

Early Autumn Study Guide

Early Autumn by Robert B. Parker

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Contents

Early Autumn Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 through 6.....	4
Chapters 7 through 12.....	7
Chapters 13 through 19.....	10
Chapters 20 through 26.....	14
Chapters 27 through 33.....	17
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	24
Themes.....	26
Style.....	28
Quotes.....	30
Topics for Discussion.....	32



Plot Summary

Spenser is in his new office at the corner of Boylston and Berkley, having been among those evicted from his previous office along with a bookie and a fortune teller. He notes that he's now directly over a bank where the employees do exactly the same things the bookie and fortune teller had done, but dress better while doing it. On his desk is a photo of Susan Silverman, Spenser's girlfriend. A woman named Patty Giacomini arrives and asks to hire Spenser to retrieve her son, Paul. She says that the police are barely interested in the case of a fifteen-year-old though Patty says that Paul has been abducted by his father, Mel.

Spenser soon finds Mel through his girlfriend, Elaine Brooks, and Paul is at Mel's house. Paul is indifferent and eventually tells Spenser that his parents are equally horrible and that he simply doesn't care about either of them. Spenser returns Paul to his mother and several months later receives an urgent call from Patty, saying that an attempt was made to kidnap Paul. Spenser agrees to stay with them for awhile and helps them through two more kidnap attempts. The bottom line is that his parents want Paul only to annoy the other.

At Patty's insistence, Paul spends weeks with Spenser in a cabin near Fryeburg and the two bond as Spenser teaches Paul to become a strong, independent person. That is accomplished quickly and when Patty says she wants to hand Paul over to Mel, Paul refuses. Paul and Spenser then set out to prove that both parents are unfit, though not so that Spenser can gain custody. The goal is simply to have both leave Paul alone so he can grow into a life for himself.

The two discover that Mel has been deeply involved in an insurance scam, and Spenser uses that to force Mel to agree to pay tuition and expenses so that Paul can attend an exclusive liberal arts school where he can follow his dream to dance. They also discover that Patty's monthly visits to New York were not as she'd described but were merely an opportunity for her to get drunk, pick up a stranger in the hotel bar, and have sex. Confronted with the knowledge of those facts, Patty also agrees to stay away from Paul.

Through it all, Paul and Spenser bond though Spenser's ultimate goal is not to have Paul become dependent on him but to become an adult. Spenser says that it's not fair that Paul has to grow up so soon; after all, the boy is only fifteen. Paul confidently responds that he'll be sixteen in the early autumn. Spenser replies that Paul is much older than that.



Chapters 1 through 6

Chapters 1 through 6 Summary

Spenser is in his new office at the corner of Boylston and Berkley, having been among those evicted from his previous office along with a bookie and a fortune teller. He notes that he's now directly over a bank where the employees do exactly the same things the bookie and fortune teller had done, but dress better while doing it. On his desk is a photo of Susan Silverman, Spenser's girlfriend. A woman named Patty Giacomini arrives and asks to hire Spenser to retrieve her son, Paul. She says the police are barely interested in the case of a fifteen-year-old though Patty says that Paul has been abducted by his father, Mel. Spenser asks where Mel might be holding the boy and begins figuring how to find them.

The next morning, Spenser is in his car outside Elaine Brooks' apartment building. He listens to the radio, glances several times at photos Patty provided of both Paul and Mel, and goes over his notes from his interview with Patty. Patty said that her divorce from Mel was "acrimonious," that fifteen-year-old Paul lives with Patty, that they live in the home where Patty and Mel lived as a couple, that she doesn't know where Mel lives now, and that Mel is a successful real estate and insurance broker. It's January and Spenser is having to leave the car idling. By eleven o'clock, he's tired of waiting and parks the car around the corner. He's called Mel's office several times and was told both he and Elaine were out, so he now goes to the intercom and presses the button for Elaine's apartment. Spenser notes that the voice had been sleeping a minute before and covers the call by asking for Harry, prompting Elaine to call him an asshole and say he'd pressed the wrong button. Spenser then goes to Bloomingdale's, buys a one-hundred-dollar ice bucket and returns to Elaine's apartment where he poses as a delivery man. He insists on making the delivery in person, tells her it's from Mel, and then goes back to the car. Spenser says that it's a ploy to make something happen so he doesn't have to keep waiting.

A short time later, Elaine leaves the apartment and Harry easily follows, losing sight of her briefly as she turns in at Mel's house, a two-family. Mel lives in the upstairs half of the house and Harry easily jimmies the door. He walks in and finds Elaine's back to the door so that Mel sees him first. Elaine quickly identifies him as the delivery man who'd brought the ice bucket. Mel orders him out and makes several threats, but Spenser notes that Mel played football, knows about weights, and probably realizes he couldn't win in a fight against Spenser. Mel threatens to call the police and Spenser encourages him to do so, knowing he won't because he doesn't want to be found to be subpoenaed. When the threats fail to work, Mel tells Spenser that Paul is down the hall. Paul seems angry, sarcastically thanking his dad for fighting to keep them together. Spenser tells Paul to gather his things but Mel says that he's not going to let Paul take anything. Spenser sarcastically asks if Paul can at least take a jacket.



Paul and Spenser leave Mel's house without any trouble. They get into Spenser's car, and Spenser asks Paul to direct him to his mother's house. As they drive, Spenser begins to quiz Paul about his life with his parents, asking how they treat him and whether the boy has a preference regarding where he lives. As Paul continues to be noncommittal, Spenser probes, seeming to insist on answers rather than evasions. When Paul asks what it is he really wants, Spenser says he's trying to decide what's the right thing to do for Paul - an answer Paul seems to doubt. Spenser eventually says that if he can't get real answers from Paul rather than vague shrugs, they'll just keep driving around with Spenser offering his own comments on things until Paul screams for mercy and makes a decision. Paul eventually says that both are horrible, and Spenser says he hadn't thought of that possibility. Paul asks what Spenser plans to do next, and Spenser says that because both options are awful, he'll take Paul to his mother and keep the hundred dollars.

They arrive at Patty's house and Paul walks in without knocking. Spenser rings the doorbell to announce his presence and follows Paul inside where he finds Patty with a man she introduces as her date, Stephen Court. Patty says she hadn't expected Paul to be returned so quickly and that she's made dinner plans. She quickly asks Spenser if he'll take Paul to dinner, adding that she'll pay for the meal. Spenser agrees to take Paul, declines the money, but then asks Paul whether he wants to go, which initially prompts Paul to shrug. Spenser says that he is hungry and invites Paul to go along, an invitation Paul accepts. They go to a Chinese restaurant that Patty had said Paul likes, but Paul says he's never actually been there. Spenser orders for both of them when Paul can't make up his mind and they share the meal. Paul asks why Spenser didn't accept his mother's offer to pay, and Spenser said it didn't seem the right thing to do. After the meal, they return to Patty's house and when Paul says he can go in alone and isn't afraid, Spenser says that he also isn't afraid, but that it's never "any fun" to go into a dark house alone. They go in together.

