

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Coen Brothers

Eddie Robson

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About the Book

The Coen brothers make up one of the most original and unconventional filmmaking partnerships to come out of America at the end of the twentieth century. From their debut tour de force *Blood Simple* to the hugely acclaimed *Fargo*, the brothers' films have attracted critical kudos and commercial success in equal measure. Each of their films is unique, yet you're never in any doubt you're watching a Coen brothers movie.

This guide is a chronological exploration of the filmmaking career of Hollywood's best-loved outsiders, charting their rise from cult favourites to box office contenders. The book combines indispensable reference material with critical analysis of their films, from the elegiac *Miller's Crossing* to the surrealistic *Barton Fink* and the Odyssean caper *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

About the Author

Eddie Robson is an experienced journalist, and has covered film, television, music, books and computer games. His professional credits include the *Guardian*, *Film Review*, *What DVD* and *SFX* magazine.

Coen Brothers

Eddie Robson



*This book is dedicated to Mum, Dad, Helen
and Gran - because it's a family thing.*

INTRODUCTION

It's difficult not to feel self-conscious when embarking upon a critical assessment of the work of Joel and Ethan Coen. This is precisely the kind of analysis which they tend to resist: they appear puzzled by the existence of critics and bemused by any attempt at an intellectual reading of their work. Their interpretation of the journalist's activity is that ['they have to write a](#) certain number of words, so they indulge in all sorts of things that will justify that number.'

At this point, therefore, I feel that I must apologise to Joel and Ethan, and warn them that there are rather a lot of words about their movies in this book.

It sometimes seems that the brothers' reluctance to talk about their work stems from the fact that they too are afflicted with a degree of self-consciousness, to the point where they'd really rather just get on with their work and refrain from analysing it too much. Sometimes, in order to get anything done, you have to let go and just *do* it. The Coens were also some of the first filmmakers to have grown up with movies as part of everyday life, consuming film indiscriminately from the television during their early years. Cinematic technique seems to be instinctive to them and this is perhaps because their formative experiences made it a second language. That said, they have sometimes been enticed into explaining the thought behind certain aspects of their movies and, on these occasions, they have revealed the level to which they conceptualise before they start (check their comments on lines and circles in **The Hudsucker Proxy**, for example).

So, what is this book and how does one go about using it? Well, in the format established by previous entries in the Virgin Film series, information and criticism are ordered under category headings to aid the reader in locating what they want to know. Each of the first ten films directed by the Coens (from *Blood Simple* to *Intolerable Cruelty*) has its own chapter and there are also shorter chapters for *Crimewave* (which they co-wrote with the film's director Sam Raimi) and *The Naked Man* (which Ethan co-wrote with J Todd Anderson). Each chapter is headed with the title of the film and year of release, followed by the main production credits (transcribed in the order that they appear on-screen, whether at the beginning or end of the movie) followed by the credited cast. From there on, the following headings are used as appropriate:

TAGLINE: The one-line sell for the movie used in contemporary publicity materials. Sometimes there's more than one.

SUMMARY: The plot. Best to watch the film before reading this, for obvious reasons.

DEVELOPMENT: How Ethan and Joel initiated each project, concentrating on the scripting process. While they usually work from an original concept, they do have a tendency to 'borrow' from other sources. In some cases they even draw upon real events - and no, I'm not talking about *Fargo* . . .

REFERENCES: Throwaway references to books, films and so on. This section also notes references to other Coen films.

CASTING: A rundown on who's in each film and how they ended up there, including their previous work and what you might have seen them in since. Also, since the Coens like to

work with tried and trusted colleagues on their films, this section will make note of any Coen regulars the first time they appear.

PRODUCTION: An account of the film's production process, focusing mainly on the shoot and post-production.

DELETED SCENES: Details of scenes that were either scripted but never shot or shot but never used, along with the reasons for cutting them.

MUSIC: The original music on every Coens movie has been written by Carter Burwell, whether on his own or in collaboration with others (in the case of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* most of the work was done by T-Bone Burnett). This section will cover his score as well as any stock music that has been used on the soundtrack.

CRITICAL RECEPTION: What the critics thought of the film on its original release. Some love the Coens' movies, some hate them: I will include as wide a variety of comments as possible.

BOX OFFICE: A note on how much money each film made, where such data is available.

AWARDS: A rundown of the awards garnered by each film, from the Oscars to Cannes. It must be said that, given the sheer number of prizes that are awarded these days for excellence in the field of anything you care to name, it would be impossible to give *complete* information on which film has won what, but the most significant ones will be listed.

