

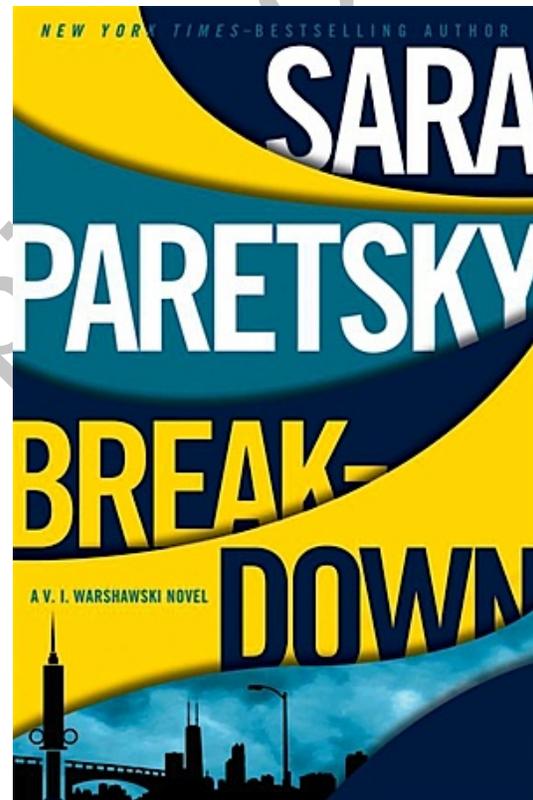
Politics, mental illness and vampire hunters —*what's not to like?*

by Jim Napier

CHICAGO-BASED CRIME WRITER Sara Paretsky has long dominated the contemporary hard-boiled genre with fast-paced tales featuring her indefatigable, often headstrong sleuth, VI Warshawski. With more brass than a two-dollar watch and an attitude that would wear down a KGB interrogator, VI is a one-person wrecking crew, cutting through the carefully-constructed edifices that shield bad people in high places, and leaving destruction, but also light, in her wake.

In *Breakdown* VI is summoned by her cousin Petra to find a group of seven pre-teens gone missing. Warshawski finds herself in an abandoned Jewish cemetery in Chicago in the midst of a summer storm and (if you'll excuse the expression) the dead of night. Wearing by now a sodden party frock and grungy trainers, the fifty-something PI is in no mood for messing with when she runs across the kids holding a vampire ritual and trying to call up Camilla, Queen of the Dead. The kids get more than they bargained for when they stumble on a corpse impaled on a piece of rebar and lying on a slab, his blood still fresh. Making matters worse, someone has heard the com-motion and called the cops. VI manages to get the kids away from the crime scene and back to one of their parent's apartment, but not without incident: one of them claims they saw

someone, likely the killer. Even more disturbingly, another member of the group lost her cell-phone in the cemetery: she may have photographed the killer, and if so, her phone could be used to track her down.



UNDAUNTED BY A LITTLE MUD AND MURDER, VI makes her way to the ballroom event where she'd been headed before receiving Petra's frantic call. The object of attention is Wade Lawlor, doyen of the Political Right and host of a media-dominating TV show on the Global Entertainment Network. Lawlor has the public ear, and his word can make or break

anyone with political ambitions. He's hitched his wagon to local senatorial candidate Helen Kendrick, another right-winger whose fortunes stem from her husband's corporate interests. Lawlor had supported a group disputing Obama's citizenship, among other right-wing causes, and he and Warshawski are light-years apart. They trade thinly-veiled insults and before long VI has made yet another – and important – enemy.

VI is at the function at the request of Murray Ryerson, a journalist with whom she's worked on a number of investigative pieces. Murray's latest interest is the plight of the mentally ill, both on and off the street. The project piques VI's interest, not least because she has a good friend from her college days who has spent most of her own life battling mental issues. When she learns Lawlor had helped to axe the investigative series before it got off the ground, VI's hackles are raised. Lawlor's favorite pastime is washing other people's laundry in public. Does the media mogul himself have something to hide?

DESPITE ITS COSMOPOLITAN AIR, the Windy City is really just one big – if

not always happy – family, and VI soon discovers that the victim in the cemetery has ties to the law firm presided over by her own ex-husband. And adding to the rapidly-expanding fog of conflicting interests, one of the girls at the cemetery is the daughter of Sophie Durango – who's running for the senatorial seat against Lawlor's darling of the Right, Helen Kendrick. When Lawlor goes after Durango on his show, Warshawski decides it's time to get involved.

In *Breakdown* Sara Paretsky weaves a wide-ranging tale involving death in an abandoned graveyard, the all-too-cozy relationship between politicians and the media, and the plight of the mentally ill into a single fast-paced plot. In the hands of a lesser writer this ambitious project might well have degenerated into a tangled skein of plots and sub-plots, but Paretsky is able to pull it off in trumps. Given the current electoral circus in the U.S. *Breakdown* is a timely tale, and Paretsky's political arrows strike all too close to home. Like her plucky protagonist, Sara Paretsky has lost none of her edge.

Sara Paretsky, *Breakdown*
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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com