

# The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel

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New York City, perhaps more than any other place on earth, harbors large pockets of people who brag about being too busy to watch TV. Many of them are lying—at least a little. On average, 54.4 million Americans tune in every night, remember. Some of them are even card-carrying intellectuals who, if they haven't graduated yet to a 60-inch screen with wall projection and Dolby sound, nevertheless keep a little cable-ready Sony wedged up there in the bookcase, next to Rilke and Heidegger. If you're telling the truth, though—if you *really* haven't looked lately—you should give it another chance. You're missing out on something. TV is actually enjoying a sort of golden age—it has become a medium you can consistently rely on not just for distraction but for enlightenment.

I should quickly explain here that by TV I don't mean all TV, or even most of it. I don't mean the tabloid exposés of Sally, Ricki, Geraldo and the rest. I don't mean the sitcoms, which, with a few exceptions like "Home Improvement," seem increasingly devoted to the theme of dysfunction and to be stuck on the premise of cramming as many unlike people as possible into a single household. I don't mean the prime-time soaps, like "Melrose Place" and "Beverly Hills 90210," though I watch them faithfully.

And I especially don't mean highbrow TV like "Masterpiece Theater," with its attempts to translate three-decker Victorian novels onto the tube. As last season's "Martin Chuzzlewit" demonstrated—not to mention the disas-

trous "Middlemarch" of the season before—TV, no matter how well intentioned or generously budgeted, probably isn't capable of successfully dramatizing such large-scale literary creations, at least not in just a few hourly installments. In the case of "Chuzzlewit," great chunks of the plot fell out, and the characters, even one-dimensional types like Pecksniff, turned into caricatures of themselves; it was Dickens's illustrator, Cruikshank, rather than Dickens himself, who became the real inspiration for the series. George Eliot fared even worse. What disappeared in Andrew Davies's TV adaptation of "Middlemarch" was not just the usual "complexity" but politics (one of the big themes in the novel) and—astonishingly—sex. Rosamond became a simp, not a predator, and Casaubon was so desiccated in Patrick Malahide's characterization that his slimy reptilian side—the side that was interested in Dorothea for more than just her footnoting ability—was all but lost sight of.

The TV shows I have in mind are the weekly network dramatic series. These shows are flourishing in a way that they haven't since the very early days of the medium, and have grown in depth and sophistication into what might be thought of as a brand-new genre: call it the prime-time novel.

To watch network TV still requires a fair amount of patience. Even when you tune in to the best shows you have to endure the constant onslaught of commercial interruptions, and commercials, it has to be said, have not improved over the years. (It helps if you picked up the television habit back in your childhood, during those blissful, cartoon-saturated Saturday mornings spent in front of the old cathode-ray-tubed RCA, while your mother banged the vacuum around your feet and sighed about all the fresh air you were missing—you learned how to tune out.) Yet for all its commercialism, network TV now is less under the thumb of the money men than either the movies or the Broadway theater, if only because with any given episode there's so much less at stake financially. TV, as a result, is frequently more daring and less formulaic than either the stage or the big screen, both of which have to make back huge investments very quickly. Television can afford to take chances, and often enough it does. And TV of late has, ironically, become much more of a writer's medium than either movies or Broadway, which are more and more preoccupied with delivering spectacle of one kind or another. (TV is more of a writer's medium than a lot of magazines, for that matter.)

This state of affairs has come about not through any great wisdom or cultural aspirations on the part of the executives who run the networks—these people have M.B.A.'s, after all, not degrees in comp lit. It has happened, rather, because of the very nature of the medium (spectacle doesn't show up well on the small screen, and it's too expensive anyway) and because of the almost accidental fact that the people who create and who produce most shows are also the people who write them, or else they're former writers. In any case, it's generally the writers, not the directors or the editors, who have the final cut. Think of what Hollywood would be like if the novelist Richard Price, say, got to tell Spike Lee what to do.

TV will never be better than reading, thank goodness. It's hard to imagine a tube, however small, that could approximate the convenience and

portability—the companionability—of a book. And images and spoken words, no matter how eloquent, lack the suggestiveness, the invitation to something deeper, of words on a page. But on television these days, if you listen hard enough, you can often hear dialogue of writerly quality—dialogue, that is, that's good enough to be in a book. And there are ways in which TV has actually taken over some of the roles that books used to fill. A few of the more inventive TV series, for example, have become for our era the equivalent of the serial novel, unfolding epic stories installment by installment, and sweeping all of us up in shared anxiety and in a lot of group sighing and head shaking over what fate or (it's the same thing) the author has in store.

