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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
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DVDs: TV's Top 10 Crime Solvers

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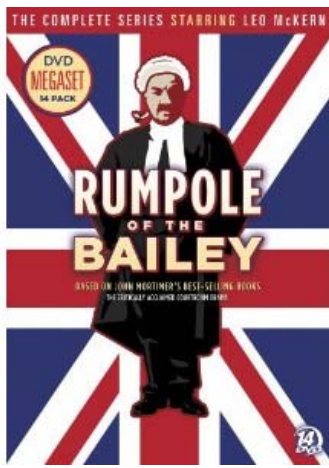
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TONY SHALHOUB

MONK

THE COMPLETE SERIES





Monk: The Complete Series (\$249.98; Universal) is out on DVD and it's a compulsively thorough job that's worthy of the OCD man himself. I've been very down on bulky boxed sets for a while -- exactly how many people want to make a DVD boxed set the centerpiece of their living room? But this one strikes a clever balance. You get 32 DVDs with all 125 episodes from the eight season run of the Emmy-winning series starring Tony Shalhoub as the man more likely to wipe down a crime scene than preserve it. (Such a mess!) It's packed with the extras and commentaries we expect nowadays. And the box itself is an impressive rectangle that can fit sideways on a shelf or nestle on your coffee table if you so choose. But there's one more option. You can remove the plastic sleeve that protects it and crack the boxed set in half: suddenly you have all eight seasons nicely displayed in a manner that will fit snugly even on shallow shelves built for DVDs. Each season is in order and offered in its own DVD set for easy access. Finicky fans can heave a sigh of relief. It's a very nice job that won't take up too much extra space. Or -- as with so many massive boxed sets -- you can just remove the eight seasons and put the boxed set itself in the closet. I'm one of the annoying fans who still mourns the loss of Bitty Schram. But Monk himself is a unique and wonderful character. And where, I wonder, does he fit into the pantheon of top TV crime solvers? And who ARE the top TV crime solvers? You don't need to be Ellery Queen to know a list is coming. I've avoided just regular old cops and super heroes and procedural shows like *Law & Order* or *CSI*, which are more about the cases than the people solving them. I can't quite put the distinction into words, but I know a crime solver when I see one.

TV'S TOP 10 CRIME SOLVERS

1. **Jim Rockford**/*The Rockford Files* -- A childhood favorite. Jim Rockford is the Everyman detective, a guy struggling to pay his bills who'd rather talk than fight and rarely carries a gun. It's as close as TV ever got to John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee. Darn close, actually. Jim Rockford just felt real, the same way *Hill Street Blues* seemed to capture (in dramatic fashion) what being a cop on the streets was actually like.

2. **Sherlock Holmes** by Jeremy Brett/*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* -- TV had tackled Holmes (the greatest detective of them all) many times before and will many times in the future (including a cheeky modern update airing on PBS called *Sherlock* that begins this Sunday. But Jeremy Brett has surely put his definitive stamp on the role that all others will be judged by for generations to come. Quirky, moody, addictive, compelling, intellectually alive, manic -- his Holmes is electric. And he is featured in a series that was perfectly in tune with the stories as written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. No fancy trappings or rethinking of the role - just pitch perfect period settings with the intelligence and humanity of real people, rather than cardboard characters.

3. **Jane Tennison**/*Prime Suspect* -- To be honest, after the first two miniseries installments, the *Prime Suspect* franchise is quite variable in quality, ranging from solid to okay. But no apologies are necessary for DCI Jane Tennison, one of the great characters in TV history. Wonderfully flawed, she is above all great at her job. And those first two installments in her story -- two complete miniseries that tackle racism, sexism, class and so much more -- are TV at its absolute peak.

4. **Maddie Hayes and David Addison**/*Moonlighting* -- If we were talking about movie crime solvers, you can be certain *The Thin Man* series would be right towards the top. Crime solving can be a lark, you know. And while *Hart To Hart* and the superior *Remington Steele* gave it a go, few TV shows ever matched the bubbly, screwball comedy brilliance, fourth wall-bursting inventiveness of *Moonlighting*. Creator Glenn Gordon Caron could have taken six months to deliver a script for all I cared. The result was so mind-spinningly funny and smart and silly (not to mention Shakespearean at times), it was always worth the wait. He and Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd should thank their lucky stars the three of them

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came together for this unique, heady TV series. No crime show was ever sexier.

