

HARTS

& Minds



Article © HARTS & Minds

BOOK REVIEW:

Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television

Reviewed by Elizabeth Fiedler

HARTS & Minds:
The Journal of Humanities and Arts

Vol. 2, No. 2 (2015)

BOOK REVIEW by Elizabeth Fiedler

Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television

by **Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette, and Ben Bethell**

(Jefferson North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015). 219 pages.

Offering a much needed step forward in the developing area of television studies, Roger Sabin and the other contributors to *Cop Shows* make significant inroads into the study of the cop show genre, offering contextualisation within American culture and engaging with themes relating to both cultural studies and visual media studies. The chronological format of the book reflects the authors' goal to be accessible and informative to both the academic looking for a concise yet insightful history of the genre, and the cop show aficionados among the general public. Lest the authors' self-description as "fan scholars" cause academics to dismiss the book as trivial, be assured that Sabin's book does important work toward beginning to fill a gap in generic television studies.¹ In fact, the volume engages with such serious themes as the trickiness of defining genre; issues of gender, class, and race; reception and intertextuality; and portrayal and transmittal of cultural attitudes toward the police and institutional justice. The book addresses all these issues and more as they arise in the discussion of the nineteen plus cop programs featured, all the while preserving a sense of the entertainment and pleasure offered by the shows in question. This is a labour of love as much as it is a collection of historical evidence and a series of signposts for further study. "Fan" and "scholar" turn out not to be mutually exclusive terms, as the book draws connections from cop shows to other productions of popular culture such as MAD magazine and pop music on one hand, and scholarly books, articles, and dissertations on the other.

The introduction to *Cop Shows* outlines how a body of television dramas was born out of crime fiction and other literary and visual media genres, especially the growing field of television studies. It also offers a guide to reading the book and to watching the shows with an awareness of their interaction with cultural debates about crime, stating that they "are both reflectors and transmitters of the zeitgeist. They co-opt social and political issues, push them through the mincer of a commercial system, and offer stories based on colourful characters."² Thus, the reader is prepared for a fast-paced but thoughtful overview of the history of police dramas.

The body of the book consists of one chapter dedicated to each of the nineteen most successful and influential American cop shows. These are followed by a twentieth "chapter" that is actually a roll call of other shows not treated in detail but that merit closer future study, with shows dating from 1950 to the present. The nineteen main chapters are also organised chronologically by initial airdate, from *Dragnet* (1951-59) to *Justified* (2010-15). At the end of each, the reader will find sections entitled "Recommended Viewing" and "Further Reading." These last two features are an example of how well the book considers its hybrid audience; the viewing suggestions offer up the most entertaining, most typical, and often the most challenging episodes in terms of narrative techniques and cultural issues. This may appeal both to general viewers who want to get an idea of the show without needing to watch several seasons' worth, as well as to the scholar looking for specific episodes that stand out in terms of the show's structure, ideological stance, etc. The reading recommendations are helpful in narrowing down what parts of *Cop Shows*' extensive bibliography pertain most directly to the series and issues addressed in the chapter, usually with suggestions of general interest, such as DVD extras in the form of documentaries and interviews, as well as scholarly essays, books, and even unpublished dissertations.

Each chapter takes care to place a particular show in its historical and cultural context, in relation to other previous and contemporary shows, feature films about police and other related media. The overall chronological structure of the book allows for the tracing of lineages and genealogies, such as identifying the *Starsky & Hutch* “hip detective” type’s origin in Warner-produced private eye shows that aired a decade and a half before the incredibly popular buddy cop show appeared. It also identifies the long line of shows from *Dragnet* to *The Wire* and beyond, whose gritty realism and sense of society’s moral crisis can be traced back to crime radio plays, crime comics, film noir, and even Italian neorealist cinema. These lines of influence and others are outlined briefly and with clear references to specific shows, books, authors, producers, etc., but the chronological structure of the book and its purpose as a brief history does not allow for examining them in-depth, and so the authors offer them to the reader anyway as an avenue of further exploration and research.

