



The Drink Tank

The third of the Crime Fiction issues, and I'm excited! As I noted in one of my pieces, I read (well, listened to) a lot of Cozy Mysteries. I find them fun, and since they include food almost always, or at least all those I listened to did, it makes me happy.

Speaking of food and crime, my book, *Food and Crime*, comes out on July 27th in the UK! No word on US release, but you can get it from Amazon UK and even with shipping, it's not that bad!

I went to CostumeCon last weekend, and it was a blast! The kids got to meet Adam Savage, I got to MC a fashion show,

and we got the buffet for three for the price of 1/2! I'm happy for that! I miss cons, and this one was possible and comfortable because they had a real COVID policy that required Vaccination and Masking on-site. That was a very good thing. Got to see some folks I haven't seen in ages! The kids had a very good time too!

The next issue is dedicated to the film/television/cultural phenomena *What We Do in the Shadows*! May 25th is the deadline! After that, it's the Manhattan Project, and man there's gonna be some writin' there!

I also have to thank Henry Welch for giving me some amazing unused fan art he had from his days doing *The Knarley Knews*! It'll be popping up for a while, as there are a few hundred pieces! It seems appropriate that an entire envelope of Rotsler art like the one over there <— was the first I scanned and am using!

No WorldCon or NASFiC for me this year, though I'll be going to Hawaii with the family in mid-May, the kids will be turning 8, I'll be working on zines, zip-lining, watching Hawaiian TV, eating plate lunch, and sitting in the hot tub. You know, chillaxin'.

If you've got anything to say, send it to drinktankeditorial@gmail.com!



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Letter

Graded Mail

Sent to

DrinkTankEditorial@gmail.com

By our loyal readers

Let us begin with John Hertz from a good while back!

Dear Chris,

The Drink Tank 442.

In detective fiction, Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey stories and Stout's Nero Wolfe are first rate.

Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and Poe's stories, need no help from me.

Two of my best friends in fandom, June and Len Moffatt, both gone now, were big MacDonald fans.

Brother Serface's discussion of MacDonald's Travis McGee puzzles me. He seems to say McGee is "emotionally detached, a loner who needs no one and nothing other than his wits and his will". That's not the McGee of even one story. On the contrary.

Your Fan

John H.

What little I remember of my McGee reading is more in line with Chuck's take, I think. If I'm being honest, MacDonald's works often blend together for me.

I miss Len and June! I used to talk to them about mystery novels during my years of going to LosCon and whenever they'd show up at a WorldCon or WesterCon. I remember Len and I talking about Sherlock Holmes when we were first talking about the Holmes issue of Journey Planet

We need to do a Poe issue. I love Poe, and my kids, well JP, has several editions of Collected Poe works. He likes his darker works, but not so much 'murder stuff' as he called them.

Always good to hear from ya! I promise I won't take as long the next time we get a LoC from you. I've got a series of Vanamonde to make it through! Not until after I've gone through the Holier Than Thou and No Awards that Marty Cantor gave me and I'm reading in tribute after his passing.

And now a note from the incredible Steven H Silver!

John Lennon's Imagine: The Russian Pressing

Back when I wrote the Beatles article for *The Drink Tank* issue about that band, I was trying to find my Russian pressing of *Imagine*. I just found it when going through a box in the basement.

Note the blue disk is the actual record. The sleeve is just white.





Hard Case Crime

By Christopher J. Garcia

It was the early 2000s, Mickey Spillane was dead, and screen-reading was taking off like never before. I hadn't really been reading mysteries for a while, science-fiction was taking my time when I wasn't writing *The Drink Tank* issues, and my collecting was solidly the old Lazer Books with those amazing Kelly Freas covers. I'd gotten $\frac{3}{4}$ of them in the drawer of my dresser in the little apartment I had in Sunnyvale. I wasn't looking to get back into reading Sherlock Holmes or Mike Hammer again, but life has a way.

