

# *Neptune Noir*

Unauthorized Investigations  
into *Veronica Mars*

EDITED BY

**Rob Thomas**

WITH LEAH WILSON



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***Rob Thomas***

*Introduction*

**Digressions on How  
Veronica Mars Saved  
My Career and, Less  
Importantly, My Soul**

**I** TAUGHT HIGH SCHOOL during my mid-twenties in Austin, Texas. I have clear memories of sitting in my living room watching TV and wondering how clearly god-awful programming made it on the air. Unfunny comedies. Cheesy dramas. Why can't every show be *Seinfeld* or *Northern Exposure* or *Moonlighting*? Surely there are smart, well-paid, well-intentioned people involved in the process of creating these shows, I'd say to myself. And even if there aren't, doesn't someone at the network watch the show and say, "This is bad television; let's fix it or get it off the air!"?

They're spending tens of millions of dollars on something that is by almost any measurable standard *bad*. *Do they know? How can they not know? Do they care? How can something this bad happen?*

I moved to Los Angeles for good nine years ago at age thirty-two, and here's what I learned in the TV/film business: It's a minor miracle when any finished product *doesn't* suck.

I learned this particular lesson the hard way. It's possible to have a collection of talented people all working together on a project, all with the best intentions, working hard, and it still be far, far easier to fail than to succeed. It doesn't take much to destroy a project: one bad

piece of casting; the wrong director interpreting it; a “gotcha” ending that doesn’t “getcha”; one belligerent person in a test screening; one bad network “note.”

The list is a long one. A television show is a house of cards, and if you place one of those cards wrong, the show will collapse.

Does this seem obvious? Perhaps, but it wasn’t to me.

I spent nine years playing in a rock band trying to *make it*. I never came close. Of course, I was at a bit of a disadvantage as a musician as I wasn’t a very good one. So, after I quit the band, I turned to writing to fill this “artistic void” I felt in my life. To my surprise, after I finished my first novel, things happened extraordinarily quickly for me. I found an agent. I got a book deal. It was the beginning of a seven-year ride where everything I wrote was published or produced. I wrote four novels and a short story collection. Simon & Schuster published all of them. I wrote two feature films, an independent and a studio film—both went into production. And in the biggest miracle of all, I wrote a television pilot that went on to become a well-received if ratings-starved series. While I was writing and producing that series, *Cupid*, David Kelley called me. He was going to do a new series, and he wanted to know if I’d be interested in running it for him. It was going to be the first time he created a new show and immediately handed it off to another writer. I felt as though I were being anointed crown prince of Television Land. Competing studios offered me millions of dollars for my services. I’d only moved to Los Angeles eighteen months earlier. It’s safe to say I was ripe to get smacked around.

Which, unfortunately, I did.

I left the David Kelley series *Snoops* before we even began shooting episodes. David and I didn’t see the series in the same way, and it was his show, so I left. But that’s not the hard lesson. That came later. I didn’t realize at the time but the day I quit *Snoops* was the first day of a five-year period that would see my career cool, cool some more, then freeze over. For the next five years it felt as though I were typing directly into a trashcan. I probably wrote a dozen pilots in that time, and nothing made it on air.

Soon after quitting *Snoops*, I wrote a pilot for Fox about a minor league hockey team in South Texas. I was proud of the script, and the pilot was given a green light. I was attempting to get something akin

to *Northern Exposure* on the air—smart, fish-out-of-water stuff, mixing in my own experiences moving to small-town Texas when I was a kid. I wanted Paula Marshall, one of the leads from *Cupid*, as the lead. She agreed to do it, but didn't like the way her character was introduced. She was playing a girl who grew up in Texas, moved to New York, dropped her accent, and found success in the business world. In the first draft of the script, it was the death of her mother that brought her home to Texas. Paula was afraid that the show opened on too much of a downer. I wrote out the mother's death. Instead, she came home because her brother, who was supposed to take over the family business, came out of the closet and moved to West Hollywood. It was less of a downer but, in retrospect, it lessened the emotional weight. The network president who had signed me to my big deal asked me to add a character to the show. He said I should give the "Fox audience" something a bit more familiar. *Melrose Place* was going off the air, and he thought I should add a "bitch" character to mix it up a bit with the Paula Marshall character. In came the saucy blonde sister-in-law.

