

## Prologue

### HUMBLE ORIGINS AND DOGGED RETURNS

If there's one thing worse than a television lady who thinks she knows everything, it's a television lady who knows everything.

—The “Technical Director” in “Make Me a Perfect Murder”

*Columbo* essentially premiered on television three times. Given the eponymous detective's signature line, “just one more thing,” these repeated returns seem oddly appropriate. Its first iteration was a 1960 “live” teleplay written by Richard Levinson and William Link entitled “Enough Rope,” which appeared as part of *The Chevy Mystery Show* (July 31, 1960).<sup>1</sup> It starred Burt Freed as the detective Lt. Columbo, a New York City working-class police officer up against a wealthy psychologist who has killed his wife. The plot goes as follows: Dr. Roy Flemming (Richard Carlson) and his wife, Claire (played to shrill effect by Barbara Stuart), are preparing to embark on a vacation to Canada, but the doctor strangles his wife and stages a robbery to cover his crime. He enlists one of his patients, who is also his paramour, to play the role of his wife at the airport and on the plane; they stage a fight before the flight takes off, and she leaves in a huff, to ensure that the “wife” is witnessed as having returned home when the husband is already on his way to Canada. Thus, the alibi and timing of the wife's murder appear to be established, and the doctor disposes of the “stolen” property from their New York apartment while away in order to maintain the ruse. When

he returns home, Lt. Columbo is on the scene, and the episode proceeds as the detective attempts to prove how the psychiatrist covered his crime. This structure—whereby the crime is committed at the beginning, and the detective needs only to prove what we, the audience, and seemingly he already know—is the model that (nearly) all future iterations will follow.

Levinson and Link rewrote “Enough Rope” to become a theatrical play called *Prescription: Murder*. It premiered in San Francisco on January 20, 1962, with Joseph Cotten as the murderer, Agnes Moorehead as his victim, and Thomas Mitchell as Lieutenant Columbo. After a successful run, Levinson and Link adapted the play in turn as a made-for-television movie on NBC in 1968 now starring Peter Falk in the lead role and with the same title as the play. In this iteration, *Prescription: Murder* (0:0; Feb. 20, 1968), the setting had moved to Los Angeles, with the vacation/alibi now pertaining to Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Aside from the change in locales, the plot was basically the same as the original teleplay, but the character of the detective himself was further developed in both the play and the subsequent adaptation into a made-for-television movie. Indeed, the context of the murderer’s profession—psychiatry—enables this development, as both the detective and the murderer comment on his personality, fleshing him out into the character we will come to know over the run of the series.<sup>3</sup>

After the successful airing of *Prescription: Murder*, NBC invited creators Levinson and Link to produce a regular television series, but, at the time, Peter Falk was uninterested in headlining another TV show; he not only had recently played the titular character in *Trials of O’Brien* for a single season in 1965–66, but also had begun a collaborative relationship with John Cassavetes after working with him in the film *Husbands* (released in 1970). NBC thus developed a “wheel” series to accommodate the creators and the actor, as it was a format that rotated between different regular programs, each appearing for varying numbers of episodes. The network based the format on similar successes such as *The Name of the Game* (running from 1968 to 1971, it rotated between characters who all worked in the same publishing house), *The Bold Ones* (running from 1969 to 1973, it had four subseries in rotation, each focused on a different occupation), and *Four in One*

(running from 1970 to 1971, it was even more varied than its precursors by occupation and genre). The network's new incarnation was *The NBC Mystery Movie*, which aired Sunday nights and included the additional mystery series *McMillan & Wife* and *McCloud* (the latter of which had previously been part of *Four in One*) and later expanded to another iteration on Wednesday nights.

