

The Prophet in the Subway

The A train only makes express stops on the Upper West Side of New York, so if you're going local you have to take the 1 train. For me, coming from the bridge, that means hopping off the A and transferring at 168th Street. It's a pretty dirty station, and a pain in the ass because you have to take a slow and crowded elevator to switch platforms. Then, once you exit the elevator, turn the corner and descend the steps to the down-

earnest. They're persistent. They're painfully annoying. Hell doesn't seem that bad compared to a heaven stocked with the preachers.

The prophets, on the other hand, are usually crazy, usually bums. They think they are actual messengers of God, and they alternate between mumbling to themselves and shouting their ruminations at you. They're the new Ezekiel, and nobody seems to care. Our man on 168th

repent," and so on.

The subway riders, comparatively clean and emotionally sound, recoil from the prophet and his feet as they hurry on toward their destinations. They crank up the volume on their iPods to drown out his cries, disgust unhidden in their countenances.

One morning not long ago, I too raised the volume and boarded the 1 train. This time though, the prophet follows me, lumbering bare-footed into the same car. He sits down two seats away from me, alternately intoning dire predictions and fading off into groans, then beginning anew. I tune him out, the volume so high I can't even hear the screeching of the train brakes. I've got a little while to go, so I close my eyes for a few stops, and open them to find the car empty. Puzzled, I glance to the cars before and after mine. They're full. Pause the music — and the prophet is wailing, crying his divine vision so loud that it may just reach heaven.

I, too, flee to the next car. And around me I feel the undisguised relief of the others who left — leaving "that thing," that "disgusting drunk" behind. We exchange knowing glances, rolls of the eyes. Typical homeless man, our glances say. We don't need to be around that bum, with his disgusting feet and stupid ranting. We're serious members of society. We're smarter, and sure as hell cleaner. We're better. Aren't we?

I'm not so sure. If I could look around

that car again, I'd realize that I didn't know anything about those other subway riders except that they, too, thought the prophet was annoying. I didn't know their backgrounds, their relationships, their professions, their personalities. My fellow riders and I were united momentarily by only one thing: pride. We shared a smug moment of disgust at something obvious, something physical — ugliness, filth and noise. But beyond that, anything could lie behind those suits, jeans, headphones and shoes. For all I knew, one of those anonymous riders had secrets far more heinous than any of the prophet.

And that's the problem with disgust at the obvious things, at subway prophets and other dark denizens of the commute. It's too convenient a revulsion — one that overwhelms our compassion, but even more insidiously, our awareness of the less-apparent forms of immorality hidden among us. Now, I'm not one to argue that the bum contributes as much to society as the businessman. But neither am I willing to absolve myself and others of iniquities that are merely less noticeable than the ravings of a homeless man. After all, grimy feet need only soap and water for a cure, but some dirty hands cannot be washed.

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The Storyteller

town platform, you may come face to face with the local prophet.

There are a lot of strange people in the subway tunnels of New York. As far as religious bozos, there are the prophets and the preachers. First, the preachers — these are the guys with the bullhorns in the 7th-8th Avenue tunnel at 42nd street, or the pamphleteers at Penn Station. The preachers believe that they are ordinary men spreading the word of God to his children gone astray. They really, really want you to choose heaven over hellfire. They're

Street, on the downtown platform of the 1 train, is a prophet.

He's homeless, and obviously so. His face is unshaven and unwashed, his coat ragged, its stuffing spilling forth. He's probably drunk, or at least psychologically unstable. He sits with his back to the wall, his legs and feet splayed before him. It's the feet you'll notice first: bare, dirty and swollen. Then, if you listen to his shouts, moans and proclamations, you'll know he's a prophet: "And thus says the Lord, we are all sinners, repent, repent,

Crime: America's Favorite Entertainment

In the criminal justice system, sexually-based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories."

