

# Chance Short Guide

## Chance by Robert B. Parker

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# Contents

<a href="#">Chance Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>



# Characters

Parker's cast, as usual, includes the two mainstays of the series who, since *Promised Land* (1976), have been Spenser's closest allies: Hawk, the African-American mercenary who has been Spenser's closest friend and colleague, since Spenser allowed him to escape a police set-up in *Mortal Stakes*; and Susan Silverman, the Jewish psychologist with whom he has enjoyed a twenty year relationship.

Although Susan has a Ph.D. from Harvard and enjoys a thriving business as a counseling psychologist, her contributions to this novel mainly concern support, advice, and love during Spenser's recreational moments. Her intellectual observations (aside from her ongoing assessment of Spenser) present some perceptive psychological commentary about the problems of Shirley Ventura and Bibi Anaheim. Moreover, in addition to working on their house with Spenser and dining with him, she accompanies Spenser on one of his trips to Las Vegas.

In Vegas, Susan banters with Spenser and Hawk, loses a little money at gambling (as an experiment), shops a great deal, and introduces a new approach to her sexual relationship with Spenser by appearing in their bedroom nude except for a necklace and a pair of hand-painted cowboy boots.

(Apparently, however, she is not yet willing to gratify his desire to see her in a garter belt.)

However, Susan is also more directly involved in the case's action when she witnesses the attempt by Russian gunmen to shoot Spenser. The attack comes when Spenser and Susan are walking Pearl, their pointer, on Commonwealth Avenue. On orders from Spenser, Susan flees with Pearl, but activates a parked car's alarm, bringing police to the scene quickly. She then provides further assistance by serving as a witness for the dubious policemen, testifying that Spenser was acting in self-defense when he killed the two Russian hitmen. While the relationship between Susan and Spenser is not necessarily greatly deepened by these events, they do perhaps add to Susan's understanding since she is allowed to see Spenser in lethal action with a handgun while under attack.

By contrast, Hawk plays a major role in the action of *Chance*, helping in the search for Shirley's missing husband, Anthony Meeker, and accompanying Spenser to Las Vegas on the final trip. It is Hawk's presence that provides an equalizing force at the final confrontation in the parking lot: After Hawk has neutralized the gunmen hiding in the shack, Anaheim's Mexican gunman decides to depart, leaving the issue to a simple matter of a physical brawl (not following Marquis of Queensberry rules) between Spenser and Marty Anaheim. Although Hawk's role is a central one, not much new about Hawk's character is revealed by the novel.

The other familiar supporting members of the cast of the Spenser saga make cameo appearances, but with so much of the story's action taking place in Las Vegas, their roles are limited. Henry Cimoli, who runs Spenser's health club, appears briefly, and



Sergeant Frank Belson of the Homicide Squad makes a brief appearance after the gunfight on Commonwealth Avenue. Vinnie Morris, Spenser's one time adversary but current friend, is now working for Gino Fish and also appears in a couple of insignificant scenes. Readers, however, are deprived of the sharply honed sarcasm of Captain Martin Quirk, Spenser's old ally on the Boston police, who played a major role in *Paper Doll*. In *Chance*, Quirk remains offstage and his customary function of offering wry and sardonic remarks about Spenser's success and failures is relegated to Hawk.

Spenser's old adversaries from the underworld also have cameo roles, notably Gino Fish, the homosexual racket boss, and Fast Eddie Lee, the head of the Chinese underworld. However, Tony Marcus, who heads the black underworld in Boston is absent in prison, his role being filled by a clownish lieutenant, Tarone Jessup. (In fact, it is the power vacuum left by Marcus's incarceration that has helped to open up the struggle for control of the Boston rackets.) The most memorable appearance by one of Spenser's old adversaries occurs when Spenser arranges a meeting with the aging godfather, Joe Broz, once his most implacable enemy. Although Broz continues to run a fading criminal organization in his twilight years, he now lacks the drive and ambition of his years of dominance. Since Broz's wife has died and his son (lacking the common sense or toughness to replace Broz as leader) has left the business to operate a tavern in rural Pittsfield, Broz's final years are filled with a sense of futility. The remnants of the code of honor of a Mafia don lead Broz to aid Spenser with some information, as a way of repaying Spenser for not killing his son, Gerry, five years ago (in *Pastime*, 1991).

More important are the gangster characters Parker introduces in this novel: Julius Ventura and his childish daughter Shirley; Anthony Meeker, Shirley's runaway husband; the brutal Marty Anaheim; Bibi Anaheim, Marty's abused wife; and Bernard J. Fortunato, a sleazy Vegas private eye, who sells information to both sides whenever he can.

