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MURDER,

THEY WRITE

By Jim Colucci

Bullets rip. Blood spatters. Maggots writhe.

Hardly the stuff of your average chick flick. Yet for all three series in TV's top-rated forensic franchise, it's a woman overseeing it all. *Watch!* sat down with Carol Mendelsohn, Ann Donahue and Pam Veasey—the showrunners, or head honchos, of *CSI*, *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: NY*, respectively—and found that the three had quite a bit in common aside from their gender. They all were inspired by early 1980s NBC dramas *St. Elsewhere* and *Hill Street Blues*. They all show a versatility in bouncing between different TV genres, allowing them to have written themselves out of some tight career corners. And finally, they all advise any young woman or man who longs to follow in their high-heeled footprints to remember their sensible mantra: write, write and write. Because that's the only way one might someday get the chance to be known as one of the Women of *CSI*.



CAROL MENDELSON, *CSI*

It's a late Thursday morning in mid-March, and Carol Mendelsohn is running more than an hour late for work.

For the past three days, the *CSI* executive producer has been doing double duty, running the red-hot forensic crime drama in the afternoon only after reporting each morning to the jury pool at the Los Angeles County courthouse. Her presence there is ironic, considering the impact the show has had on the criminal justice system—as the media have dubbed it, “The *CSI* Effect.” Jurors are reportedly disillusioned that real-life evidence isn’t as slick, smart—or unfortunately, as well-funded—as the clues as-seen-on-TV.

Excused after waiting through her required number of days, Mendelsohn is sure that even if she had entered the *voir dire* process for jury selection, she would have been dismissed due to her connections not only to *CSI* but also to the many law enforcement officials whose expertise the show taps on a regular basis. In fact, Mendelsohn’s law enforcement background reaches far further back than does her career in television.

“I became a lawyer because my dad was a lawyer,” she explains. But her heart had always belonged to Hollywood—something the Chicago native credits to her upbringing as “an only child who grew up sitting way too close to the TV.” And so, ultimately bored after five years of practicing law in Washington, D.C., Mendelsohn enrolled in a TV script writing course at the American Film Institute. And after a few years honing her new craft in D.C.’s theater world, Mendelsohn finally made her move to L.A.

As she practiced turning out sample after sample of TV’s top dramas, Mendelsohn came up with a *Remington Steele* idea that featured her first action sequence: a chase scene on elephant-back. That “spec” script landed Mendelsohn the first paying job of her second career: a 1985 freelance episode for NBC’s *Fame*. After two more assignments for the series, the new writer got an agent and a Hollywood deal, working for legendary TV producer Stephen J. Cannell (*The A-Team*, *The Rockford Files*). The timing was lucky, Mendelsohn says, because TV networks were at that time beginning to mandate that there be at least one woman on every writing staff.

For three years in the late 1980s, Mendelsohn moved among the company’s shows, starting on ABC’s *Hardcastle & McCormick* and jumping to NBC detective series *Stingray* and CBS’ mafia drama



Carol Mendelsohn with *CSI* star Marg Helgenberger

Mendelsohn: Tony Esparza/CBS; Helgenberger/Mendelsohn: Ron P. Jaffe/CBS

Carol Mendelsohn, *CSI*

Writer: *Fame*, *Hardcastle & McCormick*, *Stingray*, *Wiseguy*, *Tour of Duty*, *Gabriel's Fire*, *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill*, *Melrose Place* and *Providence*.

Big Break: Mendelsohn came up with an idea for *Remington Steele*, which featured her first action sequence: Remington and Laura in a chase scene, each atop an elephant.

Wiseguy. "It was great," she remembers, "because Cannell had a TV team that was doing what movies were doing—great action sequences, ramping cars and blowing things up." But Mendelsohn had unknowingly steered *Stingray's* classic Corvette right into a career trap. "I ended up stuck only in the realm of male, action-oriented TV," she explains. "People would say, 'Can she write for women?' My agent would say, 'She is a woman!'"

Mendelsohn did score a few freelance gigs on the somewhat softer side. In 1994, though, she landed a fateful assignment: to create a telemovie as a pilot for her own potential series called *Frogmen*, about the adventures of a team of Navy SEALs. But when the show's would-be star, a certain O.J. Simpson, was arrested for murder, Mendelsohn's completed pilot movie ended up jailed as well.

