

## Television – Nick Neave looks on

## THAT'S AMAZING, HOLMES

TWO of the three programmes under review this month concern crime. BBC2 set the ball rolling with a new three-part series, *Mind of a Murderer*, which grandly promised to reveal recent scientific explanations for why some individuals commit murder. In the first episode we were taught the difference between psychotics (they commit crimes while temporarily insane) and psychopaths (they commit them for the fun of it). With *Crimewatch*-style re-creations and jarring music straight from a Hitchcock movie the story unfolded, but an 'expert' did not appear for around 20 minutes. Dr Tonmoy Sharma (Institute of Psychiatry) did reveal some up-to-date scientific explanations, but they were in rather short supply: there were some mutterings about murderers having a small amygdala, along with deficits in working memory and emotional recognition, but nothing that really matched the blurb. The second episode was particularly harrowing, not just in the crime re-creations but also in the descriptions of the childhood experiences of the murderers in question. Links between childhood abuse and later criminal behaviour were made, but again the promise of some real scientific understanding remained wanting.

As part of their *Catching the Killers* series, BBC1 served up a fascinating résumé of criminal profiling, ranging from Lombroso's determination to match criminals to crimes by their physical appearance, to the modern use of psychological profiling. Arguably things haven't changed all that much – David Canter (University of Liverpool) was on hand to point out some of the flaws in the profiling process. Interestingly we found out that the first psychological profile was created by psychiatrist James Brussell in the 1940s. He utilised current psychological understanding to give the police an idea of who to look for in their search for a bomber who was terrorising New York. In key with the Freudian thinking of the time, an analysis of the bomber's handwriting revealed that he wrote his Ws like a pair of breasts. Brussell concluded that he was unmarried, and also that he would wear double-breasted suits – he was later found to be spot on!

On a rather cheerier note, Channel 4 came up with *The Cleverest Ape in the World*, presented by Susan Blackmore (University of the West of England). She tried to discover what, if anything, distinguishes us from our near relatives. We were introduced to a chimpanzee that could recognise herself in a mirror, an orang-utan that could communicate in sign language, and another chimpanzee that could count. Apparently, several British universities have already sent them unconditional offers. Other explanations for these amazing talents could have been aired (imitation, conditioning, etc.) and Sue Blackmore generously concluded that 'in some tasks chimpanzees are cleverer than us'. I would argue for rather more than this – I have yet to see chimpanzees take part in synchronised swimming, watch daytime TV or hold fashion shows, which in my book makes them far superior to us.

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## Radio – John Morton listens in

## Hitting the killer question

DROPPING in on Radio 5 Live, it happened to be the day after the Scottish Executive announced proposals for law reform in Scotland on smacking and Dr Penelope Leach (Royal Free and University College Medical School) was facing a rather forgettable interviewer. Recall that the Scottish proposals include a total ban on blows to the head, shaking and the use of implements. There is also a ban proposed on any physical punishment of children up to and including the age of two.

The interviewer was unexpectedly unsympathetic, but the admirable Dr Leach ploughed on with humour and determination. Penny pointed out that two-year-old children were at the greatest risk of being severely beaten and that parents who successfully find alternative (and more effective) ways of controlling their children and their tempers would stand a very good chance of lasting out. She did muse about people making an entry in their diary on their child's third birthday 'Start hitting Johnny today' and borderers threatening to take their brats the 100 yards down the road to England if they didn't shut it.

By the way, I first wrote about this topic in May last year, referring to the government's consultation document. I noted then that the Society did not have a publicly stated position. We still don't.

On the theme of Scotland, *In the Psychiatrist's Chair* is running a series of repeats of old sittings, and the first revisited subject was R.D. Laing. In the introduction we heard that the original proposal for the programme name was *What makes you tick?* Anthony Clare also mused on why people ever accepted

invitations to appear. One notable said it was a way of meeting a psychiatrist without having to go through the unpleasant business of developing symptoms!

The Laing interview was from 1985, and the glory days were over. Both Laing and Clare were a little on the nervous side, Clare being known even then as a critic of Laing's methods. The killer question, slow in elaboration,

was: 'Suppose you were to become profoundly psychomotor retarded, profoundly depressed, suicidal, what would you want someone like me to do?' (long pause) 'If anything indeed?' Laing asked first that someone check he didn't have anything rational to worry about, and then to give him drugs to get him into a brighter state of mind. Not the answer we might have expected. A remarkable and illuminating interview.

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