TV drama is also one of the few remaining art forms to continue the tradition of classic American realism, the realism of Dreiser and Hopper: the painstaking, almost literal examination of middle- and working-class lives in the conviction that truth resides less in ideas than in details closely observed. More than many novels, TV tells us how we live now.

Much of the TV drama I'm talking about—shows like "E.R.," "Chicago Hope," "Homicide: Life on the Streets," "N.Y.P.D. Blue," "Law and Order," "Picket Fences" and the lamentably canceled "My So-Called Life"—is rooted in the formulas set down in the earliest days of the medium: the cop show, for example, or the doc show. The first generation of great TV writers, the Gore Vidals and Paddy Chayefskys, consciously based their work on literary models, and on classical dramatic principles in particular. The current generation is no less literary ("Homicide"'s Henry Bromell used to write short stories for *The New Yorker*), but to a considerable extent the best new shows owe their form and content to nothing other than TV itself. You could make a case, I suppose, that the great innovation of contemporary TV—the device, first used by "Hill Street Blues" in 1981, of telling several stories at once—was inspired at least in part by Elmer Rice's 1929 play, "Street Scene," which simultaneously told the stories that unfolded in a single day in the life of several families living in a New York tenement. You could also argue, much more convincingly, that some of the better writing on the good shows now could never have happened without the example of novelists like Elmore Leonard and George V. Higgins. The real influence, however, is simply earlier cop and doc shows like "Naked City" and "Ben Casey," whose tricks the latest crop of writers have borrowed and whose formulas they've enriched and complicated. Many of these shows, in fact, work by combining several familiar TV genres: doc show plus soap opera, for example ("E.R."), or cops-and-robbers plus midlife-crisis comedy ("N.Y.P.D. Blue").

What's surprising is that by operating within the ancient conventions, and sometimes right at the very edges of them, these shows often manage a considerable degree of originality. And they frequently attain a kind of truthfulness, or social seriousness, that movies, in particular, seem to be shying away from these days. A TV executive I know is fond of pointing out that an issue-oriented film like "Silkwood" or "Norma Rae" could not be

made today, that nobody would finance such a project; his implication is that people who care about radiation and about the labor movement are now working for TV instead of for Hollywood. In truth, TV might not make "Silkwood" or "Norma Rae" either, and yet in some series characters like Norma Rae and Karen Silkwood would not seem the least out of place.

Few shows have ever been as issue-oriented as "Law and Order" (NBC, Wednesday night). Its seriousness, in fact—its way of looking at contemporary issues from several sides at once—is what most recommends this program, which in other respects has an almost antediluvian quality. No jumpy, hand-held-camera shots, that is; no overlapping dialogue; no complicated ensemble plots. Each episode proceeds in a stately Aristotelian fashion, following the two-part formula invoked by the introductory voice-over: "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: the police, who investigate crime, and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories."

Apparently unburdened by personal lives, the detectives here (played by Jerry Orbach and Benjamin Bratt) wear nice suits and topcoats and drink their coffee out of mugs, not out of those Grecian-frieze paper cups that have become a signature detail on some of the hipper shows. And they go about their business in an efficient, bantering manner, an updated version of the style that prevailed on the old Jack Webb "Dragnet." The district attorneys, on the other hand (Jill Hennessy and a boyishly tousled Sam Waterston), quiver with conviction and with passion for justice, and have to be periodically brought to earth by an avuncular old counselor (Steven Hill).

What these characters (the lawyers especially) mostly do is talk. They talk about "perps" and victims and witnesses, naturally, but they also talk a lot about rights and about the system and about the urgent and sometimes unresolvable dilemmas that the writers send their way with such uncanny regularity. "Law and Order" depends on stories more than characters, and it's known in the industry for its speed in responding to real-life events and incorporating them into the show's plots; sometimes it takes as little as eight weeks for a script to be developed and to make its way onto the air. Last season alone there were stories involving abortion rights and affirmative action; a murder, very similar to a famous Westchester case, in which a young man, suffering an alcoholic blackout, killed two people he mistakenly took to be his parents, and the apprehension and conviction of a Katherine Ann Power-like fugitive (who, in a nice touch, was represented by William Kunstler himself, his shaggy gray locks streaming behind him and his glasses perched unslippably on that majestic furrowed dome). Still unresolved (though a solution has been promised this season) is a two-year-old murder case eerily reminiscent of the Malcolm X assassination. This one also includes characters modeled on Louis Farrakhan and Coretta Scott King. It has raised the specter of race riots in New York, and turns on the issue of a lone gunman versus a conspiracy of shooters. It has everything except the Michigan militia.