5. **Horace Rumpole** / *Rumpole of the Bailey* -- Even She Who Must Be Obeyed would admit that Rumpole is an iconic figure, a shambling man of justice who can talk circles around most anyone and a shrewd judge of character. Rumpole was so superior in court, it makes the eleventh hour shenanigans of Perry Mason (always breaking down the final witness at the last moment) seem tepid in comparison. As with so many of our heroes, Rumpole is so smart he's kept in check by career setbacks and a home life where he is most certainly NOT the man in charge. A new packaging for *Rumpole of the Bailey: The Complete Megaset* (\$99.95; A&E) has just come out. As far as I can tell, it is identical to the complete series set that came out in 2006, down to the picture quality (which is fine, though they might have at least cleaned up the title sequence). Numerous bonus features are a pleasure and it's packaged in a very slim set indeed for a show that includes 42 episodes from seven seasons (as well as a feature length bonus film). If you already own it, there's no need to upgrade. If you don't and are a fan of British mysteries, by all means buy or rent it right away. Then you'll be able to dive into the novels as well.

6. **Columbo** / *Columbo* -- "Just one more thing..." Criminals never heard more dangerous words than these, especially when they were delivered with such sly, disarming "I know I'm an idiot but humor me" charm by homicide detective Lieutenant Columbo. Peter Falk kept returning to the role again and again and can you blame him? Who wouldn't love getting to pull the rug out from under smarty pants LA criminals time after time and doing it with enough deductive reasoning to make Holmes sit up and pay attention? The mysteries varied all over the map in quality but the appeal of the man himself never wavered.

7. **Christopher Foyle** / *Foyle's War* -- For me, one of the great charms of a mystery series is getting to know a new place or time, whether it's ancient Rome in the Steven Saylor novels or Laos in the books by Colin Cotterill. *Foyle's War* illuminates the home-front of Britain throughout World War II with this exceptional show. The taciturn, hawk-like Foyle is a marvelous man brought to life by Michael Kitchen: the less he says, the more perceptive and penetrating he becomes and people speaking to him positively squirm in his presence. And throughout the mysteries you get war profiteers, women at work, deserters, shortages and more. This may seem like an odd compliment but the show is so vivid and detailed and rich that I'm always gutted (and surprised) when I realize there are no novels to explore about this character and this time. I just want to spend more time with him.

8. **Veronica Mars** / *Veronica Mars* -- Sure, I watched *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* TV shows when I was a kid and loved other teen detectives. But they're light years behind Veronica, the smartest solver of high school mysteries since Judy Blume explained sex and girl stuff to a generation of kids raised on *The Brady Bunch*. If only the show hadn't panicked in its third season, she'd be higher on the list. Now get that feature film in the works while Kristen Bell can still play a college student.

9. **Chief Inspector Morse** / *Inspector Morse* -- Grumpy is the de facto mood for so many crime solvers because they're so much smarter than everyone else in the room (especially their sidekicks) and it can get rather tiresome. Why do criminals insist on raping and pillaging and murdering when they should know that Morse is going to sniff them out? A cultured, private man, Morse will tend to fall in love too easily with women involved in murder. And Lewis really is quite dependable and helpful, in his way. The British are such deft hands at mysteries they do tend to drag a series out (as if the show itself wasn't stretched to the limit, they even gave Lewis a rather unnecessary spin-off). But Morse is one for the ages in all his ornery glory.

10. **Special Agent Dale Cooper** / *Twin Peaks* -- An un-ironic Boy Scout crossed with visions and a laser-like ability to discern telling clues, Kyle MacLachlan's Cooper is an utterly unique crime solver. It helps that he's part of an utterly unique show that used dream sequences to prod Cooper towards the solutions of his crimes. But watching this sexily formal and polite man wade through a steamy and fantastical mystery while never losing his decency or genuine oddity is fascinating. No wonder people imagined crazy ideas like the one that suggested the secretary he dictated notes to didn't exist and was actually Cooper himself after donning a dress. Finding out whodunit was never the point: it was the journey that mattered and what a tour guide in Dale Cooper.

I know, I know. What about *Tattinger's*, and *Peter Gunn* and *Remington Steele* and *Tenspeed & Brown Shoe* and so many more? So tell me who I missed and more importantly, tell me where Monk belongs on this Top 10 list.