Later, Spenser and his girlfriend, Susan Silverman, watch a basketball game. While they talk about Paul, there are many side comments about the game, which the home team loses badly. On a positive note, there's no pushing as they leave the arena since there were few fans, many of which left early. Spenser talks to Susan about Paul, saying that he understands that many parents use their kids in their own battles, but that Paul has nothing going for him. Spenser predicts that Paul won't survive the battle and says he hates to see the teen go "down the tubes." Susan asks what he plans to do about it, and Spenser says he can't adopt him and outright rejects the idea of getting child welfare involved, saying they're all too busy fighting over federal funds to be bothered with a kid. Susan says some are competent, but when Spenser asks for a phone number of a competent one, Susan agrees he's right. They go back to Susan's for burgers, and Spenser predicts he'll be involved again with Paul at some point, saying that Mel will eventually kidnap the teen again, and Patty will want Spenser to get Paul back. Susan says Spenser should avoid becoming involved again because the battles will be the same, and there's nothing Spenser can do about it.



Chapters 1 through 6 Analysis

Spenser notes that Patty barely acknowledges him when he smiles, though the smile would once have prompted women to begin undressing. Spenser takes this to mean he's losing his touch, and he'll sarcastically say so again a short time later when he meets up with Mel - Patty's ex-husband - and admits that Patty didn't proposition him. The sarcasm is typical of Spenser who seems to have a wisecrack or a smart comeback for every situation.

Spenser's appearance is presented through a series of comments exchanged with Patty. She notes that he has apparently been hit in the nose pretty often. Spenser doesn't take offense but simply responds that it's true, but counters that he has all his teeth and then bares them to show her.

As Spenser talks with Patty, he asks about her relationship with Paul and about Mel's relationship with Paul. Patty says that Mel doesn't care about Paul but simply wants to hurt her. This is a foreshadowing of the fact Spenser will eventually learn that neither cares at all about Paul and that he's merely a pawn in their game.

When Spenser picks up Paul, Spenser makes it a point to ask if Paul wants to return to his mother or remain where he is. Paul only shrugs. On the trip back to his mother's, Spenser continues to ask Paul what he wants. When Paul asks Spenser why he cares, Spenser says he's trying to do what's right. Paul accuses Spenser of only trying to get the money his mother paid for his return, which Spenser says is only a hundred bucks. Spenser says that if Paul doesn't want to return to his mother, he'd simply repay the money and drop the case. Paul doesn't know what to make of Spenser, but it seems clear that Spenser simply wants to do what's right for Paul, whatever that may be. As Spenser begins to get a clearer picture of what's happening to Paul, he becomes more concerned about the teenager - a fact that continues to baffle Paul. Paul eventually seems to stand up for his father, saying muscles aren't vital. Spenser says that having muscles aids him in his own career, and Paul says that it seems a "gross" occupation, prompting Spenser to say he opted for detective work because he couldn't "sing or dance." This defense of his father is not explained, and Paul seems unwilling to go too far in this defense.



Chapters 7 through 12

Chapters 7 through 12 Summary

In April, Patty calls Spenser who says that he's very busy. She responds that she's afraid Paul could be hurt and pleads with him to come right away. He drops the book he was reading and goes to her house. Patty admits that she's now feeling like she might have overreacted, then recounts the facts Paul told her - that he was walking home from school when a man tried to force him into a car, that Paul ran toward a policeman at the school, prompting the would-be kidnapper to leave, and that Paul didn't know the man. Patty says that she's certain Mel is behind the attempt. She asks Spenser to remain with them and says the money isn't a problem. Spenser tells her that hiring him as a full-time body guard isn't the answer but is only a short-term solution. Patty insists that she and Paul go with Spenser to pick up his things. She is impressed with his apartment, including the fact that it's neat.

Patty cooks dinner for them that night. The following morning, Spenser takes Paul to school and says that Paul is not to leave the school by any other door than their appointed meeting place and that he's not to leave with anyone other than Spenser. When he returns to Patty's, she's cooked breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast, coffee and juice. It's here that Patty explains that she occasionally leaves town in order to seek "self-actualization," and calls Spenser "lucky" for being both a man and having no children. She says that men have all the power and money and that a woman needs a man in order to have either. Spenser responds with a typically sarcastic answer, saying he doesn't have time to argue with her because he's too busy consolidating his power and counting his money. The conversation then turns to Mel, and Patty says he has a driving need to win. Spenser likens their battle over Paul to a game of "capture the flag." Patty doesn't address Spenser's statement except to ask whether Spenser disapproves of her, then to say that Mel is not going to get Paul.

Spenser goes for a jog later that day and sees a woman jogging as well. He sarcastically notes that he could offer her his money and power in order to get her to jog with him but fears she'd jog off and leave him behind instead. After he showers, Patty asks if he wants some lunch, and he asks if she's after his money and power. She says she might be.

That weekend, Patty goes for a "self-actualization" trip to New York, leaving Paul and Spenser on their own. Paul spends all his time watching television and on Saturday evening Spenser offers to cook supper. Paul is noncommittal but comes to eat when Spenser has completed the meal - pork chop medallions, rice, sauce and salad. Spenser has to drag out the details of what Paul was watching on television in order to get any conversation going. Paul seems confused when Spenser says he made up the recipe. After the meal, Paul suggests ice cream and they go out. Spenser has none and Paul asks why. Spenser replies that he has a deal with himself - he can have beer or dessert but not both. When Paul asks if he ever indulges, Spenser says that he doesn't.



By the end of April, Spenser is still living with Patty and Paul and notes that Patty's cooking is uninspired but he doesn't mind that so much as he worries about the growing intimacy between them. One day, Patty calls to Spenser to come into the living room where he finds her in high heels, a peignoir with nothing on underneath and striking a pose with a window for backlighting. Spenser points out that she's being dramatic, which makes her decide that he doesn't want her. He says that he wants every good-looking woman he sees, but that he can't sleep with her because of Paul and his own girlfriend. When Patty presses for more answers, he says that she's a good looking woman expressing the need to be loved, and that it's sheer bad luck that she expressed that need to the wrong guy. Spenser cooks but she doesn't try any of it.

Two days later, Patty answers the door and two men push their way inside. One asks immediately for "the kid," and the other calls Spenser by name, saying that he hadn't known Spenser would be there. Spenser calls the man Buddy and says Mel didn't know he would be here. Buddy pretends he doesn't know Mel, but Spenser is having no part of that and says that no one else would go to the trouble to try to kidnap Paul. Buddy warns the second man, Harold to "be cool," but Spenser is soon beating Harold bloody. Harold tells Buddy to "jump in," saying that Spenser can't take them both, but Buddy says he's certain Spenser could take them both and refuses. When Spenser offers to call the police, Buddy admits that he knows Mel, that he and Harold were paid "a C each," and tells Spenser that Spenser's problem is that he's "not a shooter" as he and Harold walk out. Patty wants to call the police, but Spenser said the language he and Buddy had used was a promise to each other that Spenser wouldn't call the police if Buddy would tell the truth about his mission here. Buddy's comment about Spenser's inability to shoot prompts Paul to question Spenser, who says he has killed before, but that it was a "have to" case. Spenser says that his reluctance to use a gun now has to do with the sanctity of life.

