

All Our Yesterdays Short Guide

All Our Yesterdays by Robert B. Parker

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Characters

Since the narrative is developed chronologically and involves the Sheridans and the Winslows, the characters are presented by generations and in parallel dynasties. Conn Sheridan and Hadley Winslow begin the connection of the two families with a fleeting romance in Ireland during the Troubles of the 1920s. Conn is an Irish patriot, a member of the Irish Republican Army, who is wounded in an attack on a rural police station. He is nursed back to health by Hadley Winslow, the wife of an American banker living in Dublin because her husband is there on business. Conn and Hadley have a brief, passionate affair and Conn wants them to run away together, but Hadley will not give up the comfort and social position her wealthy husband provides her. Conn flees Ireland for Boston when the British police close in on him.

Hadley and her husband also return to Boston where she and her husband live.

Unable to have Hadley for a wife, Conn very calculatedly marries Mary Ellen Murphy and they have one son, Gus. Their marriage is a loveless one and Conn seeks sexual companionship elsewhere. He also rises in the Boston Police Department but augments his salary through kickbacks. Hadley, too, has a son, Thomas J. Winslow, Jr., who lives the indulged and spoiled life of a rich family's son. He also develops a deadly sexual perversion and is caught by Conn for sexually assaulting and murdering a young girl. As a favor to Hadley, Conn covers up the crime, and Tom is sent to Switzerland for treatment, presumably never to return to America.

Gus, like his father, joins the Boston police force and rises through the ranks. He, too, makes a loveless and sexless marriage and is on the take. He seeks sexual favors elsewhere. Gus and his wife have one son, Chris. However, Tom returns from Europe and assumes a position in his father's banking firm and apparently leads a normal, productive life. He marries and has one daughter, Grace. However, Tom is not completely cured of his sexual peculiarities and murders several young girls, until he is caught by Gus, who like his father gives him an out, this time by allowing him to commit suicide.

Unlike his father, Chris attends college and law school and partially through his father's political and personal connections, assumes control of a police department crime task force, a task force in charge of solving the sex crimes committed by Tom. Chris has also developed a relationship with Grace and the two are serious enough to think about marrying. Gus sacrifices his career and reputation for his son, thereby partially expiating his own sins and those of his father, Conn. Chris benefits from Gus's sacrifice and becomes head of the Boston Police Department. Grace learns of her father's guilt and shame, which clears the way for her to marry Chris, which she does at the narrative's end, bringing the saga of the two families full circle and fulfilling the dream of Chris' grandfather of uniting the Winslows and the Sheridans.

Social Concerns/Themes

Although Robert Parker has become a famous and wealthy with his Spenser series, he has also published three other works of fiction not strictly crime novels nor featuring Spenser. *Wilderness* (1979), *Love and Glory* (1983), and *All Our Yesterdays* (1994). While the earlier non-Spenser books were modest affairs, *All Our Yesterdays* is a big, sprawling family-saga, which begins in 1920 and runs to the present and involves three generations of the family's of Conn Sheridan, one time I.R.A. gunman, and Hadley Winslow, wife of a Boston tycoon, who have a brief affair the consequences of which take almost seventy-five years to resolve.

The narrative begins in Ireland during "the troubles," where young and reckless Conn Sheridan, an I.R.A. captain, is wounded during a raid on a country police station and is sent to Dublin to recuperate where he is nursed by Hadley Winslow, whose Irish-American husband is managing a local branch of the banking firm he runs in Boston, Massachusetts. Conn falls in love with Hadley, and they have a brief but rather intense affair before Conn escapes to the United States to avoid capture by the British forces. He flees to Boston and becomes a police officer with the metropolitan force, marries badly and has a child who in turn makes a loveless marriage and also has a son. Conn's grandson becomes the narrator for the contemporary portions of the story. Hadley's offspring also flourish and her granddaughter falls in love with Conn's grandson. The history of both families forms the narrative of the novel.

As with Parker's other fiction, *All Our Yesterdays*, revolves around issues of loyalty and honor and the search for personal values in a world full of distrust, betrayal, and lack of moral grounding. The eventual marriage between Chris Sheridan and Grace Winslow supplies not only the denouement for the novel but also resolves the continuing tensions between the families. Chris tells the story of their grandparents and parents while he and Grace try to sort out their own problem-ridden relationship. In the process of recounting the tale, Chris lays to rest the ghosts which have haunted both of their families.

