

TELEVISION



FARGO – A period piece is generally defined by its aesthetic and atmosphere, with costumes and music tracks characterizing an era, and appropriate narrative tropes invoked to bring a sense of familiarity. FX’s *Fargo* from writer Noah Hawley has depicted four different periods in American history, but even amid the trappings of a period piece, this true crime anthology is not about what happens in a certain year – it’s about what came before, and what is approaching.

Despite its claim of being “a true story,” there is a silent understanding that this is not explicitly factual. There is still “truth,” however – *Fargo* is not solely about small-town criminal buffoonery and insidiousness, but rather the attitude that leads to American carnage. Each season showcases a different stage of America in a state of in-betweenness. It is cyclical in nature, each season featuring characters who inadvertently create Rube Goldberg machines of violence and incompetence, blinded by their ambition, hubris or disillusionment. As the show hits periods before and after flashpoints such as the Great Recession and the Vietnam War, there is always plenty of thematic meat to chew on.

Season 4, featuring an absolutely stuffed cast led by Chris Rock, promises to go into the heart of what being “American” means, with the 1950-set piece pitting Italian immigrants against Black Americans, the former reeling from World War II and the latter fleeing the Jim Crow South. What begins as an epic and determined narrative becomes bogged down with an overabundance of subplots and characters, full of monologuing but short of actual lessons to be learned.

Instead of contemplating how we arrived at this point as a people, using characters and events to personify American strife and allowing viewers to connect the dots, the fourth cycle of *Fargo* turns into a preachy classroom lecture that becomes lost in grand-standing ideas while failing to produce a message.

But perhaps, in the end, a moral is impossible to produce. The United States currently lives in a period of intense discord, and it’s a time to reflect on the harm the country has done to others and its own inhabitants. As *Fargo* demonstrates in its own folk-tale story-book way, America is going through eternal growing pains. The real story may be what happens after.

– CHRIS COMPENDIO