



# DETECTIVE SHOWS I'D LIKE TO PUT ON TV

by Ron Miller

Every mystery fan knows there just aren't enough good detective shows on television anymore. It's time to do something about it, so I'm volunteering my help, free of charge.

As a longtime TV critic and columnist, I've heard all the excuses from network presidents about why we don't get shows like "The Rockford Files" and "Murder, She Wrote" anymore and why we have to wait all year for an episode or two of "Columbo" or "Agatha Christie's Poirot."

They all blame it on Madison Avenue advertising firms. They say young people don't care much for the good, old-fashioned detective shows and advertisers mainly want to reach younger female viewers with their messages. Without ad support, the networks tell us, there can't be any "old-fashioned" detective shows.

But who's asleep at the wheel back there in TV Land? Young women in the prized 18-49 age group WILL watch detective shows if you find a way to make them appealing. The networks just haven't gone looking for the right detectives at the local bookstore.

Here are my suggestions for 10 young viewer-friendly detective programs that somebody should have tried before now.

## 1. MARY & SHERLOCK

Why not a series based on Laurie R. King's wonderful books about the cases of elderly Sherlock Holmes and his young American wife Mary Russell? Sherlock Holmes is a pre-sold name that everybody in the world knows about, so the older mystery fans certainly should tune in. But the bulk of the detecting is handled by the bright and energetic young Mary, who first met the retired sleuth Holmes on the beach near his country home in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*. She's a feminist, and her adventures after she lures Sherlock out of retirement have proved catnip to hordes of younger female readers who have made Laurie King one of the most consistently popular mystery writers of the past decade.

### A May-December Investigation



Odyssey Entertainment



Matt Frewer has already been fitted for an Inverness cloak in several TV movies. For Mary...perhaps Kirsten Dunst has a younger sister?

## 2. YOUNG CHARLIE CHAN

Asian-Americans have protested efforts to bring back Earl Derr Biggers' immortal Chinese detective. They don't want to see another Caucasian guy in Chinese makeup playing a make-believe Chinese who speaks pidgin English, has numbered sons, eye-rolling black valets and spews all those quotes from Confucius. Here's a way to avoid that, but still lure fans of the old Charlie Chan movies: Why not look into the life of Chang Apana, the real Asian police detective Biggers used as the model for Chan? Apana worked for the Honolulu P.D. in the 1920s. You could do a reality-based Charlie Chan series, dealing with the tough job the young Chinese must have had making his way up the ladder to police inspector in 1920s Honolulu, battling bigotry every step of the way. Find a charismatic young Asian actor and put him in the glamorous and exciting atmosphere of 1920s Honolulu and you have a possible hit show.

## 3. RACHEL PORTER, WILDLIFE SLEUTH

Former soap actress Jessica Speart has been writing the Rachel Porter series of paperback originals like *Gator Aide* and *Black Delta Night* for years. This character is a natural for a TV series! Rachel is an investigator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, going from one photogenic locale to another with each new adventure, tracking down people who smuggle exotic birds and animals into the U.S. or criminals poaching or harming wildlife. Rachel is young, pretty and delivers more wisecracks and witticisms per novel than a season of Lettermans or Lenos. The locales would be dazzlingly different—and the character is saucy, yet serious-minded.



Elsa Trillat

In these CSI-crazed times, why hasn't Patricia Cornwell's Dr. Kay Scarpetta appeared on TV yet?

## A Walk on the Wild Side



U.S. Fish and Wildlife investigator Rachel Porter visits some of America's most gorgeous places while fighting crime. At left: San Bruno Mountain State Park in California, the setting for *BLUE TWILIGHT* the latest in Jessica Speart's popular series.

What's more, she would call the nation's attention to the serious problems with fish and wildlife management that millions of viewers seem entranced by in *National Geographic* documentaries or reality-based programs on Animal Planet or The Discovery Channel. Who wouldn't watch her?

## 4. KAY SCARPETTA, M.E.

With CBS' *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* right at the top of the ratings each week, two more *CSI* spin-offs also doing well, the *Silent Witness* forensic mystery series still being made in England and Patricia Cornwell's novels about Medical Examiner Dr. Kay Scarpetta always at the top of the best-seller lists, why isn't there a Kay Scarpetta TV series by now? Cornwell's Scarpetta novels are sold by the millions to just the right TV demographic group: Women 18-49. And their appeal isn't gender-pegged either. Men would love a Scarpetta series. Let's get it going, networks!

