

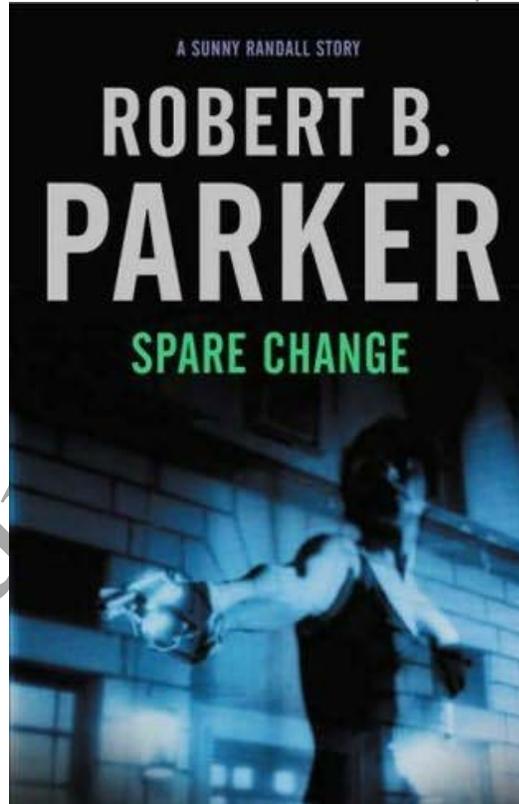
Cat and Mouse: *who's chasing whom?*

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

He has been called the dean of American crime writers; you might know him better as the creator of the Boston private investigator Spenser, in the long-running TV series of the same name. The unquestioned heir to a tradition begun by Raymond Chandler, his spare, powerful use of language transcends the genre to embody the essence of American writing from Mark Twain to Ernest Hemingway; and three decades after publishing his first novel Robert B. Parker continues to shape the prose of successive generations of crime writers.

Like his fictional protagonists, Parker is a straight-talking, meat-and-potatoes type of guy, to whom traditional values — family, keeping your word, and doing the right thing—are more important than academic honours or worldly success. The man is what he seems, and he stands for what he believes. His values are simple and straightforward, and at the core of his being is an unshakeable belief that what's right is right, and that a person ought to do what's right. In a sea of muddy values, conflicting beliefs, and sometimes bewildering shades of grey, Robert B. Parker stands out as a beacon, guiding readers to the comfortable shores of home. It is an attitude that has won him legions of loyal fans.



Robert B. Parker

Parker is a solid man, seemingly large enough to blot out the sun. Although he is in his mid-seventies, he looks all the world like someone you wouldn't want to mess with. His well-worn brown leather bomber jacket and faded jeans suit him like a second skin; his short-cropped brown hair and full moustache do not entirely mask a face that can be affable one moment, stern the next. Only his eyes give him away: you get the impression that beneath that daunting

exterior he is a big, huggable teddy bear at heart, a perception reinforced by visiting (www.robertbparker.net), where a slick, totally professional summary of his achievements is complemented by a disarming collection of personal photographs focusing not on literary events, but on family, friends, and household pets.

Parker was born and raised in Massachusetts, and attended Colby College in Maine. He served in the U.S. Army in Korea before returning home to earn a Ph.D. in English from Boston University. Having attained tenure, he turned his attention to writing, which was all he ever wanted to do. The rest, as they say, is history. For thirty-six years Robert B. Parker has been turning out crime novels at a prodigious rate: thirty-four Spenser novels, six more featuring small-town police chief Jesse Stone, another five Sunny Randall novels, and for good measure, almost another dozen stand-alone books.

His 31st Spenser novel, *Promised Land*, won an Edgar Award in 1977 for Best Novel of the Year, and in 2002 Parker was named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America, an honour he shares with the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Ellery Queen, and Agatha Christie.

A long-time dog lover, Parker lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife Joan and their two dogs. They have two grown sons.

Spare Change
(Putnam, 2007)

Three decades ago a young Boston police detective named Phillip Randall struggled to track down a serial killer who, over a three-year period, claimed seven victims before he disappeared. The signature for his crimes was to leave

exactly three coins near each of his victims. The man who came to be known as the Spare Change Killer wrote a series of notes to the detective, daring him to catch him. They established a perverse relationship, the mouse baiting the cat, teasing him, taunting him to spring, before disappearing into the night.

Now someone has resumed their deadly game, leaving near his victims the same trademark coins. The notes have resumed as well, only this time they're addressed to the detective's daughter, ex-cop and PI Sunny Randall, who has joined a multi-agency task force and taken up the chase. Is it a copycat crime, or has the original killer returned on a second murderous quest?

Suspects are thin on the ground. At Sunny's suggestion the police set up a plan to secure the next crime scene within moments of its discovery. The plan is successful: they find the weapon nearby, and they interview several persons found near the crime scene. Based on their interviews Sunny is convinced that she knows who the killer is; but her evidence is purely circumstantial, based solely on a suspect's attitude during their interview. She moves to turn the tables by taunting him, challenging him to reveal himself by making a foolish move. Her mission takes on a new urgency when Sunny discovers that she's on his hit list. Her father and the task force doubt her sanity when she proposes to flush the killer out by confronting him directly.

Crisp and clear

Like all of Parker's novels, *Spare Change* is character-driven, and the main characters are nicely nuanced. Sunny Randall is revealed to readers through her relationships with those around her:

her father Phil, anxious to protect her, her mother, living in a perpetual alcoholic haze, her hopelessly optimistic sister, her ex-husband, who still loves her, and their dog Rosie, over whom they share custody in an amiable, if seemingly doomed, relationship.

A hallmark of Parker's style, *Spare Change* is crisp and clear, and, coming in at a little less than three hundred pages, a quick read. With an action-packed climax it is quintessential Parker, and fans will enjoy his latest effort.

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