DIALOGUE TO SKIP BACK FOR: Every script that Joel and Ethan have written is a finely wrought piece of work, with the dialogue as not so much the icing on the cake as the

thick layer of custard on the trifle. This section is for quoting standout lines from each film.

ANALYSIS: This section looks at structure, character, camerawork, cinematography, themes – whatever seems pertinent, really. Other critical standpoints on the brothers' work will also be examined.

GENRE: [‘There’s no point in making](#) a genre movie *unless* you use that knowledge somehow as a kinda device of the storytelling,’ says Joel. ‘But then you can change or subvert that, and that’s what’s nice.’ The Coens love to play tricks with genre: most of their movies are film noir to a greater or lesser extent, but other genres make appearances. Further discussion of the influences on each film may also be appropriate here.

EVER AMERICA: All of the Coens' first nine films are set in the twentieth century and most have been period pieces looking back to the recent past, whether that involves skipping back a few years (*The Big Lebowski*, *Fargo*) or doing a full-on costume drama like *Miller's Crossing*. [‘We tend to do period stuff,’](#) Ethan says, ‘because it helps make it one step removed from boring everyday reality.’ They have also situated all of their movies in their home country: [‘Strangely, the subjects that come](#) to mind are always situated in America,’ says Joel. ‘That’s what seems to interest us.’ A distinctive view of twentieth-century America has therefore emerged across their work (moving into the 21st with *Intolerable Cruelty*), and this section looks at how the Coens' homeland is depicted in terms of the period and location selected for each film.

AVAILABILITY: This section lists whether, at the time of writing, the movie is commercially available on DVD. It'll

note whether it's on Region 1, Region 2 or both, and what extras you get on the disc.

THE COENS' VIEW: A comment from the Coens that sums up their feelings about the movie in question.

VERDICT: Enough beating about the bush - how *good* is it? This is the place for assessing the film's merits and how it rates against the Coens' other works.

EARLY LIFE

The advantage of dealing with a creative partnership between two siblings is that one can deal with both their childhoods at once without having to recount the historic circumstances of their meeting. Ethan has known Joel all his life, while Joel has known Ethan all of Ethan's life.

Joel Coen was born on 29 November 1954 and Ethan arrived just under three years later, on 21 September 1957, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Their parents were middle-class Jewish academics: though born in New York, their father Edward was brought up in his parents' home town of London and earned his qualifications at the London School of Economics. He later took a teaching job at the University of Michigan. Joel and Ethan's mother Reba came from an orthodox Jewish Latvian family and she went on to become a professor of art history at St Cloud State University. Neither parent made a particular effort to impress their interests on the boys: ['My mother once wrote an](#) article, "How to Take Children to an Art Museum", Joel says, 'but I don't recall her ever taking us.' The brothers also have an elder sister, Deborah Ruth. They have claimed on many occasions that their childhood years, spent in the Minneapolis suburb of St Louis Park, are of no interest whatsoever.

['There's three years difference in](#) age and that's important when you're a child,' Joel says. 'It was only after leaving school that we really got to know each other.' Even so, both of the boys were frequently at a loose end during their teens and Joel hit upon the idea of buying a Super-8 camera and making their own movies. They mowed lawns to earn the

cash and purchased the equipment, then they began shooting. Many of their early efforts were remakes of bad movies they had seen on TV: notable titles include *Lumberjacks of the North*, *Ed . . . A Dog* and *The Banana Film*. Evidently Joel enjoyed the filmmaking process because when he went to New York University in 1974 he enrolled to study film. What he did there, it seems, was much the same as what he had done with Ethan during his teenage years, only with better facilities and a diploma at the end. He claims not to have learned anything – apparently he spent the majority of his time sitting at the back of the class looking cynical – but he appreciated being able to concentrate on moviemaking for a few years. His thesis was a thirty-minute film called *Soundings*, in which a woman fantasises out loud during sex with her deaf boyfriend. The subject of her fantasies, however, is not her boyfriend but his roommate, who is next door.

Meanwhile, Ethan went to Princeton University in nearby New Jersey in 1977 and studied philosophy. He acknowledges that he chose the subject because he didn't really know what he wanted to do with his life and his attitude to the course was casual. On one occasion he was ordered to see a psychiatrist after submitting a faked doctor's note to the effect that he had fallen victim to a freak hunting accident and lost an arm. Joel married his first wife during this time, whose identity he has admirably managed to keep from the public. On graduating from NYU Joel started to look around for movie work and in 1980 he scored an assistant editing gig on *The Evil Dead*, the debut feature by a 21-year-old independent director called Sam Raimi ([see Crimewave](#)). He also did editing work on *Fear No Evil* (Frank Laloggia, 1981) and *Nightmare* (Romano Scafolini, 1981), and got himself fired from the latter.