The next attempt, in Spenser's words, was "meaner." Spenser gets a call from Buddy, who says that they have Patty and are willing to trade her for Paul. They arrange to meet on the Massachusetts Avenue bridge in an hour. Spenser immediately calls Henry Cimoli in search of a man he calls Hawk. He explains the plan to Hawk, that Paul is to be sent walking from one end and that Patty will be released as soon as Paul is on his way. Spenser and Hawk quickly make a plan and hangs up. Paul is anxious and Spenser patiently explains what's going to happen. He tells Paul that he is to walk across the bridge until he meets his mother and make her lie down at that point. Spenser will arrive with the car and Paul and Patty will get in and drive to Susan's. Spenser gives Paul the address and has him repeat the instructions. When Paul angrily says he's scared, Spenser says that's a natural emotion, but it doesn't change anything at all.

Paul does what he's told, though Patty doesn't lie flat. Spenser rushes to them as the Oldsmobile that had dropped Patty begins to move toward the two. Just then Hawk screeches off the street in a stolen station wagon and slams into the Oldsmobile. There are gunshots as Spenser hands the car over to Patty and Paul and rushes to help Hawk just in time to see Hawk grab one of the men and throw him into the Charles River. Just then, they hear sirens and quickly leave the scene by way of a nearby college campus,



returning to the spot where Hawk left his own car. Hawk says he's sorry the police were so quick to respond as he'd planned to throw them all into the river.

Chapters 7 through 12 Analysis

From the moment Spenser arrives again at Patty's home, Patty's attitude indicates that she's interested in Spenser. She calls his apartment a "bachelor pad," and comments on the fact that it's very neat. She also insists that she cook dinner for them and stops to buy groceries toward that end. This will all lead up to Patty making a play for Spenser. Patty later outlines her attitudes about men and women very simply. She says that men have all the money and power and a woman's only way to achieve those things is to catch a man. As they finish their first meal at Patty's house, Spenser offers to help clear the dishes, but she declines, saying it's "a pleasure to wait on a man again." Spenser looks at his watch and notes that it's "not even ten o'clock." The exchange seems to be a foreshadowing of Patty's desire for Spenser and his lack of desire for her.

Patty has yet to make any long-range plans regarding how she'll handle the situation. She tells Spenser that she feels he should be "treated nice" because he's "stuck" with her and Paul. Patty begins to taunt him, telling him that for twenty bucks she'll show him a good time and asking who would tell Paul that his mother the whore slept with Spenser. Spenser says that sooner or later, Patty would reveal it either to Paul or to Mel, and that he isn't worried about what Paul thinks of Patty but is worried about what Paul thinks of him. Spenser then tells her that the situation is awkward, but doesn't have to be overly so. He says that he's flattered, points out that she's been through a nasty divorce, and ends by saying that he's attracted to her but that sex with her would be "counterproductive." This seems to be evidence of Patty's own lack of self-esteem. She admits to needing a man and though she says it's for power and money, there seems to be a craving for sex and attention as well. That craving will come back to haunt her as Spenser eventually uses it to force her into leaving Paul alone to live his own life.

When Paul says he's scared about the exchange during the kidnapping of his mother and he seems angry about it, it's not explained whether his anger is at being placed in the situation at all, or whether it's anger that he's afraid. In any case, Spenser's wisdom is that Paul has the right to be angry, but that the anger doesn't change the situation. The author doesn't explain the impact of these words on Paul but it seems that he heeds them, at least to some degree.



Chapters 13 through 19

Chapters 13 through 19 Summary

Spenser asks Hawk for a ride to Susan's house and Hawk seems to object, saying that Spenser owes him champagne and dinner in return for the ride to Smithfield, which Hawk says is "clear out in the woods. Hawk buys champagne for himself and beer for Spenser, saying there's no need in wasting champagne on Spenser. Hawk laughs at Susan's new vehicle, a four-wheel drive Bronco. Patty and Paul are already there, and Susan isn't excited at the unexpected visitors. Hawk is very reserved and it's noted that Susan is one of the few people Hawk seems to enjoy. They settle down to talk for awhile, agreeing that they'll make BLTs for the meal.

Patty is amazed by Hawk. She asks if he knows the details of the situation and he says he doesn't. She says that means that he just threw several men off the bridge into the Charles River without knowing why he was doing so, and he agrees to her assessment. Spenser catches Hawk and Susan up on the situation, and Susan says that it seems the only possible solution is for Patty and Mel to negotiate some sort of truce. Patty flatly refuses, says that she's afraid of retaliation, which means she doesn't want to turn Mel in to the police, and admits that she's running out of money meaning she can't employ Spenser on a permanent basis. She then says that she has a safe place to be where Mel can't find her, but that she can't take Paul there and offers to pay Spenser to take Paul away as well. Spenser thinks only for a minute, then agrees, joking that "he ain't heavy, he's my brother."

They eat the BLTs and talk a little with Spenser agreeing that he and Paul would leave the following morning. He pays Hawk fifty dollars to take Patty and Paul home and to stay with them for awhile. Patty and Paul seem uncertain, but Hawk - who is black - jokes that they shouldn't worry because some of his best friends are "honkies." Spenser says that Hawk is "almost as good as me," then jokes that Hawk might even have an advantage in the dark. Paul spends some time with Susan after the others leave. They have sex and talk about Paul. Susan, a guidance counselor, says that kids like Paul often fail and that she believes that Spenser has taken on a huge task. Susan predicts that Susan is very nearly out of money and asks if Spenser will keep Paul even if the money dries up, then predicts that he will. She then asks where he plans to go and Spenser says to the land Susan owns in Fryeburg where he's planned to build a house.

It's early May with all the signs of spring when Spenser picks Paul up in Susan's Bronco. Stephen is there and Spenser makes fun of his overall look. They stop at a restaurant named Horsefeathers where the food is good, then are soon back on the road to Fryeburg. They arrive at the lakefront property that includes a small cabin. Spenser tells Paul that they'll live in that cabin while they build a house. Paul says he doesn't want to and Spenser says merely that they'd see what happened.



That night, Paul is angry that there's no television. Spenser challenges him to read, but Paul she he doesn't like to read. They talk briefly about the book Spenser is reading and why he'd choose to read about history. The next morning, Spenser wakes Paul early and tells him that he needs structure and that he'll soon adjust and feel better about it. Paul refuses to get up and Spenser pulls him out of bed and forces him into the shower, a process that takes a full half hour. Paul agrees to dress himself. When Spenser finds out that Paul has no sneakers, they drive to North Conway to make some purchases, including sneakers, a jock strap and athletic socks for Paul. When they return to the Cabin, Spenser says that it's time for a run and they go about a mile before turning back. Spenser praises Paul for the distance he achieves, saying it's good for his first time out, and explains that he's taking a handgun along so that he's prepared in case Paul's father sends someone for him. When they return to the house, Spenser has Paul help him move the weight bench, heavy bag and speed bag into place, keeping up a running commentary about plans for their use. When Paul is quiet, Spenser briefly fears that he's broken Paul's spirit, but then Paul gives Spenser his typical shrug and Spenser knows that the teen is alright.

