

HANNAH IS... OUTSPOKEN

“Why I hate ‘feisty’ female characters”

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Last week marked 20 years since the release of the Coen Brothers' cult film *Fargo*, the black comedy that made its directors household names, spawned a recent, hugely successful TV series, turned the innocent woodchipper into something altogether more sinister, and gave birth to one of my favourite film characters of all time: Marge Gunderson.

If you haven't yet had the immense pleasure of watching *Fargo*, treat yourself immediately. Or, at least, in five minutes' time when you've finished reading this. To whet your appetite: *Fargo* is a neo-noir about a series of seemingly absurd crimes in a small, snow-blanketed town in Minnesota that's as darkly hilarious as it is thrilling.

Marge Gunderson is the chief of police in Brainerd – and the only cop with the brains to get to the nub of the unfolding mystery. In a delightful gender role reversal, she's married to Norm, a house husband with a passion for painting ducks. Her singsong Minnesota accent is an incongruously cheery presence at the scenes of *Fargo*'s many grisly crimes, and she's an all-round good egg – she memorably tells the killer, “There's more to life than a little money, you know. Don't you know that? And here you are, and it's a beautiful day! Well, I just don't understand it.” Oh, and she's heavily pregnant.

Why do I love her so much? Frances McDormand, who won an Oscar for her portrayal of Marge, sums it up best: “I think, what became iconic about the character, and what I'm the most proud of about that character,

was that she was a pregnant woman doing her job, and then she just ended up being a person doing her job.”

To put it another way, Marge is a smart, heroic character who happens to be a woman, but she is absolutely not a ‘strong female character’ – a phrase I loathe almost as much as ‘sorry, we don't serve breakfast after 11am.’ I also hate ‘spunky’ female characters, ‘badass’ female characters and, more than anything, I hate ‘feisty’ female characters. In fact, I hate any kind of female character description that contains an adjective you wouldn't dream of applying to a man. You wouldn't ever refer to James Bond as a ‘strong male character’ and yet, how many times do you want to bet the franchise's team of writers have patted each other on the back for creating a Bond girl that ticked the ‘feisty’ box?

If you're talking about strong as in well-written and well-rounded, like a conceivably real person, then yes, I'm all for that. But too often the female TV and film leads we're expected to be grateful for are quite the opposite – simply the same old sex objects or stereotypes with an added gun and a few good (if a little self-conscious) one-liners.

Conversely, Marge's gender is notable only for how un-notable it is. She's a funny, engaging, complicated person who's good at her job and who happens to have chromosomes of the XX persuasion and a baby in her belly. She's not a one-dimensionally female version of a male character; she's not especially sexy, and she certainly doesn't have any inexplicable nude scenes (probably a blessing

for McDormand, given the film's frosty setting); as in real life, the sexism she faces in the workplace is subtle rather than her sole storyline; unlike other ‘strong female characters’ she isn't punished for her brilliance by ending up alone – in fact, her domestic scenes with husband Norm are some of the film's most touching. And she's the only pregnant character in any film I've seen that never gives birth – the point of Marge Gunderson's story is that she catches the killer, not that she has a baby.

In the way that real-life police women (I presume) do not wake up and think, “Today I'll accessorise with a gun to show how feisty and unusual I am, a woman in a traditionally male line of work – better make sure my uniform reveals just the right amount of cleavage,” you never feel that Marge is there as the token strong female character. Yes, she's strong, in every sense, and she can even be a little feisty, but that's not all she is – not by far.

Now that I think about it, it's kind of sad that 20 years on, that still feels like something worth celebrating.



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