*Columbo* thus premiered, yet again, in March 1971 with the now-pilot episode "Ransom for a Dead Man" (0:1; March 1, 1971; written and produced by Dean Hargrove); it then began its regular season as part of *The NBC Mystery Movie* in September of the same year with the episode "Murder by the Book" (1:1; Sept. 15, 1971). It ran as part of the NBC lineup for seven seasons. The most successful of all the series in rotation, it regularly made the no. 1 spot in ratings, earning Falk three Emmy Awards (in 1972, 1975, and 1976) and the writing team one (for "Death Lends a Hand" [1:2; Oct. 6, 1971]).<sup>4</sup> It also won a series of other Emmy Awards for cinematography, editing, and guest appearances, as well as the award for Outstanding Limited Series in 1974, and it received a regular slew of nominations for its entire original run. The series won a Golden Globe for Best Drama in 1973, and Falk won the Golden Globe for Best TV Actor the same year.<sup>5</sup> During this highly successful run, between three and eight original episodes were broadcast each year of its seven seasons, with a total of forty-four episodes overall.

During the first few years on the air, the series helped to launch and foster the careers of a number of significant television writers and directors. Before going on to create his own successful crime and legal series like *Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law*, *Murder One*, and *NYPD Blue*, Steven Bochco penned seven episodes, including "Murder by the Book," which was directed by Steven Spielberg, a Universal regular at the time; Bochco was also employed as the story editor for the first season. Stephen J. Cannell worked on the series early on before he created his own series (*The Rockford Files*, featuring another charming 1970s detective), as did Dean Hargrove (the showrunner for several seasons, who later created US cozies like *Father Dowling Mysteries* and *Matlock*), Roland Kibbee (who executive-produced alongside Hargrove for most of seasons 3 and 4), and Peter S. Fischer (who cocreated *Murder, She Wrote* with Levinson and Link and went on to executive-produce the Angela Lans-

bury series).<sup>6</sup> Some of the writers were already television veterans, such as Hargrove, Kibbee, and Jackson Gillis, the latter of whom was also a longtime writer of *Perry Mason*. Many of the formative writers of the first several years had moved on to various other projects by the final two seasons, though the series did showcase the directorial work of semiregular Patrick McGoochan in the fifth season and future filmmaker Jonathan Demme in the last season.<sup>7</sup> These final two seasons demonstrate, then, both another beginning and its multiple endings. In fact, the chaotic “Last Salute to the Commodore” (5:6; May 2, 1976), directed by McGoochan in the fifth season, was originally slated to be the last episode, concluding with the lieutenant in a small boat in the Los Angeles harbor, rowing away from the scene of both the crime and his solution. The actual final episode of its original run, “The Conspirators” (7:5; May 13, 1978), reorients that previous ending in grander scope: here the detective remains on land while hailing a ship through the Coast Guard before it can disappear with the murder weapon on board.

Complicating its beginnings and its endings, *Columbo* and “Columbo” have reappeared in various forms since the original series. In 1989 *Columbo* was back on television, this time on ABC, as an ongoing but irregular two-hour movie series; between its first showing in 1989 and 2003, twenty-four new episodes ran, with Falk as a primary producer. Richard Levinson had passed away in 1987, and William Link was a supervising producer only for nine episodes, until 1990, when Falk largely took the reins. While five episodes of this reboot were penned by original writers for the series, overall the production team of the original was not intact; therefore, while it followed the basic formula, it was largely driven by the character rather than the narrative and visual style, with much of the authority on set coming from Falk himself. Two final reappearances of the detective as a crime solver followed: in 2010, Link published a collection of stories of new mysteries for the detective at the same time that the original play, *Prescription: Murder*, enjoyed a revival. And in countless other television series—such as *Monk*, when a character played by Gena Rowlands compares Adrian Monk to the lieutenant, or Hallmark’s *Flower Shop Mysteries*, when the

amateur sleuth Abby Knight (Brooke Shields) makes a brief distinction between bingeing *Columbo* and *Murder, She Wrote* (two series that regularly reran on the Hallmark Movies & Mysteries Channel, after all)—the character is invoked time and time again. In 2023, the series *Pokerface* was introduced, and was widely recognized as an homage to *Columbo* and other 1970s series. And *Columbo*'s influence has spread beyond television: the “*Columbo* technique” became a mode of police and psychiatric training.<sup>8</sup>

