

Chicago Code Hits Home

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If you prefer to experience the world through the filter of the small screen — and I do — then you already know that Chicago is fast becoming the cultural capital of the world. Some of the best and buzziest TV shows are set here: CBS' "The Good Wife," Showtime's "Shameless" and now Fox's promising cop drama "The Chicago Code."

Los Angeles may be glitzy, New York may be sophisticated, but Chicago is real — and using it as a location automatically brings to mind the slushy gray area between city cynicism and Midwestern morality.

Because we're real, we know that there's one main reason that we're so popular: This is where the art of corruption was perfected. At this point, it would be a mistake to clean up City Hall. Bad for business.

But Jarek Wysocki, the hero of our series, is going to try anyway. He's played by Aussie Jason Clarke ("Brotherhood"), who does a nice job with a Back-of-the-Yards accent. We know he's a good guy because he loves Audrey Hepburn, hates swearing and would look good in profile on a Roman coin.

"When my father pinned the Chicago P.D. badge on me, he told me to shake hands with the good citizens of this city using a velvet glove," Wysocki says in voiceover in the first episode. "But keep a razor blade hidden between your fingers for the ones who forgot their manners." With writing like that, Chicago might develop a new reputation for folksy wisdom. There's quite a bit of narration, in fact, a device I wouldn't miss once we learn what's what.

"The Chicago Code," premiering Monday, is created by Rockford's Shawn Ryan ("The Shield"), and he introduces us to characters that are memorable without being caricatures. Wysocki's former partner Teresa Colvin has shot up the ranks and been named police superintendent. She's played by a suitably glammed-down Jennifer Beals. Refreshingly, it's no big deal that she's a woman. She doesn't seem to have sexual chemistry with anybody, and is reviled more for her attempts to put subpar cops out to pasture. (She transfers one officer to the mop closet.)

Wysocki seems to be the only guy she can trust, so she gives him the latitude to cherry-pick the "cases that matter." Among their ambitious targets: the Irish mob (fictional, I was disappointed to learn) and Ald. Patrick Gibbons (Delroy Lindo), whose enormous wardrobe allowance would seem to suggest that he's on the take. There's a difference

between corruption and getting things done, we're reminded, and Gibbons' philosophy seems to be, "Why choose?"

Detective Wysocki's agenda also includes avenging his brother's death, looking out for his niece, marrying a 27-year-old and rendezvousing with his ex-wife. You can't fault the man's work ethic.

The action is fast, and I was pleased to find that scenes play out unpredictably. I do look forward to less explaining, though, and more insights like this: "This city survived the great fire and ended up building the world's most beautiful skyline," Wysocki opines. "Because if there's anything that Chicago knows, it's how to punch back."

Whether the bad guys or the good guys win each round, one thing's evident: Chicago's got swagger.