

1 The Who, the How and the Why

6 Part of this book's objective is to make a case for *Cracker's* consideration as a 'classic' work of television. This has to do with more than a mere statement of quality. I'm not about to argue whether *Cracker* is 'as good as' or 'better than', say, *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966), *Pennies from Heaven* (BBC, 1978), or *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982). Nor am I proposing these as necessarily the best of their respective decades, but they are all works around which a certain critical consensus has gathered to confer classic status. I might just as well have listed *Talking to a Stranger* (BBC, 1966), *The Naked Civil Servant* (Thames for ITV, 1975), *Abigail's Party* (BBC, 1977), *An Englishman Abroad* (BBC, 1983), *Made in Britain* (Central for ITV, 1983) or *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985), all of which have, at one time or another, been described as 'classics'. These programmes share a convergence of popularity and critical praise, high standards of technical achievement and performance, a powerful sense of their time (even if, like *Pennies from Heaven*, they are set in the past). But they are also marked by a confident authorial voice: each is the work of a single writer, working with a sympathetic director and producer; even though *Cathy Come Home* is today more closely associated with its director (Ken Loach) than with its writer (Jeremy Sandford), this was not so completely the case at the time.

Another common feature of the above list is that all were produced before the end of the 1980s. There is as yet little consensus

about what, if anything, constitutes classic television after that time. Indeed, much of the critical comment on contemporary television prefers to see mostly a decline in standards, a generalised retreat from the 'golden age' of television in the 1960s and 70s, brought about by an increasingly commercial, risk-averse broadcasting culture (see, for example, Day-Lewis, 1998), particularly in the ITV that emerged after the franchise auction heralded by the 1990 Broadcasting Act. In this analysis, contemporary television tirelessly reproduces and repackages a number of carefully worked formulae to satisfy diverse audience tastes, while innovative, individual and, especially, politically engaged work is marginalised.

This aggressively commercialised new broadcasting climate, marked in the 1990s by the centralisation of commissioning in John Birt's BBC and by an ITV heavily reliant on established star vehicles for the likes of John Thaw or David Jason, is typically characterised as hostile to writers. As Lez Cooke notes,

the writer with an 'authorial vision' was now considered to be a luxury that most television companies could no longer afford . . . what was required in the market-driven context of the 1990s were writers who could develop marketable projects which would win and retain audiences. Indeed the concept to be developed might not be an original idea brought to a producer by a writer but a concept developed by TV drama commissioners, perhaps in collaboration with a writer who might then be invited to develop the idea if it was deemed potentially marketable. (Cooke, 2003: 164)

This might well be a regrettable trend, but the case of *Cracker* – which fits this development pattern almost exactly – shows that it doesn't inevitably lead to safe or predictable programming, nor to a stifling of the writer's voice.

When ITV found itself facing the temporary (as it turned out) retirement of its cash-cow *Inspector Morse*, the call went out for a detective drama to plug the gap. In response to a circular from Sally Head, Granada's head of drama, for commissioning ideas, producer

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Gub Neal hastily drew up an outline, based on an idea he had been mulling over since his brief time as a producer on *Prime Suspect 2*. His conception was not of a sedate, crossword-solving copper in the Morse mould, but of a ‘totally new-age detective’. A trained criminal psychologist, rather than a policeman or a genteel amateur sleuth, he was ‘working-class, but an academic’, using

anthropology, animal psychology, but mainly his own mind as a drawing board for penetrating crime. . . . The town marshal with a pocket full of Jung. He uncovers the mysteries behind the criminal mind. . . .

The question for this man starts not with who but why. (Crace, 1995: 14)

At this stage, the character was called Jonas. It was only now that Neal first approached a writer.

Personality may be a key factor here: Neal had already established a reputation as a producer who encouraged innovative

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Gub Neal

drama. But the fact remains that *Cracker* not only appeared in the middle of television drama's perceived decline but emerged from precisely the commissioning climate that was held largely responsible for it. And although the call was for a substitute for the stately *Morse*, what resulted was not more of the same but a drama, as Neal puts it, 'as noisy and as angry and as difficult and as awkward and as complex as we could have dreamed' (Neal, 2007). And, he might have added, as *authored*.

