

NOAH HAWLEY

The *Fargo* showrunner on writing a state-of-the-nation fantasy novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Carolyn Fong

HOW DO YOU GRAPPLE WITH WRITING about contemporary America, a place where fantastical events seem ready to intrude on day-to-day reality at any moment? For Noah Hawley, his answer was to embrace the fantastic. “It became clear over time that *Anthem* had to be a fantasy novel,” he says of his latest book, “but rather than a true fantasy novel, it’s a fantasy novel that takes us through our real surroundings.”

But how do we define “real”? One of *Anthem*’s recurring themes is the idea that the “line between fact and fiction has really broken down, to the degree that two people can be convinced of alternate realities”. And not just alternate, but irreconcilable when you consider, say, the hostility with which QAnon followers, conspiracy theorists with beliefs rooted in the notion of a satanic cabal opposed to Donald Trump, view the established media.

It’s an idea touched on by one of Hawley’s characters, a teenager who calls himself The Prophet. “He says, ‘You know, 33% of Americans believe that angels and demons walk among us, and some similar number believe that UFOs are real,’” explains Hawley. “And he’s asked, ‘What do you believe?’ He says, ‘Well, I believe that the more people believe it, the realer it becomes.’”

The book also has a character who calls himself Randall Flagg, a recurring character in Stephen King’s work. In a fictional world, reasons Hawley’s Flagg, why can’t he be a fictional character? One way to look at 6 January 2021, when Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building, says Hawley, is to see it as “sedition as cosplay”.

WAR OF THE WORDS

This idea that reality has become in effect contingent runs through *Anthem*, giving it a dreamlike – or nightmarish – quality as it follows a group of teenagers who, *The Lord Of The Rings* style, embark on a quest that pits them against a billionaire sexual predator recalling the late Jeffrey Epstein. Yet Hawley says we shouldn’t read it as a political book. He even does this in the novel, as he breaks in to comment in arch terms on the story.

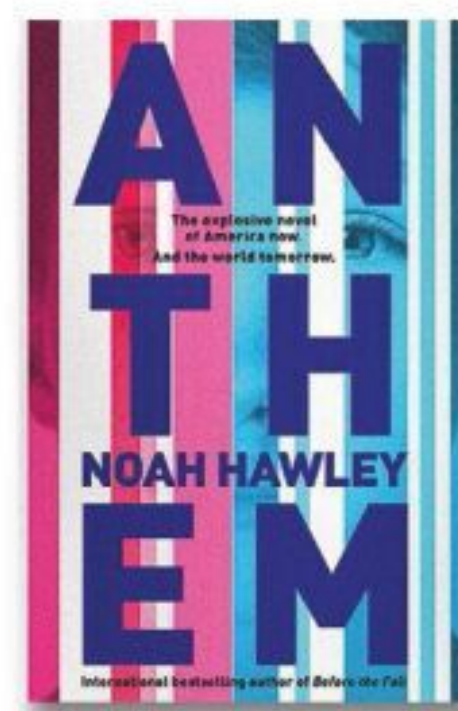
Some of Hawley’s older characters are from the right of the political spectrum, including a “sovereign citizen” who holds fringe ideas about living free of legal constraints. At times, as the book’s perspective shifts, these characters carry the story and we see the world from their perspectives. “I had no interest in creating a liberal document,” Hawley says. He’s far more bothered by the

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Greatest Hits
Hawley’s five previous novels include the thriller *Before The Fall* (2016). He created the TV series *Legion* (2017-19) for FX, based on the Marvel character and starring David Haller as Charles Xavier’s mutant and schizophrenic son.

Random Fact
Hawley was signed on to write and direct a fourth *Kelvin Timeline Star Trek* movie. The movie would have featured a new crew, but was shut down in 2020.



idea that the same word – “freedom”, for example – can mean such different things to different people. “How do you tell a story about a world in which the words don’t mean the same things to people on two sides of the aisle?” he asks. But of course it’s a rhetorical question; the answer lies precisely in the way Hawley shifts perspectives.

A fascination with writing arrived early in Hawley’s life. His late mother, Louise Armstrong, was a self-taught writer. In the words of an obituary written by activist Julie Bindel, Armstrong’s collection of narratives from survivors *Kiss Daddy Goodnight: A Speak-Out On Incest* “galvanised feminists to organise against child sexual abuse”.

ALIEN RESURRECTION

Hawley wanted to be a songwriter, but the musician’s life wasn’t for someone who is “not a night person”. He began writing fiction “on the side, as something that was just my thing”. Then his first novel *A Conspiracy Of Tall Men* (1998) was optioned by Paramount and he began writing for the screen. “I just kept making it up as I went along,” he says of his career.

He began to get breaks in television, and he’s now probably best known as the creator of *Fargo*, the anthology series based on the Coens’ film of the same name. It’s easy to see him as a showrunner. He’s precise and somehow conveys a sense of being organised. Not that every project has been a success. His debut feature, the 2019 “magic realism astronaut movie” *Lucy In The Sky*, failed to find an audience, for all that it was hugely imaginative in the way it played with the screen’s aspect ratio.

There’s a sense that his missteps have most often been down to ambition, and it will be fascinating to see what he brings to his new TV project, a series based on the *Alien* franchise. It’s going well, he says, in part because there’s plenty of creative space for new stories. “We know there’s a Weyland-Yutani Corporation,” he says. “We know there are these creatures. You don’t really know anything about, y’know, has humanity spread throughout the universe?” The series, he suggests, may provide some answers. We can probably expect the idea of humanity creating its own AI monsters, too.

Ultimately, whatever he does, says Hawley, his approach is to challenge himself. “My process is: ‘What is the story? What am I taking for granted, and how does the story want to be told?’” ●

Anthem is out now, published by Hodder & Stoughton.

“33% of
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