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## Book review : 'You're Nicked' : investigating British television police series

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## **You're Nicked: Investigating British Television Police Series**

Lamb, Ben, *You're Nicked: Investigating British Television Police Series*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; 217 pp.: ISBN 9781526125859 (hbk), £80.00.

Reviewed by Dr Richard Hewett, the University of Salford

*You're Nicked* utilises a well-chosen range of case studies to examine historical trends in the development of the British television police series between the 1950s and the 2010s. Previous works in this area have either concentrated on a more limited timespan (Sydney-Smith, 2002), accommodated crime drama as part of a wider television history (Cooke, 2015), provided a multi-national critique (Turnbull, 2014), or focused on alternative sub-genres such as the detective drama (Piper, 2015). Lamb's monograph therefore provides a much-needed overview of the national specifics of small screen cops and robbers – or as the author puts it, 'series that regularly depict the routine work of police constables and detectives' (2020, p. 3).

This rationale for the selection of case studies excludes cross overs with the action, espionage and fantasy genres, while its focus on series that were popular mainstream successes at the time of original transmission also excludes the marginal. This is not to say, however, that Lamb's beat re-treads ground already covered by his predecessors. Although landmark series *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955-1976), *Z Cars* (1962-78) and *The Sweeney* (1975-1979) are included, they are accompanied by less well-remembered stable mates such as *Hunter's Walk* (1973-1976), and the methodology employed is designed to offer a fresh socio-political perspective. In particular, Lamb employs detailed textual analysis to examine the deployment of public and domestic spaces within these dramas, highlighting changing relations between the police force and the public in the process. The impact of changes in production practice, such as the shift away from multi-camera studio towards single camera location film and later

digital video, are considered with regard to how set design and camera work influence the depiction of, variously, the police station space, the domestic settings of civilians, and the homes of police officials. With the exception of the opening segment, which encompasses the 1950s and 1960s, each chapter focuses on a separate decade, utilising two to three case studies apiece. These are framed historically via research into the social, institutional and political discourses taking place during each of the eras covered. Thus, *Juliet Bravo* (1980-1985), *The Gentle Touch* (1980-1984) and *The Bill* (1984-2010) are investigated to unpack the impact of video cameras, the first two of these utilising the recording medium's clarity of image to examine policing methods from a woman's perspective, while the latter's employment of handheld camera work reflects the chaotic and high pressure environment of Sun Hill station. At the same time, Lamb illustrates how narratives reflect the impact of the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE), whether this takes the form of increased paperwork, inhibiting CID officers' ability to operate freely (*The Gentle Touch*), or as an effective set of guidelines, safeguarding civilian rights at the level of community policing (*Juliet Bravo*).

Using this methodology Lamb makes the case that UK television police series have moved from depicting primarily working class concerns, as epitomised by the inhabitants of Newtown in *Z Cars*, to a modern scenario in which series such as *Broadchurch* (2013-2017) and *Happy Valley* (2014- ) focus more on the middle-class population. There is also a shift from the depiction of a close relationship between the public and the uniformed police in the 1960s, to a focus on the impact of austerity upon beleaguered law enforcement officers now obliged by managers to prioritise caseloads according to diminished resources. In particular, police dramas of the 2010s foreground the psychological impact on protagonists of their

increasingly pressurised working environment, to a far greater extent than that experienced by their twentieth century predecessors.

One of *You're Nicked's* main strengths is the attention it gives to series that, while popular in their day, have received comparatively little coverage when compared with 'landmark' productions. The perils of selecting any case study as representative of a particular era have been detailed elsewhere (Bignell, 2006), and Lamb largely avoids offering any one show as paradigmatic by comparing and contrasting each series with contemporaneous productions. Thus *Waking the Dead* (2000-2011), *New Tricks* (2003-2015) and *Life on Mars* (2006-2007) provide complementary perspectives on the tensions between 'old style' policing and twenty-first century technologies and procedures. In order to accommodate a study of such chronological breadth, Lamb has necessarily imposed a strict focus, though his remit of examining the 'routine work' of 'police constables and detectives' is more rigorously applied in some cases than others. While *Prime Suspect* (1991-2006) and *A Touch of Frost* (1992-2010) both clearly meet the stated requirements, *Cracker's* (1993-2006) spotlight on a police consultant makes it a less comfortable fit, particularly when one considers that near-contemporary *Inspector Morse* (1987-2000) – which is not covered in any detail – has thus far received significantly less academic attention. It is also notable that, while claiming to cover the 1950s and 1960s, the opening chapter focuses primarily on *Z Cars*, *Dixon of Dock Green* being allocated just three of the book's 217 pages. This section might profitably have been expanded to provide the same degree of comparison that is the strength of subsequent chapters, perhaps contrasting *Dixon* with *Fabian of the Yard* (1954-1956) (though this was admittedly less popular with British audiences), or *Z Cars* with *No Hiding Place* (1959-1967).

The book follows a clearly outlined structure throughout, and the points made for each of the periods covered are neatly summarised both at the end of their respective chapters and the final conclusion. *You're Nicked* could therefore be used either as the core textbook for a module on UK police drama, or as the source of further readings on any television histories course. Lamb's monograph makes a valuable intervention, offering a fresh perspective on the analysis of small screen crime drama, while also filling a sizeable gap in the history of the genre.

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### **Author biography**

**Richard Hewett** is a lecturer in Media Theory at the University of Salford. He is a British television historian, focusing on performance style and adaptation. His book, *The Changing*

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