During this period, I took Evelyn to the Barnes & Noble on Stevens Creek, a few blocks from my apartment, the closest place to buy the manga she so loved. We parked close to the store, not handicapped-zone close, however, and walked in.

I walked; she darted.

Evelyn was out among the wild books before I had a chance to call after her, and I figured she'd be fine. I saw a rush of air filling the gaps behind her indicating she was heading towards the manga portion of the kids' section. I took a moment to myself and headed towards the magazines. The science-fiction section lay beyond.

I'm not sure why, but I turned down the mystery aisle first. It was two sections closer than the magazine racks, the prominent stain on the end cap from some incident months before indicating the one I always started with: *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, *Culture*, and *Poetry* all inhabiting the same rack somehow, as if they knew my completely obvious secret passions. As I walked the section, I saw three books next to one another, nearly identical cover designs, but each with magnetic, 1950s style cover art: *Grifter's Game* and *Fade to Blonde*. I knew the name Lawrence Block, and the other books looked like they fit. They reminded me of a few of my dad's old crime novels. I saw the spines of several more that were obviously in the same series. I grabbed two: *Straight Cut* by Madison Smart Bell and Donald Westlake's *361*.

I re-discovered Evelyn a little while later, a mound of half-read Japanese comics surrounding her, and we headed home. I know I cooked her dinner. I know I put her to bed, Gen was working late that time of year, but other than that, all I remember is that I began reading *Straight Cut* and absolutely could not put it down, which since has happened several times with Hard Case Crime novels. I read the two I had bought, and with my highly-used library card, I took out all five others they had at Santa Clara's Central library. *Bust*, *Fade to Blonde*, *Little Girl Lost*, *A Touch of Death*, and *The Gutter and the Grave*.

I devoured them.

Like every other thing I've fallen for, I headed into it hot-and-bothered for more. I was reading about two a week, a blistering pace for me. I would take a book with me to lunch, typically at the Carl Jr.'s on Middlefield in Mountain View, always getting the same thing: a Western Bacon Cheeseburger, hold the cheese, cross-cut fries and a Coke, and sitting in the same place, the last booth on the right nearest to the backdoor. I headed to Half-Price Books, to Recycle Bookstore, and to the used book place in Santa Clara that I can't remember the name of but that has gotten a lot of my money over the years. I soon had $\frac{3}{4}$ of those that they'd published and had read all but a few of the others from the library.

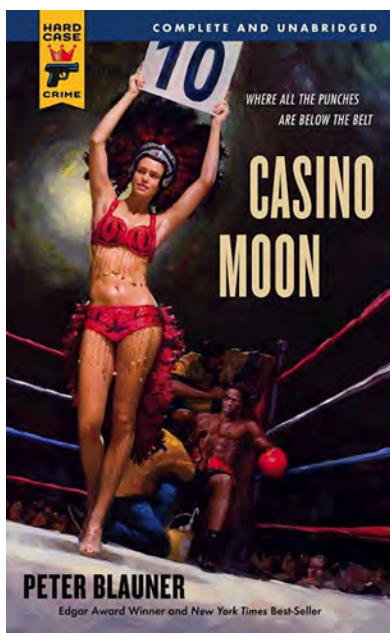
Hard Case Crime was born from the Internet. Charles Ardai loved reading mystery novels in high school. He also interned at *Asimov's*, oddly, perhaps showing a part of why I like the dude so much. He founded a company called Juno, an early email service, and ended up selling it in 2001, and then with the proceeds, he co-founded Hard Case Crime. The idea was to publish new voices that harkened back to the old-time, hard-boiled crime novels of the 50s and 60s, as well as re-publishing those very same novels. The result was a line of books, initially released about one a month, that allowed for incredible back-and-forth between the works. Sometimes, it was hard to tell which were new and which were old, though sometimes you could suss it out. The entire series was amazing, and even the books I didn't fall all over myself for ended up being worth reading, often more than once. They were all worth looking at; the covers were all in the mode of 1950s crime novels, sometimes from artists like Robert McGinnis who had done the original covers. These ended up being a true marker for the series.

