

Biography: Joel and Ethan Coen

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Joel and Ethan Coen at Cannes 2001

Joel and Ethan Coen, commonly known as "The Coen Brothers" have written and directed numerous successful films, such as comedies *O Brother Where Art Thou*, *Raising Arizona* and *The Big Lebowski*, as well as darker film noir dramas such as *Fargo*, *Miller's Crossing* and *Blood Simple*. The brothers write, direct and produce their films jointly, although until recently Joel received sole credit for directing and Ethan for producing, while they alternate top billing for the screenplay. The brothers work so closely and share such a strong vision of what their films are to be that actors say that they can approach either brother with a question and get the same answer. The brothers are known in the film business as "the two-headed director". The pair are frequently credited on their own films as editor under the name "**Roderick Jaynes**".

Biographies



Joel Coen was born November 29, 1954, and has been married to actress Frances McDormand since 1994; they have an adopted baby named Pedro. **Ethan Coen** was born September 21, 1957, and is married to film editor Tricia Cooke. The brothers grew up in a Jewish family in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. Their parents, Edward and Rena Coen, were both

professors, their father specializing in economics at the University of Minnesota and their mother in art history at St. Cloud State University.

When they were kids, Joel saved up enough money from mowing lawns to buy a Vivitar Super-8 camera, and together they remade movies they saw on television with a neighborhood kid, Mark Zimering (a.k.a. Zeimers), as the star. For example, Cornel Wilde's *The Naked Prey* (1966) became *Zeimers in Zambia*, which also featured Ethan as a native with a spear.

Both of the Coen brothers attended Simon's Rock Early College (now Simon's Rock College of Bard) in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Simon's Rock is designed for bright students seeking to start their undergraduate education earlier than is normal. After graduating from Simon's Rock, Joel spent four years in the undergraduate film program at New York University where he made a 30-minute thesis film called *Soundings*. The film depicted a woman engaged in sex with her deaf boyfriend while verbally fantasizing about having sex with her boyfriend's best friend, who is listening in the next room. After also graduating from Simon's Rock, Ethan went to school at Princeton University and earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy. His senior thesis was a 39-page essay entitled, "Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy."

After graduating from NYU, Joel worked as a production assistant on a variety of industrial films and music videos. He developed a talent for film editing and met Sam Raimi, who was looking for an assistant editor on his first feature film, *The Evil Dead* (1981).

Stylistic devices

Owing a heavy debt to film noir and other film styles of the past, the Coen brothers' films combine dry humor with sharp irony and shocking visuals, most often in moving camera shots. The Coens prefer not to put the opening credits at the very beginning of the film.

Dialogue

In all of the Coens' films, the most important element is dialogue. The films typically feature a combination of dry wit, exaggerated language, and glaring irony. The brothers frequently use dialogue to develop characters and advance plot. Dialogue is so important that many of the action scenes are driven by characters' lines rather than physical actions. A good example of this is in 'The Big Lebowski' when the Nihilists confront the group, demanding money. The majority of the scene is based around the witty dialogue of Walter Sobchak and his outrageous response to their demands ("No, without a hostage, there is no ransom. That's what ransom is. Those are the fucking rules."). The exaggerated language is sometimes erudite (as in Tom's "if I'd known we were going to cast our feelings into words, I'd have memorized the Song of Solomon"), but more often failed erudition, ("Jesus, Tom, I was just speculatin' about a hypothesis" (*Miller's Crossing*), and ("You know, it's proven that second-hand smoke is, uh,

carcin- ... uh, you know, cancer agent" (*Fargo*), and the Dude's imitation of Maude's "in the parlance of our times," appending it with "You know?... Man?" (*The Big Lebowski*)).

Blood and guts

The Coens also show a fascination with blood and vomit; *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* all show elaborate puddles of blood, whereas in *Fargo* it's a wide spray in the snow coming from a wood chipper; Tom vomits in *Miller's Crossing* once off-screen at his house and once on-screen in the crossing itself; Marty vomits in Ray's yard in *Blood Simple*, and then vomits again on the floor later (but this time it's a torrent of blood); Charlie vomits off-screen in *Barton Fink*; and Marge bends over to vomit but doesn't in *Fargo*.

