

'CSI' Creates New Detective Template

Like some rapidly mutating virus, a different kind of television detective is spreading over prime time — the white-coated forensic scientist, with his rubber gloves, his flashlight, his evidence-collecting Q-tips. First there was stolid and impassive Gil Grissom on the original "CSI," which had its premiere in October 2000. Two years later Grissom morphed into the craggier, more hyper Horatio Caine, on "CSI: Miami," and the Horatio Caine model has this season been refined into the sleeker, more mysterious Mack Taylor on "CSI: New York."

All three share the same DNA, however: At heart, they're lab rats. They solve crimes, but not in the old-fashioned way of rounding up suspects, checking with informants, and extracting confessions before the perps can lawyer up. They spend much of their time in the morgue, probing cadavers, or else they're peering at fingerprints and clothing scraps. They're always spraying Luminol and putting on colored goggles that enable them to see in a carpet sample or a strand of hair something that ordinary police work has missed. And they dominate the airwaves in a way that no previous TV detectives ever have: All three of these nerdy, splatter and fiber-obsessed men dominate their respective time slots.

CULTLIKE FOLLOWING

There's something cultlike about the CSI investigators. They worship rationality in a way that gets results but that may not be entirely healthy. About all three team leaders, and Mr. Grissom especially, there's a certain Sherlock Holmes quality — a hint of arrogance and a kind of intuitive brilliance that depends not just on the scientific method but also on sudden flashes of insight (derived, perhaps, from an unnatural understanding of the criminal mentality). And like Holmes, all three are loners, damaged goods. Even by the constricting standards of the one-hour self-contained police procedural, where the case comes first and personal details are doled out sparingly, if at all, these characters have no lives to speak of; human interaction, in fact, makes them faintly uneasy.

All three shows love the dramatic, Mr. Wizard aspect of lab work, and each is punctuated by eerie slow-mo close-ups of DNA strands unraveling, say, or corpuscles shooting through the bloodstream and projectiles penetrating brain tissue, but the shows also implicitly subscribe to the Dr. Frankenstein philosophy shared by struggling students in high school chem class: that to get A's in this stuff, you have to be a little, well, weird.

Anthony Zuicker, who originally

dreamed up "CSI," got the idea while watching a program about forensic detectives on the Discovery Channel. At the time, he was working as a tram operator, driving the route between the Mirage and Treasure Island hotels in Las Vegas, and he researched the show by hanging out with Daniel Holstein, who in real life is the senior crime-scene analyst there. Mr. Holstein, as it happens, was a high school buddy of Mr. Zuicker's, and he's famous for three things, Mr. Zuicker told me recently: He's phenomenal at picking winners in football, he's fascinated by maggots and he's always wheedling people for blood samples.

CREATING CHARACTER

Mr. Grissom, described in an early prospectus for the show as a cross between "Mr. Rogers and Bill Gates, but has the intelligence of Albert Einstein," was endowed with two of these three traits. Some of his other traits have come from the actor who plays him, William Petersen, who by all accounts has taken an unusually proprietary interest in the character.

Carol Mendelsohn, who, along with Mr. Zuicker and Mr. Donohue, runs the "CSI" franchise, says it was Mr. Petersen who insisted that Mr. Grissom be empathetic but aloof, a listener, and that he shouldn't always be right; and it is Mr. Petersen, presumably, who is most responsible for Mr. Grissom's detachment and singleness of focus (though perhaps not for his dalliance last season with Lady Heather, a heavy-breathing dominatrix).

"Grissom is a Hannibal who found a different outlet," Mr. Petersen told Playboy magazine last March, implying that under different circumstances the character might have become a Lecter-like serial killer. The same is true, one feels, about the Horatio Caine character in the Miami version; his interest in the crimes he solves is both so passionate and so cynical — he expects the worst of everyone — that he seems slightly deranged at times.

It's too soon to tell about the new guy in New York, Mack Taylor. On the one hand, he seems too good, too sweet-natured to be, like the others, the flip side of a criminal or a monster; on the other hand, like Mr. Grissom and Mr. Caine, he really enjoys his time in the morgue. These guys love cadavers, especially ones with exit wounds or lividity slats and, indeed, all three shows manifest a kind of interest in, and even reverence for, the deceased that's unusual on TV, where the discovery of a corpse is typically just a starting point. On the "CSI" shows, finding out what caused the death and how — completing the victim's story, so to speak, and putting it to rest — is typically more important than apprehending whoever was responsible.