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Parker's Brothers by Lenny Picker

Thriller author Harlan Coben, who read Robert B. Parker's Spenser novels in college, once observed, "When it comes to detective novels, 90% of us admit he's an influence, and the rest of us lie about it."

Almost two years after the death of Parker, an academic who wrote his thesis on Raymond Chandler and completed a Chandler manuscript (*Poodle Springs*), many authors and critics specializing in crime fiction about private eyes still share Coben's assessment of Parker's role in revitalizing that subgenre.

Harry Hunsicker, author of the Lee Henry Oswald series set in Dallas featuring a Gulf War veteran (*Crosshairs*, St. Martin's, 2007), remarks: "Robert B. Parker has been a huge influence on my work and that of an entire generation of writers. It's hard to overstate how important he's been to the PI genre." Loren D. Estleman, who's been writing Amos Walker PI novels since 1980 (*Forge* published the 21st, *Infernal Angels*, in July) considers Parker making "the case for the modern detective story as American literature... his most enduring legacy."

Kevin Burton Smith, who runs the *Thrilling Detective* blog, considers Parker "as big an influence on writers from the '80s until the present as Hammett, Chandler, Macdonald, and Spillane were in their day. Each, of course, built on the previous writers, but there's no denying Parker's influence on the PI genre in terms of commerciality, regionalism, women and relationships, and race."

Max Allan Collins points to Parker's impact on publishers: "Every so often, a private eye writer comes along and makes an impact that opens doors for other private eye writers. Parker encouraged editors to consider other private eye fiction for publication. He's been hugely influential on a lot of other private eye writers, some of whom, like Walter Mosley and Bob Crais, have been very successful themselves. With his Boston setting, Parker also opened the door for regional mystery writers, and that went way beyond just private eye fiction."

Collins himself continues to add to his prolific inventory of PI work, which now includes his 15th Nate Heller novel, *Bye Bye, Baby* (*Forge*, Aug.), in which the private sleuth, whose casebook includes most of the major crimes of the 20th century, gets involved in sorting out the questionable death of Marilyn Monroe.

Readers who haven't sampled PI fiction lately may be reluctant to, based on outdated stereotypes, unaware that Chandler's mean streets are no longer the sole address for gritty crime fiction featuring a detective-for-hire whose first loyalty is usually to the client footing the bill. Or, as Ace Atkins puts it, "Those unfamiliar with PI novels often [assume there's a] fedora, cigarette, and smoky office. While a great novel can contain all of those, it can also be a hell of a social commentary. A PI is a wonderful vehicle for a good author to explore so much—he/she can go anywhere and write about anything." Atkins, formerly a crime reporter in Florida, made his name with hard-edged period pieces, including *Devil's Garden* (Putnam, 2009), in which Pinkerton agent Dashiell Hammett narrates his efforts to assist the defense team representing Fatty Arbuckle in his 1920s manslaughter trials.

The where is very much in play these days. Some of the best contemporary authors have found ways to introduce the conventions popularized by

Hammett and Chandler into what Conan Doyle labeled "the smiling and beautiful countryside." Steve Hamilton's *Alex McKnight*, a former Detroit police officer who watched his partner die and still carries a bullet less than a centimeter from his heart, works as a PI in the small town

of Paradise, Mich. Hamilton chose the setting to make things more challenging for himself: "For me, it's a lot more interesting to see what kind of trouble your PI can get into when he lives in a cabin in a very small, remote town on the shores of Lake Superior."

The eighth McKnight novel, *Misery Bay* (Minotaur, June), deals with the unexpected aftershocks from a young man's suicide in a lonely corner of the Upper Peninsula. (And, in fact, Hammett's *Red Harvest* takes place in a small mining town.) McKnight's ninth, *Die a Stranger*, will be published by Minotaur in July 2012.

The crimes being probed by today's PIs aren't limited to murder, extortion, and political corruption. Peter Spiegelman, whom Reed Farrel Coleman, creator of Moe Prager, has dubbed "one of the most underappreciated PI writers today," had his PI, John March, helping his brother with an Internet stalker in 2007's *Red Cat* (Knopf). Coleman himself is at the top of many cognoscenti's lists of the best in the subgenre. His seventh novel starring Prager, *The Hurt Machine* (Tyrus, Dec.), has the part-time wine merchant, part-time shamus attempting to learn why two EMTs on a meal break let a man who suffered a stroke die. Coleman's plots illustrate how elements of fair-play whodunits can be successfully grafted onto a grittier view of the world than the English cozy. His work blurs the line that some would draw between PI fiction and noir; as film noir expert Eddie Muller once put it, in the Prager books, "the truth always makes things worse"—the quintessence of noir.