Film noir and misunderstanding

Stylistically, Coen brothers movies show a heavy debt to film noir, featuring stark contrast in lighting (most notably in *Blood Simple*, *Miller's Crossing*, and *Fargo*) and the typical theme of people being in over their heads working on a scheme. Their movies often deal with kidnapping. A near universal plot device is misunderstanding: misunderstanding over who killed Rug Daniels and who took his hair causes friction between different mobs in *Miller's Crossing*; misunderstanding of Norville's blueprint causes him some grief later in *The Hudsucker Proxy*; everyone except for the nihilists in *The Big Lebowski* misunderstands Bunny's kidnapping; and in *Blood Simple*, misunderstanding is the driving force behind the entire plot past the thirty-minute mark. The Coen brothers' film *The Man Who Wasn't There* pays homage to film noir, with a plot that seems an update/twist of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The film is in black and white and has been lauded by various critics for both its cinematography and its sharply drawn, fairly sympathetic characters, though many critics take issue with the sharp turn in plot towards the end.

Depictions of various cities, states, and regions of America

The various aspects that make the character of a city, state or region of America are an integral component in several Coen brothers films. *Raising Arizona* strongly features the distinct Arizona landscape, and some of the movie's characters are stereotypes of typical Arizonans. Similarly, in *Fargo* the landscape and accents of North Dakota and Minnesota are an essential component of the film. *The Big Lebowski* is the Coens' Los Angeles film, with the Dude and other characters emblematic of the city's eclectic population. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is distinctly Southern, as it was filmed in rural Mississippi, most of the characters speak with pronounced Southern accents, and the soundtrack is a mix of old country and folk songs. *Barton Fink* is in some respects a satire on another famous area of Los Angeles, Hollywood. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is New York, etc. There are several scenes in the movie that, in the Coen brothers' distinctly farcical way, paint the movie industry, and movie executives in particular, in a very unflattering light.

The Coens also often set their movies in times of American crises: *Miller's Crossing* during prohibition, *Barton Fink* in the time around the attack on Pearl Harbor, *The Big Lebowski* during the 1991 Gulf War, and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* during the Great Depression. Interestingly, it should be noted that their film *Intolerable Cruelty* is set in the present day.

Violence

The majority of the Coens' films are extremely violent. In every one of their films there is at least one death and, in many cases, multiple deaths. In their lighter films, e.g., *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the plot is unleashed by the suicide of *Waring Hudsucker*, or in *The Ladykillers (2004 film)* all of the main characters die in an attempt to dispose of a body. In some of their more graphic films, e.g., *Fargo*, most of the main characters die or are assaulted, all of which is portrayed onscreen; in one particularly graphic scene a character's body is processed by a wood chipper.

The majority of the violence in their films falls under the category of dark humor. One of the most comic scenes in *The Big Lebowski* is when Walter, The Dude and Donny fight the Nihilists. The Coens always use violence to drive the plot forward; for example, in *Fargo* Carl Showalters' assault by Shep Proudfoot drives Carl to call Jerry and tell him to deliver the money.

Overall, acts of violence are never wasted in a Coen brothers' film, and often these scenes are written into the script for comic effect or to advance the script.

Camera techniques

Visually, the Coens favor moving camera shots, especially tracking shots (the camera is placed on a track, or dolly, or the use of a Steadicam is employed. The camera then follows and moves with the subject of the shot) and crane shots; even when the camera is "static" it is often still drifting slightly. Their films are also distinguished by cinematic visual flourishes that mark turning points.

The "Raimi cam" rush

Occasionally in their tracking shots they "rush" the camera forward, as in the scene in *Raising Arizona* where Nathan Jr. is discovered missing; the Coen brothers dubbed the rush forward the "Raimi cam" in tribute to their longtime friend and director Sam Raimi, who used rushes extensively in *Evil Dead* (which Joel Coen helped edit). *The Hudsucker Proxy* features not one, but two, consecutive rushes when Norville shows Mussburger's secretary the Blue Letter: first on the mouth of the lady screaming on the ladder, and then on Norville reacting to the scream.