The series has gone through a few publication deals, formats changed, and they branched out into comics as well.

The best of the series? Well, I've got a few that I count among my all-time faves.

***Somebody Owes Me Money* by Donald E. Westlake**

This one hits a field that I love: cabbie stories. It's the kind of literary narration that feels absolutely perfect for the character. The cabbie here, Chet Conway, is one of the most impressive characters in the entire series. It was amazing reading for a guy who always wanted to play the ponies and the dirty dealing. The impressive Michael Koelsch cover drew me in, and the writing didn't disappoint.



***Casino Moon* by Peter Blauner**

Ricky Mujica's cover is one of my all-time faves! It really sets the mood for this story that has a lot in common with one of the best films of the 1990s: *Diggstown*. THIS BOOK HAS EVERYTHING: boxing, gangsters, ring-card girls, Atlantic City, and a guy! It's a super-smart novel that feels like a classic. It actually won Blauner the Edgar for Best First Novel.

***Charlesgate Confidential* by Scott Von Doviak**

I bought this largely because I lived in the Charlesgate for two years in the early 90s, when it was an Emerson College dorm. The book is a fun little book that reads so easy it should be a scotch. Paul Mann's cover is just about the best of all the Hard Case covers, and the story of an art heist mixed with a reunion, all taking place in the hotel I once lived in (and yes, it is haunted), was so great!

***The Last Quarry* by Max Allan Collins**

The Quarry books are all magnificent, and this is my favorite of them. The way Collins jumps around in the releases, going backwards and forwards with each book and still managing to make the story of this incredibly talented hitman still feel like it has real stakes is an impressive task.

***Money Shot* by Christa Faust**

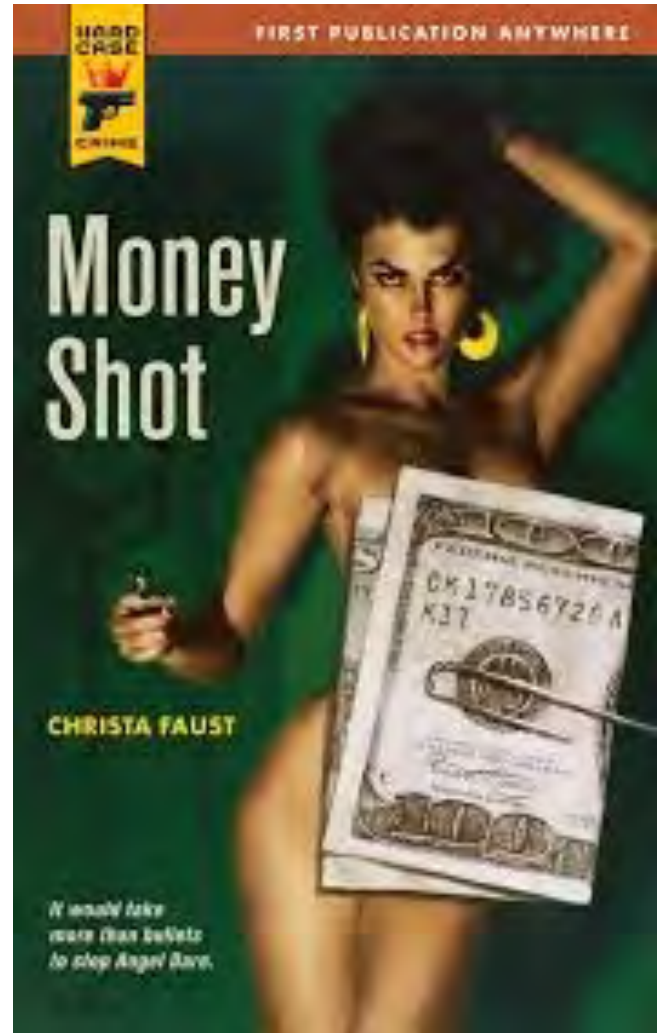
A story that largely takes place in and around the world of porn. Faust is as hard-boiled as they come. The Glen Orbik cover is one that's stuck in my mind. Faust writes incredibly well, and I first encountered her work in the 1990s book *Hoodtown*. I loved *Money Shot*, and I am pretty sure I've read it four or five times. Since.