Ethan had moved to New York by this time and was working as a typist at Macy's department store, which at least taught him valuable skills for his writing career. (He

also did some writing for the cop show *Cagney and Lacey*.) The brothers had re-ignited the creative partnership from their teens, in a more structured way this time. [‘We started writing scripts for](#) other people, for people who were coming in to work on projects I was working on,’ says Joel. ‘It was at that point we realised: this works out pretty well.’ When they saw what Raimi had achieved with *The Evil Dead*, they saw the possibility of making a movie of their own.

BLOOD SIMPLE (1984)

(Colour - 97 mins)

Directed by Joel Coen

Produced by Ethan Coen

Written by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen

Executive Producer: Daniel F Bacaner

Associate Producer: Mark Silverman

Director of Photography: Barry Sonnenfeld

Production Designer: Jane Musky

Music: Carter Burwell

Editing: Roderick Jaynes and Don Wiegmann

First Assistant Director: Deborah Reinisch

Casting: Julie Hughes and Barry Moss

CAST: John Getz (*Ray*), Frances McDormand (*Abby*), Dan Hedaya (*Julian Marty*), M Emmet Walsh (*Private Detective*), Samm-Art Williams (*Meurice*), Deborah Neumann (*Debra*), Raquel Gavia (*Landlady*), Van Brooks (*Man from Lubbock*), Señor Marco (*Mr Garcia*), William Creamer (*Old Cracker*), Visser Bivens (*Strip Bar Exhorter*), Bob McAdams (*Strip Bar Senator*), Shannon Sedwick (*Stripper*), Nancy Finger (*Girl on Overlook*), Rev William Preston Robertson (*Radio Evangelist*)

TAGLINE: 'Breaking up is hard to do.'

SUMMARY: The scene is contemporary Texas. An unhappily married woman named Abby commits adultery with a man named Ray who works in the bar owned by her husband, Marty. Marty has hired a private detective named Loren Visser to get proof of the infidelity. Abby moves out of their

house, and when Marty fails to force her to come back, he pays Visser \$10,000 to kill her and Ray. Visser breaks into Ray's house, steals the pistol that Abby keeps in her bag, then takes photographs of the sleeping Abby and Ray. Visser doctors the photographs to make it look like the lovers are dead, then presents this to Marty in his office at the bar. Marty pays Visser and hides one of the photographs in his safe, but Visser kills him using Abby's gun and leaves the weapon on the scene of the crime.

Ray discovers Marty's body and assumes that Abby has killed him. He tries to clean up the scene and, with tremendous difficulty, disposes of the body. Marty isn't quite dead and Ray buries him alive in a shallow grave. Ray then drives to Abby's new apartment and they speak at cross-purposes, with the result that each believes the other has killed Marty. Meanwhile Visser has realised that his lighter is missing and so is one of his faked-up photographs of Abby and Ray. He breaks into the bar to look for them and Abby walks in when he's trying to crack the safe: she doesn't see him but she does discover his tampering. Visser realises that he is not secure with Abby and Ray still alive and heads for Abby's apartment. He succeeds in killing Ray, but after a lengthy game of cat-and-mouse, he is outmanoeuvred and shot by Abby.

DEVELOPMENT: [‘The inspiration \[for *Blood Simple*\] was these movies that Joel had been \[editing\],’](#) Ethan remembers, ‘which had been done mostly by young people like us who didn't have any credentials or credibility in the mainstream movie industry.’ These young people had written scripts with obvious selling points – exploitation films – and raised the money themselves. Sam Raimi was happy to give the Coens advice on getting their first feature together, drawing on his experience of making *The Evil Dead*, and he wound up collaborating with the Coens on a script called *Crimewave*, which he decided to make his next

project after *The Evil Dead* was released. While Raimi was securing distribution for his debut feature (the film was finally released in 1983), the Coens started work on a new screenplay with a view towards rolling it into production under their own steam.