Two of the most commonly cited expressions – or causes – of TV drama's malaise are the disappearance of the single play and the increased prevalence of soap opera and, more especially, its invasion of other genres, from drama series to documentary. The writers who had dominated 'serious' television drama in the 1960s, 70s and 80s – figures like John Hopkins, John McGrath, Dennis Potter, Alan Plater, Troy Kennedy Martin, Trevor Griffiths, Alan Bennett, David Mercer – had all been significant contributors to high-profile, high-status single drama anthologies like ITV's *Armchair Theatre* (1956–74) or *Playhouse* (1967–83), or the BBC's *The Wednesday Play* (1964–70) or *Play for Today* (1970–84). Some strands, like the thirty-minute *Teletales* (BBC, 1963–4), were specifically created to introduce writers new to television. The single drama was, if not necessarily an apprenticeship, then something like a 'sandpit': a space where writers could experiment, develop their craft, find their 'voice'.

But by the mid-1980s the main single drama strands had come to a close, leaving only a few isolated slots. And while Channel 4's *Film on Four* and the BBC's later *Screen One* and *Screen Two* might fill a similar slot in the schedules as *Play for Today* and its kin once had, their feature-film production values and consequently higher cost meant that producers were much less inclined to look to inexperienced writers for their scripts. Dennis Potter, for one, looking back on his career shortly before his death, worried how new writers could possibly develop in such an inhospitable climate: 'I was given the space to grow into Whereas if I was starting now, where would I get that chance? Who would cosset and look after me? Where is the single play?' (Potter, 1984: 16).

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Writers arriving in television from the early 1980s on had to look elsewhere for their opportunities. Increasingly, they came not in anthology dramas but in more populist forms: children's television and, especially, soap opera. It's striking just how many of today's most conspicuous television writers learned their craft in one or both of these: Russell T. Davies cut his teeth on kids' series like *Why Don't You...?* (BBC, 1973–95) and *Children's Ward/The Ward* (ITV, 1989–2001); Paula Milne on soaps *Crossroads* (ITV, 1966–88) and *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–); Kay Mellor on *Coronation Street* and *Brookside* (Channel 4, 1982–2003). Even Andrew Davies, old enough to number a *Wednesday Play* among his early credits, wrote numerous items for children's variety show *Little Big Time* (ITV, 1968), and created the anarchic children's hit *Educating Marmalade* (ITV, 1982–3). Any list of the best of contemporary British TV writers would surely include most or all of these names, though two are missing: Jimmy McGovern, writer of seven *Cracker* stories, and Paul Abbott, writer of three. They too have their roots in soap: McGovern in *Brookside* and Abbott in *Coronation Street* (Abbott also developed *Children's Ward* with Kay Mellor).

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It may be true that writers are, as Dennis Potter worried, less 'cosseted' today than they once were. But some writers *have* thrived without the opportunities afforded by the single play, and it may even be that the more ratings-driven demands of continuing series and soaps offer their own opportunities for some who might, early in their careers, have struggled to get commissions for authored works. Jimmy McGovern, for one, is supremely grateful for his *Brookside* apprenticeship: 'I wouldn't have got near a *Wednesday Play* because I wasn't good enough. I didn't know enough . . . I think that high volume of churning stuff out [on *Brookside*], it really worked for me, it really taught me' (McGovern, 2007a).

Brought on board by *Brookside* creator Phil Redmond as part of a commitment to foster local talent, McGovern started on episode 14 (broadcast December 1982), and stayed on until episode 704 (July 1989), contributing nearly 90 episodes. In the absence of the single play,

cracker



Jimmy McGovern

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soap, as represented by *Brookside* and, later, *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985–), was repositioned, at least for a time, as the most immediate TV form for the transmission of social and political anxieties. McGovern was a driving force during *Brookside*'s most politically engaged period, when characters like Ricky Tomlinson's Bobby Grant and John McArdle's Billy Corkhill experienced life at the sharp end of Thatcherism. 'I can have far more effect as regards the bringing forward of an alternative society than left-wing playwright Howard Brenton could ever have,' he told the *Guardian* in 1986 (Willis, 1986).

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12 Paul Abbott

In Bobby Grant, particularly, McGovern found a character through which he could act out his frustrations about what he saw as a new victimisation of the white working class. Bobby was a socialist, an active trade unionist, a Catholic, a father of three: his biography was strikingly similar to McGovern's own. As *Brookside* developed, Bobby came to see all he believed in under assault: the hard rightward swing of 80s politics saw not only the frustration of his own political dreams, but an all-out assault on the trade unions that represented to him working-class political expression and strength. At the same time, his class alienated him from a political constituency that he had considered his own. In the eyes of the middle-class left, he was assumed to embody a host of outdated, sexist, racist attitudes, while his inability to master the language of leftist political discourse saw him treated with scorn by those he had assumed would be his allies. Meanwhile, his fruitless devotion to his causes saw a rift open up between him and his family,

and when his wife, Sheila (Sue Johnston) was raped, Bobby – a compassionate man, but a traditional one – found himself well out of his emotional depth, unable to find in himself the strength to give her the full support she demanded.