They share lunch though Paul complains that the feta cheese smells funny, then rest outdoors while Spenser listens to a baseball game, which Paul complains he doesn't like. Spenser tells Paul that he can listen to anything he likes on the radio at any time other than when Spenser is listening to a ball game. They then begin to work on the weight bench though Paul can't lift the bar without a single weight on it. Spenser explains how the weightlifting produces muscle, and they then do curls. Later in the evening, Paul says that he doesn't want to do anymore and asks why Spenser can't just leave him alone. Spenser points out that everyone has left Paul alone and that the result is that he's a mess. Spenser tells Paul that he has to become proud of something and says that feeling good about his body is a good place to start because it's easy to effect change. Spenser then tells Paul that he's gotten a bad deal, that his parents aren't any help and aren't going to change, and that means Paul is going to have to grow up sooner than any young man his age should have to. Paul cries for awhile and Spenser merely waits while he does so, then tells Paul that it's okay to cry. When Spenser hands Paul boxing gloves, Paul takes them though he doesn't look up.

Soon they are working on the foundation for the new cabin. After a full day on Friday, Spenser asks Paul what he'd like to do the following day - Saturday. Paul says that he doesn't know, but when Spenser asks if there isn't something he'd like to do but had been afraid to ask, Paul says that he liked the movie, "The Red Shoes." Spenser asks if he wants to go to a ballet and Paul agrees.

Saturday morning, Spenser dresses and is amazed when Paul emerges from his room dressed in a tan corduroy jacket, brown slacks, blue polyester shirt, no tie and black socks. Spenser says he looks like "a runner-up for the Mortimer Snerd look-alike contest," which prompts Spenser to say that they'll have to go shopping for clothes. Paul asks about the identity of Mortimer Snerd, who was the famous ventriloquist dummy used by Edgar Bergen. They go to an elite store known as Louis' in Boston where Spenser spends seven hundred and fifty dollars for clothes for Paul, including a charcoal suit and some extra shirts, slacks, socks and shoes. They then go to the



Museum of Fine Arts for awhile, then back to Spenser's apartment for Paul to change before going to meet Susan at Casa Romero. Susan seems withdrawn though she doesn't discuss it and declines the invitation to join them at the ballet.

Chapters 13 through 19 Analysis

When Patty asks Spenser to take Paul, Spenser's immediate reply is that Patty should take Paul to this safe place where she plans to go. She says that Paul can't come with her, and Spenser soon realizes she's going to stay with Stephen, the man she'd had a date with on the day Spenser first returned Paul to Patty. It seems evident that Paul is working hard at ignoring the adults and the conversation that's flowing around him, and that it's likely because of how he feels at this point. He's bound to feel like a burden and is probably disappointed that his mother is so willing to leave him. It's clear that Spenser is willing to take Paul because of what he'd told Susan earlier - that Paul has little chance of surviving this war between his parents. Later, Paul and Susan talk about the situation some more, and Susan says she doesn't want to be too heavily invested in the situation because she expects it to fail.

When Paul and Spenser arrive at the cabin, their first task is to unload the Bronco, which Paul does awkwardly. It seems that he may not really know how to best carry a shovel or a gun, but it also seems possible that he simply wants to make himself appear incapable of carrying out these small tasks so he doesn't have to do anything. The following morning, Spenser sees evidence of a sensitive, intelligent young man when Paul makes a derogatory remark about Susan's advice to Spenser regarding Paul. Spenser says quietly that Paul has no right to talk bad about Susan because she is someone Spenser cares for, and Paul immediately seems to understand that concept and to accept it as undeniably true. When they are preparing to go to the ballet, Paul asks why Susan has to come along. Spenser responds that it's because he loves Susan and hasn't seen her in a couple of weeks. Paul only nods and seems to understand that this is the same concept as what Spenser told him previously.

When Spenser and Paul return to Spenser's apartment with Paul's new clothes, Paul asks which he should wear. When Spenser says that Paul can decide for himself, Paul says that he's forgotten what pieces go together. It seems evident that Paul is simply trying to find a way to avoid making a choice for himself but Spenser won't let that happen. Instead, Spenser says that Paul was along with the clothes were purchased and that he has the ability to make this decision. And Paul does so with no more discussion. When he emerges, dressed, Spenser approves except for the fact that Paul seems to need a haircut. But, Spenser notes that since they're going to the ballet, Paul's longish hair is probably appropriate.

While having dinner, Susan seems quiet, only briefly answering Spenser's questions. The problem is not yet revealed but its impact on Paul is instant and automatic. He looks down at his plate and seems to withdraw to some degree. Spenser asks Susan if there's something she wants to talk about, but she declines and Spenser says he'll

pursue this later, if ever. They do make up later and it seems that Susan is jealous of Spenser's time with Paul.



Chapters 20 through 26

Chapters 20 through 26 Summary

Spenser notes that he'd never been to a ballet before and that he wasn't looking forward to the next time, though Paul is obviously in love with the art form. When Spenser asks if Paul would like to dance, Paul spouts the theories of his parents - that male dancers are fags, as are men who enjoy books or cooking. Spenser then asks what Paul would do if he were given the opportunity to do anything at all, and whether he would choose to take dance lessons. Paul, who has always shrugged off decisions and refused to make commitments saying that he enjoys or doesn't enjoy anything, nods that he would like to take dance lessons.

On a day in late May, Paul and Spenser run five miles and Paul works hard at the bags. Spenser notes that he's gained some in height and wonders if this is what it feels like to watch one's own child grow. Spenser teaches Paul about punching, using his body and his shoulder to make his punch go farther, and then Paul turns the talk to Spenser's fighting ability. He asks whether Spenser could beat Hawk in a fight, and Spenser says that he possibly could. Spenser also tries to make Paul understand that there's really no such thing as a fair fight. He says that in order to have a chance in the ring with a good boxer, he'd need a baseball bat, but he tosses out the idea that he and a better boxer would not be evenly matched; therefore, any fight between them would not be fair. Paul seems to absorb the ideas Spenser tries to convey.

One day Patty arrives and tells Paul that it's time to go home. When Spenser asks why now, Patty says that she's decided to let Paul live with his father. Spenser immediately realizes that Patty wants to live with Stephen, but Stephen doesn't want Paul, which is the reason Patty has given Paul to Mel. He says so and she is immediately angry, but it's easy to see it's the truth. Patty then orders Paul to get his things and Paul refuses. Spenser backs Paul and Patty leaves, angry, with a threat to send the police. When she's gone, Paul returns to the framing they'd been working on. Later, he asks if Spenser could get into trouble for his role in the situation, and Spenser points out that it could be defined as kidnapping. Paul, who is "almost sixteen," asks to remain with Spenser and Spenser agrees to the request.

Spenser goes to Susan's house, leaving Paul at Henry Cimoli's, with the intention of talking to Susan about whatever is bothering her. Susan is abrupt, saying she's surprised Spenser has time to bother with her. Spenser accepts her offer of instant coffee and cinnamon donuts, then brings her up to date with Paul's situation. Susan is petulant, saying that Spenser hasn't had time for her and that perhaps what they have to say to each other isn't important. Spenser tells her that it's always important because they love each other, always will, and that neither of them is "ordinary" meaning they shouldn't have an ordinary argument. After a moment, Susan holds out her hand to Spenser and he takes it.



