

# CRIME WRITER, ROBERT B. PARKER DIES AT AGE 77

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PINE BLUFFS – Beloved novelist and creator of the Spenser series about a hard boiled yet intelligent private investigator, Robert Brown Parker died suddenly at his home in Cambridge, MA on Monday, January 18, 2010. He was seventy-seven.

It's probably fair to say that I'm a colossal Robert B. Parker fan, having read at least twenty of his novels. I had just finished his 2009 effort, *The Professional*, about a con man who was blackmailing a group of young, wealthy, oversexed women unhappily married to older, wealthy men, when news of his death arrived. Since I drew a bit on his character in the Spenser series to develop the protagonist, Matt Dawson, in my novels, *The China Connection*, *Little Sister Lost*, and my latest, tentatively titled *Return to Darkness*, I was saddened. From Parker, I learned to move the story using crisp, witty dialogue rather than lots of expository material.

Born in Springfield, a city in southwestern Massachusetts, on August 26, 1956, the prolific writer did not stray far from home. He met his wife, Joan, at a birthday party as a toddler. They grew up in the same neighborhood. The couple had two sons, David and Daniel.

On that fateful Monday morning fifty-two years later, he and Joan had eaten breakfast together at their home. Then, Joan went out to do her running, and when she returned, she found him dead at his desk. He had apparently suffered a heart attack.

According to Mark Pratt, an Associated Press (AP) writer, ". . . 'An ambulance was sent to Parker's home in Cambridge Monday morning after a report of a sudden death, said Alexa Manocchio, spokeswoman for the Cambridge police department.' Parker's long time agent, Helen Brann, said that the author's widow called her Monday right after finding him dead at his desk."

Parker, author of sixty seven novels, claimed that he did not outline, wrote at least ten pages each day, and seldom knew "who done it" until the end. Here's an excerpt from one of his interviews:

**Question:** In recent years you have published two and often three books a year. Can you tell us about your writing schedule and how you accomplish this?

**Answer:** I don't outline. Each weekday I write ten pages. I don't rewrite, I don't write a second draft. When I am finished, I don't reread it. Joan reads it to make sure I haven't committed a public disgrace, and, if I haven't, I send it in. Then I begin the next book. I am not obsessive about this, if there are things that interfere occasionally, in which case I may not write some Tuesday.

This was one author who apparently knew how to stay in shape:

**Question:** How do you manage to stay physically fit?

**Answer:** "When I have finished my ten pages -- which usually takes from about eight AM to two PM, I work out. I spend three days a week doing Pilates training, I climb twelve flights of stairs two days a week, and take a two-mile walk one day."

This respect for physical fitness was best reflected in his character, Spenser, and brought vividly to life by Urich in the TV series, who was often seen in a local Boston gym, battering a sparring partner or punching the heavy bag, sometimes along with his sidekick Hawk, who appears in all the Spenser novels. In fact, in one of Parker's blogs, we have this comment:

". . . and now I'm off to the gym to spar with my trainer, who has promised not to hurt me."

Parker wrote thirty-nine Spenser novels, beginning with *The Godwulf Manuscript* in 1973, and ending, maybe, with *Painted Ladies* in 2010. I say 'maybe' because there's a rumor that two or more new works are in the pipeline.

He claimed that his spelling of the protagonist's name -- with an "s" rather than a "c," was the correct one, and that he'd modeled it after the English poet,

". . . who probably spelled it correctly back then, although people weren't as picky about spelling in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, like they are now."

Although the Spenser for Hire TV series was hugely successful, Hollywood has yet to make a Spenser movie. Will there be one? On his web blog, Parker had this to say on May 29, 2009:

"Negotiations continue on the Spenser For Hire front. The mills of Hollywood grind exceeding fine. But I have no reason to think it won't happen in awhile."

What was Spenser's first name? Parker said he originally wanted to give him the name David, after one of his own sons, but didn't want to slight his other son, Daniel, so he decided against any name at all. The two boys are apparently musicians and actors, talented in their own right.