When you're already on the air, you have some leverage with a network. They've spent millions of dollars promoting your show. They're invested. In development, the network holds all the cards. If they say they want a cute six-year-old in the show, you say, "Can it be an orphan?!?" So you make compromises. And I certainly made *these* compromises. It's possible the show could have survived all that, but the biggest mistake was all mine, and it doomed us.

There was a two-season trend during the late nineties of doing pilot presentations. Rather than doing a full forty-two-minute pilot episode, networks were ordering twenty-minute "presentations." I was forced to cut my sixty-page pilot script into a thirty-page presentation script. Smart writers, when given the order for a presentation, threw out their original script and reconceived it as a thirty-page story. I didn't do that. I attempted to tell my original story in half the pages. The end result was a mess. I remember sitting in the editing room tinkering for hours and then having it dawn on me: *This doesn't work. It will never work. It's bad. We've spent a couple million dollars to make it. And there's nothing I can do now to save it.* Good, talented people with fantastic credits and best intentions had worked hard to make the show a success. I had believed in it absolutely when I wrote it.

It was a terrible, sobering epiphany. I can put all my energy into a project, and it can still end up not working. I remembered my days sitting on my couch in Texas wondering how bad shows happen. Easily, it turns out.

A couple years later, I did a pilot for ABC based on a British series. I rewrote the pilot, and despite loving the British version, I changed one plot point around. Rather than having the bad guy deliver a solo declaration of his evil intentions in the first act, I decided to hold off on that reveal until after he had actually committed a nefarious act. I thought my way was smarter. (I have an aversion to monologues. Who actually speaks out loud to oneself?) It was a big mistake. The climax in the British version is terrifying. The climax in my version? Not terrifying. It probably cost me getting the show on the air.

To set the stage for *Veronica Mars* and what the show has done for me, it's important to understand my frame of mind at the time I wrote it. My initial seven years of success had given way to nearly five years of failure. I felt like I was spending my prime writing years on the sidelines. I love producing a show. I love going to work. I love having my work out there for public consumption. Each fruitless development season put me further down an emotional well.

Every writer in development makes a decision about how to proceed in development. There's an easy way that becomes difficult, and there's a difficult way that becomes easier. Networks have agendas during each development season. Generally they are chasing the success of a show on some other network. In the wake of *CSI*, every network went chasing procedural shows involving some sort of science. In the wake of *Lost*, every network wanted "outside the box" (read: non-cop, non-doctor, non-lawyer) shows with an ongoing unsolvable mystery. *ER* begat a dozen high-incident procedural dramas. The easy path for a writer in development is to find out what kind of show a network *wants* to put on, then give them exactly what they drew up on a dry-erase board on one of their many retreats. When you go down this path, the networks *want* you to succeed. Executives feel ownership of a show that they can truthfully say they helped with the creation of. The difficulty is that, when it's their notion, they become very proprietary with the show. If you're not careful, you become the hired gun executing their vision. Also, when network executives come up with ideas, they're almost never what one would call "fresh."

They're rehashing of someone else's success, so you're generally stuck writing "a *male Sex and the City*" or "ER—in space!"

If you take the other route—writing something you find inspiring or truly original—you face a longer road to get it ordered to script, ordered to pilot, ordered to series. You don't necessarily have a champion at the network. No executive is saying, "That's my horse in the race." The reward is that if you succeed in getting this show ordered, it's a personal vision. It's usually smarter and fresher. And the network is generally more apt to let you do your own thing.

I'd like to be able to claim that throughout the dark days of my career that I consistently stuck to my guns and only worked on projects that were inspiring personal visions, but that would be untrue. The hockey pilot was certainly a personal, out-of-the-box vision, and I'd gotten my ass handed to me on it. Over the next few years, I did more than my share of network-generated ideas.

