

He reads between the lies.

THE MENTALIST



The pilot of [The Mentalist](#) (CBS) opens with a smarmy-looking man who resembles a Ken doll approaching a press conference outside a residence where parents are thanking police and volunteers for searching for their missing teenage daughter and utterly failing (as she has just been found dead). My first thought was "Who thanks police for their help while their dead daughter is being gurneyed off to the morgue like three feet away?" But that is neither here nor there for a review – I just accepted that the show wasn't going to be about realistic displays of emotion, and that they were trying to jam about a dozen plot elements into ten seconds.

The Ken doll man then heads off into the parents' house to steal food from their kitchen. The Ken doll is our hero, Patrick Jane, ex-fake psychic and current consultant for the [California Bureau of Investigation](#), where he uses his skills in mentalism to solve crimes. Sort of like if [Sylvia Browne](#) became talented at deductive reasoning, reformed, and morphed into [Sherlock Holmes](#).

We see the world through Jane's eyes, which are constantly seeking the truth behind the crimes he investigates, and then shoving it down our throats as though the viewers of this show are

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Written by Alison Smith

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children that need to be taken by the hand and led through a plot so simple it makes [CSI](#) look like

[Anna Karenina](#)

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For instance, while stealing food from the kitchen, Jane notices a few things (and therefore so does the camera). There are a variety of teas in the pantry, and they all have names like "Serenity" and "Tranquility." The photos on the refrigerator of the parents are emotionless, while for some reason there is a strip of photos of the daughter and the father from one of those carnival photo booths where she is sitting in his lap. And not looking happy about it. The kitchen is clean and utilitarian.

While Jane is stealing food from the kitchen, the mother enters and he makes her a cup of tea as well. They chat, and Jane discovers that the mother suspects the father of killing the daughter, even though police think it was a neighbor boy. Why? Because the father was molesting the daughter. Of course, Jane knew this already because he looked at the photos and is not a mindless twit. The California Bureau of Investigation's detectives are apparently all idiots, because really, is it possible no one else came to that conclusion?

Jane convinces the mother that with a "mother's instinct" and since "wives usually know when their husbands are lying," all she has to do is ask her husband if he is the killer. The husband enters, Jane asks, the husband lies, and the mother shoots her husband. Something like twenty detectives rush in to see what happened, and Jane says the utterly priceless line, "Honestly, this is not as bad as it looks." I could practically hear the rimshot echoing through the scene.

But it is that bad, isn't it? The killer is dead, the mother will have to stand trial. The daughter is dead, and yet Jane stands there, looking smug, with an annoying half-smile on his face. It isn't as though the true identity of the killer would've never come out, so all Jane did for the California Bureau of Investigation was ensure that they'd have to process a second crime scene.

The part I've described thus far is the first ten minutes of the pilot episode of the show.

So far, there have been five episodes of *The Mentalist*, and all are roughly the same type of crime show we've been watching for years, thanks to the nine thousand incarnations of

[Law and Order](#)

. I've heard skeptics praise

The Mentalist

again and again, and yet I'm not sure why. The crimes so far have been typical of the genre, except they seem like detective fiction written by someone who doesn't know anything about investigations or law. And there's also the annoying fact that the main character has started to routinely use hypnosis to recover memories from victims.

I see why skeptics can appreciate *The Mentalist* to a degree – the main character used to make his living lying and pretending to be psychic and now says in nearly every episode "There are no psychics," but still – does that make it a good story? Is his character even believable? And