McGovern's growing disillusion with the left came to a head at the end of the 1980s. Not with the fall of the Berlin Wall and its symbolic enactment of the toppling of Communism, but in a more local event of at least, for the writer, equivalent symbolic importance. On 15 April 1989, ninety-four Liverpool football supporters lost their lives (the total ultimately reached ninety-six) at Sheffield's Hillsborough stadium, where Liverpool were scheduled to play Nottingham Forest in an FA Cup semi-final, when a combination of inadequate safety procedures and defective crowd management led to horrific overcrowding on the terraces.

The crush at the stadium's Leppings Lane end followed the decision by the senior police officer, Chief Superintendent Duckenfield, to open a locked gate in order to relieve pressure building up outside the ground. The tragic result was a far worse crush inside: without any stewards or police to steer the new arrivals into the outer 'pens' – where there was still plenty of standing space – they were driven into the already overfull central pens. Attempts by those at the front to escape the crush by scaling the perimeter fencing were initially interpreted by the police as a pitch invasion, and officers were dispatched to push them back.

As the dust settled, Duckenfield, rather than admit his own culpability, claimed that Liverpool fans had forced the fatal gate. Upon this mendacious foundation was built the edifice of distortion and myth that characterised early accounts of the tragedy and proved stubbornly hard to shift: Liverpool fans had been drinking unusually heavily; the crush was caused by fans arriving late and determined to get in at all costs; many had turned up without tickets. This line, aggressively pushed by the South Yorkshire police, was reported, mostly uncritically, in the press and television news.

The first official report into the disaster, by Lord Justice Taylor, offered some solace to the grieving families of the Hillsborough dead.

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While criticising safety standards at Hillsborough, and noting ruefully the extent to which the control of a small minority of hooligans had superseded the welfare of ordinary, decent spectators as the priority of clubs, police and politicians alike, Taylor dismissed the suggestion that drunken and ticketless fans were a major contributor, and put the blame firmly on the South Yorkshire Police, concluding that ‘the main reason for the disaster was the failure of police control’ (Taylor, 1989: para 278).

Encouraged by Taylor’s damning judgment, the families expected that justice would now take its course. But in the face of sustained police pressure, the process began to turn against them. The Coroner’s Inquest recorded a verdict not of ‘unlawful killing’, but of ‘accidental death’. The Director of Public Prosecutions rejected charges against South Yorkshire officers; the independent Police Complaints Authority felt differently, but was forced to drop its charges when Duckenfield retired early on health grounds. The families were left with minimal compensation (while police victims of trauma got much more), bereft and furious at what seemed a monstrous travesty of justice. Much of Liverpool shared their anger and bitterness. For McGovern, the disaster would mark the final extinguishing of the faith in the ideologies of the left that he had been wrestling with throughout the 1980s; Hillsborough seemed, in retrospect, the consequence not only of police incompetence but of the left’s abject abandonment of the white working class. The outpouring of grief and the sense of burning injustice of Hillsborough would fuel *Cracker* and, later, the drama-documentary *Hillsborough* (ITV, 1996), but its more immediate impact surfaced in his relationship with his *Brookside* mentor, Phil Redmond.

The rift with Redmond began when a producer cut a scene McGovern had written in which a character burned copies of *The Sun*, in protest against that paper’s slanderous allegations a few days after the disaster that Liverpool fans had robbed and even urinated on the dead.¹ McGovern was incensed at the cut, and when Redmond backed his producer, McGovern saw this as evidence that the programme had lost its political backbone; he left not long after (Day-Lewis, 1998).

While *Brookside* had nurtured McGovern's talents, he found it harder to sell his ideas elsewhere: 'I wasn't trusted by anybody. I was nothing but a soap-opera writer' (McGovern, in Butler (1995)). In 1992, with three single dramas to add to his CV, including the well-received *Needle* (BBC, 1990), he was still struggling to get the BBC to produce his ambitious multi-part drama, *Priest*, the project he'd been nursing for the best part of a decade. There's no little irony in the fact that it was Michael Wearing – who had supported *Boys from the Blackstuff* in the face of opposition from senior BBC executives, and who was long considered a steadfast champion of writers – who ultimately turned *Priest* down.