Ventura is a hard-headed and not overly bright racket boss involved in the struggle for power in Boston's underworld. Despite his tough guy persona, Ventura is fairly easy for his childlike daughter Shirley to manipulate by tears and entreaties. Ventura has also been victimized by Shirley's runaway husband, Anthony Meeker, who has been skimming money from Ventura's profits.

Although Ventura is an unpleasant mobster who tries to limit Spenser's involvement in the case, his love for Shirley and her oppressive mother help to humanize him.

By contrast, Marty Anaheim, Spenser's main antagonist, a somewhat younger mobster on the rise, is egotistical and brutal: Lacking sophistication he operates on the level of a predatory animal. His first meeting with Spenser almost produces a fight; he has brutally mistreated his wife, Bibi; and he has been stealing profits both from Ventura and from his own employer, Gino Fish. Marty Anaheim's early success and belief in his own strength have made him more than arrogant; he has created a faith in his own invincibility, which is not destroyed until the final scene when Spenser defeats him in a fist fight in the presence of Hawk, Bibi, and Anthony Meeker. The defining crime of Anaheim's life is not, however, his attack on Spenser or his mistreatment of Bibi, but his brutal and gratuitous rape and murder of Shirley Ventura in an abandoned parking lot in



Las Vegas. His arrogant confession of this crime in the presence of Spenser, Bibi, and Meeker leads to his conviction for murder.

The lesser gangster figures in the story are well drawn, in particular Anthony Meeker and Bernard J. Fortunato. Meeker is portrayed as a kind of jackal who follows the lions of the criminal world: He has been stealing both from Ventura and from Anaheim (while Anaheim has been a lieutenant for Fish); only Anaheim's desire to use Meeker in his takeover bid has saved him from Fish's vengeance. Meeker is also defined as a parasite who uses women, first by marrying the hapless Shirley Ventura, and then by abandoning her for an affair in Vegas with Bibi Anaheim. Although Meeker survives the threat of Anaheim's vengeance through the intervention of Spenser and Hawk, his compulsive gambling has helped him lose most of the money he and Bibi managed to steal so that his future is not bright.

Like Meeker, Fortunato is a chiseler and a survivor, though he pretends to be a private detective. However, Fortunato's lack of ethics is laughable, for he sells every item of information he turns up to anyone who might buy. Fortunato's dishonesty is so amusing and predictable that one suspects he may turn up again in a future novel.

By contrast, the women connected with Ventura and Anaheim suggest that being in the family of a crime lord is repressive and dehumanizing. Ventura's wife is a fanatical Catholic mother whose overly protective behavior to Shirley has smothered the young woman and left her emotionally crippled. Shirley, who has a larger role, is assessed initially by Spenser as a "nitwit." Barely competent enough to call a cab or arrange a flight on an airline, Shirley continues to adopt the role of a little girl to manipulate her father.

Victimized by her marriage to the sly and cowardly Anthony Meeker, Ventura's chief "bagman," Shirley has been enticed into a relationship with Marty Anaheim, hoping to steal enough money to escape from the influence of her father and mother. Her intrigue with Anaheim, however, leads to the most brutal crime in the novel: her rape and murder in a vacant parking lot in Las Vegas.

Unlike Shirley, Bibi Costa Anaheim has more intelligence and more spirit, and Spenser devotes most of his effort in the final half of the book to getting Marty Anaheim indicted so that Bibi will be liberated from his influence. Spenser's investigation of Bibi's past takes him back to Fairhaven High School where he learns that, eighteen years ago, Bibi had been talented and lively as a teenager but rebellious against a dull middle-class family life. Had Bibi followed the path of her friend, Abigail Becker, Bibi might have attained a similar life—a conventional marriage and a career as a bank officer.

Unluckily, her rebellion at seventeen had taken the course of marrying Marty Anaheim, whom she romanticized into an alluring figure because others thought him to be "dangerous." Although Bibi's marriage to Marty Anaheim and her desperate liaison with the cowardly Meeker have made her suspicious of all men, she is not as psychologically damaged as Shirley is, and there is a possibility that she can become a healthy and self-respecting person if her ties to Marty are severed. As a result, Spenser



demonstrates to her in the final confrontation with Marty that Marty cannot always be victorious: Bibi witnesses Marty's futile attack on Spenser, which results in Spenser, a former professional boxer, beating Marty until the latter is senseless. Although Bibi is liberated by Spenser's actions, she is not necessarily grateful about Spenser treating her as a damsel in distress. Thus, although Spenser reaffirms his own values through his actions in the case, only Susan and Hawk appreciate the value of what he has done.