'When we did *Blood Simple* we were influenced by the novels of James M Cain,' Ethan says. 'They're the same sort of thing: overheated, domestic melodramas.' This was partly because of the brothers' great admiration for the writer described by the critic and novelist Edmund Wilson as 'the poet of the tabloid murder', but also because they felt it was within their means. Ethan notes that Cain's brand of murder narrative 'seemed tailor-made for something you might be able to do successfully on a small budget, in real practical terms'. Their contemporaries like Raimi were doing horror films because the genre had a young, strongly defined audience, but the Coens wanted to do something, well, simpler. 'These types of stories are about a small group of people doing very non-special effects-type of stuff to each other; it's really that simple,' says Ethan. 'They're even simpler than horror films.' However, as Joel notes, the script 'was also very much inspired by' horror, particularly in its closing sequence (see **GENRE**).

The germ of the story was an inversion of Cain: his novels *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* both feature a married woman getting her lover to murder her husband, so the Coens wanted to write a story where the cuckolded, jealous husband plots to murder his wife and her lover. (As in *Postman*, the husband is of Greek extraction, although the novel's influence is stronger on **The Man Who Wasn't There**.) The film's title derives from another pulp crime novelist, Dashiell Hammett, who described the confused, paranoid, guilt-ridden state of mind a person falls into after committing a murder as 'going blood-simple' in his novel, *Red Harvest* (see **Miller's Crossing**).

The other element that the Coens threw into the mix was Hitchcock, whose influence is strongest during the chain of events in which Ray tries to cover up Marty's murder. The sequence is an extrapolation from the lengthy murder scene in *Torn Curtain* (1966), a five-minute sequence that sees Paul Newman awkwardly dispose of a body, finding it trickier and messier at every step. The Coens decided to prolong their corpse disposal for even longer – twenty minutes – as the centrepiece of *Blood Simple*. (Hitchcock's quote on the matter – [‘It is very difficult, very painful, and it takes a very, very, long time to kill someone’](#) – appeared at the beginning of the *Blood Simple* trailer. See **ANALYSIS**.) Furthermore, Ray's attempt to clean up Marty's blood from the floor of his office recalls *Psycho*, something which the Coens kept in mind when writing it. [‘What we asked ourselves was: How could we make it different?’](#) Ethan says. ‘So, instead of making it an efficient cleanup like [*Psycho*] does, we made it inefficient. There's blood everywhere.’

REFERENCES: Marty's death sequence isn't the only segment influenced by Alfred Hitchcock. Visser leaving his lighter in the office is reminiscent of *Strangers on a Train* (1951), in which one character tries to frame another for a murder by placing a monogrammed lighter at the scene of the crime. However, in *Blood Simple* the lighter is never found (it's under Marty's fish) and is, in the end, of no consequence.

The opening sequence is similar to that of *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), with the credits progressing over the screen as a man drives a woman along a straight, featureless road.

The character of Helene Trend, who leaves a message on Abby's answering machine, originated in the Coens' own *Crimewave*, written before *Blood Simple* but produced afterwards.

CASTING: The most notable actor to work on the Coens' first film is Frances McDormand, although the role of Abby almost went to another actor destined for a successful career. They needed an actor from the southern states and found one performing on the New York stage in a play entitled *Crimes of the Heart*. [‘We met Holly Hunter and](#) liked her,’ remembers Ethan, ‘but she wasn’t available because she was doing [another] play in New York.’ Joel picks up the story: [‘But she and Fran were roommates](#) at the time, in the Bronx.’ The two aspiring actors had met at Yale Drama School, where McDormand had enrolled as a graduate student after her years as a theatre major at Bethany College in West Virginia. [‘Holly went back and told](#) Fran, “I can’t do this movie but you should go and get an audition”.’ (Hunter did make a small appearance in the movie, uncredited, as the voice of Helene Trend.)

[‘I went in and they](#) were my age,’ McDormand recalls of this meeting, which was the first time she had ever auditioned for a film. [‘They were chain-smoking with a](#) huge ashtray full of cigarette butts in the middle.’ Her first impression of the Coens was that Hunter had been right about them being slightly odd. [‘I thought they were weird,](#) geekish, intellectual. I asked Joel a question about the character and he went into a twenty-minute monologue from a writer’s point of view.’ She won the role and went on to appear in roles of varying scale in *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo* and *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, plus an uncredited role in *Miller’s Crossing* and a small part in *Crimewave*. She also has an enviable reputation as a character actress outside of the Coens’ work, with notable credits including *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993), *Wonder Boys* (Curtis Hanson, 2000) and *Almost Famous* (Cameron Crowe, 2000). She also became Joel’s second wife in 1985.

