

Why TV Crime Shows Are to Die For

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CBS NEWS

For their millions of loyal viewers, TV crime shows are appointment television . . . not to be missed. You COULD even say they're TO DIE FOR. And even though NBC announced this past week that it was cancelling the original "Law & Order" series after 20 seasons, there's no need to worry. There still will be plenty of police shows on television . . . as Tracy Smith reports in our Cover Story:

It is, by any measure, a killer idea: Prime time crime.

1. Do you think that this accurately portrays "real" crime?
2. What do you think the consequences of this image of crime is in real life?
3. What is the METAPHOR in this paragraph?

Dirty deeds . . . and clean resolutions. The ugliest murders, and the most beautiful people, dishing up justice in under an hour, and in a uniquely satisfying way.

NYU Professor Aurora Wallace likens them to macaroni and cheese: "They are enormously comforting. This is the comfort food of television."

And they have legs. The original "Law & Order" series, cancelled just last week after 20 years, is tied with "Gunsmoke" for the longest-running prime time drama in history.

4. Why do you think crime dramas and crime fiction are so culturally and internationally popular?
5. What are the ALLUSIONS in this paragraph?
6. Based on the ALLUSIONS, what do you think are the most popular type of MURDER MYSTERIES on TV and other media?

"Crime dramas have been popular, crime novels have been popular in every culture everywhere in the world," said Rene Balcer, "Law and Order"'s executive producer. "The second story ever told was a murder mystery - you know, the first story ever told was Adam and Eve, a love story. The second story, Cain and Abel."

But the Cain and Abel story was probably never told like "CSI," where forensic science is crucial, but murder is almost always part of the mix.

"Murder is the ultimate catalyst for a good story, because the stakes are the highest," said "CSI"'s creator, Anthony Zuiker. "There's no higher stakes than human life. We have done shows where there's an art heist. They failed miserably. Nobody quite cares that Mrs. MacGillicutty lost her \$10 million

painting. But America understands the person next door was brutally murdered and she had a whole life ahead of her."

And apparently, murder travels well.

In 2008, "CSI" was at least a Top-15 show in nearly 30 countries.

In fact, there are few places in the world where "CSI" *isn't* shown.

"The running joke really is that 'CSI' airs in every country but six: North Korea, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, and a couple of others I probably can't even name," said Zuiker. "But really, it's shown in every second of every day around the world, as we speak."

Of course, you might expect "CSI" to be a hit in Great Britain:

"I like 'CSI' because it's so clever and really technical," said one London girl.

But the show is also popular in places where America is not.

In Damascus, Syria, for instance, "CSI: Miami" (with Arabic subtitles) is on at least three times a week.

"I know so many people who are following that show right now," said 15-year-old Maria Ayoub.

7. Does EXPORTING pop-culture hurt or help America?

"From the perspective of people in other countries, America is an extremely violent culture," said professor David Schmid of the State University of New York at Buffalo. "When people watch 'CSI' in other countries, they treat it pretty much as a documentary in a lot of cases, because it just dovetails so neatly with what they already think of as being America."

Australian-born Shane Brennan, who's in charge of both "NCIS" and "NCIS: Los Angeles," doesn't think that Americans are more into crime shows than people from other countries.

(CBS)"I don't think we all have to rush out to our analysts and be concerned that we are a little strange over here," Brennan said.

Brennan said the rapid-fire justice of TV crime drama has universal appeal: "At the end of the day, when you boil us down, we're all made up of the same atoms and the same DNA. And we have the same emotional responses."

"And we all like murder," said Smith.

"And we all like to see the murderer get caught!" Brennan laughed.

And what's more, we like to see *how* the murderer gets caught, with super computers and super-human police.

Those things apparently got a lot more important to viewers after September 11th, 2001.

There's a belief that the horror of 9/11 created a huge sense of vulnerability in our national consciousness, and that watching the good guys win makes us feel better.

"If you look at the popularity of these genres since 9/11, there's something significant there," said NYU's Aurora Wallace. "It's as if we're giving an answer to a failure of intelligence and a failure of technology."

"It's not like I sit down in front of my television and say, 'Now I'm going to feel better about 9/11,'" said Smith.

8. Why are we reassured at the end of a crime drama as opposed to the evening news?

"No, of course not. But it's much more reassuring at the end of this show than it is at the end of the news."

"My sense is that since 9/11 there's been a real ground shift," said Brennan. "There's been a real change in the way people view crime and the way they view these kinds of shows, where you've got basically a fight of good against evil.

"And given the events of 9/11 and everything that's happened since - and continues to happen - I think what the audience are looking for is reassurance."

9. What does "colour their view of the world" mean?

But beyond reassurance, crime dramas can, for some people, color their view of the world.

A 2009 Purdue University study found that some people who watch a LOT of crime shows think the world is a scarier place than it is. They tend to "overestimate the frequency of serious crimes" . . . like murder.

