

Scene of the crime: Television's longing for justice

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

Recently I overheard a witty friend say that she didn't watch much television. "I'm not into forensics," she said.

She has a point. *CSI*; *CSI: Miami*; *CSI: NY*; *Bones*; *NCIS* and *Cold Case* are among the most popular shows on network TV, and all focus on homicide police and scientists with a formidable array of technology at their command. Week after week, they ingeniously wield DNA analysis (the Q-Tip industry could survive solely on mouth swabbings depicted in these shows), microscopic and assorted other technical examination of body tissue and skeletal parts, intricate ballistics, in-depth psychological profiling and so forth.

All of these shows also include numerous views of corpses at one or another stage of dissection. For column research, I popped in on *CSI* recently. In a scene that stretched at least five minutes, a coroner and another high-tech crime stopper held and scrutinized a piece of a victim's skull and brain as if it were a sizable wedge of cheese just sliced off and handed to them at the deli. All the while, the brain's owner lay stiff and chilled beside them on a stainless-steel table, with a third of the top of his head neatly sawed off at a diagonal. "The dead don't care," undertaker and poet Thomas Lynch has written. We hope.

One can find many more documentary-style forensics programs on cable television. What's going on? Does our culture have a bottomless hunger for forensics?

It is widely remarked that medical doctors and scientists are the high priests of our day. (*Time* magazine has replaced its religion section with a health section, breathlessly reporting the latest murmurings from Mayo Clinic or the *New England Journal of Medicine*.) We have distanced ourselves from the reality of our mortality. Whereas wakes were once held in the front parlors of homes, dead bodies are now held at a distance, in hospitals and funeral homes. Our forebears steadily if reluctantly stared death in the face. We focus on longevity.

We try to deny or at least ignore death. Nonetheless, it remains a stubborn and naggingly disturbing fact. Forensics TV provides a way to approach the fear and mystery of death. Armed with their dazzling chemistry and machinery, as well as their encyclopedic knowledge of flora, fauna, history, geology, anthropology and mythology, the forensic scientists are oracular. With their relentless, unerring methods, they pry open and expose the secrets of death. These sagacious uber-geeks learn—and reveal to us—just how someone died, how old they were, where he or she lived. They poke and prod through viscera and report drug and dietary habits. Examining skeletal deformation, they can determine that, in life, this corpse was a weightlifter. Death loses its mystery, and with its mystery, much of its power to frighten.

Into the bargain, the forensic oracles assure us that dead bodies are really not so scary. These high priests chase away ghosts or other unsettling possibilities by reducing corpses to objects for clinical examination and cool, academic discussion. As the TV characters so often assure themselves, and thus indirectly their viewers, a corpse is not a real person. It has assumed the status of meat or an inert object of curiosity. It need no more disturb us than a museum exhibition of an Indo-European skull or an Egyptian mummy.

But these fictional heroes are not simply detached scientists. They are passionate detectives. They honor the persons the corpses once were by seeking out and hunting down their killers. These televised priests are not able to assure people of postmortem rewards, but they do show how, even in a largely secular age, there can be such a thing as justice after death and a final reckoning for evil. That is no small hope.

So it seems that the burgeoning genre of forensics television series is more than a matter of gory titillation and casual sensationalism. These programs scratch at religious itches: they try to see beyond death and long for ultimate justice. The church may have more than a little to say on such subjects.