In contrast with the intrigues of the novel, Spenser's actions in *Chance* once again follow the principles of his code.

Although he takes a job for Julius Ventura, he refuses to follow Ventura's orders; he works to rescue Bibi Anaheim from an abusive relationship; he defends his life against the Russian hitmen; he does not back down from Marty Anaheim; and eventually he not only gets Marty arrested for the murder of Shirley, but avenges his honor by beating Marty to a state of helplessness in the process.

If the aim of a Spenser novel is not to enlarge our understanding of the hero, but simply to reaffirm his values, *Chance* succeeds admirably.



## Social Concerns

Chance follows a pattern of some of Robert B. Parker's recent Spenser novels (*Stardust*, 1990, *Paper Doll*, 1993) by taking the Boston detective on an investigation into the past of a character victimized not only by criminals in the present but by family background and social environment. In *Chance* Spenser's ostensible job is to search for the missing husband of Shirley Ventura, the daughter of a Boston mobster named Julius Ventura; but the real quest becomes understanding the past of the disappearing Bibi Anaheim, the captive wife of the brutal mobster Marty Anaheim, and rescuing her from her bondage to her abusive and tyrannical husband.

Spenser's search for the truth about Bibi Anaheim becomes the study of how a spirited and rebellious young woman of limited education can be victimized by marriage at seventeen to an egotistical and dominating husband. As Spenser digs into Bibi's past, he visits her high school, Fairhaven, on Cape Cod, and studies the conventional life of her closest high school friend, on his way to discovering why she made the terrible error of marrying Marty. Although Spenser and his friend Hawk treat the clichés of feminism lightly in the book, as is customary when political correctness issues arise, the novel makes its central concern the liberation of Bibi from her brutal husband, who, if he can find her after her flight, will either enslave her again, or kill her.

Ironically, although Bibi runs to Spenser for help when she learns that her husband has come to Las Vegas to get her, she also accuses Spenser of using her as bait to set up his final confrontation with Marty. In an epilogue scene, Susan Silverman, Spenser's significant other and resident guide to psychology, suggests that it may take years for Bibi to understand how indebted she is to Spenser and his friend Hawk for freeing her from Marty's domination. In her resentment of Spenser, Bibi may be a symbol of certain feminists, who in their joy over liberation from traditional social attitudes toward women spend a good deal of effort expressing resentment toward men, including those men who are sympathetic to their cause.

A secondary social concern is the battle among different leaders of the mob and the Russian mafia for control of the rackets in Boston. This behind the scenes battle takes place because of the waning influence of the aging Joe Broz, Spenser's antagonist in several earlier novels. Broz and Spenser have now reached a temporary truce because Spenser once spared Broz's son, Gerry, in a shootout, although Spenser had every opportunity and reason to kill him. Although neither Spenser nor Parker seem to care who wins the battle for control of the rackets, the presence of the Russian mafia on the scene (criminals who have left the former Soviet Union for greener fields in the United States) does provide complications, since the Russians are less predictable than their American counterparts.

Indeed, one group of Russians, urged on by Marty Anaheim, attempt to make a hit on Spenser while he and Susan are walking their pointer, Pearl. Spenser, using his small thirty-eight, kills two of his wouldbe assassins; this event helps to precipitate Spenser's final trip to Las Vegas to destroy Marty.



It is notable, however, that while members of the Boston world of organized crime (Joe Broz, Gino Fish, Fast Eddie Lee, Tony Marcus) figure largely in many Spenser novels, Parker takes care to avoid romanticizing the mob, particularly the Mafia, who have been somewhat glamorized in numerous Hollywood films, from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* to Martin Scorsese's *Casino*. Generally, the mobsters in Parker's book are shown as uneducated, of limited intelligence (except for those at the top like Gino Fish), lacking in honor even toward their bosses, and decidedly brutal and ruthless. (The one exception here is Vinnie Morris, the triggerman who was Joe Broz's number one executive officer, and who not only becomes Spenser's friend, but probably saves his life in *Walking Shadow*, 1994.)

Aside from these social concerns, readers should note that *Chance* is Parker's Las Vegas novel, just as *A Savage Place* (1981) and *Stardust* were Los Angeles novels.