"I think that there's a very obvious way, especially since the 'CSI' franchise expanded and now covers a variety of cities, that the 'CSI' franchise basically turns the whole country into a crime scene," said Schmid. "It seems that you can't escape crime, no matter where you live. And so, these shows often have to pull off a very difficult balancing act:

"On the one hand, they generate fear. But if that's all they did, they wouldn't be popular. What they have to do at the same time is to control that fear, to persuade their audience that, you know, something can be done about it, and the world is safer than it appears to be. And I think that's what a show like 'CSI' does so incredibly well."

10. What is the balancing act that shows must "pull-off"?

Something else crime shows do well: Make viewers cringe.

"Dead bodies look fake in real life," said Zuiker.

"The real dead bodies look fake, but your *fake* dead bodies look *real*," said Smith.

"Yes, exactly," said Zuiker. "And the fake dead bodies don't smell, but the real dead bodies smell and they're in your pores for days."

Are there times, Zuiker was asked, when he's pushed the envelope too far?

"Sure, sure. You know, my job as a creator, our job as executive producers is to push the envelope as far as it possibly can that doesn't upset the audience or break their trust. It's CBS' job to see what's applicable for error. And that's the relationship that we live in."

"How often does that happen that you're pushing the envelope and they're saying, 'Tone back a little bit'?" Smith said.

"For me, quite often," Zuiker laughed. "Because for me, I'm always afraid that the audience is going to get bored."

That seems unlikely. But the gore isn't why people watch.

In a recent study, researchers at Indiana University showed people episodes of "24," "The Sopranos," and others, with all the violent scenes cut out.

Turns out, the test subjects said they enjoyed them *significantly more* than people who saw the original versions.

Does Zuiker think "CSI" would work without, as Smith described it, the "squeamish," "shock-value stuff"?

"I think we can. I think, you know, science goes far beyond blood and goes far beyond gore or shock value. It's all so fascinating that we don't have to really show gore to make the show successful.

"But for entertainment value, the show does work when we do that," he laughed.

And producers say it'll likely KEEP working, as long as there is violence, virtue, and viewers with an appetite for both.

Shane Brennan said, yes, murder stories will be with us for "absolutely forever."

"It's so much part of our DNA that we need to be challenged. We need to be scared. We need to triumph over the bad in the world."

"I think if you can create something and make something from week to week that the whole world enjoys every second of every day, it's pretty special," said Zuiker. "And sends the right message that if you commit a crime, we're gonna catch you."

"And that's the bottom line?" Smith asked.

"That's the bottom line - justice."

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11. Why does Brennan think that mysteries will be with us "absolutely forever"?

FIGURATIVE v. LITERAL

Characteristics of FIGURATIVE language:

imaginative

literary

creative

artful

abstract

subjective

poetic

connotative

language that describes the world from an IMAGINATIVE point of view. Tell us how the world *should* or *ought* to be

Characteristics of LITERAL language:

concrete

factual

scientific

objective

no exaggeration

no embellishment

no imagination

denotative

language that describe the world as it *is*

[[figurative / poetic devices]]

imagery: the use of language that heightens the “mental picture” when reading literary and non-fiction texts through the use of figurative language devices – metaphor, simile, personification, connotation and denotation.

hyperbole: the use of over-exaggeration in writing.

My eyes are burning.
I've walked a hundred miles just to cross the street.

apostrophe: addresses the absent as if present or inanimate as if able to understand.

Die loneliness (inanimate), die!
Car (inanimate), don't fail me now.
Why did you have to die? Why? Why? I miss you. I miss you (absent).

metaphor: comparing two unlike things using IS

His hair is a stinky, messed-up brillo pad.
Her eyes are Mona Lisa's.

simile: comparing two unlike things using LIKE or AS.

His voice resonated like a Sunday morning preacher's,
Her skin is as clear as a pane of glass.

allusion: references made in literature and non-fiction writing to:

personal connections: these are intimate connections made BY the reader to the text.

Sometimes the allusion is not purposefully used by the author, but the reader connects to the material from personal experience.

history: events, personalities, politics, wars

religion: Moses, Buddha, Mohammed

literature: famous characters, famous novels/poems/plays, famous quotes, famous authors

pop culture: famous movies, art, TV shows, actors, music, singers, musicians, architecture, songs, movie lines

tone: sarcastic, humorous, preachy, serious, casual etc.

symbol (symbolism): symbols/symbolism takes you beyond the literal to a whole new world of connotative meaning. Writers will often appeal to our senses by invoking symbols – the cross, colours, objects, allusions – within writing, making us think outside the literal definition of the word. Use of symbols is an excellent way to heighten imagery.

personification: attaching human qualities to inanimate or non-human things

The statue stared protectively over the darkened square,

onomatopoeia: words that resemble a sound (spelled phonetically)

agh, psst, sshh

euphony: melodic or pleasing sounding words that usually have dominant S, L, M, V W sounds

murmur, sly, lullaby

cacophony: words that are harsh sounding that usually have dominant K, C, G, P B sounds

clutch, scratch, gross, puke

alliteration: repetition of initial consonant sounds in a series of words