Unlike McDormand, the other principals all had some screen experience when they came to *Blood Simple*. However, the only one specifically sought out by the Coens

was M Emmett Walsh, who had over thirty film roles to his credit including parts in *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet, 1973), *Slap Shot* (George Roy Hill, 1977), *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) as well as numerous TV appearances. Joel and Ethan had seen him in *Straight Time* (Ulu Grosbard, 1978) and he stuck in their minds while they were writing the character of Visser. They sent Walsh the script and although he didn't rate the film's chances of success he liked the character enough to accept. His intention was to construct a performance around the character and make use of it in one of his later roles, ['because nobody was going to](#) hear about this movie,' he said. 'At best, it would be the third bill at an Alabama drive-in.' Walsh continued to be sceptical of the film's chances of success until he arrived in Austin and met the Coens. While he assumed at first that the brothers were being bankrolled by rich parents, that changed when ['I saw the storyboards and](#) the shooting schedule, and I realised they knew exactly what they were doing.' Even so, Walsh would often ground Joel and Ethan in reality during the shoot, pointing out that they were doing the moviemaking thing for real this time. He also made one further appearance with the Coens, taking a small role in *Raising Arizona*.

While *Blood Simple* was only John Getz's third film role, he came to the production with plenty of TV experience, having appeared in a number of TV movies and regular roles in series such as *Another World* and *Rafferty*. The exposure he received from playing Ray in *Blood Simple* launched him into further film roles, including *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) and *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000). Dan Hedaya came to the film from supporting roles in films such as *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (Jerry Schatzberg, 1979) and *True Confessions* (Ulu Grosbard, 1981). Afterwards he took a semi-regular role in *Cheers* as Carla's good-for-nothing ex-husband Nick Tortelli: the character was one of the leads in a short-lived 1987

spin-off, *The Tortellis*. In the cinema he has often been cast in police roles, notably in *Running Scared* (Peter Hyams, 1986) and *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995). Samm-Art Williams had worked with Hedaya on *Night of the Juggler* (Robert Butler, 1980) prior to *Blood Simple*, and although he had done some acting before the film his career moved behind the cameras afterwards. He was a producer and writer on the highly successful sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and has taken similar roles on a number of other TV series.

PRODUCTION: In early 1982, having decided to press ahead with the *Blood Simple* script they'd written, Joel and Ethan set about raising the cash to make it. [‘We knew no one would](#) buy it,’ Ethan says, ‘particularly since we wanted to make it ourselves.’ The brothers estimated that they would need somewhere in the vicinity of \$1.5 million if they were to make the film. Movies have since been made for much less - *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994) had a budget of \$27,000 while *El Mariachi* (Robert Rodriguez, 1992) cost just \$7,000 - but at the time of *Blood Simple* there was no model for low-budget independent filmmaking and the Coens had to do things in more or less the conventional way.

[‘We followed the example of](#) Sam Raimi,’ Joel says. ‘Sam had done this trailer, almost like a full-length version of *The Evil Dead*, but on Super-8. He raised \$90,000 that way.’ Raimi’s promo version, entitled *Within the Woods*, was about thirty minutes long, but the Coens decided to adapt his method and shoot a two-minute trailer on higher grade film. Joel got a friend of his from NYU, Barry Sonnenfeld, to assist them. They had no equipment of their own and only enough money to hire a camera and lights for a day or so, so they waited until the Thursday before the four-day President’s Weekend holiday. This meant that they were allowed to keep hold of the equipment for five days rather than one, which

gave them enough time to shoot a selection of arresting scenes from their script: a revolver being loaded, a man being buried alive and bullets tearing through a wall in a darkened room. They performed in the scenes themselves, with Ethan taking the part of Marty as he was buried. [‘The trailer was our selling](#) tool,’ says Sonnenfeld. ‘It showed prospective investors that we could make something that looked like a real film.’ (When it came to putting together a trailer to promote the completed film, the bulk of it was made up of the re-shot versions of these scenes.)

Ethan and Joel found a lawyer who was willing to defer half of his fee until the film made some money back and they set up a limited partnership. They then took their trailer back up to Minnesota, because they had been told that potential investors would be more sympathetic to a pair of local boys. They got in touch with as many local philanthropists as possible, most of whom came from a list of a hundred names supplied by Hadassah, the Zionist women’s charity. In the end, most of the investors were [‘small business people \[who\] related to](#) the entrepreneurial aspect of it,’ according to Joel. One substantial investor was Daniel Bacaner, who not only put money into the project but became its executive producer and introduced the Coens to other potential backers. Others were less interested in getting directly involved in the project. [‘A lot of \[the investors\] said](#) they didn’t know anything about films or scripts, so why should they read it?’ Ethan says. ‘They were just interested in whether it was a good deal or not.’

