

# The Seasons of Adaptation

Screenwriters talk about penning *Cardinal*, the cool Canadiana now taking the globe by storm

By Matthew Hays

There would be snow.

Screenwriter Aubrey Nealon had that one assurance as he headed into the daunting task of writing season one of *Cardinal*, the creepy, frosty adaptation of Giles Blunt's series of crime novels. "We knew we really wanted it to feel cold and big and northern," Nealon recalls. Mission accomplished.

And beyond all the snow, it turns out that strong writing matched with great direction, cinematography and a knockout cast — as well as vital network confidence and support — has led to one of the breakout successes of the season. Bell Media, Sienna Films and eOne executives knew they had the TV equivalent of the planets being aligned and voted their confidence with the unprecedented green lighting of three six-episode seasons at once. And that confidence was merited: shortly after the first season aired on Canadian TV, BBC announced it had bought the British broadcast rights. This was after French, Spanish and Scandinavian networks had all voted with their own shopping spree. That's a lot of warmth for *Cardinal*, a very cold show.

Corrie Coe, the senior vice president of original programming at Bell Media, says the CTV network had been looking into a serialized program for some time, but the scheduling of a six-episode season made for something of a "game of chess" in terms of a programming schedule built around longer seasons. "When we were taking our foray into this kind of show, we felt extra pressure that it be extraordinary," says Coe. "We believed in the writers, and couldn't feel more fortunate. We love the show. Clearly, we're not alone."

And it's easy to see why *Cardinal* has been snatched up. Atmospheric and chilling, season one is a satisfying, deliberately-paced adaptation of the award-winning, bestselling work of Blunt. Billy Campbell stars as John Cardinal with Karine Vanasse playing Lise Delorme, two detectives struggling to

solve the murder of a girl in northern Ontario. Like the best Nordic Noir, *Cardinal* embraces the severity of our wintry weather, making the season into another character in the show. Call it Canuck Noir.

For the writers, the challenges of penning several seasons with overlapping writers' rooms, notes sessions and coordination of plot twists made creating it that much more complicated. "I was approached with it as I was working on *Orphan Black*," Nealon recalls. "I read the novel and really liked the vibe of the book, and I liked the voice of the protagonist."

Nealon says he especially liked the six-episode format. "When I read the first book, I could picture the show at that length. You have enough time to tell the story. It's long enough to get into the depth of character that you need to, but also have a contained, lean story. It has that combination of being long enough to get into depth but short enough that you're not vamping."

"The six-episode format feels very manageable," says Sarah Dodd, who was the showrunner and chief writer for season two. "In six episodes you can take your characters on a rich journey. You're not spreading yourself too thin. We were able to show the police detective's perspective, but also show the villain's perspective too."

"The model of such a short run can be challenging in that one person is trying to oversee everything," says Russ Cochrane, who Nealon brought on board to write episode five of season one. "You can be a lot more productive when you work together, when you have someone to bounce ideas off of. Aubrey and I work really well together — we have a kind of shorthand between us. His work was just killer. We worked together on tightening things up and adding a bit of material where it was needed."

Nealon says as he was adapting the material, he knew he wanted the winter season to be paramount —



Clockwise from top:  
Aubrey Nealon; Sarah Dodd;  
Corrie Coe; Russ Cochrane



Detective John Cardinal played by Billy Campbell hunts for a vicious killer in a small Northern Ontario town, where the screenwriters have incorporated the seasonal weather as a co-star.

like another character in the show. “It’s about keeping the shots wide and keeping the silences. The huge amounts of snow, the cold, there’s a forebodingness, a dream-like quality to it. I’m used to snow. I grew up in a small town and having lots of snow around was part of my childhood. It’s a much different feeling than in the city.”

And for Nealon that meant embracing “the mundane parts of the season as well. Just the sheer time it takes to take off coats and shoes. You usually don’t find that in a screenplay, you usually go straight to the action. But in the north, it’s not just about the cold, it’s about bracing for it, something we spend a lot of time doing.”

Cochrane adds that “Aubrey saw the character of Cardinal being close to the way he saw the landscape. The frozen character would thaw over the course of the season. He gets more emotive as time passes, and he gets closer to his partner as well.”