Enter Gub Neal. Neal had none of the disdain for soap writers that McGovern had encountered elsewhere. His own entry into television had come in the mid-1980s, on the production team of *EastEnders*, and his credits as producer included the post-watershed serial *Medics* (ITV, 1990–5), created by the same partnership, Julia Smith and Tony Holland, behind *EastEnders*. Neal had seen and admired *Needle*, and he wanted McGovern for *Cracker*, persevering even while the writer was still attached to the BBC on *Priest*.

But with *Priest* apparently in oblivion (the drama was ultimately rewritten as a TV film, released theatrically in 1994 and broadcast in BBC2's *Screen Two* slot in 1995), McGovern seized on *Cracker* as a lifeline. Neal remembers the first script coming in record time, and more than meeting his expectations: 'I got this 100-page script, that had clearly slid on to the page with extraordinary veracity and bite . . . it read like a firework' (Neal, 2007). In fact, McGovern was using *Cracker* as a kind of primal scream therapy – to express his pent-up anger, 'post-Hillsborough, the assault upon the white working-class male, the '80s', but, most of all, he admits, to vent his anger over *Priest*. 'I actually turned over *Priest* and started writing,' he recalls, 'I wrote *Cracker* on the back of my rejected *Priest*, fuelled with rage, that burning sense of anger about the way the BBC had treated me' (McGovern, 2007a).

Anger has always been a crucial element of McGovern's writing, for reasons beyond temperament and politics. Born in

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Liverpool to working-class parents in 1949, he was the fifth of nine children. Perhaps the constant hubbub of a large family was overwhelming, but for whatever reason, the young Jimmy communicated only in more-or-less wordless sounds, somehow interpreted for the rest of the family by his brother Joey, two years his senior. Even when, at around eight or nine, he began to speak in intelligible sentences, he suffered a crippling stammer. Mostly, with Joey's help and his family's patience, he 'got by', but the stammer was at its most disabling when it came to the rituals he was expected to participate in at church. The certainty that the stains on his soul could only be washed clean by confession made the regular Sacrament of Penance a torture for a tongue-tied young believer. If he should die before he confessed his sins, he knew, he would surely go to Hell. But his anxiety only made more acute his inability to form the words (McGovern, 2007a). This private torment is powerfully evoked in McGovern's 2000 BBC film, *Liam*.

16 Two things, the boy Jimmy discovered, could bring order to his disjointed speech. If he gave the words rhythm or melody, he could get them out without the agony. This revelation led the adult McGovern to theorise that his affliction was a consequence of his family's departure from Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. Even generations on, he feels, he is paying the penalty for having been severed from the songlike rhythms of his forefathers' speech (McGovern, 2007a). While talking in rhythm (or in the slow, drawn way that speech therapy taught him) helped his words to take shape, speaking like this felt and sounded stilted, unnatural. When roused to anger, though, he found the fluency that had eluded him. With no self-consciousness interrupting the flow from thought to enunciation, the words came out easily.

It's not hard to imagine why writing should come to appeal. If he couldn't speak the words himself (though his impediment became less severe in adulthood, he still stammers a little even today), his characters could speak them for him. And his childhood discoveries – the urgency of communication and, especially, honesty before God (because, as the Church told him, the future of his soul depended on it), the release that

anger could bring – were translated into his written prose. Much of McGovern’s passion and vibrancy, his fierce honesty as a writer, surely comes from here. And his understanding of human motivation, derived from the ceaseless self-questioning that the Church had demanded of him, the realisation that what he had felt others had too, was put to a new use, giving his characters depth, intensity and a moral complexity that took them off the page and into the real world.

It was McGovern who fleshed out the concept of *Cracker*, but the title was Neal’s – inspired, he says, by a packet of cream crackers in a shop window. He was struck by the word’s versatility and resonance, which was more than confirmed when he later consulted a dictionary. Most obviously, a cracker is one who breaks apart or into something (as in a ‘safe-cracker’), or breaks someone down (‘I’ll make him crack’); one who solves a puzzle, riddle or mystery (a detective, of course, ‘cracks a case’). It has connotations of noise and flash (‘crack a whip’, ‘pistol-crack’, ‘crack of thunder’, ‘fire-cracker’); of excellence or pre-eminence (‘a crack shot’); of madness or mental instability (‘cracked’, ‘crackers’); of damage or flaw; of haste or urgency (‘crack on’, ‘get cracking’). It can suggest a bold attempt (‘have a crack at’), or a joke or cutting remark (‘wisecrack’). The OED also offers ‘a boaster, a braggart; hence, a liar’. There is also the potent and addictive drug derived from cocaine, and the implied ‘nutcracker’: ‘nut’, of course, being slang for both a mad person and the head – thus someone who ‘cracks open heads’. Finally, in reference to one of Fitz’s less endearing habits, there’s also the slang ‘to crack’, meaning to break wind. It seemed a richly appropriate title, more enigmatic and intriguing than the obvious ‘Fitz’.²

