

# THIS FIRE IS OUT OF CONTROL

*Burn After Reading* marks yet another wild success for the Coens



The Coen Brothers dial down the tragedy of *No Country for Old Men* and harken back to their days of absolute absurdity in *Burn After Reading*. COURTESY OF MOVIEWEB

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What could Joel and Ethan possibly do for an encore?

After their grim masterpiece *No Country for Old Men* won the Oscar for Best Picture in February, the Coen Brothers had that, um, burning question to deal with. And to answer it, they assembled a renowned cast featuring three Oscar winners and two nominees—but to collaborate for a screwball black comedy, not another grisly drama.

You have to give it to the Coens—no filmmakers transcend genres quite like they do.

Returning to the darkly comic style they so

stunningly brought to life in *Fargo*, the brothers penned *Burn After Reading* as their next release after *No Country for Old Men*. A twisted and violent take on an otherwise frothy premise, this film really had little chance of ever going awry.

Whether it be transporting Homer's *The Odyssey* to Depression-era Mississippi in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* or having stoner comedy-meets-L.A. noir with *The Big Lebowski*, nothing can beat the Coens when they are in fine genre-splicing form.

So is *Burn After Reading* the next *Fargo* or *Lebowski*? No, but it is certainly a step up from *Intolerable Cruelty* and *The Ladykillers*, the two most recent comedic turns from the brothers. And even though the film feels like a self-indulgent pleasure for the Coens, that doesn't mean we can't enjoy it as well.

*Burn After Reading* opens at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., where analyst Osborne Cox (John Malkovich, *Beowulf*) quits his job rather than face the indignity of demotion. His cheating wife, Katie (an icy Tilda Swinton, *Michael Clayton*), sees this breakdown as the last straw in their crumbling marriage and compiles her husband's financial records onto a CD as preparation for the divorce settlement.

When the disc finds its way into a Washington gym's locker room, overzealous trainer Chad Feldheimer (Brad Pitt, *The Assassina-*

*tion of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*) discovers Cox's memoirs on the CD, which he believes to be "secret CIA shit."

The finding also intrigues Feldheimer's co-worker, Linda Litzke (Frances McDormand, who also happens to be Joel Coen's wife, *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*), a 40-something bachelorette with a craving for drastic cosmetic surgery, though nervous manager Ted Trefon (Richard Jenkins, *Step Brothers*) thinks she is perfect as is. Along with Feldheimer, she decides to hold on to the CD and blackmail Cox, seeing a hefty fee as the gateway to her new look.

Unwittingly caught in the middle of it all is twitchy treasury agent Harry Pfarrer (George Clooney, *Leatherheads*), who, while struggling through starkly mixed emotions about his own marriage, ends up bedding both Katie and Litzke.

On its most basic level, *Burn After Reading* is the ultimate anti-conspiracy thriller. Paranoia takes over when everyone believes they are in way over their heads, even though their bumbling actions couldn't be more inconsequential.

Pitt, in particular, shines in a hilariously foolish role, with his campy performance fitting the part perfectly. As various paths are crossed and fates intertwined, the inept characters become all the more enthralling. Yes, the Coens make your sides hurt at times, but that isn't their sole purpose—they thoroughly invest you in the story as well.

The film's middle section does drag as the brothers weave the eccentric narrative threads together, including a subplot where Litzke tries to sell Cox's memoirs to the unassuming Russian Embassy. But an unexpected twist gives the movie just the jolt it needs while heading into the final act.

And as a warning to those still waiting to see Llewelyn Moss' fate in *No Country*: The Coens once again shuffle some climactic scenes off-screen and leave us with an ending as abrupt as it is ambiguous.

By the time the conclusion arrives, though, the intersecting plotlines are so tangled that the sudden finale comes as a welcome relief from the bedlam. Toward the end, David Rasche (*All My Children*) and J.K. Simmons (*Juno*) nearly steal the film in two hilarious scenes as bewildered CIA officials futilely attempting to piece together the puzzle. Eventually, it is Simmons' character who dejectedly puts it best:

"Jesus, what a clusterf---!"

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MOVIE: *Burn After Reading* | VERDICT: ★★★★★

