crime comedy. The movie itself is more notable as this their first collaboration than for its own merits. Other than a nifty car chase at the end that takes place on speeding car roof tops, it's mostly a live action Bugs Bunny cartoon minus the funny.

Brother Joel had first befriended the mastermind of the *Spider-Man* franchise in his humbler days as an editor on the first *Evil Dead* film. From there, a longtime friendship and collaboration would develop between the Brothers and Raimi with story ideas being swapped (*The Hudsucker Proxy*) and camera techniques being exchanged.

You know those fast moving "shaky cam" shots that are wall-to-wall in *Evil Dead II*? Well, there are quite a few to be found in *Raising Arizona* as well.

Words To Live By: "I've never seen you here before. I like that in a woman."



Crimewave (1985)

Raising Arizona (1987)

Who's In It: Nicolas Cage, Holly Hunter, John Goodman, Randall "Tex" Cobb

Pays Homage To: Director Preston Sturges, prison movies, *Looney Tunes*

What's the Rumpus: A childless redneck couple (Cage and Hunter) hatch a plan to kidnap one from a gaggle of Arizona quintuplets owned by an unpainted furniture tycoon. But plans go awry (as these things often do) when hubby H.I.'s convict buddies from the joint show up "of their own recognizance" with ransom money in mind. Things get even more complicated when a bounty hunter straight out of *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* arrives on a Harley toting a nasty sawed-off shotgun and a host of abandonment issues.

The Coen Brothers' first major studio movie was received with some confused head-scratching back then but is now considered an uncontested comedy classic. For better or worse, *My Name is Earl* would not exist without it. Turn to the right!

Words To Live By: "...and when there was no meat, we ate fowl, and when there was no fowl, we ate crawdad, and when there was no crawdad to be found, we ate sand."



Raising Arizona (1987)

Miller's Crossing (1990)



Who's In It: Gabriel Byrne, John Turturro, Albert Finney, Marcia Gay Harden

Pays Homage To: Two classic noir novels by Dashiell Hammett, *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest*, lifting liberally from the plots of both

What's the Rumpus: The Mink, The Dane, Rug Daniels, Drop Johnson. With names like these, you know you're in a mob movie. But not just any mob movie...a Coen Brothers mob movie.

In a nameless Prohibition-era town, an ice-cold Gabriel Byrne plays Tom Reagan, a mob fixer to two warring syndicates vying for control. But Reagan's got ethics...or does he? Is he really playing both sides against the middle? And if so, who's he giving the high hat, Leo or Caspar?

Chances are neither for this is one anti-hero who loves his hat. Everyone else...not so much. Never has men's headgear featured so lovingly in so cold-hearted a movie. The dude even has dreams about his hat. When it comes his dame Verna or his fedora, take a guess which one he's gonna save first.

Words To Live By: "Take your flunky and dangle."



Miller's Crossing (1990)

Barton Fink (1991)



Who's In It: John Turturro, John Goodman, Judy Davis, Tony Shalhoub, John Mahoney

Pays Homage To: Obscure '30s wrestling pictures, playwright Clifford Odets, William Faulkner's short-lived career in Hollywood, fishmongering, eclectic wallpaper design

What's the Rumpus: Long before Brad Pitt realized it was Gwyneth's pretty blonde locks in that box in *Seven*, John Turturro was toting around his own cerebral care-package in *Barton Fink*. But more than being one of the first movies to lay claim to the head-in-a-box craze (do two movies count as a craze?), *Barton Fink* is most certainly the only movie in history to tie together the seemingly disparate themes of writer's block, professional wrestling, and the Holocaust.



Barton Fink (1991)

According to Coen Brothers lore, *Barton Fink* was a product of their own case of writer's block while writing *Miller's Crossing*. Instead of throwing in the towel on *Crossing*, they decided to switch gears for this tale of an uptight New York playwright (Turturro) who relocates to the Great Salt Lick of Hollywood and the world's freakiest hotel to write B Movie wrestling scenarios..."and other things lit'rary."

Fun Fact: Ethan performed writing duties on a wrestling picture once himself, 1998's *The Naked Man*, directed by frequent Coen Bros storyboard artist J. Todd Anderson.

Words To Live By: "We're only interested in one thing, Bart. Can you tell a story? Can you make us laugh? Can you make us cry? Can you make us want to break out in joyous song? Is that more than one thing? Okay!"

