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Riffing on Crime TV: Without a Trace

Sr. Rose Pacatte | May. 26, 2009 NCR Today

When CBS cancelled the popular Without a Trace on May 19, I was disappointed.

I have been a fan of the show since it first aired in 2002. The story of a fictitious FBI missing-persons unit based in New York., it stars an international and multi-cultural cast, all with American accents: Aussie Anthony LaPaglia, Poppy Montgomery, Briton Marianne Jean-Baptiste, Enrique Murciano and Eric Close. An industry friend told me that a show?s quality is only one of several criteria (such as ratings) that decide the fate of a television show, and not the top one at that.

Because TNT bought the syndication rights in 2003, Without a Trace will continue in re-run purgatory, in an ongoing unending cycle of lost and found.
Now we won?t have the opportunity to accompany this lost sheep squad as they search for the vanished on New York?s streets, just as the characters search for themselves. There?s more bad news. Catholics in Media Associates [1]in Los Angeles, of which I am a member, gave it an award this year continuing a Sports Illustrated-like cover curse of a quasi-assured demise. (We also awarded Joan of Arcadia, Seventh Heaven, American Dreams that were cancelled shortly after we recognized them for their ability to uplift the human spirit.)

Between network and cable, new episodes or re-runs, FBI, city and military cops, there are more than fifty crime shows on television in any given week. New versions always seem to be in development. Dick Wolf?s criminal justice Law & Order and Jerry Bruckheimer?s CSI franchises are a nest of golden eggs. Reality crime shows such as CBS? 48 Hours reminds me of the detective magazines my grandfather used to read (my grandmother read movie star magazines.)

Why are we fascinated by crime television? When I lived in the UK (1993-1995) the British police procedural The Bill, on the air regularly since 1984, was the most popular show among male adolescents in custody. The explanation for this was because of the high profile of police in their lives. (The Bill is a slang term for police.) The half-hour series continues to air twice weekly today.

It is true that the United States has more prisoners than any other country in the world but does this account for the general appeal of such programming?
No one knows the compound effect of viewing so much violence on the audience because it is impossible to quantify the meaning that people make from what they watch, read, or listen to. Perhaps because the stories are told in the context of justice and truth, mixed with revenge and other expressions of the seven deadly sins, well-adjusted viewers aren?t bothered. Instead their moral imaginations are engaged and they are entertained. (But who is responsible for those who are not well adjusted?)

Murder and vice, the scales of justice, instant DNA results, the search for truth: is there a transcendent quality to how we make meaning from these shows? Is this what keeps us coming back for more?

A filmmaker friend of mine recently told me that he defines spirituality as the search for truth.

Without a Trace showed a crime-fighting agency capable of benevolence.
Benevolence and the search for truth, for meaning, are fine qualities for a television show.

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[1] http://www.CatholicsInMedia.org