With my high school teaching background as well as my start in young adult fiction, I'd long wanted to do a teen drama. The trouble was, my favorite teen drama ever, *Freaks and Geeks*, was already on the air, and it was failing. There weren't many networks clamoring to put another teen drama in primetime—unless it was a soap opera about sexy kids doing sexy things.

Years before, I'd sold Simon & Schuster two titles that were supposed to be my next two novels. The first, *Seattle and Back*, was going to be about a band on tour. The second, "Untitled Rob Thomas Teen Detective," was going to be about a boy who becomes ostracized by his peers when his sheriff father botches a murder investigation of one of his classmates. This boy was going to start working in his father's private detective agency after school. I'd named the boy Keith Mars.

I started thinking about marrying a teen "coming of age" show with an anthological case-driven show. Strangely, during my brief stint at *Snoops*, I'd enjoyed breaking mystery stories. I kept coming back to my "teen detective" idea. Somewhere in the thought process, the boy became a girl and Keith became her father. I pitched the show at a couple networks including the WB, but no one was interested. I decided to write it anyway. Since becoming a professional writer, I hadn't written anything "on spec." ("On spec" is synonymous with "for free.") There's a thrill to writing on spec. You're simply writing

what you want to write. No studio or network executive has spelled out any parameters. You haven't had to get an outline approved before writing. For better or worse, it's all you. I can guarantee that, had I sold the pitch to a network, there is absolutely no way Veronica would've been a rape victim. There's no way she would've been allowed to plant a bong in her antagonist's locker. She would not have been allowed to steal evidence out of a police locker.

Honestly, I never thought I'd be able to sell *Veronica Mars* to a broadcast network. It seemed too dark. The character was too edgy. I hoped to convince someone at FX to give it a chance, or HBO, or Showtime. I had an informal, get-to-know-the-new-network-executives meeting at UPN. These are usually fruitless, but the head of drama, Maggie Murphy, said they were looking to skew young and female. I thought, "What the hell?" I told her I had this script about a seventeen-year-old female detective lying around in a drawer. She asked to take a look at it. That was on a Friday. On Monday, Maggie bought the script. (Of note: The show wouldn't exist without Maggie's championing of it. She's an executive who believes in writers' visions.)

We shot the pilot with almost no script notes from the network and none from the studio, but during process there were a couple of crossroads where, had we gone a different direction, it would've spelled disaster.

I find it almost impossible to imagine Veronica Mars played by anyone other than Kristen Bell. We had some fantastic actresses audition for the part, but Kristen was in another league. As producers, we audition scores of people for series regular roles, then we bring our finalists to the studio for approval, and the actors who get approved by studio then audition for the network. After Kristen auditioned at studio, the first comment from an executive was that "she might be good in the best friend role, but not as a lead." It almost seems ludicrous now, but we had to fight to convince our studio to let us take Kristen to the network audition. Had we lost that argument, there would be no show today.

Then, after the pilot was shot, the network began having second thoughts about not cutting the references to Veronica being raped. At the end of the day, they let us keep the rape story line, but had it been excised from the pilot, Veronica's motivations would have all become fuzzy. The pilot wouldn't have made sense.

I suppose that, in summary, in the process of writing, casting, shooting, and editing the pilot into a TV show, there are a couple hundred important decisions, and it's possible to botch any one of them and ruin the show. To quote Nigel Tufnel, "There's a fine line between clever and stupid."

After we finished the *Veronica Mars* pilot, I took my girlfriend on a cruise from Athens to Istanbul. I proposed on the first night in Athens. We were scheduled to fly back from Istanbul to New York in time for the announcement of the UPN fall schedule. At the time, I didn't know if we'd make the schedule. There was one slot available and five pilots vying for it. What I did know, and I explained this to my fiancé, was that *Veronica Mars* was my best work, and that if it didn't make the fall schedule, I was done in the television business. I was frustrated and worn out, and I couldn't take another year of being a writer whose work was never seen. I was very, very close to moving back to Texas and returning to the world of young adult fiction.

Thankfully, we were on the schedule.