The trailer, intended to make them look like pros, caused some problems. [‘We couldn’t get people to](#) come to a screening room to see it in 35mm, so we made a 16mm reduction, got a projector, and took it around to people’s homes or where they worked,’ says Joel, estimating that around 95 per cent of these meetings were completely fruitless. On one occasion they were pulling into a potential investor’s drive and accidentally rammed his Cadillac. [‘We](#)

[had a short discussion](#) on whether to tell him before or after we asked for the money,' says Joel. ['We decided to do it after,'](#) remembers Ethan, 'so he'd already turned us down when we told him about his car.' It took almost a year of canvassing to raise the necessary \$1.5 million. ['You've got to really want](#) it,' says Ethan, 'because there are plenty of opportunities along the way for you to throw up your hands and say, "Hey! Why am I doing this?"' They got their cast together and, with Barry Sonnenfeld on board as cinematographer, they were ready to head off to their location - Texas.

['I'd lived in Texas for](#) a little while,' says Ethan. 'We actually went down there because we were familiar with it, having spent time down there and knowing people there . . . I went to UT for a semester and lived down there for about a year, so I knew people who I knew would work on the movie. I knew what the production climate was like down there.' Equally important was that Texas was a right-to-work state, where crewmembers could be hired for sub-union wages. The brothers were keen to employ inexperienced but adept crew who would be looking to get a movie on their CV, so that the money they'd raised could be spent elsewhere. Joel notes that, when shooting your first movie, having time on your side is more important than surrounding yourself with experience. ['Essentially, don't pay \[the crew\]](#) very much and shoot longer. Time is the most important thing in terms of getting what you want and having to compromise less - regardless of the skill of the crew.'

One crewmember who was able to bring some experience to the set was key grip Tom Prophet, who had moved to Austin from Los Angeles because of his wife's concerns that LA was not geologically sound. ['Tom taught us a lot of](#) Hollywood high technology with his pipe dolly and other rigging devices,' Sonnenfeld recalls, 'and we taught him some low technology as well.' The Coens began to develop their fluid, drifting camera style in this film, having decided

at an early stage that they wanted a lot of camera movement. [‘Joel and I decided early](#) on that we wanted to move the camera a lot,’ Sonnenfeld adds, ‘and when the camera wasn’t moving, we sometimes would dolly or raise or lower lights during the shot, so there was always some kind of apparent movement.’

The shoot was scheduled for 48 days, for which all involved were grateful as it made for a less pressurised set. The Coens and Sonnenfeld storyboarded the film in advance and in detail, and stuck to their plans throughout the shoot. They have carried this discipline through all of their films, but because of the tight budget on *Blood Simple* they were aware that it was even more important to plan ahead. [‘We had to be able](#) to tell the designer so the designer would then be able to come and say, “We need to see this wall and this wall or just this wall”,’ says Joel, noting that their storyboards meant that they could always answer such questions. (The Coens’ economical attitude seems to be something else they learned from Raimi: even when making the huge-budget *Spider-Man* in 2001 he shot almost nothing he didn’t need.)

[‘The first day of shooting](#) on *Blood Simple* was the first time I’d ever been on a feature movie set in any capacity,’ says Joel. ‘I remember we were both very impressed by the number of trucks.’ This isn’t as facile a comment as it might seem. To watch *Blood Simple* you wouldn’t think that the crew would have much of a presence, but the production base was pretty huge, [‘even on this little low](#) budget movie,’ Ethan says. [‘The real surprise was that](#) it’s such an ungraceful thing in terms of manipulation because of its size,’ adds Joel. ‘It’s so hard to pull it from here to there.’ However, they did have the advantage of knowing their material intimately. [‘The one thing we did](#) have experience with,’ says Joel, ‘which is good for a first time director I think, was having written a script as opposed to being given a script that we were interpreting.’