The very best of the TV dramas, however, aren't quite as earnest and explicit as "Law and Order" tends to be; they're informative in another, more

subliminal way. For instance, if you watch enough "E.R.," the hit show set in the busy emergency ward of a Chicago hospital (NBC, Thursday night), you can, without even knowing it, learn a lot about medicine. I'd like to think that in a personnel shortage I could pitch right in. Let's say you were to come speeding down the corridor right now on a gurney (the show does great gurney shots, tracking the ceiling lights overhead and the dramatic moment when those swinging double doors pop open), and let's say you were "presenting" with, oh, an aluminum rod sticking through your chest, the way one poor guy was in an episode directed last season by Quentin Tarantino. From hours of watching, I know that the first thing to do is to get a "line"—an IV—into you and to order up a 125-milligram Solumedrol push. And let's have, what the heck, 5 of morphine. That should make you feel better right away. (The best way to install a line, by the way, is to use a No. 16 needle; pull the skin tight, so the veins don't roll, and go in slow.)

All right, let's type and crossmatch, let's get a blood gas, and I want chest film. Come on, let's move! I can't remember whether it's the McGill forceps or the Foley catheter I'm supposed to use to remove the bar, but I'm not going to worry about that right now, because I've got a little problem here. Your B.P. is 50 over 30 and, oops, the monitor is starting to beep. Better give me some "epi," *stat*, and—sorry, I forgot to do this earlier—I've got to tube you and bag you so we can clear a passage and force a little air into your lungs. Oh *no!* You're flat-lining! Clear, everybody, I'm going to use the paddles! O.K., let's try that again! I'm charging. Now . . . clear! *Whap!* Nothing? All right, all right—I'm going in! I'm just going to make a little incision here, and I'm going to spread a couple of ribs, and I'm going to massage your heart. Nothing to it—I do this all the time. . . .

Well, you get the idea. You'll be going home, by the way, in less than an hour. Though "E.R." follows the "Hill Street"-honed formula of overlapping several self-contained plots with one or more longer-running stories that take several weeks to unfold, it somehow manages a nearly opposite effect with time. Instead of slowing TV time down, as "Hill Street" did, and making it resemble novelistic time, a typical episode of "E.R." crams into 48 minutes so much incident and so many people that the effect is a kind of hyper-reality, an adrenaline rush. "E.R." has lots of compelling characters: Dr. Benton, the intense, dignified black surgeon who can cure everything, it seems, except his own inner hurt; Dr. Greene, the sensitive resident whose marriage is falling apart and whose career suddenly looked bleak after he botched a delivery; Dr. Ross, the womanizing pediatrician; Nurse Hathaway, troubled and depressed and for a while sneaking too many pills from the drug cabinet. But mostly we get to know them not, as on the old "St. Elsewhere"—which used to be *the* state-of-the-art medical drama—by spending a lot of quality time, so to speak, hanging out with them, but, rather, by catching up with them in snatches as they race from one crisis to the next. The result, often, is a kind of intensity delivered on the run.

A small episode in last season's finale, involving an end-stage AIDS patient, his mother and his lover, and their letting him go, can't have taken

up more than a few minutes of air time; yet in its brevity and directness, and in the honesty of its details, it was a more affecting evocation of the AIDS crisis than Jonathan Demme's overblown "Philadelphia," say. Its power came from the fact that this little moment happened in the middle of a lot of other moments—almost as in life. Similarly, a brief, silent stretch at the end of the botched-delivery episode, when Dr. Greene, exhausted, fighting tears, rides the El home in a cold winter dawn, achieved a remarkably understated eloquence. The show has a knack for dramatizing private moments—for sneaking up on them when both we and the characters are most worn down and vulnerable.

But the real reason for "E.R."s success, I think, is that it recognizes that such private moments are so few and so hasty, and that most of us are overinvolved in an activity that has traditionally been given short shrift on TV, and in print and on the movie screen as well. I mean work, of course. In movies these days, if people have jobs at all it's in fields like architecture or publishing—professions, it would seem, that don't demand you do very much. In contemporary American novels, what people mostly do, besides sort out their relationships, is write or teach. Not the least of the qualities recommending Richard Ford's new novel, "Independence Day," is that, for a change, the protagonist actually goes to the office every day and toils at an ordinary middle-class desk job—or desk-and-car job. (He's a real-estate agent.)