Spenser tells Susan about Paul's desire to learn ballet and asks if she can find out how to make that happen. He says he plans to find some dirt on each of Paul's parents to blackmail them into leaving Paul alone. Spenser picks up Paul at the Harbor Health Club run by Henry Cimoli and explains his plan over their meal. He gives Paul the option to remain with Susan or go with him, and Paul opts to go with Spenser, saying that Susan doesn't like him. Spenser doesn't argue, but does tell Paul that he might learn things about his parents that he doesn't want to know. Paul insists that he doesn't like either of them and doesn't care what he learns.

Their first stop is at bar where Buddy Harman is known to hang out and Spenser gives the bartender ten dollars for a coke and a beer, and the information that Buddy usually drops in around three in the afternoon for an egg sandwich. Buddy arrives just about on time and runs when he sees Spenser. Spenser tells Paul to keep up and they chase down Buddy. Spenser beats on Buddy a little and Buddy tells Spenser he met Mel through a man named Harry Cotton, though he pleads with Spenser not to tell, saying that Cotton will kill him for telling. Spenser agrees and he and Paul head for Cotton's car lot. Spenser warns Paul that if Cotton is involved, it means Mel is deeply in whatever crimes he's committing.

At Harry Cotton's car lot, Spenser asks Cotton where Mel is, is threatened with Cotton promising to kill Spenser, and Spenser pulling a gun to cover their quick exit. Paul tells Spenser that his father has an office in his apartment, and Spenser says they're going to break in. They do so the following morning. When Spenser tells Paul that they'll simply take all the files rather than trying to go through them at the office, Paul asks if that won't tip his father off that they'd been there. Spenser points out that Mel is going to know they'd been there because he kicked in the locked office door. Paul carries out the card file and Spenser takes the larger file. At Spenser's office, Paul looks through the card file for names he recognizes while Spenser works on the larger file.

Chapters 20 through 26 Analysis

When Spenser and Paul are talking about his parents' ideas regarding men who dance, Spenser tells Paul that those dancers have to be excellent athletes in order to perform well and that discipline deserves respect. Then Spenser addresses the reason Paul's mom and dad have that mindset. Spenser says that Paul's father has opted to take the easy road by following what's accepted and acceptable rather than thinking for himself. Spenser seems to be trying to make Paul see that it's possible that his parents are wrong in their assumptions, and that Paul has the right to form his own opinions, but those independent decisions require courage. Spenser says that making one's own decision is a frightening prospect, but that following traditions and going along with what's already accepted requires no thinking and is easy.

As they prepare to begin their framing work one afternoon, Paul asks Spenser if he'd like to turn on the baseball game. The significance is that this is a statement of how far Paul has come from that whining child who complained because Spenser was listening to a baseball game though Spenser offered to let Paul listen to anything he wanted any

time a game wasn't being broadcast. This is evidence of an emerging theme, coming of age.

Spenser tells Patty that he'll fight for custody of Paul, though there's no indication at this point that he knows anything other than how Mel and Patty treat Paul that would aid in this endeavor. In fact, Spenser will eventually produce evidence to both that implicates them separately in wrong doings and both will agree to leave Paul alone.

Susan asks where that leaves the two of them and Spenser says it changes nothing between them. Susan counters, saying that their last dinner date had been "a fun threesome." She then asks if Spenser is ready to take on the role of father and he says he isn't. She asks if Spenser plans to hire Hawk to watch Paul whenever Spenser is away from him, and Spenser says he really hasn't made a plan. Susan sounds as petulant about Paul's presence in Spenser's life as Paul had been about Susan.

When Spenser and Paul are at Cotton's car lot, Spenser makes several of his traditional sarcastic comments. For example, Cotton is poorly dressed and Spenser says that he'd brought Paul by after the teenager had asked Spenser what was meant by the word "class." Spenser also makes fun of Cotton's frequent use of profanity. Later, Spenser wrestles out a large file box while Paul carries a smaller card file. Spenser says that it's not heavy but is awkward to carry, which prompts Paul to say, "That's what they all say." That bit of sarcasm is evidence of Spenser's influence and is a statement of how far Paul has come in such a short time.

Paul asks why he's looking for names he recognizes among his father's card file and Spenser tells him that it's like being in a corridor with doors along each side - that there's no way of knowing what's behind the doors but no escape from the corridor unless you find an open door, and so the only thing to do is start trying doors to see what happens. He also tells Paul that their actions might prompt someone to make a move. He says that the worst thing that could happen to them is to have everyone "hunker down," and that something they'd done might prompt someone to take an action that will lead to some conclusion.

While Spenser works in the afternoon, Paul goes for food. He asks Spenser what he wants and Spenser says for Paul to choose, which he does without any argument. This is a huge change from the teenager Spenser first met who couldn't decide anything for himself. Later, Paul goes out for a walk and returns with a book on ballet - another example of his emerging personality, which is much different from the Paul who had been beaten down constantly by his parents.



Chapters 27 through 33

Chapters 27 through 33 Summary

Later that day, Spenser finds a list of names and addresses, including Elaine Brooks who was Mel's girlfriend. Spenser notes that the address listed isn't where he found Elaine and checks the rest of the list against the card file and the telephone directory. Those on the list are among the homeowner and casualty policies listed in Mel's card file. They check out the list and find that all the properties are burned. Spenser begins to look into the individual properties and talks to the insurance company that held the policy on Elaine Brooks' bogus property. Spenser learns that the policy was in effect six months, that the company believed it to be arson but couldn't prove it, and that two winos had died in that fire. The company representative warns Spenser not to withhold information, reminding Spenser that they throw a lot of work his way.

Susan calls and invites Paul to go see a liberal arts school with her, and he agrees. Spenser points out that it's probably a boarding school and tells Paul that, though he won't throw Paul out of the nest before he's ready, Paul can't simply transfer his dependence from his parents to Spenser. He also tells Paul that they have to be honest with each other and that he's looking for a solution that works for everyone, including Spenser and Susan. Paul seems to understand and doesn't seem to have hurt feelings over the conversation. Spenser comments on Susan's appearance when she arrives, saying that if no one at the school hits on her it will prove they're all gay. Paul jokes back, asking what it will prove if a guy does hit on him.

While Susan and Paul are gone, Spenser goes to the gym where he's pitting his skills at the fast bag against Hawk. Hawk is called to the phone and returns with the news that Harry Cotton had offered five thousand dollars if Hawk would kill Spenser. Hawk says he demanded ten and that Cotton refused. Hawk says he has nothing pressing to do and might just hang out with Spenser for awhile. That evening, Spenser breaks into Patty's house and looks around, finding nothing of interest but the receipts for monthly trips to New York. He takes the receipts and a picture of Patty and finds Susan and Paul at his house watching a movie. The school wasn't promising, but Susan and Paul both agree to go with Spenser to New York the following day. When they leave for the airport, Spenser notes Hawk's car behind him. They check into the Hilton where Patty always stays and Spenser finds out that she'd always become drunk in the hotel bar, picked up a guy seemingly at random, gone to her room and checked out the following morning. The rest of their stay is merely for enjoyment and Paul is enthralled with a contemporary dance show, vowing that he's going to learn to do that.