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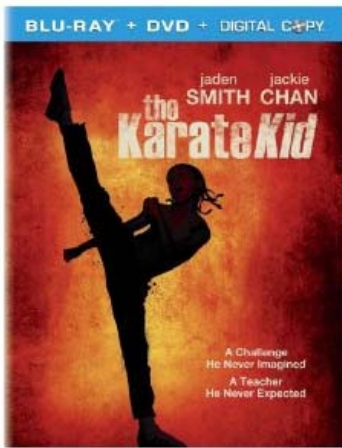
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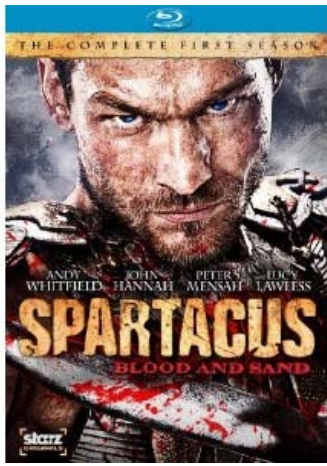
THE KARATE KID (\$38.96 BluRay or \$28.96 regular DVD; Sony) -- Just on principle I should insist that a family film like this one should not be two hours and 20 minutes long. Cut it! But then I actually saw the film and whatever flaws it may have, it didn't feel long at all. (And the original was pretty long at 126 minutes, surprisingly enough.) Jackie Chan is an inspired choice to play the teacher of a kid new to China and getting bullied by a gang of budding martial arts experts. Jaden Smith was quite good in *The Pursuit of Happyness* but being the center of an entire film is pretty overwhelming and his response seems to have been to keep it simple and not do much emoting at all. So he's a little stiff but not awful and darned if the story doesn't kind of work. Again. Not great, but not bad. BluRay extras include more footage of Chan in action and training video with Smith.



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST DIAMOND EDITION (\$39.99 BluRay; Disney) -- I suppose by now we should refer to this movie as Disney's crown jewel, as opposed to the still-gorgeous *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. *Beauty and the Beast* comes to BluRay looking absolutely stunning and is presented with the care Disney has always shown its animated catalog. You get three versions of the film (theatrical, extended, and work-print), along with all previous extras (I think) and some new ones that will take days to peruse. But first and foremost is the film, which still delights. Why? The score, of course. It's one of the great movie scores ever written. A no-brainer for BluRay owners.

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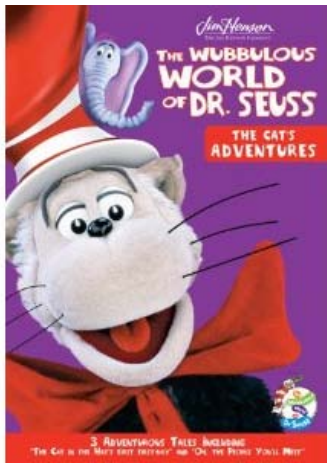




SPARTACUS: BLOOD AND SAND (\$79.97 BluRay and \$59.97 regular DVD; Anchor Bay) -- Where to begin? This is the most glorious bit of trashy tv around; it's a guilty pleasure times ten thanks to near-naked gladiators fighting for their lives, Lucy Lawless purring her way through scene after scene, backstabbing, lovemaking and greed. It's also hands-down, the most violent show in TV history. Hey, either that has you moving on to the next review or rushing to the store. You know who you are. They obviously pitched it as *300*, the TV series, right down to the homo-eroticism. (At least one gladiator is gay and if the scene revealing that isn't explicit enough for you, the realization that the man he is pleasuring himself with is *also* enjoying himself will certainly surprise.) But the most fascinating aspect of the show for me is the visual style, which like *300* embraces a non-realistic style with vigor. Time and again the show uses visual effects for stylized beauty, violence and just for fun. I wish they'd push that even further. The extras make clear they know their audience: you can check out features like Grime and Punishment or Oh, Those Randy Romans. *I, Claudius*, it ain't. If Wentworth Miller (of *Prison Break*) is ready to step in for the prequel, they should snap him up immediately.