Her career bounced back when a friend who knew her love of soap operas lobbied to get her a meeting with Darren Star for his FOX hit *Melrose Place*. She stayed for five years among the twisted denizens of the Melrose apartment complex, rising to the rank of executive producer and showrunner. She followed up with a short tour of NBC's *Providence*—and then afterward found that, frustratingly, she was now oppositely pegged as exclusively a soap opera writer.

Going with the flow, Mendelsohn consulted with CBS' then-director of development Nina Tassler, and created a soap pilot based on the eccentric, mob-tinged Las Vegas upbringing of journalist Susan Berman. Mendelsohn's pilot never got shot, but one of its competitors for the network's production budget—a little-known concept also set in Vegas, called *CSI*—did. Tassler asked Mendelsohn to step in and run the fledgling pilot with its creator Anthony E. Zuiker.

"It was a real learning curve, because at first we didn't know what we were doing," Mendelsohn remembers of the show's early days, laughing about a time when, not sure how fibers might come into play in a crime scene, one *CSI* writer dragged another across the room—and then everyone checked his person for telltale bits of carpet. "But the show has always had a strong voice, and it has never let us take a wrong turn." Mendelsohn credits *CSI's* success to the input she has always received from a collaborative team of actors, technical advisers and writers—including Zuiker and Executive Producer Ann Donahue, word of whose initial acceptance of the writing/producing slot, Mendelsohn says, "made me hang up the phone, pull over on Olympic Boulevard and start crying, because then I just knew the show was going to work."

Now 56, Mendelsohn says that although it's possible she might someday be susceptible to a different kind of *ism*—"I'm probably, if not the oldest writer in television these days, I would guess I'm in the top 10," she admits—she hasn't lately encountered any difficulties being a woman in the business. "When Ann and I first started having dinners with other women showrunners," she remembers, "we could fill one round table. Now we could fill a banquet hall." And

"One of my good friends is the director of the L.A. County Sheriff's Department crime lab, Barry Fisher. Yes, we at *CSI* have been depleting his ranks a little. Luckily, he still invites me for Passover dinner."

—CAROL MENDELSON

on a show like *CSI*, she says, being in touch with one's feminine side might even have distinct advantages. "Anthony found a pot of gold with *CSI*, because all of us like to think we're armchair detectives," Mendelsohn explains. "But women in particular love mysteries, and a lot of women watch our show. And so it's great that with all three *CSIs*, we have women writing for women."

ANN DONAHUE, *CSI: MIAMI*

When Ann Donahue was in the eighth grade, she wrote her own sequel to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In her follow-up to the Mark Twain classic, raft-borne Huck paddles quite a bit farther upriver, through the small, southern Ohio town of Loveland, where Donahue's parents had recently relocated their six children from suburban Cleveland. "No one wanted my sequel—isn't that strange?" the *CSI: Miami* showrunner asks, laughing.

After only two years at Ohio State University, Donahue dropped out because "I didn't see what I wanted in the world at college. And this will make no sense, because I was gay, but I had met my husband." A ballplayer, her new spouse convinced her to move to California, where baseball weather lasts all year. And as a closet writer, Donahue did fantasize about a Golden Age Hollywood, where she might be welcomed by Fitzgerald, Faulkner and the other fabled members of the Algonquin Roundtable West. "My goal had always been to write film or books. I wasn't thinking about television at all."

Meanwhile, Donahue took a secretarial job at a law firm. By this time divorced, she began training to be a writer by typing up her own scripts along with the legal contracts. One screenplay, about a trio of private-school coeds during World War II, ultimately netted Donahue her first assignments in television. "I called them 'Three Girls Who...' movies," she says of the telefilms she began writing for the broadcast networks. "Three Girls Who join the Army. Three Girls Who are dating one guy named Richard. And they'd only give those jobs to women."

Feeling pigeonholed, Donahue longed to write about "something more meaningful," like the war in Vietnam, which had so consumed the nightly news during her adolescence. Eventually, and purely on spec, she did, paying tribute to eight largely unsung nurses killed in the fighting. The script landed Donahue her first TV staff job, on ABC's similarly themed drama *China Beach*.