I certainly appreciated my good fortune when I got *Cupid* on the air so quickly in my career, but I don't think I appreciated it *enough*. So many things have to go right. Every year a typical network drama department will hear 100 drama pitches, order forty scripts, make ten pilots, order three pilots to series, and just one of those will see a second season. We're in the middle of our third season, so we've defied the odds, and I can say with absolute certainty, there's nothing about *Veronica Mars* that I take for granted. Sure, we don't do well in the ratings, but our fans are fervent, and they pay attention to detail. I loved reading the essays in this collection. The fact that people care enough about this piece of pop culture to invest this level of critical thinking blows my mind, and makes it all worth it.

**In some ways** this was a difficult essay for me to read. I hate camp. With few exceptions I dislike almost anything that's described as "campy." I'm never going for an ironic appreciation of the work. When something on Veronica Mars feels campy, it means we (read: I) have failed. Reading Lani's essay, however, I see that she has both a wider net of what she considers camp than I, and a greater appreciation for it when she sees it.

Here's the thing . . .

We are faced with this conundrum when breaking stories for the show: like *Murder, She Wrote*, each episode requires a crime of some sort. (Thank God we don't require a murder.) I feel like we land in what I feel is uncomfortably campy territory when we bite off more than we can chew story-wise. My personal least favorite episodes—or if not episodes, storylines—are when the stories feel too big for Veronica's world. (See the *E-String Strangler*, see season three's bone marrow transplant story, see Meg's coma.) When I think of quintessential VM MOWs, I think of a story like, "My boyfriend took a dirty video of me. Help me get it back." It's not lightweight and fluffy like a Nancy Drew mystery or something you might find on a family friendly network. It's noir and edgy, but it feels solvable by a seventeen-year-old girl with skills.

Clearly, we're not trying to do a little art-house film each week. We want to be the thinking-man's (or -woman's) popcorn show. It's fun. Stuff happens. When we get too campy, it means we dropped the "thinking-man's" part. In those cases, we just cross our fingers and hope the show works on some other (read: funny) level.

*Lani Diane Rich*

## Welcome to Camp Noir

**H**I. MY NAME is Lani, and I'm a TV junkie. I formed my addiction in the seventies, when I took my first hit off shows like *The Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, *The Partridge Family*, and *The Brady Bunch*. (Hey, give me a break. Out of all the shameful skeletons people have locked away in their seventies closets, I think I did pretty well.) In the eighties, I refined my palate a touch. *Moonlighting* was my drug of choice, with its ace dialogue and, sadly, unparalleled shark jumping. *Cheers* was my Thursday Night Special, and is to this day one of the hands-down funniest shows ever written. And *Growing Pains* was... well. It was *Growing Pains*. (Yeah, yeah, I know. But I was a teenage girl, and it was Kirk Cameron. I never stood a chance.) By the time *Northern Exposure*, *Seinfeld*, and *The X-Files* hit the scene, there was no hope for me; I was on the juice but good. (Hey, it beat a crack addiction by a country mile. Although crack does come with that awesome weight loss. Eh. Everything's a tradeoff.)

Anyway, all this to say that, when it comes to TV, I'm your basic whore with a heart of gold: I've been around. If the fifties were seen as television's Golden Age, right now we're smack in the middle of a

platinum one—thank you, Joss Whedon, for kicking that off—and my TiVo and I are *likethis*. Every year I get my list of new shows and make my predictions like a college bookie before March Madness: which ones will make it, which ones will tank, and how long it will take FOX to kill this season's most promising new show. (I still haven't forgiven them for canceling *Firefly* and *Wonderfalls*. Two very bitter pills, my friends.) Not to toot my own horn, but usually, I'm fairly close with my calls.

With *Veronica Mars*, though, I was miles off target. Modern-day Nancy Drew? UPN? Pfft. I gave it a half-season only because, unlike some other networks that shall remain nameless (Damn you, FOX! Damn you!), UPN wasn't quite as quick to Kevorkian an investment. I had no idea *Veronica* would turn into what it is: one of the defining shows of the Platinum Age.