The Coens continued to draw on what Raimi had told them about filmmaking. One of the most celebrated technical aspects of *The Evil Dead* was its use of 'shakicam', although it was apparently invented by cinematographer Caleb Deschanel while making *More American Graffiti* (Bill L Norton, 1979). Raimi showed the Coens how to use one, and according to Sonnenfeld it 'cannot be beat at any price'. A camera is mounted at the centre of a twelve-foot plank of wood with a handle at either end. Two grips grab a handle each and run with the camera low to the ground, while the cinematographer runs behind to get an idea of what angle the camera is seeing (it's impossible for him to put his eye to the viewfinder). The purpose of the board is to smooth out the bumps as the grips dash at full speed: by the time the bumps reach the middle they are less dramatic and the camera seems to float rather than bounce over the ground. On *Blood Simple*, the device was used to create the shot outside Ray's bungalow as Marty forces Abby outside: Sonnenfeld fitted the camera with a wide-angle lens to achieve the maximum zoom effect, as the view switches from a wide shot to an extreme close-up. 'It was a very enjoyable shot to watch being made,' he says, 'since it looks like such a stupid idea.'

Other experiments were attempted during the shoot. For the shot where she moves from Marty's office to her bedroom in a dreamlike manner, McDormand was strapped to a sort of pivoting flatbed with the camera in a fixed position in front of her. The bar-room wall and the bed in her bedroom were constructed as two backdrops at ninety degrees to each other. By moving the flatbed McDormand appeared to 'fall' from one scene into the next. Other shots were achieved with Sonnenfeld lying on a sound blanket and holding a handheld camera while the grips dragged him across the floor, a technique which allowed them to achieve a slow, smooth close-to-the-ground shot. The 'skip' over the sleeping drunk on the bar was almost abandoned when Joel

declared that it was 'too self-conscious'. Ethan countered, 'This whole movie is self-conscious,' and the shot stayed in. Ethan was right: it's the one shot everybody remembers.

Roderick Jaynes and Coen credits

One question that pops up time and again in interviews with the Coens is who does what on the movies. How did they wind up with Joel directing and Ethan producing? Well, as they have explained on numerous occasions ('I'd be perfectly happy never to have to answer anything again about how I work with Ethan,' Joel commented in 2001), the credits don't actually have much to do with the way that they work.

'The fact that we separate the two credits is fairly arbitrary to a certain extent,' Joel has said, and when it has come to winning awards such as Best Director at Cannes, he and Ethan have shared the credit. Ethan notes that there is a degree of specialisation - 'Joel talks to the actors more than I do and I probably do production stuff a little more than he does' - but confirms that 'it's largely overlapping'. While they have suggested that it is less confusing for the cast and crew to know who is nominally in charge, many people who have worked with the duo say that they can guarantee the same answers to their questions no matter which brother they ask. So why spread the credit? 'Psychologically, it's sort of important to us to realise that Ethan produces the movie and I direct,' says Joel, 'so, in a sense, we don't want another producer - or another director.' After *Blood Simple* they were somewhat cautious that they might be assigned a producer by a studio, on the pretext that it would free them up to be more involved with the

direction. [‘That’s sort of why we](#) keep it separate that way, but it doesn’t really reflect what happens on the set.’

The Coens also realised when putting together *Blood Simple* that the credit ‘Directed, Produced and Written by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen’ overemphasised their brotherly dominance over the film in a slightly freaky way and might scare audiences off, and this also contributed to Joel becoming the ‘official’ director and Ethan the producer. For the same reason they decided not to credit themselves as editors of *Blood Simple* when they took that job on as well, and created a pseudonym for themselves: ‘Roderick Jaynes’. Practical jokers that they are, they didn’t just leave it at that, and Jaynes started to develop a personality of his own.

It’s hard to pinpoint just when this started. It may have been with the foreword for the screenplays of *Miller’s Crossing* and *Barton Fink*, published to coincide with the release of the latter. The Coens had delegated editing duties on *Raising Arizona* and *Miller’s Crossing* but, when they returned to the editing suite for *Fink*, the pseudonym was pressed into service again. When it came to providing a foreword for the scripts, the Coens wrote one themselves and credited it to Jaynes. In this, Mr Jaynes was revealed to be a survivor from the golden age of British cinema, now retired except for his work on the Coens’ films and living in Haywards Heath, Sussex. A fictitious filmography began to emerge here, as Jaynes claimed that at the time of *Blood Simple* he hadn’t worked in film since editing the Basil Radford-starring *The Mad Weekend* (not actually a real movie: Jaynes claims [‘almost thirty years’](#) separate his work on those two pictures, yet

he worked on *Blood Simple* in 1983 and Radford died in 1952). The Coens allegedly contacted him after admiring his work on *Beyond Mombassa* (which *is* a real movie), although Jaynes had to inform them that it was comprehensively recut by Jack Tuttle and none of his own work remained, although he was still credited owing to union rules (this becomes a running theme of Jaynes's stories).