There would be no theme music, no title sequence. This meant sacrificing the iconic impact that had helped a series like *Callan* (ITV, 1967–72) – whose outsider hero was an early inspiration for Neal in his original outline (Neal, 2007) – with its slow, reverbed bass guitar and swinging lightbulb illuminating a rough brick wall. But it would give *Cracker*’s directors greater freedom to determine the look and feel of each story. The title would appear in plain white text on a stark black background (as *Prime Suspect*’s had done) and the music – if there was

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music – would be selected by the director, though the dominant theme was inflected by jazz and piano blues, to suit McGovern’s conception of Fitz’s own tastes.

Granada had taken a publicity photograph of Fitz – full length, colour, in his dark-blue suit. Neal hated it: it was Coltrane the comedian, not Fitz. He preferred the hunched, head-and-shoulders shot, in chiaroscuro black and white, grim-faced, dark eyes probing and cigarette smoke spiralling over his shoulder – the Fitz you would cover from in the interrogation room. This became the image that sandwiched



An echo of TV past:
Fitz and *The
Human Jungle's* Dr
Corder (Herbert
Lom)



the advert breaks, and gave *Cracker* a memorable visual identity in lieu of a title sequence. It was moody, unsettling, *noir-ish*: Fitz as he might have liked to see himself, in a 1940s Hollywood movie starring Bogart or Cagney. Deliberately or otherwise, it also recalled, for those with long memories, an image from British television's distant past – Herbert Lom's psychiatrist, Dr Roger Corder, half-observed in shadows and entwined in his own cigarette smoke, in the titles of *The Human Jungle* (ITV, 1963–5).

McGovern was determined not to fall back, as he had seen other writers do, on the clichés, the stock plots and characters, all the comfortable, predictable elements familiar from a hundred other crime series:

A crime drama is the easiest thing in the world to write You've got your in-built structure: motivation, perpetration, discovery of crime, investigation, interrogation. It is so easy. And therefore, in the midst of that crime story, you are duty-bound . . . to say something meaningful about life. (McGovern, 1995)

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He was happy to retain this structure: *Cracker* stories invariably ran through the list, though motivation tended to be fully revealed only towards the end. The difference lay in the balance of the component parts. With the perpetrator generally revealed at the beginning – it was 'how' and 'why' that interested McGovern and Neal, not 'who' – the narrative strategy was concerned less with sharing clues with the audience to draw them into the enigma than with bringing forward the inevitable and hotly anticipated climactic encounter with Fitz.

The interrogation scenes, not the pursuit, the capture or even the crime itself, were *Cracker's* dramatic epicentre. It was counterintuitive that this should work as television drama. A single, almost bare room, in which two characters engaged in an intellectual arm-wrestle for several minutes at a time: this was *theatre*. Where was the *action*? The various directors devoted much energy to their set-ups for these scenes: employing long takes, elaborate pans, slow zooms,

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focus pulls, extreme close-ups; changing angles frequently, moving the actors around the set. But their best assets were the intensity of McGovern's dialogue and the sheer attack of Coltrane's performance, which inspired the other actors to raise their own to match it. With guest stars of the calibre of Robert Carlyle, David Calder, Christopher Fulford, Susan Lynch, Jim Carter and Liam Cunningham, there was something gladiatorial about these confrontations. As Fitz and his opponents faced off, you could see the sparks.

McGovern poured himself into Fitz: his gambling, his drinking, his grievances against Catholicism, all of his anger and self-loathing . . . even his birthday (the same day as Twiggy, jokes Fitz). Just as the writer channelled a lifetime's examination of his conscience into penetrating the psychological and emotional worlds of his characters, so Fitz would apply the same techniques to understanding the criminal mind. And McGovern poured himself, too, into *Cracker's* perpetrators: Sean (Andrew Tiernan) in 'To Say I Love You' got his stammer and his volatility; Albie in 'To Be a Somebody' got his rage at Hillsborough and the vilification of the white working class; the gift of all his darkest old prejudices – and his first name – he bestowed on the bubbling cauldron that was DS Jimmy Beck (Lorcan Cranitch).