Given the local networks that have broadcast it over time, in syndication both in the United States and throughout the globe, the series has appeared on more channels than one can count. It was the first US series to air in China after an embargo on importation of American television was lifted, and it was said to be Queen Elizabeth's favorite series in the 1970s. Since the 1990s, it has also been a staple of cable channels such as A&E, Bravo, COZI, the Hallmark Movies & Mysteries Channel, ME, and Sundance. In the twenty-first century, it has appeared on various streaming platforms from Netflix to IMDb/Amazon/Freevee to YouTube to NBC's Peacock channel. Attesting to the series' and the star's international popularity, upon Peter Falk's death in 2011, obituaries were printed all over the world.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the first full season, *Columbo* appeared again in the news in the form of tributes and nostalgic references.<sup>10</sup>

The very nature of *Columbo*'s run between 1960 and 2003 signals not just its popularity but also its tenacity; through its repeated returns to television, the series itself operated not unlike its own lead. As the detective invariably uttered “just one more thing” to the murderers at the precise moment they thought they were rid of him, this phrase could also describe the series' unwillingness to go away. But not that we would want it to: the rumpled detective and the easygoing narrative format—revealing to the audience the killer from the start, so that our own work is mainly to *watch*, reveling in the solution that we already know is coming—offer us a level of both comfort and satisfaction as viewers. In fact, essentially knowing the outcome from the beginning enables one to watch each episode over and again, as we are never just watching for the “whodunit.” The series, like its lead character, makes

for easy company, and opportunities to view it across cable television and streaming platforms make for easy access.

More than perhaps any other television series in my life—and, believe me, there have been many—*Columbo* has proved to be my most steadfast companion. When I was a young kid in the 1970s, my family regularly watched three television series as a unit: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show* on Saturday nights and, on Sundays, *The NBC Mystery Movie*. As with the majority of American viewers of the program, *Columbo* was my favorite. Taking a page from the detective himself, I am dogged in my returns to the series. As a viewer over decades, my experience with the series is a means of telling my own history (where I lived, with whom, and even what couch I owned), and it's also a means of telling a history of changing televisual access and technological forms. Thus, when I moved to New York City after college, my roommate and I happily discovered it in syndication on Sunday afternoons on the local WWOR station. As a graduate student in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I watched it regularly on the A&E cable network, sometimes daily. When I moved to Santa Cruz, California, I would look for it on Bravo and the Hallmark Channel in the first decade of the twentieth century. And when I went east to Massachusetts ten years later, I found it on the streaming platforms Netflix, YouTube, IMDb, and Peacock. Even more specific instances and devices—old and new—are linked to this series for me. The episode entitled “A Stitch in Crime” (2:6; Feb. 11, 1973) was one of the first two recordings I made when I got TiVo in November 2004. I bought my first video iPod principally to transfer episodes of the series to take with me to Paris in 2008 (where I also found DVDs of its various seasons at the Les Halles media library in 2009). Driving across the country in the summer of 2013, I landed in a motel in Columbia, Missouri: after a particularly arduous day, I found an episode waiting for me on the ME network when I flipped on the television. The persistent appearance of a series like *Columbo* across both new and old media is itself suggestive of the ways in which the medium has and hasn't entirely transformed, even if, increasingly, new devices and new means of viewing enable viewers to deny that they are, in fact, watching “television.”

Inevitably, when I first learned about the opportunity to write an academic book on the series, I was eager to put all of my own viewing

history to work. But “*Columbo* and work” also seems a funny sort of combination, given the love I’ve had for the show since I was so very young. At the same time, I am the first to insist that we write about those things that move us—those things that we care deeply about—while also maintaining an investigatory eye. Not uncoincidentally, for me the very ability to analyze the series and television as an intertextual system comes from *Columbo* itself. And this is, perhaps, partly why I love it.