***The Corpse Wore Pasties* by Jonny Porkpie**

This one was sheer perfection. The Burlesque Mayor of New York gives us a story set in that world, and it's every bit as fun as you'd think it would be. This is not burlesque fan service either; it's incredibly smart, well-paced writing.

***Memory* by Donald E. Westlake**

This is one of the most incredible crime novels ever written, and one that wasn't published until after Westlake's death. It's an amazing novel not about a crime, but about the aftereffects of a crime, an assault after Paul Cole was caught with a married woman. This is an incredible piece of writing, and a difficult one to write. It's so well done, and it's the kind of writing that you'll only see when a writer wants to explore the after instead of the during.







The Reckless Series by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips Reviewed by Chuck Surface

I first noticed Ed Brubaker during his *Captain America* period, when he and artist Steve Epting resurrected Bucky Barnes and transformed him into the wildly popular Winter Soldier. Never had the Red Skull been more menacing, and the overall espionage vibe the two generated for Cap and company changed the game. Then came *Velvet*, a complete stunner, and I felt that perhaps only Greg Rucka could step up so mightily at pursuing comic genres beyond capes and horror. Little did I know that Ed Brubaker also had been working with another artist, Sean Phillips, to produce superior crime comics. This discovery, then, was when I stepped up from Brubaker admirer to all-out fanboy.

Brubaker and Phillips first collaborated on *Scene of the Crime* (1999), a Vertigo series, before tackling *Gotham Noir*. The hits would keep coming with, in no order, *Sleeper*, *Kill or Be Killed*, *My Heroes Have Always Been Junkies*, *Fatale*, *Cruel Summer*, *The Fade Out*, *Pulp*, and *Criminal*. Not since the pre-code days of EC has crime been so popular in comics, thanks largely to Brubaker and Phillips. December 2020: the pair releases the first of what to date has become a five-volume series, each published in hardcopy format, a title that celebrates every aspect of noir fiction, whether televised or printed, that pushes the form to its limits. December 2020 found readers struggling through a pandemic but receiving great distraction from their woes with *Reckless* starring Ethan Reckless – broken, hellbent, and at times flatly out of control. For me, this was love at first sight.



In his novel *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Tom Robbins has his central character, Woodpecker, differentiate between criminals and outlaws: “The difference between a criminal and an outlaw is that while criminals frequently are victims, outlaws never are. Indeed, the first step toward becoming a true outlaw is the refusal to be victimized.” Ethan Reckless is no victim, but the criminals he faces are, thanks to him. Once an undercover FBI agent, Reckless had been playing the role of underground hippie, infiltrating a 1960s counter-culture group none too shy about planting bombs. One goes off, leaving Reckless with a facial scar and, although Brubaker never says so out loud, traumatic brain injury, since Reckless often describes his feelings as buried deep since the accident. Fast forward to the 1980s, the decade in which each of the five volumes takes place, and we find Reckless living in the El Ricardo theater, taking odd jobs that involve finding people, settling debts, unlicensed private-investigation, and often closing matters with a baseball bat, an ax, a shotgun, his fists, whatever’s handy. He’s enamored with justice, but his rules are his own. Work? When needed. Surfing? You bet. Hello, Mr. Outlaw.

If you're thinking about John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, you're not far off. McGee lives in a houseboat, *The Busted Flush*, an idiosyncratic abode, sure, and the El Ricardo certainly is an amplification of that trope. And McGee takes odd jobs, very odd jobs, exactly as does *Reckless*. You could also consider Jim Rockford living in that old trailer along the Malibu coast. How about *Mannix*, or Philip Marlowe, or Sam Spade, or hell even Robert McCall if only just a bit? The *Reckless* series taps into these tropes and more – never imitating outright but always illuminating what keeps enthusiasts like me coming back for more. On more than one occasion, I found myself reflecting, "Jim Thompson would love Brubaker and Phillips."