When they arrive back in Boston, they're shot at and Spenser tells Susan that he must have annoyed Cotton. He tells them that he's near to wrapping up the situation and tells Paul the truth of what he discovered about Patty, saying that it won't work out unless he's honest with Paul.



The following day, Susan takes Paul with her to work and Spenser arrives at his office to find Hawk already there. They go to Cotton's car lot where Cotton gives up Shelley as the shooter who'd tried to kill Spenser the previous night. Spenser allows Buddy Hartman and another man to leave the building and fights Shelley, winning easily. When Shelley is unconscious, Cotton tries to get to his gun. Spenser tells Cotton that he'll kill him if he ever comes near any of his friends again, or if he sends anyone. Hawk says that Spenser can't leave Cotton alive. Spenser says he can't shoot a man lying on the floor. Hawk says he can, then shoots Cotton square in the forehead.

Spenser arrives at Mel's office and tells him that he knows about the insurance scam. He provides Mel with notes that prove that point, says they're copies and that he can easily prove it all, and that the deaths of the winos means Mel could be sentenced to death. He then says he wants in and Mel asks what cut Spenser has in mind. Spenser says that Mel will pay tuition, board and expenses for Paul to go to school, tells Mel that there's no negotiation and that if he misses or is late with any payment, the deal is off. Spenser next goes to Patty, telling her that he knows about the trips to New York and that he'll share the information with Mel, meaning the alimony will be cut off immediately, unless she agrees to never again contact Paul. She does.

Paul and Spenser drive the last nails into the roof of the new cabin and it's noted that Paul is tan, lean but filling out, confident and happy. He's nervous about the school he's chosen and worried that he's going to be behind, but Spenser points out that he did a lot of catching up on life over the previous summer.

Chapters 27 through 33 Analysis

As Paul continues to emerge from his shell, he comes to make a good sidekick for Spenser. Spenser says that Mel is a real estate broker and an insurance salesman and that Cotton's talent is that he has money and is bad, then says, "Put them together and what have you got." Without missing a beat, Paul responds, "Bibbity-bobbity-boo," and says he had that record as a child. Spenser says that this has to be difficult for Paul and reminds him that they're "putting the screws" to Mel in order to help Paul. He then asks Paul if he can do it and Paul seems to misunderstand, asking if Spenser is asking whether he can continue to help. Spenser says what he's really asking is whether Paul can manage being independent and on his own at this stage of his life. He says that Paul is, after all, only fifteen, but Paul confidently responds that he'll be sixteen in the fall and Spenser says that Paul will be much older than that.

When Susan, Paul and Spenser are shot at, Susan is angry. She wants to call the police but Spenser convinces her not to, saying that they'd have to explain about Mel and that he doesn't want Mel in jail because he then wouldn't be able to pay for Paul's schooling. Susan insists that Paul go with her to work the following day, saying that he's not safe alone and certainly isn't safe with Spenser. Susan then angrily says that Spenser will go "talk" to Harry Cotton because the men shot at Spenser, Susan and Paul. Susan says that if the shots had been fired at Spenser when he was alone there wouldn't have been much fuss made of it. Spenser quotes a passage that indicates his



thoughts that love without honor is worthless. That thought seems to be seconded by Hawk the following morning. Hawk first asks if Susan is alright, then says that he believes they need to go talk to Cotton. Spenser notes that Hawk seems unperturbed, but that he's actually angry about the fact that Susan was in danger. Harry had once told Paul that Hawk was not a good man, but was dependable and for that reason, Spenser trusts him completely. Susan also seems to trust Hawk and tells Spenser to take Hawk along when he goes to confront Cotton.



Characters

Spenser

Spenser is a private investigator who is hired by Patty Giacomin to find her son, Paul. Spenser quickly does so but as he's driving around with Paul, he quizzes the teen about his own preferences and his opinion of his parents. Spenser's goal is to find out what is the best situation for Paul and says that he'll readily give back the hundred dollars Patty paid for Spenser's time, if he feels that returning Paul to his father is the best thing for him. This is typical of Spenser to do what he feels is best for others ahead of himself.

When Spenser and Paul arrive at the property where Spenser plans to build a cabin, Spenser demands that Paul participate in daily exercise routines and that he help build the cabin. Paul says he doesn't want to, is angry because there isn't a television, and pleads with Spenser to allow him to simply sleep in. Spenser tells Paul that he needs structure in his life, an apparent attribute of Spenser's that has made him into the man he is. In fact, Spenser - a self-employed private investigator - seems very disciplined and self-confident. It takes only a short period of time for him to pass these traits along to Paul.

Another important aspect of Spenser's personality is that he is more angry that Cotton sent someone to shoot at him and putting Susan and Paul in harm's way than he is at the fact that Cotton sends someone to shoot at him. He tells Susan that his love is worthless without honor, a fact he seems to live by.

Paul Giacomin

Paul is the fifteen-year-old son of Patty and Mel and is being used as a pawn in the battles between the two. Susan describes him as "chattel" and that seems to be an accurate description. Paul is shy, introverted and awkward. Spenser says that Paul has no idea how he should behave in any situation, and that seems to be the case. Paul is also very dependent and wants to switch that dependence to Spenser, though Spenser won't let it happen. For example, when Paul is given new clothes by Spenser, he wants Spenser to tell him which of the outfits to wear. When Spenser refuses, Paul asks for help matching up the outfits though he was along when the purchases were made. That aspect of Paul's personality changes quickly, and when Spenser later tells him to go for sandwiches and to use his own judgment when selecting, Paul readily agrees.

Paul's emerging personality is filled with self-confidence, though it's evident that he still has some distance to go. He jokes about Spenser's struggles with a heavy file cabinet, has a ready comeback when Spenser makes a joke about Mel and his cohorts in crime, and has gained weight, strength and coordination. However, he still admits to being concerned about his upcoming move to the new school. When Spenser tells him that it's



natural to be worried, that he is after all, only fifteen. Paul confidently replies that he'll be sixteen in the early autumn.

Hawk

A black man who Spenser says is almost as good at protecting clients and fighting as Spenser is. It's Hawk Spenser calls on when the kidnappers have Patty and want to trade her for Paul. Hawk and Spenser are actually pitting their skills at the fast bag at Henry Cimoli's gym when Hawk is called to the phone. He returns, telling Spenser that Harry Cotton had tried to hire him to kill Spenser. Hawk's ability to defend himself makes him unwilling to run from any fight, and he says he wants to stick with Spenser for awhile on the chance that someone else will prompt a fight. When Cotton sends another gunman to kill Spenser and Susan is put in danger, Hawk goes with Spenser to put a stop to the attacks. When Spenser refuses to kill Cotton, saying that he can't shoot a man who is lying on the floor, Hawk says he has no such compunction and kills Cotton.

