

# FARGO

Directed by Joel Coen  
Produced by Ethan Coen  
Distributed by Gramercy Pictures  
Released in 1996

Caught in an ugly predicament of his own making, an embittered car salesman unleashes an ill-thought kidnapping scheme that only compounds his problems. As the innocent fall to greedy ravaging, a woman single-handedly restores security to her quiet corner of Minnesota. Easy to dismiss, this heroine of *Fargo* begins to pierce the machinations of the criminals Carl and Gaear once they leave three bodies in her hometown. As police chief of Brainerd, Margie Gustafson seems at first to be an injection of ill-advised humor. Seven months pregnant, she reacts to the murders with casual deliberation.

But she is a professional, unlike her Styrofoam-balancing lieutenant. She carries the moral weight of the film and, before long, her intelligence, leadership, and bravery endear her to the audience.

As mentioned above, the entire mess starts with Jerry. His identity as a swindler is established in his first scene, pressuring a couple to pay hundreds of dollars more for a new car than they had agreed to do. Soon he is home, with his dutiful sappy-anxious wife, his ineffectual son, and his imperious father-in-law (his boss) over for a visit. The guy obviously disdains Jerry and, to Jerry's chagrin, wants no part in a parking lot development plan relying on his wealth for success.

But shortly thereafter Wade changes his mind and says the plan is a good one. Jerry, who had launched a faux kidnapping scheme to pocket Wade's ransom for his daughter, now tries to call it off, to no avail. First the crooks said it made no sense, and now we see Jerry has no sense—not only can't he stop them from absconding with his wife, he started the whole plan before he was sure there was no alternative! Buy why does he need the cash anyway?

From his conversations with the GMAC financing man, the serial numbers on \$320,000 worth of automobiles are impossible to verify, given their illegibility. Jerry stalls, trying to get the scheme worked out before the lawyers get involved. Apparently (because the point is obscure) he's been securing loans for cars that don't exist, and pocketing the money himself. One of the cars that does exist is the Olds he gives to his co-conspirators, Carl and Gaear. Jerry tells the crooks it's \$80,000, split down the middle. But he is planning on intercepting \$940,000 of the ransom money, probably to make amends for his shady car deals.

At the same time he is pursuing a land development deal, foolishly thinking he can interest Wade in loaning him \$750,000 instead of developing the property himself. Wade balks. Kidnapping remains the best (worst) option.

Carl and Gaear's characters are given plenty of time to develop before they do anything important. Carl talks a lot, is hyper and aggressive. Gaear is much bigger, sullen, a chain-smoker. Though he appears to be caught in a trance half the time, he is much smarter than Carl. When they are stopped by a patrolman, Carl thinks he can take care of it. But a bribe backfires, and the patrolman gets suspicious. When he hears the hostage victim, Jean, whimpering from

the back seat, Gaear takes matters into his own hands, slamming the cop's head against the door, then shooting him dead. When a couple of passers-by ogle them, Gaear gives chase and kills them, too. Gaear is patient, willing to wait at the lake for the ransom to be paid. Carl is far too talkative, spreading insults everywhere he goes. For example, he laughs at Jean when her run for freedom is hindered by an inability to see. As she stumbles about helplessly in the snow, Carl takes perverse delight, but Gaear, again, remains impassive, keeping his thoughts to himself.

Carl's undoing is his desire, twice, to find a prostitute. On the first occasion, this provides Chief Gustafson with the tip to look in Minneapolis. As a result of the second procurement, a man who was queried about hookers later talks to a policeman, who is able to ascertain where the two kidnappers are hiding out. Because Carl was horny everything falls apart.

Once Carl has collected a ransom far exceeding his expectations, stashing it away for himself, he still allows his anger at being wounded to prevent clear thinking. Carl bickers with Gaear about who will get the car and unleashes a string of insults at his fellow lunatic, who has just killed the hostage, Jean, for making too much noise. Gaear takes the verbal assault, and then launches out the door with an axe to shut Carl up for good.

Gaear is just one example of good character development in *Fargo*. Jean and Jerry's son, Scotty, seems at first to be a little preppie punk, using foul language, getting bad grades, hanging out with his fellow wannabe derelicts at McDonald's. But after the kidnapping, we realize he is scared and needs support, just like any other 12-year-old. Jerry, incapable of anything but the scattershot realism epitomized by the first call he makes after the break-in, forgets that he needs to take care of his son. Scotty's early behavior may have been a reflection of tensions in the house and now, when he needs leadership, his dad ignores him and splits town.

Another character who is handled deftly is Wade. At first he seems to be a vindictive businessman intent on ignoring a son-in-law he thinks unworthy of his daughter. At this point we still look at Jerry as a misguided everyman. But we realize how right he is to be suspicious of Jerry, and before long he is dueling with Carl! Certainly Wade is not a lovable man, but he is perceptive, tough and brave.

Even Mike is fascinating. First he's the over-eager widower, then he's a lonely liar undergoing psychiatric care.

A final character who deserves mention is Norm, Margie's husband. He is very nice, but seems like a pushover who just lazes about. Then we see that he is no bozo, but an accomplished painter—these two have a marriage of equals where she respects him and he ensures that she is loved and fed.

Two recurring elements in *Fargo* are eating and television watching. These pastimes could be included as comic relief, but they elicit a greater meaning as simple pleasures of the snowbound Midwestern variety. Transcending roles of cop, criminal, and victim, the joys of eating well and soaking up the tube typify the people of wintry Minnesota. Differing people differ about money. As Chief Marge reflects near the end, speaking to a dazed Gaear, with so much to be thankful for, why wreak so much havoc just to get money? What is the point?

Carrying a baby, Marge is an apt defender of life. The unlucky eyewitnesses and Jean fight to preserve their lives. The trooper dies guarding the community. This is what makes the last line of the film poignant. Two months are left until the baby is born. Fighting against a dangerous world that grows ever closer ("I'd be very surprised if our suspect was from Brainerd"), Marge is determined to give her baby a chance.

And the money that produces much consternation is lost at the end, buried in the snow. The man who delivered it is dead, the man who hid it is dead, the man who lusted after it, who started the whole mess—captured, with no clue and no future. The ransom is a true MacGuffin. It enriches no one but causes grief and destruction. Marge is right to decry greed and marvel at the folly of it all. That's what she fights against—the taking. People must learn to give. By contenting herself with a simple existence of simple pleasures, she'll be able to secure a new generation's opportunity, as a mother and a cop.