And you know what? So would Dorothy B. Hughes, because Anna, *Reckless*'s punk-rock themed partner, is an equal player well beyond *Mannix*'s Peggy or *Perry Mason*'s Della Street. She keeps *Reckless* even-keeled, and one volume features her pursuing a case while *Reckless* is otherwise engaged. No doubt, Brubaker explores their mutual attraction, and, yes, the pair fight like the best of married couples.



Throughout the series, Brubaker and Phillips explore counter cultures through a dark lens. Biker gangs, drug dealers, Satanic cults, and old-school Hollywood scandals aren't romanticized but instead are laid bare as examples of California's "alternative" aspects. I truly appreciated Brubaker's adding a horror host at one point. He couldn't have targeted my tastes more accurately.



A friend once explained that he likes to ask potential comics fans what television shows or novels they prefer before suggesting titles to them. If you're down with private detectives, high-speed noir, outlaw culture, and grit, then the Reckless series is for you. After the fifth volume appeared, Brubaker and Phillips announced that they were taking a break to pursue other projects. The first of these is *Night Fever*, due out in June 2023. Ethan Reckless will return, however, and I will be waiting. Several elements remain unresolved, so hopefully that return is soon.





**Cozy Mystery Novels
By Chris Garcia**

OK, let me start by saying as much as I love hard-boiled mysteries, I also love cozy ones as well.

There's a long history of cozy mysteries, with the finest practitioner of the twentieth century being Agatha Christie. Her Miss Marple stories basically set the tone for the genre, and it was *Murder, She Wrote* that I would say led us to where we are today, with it being among the most popular kinds of mysteries.

Now what, you may ask, is a cozy mystery? Well, let me explain.

You start with the main character who is not a detective. It can be anyone, really, but they're specifically not trying to solve the crime because they don't work as a detective formally. Next, the sex and/or violence happens off-screen, and the language tends to be tamer. The crime in question almost always takes place in a world where crime isn't the norm. While many hard-boiled detective stories tend to make good use of Skid Row and other, seedier environs, the action in cozy mysteries usually takes place in the world in which we live. There are several flavors of cozy mystery, but one thing that is frequent is the use of female main characters, and it's not unusual for LGBTQIA+ characters to front them, either. They often take place in quirky cities or towns. In fact, quirky is a good general descriptor.

There are multiple sub-sub-genres as well. Paranormal cozy mysteries, like *Nocturne Falls* by Kirsten Painter and the *Enchanted Bay Mysteries* by Esme Addison, infuse magic at various levels into the story. There are mommy mysteries, and Ayelet Waldman's *Mommytrack Murders* are at least leaning in the cozy direction. There are cat and dog themed mysteries that seem to be popular. There's a whole bunch of hotel/B+B/RV Park cozy mysteries that are fun, but they're not my faves.

Nope, I'm drawn to the food-based ones.

You see, there are so many series that are based in and around restaurants, coffee shops, bakeries, food trucks, and even catering businesses. The combination of food and crime (and have I mentioned my book, *Food and Crime*, is coming out later this year?) is a fun area to explore.

The first set I read (well, listened to . . .) was the *Pie Town Mysteries* by Kirsten Wells. The concept is a woman, Val Harris, who has had her heart broken and her mother passed away. She then takes over the coffee shop that was founded by her grandparents that her mother had been running. She's a wizard with espresso, and she has a guy she grew up with who is Watson to her Holmes. There's also tension between them, and Val is shown that she's easily smitten with her hometown honey. They're a fun pair, but it's really the coffee shop stuff that is the most fun. There's *Pie Hard*, the book that details what happens when a reality restaurant make-over show comes to San Nicholas to save Val's coffee shop, only to have murders pop up! This one is a really fun story, and it has all the elements I want in a



cozy mystery. There's romance, and there's mystery, but there's also a lot of food talk and that makes everything better!