In many ways this novel is the generic American story. It traces the ascendancy of a poor, immigrant Irish Catholic family as it rises in the socioeconomic scale eventually to merge with the established, wealthy predominantly Protestant and Yankee hierarchy. The novel is about how money and power are accumulated in American culture. The rise to power of the Sheridans and the retention of power by the Winslows are presented in unflattering terms — both families have resorted to chicanery and deceit in order to gain their wealth and position — and in the end the sins of the past must be redeemed by the humiliation of Gus Sheridan, who resigned in disgrace from the Boston police force and the suicide of Tom Winslow, who must die for his unnatural sexual desires which have led him to commit murder.

By the story's conclusion there is hope that Chris and Grace will be able to put the worst of the past behind them and live their lives differently. Parker's unsentimental

examination of the class system and of the ways power is gained and maintained in America provides a scathing critique of modern American life.

Against this background of social history the individual characters of this saga work through their particular failings and successes as human beings. However, it is only at the end of the novel that there is some measure of grace in the lives of the last generation, who seem to be able to realize finally a personal measure of happiness and fulfillment.

Techniques

Parker tells his story in flashback, beginning in the present with Chris recounting the history of the two families to Grace with whom he has separated temporarily. The narrative shifts back and forth from the past to the present and from third to first person perspective, with the story told in first person by Chris and in the third person for those sections about Conn and Gus.

The major focus is on the Sheridan family, since this is primarily their story, with continuing references to the Winslow family inserted into the narrative.

Like Parker's other novels, *All Our Yesterdays* unfolds in a smooth prose style, and in many ways, the male characters assume the characteristics of Spenser from the series books. Tough, unsentimental, and yet at times tender, the figures of Conn and Gus give vent to their dark side which allows them to survive the prejudice against the Irish poor which they experience in Yankeedom Boston. It is in the figure of Chris, however, that a more sensitive and morally conventional nature prevails, which permits the conclusion of the tale and of the resolution of the continuing tensions between the two families.

Finally, in this novel Parker is far more graphically sexual than he is in the Spenser books, in which sex, although always present, is treated with more circumspection. Obviously he felt the freedom to open up the sexual issues in *All Our Yesterdays* in ways he has resisted in the series.

Key Questions

Because Parker is best known for the Spenser series, it would be appropriate to compare this novel with his more familiar ones. Such a comparison is doubly appropriate since many of the issues associated with *All Our Yesterdays* are also raised in the series books.

1. In what ways is Chris Sheridan like Spenser? Unlike him?
2. What social issues discussed in this novel are also present in the series books? Are the issues raised differently here? If so, how so?
3. It might be interesting to have the group compare Parker's family saga with other similar books they have read. There is a whole genre of novels set against a similar historical background which they could explore.
4. What is the relationship between the individual characters and the history against which they are portrayed?
5. In spite of the fact that *All Our Yesterdays* is not specifically a crime book, it does seem to revolve around a crime setting. What does this suggest?

What does Parker accomplish by continuing to pursue crime and criminality in this work?

6. How are the gender issues treated in this book? Although the women depicted in this novel are important they are less central to the narrative than the men. What do you make of this?
7. How does the somewhat cavalier treatment of police corruption in the novel effect its moral attitudes? What sort of judgment is Parker delivering on American society?
8. What narrative advantages are gained by the structure of the novel with its flashback format and variable points of view prose style?
9. The fact that the characters are so identified with being Irish raises a number of interesting questions about ethnicity in the novel. How does this ethnic identity work in the book to give it an extra dimension?
10. What does *All Our Yesterdays* have to say about questions of gender?

How are the women treated in the novel and how does this compare with Parker's treatment of women in his series fiction?

Literary Precedents

In his series novels, Parker has touched on many of the issues explored in more depth here. However, we are given a greater insight into the lives of the rich and powerful in this novel, something Spenser only glimpses from the outside. Like other largescale family sagas, this work of fiction reveals a large panorama of social and political events and delves below the surface of Boston society and pursues the rise to power of the immigrantIrish Sheridans. Like other such books about the rise of a family from poverty to riches, *All Our Yesterdays* is a cautionary tale about the American experience and traces the drives for success, many of which are unconventional and illegal, that have characterized the rise of the powerful in this country.

There are certainly echoes in the story, however faint, of the Kennedy family experience with their history of skirting the law and of the obsessive womanizing of the males. However, it would be unfair to push these connections too far because the experiences are too generic but the traces do persist. Similar novels have been a staple of popular fiction since the late nineteenth century from the novels of William Dean Howells down to those of John P. Marquand and Daniel Steele.

Even such romances as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) can be seen as sharing traits with *All Our Yesterdays*. In Hawthorne's narrative a crime in the past separates two families but yields power and position to one of them and leaves a curse that is eventually resolved by the later offspring through their marriage which finally unites the warring factions.

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