

Study of Perry Mason is bid to combat 'innocence fatigue'

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A University of Manchester historian is to study the influence of Erle Stanley Gardner, creator of renowned TV attorney Perry Mason, in a bid to reveal the roots of the fascination with stories about wrongful criminal conviction.

Forensic science historian Professor Ian Burney hopes the study will – with the help of a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship – better understand some of the challenges facing today's worldwide ['innocence projects'](#)

And that includes what many experts have described as an 'unhealthy obsession' with true crime.

Gardner—an American lawyer and author who died in 1970 – devoted much of his life to "The court of Last Resort" who with forensic, legal and investigative experts tackled miscarriages of justice.

The court, which operated before the advent of DNA testing- was later turned into a popular TV series.

Professor Burney said: "Since Perry Mason and

The court of Last Resort, innocence projects have shifted the focus away from legal arguments to DNA testing.

"But I and many others believe that the constant trickle of exonerations is leading to 'innocence fatigue,' as the public incrementally loses its outrage and fascination with the particulars of each new case.

"And as old cases with genetically untested evidence become rarer, the rate of DNA-based exonerations is levelling off."

Over the past three decades, the issue of wrongful conviction has captured the attention of the public and lawyers in the US and around the world.

Since Gary Dotson was cleared by post-conviction DNA testing in 1989, national advocacy organizations, spearheaded by the Innocence Project, have championed the cause of potentially innocent prisoners.

It has featured widely in the [news media](#), books, movies, [television shows](#), podcasts, and compulsively watched docuseries such as 'Making a Murderer' in 2015.

Today, Gardner is remembered as the creator of Perry Mason, the intrepid attorney who successfully cleared underdogs caught up in false criminal charges.

Mason's fictional heroics – which made Gardner at the time of his death the best-selling American author of the twentieth century – were a projection of his early legal work representing Oxnard California's Chinese community.

Gardner foretold better training and conditions for law enforcement officials and improving standards of medical and scientific evidence, ensuring impartial and competent advocacy for impoverished

defendants.

The writer pursued the court's cause within corridors of power – regularly meeting with state and prison governors, attending Bar Association and law enforcement conferences, and establishing lengthy correspondence with local, state and federal officials.

Professor Burney added, "Gardner, unlike modern true crime serials – selected cases with an eye to balancing human interest with considerations of structural reform of the legal system.

"So there is a need for historically robust understanding of past innocence projects like the Court of Last Resort, so we can better understand our present attitudes, and change what's wrong with them.

"The study leads to deeper questions about guilt and innocence which are fundamental to Western culture, knitted into the fabric of our sense of self and society – it asks "what is innocence, whose innocence matters, and why?"

Provided by University of Manchester

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