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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Christine Corcos](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#corcos)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Official site](http://www.usanetwork.com/series/monk/)  [TV.com episode guide](http://www.tv.com/monk/show/9130/episode_guide.html%26season%3D1)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0312172/) |       In many ways, Monk is frightened of life. Decisions paralyze him. What unparalyzes him is the need for justice. | |  | | --- | | **The Detective Who Walks By Himself**  by Christine Alice Corcos  *Monk*, the detective series featuring the obsessive-compulsive disorder-ridden former police officer played by Emmy winner Tony Shalhoub, has been a hit for the USA network since its debut on July 12, 2002. Heavily influenced by classic series that went before, including *Columbo*, which still makes occasional appearances on TV (although the latest seems to have been in 2003), *Monk* adds to the formula of the brilliant detective with a few quirks the brilliant detective with quirks that threaten to make him almost completely non-functional.  *Monk*'s premise is that the former police officer turned private detective left the force when his wife died in a car bombing meant for him. Adrian Monk (who carries, perhaps significantly, two clerical names) was already rather strange. For example, we learn in the episode "*Mr. Monk and the Other Woman*" that he doesn't like different types of food to touch on his plate. Most of us got over that little oddity when we were relatively young. I think my nephews, who are nine and seven, are over it by now. But not Adrian Monk. His wife Trudy, however, loved him in spite of this foible, and in spite of his other weirdnesses, such as his need to make certain that all the hangers in his closet face the same way-I suppose that could be helpful in an emergency-and the need not to step on cracks, and to touch all the parking meters that he passes on the street. After Trudy's death, he just gets stranger and stranger, and he refuses to take any medication to calm him down. In one episode, "*Mr. Monk Takes His Medicine*", we find out that this is not such a bad idea-medication robs him of his ability to solve crimes even as it evens out his OCD. Monk's peculiar personality makes him a trial to deal with, certainly, but he has a good heart, and his friends recognize his kindness, which earns him their loyalty. His nurse, Sharona, and later his assistant, Natalie, his police officer friends Lieutenant Disher and Captain Stottlemeyer, and the various people he meets during his adventures, Trudy's parents, and even his even weirder brother Ambrose, who suffers from agoraphobia, all truly love him, and he loves them. Actor Tony Shalhoub's talent sells Monk as a character-otherwise the detective would grate on the viewer very quickly, because frankly, he is one odd bird. He's afraid of over a hundred things, as Natalie points out, though not public speaking: heights, dark places, crowds, germs-and milk.  What motivates Monk is the desire to find his wife's killer. While he seeks the person or persons responsible, he takes other cases, high profile or not, particularly those that interest him. Things that don't match, people who do things out of character, push him to investigate. At the same time, he is often reluctant to involve himself in a case that would force him to confront a phobia. He doesn't like shaking hands, or elevators, or airplanes. In many ways, Monk is frightened of life. Decisions paralyze him. What unparalyzes him is the need for justice.  Many critics have hailed *Monk* as ingeniously plotted. True, the writers have done many of the episodes quite cleverly, but other entries been derivative. In particular, the two episodes featuring Monk's brother Ambrose (John Turturro) were essentially the same story. In both, the killer tries to reclaim evidence of a crime that has gotten away from him; Monk has to retrace the killer's steps and put together the crime from these clues. The episode "*Red Headed Stranger*", featuring country singer Willie Nelson, draws on several Columbo episodes including "*Swan Song*" (1974) in which guest star country singer Johnny Cash ("*The Man in Black*") played a country singer who murders his wife, and "*A Deadly State of Mind*" (1975) in which George Hamilton sets Lesley Ann Warren up for murder. Nelson returns as a voice on the tube in a later episode ("*Mr. Monk and the Blackout*").  Monk's obsessive-compulsive disorder and his inability to react appropriately while on duty (for example, he can't bring himself to fire his weapon even when someone's life is at stake) are the reason for what is turning into his quasi-permanent suspension from the San Francisco Police Force (note to the writers: he would have been an inspector, not a "detective" while on the force). He is on medical leave, which gives him certain rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act. So why does the Police Commissioner treat him so cavalierly in "*Mr. Monk Gets Fired*" by "yanking" his private detective's license? Let's leave aside exactly what his employment relationship is with the department, and whether a police officer can also hold a p.i.'s license. The San Francisco Police Commissioner is not authorized to do that under California state law. Only the Director of Professional and Vocational Standards may revoke or suspend a p.i.'s license, and s/he surely wouldn't do it for the reasons in this episode (Monk accidentally deleted some police files from a computer, but the computer wasn't adequately backed up. Sounds like improper police procedure, not Monk-i-shines, to me.)  This program's major assets are not necessarily the plotting, although it is usually clever, and considerable. They are the acting talents of everyone concerned, not just Tony Shalhoub. Ted Levine as the bemused Captain Stottlemeyer, Jason Gray-Stanford as Lieutenant Randy Disher, the man who overestimates his own abilities to solve crimes and who longs for a date with any pretty girl who wanders into his field of vision, Sharona (Bitty Schramm), the matter of fact nurse who spent two years dealing with Monk before returning to her ex-husband, another man who has trouble dealing with life, Natalie (Traylor Howard), recently hired on as Monk's new assistant, Dr. Kroger (Stanley Kamel) as Monk's long suffering psychiatrist, who just wants to get his patient to a goal-any goal and himself to a summer vacation--these are all worthy colleagues on the series. The guest stars are always entertaining, from Adam Arkin as "Dale the Whale", a marvelous bad guy who may hold the key to the identity of Trudy's killer, to Lolita Davidovich as a beautiful trapeze artist, to Glenne Headly (in an occasional role as Stottlemeyer's wife Karen).  