Work, along with class, has somehow become an overlooked little secret in a lot of American art, popular or high, something to be avoided or ignored. Robert Benton's "Nobody's Fool" is one of the few recent Hollywood movies with a working-class theme, and though it was in many ways a careful and thoughtful effort, by casting Paul Newman as the story's hero, a hard-drinking underemployed construction worker, it inevitably invested blue-collar life with a sheen of glamour. Newman's work clothes looked like something he had ordered from the Land's End catalogue.

TV sitcoms like "Roseanne" and "Married With Children" have lately embraced both work and class, offering us a raucous, newly liberated view of blue-collar family life. But shows like "E.R." have gone one step further. They've remembered that for a lot of us work is where we live most of the time; that, like it or not, our job relationships are often as intimate as our family relationships, and that work is often where we invest most of our emotional energy. Even if we don't work in hospitals or in station houses, we can recognize these TV workplaces as being very similar to our own—with their annoyances and reassuring rituals, crises and the endless time between filled with talk of everything and nothing.

The workplace where I've found myself most at home lately—after my day job, that is—is the 15th Precinct, the home of "N.Y.P.D. Blue," the Emmy winner created by Steven Bochco and David Milch, who also worked together on "Hill Street Blues." (Bochco, now the chief guru of TV drama, has to his own credit such ground-breaking shows as "Doogie Howser, M.D." and "L.A. Law," not to mention the short-lived turkey "Bay City

Blues" and the unspeakable "Cop Rock.") "N.Y.P.D. Blue" (ABC, Tuesday night) is filmed almost entirely in Hollywood, but by using some well-chosen New York City exteriors and just a few station-house sets—a poorly lighted stairwell, a squad room, a room where suspects are interviewed and a dingy men's room (where many of the most intimate and revealing scenes take place)—the show has managed to evoke the authentic look and feel of New York and its police force.

"N.Y.P.D. Blue" is full of cases, many of them based on the recollections of Bill Clark, a retired New York City detective who works as a consultant on the program and has also collaborated with Milch on a book about the series' beginnings. The show has perfected the old "Hill Street" formula of braiding into one 48-minute installment one or two self-contained subplots and a longer story that may take several episodes to unfold, so that the viewer is simultaneously satisfied and left hanging. In any given week the show overflows with narrative—stories about "skels," "mungo guys," junkies, rapists and thieves, and about the private lives of the cops who pursue them.

It is not plot, however, that drives the show as much as it is characters, in particular Andy Sipowicz, the bald, thick-chested, volatile but repressed detective who, in Dennis Franz's masterly portrayal, has invested both the wisecrack and the slow burn with a rare kind of eloquence. Franz, it should be noted, is not exactly breaking new ground here: this is the 27th time he has played a cop. According to Milch, everyone on the set marvels at how little he needs to prepare for his scenes, how he never has to think about them. Effortlessness, or the appearance of effortlessness, is actually a hallmark of the best TV acting, as opposed to movie acting, in which so often we're meant to see (or, at any rate, are never allowed to forget) the personality of the actor underneath the role. Think of Meryl Streep in just about any of her pictures or, at another extreme, Bruce Willis in just about any of his. Franz *is* Sipowicz, and the difference is that TV allows him to inhabit the role in ways that the big screen would not—in dozens and dozens of small moments, for example, and by reacting to other characters as well as by being the focus of a scene. Sometimes, for minutes on end, all he does is *listen*—in anger or disbelief or with enormous weariness. The difference, in its way, is as great as the difference between screen acting and stage acting.

Over the last two years, I've come to think of Andy almost as a friend—someone I know nearly as well as the people I actually work with, somebody I can count on. But his character's centrality hasn't always been so clear. In the first season it was Sipowicz's sidekick, John Kelly, the straight-shooting heartthrob played by the orange-haired David Caruso, who commanded most of the attention. And when, at the end of that year, Caruso and the producers parted over a contract dispute, a lot of viewers feared that the show's chemistry would be irreparably altered.

From Milch's book, "True Blue: The Real Stories Behind N.Y.P.D. Blue," it emerges that, in fact, he, Bochco and virtually everyone in the cast were glad to be rid of Caruso, who had become a prima donna. It also turns

out that Jimmy Smits, who replaced Caruso, had been Bochco's first choice all along. In any event, we needn't have worried, though the show cleverly toyed with our anxieties by incorporating them into the plot of last season's premiere: Sipowicz immediately began to protest to Lieutenant Fancy, the boss of the 15th, that he and his new partner would never get along. "Don't get me started," he says at one point, explaining what's wrong with the new guy. "It's a whole attitude. 'How you doin'?'—this type of thing."