Although much of the action occurs in Spenser's Boston home area, Spenser's visits to Las Vegas provide innovative moments in *Chance*. Spenser's sarcasm about Las Vegas' amenities and attempts to provide entertainment—the Debbie Reynolds Hotel, an exploding volcano— offers amusing ridicule of America's most overrated vacation spot. On one occasion, however, Spenser makes a telling comment on Vegas: Its leaders are obsessed with ancient Rome, and the implication is that the culture of the Roman empire offers an unconscious metaphor for the gaudy decadence of the city that has made an industry of legalized gambling.



## Techniques

As usual in a Spenser novel, the chief narrative technique is Spenser's witty and sardonic narrative voice, mixing allusions from popular culture, history, literature, with colloquial language and wry wit. Not only is Parker's terse and lively narrative style impressive, but his command of dialogue in *Chance* is excellent, as is usually the case. Both narrative and dialogue mock the pretenses of Las Vegas, and the volcano which Spenser can view from The Mirage Hotel becomes one major focus of Spenser's ridicule.

It should be noted that one of the moral advantages given to Spenser and Hawk in their battles with the underworld is that invariably they prove to be much wittier than their antagonists, and their repartee destroys the clichés of organized crime which are supposed to be so intimidating. Similarly, their banter also mocks the clichés of political correctness in ways that suggest that their thought is well advanced over the authors of speech codes.

In addition to narrative, Parker makes effective use of dramatic action scenes as in the Commonwealth Avenue shootout and the final encounter between Spenser and Marty Anaheim in the vacant Las Vegas parking lot. *Chance* sustains its suspense and provides stronger action sequences than some Parker novels.

## Themes

The major theme of all Spenser novels is Spenser's attempt to assert and reaffirm his romantic code of values in a hostile and resisting world. In *Chance*, Spenser's actions show many of the principles of his code: His independence is asserted in his refusal to allow Ventura to dictate the terms of his investigation, and in his defiance of Marty Anaheim; his ability to defend himself is displayed in his killing of two of three Russian hitmen who attack on Commonwealth Avenue and his climactic beating of Marty Anaheim; his love for Susan and loyalty to her is reaffirmed through their trip together and through Spenser's resistance to the charms of other women; finally, Spenser's tireless efforts to aid the relatively innocent, even at the risk of his life, are illustrated by his rescue of Bibi Anaheim from the power of her brutal husband.

Parker is not always successful in his efforts—fueled by a mixture of professionalism and chivalric idealism—to rescue or protect the innocent. Although he recognizes the weaknesses of Shirley Ventura Meeker, one of his initial clients, he is unable to prevent her murder. However, Spenser does manage to see Marty Anaheim arrested and convicted for this murder.

Other themes of *Chance* include the attempt by Bibi to escape her unfortunate marriage, and find an independent life, and the uncertain conflict surrounding the power struggle in the Boston underworld. Finally, Parker's scornful portrait—presented through Spenser's narrative of Las Vegas as a pretentious but decadent center of a moral wasteland is a subtext of the novel.

# Adaptations

Some Spenser novels have been adapted to film for television—notably *Promised Land* and *Pale Kings and Princes* (1987; about a Massachusetts town taken over by drug dealers, and notable for starring Barbara Williams as Susan)—and the novels also inspired the 1985-1988 television show with Robert Urich, Avery Brooks, and varying female leads (Barbara Stock, Carolyn McCormick). But the only adaptation of *Chance* is a Burt Reynolds audiotope version, in which Reynolds does an impressive job with the variety of voices and accents in *Chance*, particularly Hawk and the Boston mobsters.

## Key Questions

Approaches to the novel might begin with a discussion of the hard-boiled private detective tradition, as it was actually practiced by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and other competent writers (John D. MacDonald, Ross MacDonald). If readers chiefly know the tradition through parodies and spoofs in films (such as Steve Martin's *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* or Dana Carvey's *Clean Slate*) then they may not be familiar with the central themes of the genre or the values espoused by Raymond Chandler and others. Another approach to the novel might be to explore readers' understanding of organized crime, including the rackets that provide money for crime syndicates, and the things that may happen when there is a struggle for power between mobs.

If neither of these approaches is appealing to a reading group, then an analysis of feminist issues in the novel might be useful. Not only is Susan Silverman to some degree a spokesperson for feminine values, but the plots in Parker novels often involved what might be called women's issues. In this case, the liberating of Bibi Anaheim might qualify as a good theme on which to open a discussion.

