

Parker pens paeon

Homage to the golden age of Chandler

Suspended Sentences

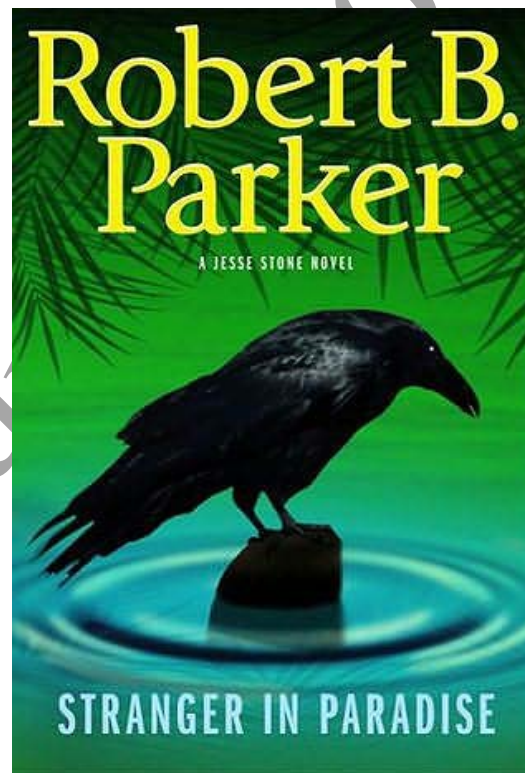
by Jim Napier

Putting aside the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the hard-boiled novel is arguably America's most distinctive contribution to crime fiction. Featuring a no-nonsense protagonist, an outsider battling the forces of evil almost always alone, and characterized by lean dialogue and fast-paced action, the genre saw its heyday in the late 1940s, in heroes exemplified on film by the likes of Humphrey Bogart, Alan Ladd, and Robert Mitchum. Its influence extends to the present day, in the novels of Sara Paretsky, Elmore Leonard, and James Lee Burke, and nowhere does it find a more polished expression than in the hands of Robert B. Parker. Reading a Parker novel is not unlike watching a master of Japanese brush painting at work: with a few, exquisitely-crafted strokes, he reveals the essence of his subject in stark relief. Shakespeare it ain't; but Parker's prose has its own kind of polish, and its own fascination, and it is beyond doubt quintessentially American.

Robert B. Parker

Decked out in his customary brown leather bomber jacket and faded blue jeans, Robert B. Parker looks like something between the avuncular next-door neighbor and a crusty veteran from the Second World War. And indeed, he

served in the U.S. Army in Korea before returning home to complete a Ph.D. in



English from Boston University. But for the past thirty-eight years Robert B. Parker has been turning out crime novels at the rate of more than one per year, to the delight of his many fans around the world. His output to date includes thirty-five Spenser novels (the basis for the long-running TV series starring Robert Ulrich), six novels featuring Boston PI Sunny Randall, and for good measure, almost another dozen stand-alone books. However, for my money

one of his most interesting series, now spanning six novels and an equal number of made-for-television films starring Tom Selleck, center around Jesse Stone, the idiosyncratic police chief of a small New England town incongruously named Paradise.

Parker won an Edgar Award in 1977 for Best Novel of the Year (*Promised Land*), and in 2002 he was named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America. He and his wife Joan live in Cambridge, Massachusetts with their two dogs.

Stranger in Paradise
(Putnam's, 2008)

Jesse Stone is a middle-aged chief of police in a small town on the shores of upstate Massachusetts. A failed minor-league ballplayer whose body betrayed him, he has a history of failed jobs and dead-end relationships, and a problem with the bottle as well. But he is fundamentally a decent man who struggles to bring a measure of meaning to his life. As he explains it to his shrink, he seeks redemption through his career. Jesse is on good terms with his ex-wife Jenn, a television reporter, and nurtures a hope of getting their relationship back on track.

Stone is assisted in his duties by a team that includes Deputy Molly Crane, a worldly-wise married mother of four, and "Suitcase" Simpson, a deputy whose libido sometimes gets the better of him.

In this, his most recent outing, Jesse is confronted by two problems. A group of residents are rallying to fight the creation of a school for disadvantaged youngsters in their neighborhood. Local activist Miriam Fiedler argues that the mere presence of a dozen Hispanic six-year-olds is enough to bring organized crime

to the area and threaten local property values. Stone is unconvinced, and wonders about her underlying motives. More worrying, a contract killer named Wilson Cromartie has recently returned to Paradise. The last time he was in town several people died, and Crow, as he is known, served ten years in prison for his involvement in the violence.

Not unreasonably, Jesse decides Crow is the larger of the problems. Crow has been hired to find Amber Francisco, the fourteen-year-old runaway daughter of a Florida gangster, and return her to her father. He seeks an uneasy alliance with Stone, and Jesse is torn: during the incident that sent him to prison, Crow prevented several men from harming women they had taken hostage, and Stone figures there must be some element of decency in the man. He has, it seems, his own personal ethic. The problem is, no one knows what it is.

Crow's task is complicated. Amber has fallen under the spell of Esteban Carty, the leader of a local street gang, the Horn Street Boys. A social misfit whose aspirations are all out of line with his abilities, Esteban unwisely decides to muscle in on Crow's contract.

But Crow is no newcomer to jungle warfare. Before long the streets of Paradise are littered with bodies, and Jesse Stone must decide how to safeguard Amber and deal with the threat of a very uneven turf war between a gang of local wannabes, an out-of-state crime czar, and a contract killer with his own agenda. Jesse must also balance the involvement of his ex-wife, who, as a television reporter, is understandably anxious for a story that could make her career. Lowest on his list is the manipulative Miriam Fiedler and her

concern about neighborhood property values. Or is that her concern, after all?

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A hardboiled for our times

Although in its cynicism and spare dialogue it owes a lot to the classic hard-boiled novels of the 1940's, *Stranger in Paradise* is very much a story for today. The omniscient point of view gives readers an overview of events as they move toward their inexorable climax. It's appeal lies in the interaction between the nuanced characters, especially Jesse Stone and his adversary, Wilson Crowmartie:

Jesse nodded slowly. "As long as I have you in town," he said, "I'm going to do everything I can to put together a case against you."

"I figured that," Crow said. "I say you won't be able to."

"Limitation is sort of complicated," Jesse said. "There was bank robbery involved, kidnapping, these fall under federal statutes. I'll talk to an ADA tomorrow, see what they can tell me."

"Ten years covers most things," Crow said.

"We're going to watch you all the time you're in town," Jesse said.

"But you're not going to harass me."

"If we can put a case together, we'll arrest you."

Essentially an outsider in a flawed world, Stone strives to live by his own values and do the right thing. It is a sense of duty that Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett would have perfectly understood.

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