So, where were we? Oh, yeah. When the 2004 season rolled out, I watched maybe two episodes of *Veronica Mars*, and decided, "Meh." I didn't really think about it again, allowing Tuesday after Tuesday to slip by celebrated only by *Gilmore Girls* and *House*.

Then, the buzz started. The unbelievable, unrelenting hype. People I hugely respected were calling it genius. Stephen King gave it high praise in an *Entertainment Weekly* article. Kristin Vietch at E!, whose TV tastes run pretty square with mine, raved every week. Joss Whedon acknowledged and embraced the *Buffy* comparisons.

Me? Big doof that I was, I *still* didn't get it. The writing seemed . . . well . . . clunky to me. I didn't get the characters. The verbal quips were too crisp, the teenagers too clever and in charge, the flashbacks too flashy, the storylines too outrageous. It was all too *too* for me. I pretty much figured I was going to have to sit this particular cultural zeitgeist out.

Then, one day, I ran across a person who described the show as "camp noir." (I can't find this person, or I'd credit him or her with it; a thorough e-mail and Google search has yielded nothing. So if you're that person, out there reading this . . . hey. Go, you.) Anyway, as soon as this person put the ideas together for me, it was like the skies opened and angels sang; suddenly, all became clear. (Okay, I might be overdramatizing a tad. But it was sunny.)

Camp Noir. *Of course*. Camp, referring to over-the-top storytelling with a hint of kitsch that's not even trying for reality; noir, French

**Geoff mentions in** his essay that Joss Whedon calls a good act break “a thing of beauty forever.” It is. And I’m sure Joss would tell you the vast amounts of time a writing staff gives to considering its act breaks. In the VM writers’ room, we usually start with the question, “What are our act breaks?” As I write this, we’re currently breaking an episode in season three about Wallace’s murdered basketball coach. After a day of story-breaking, all we have to show for it are our first four act breaks. . . .

*Cold Open Out*—Coach’s family hires Mars Investigations to save them.

*Act One Out*—Coach’s son, who Veronica has befriended, arrested for crime.

*Act Two Out*—Coach’s son escapes from jail.

*Act Three Out*—Coach’s son, who Veronica has begun to doubt, shows up in Veronica’s car.

Here’s the irony. A studio executive, who will remain anonymous, told me once that his studio did a study on the importance of act breaks, believing that they could use the evidence the study provided to goad writers into bigger act breaks. The results actually showed that act breaks meant almost nothing in terms of audience retention. People don’t switch channels because of weak act breaks. And yet, we all still think in terms of old serial movies. We need the damsel tied to the railroad tracks, the train steaming towards her and our hero galloping in to save her. That’s an act break!

Geoff makes an important point about VM finales that holds true for our season two finale and the rape mystery finale from season three that I just finished directing last week. We’re a mystery show, that’s our stock in trade, but our finales turn into thrillers. For better or worse, we break form.

*Geoff Klock*

## Story Structure and *Veronica Mars*

**E**VERY TIME WE read a book or watch a movie we bring our experiences to bear on what we are reading or watching. Someone with an aversion to violent imagery, for instance, is likely to declare *Kill Bill* a bad movie without a thought to any aspect of the film beyond the dismemberment. For those of us with an education in the humanities, assumptions may be more explicit, and come with philosophical backing: gender theory, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, formalism, reader response theory, structuralism, deconstruction, post-colonialism, new historicism. For many years my own hobby-horse has been Harold Bloom's poetics of influence, and it still serves me well. These theories, and ones like them, claim to tell us more about our experience of books and movies and music. You thought you knew what *Wuthering Heights* was about, they say, but let me tell you what it's *really* about (class, gender, language, and so on).