1. Why does Spenser take the job offered by Julius Ventura, when he is sure that neither Ventura or Shirley are telling the truth about Anthony?
2. What is Spenser's view of the Boston underworld? What is his opinion of Ventura?
3. What kind of person is Anthony Meeker? What actions indicate his unreliable nature?
4. Describe the relationship between Spenser and Hawk. What bonding rituals seem to link them? What is the purpose of their occasional parodies of discussions about ethnic and racial attitudes?
5. Describe the relationship between Spenser and Susan Silverman. Why is Susan, a psychologist, attracted to Spenser?
6. Compare and contrast Julius Ventura and Marty Anaheim. Does Parker glamorize any of the crime lords Spenser runs into?
7. What influences have handicapped Shirley Ventura and given her a poor preparation for life?
8. How does Bibi Anaheim differ from Shirley Ventura? Why does Bibi have a better chance of beginning a new life after her disastrous marriage to Marty?
9. What does Spenser learn about Bibi's past in his trip to Fairhaven High School, and in his investigation of Abigail Becker?
10. Discuss the role that Las Vegas plays in the novel. What is Spenser's assessment of Las Vegas?



11. Why does Spenser not only want to have Marty Anaheim arrested and convicted of murder, but also want to defeat Marty physically? What other purposes are served by the final confrontation scene between Spenser and Marty?

12. Why does Bibi Anaheim show a lack of gratitude for Spenser's help? Will Bibi ever change her attitude toward Spenser? What is Susan's assessment of Bibi?



## Literary Precedents

The Philip Marlowe novels of Raymond Chandler are Parker's most significant influence, one acknowledged in Parker's completion of Chandler's *Poodle Springs* (1989), and in his sequel to *The Big Sleep* (1939; see separate entry), *Perchance to Dream* (1991). Spenser gets his name, of course, from the Elizabethan poet, Edmund Spenser, whose epic *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) describes various knight errants of Queen Gloriana in allegorical quests and combats. In keeping with the romanticism of the Elizabethan visionary poet, Parker often uses epigraphs and allusive titles from English and American Romantic poets (Coleridge, Keats, Blake, Browning, Melville, and Yeats for instance, although recent titles have tended to draw on allusions to Elizabethan verse). There is no such epigraph to *Chance*, but the title may be an oblique homage to that disenchanting romantic, Joseph Conrad—who once published a novel called *Chance* about a woman's struggles to find freedom and identity.

In addition to Raymond Chandler, Parker also owes a stylistic debt to Ernest Hemingway, since Parker's own highly terse and highly disciplined style is somewhat reminiscent of the Hemingway of the early short fiction and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926; see separate entry), although Parker is capable of greater flexibility. It might seem that Hemingway's influence on Parker's style may have come through Dashiell Hammett, but Parker has denied that Hammett was a major influence.

Parker's recent tendency in Spenser novels to explore a character's concealed past does show affinities with the later works of Ross MacDonal (Kenneth Millan).

It should be noted that while Spenser's romantic values may be traced to the epics of Edmund Spenser and Sir Thomas Malory and their celebration of chivalric and romantic ideals, the romanticism of Parker's hero lacks the medieval and Elizabethan authors' grounding of their values in Christian faith. Spenser's romanticism is based on an awareness of the existential frailty of human life, and an existentialist awareness of the need for values to provide support for human existence. In this respect, Spenser follows the tradition of the Hemingway hero, even in Spenser's obsession with doing things right (whether cooking, working out, building a house, or resolving an oral crisis). Spenser's values are also associated with the ideals of heroism fostered in novels and films about the American West: Indeed, Parker's homage to this source is indicated by his providing Spenser with a birthplace in Laramie, Wyoming, which is one of the remaining spiritual centers of the Old West.

## Related Titles

In addition to its similarity to other Spenser novels involving the Boston Mafia, from *Promised Land* and *Early Autumn* (1981) to *The Widening Gyre* (1983), *Pastime*, and others, *Chance* is related to those Spenser novels where the detective explores the past of a victim or client: *Mortal Stakes* (1975), *Stardust*, and the recent *Small Vices* (1997). In *Wilderness* (1979), an independent novel, a husband and wife go into training to fight a mobster and break his hold over their lives, much as Spenser works to destroy the power that Marty Anaheim has over Bibi.

An early precursor of *Chance* was *God Save the Child* (1974), where Spenser uses his fists to humble an antagonist and break his psychological hold over a victim.

Similarly, in *Chance*, Spenser arranges for Bibi Anaheim to see his victory over Marty in a fistfight in order to destroy her image of Marty's invincibility.



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