Patty Giacomin

The woman who hires Spenser to get her son, Paul, back. Patty says that her ex-husband and Paul's father, Mel, has taken the boy, that the police will subpoena Mel if they can find him, but that the case isn't high on their priority list. When Spenser does retrieve Paul, Patty informs them that she hadn't expected a resolution so soon and has dinner plans, leaving Spenser to take Paul out for dinner as well. Patty makes a play for Spenser and it's later evident that she travels monthly to New York where she gets drunk and has sex with a stranger.

Mel Giacomin

Paul's father. When Spenser arrives at his house, Mel denies having Paul, then threatens to fight Spenser, then simply give in and tells Spenser to take Paul. Spenser eventually discovers that Mel is deeply involved in an insurance scam. Spenser tells Mel that unless he pays Paul's tuition and expenses, Spenser will turn Mel in to the police. Mel initially tries to negotiate, but eventually gives in and agrees.

Buddy Hartman

The thug who tries to kidnap Paul and later kidnaps Patty with the intention of trading her for Paul. When Buddy's co-conspirator, Harold, tries to beat up Spenser, Harold calls on Buddy to "jump in." Buddy declines, saying that Spenser could easily take them both, which is an indication that he has known Spenser for some time. Buddy is the one who tells Spenser of Cotton's involvement and is at Cotton's office when Spenser arrives to warn Cotton to stay away from his friends.



Elaine Brooks

Mel Giacomin's girlfriend. It's Elaine who leads Spenser to Mel and Paul. It's also Elaine's name on a list of insurance claims that prompts Spenser to look into Mel's involvement in an insurance scam. Having been to Elaine's apartment, Spenser realizes that the insurance claim was not on the property where she lives.

Susan Silverman

Susan is Spenser's girlfriend. She is a guidance counselor who works with young people. Susan is a bit skeptical of Spenser's involvement in the life of Paul, saying she's seen many children fail simply because of their parents. Susan becomes angry at Spenser because he is spending so much time with Paul that he seems to be ignoring Susan, but she comes around and helps locate a liberal arts school for Paul to attend. Susan has a sharp wit of her own, and Paul says that Susan told off the financial advisor at the liberal arts school he'd first gone to visit.

Harry Cotton

A scrawny, potbellied man who seems to always have a cigarette in his hand and has "swooped" his hair up and over his head in an effort to hide the immense bald spot. Harry runs a car lot that is really a front for his illegal exploits. When Spenser discovers that Harry Cotton is involved, he notes that it means that Mel is deeply involved in criminal activities. Harry is crude, using profanity freely, and dresses like he has nothing though Spenser says that he's worth several million dollars. Cotton hires gunmen to kill Spenser after Spenser begins asking questions about his involvement with Mel, and the man hired shoots at Spenser while he's with Susan. Hawk's dedication for Susan means he is angry, and when Spenser refuses to kill Cotton, Hawk does it.

Shelley

One of Harry Cotton's minions. When Shelley hears Cotton having words with Spenser, he comes to the door of Cotton's office and Spenser wonders if Shelley can actually fit through. Shelley is ordered to throw Spenser out of Cotton's office and makes a step in that direction until Spenser pulls a gun on him. Shelley is reportedly the man who shoots at Spenser when he is with Susan and Paul, and Spenser beats him unconscious for putting Susan and Paul in harm's way.

Henry Cimoli

The owner of the Harbor Fitness Club and the man who watches over Paul while Spenser goes for a talk with Susan. Henry was once among the best lightweight fighters in the area and his compact body shows the years of training. Spenser notes that Henry

looks like the world's toughest jockey when he arrives at the club on a particular day, finding Henry dressed in white pants with muscles bulging under his shirt.



Objects/Places

Boston

Where Spenser lives and works as a private detective.

Boylston Street and Berkley

Where Spenser has his office.

Hammond Pond Parkway

Where Elaine Brooks lives in an apartment building.

Emerson Road

Where Patty lives with Paul.

A Distant Mirror

The book Spenser is reading when Patty calls on him in April.

Massachusetts Avenue Bridge

The bridge where the kidnappers plan to exchange Patty for Paul.

Horsefeathers

The name of the restaurant where Paul and Spenser stop for food in North Conway, New Hampshire.

Fryeburg

Where Susan owns property and where Spenser takes Paul with plans to build a house.

Harbor Health Club

The fitness club run by Henry Cimoli and where Paul stays while Spenser talks with Susan.

New York

Where Patty goes every month to pick up a man for sex and where Paul discovers contemporary dance as an art form.



Themes

Coming of Age

Paul Giacomin is the perfect character to represent the coming of age theme and the author seems to create Paul's character with that theme in mind. Paul is an introverted teenager with the look of a neglected child. Spenser notes that Paul doesn't seem to know how to act in any situation. For example, he notes that Paul is uncomfortable carrying a gun but is also uncomfortable carrying a shovel. It's not really clear whether Paul doesn't want to be involved with anything or if he simply doesn't know how, as Spenser believes.

As time passes, Paul comes closer to his sixteenth birthday and becomes more self-assured, self-confident and healthier. There are indications of this through his actions. For example, as the story opens, Spenser asks Paul which of his parents he'd prefer to be with, and Paul refuses to make a decision. Later, Spenser buys Paul new clothes and then has to force Paul to decide what to wear to a ballet performance. But as the story draws to a close, Spenser sends Paul for lunch and tells him to use his own judgment to select, and Paul leaves without any argument. It's a sign of his maturity that he both trusts himself to make that selection and that he's paid enough attention to Spenser to know what Spenser would want.

Honor

Spenser is the epitome of an honorable man in most aspects, though it seems his idea of honor may be different from that of some people. Susan realizes this honor makes him what he is. It's Susan who says that Spenser is going to confront Harry Cotton about shooting at him, but only because it put Susan and Paul in harm's way. She says dramatically that if Spenser had been alone, he would not have been nearly as angry. Spenser responds that love without honor is worthless.

Spenser himself shows a level of honor in his willingness to return Paul to his father and give up the money Patty paid to have Paul returned, if Paul says that's what he wants. Spenser wastes some time trying to figure out what's best for Paul without giving any real thought to the hundred dollars he'd been paid to return the teen.

The contrast to this level of honor is Spenser's willingness to break in to Mel's home office and steal files. On a higher level, he is unwilling to shoot Cotton but watches as Hawk does so. There's no explanation but the author makes this seem acceptable deviations, though some readers may not agree.

A Sense of Self

Spenser is a student of human failures and successes, which is probably why he is able to see Paul for the troubled young man he is rather than simply as a package Spenser had been paid to deliver. Spenser is immediately drawn to the boy, seeing that Paul lacked everything that Spenser holds as important. When Spenser begins helping Paul, he starts by having Paul work out, run, and hold to a structured schedule. Paul objects, but not too strenuously and is soon running along with Spenser, lifting more than his own weight and able to swing a hammer with Spenser. Spenser says that he opted to start with body conditioning because he felt that was the easiest thing for Paul to accomplish. Spenser predicts that Paul will soon see changes and that those advances are addictive in that they prompt the desire for more changes. Spenser seems to be right in that Paul adapts quickly.