Academic ways of looking at literature often add to the sum total of our knowledge, but only rarely (and even then, often accidentally) give us a deeper appreciation of the book we are reading, or the film we are watching. Even worse, many academic approaches lead

us to overvalue terribly written but theoretically interesting work. Cultural studies may explain how Allen Ginsburg's *Howl* can tell us a lot about the climate of the 1960s, but it is nevertheless a very bad poem. One approach to film and television that can affect our appreciation for the better—that can actually offer us what we need, which is better taste—is the lesson in story structure found in any good guide to screenwriting. Because these guides are aimed solely at the burgeoning screenwriter, they don't often find their way into the hands of fans, critics, and academics, in spite of the good they would do. An understanding of character arcs, exposition through conflict, dangling causes, pacing, retardation, beats, scenes, open and closing values in scenes, inciting incidents, acts, act breaks, plot points, sequences, and the classical screenplay structure are vital parts of the aesthetic appreciation of film and television. This understanding should not be solely possessed by those in, or trying to get into, the industry. When Joss Whedon discusses his favorite *Buffy* episodes in the booklet included in the complete *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* box set, he singles out the season two episode "Ted," and says, "A good act break is a thing of beauty forever." We should all know enough to be able to agree with him.

That Whedon quote got me talking to a filmmaker friend of mine, Brad Winderbaum, who pointed me toward Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, David Howard's *How to Build a Great Screenplay*, Syd Field's *Screenwriting* (and related books), and Paul Joseph Gulino's *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*. As a fan of *Veronica Mars*, I want to pass on what I learned by going through "Leave It to Beaver" (1-22), story by Rob Thomas and teleplay by Rob Thomas and Diane Ruggiero, the final episode of season one, with the eye of a screenwriter but the mind of a critic. I want to use screenwriting tools—primarily the idea of act structure—to say why the episode is good, but I want to avoid reducing it to merely a model for young writers. Television has gotten so good in recent years—*Firefly*, *Lost*, *24*, *Unscripted*, *Scrubs*—we owe it to ourselves to be better viewers, and Derrida isn't the place to go. My look at "Leave It to Beaver" will not touch on every screenplay concept in the books. My more modest hope is to point toward what is missing in our appreciation of film and television.

## Story Structure

In film and television, stories are said to have a structure of at least three parts: a character wants something, there is an obstacle to getting it, and then the tension is resolved. This “ending” often involves the creation of a new tension that sets in motion the next part of the story. As Gulino points out, this story structure is like a fractal, iterated at different levels (11): it organizes series, seasons, episodes, acts, and scenes. The structure of *Veronica Mars* as a whole might be Veronica’s simple quest for safety and happiness. The structure of season one is the attempt to solve the murder of Lilly Kane. Weevil finds out that Veronica suspects Logan, and this sets up a new conflict for season two. A major structure in “Leave It to Beaver”—as I will show—has to do with trying to achieve domestic happiness with biological parents. Veronica learns to accept life without her mother, but this has new consequences that will be dealt with in future episodes. The structure of the first act of “Leave It to Beaver” is organized around capturing Logan and healing Veronica’s family, but these are only temporary solutions (because they are false ones) and lead into new problems in act two. In a single scene in act one of “Leave It to Beaver,” Weevil attempts to kill Logan but Logan is arrested by the police; Weevil attacks because Veronica made him suspect Logan; Veronica (inadvertently) solves the problem by having Logan arrested, but this causes problems that generate the scenes that follow. Like boxes nested in boxes, story structure is inescapable.

The most important structure in a television show is the act structure. After the teaser (the pre-credits sequence), a one-hour cable-television drama is divided into four roughly even-length acts—labelled as such in the script—that are divided by commercial breaks. A typical feature-length movie has three acts: the first act is usually the first thirty minutes, the second is usually the middle hour, and the third is usually the final thirty minutes. (The difference between a three- and four-act structure is minimal, and should not concern us here.) The act structure in a film is further subdivided into several ten- to fifteen-minute sequences (essentially mini-acts each with their own beginning, middle, and end): two sequences in the first and third acts and four sequences in the second act. Without these little “movies within movies” the audience becomes bored and restless.

Film sequences have their origin in the old Hollywood reels, which could only hold ten to fifteen minutes of material before they had to be changed for fresh film (Gulino 3-4). Once films got longer than fifteen minutes, they consisted of reels strung together. Story structure emerged from this physical limitation, and stayed with us even after reels became obsolete. Though in film acts are subdivided into sequences, in television acts and sequences are one and the same. Acts are thus especially important in the appreciation of cable television, because the demands of commercials make the old Hollywood reel structure indispensable.

