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Contact: Kelly Hughes, (312) 280-8126
kelly@dechanthughes.com

“Falsani is an expert at pop culture analysis and her love for the celluloid arts shines forth brightly—her interpretations are nuanced and sophisticated without being pretentious. Film lovers, whether religious or not, will be pleased.”—*Publishers Weekly*

The Dude Abides: New Book by Cathleen Falsani Explores the Enigmatic Moral Universe in the Films of the Coen Brothers

Award-winning author and columnist Cathleen Falsani explores the quirky, enigmatic films of Joel and Ethan Coen in her new book, *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* (Zondervan, \$14.99 paper, October 2009). With a journalist’s keen eye and a devotion befitting the “Dudey Satva” of Dudeism (the tongue-in-cheek—but 60,000-strong—“religion” based on the theology and ethics of *The Big Lebowski*), Falsani offers an insightful guide to the moral order of the Coeniverse.

Falsani, a long-time Coen fan who named her blog, and now this book, after the mantra of the iconic slacker-hero of *The Big Lebowski*, knows better than to try to wrestle the Coen Brothers’ films into “a God-shaped box.” She does, however, take seriously their invitation to wrestle with important spiritual and moral questions.

The Coen “gospel” is a complicated one that the filmmakers want viewers to navigate for themselves rather than showing them the way. From their debut, *Blood Simple* to their latest film, *A Serious Man* (due out in October), the Coens “boldly engage serious existential questions with darkly intelligent humor,” Falsani says. “Each film is marked by theological, philosophical and mythical touchstones that enrich the slapstickiest moments. They probe confounding ethical and spiritual quandaries, giving us a tour of a nuanced moral universe.”

“While marked by murder, mayhem, deception, and chaos, there is a moral order to the world depicted in the Coen films. That’s the good news,” Falsani says. “The bad news is that when the moral order is upset, the consequences can be dire, brutal, and swift.”

From the meditation on free will that is *Blood Simple* to the exploration of theodicy in *No Country for Old Men*, Falsani examines the deeper meanings in the Coen oeuvre, including:

- ***The Big Lebowski*** is, at its heart, about the Golden Rule. The movie’s message is “be kind. Treat others as you want to be treated yourself.” And, as the Dude says, “Take it easy, man.” Falsani compares the Dude to one of the *lamed vavniks* from kabbalistic teachings, righteous people on whom the fate of the world rests. “The Dude is pummeled time and again, a martyr for the cause of righteousness,” she says.

- ***Fargo*** is “perhaps the finest example of a Judeo-Christian morality play in all of American cinema.” Marge Gunderson willingly risks her life to vanquish evil. Hugely pregnant, Marge is “a fecund life-giver in the face of death. She embodies the theme that love is exponentially more powerful than hate, and life is more powerful than death.”

- ***O Brother, Where Art Thou?*** answers its own question by showing that “our brother is each person we see, for we are all children of God,” Falsani says. “The film presents a nuanced picture of the Christian idea of grace—that God extends unmerited good will to all of creation, including those who don’t even recognize God’s existence.”

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•**Barton Fink** borrows a teaching from the Zen Buddhist tradition that maintains that we can know reality. Falsani describes it as a cautionary tale about the dangers of living in our imaginations. “When we begin to believe not only our own reviews but also our every thought, we can end up creating and living in our own private hells.”

•**The Hudsucker Proxy**, features the unseen hand of God granting a character an undeserved second chance. “Through the medium of a screwball comedy, the Coens present a loving, if subtle, portrait of a God who reaches into the world to save us from ourselves, even—or perhaps especially—when we least deserve it.”

Falsani also assesses the forthcoming Coen film, *A Serious Man*. Easily the most overtly religious of all their films, it’s a Job-like tale that “poses questions that are as brutal as they are universal. The answers the Coens provide are unsatisfactory but truthful. There is no quid pro quo with God.”

In mining these films for the Coens’ “complicated gospel,” Falsani finds clear dos and don’ts, which she identifies as “The 14 Coenmandments.” As Walter Sobchak reminds us in *The Big Lebowski*, “This is not ‘Nam.... There are rules.’”

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About the Author

Cathleen Falsani, author of *Sin Boldly*, and *The God Factor*, is the award-winning religion columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. She attended Wheaton College and also holds masters degrees in journalism and theology. She lives in Laguna Beach, California, with her husband and fellow journalist, Maurice Possley, and their son Vasco.

Falsani is the “Sin Duda” of the Church of the Latter-Day Dude, and the rightfully installed “Dudey Satva” of St. Da Fino’s Virtual Shrine of Our Special Lady.

Visit Cathleen’s blog, *The Dude Abides*: <http://falsani.blogspot.com/>

Other links of interest:

A Serious Man trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pPMNTRk0xk>

Trailer for *Achievers*, a documentary about Lebowski fans:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgciBZphvfk>

The Church of the Latter-Day Dude: <http://www.dudeism.com/>

Lebowski Fest: <http://www.lebowskifest.com/>

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by Cathleen Falsani

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