Though not all of *Cracker's* perpetrators were male, a major element of the series – including the stories written by Ted Whitehead and Paul Abbott – was the examination of masculinity *in extremis*, of men wrestling with their new status in a world where old certainties about traditional masculine 'strengths' were being questioned. These changes were, by the early 1990s, increasingly being expressed in the very form of television drama. Christine Gledhill, responding to the increasing incursion of what was once seen as an essentially female dramatic mode into previously 'male' strongholds like the police genre, noted: 'for soap opera structures to operate inside a "male" genre, a break is required with conventions of gender representation – which dictate taciturnity and invincibility as marks of masculinity and construe talk about personal feelings as "feminizing"' (Gledhill, 1992: 119).

Perhaps incidentally, *Cracker* found for itself an almost perfect mechanism for effecting just such a break. By the device of having a psychologist at its centre, and by making him, rather than the police, the chief interrogator, it creates the conditions in which its male perpetrators are able – or obliged – to open up about their ‘personal feelings’, encouraged or coerced by Fitz to attempt to explain and understand what may appear the most violent and unintelligible acts.

The 1980s and 90s saw a creeping incursion of soap attributes into other television genres. One notable example of this trend was *The Bill*'s 1987 shift from a single sixty-minute slot to two (later three) thirty-minute slots per week. But a more likely influence on McGovern's *Cracker* were the US serials *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–7) and, especially, *Twin Peaks*, former *Hill Street* writer Mark Frost and David Lynch's ambitious fusion of detective fiction, police procedural, soap opera, horror and comedy with Lynch's signature metaphysics. While *Cracker* is content to remain on the terrestrial plane, it borrows freely from all of these genres, as we shall see. And Fitz has much in common with *Twin Peaks*' Special Agent Cooper: both arrive as outsiders to a police investigation (though *Twin Peaks*' police force is altogether more benevolent than *Cracker*'s), bringing skills and insights that frequently bamboozle their more down-to-earth associates, while Fitz's Catholic understanding of motive has its (albeit inexact) counterpart in Cooper's ‘Tibetan method’. McGovern has acknowledged a debt to *Twin Peaks* for at least one scene in ‘To Say I Love You’, while the retrieval of the plastic-wrapped body from the lake in ‘Mad Woman’ recalls the discovery of Laura Palmer's (Sheryl Lee) body that kicks off *Twin Peaks* (Ted Whitehead's *Cracker* story, ‘The Big Crunch’, goes much further in its homage). The Frost/Lynch series, too, predates *Cracker*'s recognition of the dramatic impact of grief, as its early episodes survey the effect of Laura's death on her small-town community in general and her parents in particular.

Soap's most obvious distinguishing characteristics, its serial structure and its eternal suspension of narrative resolution, are reflected not only in *Cracker*'s distinctive semi-serial form (three more or less

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distinct multi-episode stories per series), but also in the manifold subplots, from the Fitz–Judith rollercoaster and the parallel twists of Fitz’s seduction of DS Penhaligon (Geraldine Somerville) to his relationships with his children Mark (Kieran O’Brien) and Katie (Tess Thomson), which permeate the borders of the individual stories. The events of DCI Bilborough’s (Christopher Eccleston) marriage – wife Catriona’s (Amelia Bullmore/Isobel Middleton) pregnancy, the arrival of baby Ryan (Ryan Cooper), Bilborough’s death and Catriona’s attempts to come to terms with it – are another strand that weaves between episodes, as are DS Beck’s personal crisis following Bilborough’s death, his rape of Penhaligon and his efforts to assuage his guilt by offering support to Catriona, while clearly entertaining hopes of a relationship with her (hopes that are dashed, in a very soap-ish melodramatic device, by the revelation that Catriona has taken up with her dead husband’s brother).

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McGovern’s final two stories unfold almost as one, sharing similar themes (male violence against women; entrenched misogyny in the police force) and bridged by another favourite soap device, the cliffhanger. Although the two stories are separated by some four months in narrative time, Penhaligon’s rape by Beck in ‘Men Should Weep’ is resolved in ‘Brotherly Love’ (and its ripples continue into Paul Abbott’s first story, ‘Best Boys’), just as the revelation of Judith’s pregnancy in the first story is followed by the baby’s delivery in the second (while ‘Best Boys’ explores Judith’s subsequent isolation and postnatal depression). The arrival of Fitz’s brother Danny (Clive Russell) in ‘Brotherly Love’ begins another plotline, following his growing closeness to Judith, which runs into ‘True Romance’ two stories later.