The Hudsucker Proxy (1994)

Who's In It: Tim Robbins, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Paul Newman, Anna Nicole Smith

Pays Homage To: '40s screwball comedies, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, Katherine Hepburn, the hula hoop

What's the Rumpus: With the mob and Hollywood behind them, the Coen Brothers next set their sights on the corporate world with this big business satire about a country rube named Norville (Tim Robbins) who travels to New York only to become the "proxy" head of the monolithic Hudsucker Industries after its former president purposely plummets out a 50th story window. But Norville soon falls for the fast-talking Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh channeling Katherine Hepburn) and accidentally invents the hula hoop, causing the company stock to soar much to the chagrin of scheming board of directors head Sidney J. Mussberger (Newman).

Appropriate to their theme, the Coens cozied up to mega-action producer Joel Silver (*Lethal Weapon* et al.) for this their largest budget pic at the time. But the movie tanked at the box office, and, needless to say, the Coens never directed a *Lethal Weapon 7*.

Words To Live By: "You know, for kids!"



The Hudsucker Proxy (1994)

Fargo (1996)



Who's In It: Frances McDormand, William H. Macy, Steve Buscemi, Peter Stormare

Pays Homage To: The Twin Cities, Paul Bunyan, pancakes houses, burnt umber Sierras

What's the Rumpus: Most people remember *Fargo* as "that movie with the funny accents" or the "one with the leg in the wood chipper." Granted, these are crucial components of what makes *Fargo* so unique, and never have the polite and the horrific been so satisfyingly intertwined. But, more than that, this is just a darn fine murder yarn, "homespun" as it says on the posters.



Fargo (1996)

A botched kidnapping once again serves as the plot engine, but this time, instead of quintuplets, it's a used car salesman (Macy) paying two low-rent criminals (Buscemi and Stormare) to kidnap his own wife in order to have his rich father-in-law cough up the ransom. When things go awry, pregnant police chief Marge Gunderson (McDormand) is called in to investigate in her own deceptively simplistic way.

Fargo picked up the Coens' first two Oscars in '97, one for Original Screenplay and one for McDormand as Best Actress. It's the film most people know the Coen Brothers for and the closest most of us will come to a vacation in North Dakota.

Words To Live By: "We've been waiting for an hour. He's peed three times already."

The Big Lebowski (1998)



Who's In It: Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, John Turturro, Julianne Moore, Phillip Seymour Hoffman

Pays Homage To: Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, Busby Berkley musicals, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, bowling, cannabis, drinks featuring milk and Kaluha

What's the Rumpus: Like the city of Los Angeles it's set in, *The Big Lebowski* may be the Coen Brothers' most sprawling plot, meandering in and out false leads, dead ends, red herrings of every sort. It never much gets anywhere, but, hey, when your main character is a stoner gumshoe named The Dude with a predilection for White Russians and Creedence Clearwater Revival, how much headway do you really expect to make?

The Coen Brothers claim to have based Bridges' character, The Dude, on a real life dude named The Dude that they knew in Los Angeles. So in that sense it's a true story. Perhaps over some Thai stick and a couple frames, he could explain the plot.

Words To Live By: "Yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, your opinion, man."



The Big Lebowski (1998)

O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000)

Who's In It: George Clooney, John Turturro, Tim Blake Nelson

Pays Homage To: Greek epic poetry, Bluegrass roots music, Dapper Dan hair jelly

What's the Rumpus: Besides its nifty bluegrass soundtrack, *O Brother* boasts the strangest lineage of a Coen Brothers movie to date. Loosely based on Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* and its title taken from the name of a movie character in Preston Sturges' classic *Sullivan's Travels* never got around to making, *O Brother* finds the Coen Brothers back on familiar ground in the Deep South, this time Mississippi.

George Clooney plays Ulysses Everett McGill, another in a long line of loquacious Southern scoundrels so dear to the Coens' heart. Along with ex-chain gang buddies, Pete and Delmar, the three make an escape across the sepia-toned South dodging all manner of miscreants from a Cyclops to sirens to George "Baby Face" Nelson and the KKK.

Words To Live By: "Well, there are all manner of lesser imps and demons, Pete, but the great Satan hisself is red and scaly with a bifurcated tail, and he carries a hay fork."



O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000)

The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)

Who's In It: Billy Bob Thornton, James Gandolfini, Scarlett Johansson, Frances McDormand

Pays Homage To: James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, barber school training videos, dry cleaning ventures

What's the Rumpus: The Coens supposedly had a hankering to film in black and white all the way back to *The Hudsucker Proxy*. With *The Man Who Wasn't There* they finally got their chance.

