Perry Mason Encyclopedia Article

Perry Mason

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Perry Mason

America's favorite crime-solving lawyer, Perry Mason, was a character created by lawyer-turned-author Erle Stanley Gardner (1890-1970). Eventually featured in over 80 popular books, Gardner's creation had a modest success in films and radio, but proved a sensation on television. Mason's first appearance came in *The Case of the Velvet Claws,* published in 1933, but it was not until subsequent volumes that Gardner allowed Mason to spend much time in court.

Raymond Burr (left) as Perry Mason in a scene from the television show of the same name.
The mixture of legalistic detail with the time honored whodunit format was a winning combination, but one which Warner Brothers failed to capture in its series of six films (1934-1937); there was also a brief radio series in 1943. Determined not to repeat Hollywood's mistakes, Gardner formed his own production company and oversaw the creation of the *Perry Mason* series, which debuted on CBS-TV in 1957 and ran until 1966.

Cold War viewers who had been exposed to the Army-McCarthy Hearings quickly warmed to this invincible knight who invariably ferreted out the enemy within. With undertones of film-noir, each episode led to a gripping conclusion of almost ritualistic predictability: Mason's courtroom theatrics and cross-examination elicited a sudden confession from the one who had committed the murder for which Mason's client was on trial. This weekly morality play made a television star out of movie villain Raymond Burr, sparked public awareness of America's legal system, and led to countless other courtroom drama series on the tube. The Burr/Mason combo proved so popular that, after starring in the *Ironside* series as the wheelchair-bound detective, the actor reprised his most famous role in *Perry Mason Returns* (1985), the first in a sequence of 90-minute made-for-television movies which ended only with Burr's death in 1993.

Further Reading:

Collins, Max Allan, and John Javna. *The Critics' Choice: The Best of Crime and Detective TV.* New York, Harmony Books, 1988.

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Kelleher, Brian, and Diana Merrill. *The Perry Mason TV Book.* New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987.