The matter began to be resolved in a conversation about pets, of all things—one of those dialogues that "N.Y.P.D. Blue" does with such ease and confidence, in which the writers seem, without stepping out of character, to be winking slightly at the viewer, as if to say, "Don't miss this!" Sipowicz's new partner, Detective Bobby Simone (Smits), whom we have discovered to be the sensitive-loner type, talks about his racing pigeons and their ability to find their way home across long distances. Sipowicz, who raises tropical fish, says: "I got a clown-fish couple just had eggs. In the morning while I'm having coffee, that male cleans each egg with his mouth. He never breaks one. The whole day while I'm working, him and his wife guard that nest and fan water over their eggs." He pauses and looks at Simone. "Those are dedicated fish. You see that kind of thing in pigeons?"

What makes Sipowicz so affecting—and so funny—is not just his lumbering dignity but the fact that we have seen him change. Down a long corridor of Tuesday nights, we've watched him struggle with the bottle, with rage (especially in cases involving children) and with his own barely concealed racism and homophobia. We've seen him make peace with his estranged son, and we've seen him, with agonizing slowness and one terrifying drunken slip-up, fall in love with, move in with, and even propose to and marry, Sylvia Costas, the long-suffering assistant district attorney whom he insulted in the show's very first episode after she failed to convict a mobster he had arrested and then implied that the problem, in part, was that Sipowicz had lied on the stand. (When she upbraids him, his response is to grab his crotch.)

And it's not just Sipowicz who changes, of course. Detective Medavoy, a bundle of nerdish anxieties, becomes, after an uncharacteristic moment of boldness, more and more silent, flushed and awkwardly neurotic, and eventually blows his romance with the sultry but bighearted station-house receptionist, Miss Abandando. Detective Martinez, the young rookie, screws up his courage over an entire season and is eventually rewarded by getting a date with Detective Lesniak. Lieutenant Fancy and his younger brother, who are black, quarrel and then reconcile over the issue of how best to get along in a police force run by white folks.

All these alterations, some great, some small, happen incrementally, over weeks of episodes—the way such things happen in life, and not the way they typically happen in movies, for example, or even in books. To think of a character in recent American fiction who actually evolves this way—who ages and changes before our eyes—you may have to go back to Harry Angstrom, in Updike's "Rabbit" novels. In so many contemporary books,

you get just a few days or weeks in the lives of the characters, or a year or two at most. There isn't room enough for a whole lot to happen.

Milch, who as an undergraduate at Yale studied writing with Robert Penn Warren, has said on several occasions that Warren's greatest lesson was that the secret subject of any story is what we learn, or fail to learn, over time. And it's time—hours and hours of it, stretched out over a 22-week season—that is both the great advantage of "N.Y.P.D. Blue" (compared with the two or three hours at most that are available to plays or to movies) and its great discovery. The show uses time the way serial novels used to, incorporating the intervals between installments, and the tension between what we've learned and what we fear or hope, into the experience of the story itself.

I had several morning-after conversations last year with a friend of mine, another faithful viewer, about whether or not Simone's new girlfriend, Detective Russell, was a secret alcoholic—discussions not dissimilar, I imagine, to the ones serial readers must have had in 1841 while they waited for the news about what had happened to Dickens's Little Nell.

The first time they met, didn't she have a wine cooler with lunch?

Yes, but if she were a man would you have even noticed? Why can't a woman have a drink on TV without everyone's suspecting something?

All right, then why is she always going into the bathroom and locking the door? Answer that. *Sipowicz* thinks she has a problem.

Sipowicz is in A.A., remember? People in A.A. think everybody is a drunk.

Like most people—like Bobby Simone himself, in fact—I guessed the truth a week or two before I knew it for certain, and the slow unraveling only served to heighten the poignancy.

The other trick "N.Y.P.D. Blue" may have learned from the serial novel, and from Dickens in particular, is that lesser characters can sometimes claim center stage without necessarily taking on new attributes. They can do it, in fact, by simply becoming truer to their limited natures, as happened last season with Medavoy and Abandando, who, as Milch says, took even the writers by surprise. Nobody was prepared for this unlikely romance, or for how low the self-immolating Medavoy would eventually sink. "N.Y.P.D. Blue" has erased some of the traditional boundaries between subplot and main plot—the show is all one big plot that takes weeks and weeks to resolve—but it has also learned how to play characters who change against those who cannot. It has learned, in fact, a great Dickensian lesson: it is in the nature of adversity to turn most of us into caricatures.