Billy Bob Thornton plays Ed Crane, a mild-mannered barber who cuts a lot of heads and smokes double that in cigarettes. When he starts to suspect his wife (McDormand) is cheating on him with department store magnate Big Dave (Gandolfini), you start to suspect that black mail, violence and murder are somewhere in his near future.

Keep an eye out for young Scarlett Johansson in this one as a virginal piano prodigy. And, if that doesn't sway you, did I mention there are aliens?

Words To Live By: "Me, I don't talk much... I just cut the hair."



The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)

Intolerable Cruelty (2003)

Who's In It: George Clooney, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Cedric the Entertainer

Pays Homage To: '30s and '40s romantic comedies, *Divorce Court*, general intolerability

What's the Rumpus: True, *The Man Who Wasn't There* had some sluggish pacing in spots, but *Intolerable Cruelty* is considered by many Coen-heads their first unmitigated bust.

George Clooney plays Miles Massey, a top notch divorce lawyer, who, against his better judgment, falls for Marilyn Rexroth (Zeta-Jones), a sexy gold-digger looking for her next seven-figure settlement. We have no problem believing that anyone could fall for stunning Zeta-Jones, even a divorce lawyer who can spot a trophy wife from a mile away. But, come on, no pre-nump? He must have had a taste of *The Dude's* stash the night before.

For once, the Coen Brothers did not have sole screenplay credit on this one, so to ease our conscience, we're going to lay the blame at the two other credited writers' doorstep. Unfair, you say? Hey, those guys wrote a Tim Allen movie before this one.

Words To Live By: "Let the record show that the Baron has identified Rex Rexroth as the silly man!"



Intolerable Cruelty (2003)

The Ladykillers (2004)



Who's In It: Tom Hanks, Marlon Wayans, J.K. Simmons, Irma P. Hall

Pays Homage To: The original Ealing Studios *Ladykillers*, Waffle Huts, heist movie conventions

What's the Rumpus: In the Coens' first remake to date, Tom Hanks plays a scheming, silver-tongued music professor who talks like Foghorn Leghorn, dresses like Colonel Sanders and intends to knock off a nearby riverboat gambling casino with the help of four bumbling co-horts. The only thing standing in their way is the little old lady (a fine Irma P. Hall) who rents them the basement rec room they need to tunnel through to the safe.

When the old bag starts to get wise to their plan, murder is called for, but this proves easier said than done.

While *The Ladykillers* proved better than your average Hollywood remake, it was still a little disappointing given the caliber of the Coens' previous original efforts. But maybe that's just because we were holding out for a written apology after *Intolerable Cruelty*.

Words To Live By: "Madam, we must have waffles! We must all have waffles forthwith!"



The Ladykillers (2004)

No Country For Old Men (2007)



Who's In It: Josh Brolin, Javier Bardem, Tommy Lee Jones, Woody Harrelson, Kelly Macdonald

Pays Homage To: Lethal farm equipment, page boy haircuts, the Brothers' own first film *Blood Simple*

What's the Rumpus: For the Coen Brothers, *No Country For Old Men* is a homecoming of sorts, a return to the barren Texas landscape they first bloodied in *Blood Simple*. But this time, the dread runs much deeper, the evil that slowly closes in on its prey all the more relentless. Says one man to another: "Just how dangerous is he?" Says the other: "Compared to what? The bubonic plague?"

They're talking about Anton Chigurh of course, the mop-topped cold blooded assassin played to the hilt by Oscar winner Javier Bardem. After Llewelyn Moss (Brolin) finds a stash of abandoned drug money in the desert from a cross-border deal gone wrong, he hesitates before taking it, as if he already knows the world of sh*t it's going to bring down on him. But he never prepared for the likes of Chigurh. Tommy Lee Jones is the last in a long line of good ol' boy lawmen tasked with the job of tracking Moss...and cleaning up Chigurh's mess of corpses along the way.

With these three fine actors in tow and their best source material to date, the brothers Coen deliver an expertly told suspense tale, earning the "two-headed director" a triple win with Oscars for Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Director and Best Feature Film.

Words To Live By: "Whatcha got ain't nothin new. This country's hard on people. You can't stop what's coming. It ain't all waiting on you. That's vanity."



No Country For Old Men (2007)