Dodd says the seasonal theme in the first season was one of its greatest achievements. “The environment really is a character in that season — it informs everything,” she argues. “It’s true of our season too. It’s the title of the book — *Blackfly*

*Season* — so we looked for ways to highlight that. We were evoking a certain kind of mood, and to factor it into the emotional state of our character. One of the key themes is the rot behind the beauty. There are long sun-soaked days, but there is rot behind the beauty. A rot, a decay, and the blackflies run so thick that they cloud the view of the lake. And that’s the haunted quality of our main character.”

“I got autumn, which is my favourite season,” says Patrick Tarr, who co-wrote and served as showrunner for season three. “I get from September to November, which is the sweetest time to be up there. Obviously, the fall and the changing colours of the leaves opens you up to great symbolism. It ties in to what’s happening to the character.”

But with any adaptation comes the challenge: remaining true to the spirit of the source material while busting out when needed. “Taking it to the screen meant altering it, and reshaping it for the screen was one of the big challenges,” concedes Nealon. “The voice of the book is in the central character’s head. Finding ways to get that on to the screen without flashbacks was tricky. We needed to build backstory and off-screen drama.”

## Sizing up the Six Pack

WGC executive director Maureen Parker on what the tighter, leaner season can mean for writers

The screenwriters talk of the pleasures of working on “smaller, leaner” seasons of a TV series. Of shifting gears, working with smaller groups of writers, and of tighter deadlines. And of the sheer economy of a six-part series — the so-called six pack — which has proven so popular on a lot of European TV and on Netflix.

But WGC Executive Director Maureen Parker warns of obvious possible downsides to the growing appeal of six-pack seasons. “I was surprised when I looked at the data, because in terms of episodic production, the volume remains the

same.” But, she adds, “I don’t think it’s going to stay that way. I do think this will lead to less work for professional screenwriters in Canada.”

Parker also says the appeal and expansion of the six-pack format makes the things that writers often complain about even worse. “As a writer, you’re always scrambling for work. If you keep seasons this short, the story department will take most of the work, if not all of it. This means the demise of freelance writing gigs. When you had a 22-episode season, the story department would farm out much of the work to individual writers.

“The six pack means less security for writers. The engagement is precarious. It’s not a long-term project, and frankly, there’s no guarantee it’ll be picked up again. For writers, the idea of continuing engagement is very important. Shows like this are over in the blink of an eye. I fear that producers like it for all the wrong reasons, in particular because it’s even less of a commitment. The fallout: the writer is left scrambling.

“There may be the same amount of volume now, but I don’t think it will hold. Ultimately, this will mean less work for writers.” ■

“We were so lucky to have the great books,” says Tarr. “They provided a lot of inspiration. If I ever needed to remember what the character’s state of mind was, I could go back and find it. They are very evocative.”

“We did deviate from the book, as you do in any adaptation,” says Dodd. “There was so much personal story that needed to be created and developed. The novels work so well, but for six hours of TV, there was new background that had to be added.”

Nealon says keeping contemporary audience’s tastes in mind while considering how to pace the show was also complicated. *Cardinal* opts for a far more deliberate pace, almost the exact opposite of a rapid-fire paced show like *How To Get Away With Murder*. “People’s appetites for stories are voracious. You never quite know how they are going to react to something that’s paced differently. This is a slow burn mystery. It’s the opposite of the manic pace so much TV is on now.”

The ultimate high-wire act came in the coordination of three different seasons being imagined almost simultaneously, by three different

showrunners and their writing teams, with notes being sent across the country and continual meetings to coordinate story arcs that would develop throughout the entire show’s run. “I met with both Aubrey and Patrick to talk about how we could connect our seasons,” recalls Dodd. “We had a very good working relationship. Each season would be connected but unique in its own way. Writing the second season felt challenging, just because we had such big shoes to fill. I had seen final cuts of season one and had been so impressed. We had a template, but we also didn’t want to repeat ourselves. You have different ingredients, and you want your season to be part of the cycle but also to stand on its own as six hours of TV.”

“We had to have a thread running through all three seasons,” adds Tarr. “But we also wanted each season to have its own character.”

All of the writers are understandably elated at the success of *Cardinal*, a bet on cool Canadiana that turned out to be very rewarding. “The cast is tremendous,” says Dodd. “It’s very rewarding to see a show like this one take off, get great reviews and be seen in so many places.” ■

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