



The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen

By Erica Rowell

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In 1984 Joel and Ethan Coen burst onto the art-house film scene with their neo-noir *Blood Simple* and ever since then they have sharpened the cutting edge of independent film. Blending black humor and violence with unconventional narrative twists, their acclaimed movies evoke highly charged worlds of passion, absurdity, nightmare realms, and petty human failures, all the while revealing the filmmakers' penchant for visual jokes and bravura technical strokes. Their central characters may be blind to reality and individual flaws, but their illusions, dreams, fears, and desires map the boundaries of their worlds—worlds made stunningly memorable by the Coens.

In *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, Erica Rowell unmaskes the filmmakers as prankster mythmakers exploiting and subverting universal storytelling modes to further what seems to be their artistic agenda: to elicit laughs. Often employing satire and allegory, the Coens' movies hold a mirror up to American society, allowing viewers to both chuckle and gasp at its absurdities, hypocrisies, and foibles. From business partnerships (*Blood Simple*, *The Ladykillers*) to marriage (*Intolerable Cruelty*) to friendship and ethics (*Miller's Crossing*), the breakdowns of relationships are a steady focus in their work. Often the Coens' satires put broken social institutions in their cinematic crosshairs, exposing cracks in ineffective penal systems (*Raising Arizona*; *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), unjust justice systems (*The Man Who Wasn't There*), a crooked corporate America (*The Hudsucker Proxy*), unnecessary wars (*The Big Lebowski*), a tyrannical Hollywood (*Barton Fink*), and the unbridled, fatuous pursuit of the American Dream (*Fargo*). While audiences may be excused for missing the duo's social commentary, the depth and breadth of the brothers' films bespeak an intelligence and cultural acuity that is rich, highly topical, and hard to pigeonhole.

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The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen By Erica Rowell Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1209552 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Scarecrow Press
- Published on: 2007-06-01
- Released on: 2007-06-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.12" h x 1.11" w x 6.08" l, 1.36 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 392 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

...well written and engaging. (*American Reference Books Annual, March 2008*)

Rowell (a journalist and film producer) titles each chapter examining a film from the prolific duo Joel and Ethan Coen (known as the Coen Brothers) after an object that figures so prominently in the movie that it is almost a character. In "Blood Simple: A Photo," "The Big Lebowski: A Bowling Ball" and the other essays, she offers a synopsis, review, and dissection of the themes, technique, influences, and stark social commentary of the often violent and satirical and always stylized Coen films. The writing-directing brothers also created *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Intolerable Cruelty*. (*Reference and Research Book News, August 2007*)

Rowell examines [the Coen brothers] with greater concentration than the typical scattershot making-of or makers-of commentary, and even announces something like an analytical framework to apply to the films. (*Film International*)

From the Back Cover

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The Brothers Grim examines the inner workings of the Coens' body of work and exposes its roots and themes. Each chapter discusses a Coen brothers movie in terms of its primary themes, social and political contexts, narrative techniques, and influences and relationships to their other films and, more broadly, to cinema. Rowell also examines the Coens' referential modus operandi that retreads cinema, literature, history, philosophy, and art to amplify their films' themes. This comprehensive guide -- enhanced by 50 photographs -- is for anyone interested in the Coens' unique brand of cinema.

About the Author

Erica Rowell has worked in the movie industry and as a journalist. Her work has been featured on Monitor

Radio, FOXNEWS.com, ABCNEWS.com, and WNYC Radio. Her film credits include line producer on two independent features and art department coordinator on the studio feature, *The Proposition* (1998), starring Kenneth Branagh.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Brian Lopez:

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Andre Roop:

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Kristin Saylor:

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