Now, the whole series setting felt kind of familiar. The small town featured is on the Northern California coast, and I started to think of those lovely towns like Bolinas and Stinson Beach north of the Golden Gate, but in the book *Gourd to Death*, the town is revealed to have a Pumpkin Festival, and that means it has to be Half Moon Bay!

One interesting thing in this one is that in this town of San Nicholas, and Val finds herself annoyed by this fact, every business seems to have a pun-filled name.

I ended up loving this series and using a couple of Audible credits to enjoy a bunch of it.

The next series is just as enjoyable, and perhaps even comfier. It's about a café tied to a bookstore and its co-owner: Krissy Hancock. The, written by Alex Erickson, is an absolute delight! Hancock loves puzzles, is the daughter of a beloved mystery writer, and when murders start happening around her, she becomes a detective! This one ALSO has a town with the propensity to use pun names! This one is a set of stories about Krissy, and her love interest Paul, a police officer, and a busy-body book-club runner. One of the most entertaining portions of the story is the fact that there's a book-club competition where two towns' book clubs take turns hosting the event. It's a ridiculous concept, and Krissy thinks so too, but it's also a beloved institution in the town!

The Bookstore Café Mysteries has "school-girl with a crush" energy that I love. This is almost a romance series, and it's got a lot of fun characters. The third book in the series, as far as I could get on Audible without having to shell out a full credit, was light on crime, high on romance, but it was super-fun without question. She does heavily feature a great idea - the idea of dropping a chocolate chip cookie into a mug of coffee, then drinking the coffee and using a spoon to eat the cookie goop. Pre-diabetic me loves that!

The third I felt was a bit of a stretch, but it was the same narrator as the Bookstore Café stories, so I gave it a shot. I'm glad I did, as it's a great series. The Chef-to-Go stories feature Dani, a young woman who left her cheater ex-boyfriend, quit her HR job, and ended up in the small town of Normalton, Illinois. She inherits a large house and brings in three students as boarders.

And that's when the murders begin.

These are more in line with the Mommytrack mysteries by Ayelet Waldman, not hard-boiled, but they are slightly more than the other food-and-comfort mysteries I've read. Dani is a good character, as is her boarder Ivy, a wonderful semi-manic pixie dream girl. I love the two books I read, and Dani is pre-

sented as smart, sexy, funny, and talented. The romance elements are smart, though the food is a little lighter than in the other ones. Krissy's stories are about the way the food interacts with her life and crimes, but here it's more a setting. She does drop some good food concepts for the parties she caters, though.

I only got to read one book in the Kelly Jackson series of novels by Janet Finsilver. She's a young woman who has been assigned by Resorts International to a small bed & breakfast in Mendocino County, Northern California, and a murder of the previous manager, coupled with everything from an abalone smuggling scheme to an adorably smart kid and his failed cancer-sniffing dog. It's a rich story, and one that was a lot of fun, especially the group known as the Silver Sentinels who are crime-fighting seniors. I also read one novel in the Pancake House Mystery series by Sarah Fox, which was absolutely a joy as



it's about a woman brought to a small town on Puget Sound who ends up having to figure out the murder of her flapjack house-owning elderly cousin. This one might have been the most engrossing single novel I read for this piece.

These are fantastic stories, and while many critics and academics might dismiss them as over-light, and there's little of the visceral to most of them, but all of them that I read felt like they traded visceral for intelligence. These are smart, and they hang in a form that feels fresh, even if you can smell the wafting scent of 100 years of comfort mysteries coming off of them.

psych

By Chris Garcia



“TV’s gotten crazy good, you know.” -- Dean Pelton, Community

The early 2000s saw the rise of television dramedies as a legitimate form, which meant good things for detective shows. Sure, you had *Moonlighting* in the 1980s, but it was shows like *Monk* that brought this blending of ideas to the fore and made for an amazing period. Detective shows became big again not only because dramedies were on the rise, but also partly due to their stepping away from their stupid step-cousin: the police procedural. Shows like *Castle* and *Monk* really established the new kind of dramedy-infused detective show, abandoning *Barreta* and other police procedurals as templates.