According to Mark Pratt, Parker's "character was the basis for the 1980s TV series, 'Spenser for Hire' starring Robert Urich," the tough yet sensitive private investigator who made his home in a converted fire house in Cambridge, but lived alone, although in a monogamous relationship with his long-time girlfriend, Susan Silverman. Parker later said the only thing he liked about the series was the residual checks." Personally, I loved the series and watched it almost weekly along with my four teen-age kids, as often as the demands of work would permit. It was the TV series that turned me on to Parker's novels.

Robert Parker, the man, was no dummy. He earned a BA degree from Colby College in Maine, served in the army during the Korean War, and earned his Master's

degree in English Literature in 1957 from Boston University. He worked in advertising and technical writing until 1962. Later, he returned to school. In 1971, he received his Ph.D in English literature, also from Boston University. For his dissertation, entitled "The Violent Hero, Wilderness Heritage, and Urban Reality," he compared fictional private detective protagonists in the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald, considered for a long time to be the big three of private investigator novelists. By 1980, with his *Looking for Rachael Wallace*, a Spenser novel, his name was established and he was acclaimed as a master of the genre in his own right.

So appreciative of Chandler's work was Parker, that in 1989 he brought out *Poodle Springs*, a completion of Chandler's last, unfinished novel. And in '91 he published *Perchance to Dream*, a sequel to Chandler's novel, *The Big Sleep*.

Parker later created the character of Sunny Randall, a female private eye, publishing six novels with her as the lead character. The first, in 1999, was *Family Honor*. The last was *Spare Change*, written in 2007.

But perhaps his most successful later creation was the character of Jesse Stone. He wrote nine novels featuring this character, beginning in 1997 with *Night Passage* and ending in 2009 with *Night and Day*. Another, *Split Image* will be published this year. Several have been made into popular movies starring Tom Selleck, who Parker said in one of his blogs, "nails the character completely."

Both of these characters seemed to have arrived out of the blue, to an author who had been amazingly successful with the Spenser books. Here's how he explained himself:

**Question:** A few years ago you started two new series, the Jesse Stone books and the Sunny Randall books. Where did the new series sleuths come from? What different issues can you explore that separate these books from the Spenser novels?

**Answer:** Some years ago Joan and I decided to no longer hustle Hollywood, and I noticed that writing a Spenser novel took about two months. I invented Jesse Stone so I could try my hand at a third person narration, and a guy who was nowhere near as evolved as Spenser. Jesse has problems with alcohol and his ex-wife. Spenser is complete, Jesse is a life work in progress. I also liked writing about a cop and a small-town police force. Sunny Randall was invented at the behest of Helen Hunt, who wanted me to invent someone for her to play in a series of movies. We agreed that I would write a novel. Putnam would publish. Sony would buy it for Helen, and Helen would star. Everything worked fine up to actually making the movie. That is in limbo (nothing ever dies in Hollywood, though the birth rate is also low). Sunny did well and my publisher urged me to continue, so I did. I lean heavily on Joan for the woman's point of view here. And I am able to write about things from the perspective of someone of great courage but limited physical strength.

Parker also claims four westerns as his creations: *Appaloosa* (2005), *Resolution* (2008), *Brimstone* (2009) and *Blue-Eyed Devil*, which, I'm told, will debut in 2010. These popularized the exploits of characters, Virgil Cole and Everett Hitch, gunslingers for hire. Westerns? Here's what he says about that in his blog:

" . . . The response to BRIMSTONE has been gratifying. I don't know very far ahead, what I'm going to write. But I rather don't like the idea of not writing anymore about Hitch and Cole, so, probably, I will. . . "

A big man physically, Parker was not without health problems. Recently he'd had both knees replaced, a year apart. In his blog on May 23, 2008, he reported:

"I'm back, with a new right knee, to match the previously replaced left one. Both are titanium steel (in keeping with my body type), and I set off alarms in all airports. On the other hand I can walk good."

Robert Parker's contribution to the detective genre has not gone unnoticed. He has received three nominations and two Edgar Awards from the Mystery Writers of America. He earned his first prize, the Best Novel Award, for the fourth in the Spenser series, *The Promised Land*. In 2002 he received a Grand Master Award, and in 2008, he was awarded the Gumshoe Lifetime Achievement Award.

For those of us who enjoyed the regular appearance of his novels, he will be missed.