

The Granada TV series *Cracker*, starring Robbie Coltrane as a police psychologist, was one of the critical successes of the season. It was well scripted and brilliantly acted. Coltrane's character, as spectacularly successful at work as he was inept at home, was a beguiling mixture of intuition, humour and weakness. Yet despite its apparent authenticity, it was almost complete fiction.

Cracker depended upon the implausible idea of a psychologist taking a leading role in the conduct of cases and the interrogation of suspects, despite an almost total disregard for police procedure. Some reviewers may have been misled by frequent suggestions that the character was based on a real person. The name most frequently mentioned

was that of David Canter, Professor of Investigative Psychology at the University of Surrey.

Canter has now allowed us to compare fiction and reality by publishing a highly readable book, part autobiography, part psychology textbook. *Cracker* came too late to be included, but I suspect that the author would have pointed out the many differences between the fictional creation and the professional psychologist.

Nevertheless, fiction is never far from the surface of Canter's own account. *Silence of the Lambs* makes an inevitable appearance, while even the dustjacket cannot avoid a

reference to the true father of offender profiling by labelling Professor Canter a "modern day Sherlock Holmes".

The author is more modest, instead drawing attention to one of Holmes's more unusual admirers: Sigmund Freud. Canter must have been aware of the passage in Freud's *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*: "Suppose you are a detective engaged in the investigation of a murder, do you actually expect to find the murderer will leave his photograph with name and address at the scene of the crime? Are you not instead content with slighter and less certain traces of the person you seek?"

The psychiatrist Michael Shepherd once wrote an elegant monograph called *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of Doctor Freud*, detailing the similarities between Holmes and Freud. Shepherd coined the phrase "imaginative understanding" to describe their similar approaches to the detection of crime or neurosis. Despite Canter's entertaining and learned *tour d'horizon* of modern scientific psychology, this is an apt description of his own *modus operandi*.

The book succeeds best as a narrative of what the author calls his mission, or personal journey. The detective novel format is never far away as he discusses his involvement in a series of well known cases, beginning with a fascinating account of his debut in the case of John Duffy, the so-called "Railway Murderer". After this triumph Canter was invited to visit the FBI Behavioural Sciences

How to profile a Hannibal Lecter

Simon Wessely

CRIMINAL SHADOWS
Inside the Mind of the Serial Killer
By David Canter
HarperCollins, £16.99

Academy at Quantico. The FBI agents he encountered appeared to possess a weird mixture of bravado, intuition and inexhaustible experience of human horror. The academic in Canter notices the almost complete lack of methodology, system or statistics, but the sleuth is entranced.

Less successful are the sections expanding his wider theories of violent offending, which are a compromise between the desire to satisfy the popular market and maintain academic status. The penultimate chapter fails to live up to the title's promise to describe

the mind of a serial killer, although he should take comfort that few others have succeeded in that task either.

Even after reading this book, I remain unconvinced about the value of profiling as an aid to detection. Psychiatrists and psychologists, armed with similar expertise and often greater experience than Canter, are regularly called upon by the courts to examine people charged with heinous crimes. The psychiatrist has access not just to the key person — the person charged with the offence — but all statements and depositions. The psychiatrist will also consult records from hospitals, social services and schools, as well as reviewing details of previous offending. Relatives or other informants may be questioned.

All this is preparation for the day when the psychiatrist will be asked the inevitable question "Why did he do it?"

Even then much may remain obscure or disputed: the tendency of experts to disagree about the motive, diagnosis and personality of offenders is often a subject of legal amusement. In offender profiling the expert has access to none of this data, and is left, in Canter's appropriate phrase, chasing shadows.

Of course he has successes. However, these may result not from application of the scientific principles of psychology, whatever they may be, but from what doctors will recognise as the benefits of a second opinion. Reviewing the same material, an intelligent, intuitive and enthusiastic outsider — and Canter is all of these things — may enable a fresh look at existing data. The status of the distinguished academic adds further credibility, as does the use of complex, obscure statistics.

What is missing is a systematic evaluation of profiling. Canter's introduction details some of the spectacular successes of psychological profiling elsewhere; we learn little of the failures. Given the limited resources available to police psychology at present, carrying out a controlled trial of offender profiling would be a simple task. If random allocation of unsolved cases to profiling, or normal procedure, produced more convictions in the profiled group, then the technique would have proved its worth.

Canter is a man who, like Napoleon's marshals, has been blessed with luck. This has enabled him to exchange

what he describes as the hectic, tense and determined atmosphere of the university for the relaxed, coffee-always-ready, cigarette-rolling chats of the police incident room. He has been lucky with his first spectacular success, lucky with his press, which coincided with the public obsession with serial killers and made him an expert from the Punjab to Newfoundland. Canter has made the most of his good fortune. The computer he used for his Duffy enquiries had been acquired on the profits of a previous project — studying people's preferences for biscuits. Few can blame him for preferring crime to custard creams.

Simon Wessely is Senior Lecturer in Psychiatry at the Maudsley.

VALENTINE'S DAY SPECIAL

LONDON
Princ Edward Theatre
Feb 14-16
Crazy For You
DREAM the love of your life in a magnificent evening with a great dinner in El Escorial, one of the best known restaurants in Soho, followed by the best seats in the house for the romantic musical comedy *Crazy For You*. Based on George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy*, the show is crammed with great numbers including "I Got Rhythm", "Embraceable You" and "Someone to Watch Over Me". Our all-inclusive price is £30 (tickets alone normally £30) Tel: 0206 41662.
Almeida Theatre
Feb 11-12, 14-15
The Life of Galileo
RICHARD Griffiths plays the central character in a

THE TIMES
THEATRE CLUB

BLACKPOOL
Grand Theatre
Feb 15
SAVE £2.60 on tickets normally £6.10-5.50 for *Boyz n the City*. John Godber's hilarious exposé of disco nightlife. Tel: 0253 28372.
WORCESTER
Swan Theatre
February 15-18
TWO tickets for the price of one (normally £7.00) Tues-Thurs £9.50 for *Shakespeare's much-loved*



Robbie Coltrane: played the psychologist in *Cracker* to acclaim but in reality offender profiling is questionable