Psych is the best of this group.

The concept is so simple: Shawn Spencer is the son of a detective, and he’s been raised to be hyper-observant by his dad, and that has led him to be an exceptional detective. Problem is, he got in trouble with the law, so he can’t be a cop. Instead, he uses his observations to assist the cops by being a “psychic” able to commune with the moment. He starts a detective agency with his best friend, Gus, and his car, the Blue Berry, and they have incredible adventures solving crimes.

Now, let’s be clear that the pair of Shawn and Gus are only two of a sea of amazing regular, and semi-regular, characters. There’s Juliet, Shawn’s love interest and eventual girlfriend, who is a junior detective with the Santa Barbara PD. She’s excellent at being both a believer and a foil to Shawn’s wackiness, and often she’s the Gus that her partner, Lassiter, played by the amazing Timothy Omundson (later of the brilliant *Gallivant*), who is the wet-blanket, anti-psychic-type. It’s a great pairing, and her attraction/questioning of Shawn’s powers up against Lassiter’s downright denial of them makes this an ideal pairing.

Corbin Bernsen, probably best-known from his time on *LA Law* in the 1980s, plays Shawn’s dad, and he’s great as a curmudgeon who knows his son is lying, but usually plays along to a degree. He trained Shawn to be hyper-aware and vigilant, so there’s pride there, but at the same time, a constant disappointment in the fact that his son strayed from the straight and narrow. The kids of cops I know certainly had this exact relationship with their parents.

The recurring characters, Yin and Yang, the killers played by Ally Sheedy (who does crazy so well!) and Peter Weller, are the peak of the murderous foils. Shawn’s mom, played by Cybill Shepherd, is somehow both new-age and hyper-with-it, which is a tough row to hoe. Cary Elwes plays a cat burglar, and he’s suave as always.

I'll say my favorite non-main character is the chief, Karen Vick, played by Kristen Nelson. Why she's not a massive star I will never know, but she's incredibly talented, not to mention beautiful, and here she's perfect. She plays the role as if she's a simple administrator with no time for any nonsense, while trying to capitalize on every bit of unavoidable nonsense that Shawn brings to her, which only makes sense if you play it both straight AND loose at the same time! This is a nutty way to go about it, but she's so damn good at it!