Those looking for a PI story line set against the backdrop of recent history will welcome Ed Kovacs's debut, *Storm Damage* (Minotaur, Dec.), in which private eye Cliff St. James navigates a post-Katrina New Orleans in search of a missing person whose fate may be connected with the CIA. St. James is a typical PI protagonist—self-destructive, willing to use extralegal means to achieve his goals—and will return in 2012's *Good Junk* (Minotaur), where he looks into the murder of a U.S. government "black projects" engineer tied in with a murky network of seedy arms dealers and foreign intelligence agents purchasing state-of-the-art weaponry and high technology.

And private eyes aren't all ex-cops gone into business for themselves; 2010 saw the latest memorable journalist-as-PI make his debut. Bruce

DeSilva's *Rogue Island* (Forge), which won an Edgar Award for best first novel, drew upon the author's many years covering Rhode Island as an investigative reporter for the *Providence Journal* to create Liam Mulligan, who finds that a string of arsons may be tied to a redevelopment project.

But if experts are generally in accord about Parker's fictional footprint, there's more disagreement about whether PIs must be moral. Otto Penzler, in the *Huffington Post* last year, wrote that "the private detective story separates itself from noir... because it also has a character with a moral center."

By contrast, Coleman believes, "There is a huge measure of immorality in how PIs function. Haven't you ever wondered what Sam Spade would have done in *The Maltese Falcon* if he could have figured out a way to come out unscathed and if the falcon was real? I think we shouldn't confuse a PI's code of ethics—which can be completely skewed—with morality. I mean, look at Easy Rawlins. Is he insulated from the immorality of Mouse simply because he doesn't overtly sanction Mouse's murderous nature? Of course not. There's a tacit approval. PIs operate in all sorts of immoral ways even if in the name of justice and morality."

Rawlins's and Mouse's creator, Walter Mosley, returns to his other series character, the ethically compromised Leonid McGill, in *All I Did Was Shoot My Man* (Riverhead, Jan.), in which the PI tries to atone for framing a woman in the largest Wall Street robbery in history. Mosley continues his unique contribution to the field by examining race relations in the U.S. through his detective fiction.

The large number of gifted writers laboring in the field suggests that Parker's legacy will be a lasting one. Many actually improve upon Chandler, who was notoriously cavalier about his plots, in at least one respect; in a 1949 letter, he confessed that he didn't know who killed one of the victims in Philip Marlowe's debut, *The Big Sleep*. Hammett had some of the same failings; Estleman writes, "As many times as I've read *The Maltese Falcon* and seen the movie, I still don't know why Brigid killed Miles." The best of today's PI writers work very hard to make the plot hang together, even if the subgenre invites, if not actually requires, messier endings than Agatha Christie would have concocted.

As to the near-future, Hamilton believes the PI market "is on a downswing now. I imagine pure impatience on the part of the publishers is one factor. They're running a little scared in this tough market and are less willing to let a series find its legs and grow. You have to hit it out of the park on the first try, and that's not necessarily what most PI writers are built for."

Estleman's a bit more optimistic: "The market's more flexible than many publishers think. When they think it's flooded with PIs or whatever, they back off, thus fulfilling their own prophecy. Then something fresh and powerful comes along and busts the market wide open."

PI fiction's obituary has been written many times, but despite the uncertainties plaguing book publishing in general, it's hard to bet against the enduring appeal of a subgenre that, as Sean Chercover (creator of the Ray Dudgeon series) writes, "is the perfect framework for the social novel. Because it deals with behavior so universally reviled that it has been outlawed, it demands that the plot have consequences beyond the angst of the protagonist, and encourages us to shine a light into the dark corners of our nature and the hypocrisies in our society."

And its popularity in the U.S. will always be tied to its origins here. As Hunsicker puts it, "It's an extension of the frontier mentality, the rugged individualism that characterized the early settlers of our country." To quote Jackson Donne's creator, Dave White, author of *When One Man Dies* (Three Rivers Press, 2007), "It grew out of the Western vigilante and into the postwar pathos. America needed a hero who wasn't tied down by laws and government, a lone wolf who could set things right. The PI filled that void when the western novel started to fade. But he is an American hero, as American as Natty Bumppo. He's also a tragic American hero, his only mission to fix other people's problems."

And for Spenser fans mourning Parker's death, they've not seen the last of their hero. Earlier this year, Parker's estate tapped Atkins to continue the Spenser franchise. Putnam will publish his first effort, *Lullaby*, in May 2012.