

TV STREAMED

TRUE DETECTIVE
NIGHT COUNTRY

ISSA LÓPEZ FINDS
TRUTH IN THE ICE

BY DAVID
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SPOILER ALERT

Major plot points are discussed



ISSA LÓPEZ

THE FIRST SEASON OF *TRUE DETECTIVE*—created in 2014 by Nic Pizzolatto—hit HBO a decade ago. It paired Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson as cops investigating cult killings with strange supernatural undertones. Adopting an anthology approach, with a new cast and story for each new season, the show quickly bowed its season two before taking a four-year gap ahead of season three arriving in 2019. Few suspected *True Detective* might return to screens after an even longer break, but certainly no one was expecting it to return in such an excellent, compelling fashion, boasting the established likes of Jodie Foster, John Hawkes and Fiona Shaw alongside newer faces such as Kali Reis and Finn Bennett for a narrative set in the frozen tundra of a tiny Alaskan town.



It's all thanks to a meeting HBO took with new showrunner Issa López, who was asked if she had a take on a concept for a fresh run of the show. As it turns out, the committed Sherlock Holmes fan already had something she thought might work. That evolved into a confounding mystery that played out against the backdrop of Ennis, Alaska, a fictional town not far from the Arctic Circle, that is plunged into darkness 24 hours a day for several weeks each year. The locals refer to this natural phenomenon as “the long night.” At some point during the last sunset before the long night, a group of men disappear from the Tsalal Arctic Research Station they operate, oddly leaving behind only their clothes and shoes. At the site where they vanished, Det. Liz Danvers (Foster) is insistent that the area be treated as a crime scene. She teams up with Det. Evangeline Navarro (Reis)—with whom she has a checkered past thanks to a previous case—to figure out what happened. Their investigation proceeds amid simmering tensions among native tribes, eco-activists and the local oil company, while the detective's own chaotic private lives and shattered working relationship only complicate the situation.





López might be best known to U.S. audiences for her impactful 2017 film, *Tigers Are Not Afraid*, which blends the harsh reality of Mexico's criminal drug trade with magical realism from the POV of a group of kids fending for themselves in the midst of this harsh existence. Yet she'd had years of movie experience in her native Mexico as a writer, director and producer. López's creative process has evolved over time, but it largely boils down to two key driving factors: deadline and the abject panic deadlines inspire. "It's a usual process of, *Oh, I shouldn't start writing now*," she laughs. "And then it doesn't happen... and doesn't happen...and doesn't happen. And then three days before deadline, you're on the verge of having a nervous breakdown, and when you read what you wrote in the morning that night, you think what you're doing is terrible. Then you take a second read the next day, and [while] it's not as terrible as you thought, some parts are, and so you throw those away and make it better. And then you leave it."

López is candid about the fact that when she's writing on spec, the process is much more luxurious and she'll take the time to plan things out. And yet, ironically, the deadlines help her deliver, and she hasn't missed one yet despite the constant worrying. "There is no fucking method. It's terrible. I think also my brain has now been injured permanently by social media, invasive thoughts and brief attention spans combined with old age damage. Sometimes lately I'll start watching a movie or a series, and I'll watch 15 or 20 minutes and then stop and write for a good 20 minutes, before I put the computer aside and watch a little bit more of whatever I was watching or play a video game. Then I'll pick up the computer again. It's a horrible day because you don't see sunlight, but at the end of the day—or around 2 a.m.—there's something there."





The demanding maw of producing a season of television meant López had to adapt her methods, but not by too much. She's up front about not creating a series bible and working with just a small group of writers. In fact, her first document for the HBO executives was a simple breakdown featuring six pages detailing the raw beats of how the plot kicks off at the research base, including brief descriptions of the men and the minutia of life there, along with someone making a sandwich, doing laundry or slipping *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* into the DVD player. It cuts to three days later, when someone delivering supplies discovers the deserted base, poured drinks still sitting in mugs on a table, and somewhere in the snowy wastes are a jumble of naked bodies frozen together in a human corpsicle. A further six pages introduce Danvers, Navarro and other characters. The HBO team, enthused by the concept, asked who was responsible for the men's deaths. "We sat down, and I told them a little bit about it," López recalls. "They loved it, and they said, 'Okay, write a treatment for episode one.' We'd made a deal for me to create it at that point, and so I wrote a treatment, which was 11 pages—and they loved that, too. They had notes on it. I agreed with some notes but hated most because that's me."





In those early stages, López relied on a friend and fellow filmmaker for crucial input. After writing the first couple drafts of the first episode, she handed the script to her friend Barry Jenkins, the writer-director responsible for Oscar entrants *Moonlight* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*. He had agreed to board the project as an executive producer via his Pastel prodco and brought his own experiences from making *The Underground Railroad* for TV to the table. “Barry read it and called me and said, ‘This is good, but it’s not crazy. You’re crazy—I know you. So don’t be shy, go for crazy,’” López recalls. “And I went back and made it way crazier and in my own spirit, which is possibly the best bit of advice I’ve ever received. I turned it in, and he loved it. And HBO had notes...” But again the notes were manageable, and with HBO’s full backing in place, she was encouraged to run a 10-week writers’ room with just four scribes. (The “mini-room” was a key sticking point in last year’s strike and remains hotly debated among WGA writers.) At the table were Alan Page Arriaga (*Fear the Walking Dead*), Namsi Khan (*His Dark Materials*), Wenonah Wilms (*Fem 101*) and Katrina Albright (*Shining Girls*), though López also worked with *Ozark* veteran showrunner Chris Mundy to address further notes while handling the lion’s share of the scripts and directing all six episodes.



As director, López had to deal with the age-old challenge of how to bring her show's various wild concepts—visions of the dead, seemingly endless dark nights, to name two—to the screen, but that did not deter her inner scribe. “When I’m writing, the director [side of me] sometimes tries to get in my head and go, *Don’t do this to yourself*. But you cannot think about budget or the technical difficulties. I just know it’s going to be a nightmare, but you need to write the best story in the universe as if you had no limits. Then the director goes to it and is confounded!” She realized the best way to power through these challenges was to surround herself with a smart and talented crew that could come up with much needed solutions. “We as Mexicans are very ingenious, and we can go, *Oh, that’s not what I want. What’s going to work? And you find it.*” Part of that discovery stemmed from rehearsing with her actors for a month before shooting. Nothing was too precious, as the filmmaker would just quickly retool and try again. “We’d have a joke that if it didn’t work, I would be, ‘Who the fuck wrote this shit?’ and throw it away. They loved it when I did that.”