Sabin and the other contributors make similar gestures to briefly examine the engagement of the featured shows to prevailing cultural attitudes toward the crime show genre itself, toward the police, and toward the portrayal of violence in visual media. The engagement of a given show with any number of these issues forms the majority of that part of each chapter that goes beyond the basic narrative structure and visual style of the show. Most notable are the ways in which the book identifies how different shows address issues of gender and race, both reflecting and transmitting the society’s developing attitudes toward both; from *Kojak*, featuring minorities as secondary characters in a time when this alone was considered progressive, to *Cagney & Lacey*, initially conceived as a realistic portrayal of “conflicting ideas of what it meant to be a woman in Reagan-era America,” but criticized by feminist critics for eventually evolving into a hybrid of a cop show and a soap opera.³

The appendix examines a popular fan theory about the existence (or non-existence) of several interrelated shows. It begins by explaining the general outline of the Tommy Westphall Hypothesis, and represents one of many brief but intriguing moments in which *Cop Shows* engages with literary and cultural theory in ways that merely appreciative anthologies do not make an effort to do.⁴ Even more interestingly is that it also emphasises the role of non-scholarly fans in the creation of this hypothesis. In this way, the appendix, though short, is arguably one of the more forward-looking parts of the book and the most consistent with the authors’ intention to include the audience in the study of television, to raise “questions involving the viewers,” and thereby “offer a fuller picture of both text and viewer.”⁵

What *Cop Shows* identifies most strongly in police dramas is their prevailing nature as the “reflectors and transmitters of the zeitgeist” mentioned in the introduction. As the visual and narrative structure of the shows has evolved and their intertextual references multiplied, their engagement with cultural concerns has become more complex and articulate. Many of the concerns raised in the 1950s by *Dragnet* and its contemporaries about racism, violence, classism, police corruption, and other social ills are still present in our society and our crime shows. Most intriguingly, though, is *Cop Shows*’ attention to the increasing interaction and influence between fandom and television over the decades, working in both directions with fandom influencing the evolution of a show while the show’s ideological or moral stance in turn influences the operations and moral and ethical positions of real life organs of justice.⁶ This attention to the media-viewer relationship means that addressing a hybrid audience of scholars and non-scholarly viewers is both a sensible and natural choice. In the end, the book’s contribution to television studies and to the study of the cop show in particular is not limited to offering a critical history of TV police dramas; rather, it opens up many avenues of research across decades of television programs into the influence of television on audiences and vice versa. By the end of the book, the reader can have no doubt that the viewer and the show are intrinsically connected.

Notes

¹ Roger Sabin, Ronald Wilson, Linda Speidel, Brian Faucette, and Ben Bethell, *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Dramas on Television* (Jefferson North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), p. 13

² Sabin, *Cop Shows*, p. 13

³ Sabin, *Cop Shows*, p. 99

⁴ “The basic idea is that certain TV dramas are connected by a series of crossovers, which trace back to a scenario which brings into question their having ‘existed’ in the first place” (Sabin, *Cop Shows*, p. 191). The reality of the worlds of certain series, especially *The Wire*, *Law & Order* (and spinoffs), and *Homicide*, is called into question with the possibility that they are the product of the imagination of Tommy Westphall, an autistic boy whose father works in the hospital of *St. Elsewhere*, one of the interconnected series, in its final episode (Sabin, *Cop Shows*, p. 192). (That the character whose crossovers link the theory’s central series and fictional worlds together, John Munch played by Richard Belzer, is himself a conspiracy theorist adds to the charm and attraction of the theory for many fans.)

⁵ Sabin, *Cop Shows*, p. 10

⁶ For example, see p. 142-3 for a breakdown of how internet fandom speculation influenced the plotlines of the show, and a brief outline of the “CSI effect”, or “the perceived impact that the series has on real-life juries” (Sabin, *Cop Shows*, p. 142-143).

Biography

Elizabeth Fiedler is undertaking a PhD at the University of Chicago. Research interests include contemporary Italian literature, especially Italian detective and crime novels, film, and television, the role of place and geographical setting, attitudes toward institutions of law and order, and the tension between justice and morality in the *giallo*.