Lenses

The Coen brothers' earlier films (with the exception of *Miller's Crossing*) made extensive use of wide-angle lenses, which are the preferred lenses of their

regular cinematographer, Barry Sonnenfeld. When Sonnenfeld left to pursue a directing career he was replaced by Roger Deakins, who has been trying to wean the Coens off these lenses since wide angle lenses allow great depth of field, but cause considerable distortion in the apparent size of objects based on how far they are from the camera. Deakins has been working towards longer lenses, which appear to shorten the distance between objects but have shallower depth of field.

Camera angles

The Coen brothers use camera angles, which sometimes hide rather than reveal information as in *Fargo* when Jean Lundegaard hides in the shower, in *Miller's Crossing* when Tom goes into his room after Leo leaves (Verna is on the bed behind him), and in *Blood Simple* when Abby is sitting up in bed with Ray and the Volkswagen pulls up outside her window.

Disguised cuts

They also frequently "hide" their cuts in close-ups on an object, in the style of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*: one obvious occurrence in *Fargo* is when Carl bangs on the television to get it to work, and when the picture comes in it is a cut to Marge's television as seen from her bed; a similar cut in *Miller's Crossing* happens when the close up of the window at Vernie's house pans away to show a man dead on the floor at another; in *The Hudsucker Proxy* when Amy Archer is cheering "Go Eagles!" after Norville hires her, the film cuts to her showing the same cheer to her coworker at the newspaper; and in *Blood Simple* when the "close-up" of the ceiling fan over Marty's head at the bar turns out to be from Abby's point of view on the couch at Ray's house.

Other techniques

Storyboarding

The Coen brothers storyboard their films completely before filming (unlike most directors, who only storyboard complex shots such as action sequences). They state that it helps them get the budget they want as they can show where most of the money will be going.

Color correction

O Brother, Where Art Thou? was the first film fully color corrected from start to finish with digital techniques. The brothers wanted the scenery to reflect the "dust-bowl" atmosphere of the Depression and, since the actual landscape for many of the scenes was much lusher and greener than the desired effect, massive color correction was required. This, in turn, required extensive color correction throughout the film, thus the use of graphic computers to perform the correction.

The Coen brothers' circle

The Coens used cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld through *Miller's Crossing* until Sonnenfeld left to pursue his own successful directing career, including such films as *The Addams Family*, *Get Shorty*, and most notably *Men in Black*. Roger

A. Deakins has been the Coen brothers' cinematographer since Sonnenfeld's departure (see List of noted film director and cinematographer collaborations).

Sam Raimi also helped write *The Hudsucker Proxy*, which the Coen brothers directed; and the Coen brothers helped write *Crimewave*, which Raimi directed. Raimi took tips about filming *A Simple Plan* from the Coen brothers, who had recently finished *Fargo* (both films are set in blindingly white snow, which reflects a lot of light and can make metering for a correct exposure tricky).

William Preston Robertson is an old friend of the Coens who helped them with re-shoots on *Blood Simple* and provided the voice of the radio evangelist. He is listed in the credits as the "Rev. William Preston Robertson." He has provided vocal talents on most of the Coens' films up to and including *The Big Lebowski*. He also wrote *The Making of The Big Lebowski* with Tricia Cooke.

The Coen brothers have a number of actors who they frequently cast, including John Turturro, Michael Badalucco, Steve Buscemi, Frances McDormand, John Goodman, and Jon Polito, all of whom have appeared in at least three Coen productions. They are planning a third film with George Clooney following *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), which will complete their *Idiot Trilogy*.

All of their films have been scored by Carter Burwell, although T-Bone Burnett produced much of the traditional music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*.

Filmography

- *Blood Simple* (1984)
- *Raising Arizona* (1987)
- *Miller's Crossing* (1990)
- *Barton Fink* (1991)
- *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994)
- *Fargo* (1996)
- *The Big Lebowski* (1998)
- *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000)
- *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001)
- *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003)
- *The Ladykillers (2004 film)* (2004)

In production:

- *Hail Caesar* (2006)
- *No Country For Old Men (2007)*
- *Suburbicon* (2007)