"E.R." and "N.Y.P.D. Blue" are still TV shows, to be sure. People occasionally die on "E.R.," but more often they get better; in any case, few suffer much. The wards are always humming, the nurses and orderlies cheerful and polite. Nobody is seen paying a bill, or even filling out an insurance form, for that matter. And the cases on "N.Y.P.D. Blue" are almost always "cleared," as the cops say, and most often not by means of tedious, time-consuming legwork but, rather, by the much more efficient expedient of

picking up a couple of skulls and then playing good cop-bad cop with them until they break down and confess. I've never seen anybody on this show exercise his constitutional right and clam up until he can consult a lawyer.

It almost goes without saying that neither "E.R." nor "N.Y.P.D. Blue," for all their daring in other ways ("N.Y.P.D.," in particular, has repeatedly pushed the network censors way over the usual line when it comes to language and nudity), has dramatized one of the most basic and elemental acts of private life in America—namely, TV watching itself. Except for *Sipowicz* (who shoots the tube out one night in a drunken rage), nobody on these shows seems to even own a television set; I've never seen a character looking at one, not even the poor sick kids, bored silly, in the "E.R." children's ward. (They have to make do with Gameboys instead.)

The only way TV makes its presence known in these prime-time dramas is in the form of newspeople pushing their way into the station-house lobby or clamoring, vulturelike, outside the emergency-room entrance; in all of these confrontations, the camera is always seen as an antagonist, a disrupter of business and a falsifier of truth. In one episode of "Homicide: Life on the Street"—the innovative cop drama that the film director Barry Levinson is the co-producer of—the show's writers even experimented with the device of having obnoxious newscasters, with hand-held cameras, seem to waylay the characters with pointless questions between scenes.

The failure of TV drama to take itself into account is one of the great oddities of the medium. It's only on the comedies like "Roseanne" that the characters regularly do what the rest of us do: come home, give a quick wave to the spouse and the kids and then grab the newspaper to see what's on that night.

The most realistic TV family of all, of course, is Homer and Marge and the gang: the Simpsons, who not only put in hours in front of the tube, while pizza crusts and spent soda and beer cans mount up around them, but have formed most of their ideas about the world from what they see on television. TV may, in fact, be all that holds the Simpson family together.

Watching television is in many ways a private, solitary activity—almost like reading. But watching television is also what we do as a nation; millions and millions of us tune in together, like Homer and Marge, at the same time, to the same shows. Television is something, maybe the only thing, that all of us have in common. In my own case, I was never so grateful for TV as when, during a period in my life not long ago, I was working at a job that required me to spend 12 or 14 hours a day reading, or else talking to people about what they had written. By the time I got home, cranky and bleary-eyed, my wife and children were often asleep, but my faithful companion in the den never failed to brighten at my arrival. It gave me the news and the scores, sang all the new songs to me and generally kept me abreast of all the life I was missing. Most of all it told me stories. When I went back to work the next day I had something to talk about—how Andy was doing, whether Doc Greene and his wife would get back together—and I felt connected.

It's tempting to imagine a time when TV, which is one of the things routinely blamed for the breakup of the American family, could bring us all together again, the way it did a few years ago when we paused as a nation to consider who really killed J. R. TV could give us the news not just by reporting but by telling us even better, more affecting stories and by introducing us to richer, more complicated characters, about whom we could care even more deeply. It could happen.

But I'm not holding my breath. Like most viewers, I've been anxiously and hopefully watching the early installments of Bochco's new masterwork, "Murder One," which is supposed to be TV drama at its most artful yet. It's still too early to say for sure, but I already have glum forebodings. Taking on contemporary social issues is one thing, but do we really want to be reminded of the O.J. case for 18 more weeks?

And much about the show suggests that Bochco et al. may have entered a baroque, mannerist phase: the portentous, harpsichord-like theme song; the dark palette and Rembrandt-esque shadows; even Daniel Benzali, the show's star, who with his enormous smooth head resembles a kind of giant, middle-aged putto—a cherub grown old and overripe. "Murder One" raises the awful possibility that TV, without our even knowing it, may already have passed through its golden age and be embarked upon a descent into self-consciousness and affectation. Or, worse, that TV, if it's good, is good when nobody expects too much of it.