Prime Suspect’s nine stories collectively offer up two funerals. *Cracker*’s eleven stories, by contrast, contain three funerals, three weddings, two births and one christening. This preponderance echoes the ‘big events’ by which soaps periodically boost audience excitement. *Cracker*’s big events come without the media fanfare typical of the soaps’, but share their tendency to use them for major dramatic revelation (Geraghty, 1991). The sparsely attended funeral of Albie’s father in ‘To Be a Somebody’ is the catalyst for his killing spree;

Fitz's mother's funeral in 'Brotherly Love' is the occasion for new insights into his relationships with his family and his detachment from his working-class past; Beck's funeral in 'Best Boys' shows us how Penhaligon is coping with his death. And just as *Coronation Street* might undercut the solemnity of a funeral with humour, so 'Brotherly Love' gives us the daft spectacle of a game of bingo in honour of the late Mrs Fitzgerald. In 'True Romance', the wedding of Nena (Fleur Bennett) alerts us to the existence of a shocking family secret (although its revelation comes much later), while indicating her sister Janice's (Emily Joyce) manipulative neurosis.

The adoption of soap-style storytelling came naturally to McGovern and Abbott by virtue of their respective backgrounds. But their directors, too, were largely free of old prejudices against the genre. Of *Cracker's* ten directors, all but one – Roy Battersby – had entered the industry in the 1980s or 90s, and five had served time on soaps: Tim Fywell and Richard Standeven on *Brookside*, Julian Jarrold on *Coronation Street*, Jean Stewart and Antonia Bird on *EastEnders*. Most of the remainder had directed episodes of ongoing popular dramas – *Casualty* (BBC, 1986–) (Charles McDougall), *The Bill* (Standeven, Stewart) and, especially, the Gub Neal-produced *Medics* (Standeven, Stewart, Simon Cellan Jones). Andy Wilson had taken another very 1980s route into television by directing pop videos, while even Michael Winterbottom – ultimately the most successful of the group – who unusually had already directed some standalone dramas, had also contributed to the children's anthology series *Dramarama* (ITV, 1983).

Cracker, then, was overwhelmingly the work of a generation of writers, producers and directors (and even actors) that had entered the medium when the 'golden age' of 'classic television' was, according to conventional wisdom, dead or dying. And yet its continuing popular and critical respect, and the fact that it has lost none of its power to shock and disturb, despite more explicitly gruesome drama since (most obviously, *Messiah* (BBC, 2001–)) are strong arguments for its acknowledgment as a classic in its own right.

To an extent, it is a status that the series has already earned for itself. In the BFI's *TV100*, a 2000 poll of industry figures across six

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Weddings,
births, funerals:
'True Romance'



'Brotherly Love'



'To Be a
Somebody'

cracker



'Cracker'
(2006 special)



'One Day a
Lemming Will
Fly'



'Brotherly Love'

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genres, *Cracker* came in at number nine in the drama series and serials category and thirty-ninth in the overall list. When Channel 4 polled another group of insiders seven years later for its *50 Greatest TV Dramas* (2007), *Cracker* managed eighth place in a list that included not only single dramas like *Cathy Come Home* but also American TV.

In its lifetime, though, *Cracker* occupied a more ambiguous position. Press reviews for the first story, 'The Mad Woman in the Attic' were almost uniformly glowing, generously dividing praise between lead actor, director and writer. It was 'an original and highly entertaining thriller,' with 'taut writing, plenty of tension, some wry humour and sharp characterisation' (*Daily Mail*); 'as exciting a debut as you could hope to see' (*Evening Standard*); Jaci Stephen in the *New Statesman & Society* praised 'McGovern's intense and gripping script', 'Michael Winterbottom's superb direction,' and 'Coltrane's ability to bring both mania and gentleness to the part'. The *Independent's* Thomas Sutcliffe – McGovern's own pick of the broadsheet critics (Day-Lewis, 1998) – posted the most perceptive review, noting that 'after a decade of judicial miscarriages, it's hardly surprising that the whodunnit should have given way to the didhedoit,' marvelling at the 'casual veracity' of the writing, and celebrating 'a whole range of pleasures from brisk procedural ... to a sense of lives extending beyond the frame of the story'. Only the *Guardian's* Hugh Hebert sounded a more cautious note, acknowledging the 'deadpan comic boldness', but arguing, idiosyncratically, that 'characters who ditch their first names are suspect'.

But while the review pages may have been (initially) in favour, the news and opinion pages of the rightwing press were more hostile. With debates raging about the perceived excess of violence and sex on television, *Cracker* was held up as another example of the medium 'pushing at the boundaries of taste and decency'. The Broadcasting Standards Council (the entirely superfluous 'watchdog' that essentially duplicated the regulatory functions of the Independent Television Commission and the BBC Governors, but whose judgments, frequently based on just one or two green-inked complaints, were routinely reported in the pages of the *Mail*, *Telegraph* and others) received a small

handful of complaints about each of the stories in the original three-series run, upholding or partly upholding most of them. Typical was its conclusion that the scenes of the murdered body in the train in 'Mad Woman' were 'too protracted and unnecessarily graphic'.