The Coens have used the Jaynes device on a number of occasions to poke fun at themselves. Jaynes is an irascible figure who is rude about nearly everybody he's worked with (*The Mad Weekend* director George Milestone is described as 'a small man both in stature and talent') and the Coens are no exception. In Jaynes' introduction to the screenplay for *The Man Who Wasn't There* they are seen expressing their keen admiration for the work of Steve Guttenberg while their editor is 'struggling to make simple match cuts in footage shot by people patently ignorant of the simplest mechanics of film construction'. His working relationship with the Coens is rather terse, due in part to Jaynes's contempt for directors and screenwriters (he refuses to read the script before starting work) and his old-fashioned attitude (he commends *Miller's Crossing* because 'the actors had been issued proper suits').

However, when Jaynes was nominated for an Oscar after his fine work on *Fargo*, the Coens were finally forced to admit that he didn't exist. Refused permission to send up a delegate if Jaynes won, the Coens had to accept credit for their own editing. Nevertheless, they continue to talk about their veteran editor as if he was real (it clearly amuses them still). On the DVD commentary for *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Billy Bob Thornton claims that he bumped into Jaynes in an LA supermarket and was

surprised at how tall he was, and on a visit to Cannes Joel was asked if Jaynes would be in attendance and responded, [‘He’s probably at some BAFTA event. He’s a member of BAFTA. He was nominated for an award, and every nominee automatically becomes a member. So we have his membership card.’](#)

[‘For Blood Simple the lighting](#) was used as a psychological tool,’ says Sonnenfeld. ‘For the film to be effective, the film had to be dark and contrasty. In fact, at the end of the film, the lighting itself becomes a character.’ This refers, of course, to the sequence in which Visser shoots holes in the wall. Light floods through these holes into the darkness at a variety of angles, for no reason other than that it looks great: they originate from a rig of twenty lights set up by Sonnenfeld behind the wall. It creates an effective sense of chaos in the frame and, in a film dominated by darkness, this became another memorable shot. Sonnenfeld achieved solid darkness throughout by overexposing the film stock slightly. [‘Joel, Ethan and I felt](#) strongly that we wanted our blacks to be rich, with no milky qualities.’ When the film was being developed and printed back in New York at Du Art Labs, Sonnenfeld sent them camera reports with the instruction, ‘Print it too dark!’

Inevitably there were also some lessons to be learned. [‘\[Something\] which we had no idea](#) of at the time but knew much better with our second movie is just walking into a space and knowing whether you can shoot there,’ Ethan says, noting that they discovered a great deal about the demands of setting up lights and manoeuvring a camera within a space. [‘It’s weird, if you have](#) no production experience you can walk into a room and say “oh this is great, we’ll shoot here and it will be great,” but there is a reality about shooting.’

DELETED SCENES: One scene from an early draft is noted in the published version of the script. In this, Ray stops off at a motel shortly after burying Marty and tries to check in, but is frustrated by the two surreal characters who work there, Dusty Rhodes and Kyle. After a lengthy explanation of the various options from Rhodes, with frequent interruptions from Kyle, Rhodes reveals that the motel is booked up anyway.

The brothers considered this scene too lengthy and replaced it with a more basic scene in which Ray stops at a traffic light: this was shot but was itself omitted from the finished film for the sake of getting to the thrilling climax more quickly. In later years, the Coens realised that farcical non-sequitur scenes like this were actually one of their strengths, and they have become a Coen trademark (the Mike Yanagita scene in *Fargo* and Ann Nirdlinger's abduction story in *The Man Who Wasn't There* are good examples).

MUSIC: Before *Blood Simple* Carter Burwell was a fine-arts major at Harvard who had never considered trying to get into the movie business. [‘Their sound editor, Skip Lievsay,](#) asked me if I would be interested in working on a film,’ Burwell explains. ‘He knew my music from playing in clubs in New York. So he introduced us.’ In his first effort as a movie composer, Burwell's background as a classically trained pianist is evident, as is his experience as a blues improv player. The score is downbeat and minimal, based around a simple, stark piano figure that Burwell twists and repeats endlessly. It's one of his subtler scores: while it undoubtedly makes a contribution to the tone of the film, you can almost forget it's there at times.

As a result of his continuing work with the Coens - he has worked on all of their films - Burwell has found himself increasingly in demand, working on the soundtracks for numerous left-field movies and occasionally straying into the mainstream. His work can be heard on films such as