

The Lady Speaks Her Mind

Crime writer Sara Paretsky discusses her seminal sleuth

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

*From Kansas farm girl to NY Times Bestseller list: Sara Paretsky published her first mystery, *Indemnity Only*, in 1982. A founder and former President of the writers' group *Sisters in Crime*, she was awarded the CWA Gold Dagger in 2004. She had already received the Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement in 2002 and in the same year was named Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America. With *Breakdown* Sara has published the fifteenth novel featuring her iconic female private investigator V I Warshawski. Sara and her husband live in Chicago with their golden retriever. Reviewer Jim Napier caught up with her during her recent North American tour to promote her latest Warshawski book, *Breakdown*.*



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Sara Paretsky

PARETSKY'S PROTAGONIST, V I Warshawski, is both superhero and antihero: she likes Johnny Walker Black, often wrecks her cars, is messy, headstrong, and tough. Paretsky herself is quite the crusader: a community organizer at the age of 19, mentor to teens in troubled schools, and diehard supporter of lost causes—not least, the Chicago Cubs. So I asked Sara how much of her is in V I—or perhaps how much of V I is in her. She was typically honest in her response. “If I were the active person V I is, I’d be out on the mean streets instead of writing about them,” she admitted. “V I and I have the same mouth, but definitely very different ways of living.”

The introduction of V I’s character was a real game-changer in the portrayal of women in crime fiction, which previously had cast them mostly as vamps, victims, or villains. I asked if it was an easy sell to publishers. “It took about a year to find a publisher,” she said, “partly because V I was challenging gender stereotypes, partly because the books are set in Chicago, and New York publishers could only imagine private eyes on the east and west coasts. Another handicap is an ongoing prejudice against the PI novel itself. New York keeps declaring its death, and yet we PI writers seem to keep finding readers.”

BUT V I IS NOT simply Sam Spade in drag, I pointed out: she has friends she confides in, and she often worries about how her job affects her ability to relate to others. I asked whether that depth to her character helps explain why her novels continue to be widely read. "I think readers take pleasure and comfort in an ongoing cast of characters," she said. "It's why series novels have such an enduring popularity, starting with Sherlock Holmes, and moving on from there. I know as a reader I always enjoy slipping back into [a Nero Wolfe] or hooking up with [a good Margery Allingham novel]."

FOR MANY READERS V I has become a symbol for empowered women everywhere. I asked Sara whether she thought crime writers have moved on to treat women as more complex, three-dimensional figures as a result of her influence. "I like to think that mine was one of the voices that helped effect that change," she acknowledged. "Of course, Carolyn Heilbrun, Lillian O'Donnell, Marcia Muller, and Sue Grafton also made a difference."

Some say that the Hollywood film version of *Deadlock*, featuring Kathleen Turner as V I, didn't do the character justice. I asked her if she agreed, and whether she would make another film. "The film version took episodes from my first three books without being based fully on any of them," she said. "The film brought pleasure to quite a number of viewers, but most critics agree with Leonard Maltin in considering it a bomb. I'd love to make another film, but Disney owns the rights, and so far they have not been interested in a new project."

THE RELATION BETWEEN CHARACTER AND SETTING is often crucial to the

success of a series, and Paretsky has said that VI is a natural fit for the city of Chicago. I asked her to elaborate a bit on that. She replied that "San Francisco is a Chardonnay kind of town, but Chicago is a shot-and-a-beer city. V I's personality definitely fits this grittier, blue-collar city persona. New York's politicians and business people are more ruthless than Chicago's, but they're also more sophisticated; I don't think she'd function well in that environment."

I pointed out that her books have been criticized by some readers as "political" instead of being merely entertaining. To mention only a few, *Blood Shot* deals with both child abusers and the risks to workers at a chemical plant, *Bitter Medicine* raises issues of harmful medical practices, *Body Work* gets into the murky waters of the Gulf War, and *Blacklist* deals, in part, with anti-Islamic hysteria. When asked how she responded to that criticism she admitted "All angry criticism is hurtful to a degree, and I do sometimes wonder if my viewpoint affects my sales. But in the end, I can only write when I feel passionately engaged by my story and my characters."

PARETSKY'S LATEST BOOK is titled *Breakdown*. When I asked what sort of pickle V I had got herself into this time, she laughed. "We're looking at vampire-obsessed tweens, a holocaust survivor's murky economic past, the 24-hour cable news cycle, V I's ex-husband, and the tightrope that immigrants to the US are walking these days. Throw in a few psychotropic drugs, and you've got *Breakdown*."

Finally, I asked Sara whether she could give her readers a hint of where she might be headed. As V I ages, are there any life-altering changes in store for the

spunky PI? “Right now V I is in a holding pattern around the age of fifty,” she replied. “Maybe when I get to seventy myself, sixty will look young and perky, and I’ll age her another decade.”

So I left her to it, wondering whether, like most authors, there wasn’t a lot more of her no-nonsense protagonist in Sara Paretsky than she’d care to admit.

Readers can find more about Sara at <http://www.saraparetsky.com/>

Since 2005 Jim Napier’s reviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spineingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crimetime*, and *January* magazine, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



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