## 5. WARSHAWSKI, P.I.

We all know Sue Grafton doesn't want her hard-boiled female P.I., Kinsey Millhone, to wind up on the screen, but TV really needs a rough, tough female private eye. Why not give Sara Paretsky's Chicago gumshoe V.I. Warshawski a chance to redeem herself after that awful 1991 V.I. Warshawski movie starring Kathleen Turner? Paretsky's nov-

els keep getting better and better, and Warshawski grows more real and credible each time out. Men would love this show as well as women, especially if they could find somebody like Charlize Theron to play V.I.

## 6. THE DELAWARE FILES

Only once has Jonathan Kellerman's Dr. Alex Delaware come to the screen—in a 1986 NBC movie based on the first Delaware novel, *When the Bough Breaks*, starring Ted Danson of *Cheers* as Dr. Delaware. Kellerman has had more than 20 years of best-sellers about the L.A.-based child psychologist who consults for the L.A.P.D., so why not give him a series? Women love

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Kellerman's novels because Delaware is constantly involved in the sort of child behavioral problems that they read about in the paper every day, hear about on Oprah or know about from their own lives. This is a winner concept for any network to try, hopefully with a good-looking, romantic leading man type in the starring role to further whet female interest.

## 7. CALLING GAIL MCCARTHY

Novelist Laura Crum is the best of the equine mystery writers on the scene since Dick Francis called it a day. She writes about Dr. Gail McCarthy, a horse veterinarian in a rural community in Northern California. She's not a detective, but her work with horses constantly brings her into mysterious, often life-threatening situations that force her into amateur sleuthing—sometimes to save her own life. The outdoor settings for Crum's novels like *Slickrock* and *Hayburner* would have amazing appeal to the millions who work with, own or just love horses—not to mention those of us



Laura Crum, shown with dog Fergie,

who miss westerns. Gail McCarthy almost always winds up in the midst of some pretty exciting events—and the mystery elements are genuine, just as they always were in Francis' best-sellers. A cable network like Lifetime could have a big hit with this romantic, action-packed series.

## 8. THAT WIMSEY GIRL

Why hasn't someone explored the possibilities inherent in the grandchildren of Lord



WGBH/Mystery!

What about their grandchildren? Would Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane's detecting genes carry on to new generations? Shown is Edward Petherbridge and Harriet Walker in the 1987 BBC series *The Lord Peter Mysteries*.

Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane? Dorothy L. Sayers let us know the Wimseys had three sons before she gave up writing about the gentleman sleuth with the golden monocle and his very bright wife. The youngest, Paul, was born around 1940, so let's pretend he had a daughter he named Pietra Harriet Wimsey—nickname Pet—around about 1970, which would make her a nice thirtysomething about now. I predict Pet Wimsey would be a little wild, but awfully smart—and I think she'd be a crusading journalist who embarrasses the other aristocrats in the Wimsey family all the time, solving mysteries before Scotland Yard even has a clue. Networks? Are you listening?

## 9. EASY DOES IT

So far, only Walter Mosley's first Easy Rawlins mystery, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, has come to the screen—a 1995 feature film starring Denzel Washington. The other books, which bring accidental African-American detective Rawlins through the years, starting with the late 1940s, could provide the core for a series of made-for-TV movies or a weekly series built around the Rawlins character. It most definitely would appeal to African-American viewers, but could have a much wider audience—and more significance—if the scripts emphasized the race issues so often incorporated into Mosley's plots.

## 10. THE DETECTION CLUB

Every mystery fan probably has a wild and

crazy idea about the mystery show they'd really love to see. So, here's mine: What if Scotland Yard brought some of its most baffling cases to the celebrated Detection Club, seeking the help of the famous mystery writers who were members in the 1930s? We know the real Detection Club members collaborated on a 1936 book called *The Anatomy of Murder* in which each of them tackled the task of re-examining a real-life murder case, so it's not that far-fetched an idea. And what fun casting the roles of Anthony Berkeley (Francis Iles), G.K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, John Dickson Carr and so on. It would be something like *The Justice League of Mystery Writers*. Networks, you can mail my royalty checks to *Mystery Scene* and they'll forward them to me. ✦

*Ron Miller is the former national president of the Television Critics Assn. and the author of Mystery! A Celebration. He's the editor and co-founder of www.thecolumnists.com, where he writes the Dark Corridors mystery pages.*

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