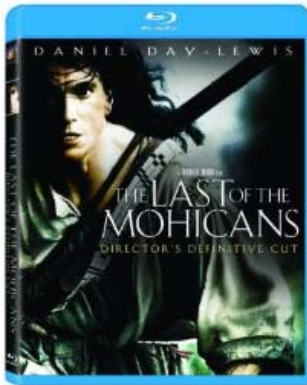


LEAVES OF GRASS (\$29.98 BluRay and \$28.98 regular DVD; First Look) -- Edward Norton has a blast playing dual roles in this comic drama about twin brothers. One is a strait-laced philosophy professor and the other is a pot-dealing hick. Throw in writer-director Tim Blake Nelson as a sidekick, Susan Sarandon as Norton's mom and Richard Dreyfuss as a drug-dealing Jewish businessman and you've got a recipe for a cult classic comedy. Unfortunately, some ingredient is missing. The comedy isn't quite funny and too soon the movie gets serious as professor Norton is back home mending ties with his mom and wooing local poet Keri Russell while his bro gets medieval with the bad guys. Norton has such fun with his dippy accent as the pot grower that I wish the movie had been more of an outright comedy than the drama it is. A few surprise twists are just twists, not dramatically interesting changes and it all falls flat by the ponderous end. Maybe they spent too much time dealing with the various scenes where Norton acts with himself. Those come off seamlessly but the unfocused script remains disjointed. On the bright side, it's nice to see the BluRay essentially the same price as the regular DVD.

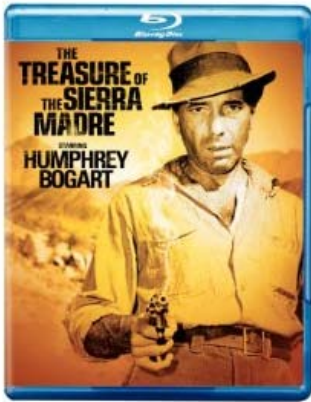


THE WUBBULOUS WORLD OF DR. SEUSS: THE CAT'S ADVENTURES (\$9.98; Lionsgate) -- Dr. Seuss and Jim Henson seems a fool-proof combination. But it's a little head-spinning for someone who grew up with the animated Seuss specials. The intros are in the Muppet style and the stories are animated. I like the intros much better than the undistinguished animation and yet I'm used to Seuss *animated* rather than in puppet form. Little kids won't have to deal with any of this of course. The very young will enjoy this just fine though nothing reaches the high standards you expect from everyone involved. Also out are *The Cat's Musical Tales* at the same price and a newly released *There Is Nothing To Fear In Here* in time for Halloween which is \$14.98.

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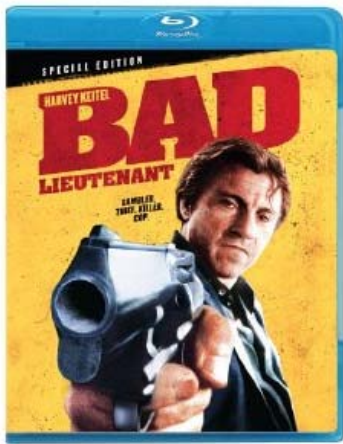


THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS (\$34.99; FOX) -- I'm almost afraid to comment on this film since its DVD history is so tangled. Director Michael Mann released an 'expanded' directors cut previously and now he's offering a "definitive cut." All along, his desire is to fine-tune the movie to be as good as possible. But whatever changes are made or unmade, I always firmly believe that the DVD should ALSO offer the original theatrical cut. The DVDs have cut the Clannad Celtic tune used in a crucial moment and then restored it...but used a different section of the song with different lyrics. Hey, I never liked the use of that song either, Michael Mann. But it was in the theatrical cut and so at least one version of the movie available for viewing should reflect that. Mann also strove to shoot the film in natural light whereas the original DVD boosted the contrast in order to make it "easier" to see the action. Mann has fiddled with that again to get closer to his original intent. Lines of dialogue fall in and out. Daniel Day-Lewis remains remarkably persuasive since never before or since has he been much of an action hero. Like Mann, I always felt the movie fell short of the greatness that was tantalizingly in his grasp and his changes have clearly worked to modify the more soapy moments of the original. But I wish the original were here to compare side by side to what he's accomplished today. Extras include new commentary and a new making-of. Naturally. They need a new making-of every time they put it out on DVD!