In October 1994, following the stabbing to death of a forty-year-old midwife in her home, a Lincolnshire coroner let it be known that he felt it 'a considerable coincidence' that the murder came 'just twelve hours' after a *Cracker* story (the Hillsborough-themed 'To Be a Somebody') featuring two stabbings. Despite offering no evidence of any direct connection or of further similarities, he was widely quoted. The same story brought a more predictable outcry from the South Yorkshire police, whose Chief Constable Richard Wells wrote to (then producer) Paul Abbott to express his 'concern and sadness' about the Hillsborough storyline, having received a 'flurry' of calls from distressed officers present at the tragedy. In an article in the *Daily Mirror* on 27 October, Wells acknowledged that 'the fans and the families are still hurting,' but insisted, 'so too are my officers'. McGovern, interviewed in the same paper a month later, wryly noted that the attacks had come from the two professions who had most profoundly failed the Hillsborough families – the police and the coroners.

Thereafter, press outrage gathered pace. The opening scene of 'The Big Crunch', featuring a headmaster having open-air sex with a pupil, drew condemnation from the previously unknown Community Standards Association, whose spokeswoman worried, bizarrely, that 'young girls who saw this sleazy programme could be terrified of their teachers now' (*Daily Record*, 2 November 1994).

The *Daily Star* reported a 'furious backlash' after 'Brotherly Love' offered up 'some of the most sickening sex and violence ever seen on British TV' (23 October 1995). The *Daily Express* judged *Cracker* 'incredibly good quality drama,' but complained, 'the violence and downright seediness . . . has become repulsive' (25 October 1995).

Perhaps cowed by the condemnation on the news pages, some of the critics began to step back from the earlier rapture. Reviewing 'To Be a Somebody', Matthew Bond, in *The Times*, lamented the

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‘Tarantino-like approach to blood and gore,’ while the *Daily Mail*’s Peter Paterson complained that ‘*Cracker* has conned us down a path of sleaze, immorality, corruption and filth.’

Audiences, as it turned out, were rather more loyal. From a respectable but not earth-shattering start – hovering between 9.8 and 10.1 million viewers each for the first four episodes (according to the BARB ratings) – numbers began to climb. By the end of its first series *Cracker* was nestling just behind popular drama’s leading pack (*Casualty*, *Heartbeat*, *London’s Burning* (LWT, 1988) and *Soldier, Soldier* (ITV, 1991–7)) with nearly 12 million viewers. By the end of the second it was in the top three with 15.2 million (equal to *Prime Suspect*’s 1993 high-water mark), a total bested by the numbers tuning in for ‘Brotherly Love’, which averaged 15.7 million an episode.

For McGovern, still sore with the BBC over *Priest*, success was the best revenge – ‘The BBC put everything against *Cracker* for three years, and we wiped the floor’ (McGovern, 2007a). Even *Panorama*’s must-watch interview with Princess Diana (BBC, 3 December 1995) failed to make much of a dent: the first part of Abbott’s ‘True Romance’ still managed 12.4 million.

Nor did the media feeding frenzy bother the industry too much. The series’ three-year span saw Granada’s trophy cabinet fill up: *Cracker* received 14 BAFTA nominations between 1994 and 1996, winning seven, including three consecutive best actor awards for Robbie Coltrane, and back-to-back best drama series awards in 1995 and 1996. McGovern, meanwhile, won the Dennis Potter award for best television dramatist in 1995, and was honoured at the 1996 Writers’ Guild Awards as creator of the best original drama series. Coltrane also picked up the Silver Nymph award at the 1994 Monte Carlo Television Awards and the best actor gong at the 1995 Royal Television Society Awards.

Neither audience nor accolades are enough to confirm *Cracker*’s ‘classic-ness’. The history of television is littered with works which were celebrated in their time before disappearing into obscurity. *Cracker* hasn’t faded yet, and it’s notable that ITV’s resurrection of the series in 2006, alongside *Prime Suspect*, came at a point when the



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channel was in profound need of a critical and ratings hit. But ultimately the survival of *Cracker* in the public imagination rests on the durability of its themes, stories and characters, which, notwithstanding their engagement with their own place and time, remain as alive today as they were in the early 1990s.