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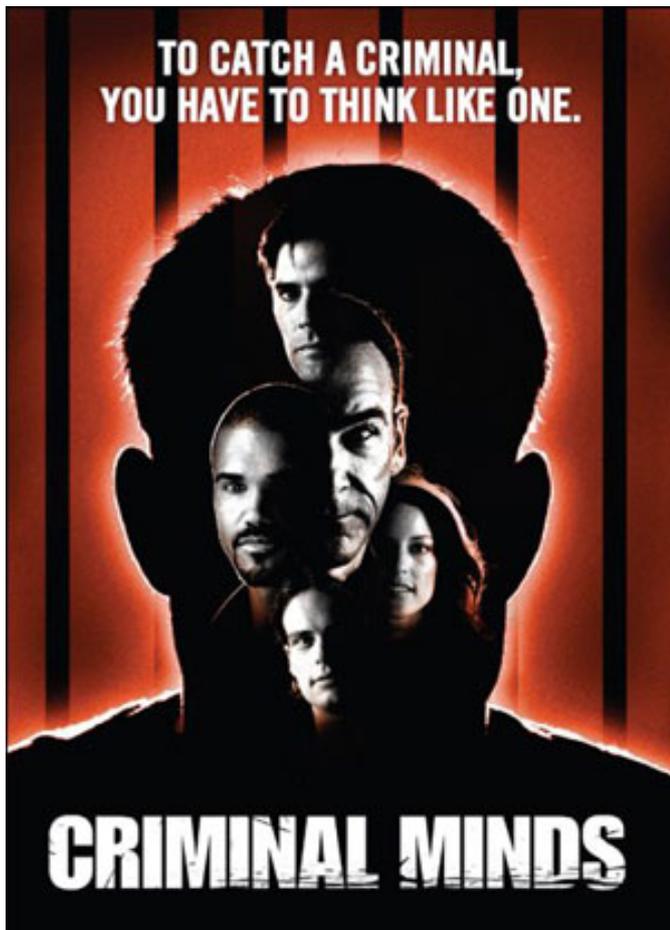
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the answer is no – not really. Not unless you make a caricature of a real mentalist. I mean, part of being a mentalist is throwing out a billion observations in the hopes that one sticks and you get a huge hit. But that's not exactly how one investigates crimes.

The Mentalist tries very hard to be quirky, in the same style as [Monk](#) or [Psych](#), and if you like either of those shows you'll probably like this one, too.

However, there is another show that is often overlooked and has just as many skeptical elements, relies on psychology like *The Mentalist*, has realistic crime often based in historical crimes, cites statistics and literature, and manages to combine interesting characters with interesting plot – a difficult task in the realm of crime drama.



The show is CBS' [Criminal Minds](#), which follows the (fictional) investigations of the [criminal profilers](#) of the FBI's [Behavioral Analysis Unit](#)

. You may not ever hear the characters utter anything as blatantly pro-skeptic as "There's no such thing as psychics," but the plots of the episodes are definitely rooted in skepticism starting with the very first famous quotation given in the pilot - "The belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness." Joseph Conrad.

Where *The Mentalist* is quirky, *Criminal Minds* is dark. The BAU team often investigates the crimes of serial killers, searches for missing persons being held by the most twisted individuals

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imaginable, and follows a trail of clues that seems like murky water to the casual viewer rather than stuffing your mouth with refrigerator photos with implications so obvious it's a wonder that the cast of *The Mentalist* doesn't stare directly into the camera and say, "Well, duh."

For example, in the episode of *Criminal Minds* "[The Big Game](#)", the BAU investigates the murder of a couple following a Superbowl party. After reviewing records, the team realizes that about a week prior to the murder, a person walking their dog near the house reported a suspicious person. When police responded, they were unable to find the suspicious person that had been reported. At this point, logically, I would assume that the killer had staked out the house. *But Criminal Minds* was able to surprise me when the team decided that, in fact, the killer was the person who had been walking the dog – and had called police to gauge their response time.

In other words, *Criminal Minds* came up with a logical answer that wasn't the obvious one. I didn't feel spoonfed, just interested. *Criminal Minds* is, stylistically, like reading along with a Sherlock Holmes story while simultaneously trying to figure out the mystery yourself whereas *The Mentalist* is like reading a Sherlock Holmes story that has been rewritten to appeal to five year olds.



And *Criminal Minds* has another element I love – the character Spencer Reid, a young FBI agent whose [eidetic memory](#) is a source of near-constant annoyance for

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his fellow agents, and yet is a rush of interesting facts for the viewer. Reid spends every episode rattling off statistics and details of historic crimes that are scarily accurate for a fictional television show.

The difference between Reid and Jane, though they have a similar massive compendium of knowledge, is that Jane's infallible logic makes him cocky, smug, and sort of annoying; whereas Reid is awkward, shy, and made out of depth rather than cardboard.

Not to say that *Criminal Minds* is a series of facts. It isn't. The crimes sometimes seem unbelievable – as they normally are in this genre. But in watching

Criminal Minds

, you'll get a larger dose of skepticism than a repetitive "There's no such thing as psychics" quote.

Seeing a show that takes a hard line with psychics is gratifying, and as a skeptic I support *The Mentalist*

for the views it seems to represent. And after working a few kinks out, it might turn into a great show. It just isn't there yet. And until it gets there, I'll console myself with

Criminal Minds

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THE MENTALIST: 3 out of 5 stars

CRIMINAL MINDS: 5 out of 5 stars

SKEPTICAL FURTHER READING:

[The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading](#) by Ian Rowland ()

[Psychological Subtleties 2](#) by Banachek

[The Works of Robert Ressler](#)