

## ***Fargo* and *Wicked Little Letters* take on the patriarchy**

It's hard to dramatize the evils of patriarchy without falling into melodrama or historical difference.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue



Juno Temple as Dorothy "Dot" Lyons in the most recent season of *Fargo* (Photo courtesy of FX Networks)

Early in the first episode of the latest season of *Fargo* (created by Noah Hawley), Dorothy "Dot" Lyons (Juno Temple) fights off attackers who have broken into her home. After she retreats upstairs, we watch the attackers follow a strand of yarn that she seems not to have realized is leading them straight to her hiding place. It turns out the yarn is a lure, not a trail, and we are just as surprised as the attackers to discover what waits on the other end. The rest of the episode is a whirlwind of chaos and violence as we realize this Minnesota mom is more than she seems.

Dot has already had a rough 24 hours leading up to this fiasco. The episode opens in the midst of a middle school committee meeting that has gone horribly wrong: parents and teachers wrestle and punch each other, throwing furniture and screaming in each other's faces. Dot is arrested when she accidentally tases a police officer as she tries to shepherd her daughter out of the brawl. We never learn what caused a planning meeting for the fall festival to erupt into physical violence, but it is 2019, and the menace of civic breakdown haunts the show at every turn.

*Fargo* is an anthology series, so every season is a new story with new characters. What connects the seasons to each other—and to the 1996 Coen brothers film of the same name—is a darkly humorous exploration of the forces of good and evil that overwhelm ordinary lives. Usually, the forces of evil in *Fargo* take on almost supernatural qualities, represented in figures who unleash violence and chaos beyond the control of any one person to rein them in. There are several contenders for this role in the current season. Dot's mother-in-law, Lorraine (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is the head of a "debt empire" that has made an exorbitant fortune profiting off people trapped in debt of all kinds. One of the bounty hunters who attack Dot in her home is a payer of debts on a cosmic scale. In another season, the entangling power of debt and forgiveness would be the central story. But this season has its sights set on even more prosaic and unambiguous evil: patriarchy in all its guises.

We meet infantile, self-absorbed husbands and mediocre, entitled businessmen alongside weak-willed cops looking for an excuse to exercise brute force. But the wellspring of all this patriarchal bluster is Dot's ex-husband, Roy Tillman (Jon Hamm), a self-professed Christian nationalist and "constitutional sheriff" who recognizes no law beyond his own interpretation of patriotic patriarchy. The fight between good and evil is between Roy, who wields almost unlimited power within his fiefdom, and Dot, whose unbreakable will for freedom gives her preternatural survival skills, like a caged tiger ready to spring.

It is hard to make a drama about the evils of patriarchy without falling into melodrama or historical difference, as though these are only problems from the past. I was reminded of this when I saw *Wicked Little Letters* (directed by Thea Sharrock), which is based on a real-life case of libel and scandal from the 1920s in an English seaside town. Edith (Olivia Colman) is the target of a series of filthy-language poison pen letters she accuses her neighbor Rose (Jessie Buckley) of sending. Rose is a loud-mouthed Irish woman who lives out of wedlock with her lover and daughter, making her the perfect suspect for scandalous behavior in a small,

decorous Protestant town. When police officer Gladys Moss (Anjana Vasan) suspects her blundering male colleagues have the wrong culprit, she and other women band together to clear Rose's name.

As a caper, it wears thin. By the time the culprit is revealed about halfway through the movie, no viewer will be surprised. But sitting at the heart of the story is another case of Christian patriarchy. The patriarch in this story could be Roy's progenitor, demanding absolute obedience and choosing the victims most inclined to submit to his tyrannical will. He stomps and spews and convulses with anger at the way women are demanding rights and taking on new social roles. *Wicked Little Letters* plays the patriarchy like a joke, a reminder of the bad old days when women police officers faced discrimination and men bemoaned the rise of women's rights. It is a lighthearted film that doesn't fully grasp the red-hot rage at its center.

*Fargo* understands this rage more fully, partially because it understands that the battle for patriarchal power is far from over. The men in *Fargo* are fuming at a world they feel has displaced them, and they are determined to make the world great again in their image of Christian patriarchy. The women in *Wicked Little Letters* have only petty pranks to use in the fight against the patriarchy. Dot, on the other hand, could give both MacGyver and Jason Bourne a run for their money as she outmaneuvers every scheme against her. The stakes feel substantially higher in this world, the violence more pronounced and unsettling. In the end, though, it is only Roy who sees this as a cosmic battle he is ordained to fight. Dot can't defeat him on her own, but her greatest power is refusing to accept a world where she would have to.

In 2019 (and maybe in 2024 as well), as neighbor turns against neighbor and men armed to the teeth declare themselves victims, the evil Roy represents begins to seem more like pathetic flailing than revolution. About midway through the season, Dot's current mother-in-law and former husband meet for the first time. As Lorraine takes the measure of Roy, she sums him up: "You want freedom with no responsibility. There's only one person on earth who gets that deal," she teases.

"The president?" asks Roy.

"A baby," she shoots back. Maybe we are meant to be laughing after all.