If this quote is not permanently engrained in your memory, you are probably not a *Law & Order* fanatic. If this is the first time you are reading and/or hearing it, then you may have been living under a rock for the past thirteen years. Of course I don't mean to offend the innocent reader here, but seriously, you need to check your TV Guide once in a while.

After this introduction, it is probably not surprising that one of my favorite shows has always been *Law & Order*. Though I love all the variations of the brilliant series, my favorite is undoubtedly *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, or just *SVU* for short. As has become evident to me over my time in law school, many of my classmates are equally enthralled by this series and *SVU* seems to be a favorite. The question I have always attempted to answer is why.

For those who are not already familiar with the show, *SVU* focuses on the Special Victims Unit of the New York City Police Department as they investigate crimes of a sexual nature. Of course, I may have already answered my question of why so many of us love *SVU*: Humans are oddly attracted to depravity and *SVU* gets some of the most depraved criminals imaginable, from the child pedophile to the violent serial rapist. Many of these episodes are ripped directly off current headlines and are actually based on true events.

Although the crimes depicted by the show may account for its popularity, I would like to offer one more obvious explanation — victims. Unlike other *Law & Order* shows, *SVU*'s victims often survive and as a result play important roles in the storylines. People enjoy connecting with other people and with victims still breathing and talking, fans of the show can connect with them more easily than with a black body bag.

Why do I care? Why should you care? Why should anyone care or try to explain why a TV show is popular? It's simple — it matters. It matters because it's not just about TV. Our fascination with a show can actually help explain our fascination with certain crimes.

If you have access to a TV, newspaper, computer, radio or another breathing person, you probably recall the Florida murder trial of Casey Anthony, a twenty-something-year-old mother accused of killing her two-year-old daughter, Caylee Anthony. In July 2008, Caylee's grandmother reported her missing after not seeing her for over a month. After months of searching, Caylee's remains were found in a wooded area near her home. While Caylee was still missing, Casey was charged with first degree murder, to which she pled not guilty.

After six weeks of trial, Casey was acquitted of first degree murder. Though the prosecution had sought the death penalty, Casey walked away with nothing but a few misdemeanor counts of providing false information to police officers. More shocking

ever, may have been the victim herself. For months, pictures of the beautiful blonde girl with angelic features and cute expressions flashed on our TV screens several times a day. Harder than forgetting Caylee's face, was imagining her dead, wrapped in a blanket, left in the woods, potentially at the hands of her own mother.

Victims are keys to our obsession with certain crimes and it is their stories that we really care about. Murder is murder no matter who dies. But when the beautiful wife of a famous football player is murdered or a two-year-old girl is found dead in the woods, people seem to care a little bit more. With the victims in mind, we tend to think of the crime as that much more disturbing, and therefore that much more interesting. The problem is not *SVU* capitalizing on our fixation



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Barely Legal

than the verdict, however, was the coverage that preceded and followed it. Almost every news channel aired continuous coverage of the trial. Because of all the media attention the trial received, the jury had to be sequestered for the entire length of the trial. Scot Safon, executive vice president of HLN, a cable network that covered the trial extensively, asserted that the draw for the case was the "very, very strong human dimension." The Casey Anthony trial was even compared to the O.J. Simpson trial, which also received national attention and a verdict of not guilty.

Many explanations have been offered for why this case received such widespread national attention. Some say that Casey's lies and calm demeanor made her a fascinating person to watch. It may have also been the psychological dimensions, especially the potential motive behind such a murder, which kept the nation infatuated with the case. The biggest draw of all, how-

with victims.

The problem lies in our sole focus on certain kinds of victims. Though Caylee's death was tragic, she was unfortunately not alone. Other children, from other states, races, social and economic backgrounds, went missing in 2008. National media coverage of their disappearances and/or deaths, however, did not follow, at least not to the extent that it did for Caylee. The question remains — why not?

(In case you were wondering, there is an *SVU* episode based on Caylee Anthony's death. It's called "Selfish," and yes, I suggest you Netflix it.)

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