

# The Columbo Defect

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*We like Columbo partly because we want our hunches about life and its meaning to be true and the series appears to reassure us that they are*

**C**OLUMBO is one of the most popular of all TV series, and hardly a day passes without an episode on some TV channel or other. What is the secret of its enduring success?

The acting of Peter Falk and the character he creates are certainly part of the answer. With his wrinkled raincoat, beat-up Peugeot 403 Cabriolet convertible, lethargic basset hound called 'Dog' and elusive wife, Columbo is the eccentric detective writ large. He is very 'un-American' in his manner.

Yet Columbo is not what he seems. The scruffy, absent-minded image which disarms his opponents belies the reality of a sharp, incisive brain which can unravel the most 'perfect' crime. But it goes deeper than that, for the character himself is also a bit of a mystery. What is his first name? Frank? Or is it Philip? What does Mrs Columbo look like? How many kids does he have? Like the Mona Lisa herself, the private man is an unknown and inscrutable individual and none of our business.

The well-crafted plots also help. The formula always feels fresh because of the variety of ingeniously devised murders with which they begin and the care to detail which the killer shows in devising his cunning plan to dispose of an unwanted partner, relative, rival or whoever. But equally ingenious are the surprising telltale clues that he (or she) leaves and which enable the wily lieutenant to nab his suspect. Columbo usually tricks the killer into confession, as in *Any Port in a Storm*, where Donald Pleasance plays the murderous owner of a winery whose knowledge of the subject leads to his downfall.

But, as well as the acting and the plots, there is a third factor in its success. One thing that is not a mystery is the identity of the killer. *Columbo* reverses the usual whodunit

formula. In the traditional murder mystery, the identity of the murderer is not revealed until the climax of the story, and the detective uncovers clues pointing to the killer. In *Columbo*, on the other hand, the audience sees the crime unfold at the beginning and knows exactly who did it and how it was done; the 'mystery' from the audience's perspective is spotting the clues that will lead Columbo to discover and expose the killer's guilt.

This allows the story to unfold more from the criminal's point of view; Columbo doesn't normally appear until 15 minutes or more into the story, the preceding time being taken up by depicting the often-complex nature of the crime, including the history between the killer and the victim. Then we have the battle of wits between Columbo and the killer, usually played by the likes of Patrick McGoochan (4 episodes), Robert Culp (3), William Shatner (2), George Hamilton (2) or Robert Vaughn (2). Three of the best feature Jack Cassidy as the smuggest of the villains: *Now You See Him, Publish or Perish* and *Murder by the Book*, the last directed by Steven Spielberg.

Yet this lack of mystery has another dimension. *Columbo* attests to the fact that the true source of interest in the detective's work is the process of decipherment, not its result. Moreover, and here's the crucial point, not only do we the spectators know in advance who did it but also, inexplicably, Columbo himself knows the moment he encounters the culprit. His subsequent work is not the enigma of 'whodunit', but how he should prove it to the killer.

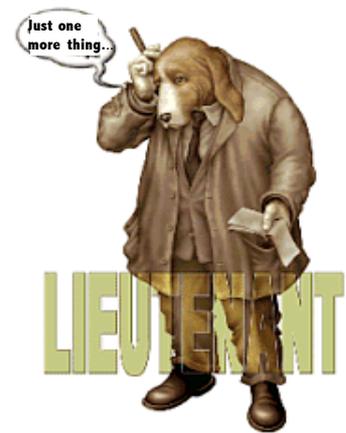
This reversal of the normal order has clear theological connotations. In all major religions the faithful first believes in God (because of upbringing, environment, family etc) and then seeks evidence to 'prove' it. Just as Columbo first knows with a mysterious but infallible certainty who did it and then proceeds to gather proofs, the believer 'knows' that his or her God exists and then afterwards



finds the 'rational' justification for this belief. In other words, we like *Columbo* in so small part because we want our hunches about life and its meaning to be true and the series appears to reassure us that they are.

The reality, of course, isn't like that at all. Hunches are no rational basis for any opinion. But it doesn't stop us. "What a man had rather were true he more readily believes", wrote Francis Bacon, and once the prejudice or preference sinks it, we then search for the evidence that supports it and ignore or downgrade any counter-evidence.

Religion and myth thrive on this Columbo defect. We want everything to turn out all right in the end; we want to establish ultimate justice; we want eternal happiness; we want to make sense of it all. So the mystery is solved: God is the answer. And before I end this discussion of the theological implications of *Columbo*, just one more thing... □



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