She soon joined the final season of FOX's *21 Jump Street* and met executive producer David Levinson, a mentor whom she credits as "my rabbi. Lou Grant to my Mary Richards." Under Levinson's tutelage, the young writer learned every skill she would later need as a showrunner—which, after stints on the FOX soap *Beverly Hills, 90210* and quirky CBS drama *Picket Fences*, she then had the opportunity to become.



Donahue: Ryan Romero/CBS

In 1996, ABC debuted the police drama *High Incident* with Donahue at the helm. The show lasted only one season but boosted its first-time showrunner into TV's highest ranks. "I kept thinking, 'Well obviously someone else should get the title of executive producer!'" Donahue explains. "It's probably a female way of thinking. But any showrunner who tells you the first time he or she is not scared is either not really showrunning or is lying."

Donahue next ran a short-lived NBC comedy entitled *MYOB*—then she was out of a job. But "the stars aligned," Donahue says, when her agent suggested she meet with another client who was about to begin running an under-the-radar new CBS drama. Even more fortuitously, the client, Carol Mendelsohn, lived just three doors down. And so Donahue rang Mendelsohn's doorbell, and began discussing working on a new show called *CSI*.

Donahue and her new boss, Mendelsohn, immediately found they had a lot in common, having worked for many of the same production companies and even for different branches of the same law firm. And so, Donahue says, the two women immediately discovered they had a shorthand in communicating ideas, leading to the smooth launch of *CSI*.

In fact, the show worked so well, surprising even CBS executives by handily winning its new time slot on ultra-competitive Thursday, that in

"I kept thinking, 'Well, obviously someone else should get the title of executive producer! It's probably a female way of thinking.'"
—ANN DONAHUE

Ann Donahue, *CSI: Miami*

Writer: *China Beach*; *21 Jump Street*; *Beverly Hills, 90210*; *Picket Fences*; *Murder One*; *High Incident*; and *MYOB*.

Big Break: Interested in writing about larger issues like the Vietnam War, Donahue wrote a script in the 1980s that paid tribute to eight largely unsung nurses killed in the fighting. That bit of foresight landed Donahue her first TV staff job as a writer on the drama *China Beach*.

its second season, CBS President Les Moonves called the creative team into his office. He wanted a spinoff. "He said, 'Pick a city,'" Donahue remembers. "I leaned over to Anthony and said, 'This never happens. Usually you're in here begging them to take your idea.'" Producer Jerry Bruckheimer, whose mother lives in Miami, came up with the winning suggestion, and the team flew to Florida to formulate the new show's characters and feel. Whereas Las Vegas is all about secrets and neon night, Donahue explains, *CSI: Miami* would reflect the bright sunshine and see-and-be-seen rhythm of its setting. And once again, Donahue would be in charge.

Now 52 and partnered with TV writer/producer Anne McGrail, with whom she has three children under 3—daughter Ava and twin sons Jack and Leo—Donahue is content as she settles into an office armchair at the Manhattan Beach, Calif., studio where *CSI: Miami* is shot. "I truly love what I'm doing," she says. "I've had more success and reward than I ever thought possible."

Twenty years ago, Donahue adds, she doubts it would have happened that all three shows in a crimesolving franchise would be run by women. "It used to be men in charge, who would say, 'Well, we need a woman on staff for the rape episode.' It's because of the few women ahead of us that we were able to get our foot in the door."

And yet, she theorizes, sometimes when dealing with a bludgeoned victim, a woman's touch is just what's needed. "*CSI* goes big by going small. And women are good at noticing the small details that can turn the course of an entire investigation."

PAM VEASEY, *CSI: NEW YORK*

In 1986, Pam Veasey was a young receptionist on the hit NBC sitcom *Gimme a Break*. And then the show's producers did.

Having heard about her writing aspirations, showrunner Arthur Julian asked Veasey one day for one of her writing samples to read in the bathroom. Minutes later, Julian's fellow showrunners Rod Parker and Hal Cooper called her into their office. "They said, 'We're going to have to let you go as receptionist,'" Veasey explains. "And they knew I would do this: I said, 'Fine! Because I am gonna go be a writer!' At this point they were falling over laughing. Hal finally calmed me down and said, 'Shh! It's because we're going to make you a writer.'"