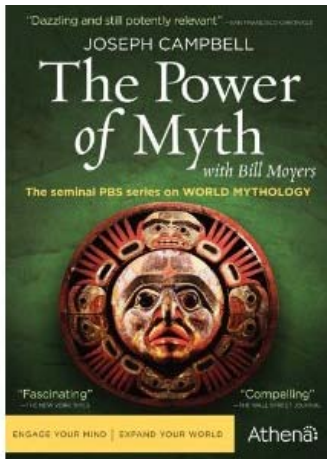
THE MALTESE FALCON/THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE (\$24.98 each; Warner Bros.) -- Two hard to beat catalog titles out on Bluray. *The Maltese Falcon* is my preferred Humphrey Bogart flick here, with its matchless air of tough guy mystery. Bogie is surrounded by a top-notch cast, including future *Casablanca* pals Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet. I've always been a bit bored by Mary Astor but she's fine here. It looks good (though not spectacularly so) and has a lot of extras, though not as many as the previous DVD boxed sets (notably earlier versions of the story). I assume that was done to keep it to one disc. Fans of the movie not obsessed with extras shouldn't hesitate. But *Treasure*, which I like less, is done better. Its picture looks significantly better than the earlier version I have or *The Maltese Falcon*. Plus it comes with all the extras from a previous boxed set, including a very substantial TCM documentary on director John Houston.

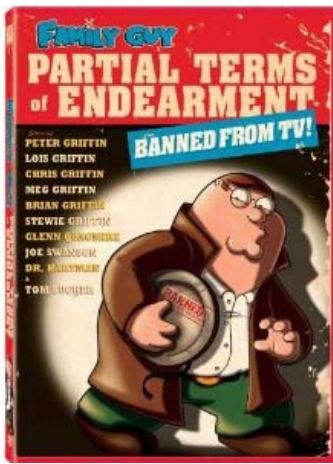




HARD CANDY/BAD LIEUTENANT (\$19.99; Lionsgate) -- It's great to see more and more catalog titles coming out on BluRay at low prices. You can find these on sale for \$11-\$15, too. BluRay should not cost a premium of studios want it to be the new standard and phase out regular DVD. The higher quality of BluRay should be a selling point for DVDs and a way to keep customers happy, not an excuse to raise prices. If you're a fan of Ellen Page, you should check out *Hard Candy*, in which she turns the tables on a man in his 30s looking to date a dangerously young woman in her teens. (The man is played by Patrick Wilson who knocked "God Bless America" out of the park during the Yankee game this week. Well done!) And fans who've seen the loopy Nicolas Cage *Bad Lieutenant* should catch Harvey Keitel's lacerating original. Both movies come with the usual extras.

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JOSEPH CAMPBELL AND THE POWER OF MYTH (\$49.99; Athena)

THE QUEEN (\$39.99; Acorn)

FAMILY GUY: PARTIAL TERMS OF ENDEARMENT (\$14.98; FOX)

CAPRICA SEASON 1.0 (\$49.98; Universal) -- Bill Moyers' interview with scholar Joseph Campbell is one of the all-time high points in TV interviews -- intelligent, fascinating and a good introduction to Campbell's theory on myths that influenced everyone from Moyers himself to George Lucas. *The Queen* is a mishmash of a documentary about Queen Elizabeth II, which combines new interviews, historical footage and reenactments by five top actresses portraying the Queen at various points in her career. Avid buffs of the monarchy will enjoy it, but the schizo nature of its approach is unsatisfying for most. The *Family Guy* release is of an unaired episode about abortion which includes the episode itself, a table reading (surprisingly interesting), the rare TV special *Seth & Alex's Almost Live Comedy Show* and nine songs you can download. In other words, one episode and the TV special. Plus commentary. If the episode will be included in future boxed sets, I wouldn't bother. Finally, the spin-off/prequel to *Battlestar Galactica* spent most of the first half of the first season trying to figure out what it should be. Maybe it's going to come more into focus in the second half. Unless you're already a fan of *Caprica*, wait till the end of the full season and get the entire set all at once. This has the pilot and the first eight episodes, which SyFy puts out to appease fans waiting for the second half, which airs months after the first. You know the drill.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available free on iTunes](#). Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available for free on iTunes](#). Link to him on [Netflix](#) and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week. Also, Michael Giltz freelances as a writer of DVD copy (the text that appears on the back of DVDs) for some titles released by IFC and other subsidiaries of MPI. It helps pay the rent, but does not obligate him in any way to speak positively or negatively of their titles.

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