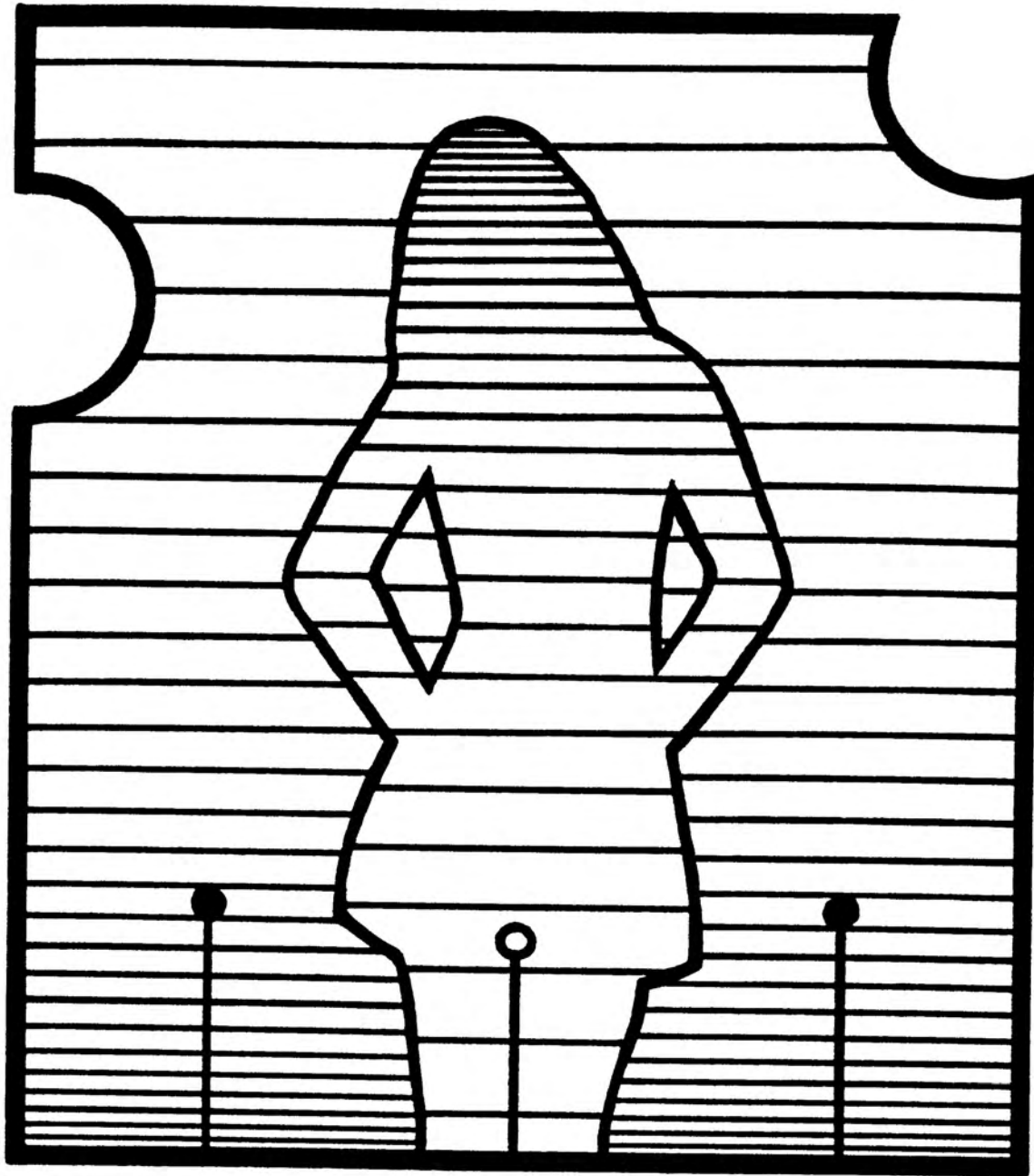
While the series does great genre-of-the-week stuff, like episodes on visiting Comic-Con, or one that's based on an Indian family wedding and a murder, or the ones that are more hard-boiled, like Shawn's tangles with Mr. Yang, the show brilliantly moves through these without forgetting itself.

And there's a *Twin Peaks* episode.

I've written about it before, for a *Drink Tank* about *Twin Peaks* (the ninth-anniversary issue) but it shows the power of the characters that they can be enveloped in the world of *Twin Peaks* and retain their unique, important elements, not at all watered-down, and feel like a *Psych* episode. The fact that Ray Wise, Mr. Palmer on *Peaks* and a Catholic priest semi-regular on *Psych*, is there only helps make it that much better.

There are also five books in the *Psych* Universe, the best of them being *Mind over Magic*. It's a super-smart piece that takes Shawn and Gus to a Magic Castle-like society of magicians and a magic trick that is super-complicated. Author William Rabkin gets Shawn as a character and does a great job with the entire surrounding world that Shawn and Gus inhabit. The mystery is twisty, and the whole thing just works as a tie-in, as well as a stand-alone!

Psych is just good fun, and the kind of mystery show that you don't see coming around prior to the launch of Smart Television in the late 90s. It takes the kind of smart gags that you find in shows like *Arrested Development*, combines them with the referentiality of our increasingly postmodern world, and tosses in intelligent mystery stuff. *Monk* did a lot of the same but never had the character work that *Psych* managed to jam into every episode.



Next Time: What We Do in the Shadows (Deadline—May 25th)