This sense of self is also exhibited by Susan, which seems to at least part of the attraction between Susan and Spenser. Susan admits that she told off an employee at the first liberal arts school she and Paul visits. Susan seems to have a brief meltdown in which she is overly jealous of Spenser's time with Paul, but once Spenser talks with her about it, she's soon back on an even keel, confident with her role in Spenser's life and ready to share to some extent.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in first person from Spenser's perspective, which is an adequate method for this story. There are only a few instances in which Spenser isn't where the action is happening, so nothing important is left out through this limited perspective. One of the few instances in which an omniscient view would have been preferable is the scene in which Susan has dinner with Spenser and Paul and seems withdrawn. Spenser doesn't know what's wrong; therefore, the reader also doesn't know. The reason for the incident is soon revealed and the delay isn't lengthy.

The first person perspective means that the reader is privy to Spenser's thoughts. His sarcasm and humor are presented as an integral part of the story, but it should be noted that the majority of this is presented as part of the dialog, and there is little presented to the reader in terms of Spenser's thoughts or private ideas.

Setting

The majority of the story is set in Boston, though there are trips to a rural area at a lake near Fryeburg and another scene in New York. There are several specific scenes within the story. For example, Patty's house is described in great detail as being laid out on three levels with the bedroom where Spenser is to sleep on the ground floor. The same can be said for Mel's office, which Spenser says includes a kitchen that was left intact from the building's previous use as a house. The cabin where Spenser and Paul stay in Fryeburg is also detailed fully, including the cooking arrangements and the fact that the water for showering comes in from the lake and water for drinking is from a well. These details add depth to the settings, though they are sometimes so detailed that they become repetitive.

There are some scenes in which the details offer an ironic, sarcastic or humorous avenue. For example, when Spenser goes to the bridge where the kidnappers have arranged to trade Patty for Paul. The author explains what Spenser knows about that bridge. He says the bridge is open to traffic, that it crosses the Charles River and some people enjoy strolling across it, and that it's near MIT. Then it's noted that there's a rumor that some students measured the bridge using a classmate named Smoot on the ground and making a mark for each length of Smoot. Spenser notes that the faint markings can still be seen. When the fight begins, Spenser hears a shot from "about five smoots away."

Language and Meaning

There are extensive descriptive passages in the story that may become somewhat distracting to some readers. There is also a tendency toward sarcasm that some



readers may find funny but others may find trying. For example, in Chapter 7, Spenser arrives at Patty's house and describes in great detail what she's wearing, ending with a sarcastic note. "She had on a white headband and a green silk shirt, a beige plaid skirt and tan Frye boots. Around her waist was a wide brown belt and her lipstick was glossy and nearly brown. Probably just got through scrubbing the tub."

The story is very typical of Robert Parker's Spenser novels. There are some points that seem to mimic other of his books which may be annoying to some readers. There are no unexpected twists and the story is based largely on Spenser's personality. This shows in the language and tone of the book.

There are some passages that contain profanity. These are not overpowering though some readers may find them offensive. The majority of the words used in the book are straight forward and any reader with an adequate vocabulary should have no problem with comprehension.

Structure

The book is divided into thirty-three chapters, each about six pages. The brief chapters are divided roughly into events. For example, the sixth chapter is the date Spenser has with Susan, including the conversation they have regarding Paul's situation. Chapter seven begins with Patty calling on Spenser again. The chapters are also neatly tied together. Chapter six ends soon after Susan advises Spenser not to have anything more to do with Paul since there's nothing he can do to help. Chapter seven begins with Spenser rushing to help when Paul is in trouble.

The title comes from a conversation between Spenser and Susan that refers to Paul's age. It's noted that Paul is being forced to grow up more quickly than he should have to and that's compared to a seasonal change in which autumn comes early.



Quotes

"The urban renewers had struck again. They'd evicted me, a fortune-teller, and a bookie from the corner of Mass. Ave. and Boylston, moved in with sandblasters and bleached oak and plant hangers, and last I looked appeared to be turning the place into a Marin County warehouse." Chapter 1, Page 5

"Over the years, I'd found that stirring things up was better than not. When things got into motion I accomplished more. Or I seemed to." Spenser on the reason he'd delivered an expensive ice bucket to Elaine Brooks, Chapter 2, Page 17

"He was a big guy and he'd played football, and he was probably used to being tough. But he probably also knew something about physical potential from his old football days and I think he had a suspicion that he couldn't throw me down the stairs." Spenser talking about Mel, Chapter 3, Page 21

"He's skinny. He seems to have no capacity to decide anything. His only firm conviction is that both his parents suck." Chapter 6, Page 40

"I tried to look powerful and rich, but she didn't hurry to catch me." Spenser passing a female jogger, Chapter 8, Page 57

"He's an errand boy. You want your warehouse burned for insurance, you give Buddy a couple of bucks and he torches it. You want a Mercedes sedan, you pay Buddy and he steals you one." Chapter 11, Page 75

"My God, he's chattel in a divorce settlement. What do you know about the needs of a neurotic adolescent?" chapter 14, Page 97

"He snorted angrily and went back in the living room. I figured he'd stare at the record player. Anything in a pinch." Chapter 15, Page 105

"I looked at him, white and narrow and cramped, almost birdlike, with his shoulders hunched and his head down. He needed a haircut. He had hangnails. What an unlovely little bastard." Chapter 17, Page 123



"You look like the runner-up in a Mortimer Snerd look-alike contest." Spenser on Paul's attempt to dress up for the ballet, Chapter 19, Page 130

"I mean he's spent the last six months trying to get the kid away from you because he thought you wanted to keep him and you've spent the last six months trying to keep him from getting the kid because you thought he wanted him. But he doesn't and you don't. When he finds out that you're glad he's got the kid, he'll want to give him back. You'll spend the next six months trying to give him to each other." Spenser to Patty, Chapter 22, Page 149

"A spider had made a web in one corner of my window. Since it didn't interfere with my view of the ad agency across the street, I left it alone." Chapter 26, Page 175

"'I can't kill a man lying on the floor,' I said. Hawk shook his head, spit through the open door into the repair bay, and shot Harry through the middle of the forehead. 'I can,' he said." Chapter 31, Page 210

Topics for Discussion

Who is Spenser? How does his occupation prompt his involvement with Paul Giacomin?

What is it that Spenser asks Paul when they are first alone in the car together? What is Paul's response? What does Paul expect Spenser to do with him?

Describe Paul's situation. What does Spenser initially plan to do about Paul's situation? What does he come to do about it? Why?

What is the significance of the title, "Early Autumn?" What does the cabin come to symbolize for Paul and Spenser? List three additional symbols used in this story.

Who is Shelley? Susan? Mel? Elaine? Patty? Henry Cimoli? What are their relationships to Spenser?

Spenser tells Paul that if he wants to escape his parents, he'll have to become autonomous. When Paul asks what that means, Spenser says it's independent or self-reliance. How does Spenser react when he realizes that Paul is becoming dependent on him? What is Paul's reaction to Spenser's explanation? What is the eventual outcome of Paul's realization of the situation?

What is the relationship between Susan and Paul? How does it evolve as it does? What are the driving forces that prompt their relationship to evolve in his manner?

Describe Hawk's role in Spenser's life. What does Spenser say about Hawk when Paul asks about the man? What action does Hawk take that Spenser is reluctant to take? What does this say about the personalities of the two men?