To follow the structure of “Leave It to Beaver” closely we must break it into its component parts and summarize its acts, just as Paul Gulino analyzes sequences in his screenwriting book.

### **The Teaser: Establishing the Status Quo**

The purpose of a teaser is obvious: it hooks the audience into the coming show. But it also serves as the starting point that the episode will disrupt. If the show is the same at the end as it was at the beginning, why would we watch it? (The exception to this rule is a show where lack of change is the point, as it was in *Seinfeld*.) *Veronica Mars* has unusually long teasers, and “Leave It to Beaver” is no exception. Six of its eight scenes all establish the status quo. The remaining two scenes are the hook, the inciting incident for the plot of the episode.

It begins at a newspaper office, where Keith Mars is trying to convince someone to run a story about how Abel Koontz is innocent of the murder of Lilly Kane. (Pretentious naming—such as “Cain” and “Abel” in a murder investigation—is one of the few weak points of *Veronica Mars*.) Rob Thomas re-establishes the season one plot arc that will be resolved in this episode: Who killed Lilly Kane?

In the second scene, Keith Mars picks up the envelope containing the results of his paternity test before entering into the domestic scene of Veronica and her newly returned mother cooking. This establishes the second season-long plot arc: Can Veronica Mars’s family stay together? The water bottle her mother drinks out of is planted in this scene—it will be important in act two—and the family banter reinforces the show’s structure on the level of theme: the discussion of how to chop onions without crying points to the

*Evelyn Vaughan*

## Veronica Mars: Girl. Detective.

**D**O ME A FAVOR. Read this, the opening voiceover from the pilot episode of *Veronica Mars*:

VERONICA (V.O.): This is my school. If you go here, your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California: a town without a middle class. If you're in the second group, you get a job: fast food, movie theaters, mini-marts. Or you could be me. My after-school job means tailing philandering spouses or investigating false injury claims.

Now—read it again, and imagine it being spoken by Humphrey Bogart.

If you immediately started thinking about cigarette smoke, men in fedoras, and femmes fatale with great gams, then clearly it's working—Rob Thomas (a TV God, along with the likes of Joss Whedon and Aaron Sorkin) has created a hard-boiled detective protagonist out of a little blonde California girl.

Cool, huh?

The fact that the series is neo-noir isn't particularly earth-shattering. What's notable about its success in this arena, though, is the importance words play in creating that effect. More specifically, Veronica's words.

The power of the voiceover narration in *Veronica Mars* to capture the hard-boiled detective feel, however, is only half of the equation. The narration also captures—bear with me, here—a completely unexpected but unmistakably girly vibe.

Don't believe me?

Do me a favor. Read the following voiceover, from a lunch-period scene in the pilot:

VERONICA (V.O.): It's not like my family met the minimum net worth requirement. My dad didn't own his own airline like John Enbom's, or serve as ambassador to Belgium like Shelly Pomroy's, but my dad used to be the sheriff and that had a certain cachet. Let's be honest, though. The only reason I was allowed past the velvet ropes was Duncan Kane, son of software billionaire Jake Kane. He used to be my boyfriend.

Now: Read it again, and imagine it being spoken by Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*.

Wait—I can hear your howls of protest from here. I'm not saying that Veronica is anything like Carrie Bradshaw. One of the reasons I love Veronica is that she's almost the anti-Carrie . . . the idea of Veronica spending rent money on a pair of fashionable Manolo Blahniks is ludicrous. I'm talking about the voiceover technique. So please. Go back and give it a try.

Not as farfetched as you would have thought, huh?

Here's my theory about the perfection of the voiceover narration in *Veronica Mars*. By using a voiceover with short, cynical sentences, the writers are indeed harkening back to the days of the hard-boiled detective thrillers. This certainly fits, because Veronica is almost as much a professional detective as her dad—just ask lawyer Cliff McCormack. But keep in mind that this technique, so popular in the early twentieth century, long ago became almost mockable, the venue of sitcom dream sequences and Flonase nasal spray commercials. So why does it still work so well for Veronica?