Veasey had been a political science and journalism dual major at the University of Southern California when she first fell in love with comedy. "I was one of those people who everyone said was funny," she notes. But after a year and a half of performing stand-up, "it turned out I wasn't really that funny outside the 15 freeway in Pullman, Wash.," her hometown, where the high school cheerleader had won the title of Junior Miss. After USC, Veasey planned on becoming either a presidential speechwriter or broadcast journalist, and landed her first gig covering the 1984 San Francisco presidential convention for CBS News. She soon joined the Democratic campaign—but when there was no President Mondale later that year, she decided to venture into writing via that fateful *Gimme* gig.

Veasey wrote six episodes of the Nell Carter sitcom in its final season, and freelance episodes of several other comedies as well, before a writers' strike in 1988 convinced her to try politics once more. Again her candidate, Michael Dukakis, lost—but one of her political co-workers knew of a writing job back in Hollywood on a brand-new FOX show called *In Living Color*. Throwing together some sample sketches overnight, she nailed a spot on the cutting-edge comedy she calls "raunchy, gutsy, aggressive and fun." By the end of *Color's* run, Veasey had become the series' showrunner, one of what is to this day just a handful of African-American female bosses in prime time. She proceeded to run two short-lived sitcoms before burning out on the TV comedy genre altogether. "It all seemed like the same type of comedy that I had been doing," she explains. "Setup, punchline. I felt like there wasn't anything out there that I really wanted to write."

So, against the advice of her agents, Veasey left Hollywood for a year, regrouping at her house in

"We all fell in love with New York—the way it moved, its attitudes. So when I heard that CBS was going to do *CSI: NY*, I thought, 'I've got to do that show!'"

—PAM VEASEY

Pam Veasey, *CSI: NY*

Writer: *Gimme a Break*, *In Living Color*, *Between Brothers*, *The Gregory Hines Show*, *Nash Bridges*, *Matt Waters*, *Martial Law* and *The District*.

Big Break: While serving as a receptionist on the sitcom *Gimme a Break*, Veasey got her own break. The show's producers fired her—and promptly rehired her as one of the show's writers.

Colorado and reinventing herself as a drama writer. For one thing, she says, whereas one can be racially pigeonholed in comedy, "drama was the one place where I thought it wouldn't be about color—because there was nobody like me." So, armed with new drama samples, she soon landed a job on CBS' *Nash Bridges*, where producers were looking for a writer with a comedy background to help create a buddy comedy dynamic for series stars Don Johnson and Cheech Marin. She moved on to the late '90s CBS series *Matt Waters*, *Martial Law* and ultimately *The District*. The problem was even after having run several comedies, as a drama writer, she had had to start all over, practically at the bottom.

By the last of her three years on *The District*, Veasey was again in the showrunners' club. That series was set in Washington, D.C., but as Veasey explains, its premise was based on the work of a real-life deputy police commissioner from New York. "And so in the process of writing the show, we all fell in love with New York—the way it moved, its attitudes," she says. Hearing that CBS was planning a New York-based *CSI* spinoff, Veasey inquired at the network but was told, "We have people over there to do that." But luckily, when Veasey had earlier appeared on a Women in Television panel with *CSI* showrunners Ann Donahue and Carol Mendelsohn, the show's impresario creator Anthony E. Zuiker had been in the audience. Impressed, Zuiker specifically requested Veasey, "and it seemed like kismet," she remembers.

By this time married to football coach Marvin Williams, and the mother of two boys—Avery, now 10, and Mason, now 8—Veasey joined *CSI: NY* and by the second season was running the show. "What you find out about showrunning," the multigenre veteran explains, "is that it really is all about people. Being able to hear their concerns—your actors, crew, set designer, wardrobe, casting—and getting all these people to invest in one singular style of a TV show.

"Here is a show from the No. 1 franchise on television, and it's with Gary Sinise and Melina Kanakaredes and a whole crew of other terrific actors. And to be perfectly honest, not a show about color," she says, ticking off reasons why she loves being exactly where she is. But for Veasey, the most interesting part of running *CSI: NY* is still getting the chance to write the show, crafting the intricate, clue-driven forensic mysteries audiences clearly crave. Admittedly a C student in chemistry, she relies on a writing staff that includes a former NYPD cop and Queens district attorney, and technical advisers to spice up the forensic details. "And now," she jokes, "I use the word 'epithelial' in sentences like it's common." **W**

Veasey: Robert Yorks/CBS