Monk does not believe in coincidence. He does not believe in psychic powers. He does not believe in accident. He believes in logic. He believes in reason. He may have OCD and he may have personal problems, but when he has a crime to solve it occupies all of his attention. In the episode "*Mr. Monk and the Psychic*," for example (aired July 19, 2002), Monk becomes suspicious when a psychic claims that a dead woman's "aura" leads her to the woman's body. He unravels the crime by deducing that the victim's husband, a former police commissioner, murdered her and used the psychic to deflect attention from himself. Monk expresses his attitude to Sharona in a wonderful line. "You've got to be a little skeptical, Sharona. Otherwise you end up believing in everything--UFOs, elves, income tax rebates."  Some of the episodes are downright weak in terms of plot. The March 16th episode, "*Mr. Monk Gets Jury Duty*," for example, featured Monk as a jury member unable to focus when he realizes that someone has secreted a body in a dumpster just below the window of the jury deliberation room. Since he has already made a nuisance of himself, the bailiff won't pay any attention to him. So he calls out to his assistant Natalie, who is in the street below as she is bringing him lunch. (Why is she bringing him lunch? Lunch should be provided by the court, but of course, Monk's dietary requirements have already been explained to the judge).  Of course, jury members are not supposed to contact anyone but the bailiff during their deliberations, as both Monk and Natalie know very well. But the contact goes on. Natalie summons Captain Stottlemeyer, and Stottlemeyer communicates with Monk while Monk is in the jury room. Eventually the judge spots Monk and the police discussing the body and he sequesters the jury, who are consequently enraged with Monk. The judge should probably have declared a mistrial, but that would be the end of the episode, and Monk would not get the chance to solve the other mystery in the story, which is why one of the jurors keeps changing her vote just as everyone else agrees on a verdict. Monk is, incidentally, instrumental in convincing them that the case on which they are deliberating is a frame-up: it's highly reminiscent of *Twelve Angry Men*, down to the functional identifications of the other jury members ("Postal Worker Juror", "Sports Fan Juror", etc.).  The *Monk* writers and directors often indulge in these kinds of popular culture references as if to invite the audience into their tight little world. Guest stars like Tim Daly (with whom Shalhoub co-starred on *Wings)* and Danny Bonaduce play themselves. But one of the things that rapidly becomes annoying is the lack of credibility that Monk enjoys week after week. Monk is always right-so why don't people who have heard of him believe him when he says he thinks he knows who the killer might be? And why don't they run interference for him? In this country, which caters so much to celebrities, it's very difficult to understand why Monk has so much trouble getting himself heard. We know the answer-the plot would evaporate because Monk would have many fewer difficulties. His weird little phobias must also earn him, if not enemies, then adversaries. Otherwise, things would be much too easy. Those adversaries, if they are the criminals, do eventually grant him their respect, as in "*Mr. Monk and the Astronaut*." But it takes the entire episode, and coupled with Monk's phobias, it can become wearying for the viewer. This particular element-the criminal's lack of respect for the detective, which sometimes degenerates into taunting-again recalls Columbo.  Through the four seasons that the show has been on the air, all the recurring characters have grown. Stottlemeyer has learned not to take his marriage or his wife for granted, just as she has left him. Disher has learned a little something about the intelligence and the emotional reliability of the opposite sex. Monk himself has learned that his dead wife would have wanted him to try to move on with his life. Coming to that determination hasn't been easy, even deliberately with the assistance of his psychiatrist, or accidentally through the mishaps attendant on assisting his friends.  In "*Mr. Monk Goes to the Dentist*" Lieutenant Disher thinks he sees his dentist kill someone, but no one believes him. Out of a mixture of pique and a sense that years on the force have earned him no loyalty from either his superiors or his friends he quits to pursue a career in rock music (a very bad decision). Natalie convinces Monk to investigate. Now Monk is in the position of being the person who doesn't believe, but who gives a friend the benefit of the doubt, and who discovers that the friend is correct. Through that experience, he grows just a little more, as does Disher, who realizes that rock music is a fine hobby for someone who is a good enough musician to know that he's not good enough to be a professional musician.  *Monk* is a very moral show. Adrian Monk is a very moral man. He believes in justice and he goes after crime and criminals no matter where they may be. Working in the private sphere, assisting the professionals in the public sphere, he still yearns to return to the police force, even though he can still interact with his old friends unofficially, and some of them still respect his work. He knows that the likelihood that he will ever to that life is small. Meanwhile, he continues to take private cases, and those on which Captain Stottlemeyer invites him to assist. He overcomes his own fears to do it. His friends, Natalie, like Sharona before her, Disher, Stottlemeyer, all help him, but ultimately the detective who walks by himself, and works by himself, Monk, does it alone, as we all must. Facing his fears, he calls them by name. As we now know, they include just about everything. Even milk.  Posted March 23, 2006 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/submit-comments.htm) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |