Hugger Mugger Short Guide

Hugger Mugger by Robert B. Parker

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Spenser has proven to be one of the most durable characters in crime literature, taking his place alongside Sam Spade, Mike Hammer, and even Sherlock Holmes as a classic sleuth with his own methods, his unique and unfailing morality, and his razor-sharp wit. When he suggests to Penny and her father that he will handle Delroy's objections to his intrusions with his "northern charm," Penny points out that this might be an oxymoron, and he acquiesces, "You're right. . . . Maybe I'll just threaten him."

Spenser later sums up the character of a Southern lawyer by saying that he smiles "a wide smile, a good old Georgia boy, friendly as lemon cake" and by noting that the lawyer selects a cigar "slightly smaller than a Little League bat."

Staunchly humanistic, altruistic, and romantic, Spenser does not think twice about blithely accepting those who are gay, putting his life on the line for what he believes in, or freely admitting to Susan that he finds other women, including Penny, attractive.

After he discovers that Penny may be having an affair with Delroy, he lets Susan know that his initial reaction was disappointment. "Life is full of heartbreak," Susan says, to which Spenser jokingly replies that he is lucky to have "a fallback position."

Then he admits that Susan is really his main position: "Everything else in life is fallback."

His love for her is an absolute, not subject to change, as is his firm belief in the potential for goodness in the human spirit, even as he dodges bullets and fends off roundhouse right hooks.

Spenser is physically up to most tasks, being an ex-boxer who tries to stay in shape and knows a good deal about hand-to-hand combat and the use of various weapons.

Perhaps his biggest flaw, however, is the hubris that such toughness can engender, and even though his high opinion of his physical prowess is often a source of humor, Spenser nonetheless gets himself into some very tight spots by overestimating himself and being overconfident in his physical abilities. At the same time, he is well aware of his shortcomings as a sleuth and of his unconventional methods, which involve trying to learn as much as he can about a case while stumbling in what he hopes is the right direction. At one point in Hugger Mugger when he does not have a clue as to what is going on, he refers to himself sarcastically as "Spenser, Ace Detective."

Susan, a Harvard-trained psychologist, has her own brand of toughness, often shown by her willingness to stand by Spenser when he does show his faults and when she realistically fears for his life. So small that she can sit in a bathroom sink to put on makeup, she is the rock of sanity and strength that Spenser needs to get him through his battles. She also serves as a sounding board for his theories, always standing ready to tell him frankly that he is talking nonsense when they both know that he is. In Hugger

Mugger, Susan's role is primarily in the background, as it usually is in Spenser novels, but she does come on stage during a trip they take to San Francisco and during a period of time when Spenser is back in Boston after Penny has fired him. (Dolly Hartman, Walter Clive's mistress, later rehires him.) As always, Susan and Spenser have some of the sexiest, funniest, most urbane repartee since that of Nick and Nora Charles in Dashiell Hammett's The Thin Man (1934), yet in the midst of the rapid-fire banter, there is often a moment that shows how much they mean to each other, as when Susan laughs at one of Spenser's jokes during a long-distance call and he tells the reader, "Susan's laugh . . .

was immediate and intimate and as much of home as I was ever likely to have. It made my throat hurt."

Penny Clive rarely laughs, because that would break her veneer of decorum, but she has a ready smile that is charming, warm, and winning, a smile that effectively masks her Machiavellian nature and completely fools Spenser for quite a while. He finds Penny "adorable," and their conversations are sublimely witty and frothy, until someone kills her father. Then Spenser gradually begins to see the machine behind the veil and begins to wonder exactly who Penny is and how she got to be so strange and devious. All three Clive sisters are beautiful, but Penny is especially gorgeous: blond and perfectly, subtly, healthily tan. Her teeth are as white as those of the models in toothpaste ads, and her sharp, bold intelligence serves to make her even more alluring. However, Penny's mind holds surprises and secrets that turn out to be as shocking and disconcerting as any Spenser has had to face, and her power over others is the force that ultimately proves the most destructive in the novel. Yet she is no match for the undaunted Spenser. At one point, she looks at her family with "a very cold gaze. Scary almost," he notes, "unless of course, you were a tough guy like me."

The name of the Clive family is appropriate in at least two ways: the most famous Clive in history is Robert Clive, an eighteenth-century English baron who established the British Indian empire, and the Clives are regal and colonial in their bearing and style. Secondly, the name sounds like the word cleave, and the family is split apart emotionally and, by novel's end, physically. There develops a deep hatred born of selfishness and greed, which are the motives for the murder of Walter Clive and for the subsequent imprisonment of his daughters Stonie and SueSue in the family home, until they are liberated by Spenser and Pud, a former football player, while Cord waits for them in a safe place (he is not prepared for such physical battles). There is hope for these daughters and their formerly profligate husbands, but even if Penny is never sent to an actual prison, she will be forced to live within the prison walls of her own warped and rigid mind while she gradually deteriorates like the mansion around her.

The sisters' mother, Sherry Lark, following her divorce from Walter, has moved to San Francisco to become a latter-day hippie, and it is obvious from her carefree, egocentric demeanor that she has little emotional attachment to her daughters. They tolerate her, and she makes a show of keeping in touch with them; however, SueSue and Stonie

openly dislike her, and Penny is probably only more civil because she is more mannered. Readers can readily see why Walter would have preferred his mistress, Dolly, to the ditzy Sherry, whose name neatly sums her up: someone who wants to laugh, drink, and have a lark with life, avoiding responsibility at all costs while wearing her freedom like a political campaign button.

Dolly Hartman, whose name and appearance resemble Dolly Parton, is a relatively minor character, but she lights up the page whenever she appears, being not only lovely but forthright, smart, and supremely confident. As Spenser describes her, "She was iridescent with cool sexuality that made me want to run around the desk and ask to die in her arms." Dolly is also determined that her son, Jason, now a young man, get what is due him from the Clive estate, so she hires Spenser to help her, which allows him to resume the investigation of Walter's murder and reacquaint himself with those other characters in Lamarr, Georgia, whom he has learned to love and hate, namely Deputy Sheriff Becker and Tedy Sapp on the one hand, and Jon Delroy and his henchmen on the other.

Becker might be viewed as an older, Southern version of Hawk: his laid-back manner belies his quick mind and his hardwon toughness, and he has a ready sense of humor that matches Spenser's in its irony and offhandedness. When Spenser asks if Becker has any suspects in the horse shootings, he answers, "Well, so far I'm pretty sure it ain't me." Becker tells Spenser that Hugger Mugger's groom, a small black man named Billy Rice, is sleeping in the horse's stable with a ten-gauge shotgun, "case a hippopotamus sneaks in there." However, because of legitimate political concerns, Becker is only able to play a minor, though important, role in the investigation. He must sit back and be supportive while Spenser does most of the heavy lifting.

As mentioned earlier, the detective gets much of his direct help from Tedy Sapp, one of the most interesting of all the characters—especially interesting and unusual as Spenser's main ally. Though Spenser has never been prejudiced or homophobic, he has also never been known to enjoy hanging around gay bars, and he has occasionally had funny things to say about those who do enjoy such a lifestyle, not being a man to let a good joke pass him by, although it might be offensive to the politically correct. Even here, summing up Sapp's effectiveness as a bouncer, Spenser quips, "Most people don't anticipate a tough fairy."

A former soldier and former policeman who lifts weights and has studied karate, Sapp never has a problem convincing people to leave the bar when he wants them to.

Being a man who values courage and honesty, he does not hesitate to help Spenser in his quest, going so far as to provide a safe haven for Stonie, SueSue, Cord, and Pud, and providing armed back-up for Spenser when the bullets start to fly.

Like most of the other people Spenser instinctively feels comfortable with, Sapp also has a good sense of humor. When Sapp learns that Spenser used to be a policeman, too, but was fired for disobedience, he says, "I'll bet you're pretty good at disobedience," and Spenser replies, "One of my best things." When Spenser sees that Sapp has been

using an Ml rifle during the shootout scene, Spenser calls the gun "an oldie but goodie," and Sapp says, "Like me." Through the humor and camaraderie between these two quite different, though in some ways very similar, men, Parker is showing the possibilities for an open, tolerant society, while through Spenser's obvious disdain for the despicable aspects of the other characters, Parker effectively demonstrates the need to be disobedient to any social system that would valorize and nurture such corrosive, self-centered, and narrow-minded attitudes.

One product of such a social system is Jon Delroy, who has built his reputation for toughness on his claims of being a former marine and a former FBI agent, neither of which is true, and on his militaristic, storm trooper stance, which Spenser immediately sees through and has the temerity to make fun of. None of Parker's characters is a caricature, however, and Delroy, who has often made a living by scamming women, is eventually undone by his heartfelt love for Penny. The scammer gets horrendously scammed, but in the process he shows that he really does have some toughness and does possess enough genuine emotion to be true to his one and only love. His other traits overbalance these good ones, though.

Of the black grooms at Three Fillies.Stables, he says, "They wouldn't tell a white man the truth if it would make them rich," and his opinion of Sapp is even lower and more profane. Delroy's favorite problem-solving methods center on cruelty, fraud, extortion, and even murder. Sapp sums him up succinctly by referring to him as "a mean, dangerous jerk."

Social Concerns

S penser, the brash private eye with one name, one girlfriend, and more scars and minor injuries than most sports heroes, returns in Hugger Mugger to try, in his unusual but effective way, to right some wrongs in his corner of the world, which in this case stretches south to include the fictional town of Lamarr, Georgia. Hugger Mugger is a two-year-old thoroughbred stallion that the Clive family hopes will be the next Triple Crown winner, but the prize horse is in danger from some unknown sniper who has shot three other horses belonging to the Clives and has tried to shoot Hugger Mugger. Thus Spenser is hired to catch the bad guy.

Perceptive and acerbic as always, Parker uses this situation to observe and point out—via the cutting words of his wellknown detective—the foibles, vanities, and perversities of the worst of current southern aristocracy. The Clive family, headed by patriarch Walter Clive, represents all that is bad about the New South and quite a few things that have always been bad about rigidly stratified societies—for example, the way some members of the upper class take unfair advantage of their old money, silverspoon prestige, and enormous power to further their own private interests while abusing other people in the process; and the fact that racism arid prejudice are often perpetuated by means of the accepted social order. Unfortunately, like the caste system in India, American society, especially in the South, retains its unyielding class structure with its built-in rancor and pain, despite centuries of progress toward the egalitarian ideals of its founding fathers, and this ugly truth often shows through the humorous, jaundiced commentary of Spenser as he goes about discovering who is doing what to whom.

Dalton Becker, the honest and talented deputy sheriff in charge of the official investigation is "a big, solid, slow black man [with] short graying hair," and he readily admits that he is treading lightly in deference to the Clives' elite position in the county's social and political circles. As Becker points out to Spenser, the sheriff is an elected official, and getting elected requires the support of the Clives and others like them. Therefore, there are some lines of enquiry closed to the deputy sheriff. He cannot energetically press the family for information if he wants to keep his job, and the fact that he is an African American does not help him gain the respect and cooperation of the Clives. As Parker demonstrates here, the surface of the New South is more attractive, but prejudice and racism are still sinewy monsters in the shadows.

Unlike many of the other Spenser novels, Hugger Mugger does not feature Hawk, Spenser's black sidekick, who is away on an extended vacation. The sleuth's most important helper in this case is Tedy Sapp, an openly homosexual bouncer at the local gay bar, the Bath House. Sapp looks like a professional wrestler but has dyed his hair "the aggressively artificial blond color that musicians and ballplayers were affecting that year," in an effort, as he says, "to gay [himself] up." Spenser jokes with Sapp about gay stereotypes and helps Sapp kick out a gaggle of rednecks who want to hurt some of the bar's clientele. Spenser also jokes with Becker about black stereotypes and helps the deputy sheriff in his investigation. Implicitly, Parker is representing an ideal society in which people treat each other as equals and help each other achieve important goals,

while at the same time dealing with prejudice and other human flaws by acknowledging them and even having fun with them.

The Clive family, which has a background steeped in incest, adultery, and drunkenness, stands in opposition to such an ideal society and openly tries to discourage it by attempting to maintain the status quo at almost any cost. Penny, one of Walter's three daughters (the sources of the name for his Three Fillies Stables), is a charming but astute businesswoman who is virtually in charge of the family business. Following her father's death, she forces the break-up of her sisters' marriages in order to preserve the "purity" of the family. She shuts out Spenser to prevent him from discovering any inconvenient truths or damaging secrets, and she constantly shows the steely reserve behind the magnolia sheen. More than any other character, Penny represents that particular Southern ability to smile politely and offer icy, delicious drinks while destroying enemies with a ruthlessness that borders on vicious cruelty.

Techniques

Parker, who has a Ph.D. in literature from Boston University, is especially well versed in the detective genre—he focused his dissertation on Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald— and he is also well aware that this genre has much older roots than those found in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle. The fictional sleuth is merely one of the most popular versions of the hero on a quest, as delineated in Vladimir Propp's seminal Morphology of the Russian Folk Tale (1928), a hero who is often tempted but who steadfastly remains true to his beliefs and his determination to complete the quest. Spenser is clearly a Lancelot figure, and knowing in detail the history of such characters allows Parker to take Spenser out of the mold enough to be interesting but not enough to destroy his deep ties to the genre. In other words, Parker both uses and plays against the stereotypical hero-centered detective novel.

Spenser always solves the case and brings the villains to justice, while protecting and worshiping his favorite damsel, Susan, but he does so in a roundabout, sometimes hilarious way, complete with several selfdeprecating quips. In Hugger Mugger as in his other Spenser novels, Parker shows his deft ability to walk the tightropes between sentimentality and brutality, between farce and melodrama, and between pulp fiction and overly serious literature. Spenser's important but idiosyncratic relationship to the detectives who have gone before him is a constant source of both solidity, in the sense that the reader has certain touchstones that remain firm, and play, in the sense that Spenser often makes fun of his own profession. When another character asks how he knew some secret, he always has the deadpan reply ready: "I'm a detective."

In fact, comic relief may be the most important literary technique that Parker employs. After all, there are always the elements of tragedy in a Spenser novel: people are killed; people dishonor themselves; people betray each other in horrible ways. But during and after all the violence and pain, Spenser maintains his semi-detached, world-weary, and indestructible wit.

He may not agree with or understand the events swirling around him, but he is wise enough to know himself and to know how valuable laughter can be, especially in the face of disaster.

Parker's talent for characterization is also important to the success of the Spenser novels. Like the best portrait painters, Parker can capture the essence of his characters with a few poignant strokes. Walter Clive, for example, is "tall and athletic and ridiculously handsome [with] a lot of white teeth and a dark tan. His silver hair was thick and smooth." He has a smile that says, "Of course I'm superior to you, and both of us know it, but I'm a good guy and am not going to hold it against you." His daughter Penny "had big eyes, the color of morning glories. Her eyes were nearly as big as Susan's, with thick lashes. Her smile was not superior. It was friendly . .. and maybe a little more."

People are also quickly characterized by what they say and how they say it. Shortly after meeting Spenser and Susan, Sherry Lark claims that Lamarr, Georgia, is "stifling to the spirit. . . . All that rampant machismo, all that rancorous capitalism....

You know the two are really mirror images of each other." But then she goes on to tell Spenser, "You're a man, you probably don't understand it." As Susan plays along with Sherry's tirade, readers can easily see that Sherry Lark has meticulously made herself into the butt of a joke that she will never get.

Parker's gift for dialogue adds immeasurably to the power of his characterization.

Imagery is another literary technique that Parker uses with dexterity, but not with heavy-handedness. He sets the scenes with just an occasional touch of poetry, as when Spenser describes the Three Fillies horses working out in the early morning: "The horses' hooves made a soft chuff on the surface of the track. Otherwise it was very still.... There was nothing else in sight but this ring in the trees where the horses circled timelessly, counterclockwise, with an evanescence of morning mist barely lingering about the infield." On another occasion, he describes the climate: "It was hot in Lamarr. The sky was cloudless and the sun hammered down through the thick air."

Occasionally one notices the influence of Ernest Hemingway on Parker's spare but effective prose.

A technique that he rarely uses but expertly puts into play in Hugger Mugger is the careful changing of tenses to create a certain effect. In a novel about horse country, including a horse race is obligatory, and Parker makes it more exciting by having Spenser narrate the race in the present tense, whereas his normal (logical) choice is to narrate in the past tense. Thus, the action speeds up with the horses.

Themes

As Lord Acton correctly pointed out, absolute power corrupts absolutely, and although the Clives do not have absolute power, they are nonetheless almost totally corrupt. Penny's sisters, SueSue and Stonie, spend their time trying to seduce strangers for fun, and their husbands Pud and Cord, respectively, are equally immoral, Pud being an alcoholic who indulges his sexual appetites with prostitutes and Cord being a pederast. These perversions obviously contrast with the unshakable, long-lasting love shared by Spenser and Susan Silverman, two very different people who fit together like yang and yin. Quoting Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, Spenser points out to Penny, "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds." He is also fond of telling people that his name is spelled like that of the English poet Edmund Spenser. These references to poetry and romance are integral to his character and point up one of the main themes in any Spenser novel: love is stronger than evil. No matter what the intrepid private eye must face in his bloodspattered career, he can always depend on the fact that Susan loves him and he loves her. This is the Rosetta stone behind all the wisecracks, courage, and caring in Spenser's world: it is the one true thing to which he can always return, the proof that everything can really be all right, and the source of much of his legendary personal strength.

Another familiar theme in Hugger Mugger is that being humane increases, and sometimes even salvages, the humanity in others. After Spenser shows that he values SueSue, Stonie, Pud, and Cord as people, even with all their horrendous faults, they begin to heal and respect themselves and each other. In his first solo encounter with SueSue, she epitomizes the Clive philosophy when she says, "Money makes the world go round, darlin'. And sex makes the trip worthwhile." This is after Spenser has spurned her advances and mentioned his love for Susan. "Love?" SueSue laughs.

"Only some big dangerous gun-totin' Yankee would come around talking 'bout love.

My God—love!" Yet it is Spenser's inherent love for his fellow human beings that ends up saving the lives of SueSue and Stonie, and helping Pud and Cord reclaim some dignity in their lives. In a very real sense, love is Spenser's God.

As mentioned, the continued prevalence of racism and prejudice is also an important theme here, especially as it exists alongside the official pronouncements that American society is the best on Earth and that Americans have made great strides in stamping out such anachronisms. Parker has often shown, as he does in this novel, that human nature can be quite stubborn when it comes to getting rid of the sins of the fathers and that a person is better served by being realistic about such insidious flaws than by glossing over them. People will always be people, and some of them will be smallminded, retrograde villains. This type of person is represented in Hugger Mugger by Jon Delroy, the dives' Nazi-like security chief who tellingly wears an "SS" pin on his lapel, the "SS" standing, in this case, for Security South, the company he manages.

Delroy is as rigid as an oak and, it turns out, just as dumb. As such, he is the perfect foil for the easy-going, quick-thinking Spenser, who is treading on his territory, but Delroy's brand of evil is tiny compared to the evil that surrounds him, both in the novel and in reality.

Key Questions

The so-called hard-boiled school of detective-fiction writers, whose most wellknown representatives were Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane, presented realistic, often depressing pictures of American society as being deeply, irreparably corrupted by greed, cruelty, and dishonesty. This was a society from which the ruggedly independent private eye must rebel yet must also, ironically, protect by maintaining a basic code of law and order. This romantic, heroic viewpoint is echoed in the stance of many comic-book heroes, such as Superman and Batman, who battle both villains and corruption, as well as in the tales of King Arthur and his knights. In his Spenser novels, Parker shows his debt to and understanding of the writers who formed and popularized the genre of detective fiction, along with his broad knowledge of the similar literature that preceded it.

1. How does Parker make his hero different from all those who have gone before him? What are some of the similarities that Spenser shares with his predecessors?

2. In what ways is Spenser a superhero?

Are there any comic-book heroes that are very close to him in terms of strength and attitude? Do they have helpers like Hawk, or in the case of Hugger Mugger, Tedy Sapp?

3. How is Spenser's quest in Hugger Mugger related to the adventures of the Knights of the Round Table? How do his practices of chivalry and morality compare to theirs?

4. Spenser's love for Susan Silverman is always an integral part of any Spenser novel and is an important source for his internal resilience and positive attitude.

Why do you think that the couple has remained unmarried? Does this fact undermine Spenser's firm belief in the need for morality (a strong sense of right and wrong)? If so, how does it?

5. "Noblesse oblige" is a French phrase that means nobility comes with obligations, that those in positions of prestige and power must behave themselves so that they remain good examples for the rest of society. Enumerate the ways in which the Clives fail in their duties to their employees and their community.

Do Penny and Walter Clive get what they deserve? Why or why not?

6. Some readers may be offended by Parker's valorizing of the openly gay character Tedy Sapp, even though Sapp makes it clear that he is not "recruiting" people. In other words, he does not care whether others become gay or not; he is simply being true to his own personality. Parker depicts the homosexual community in a favorable light here, but at what point does fiction become polemic and lose some of its power as literature? Does Parker approach or pass that point in Hugger Mugger? Is his portrayal of Sapp and his friends realistic?

7. What are some of the contributions Parker has made to the detective-fiction genre? Has he refined, expanded, or changed it significantly? Do you think Parker's fiction will have much of an impact on society itself? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

There were many detectives plodding their way through thousands of mysteries in popular fiction before the dime novel became a twenty-five-cent paperback, but only a few of them stand out in such a heavily littered genre. Sherlock Holmes is, of course, the most well-known nineteenthcentury detective, but Edgar Allan Poe's Monsieur Dupin was the first classic sleuth in American fiction. Spenser can be compared, or more properly, contrasted, with both. Though he shares with Holmes the knowledge of how important it is to rely on a trustworthy helper, he certainly does not have the meticulous, almost insane attention to detail that served Holmes so well. In fact, Spenser readily admits that he is often just stumbling around in the dark with good intentions and little inspiration. And while he has the dogged determination of Dupin, he does not ruminate or concentrate too well. As he says in Hugger Mugger, when he thinks "long thoughts," Susan sometimes remarks on his snoring.

Spenser's closest literary precedents are the heroes created by Hammett, Chandler, and Ross Macdonald, along with John D. MacDonald's Travis Magee and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer. Spenser has the toughness and jaundiced eye of Hammett's Continental Op and Sam Spade along with the sophistication of Nick Charles, and Parker pays direct homage to Hammett in Hugger Mugger when Spenser alludes to The Thin Man. As he and Susan are zipping along in her Mercedes convertible, he says, "I feel like Nick and Nora Charles," and Susan replies, "Of course, darling. Would you like to stop at the next Roy Rogers and have a martini?" Susan's remark is funny but also points up the comparative ugliness of the current American landscape as compared to the wide-open beauty of the countryside during the days of Hammett's novels. The ugliness in the minds of the villains remains about the same, though, and Spenser is just as relentless in his pursuit as any of the detectives that preceded him in the genre.

Like Spenser, Chandler's Philip Marlowe was named after a well-known English writer, in this case Christopher Marlowe, but the two Marlowes were similar only in their quick temper and clever turns of phrase. Chandler's Marlowe differs from Spenser mostly in his somber, almost morose, attitude and his dark reflections on evil and life in general. Marlowe is antiromantic, even cynical, and Chandler's prose is grittily realistic. The tone is heavy, especially compared to the bright wittiness and breezy optimism of Spenser.

Unlike Chandler and Hammett, Ross Macdonald chose to veer away from the hard-boiled style and create a more detached, more sophisticated detective in Lew Archer, who is well read and an aficionado of Japanese art. Spenser shares with Archer his intelligent, no-nonsense view of human nature, but both Archer and his creator took themselves far more seriously than do Spenser and Parker.

Travis Magee, on the other hand, shares many characteristics with Spenser: he is romantic, tough, resourceful, and often lighthearted. He also has a regular helper, in the form of Meyer, the bearlike accountant.

However, Magee is more philosophical and methodical than Spenser, and is an unrepentant playboy. Settling down with one woman seems to be anathema to the freewheeling Magee, even though he does believe in love and does occasionally fall in love.

Mike Hammer is also a ladies' man but is a loner in the style of the cinema cowboy.

Arguably the most popular modern detective, in terms of sheer volume of sales and media adaptations, Spillane's creation shares Spenser's tough-guy stance and traditional American values, but he is more force than finesse. Whereas Spenser is subtle and playful, Hammer is much closer to his name in his approach to cases and to villains, and although Spillane is an excellent storyteller, he could never match Parker in terms of literary or comic abilities.

Related Titles

While the Spenser novels, after the first one, The Godwulf Manuscript (1973), could be viewed as a series of sequels, each one also stands on its own merits, and each one is a novel in the full sense of the word, not just a detective novel. Parker's genius is shown in his ability to maintain a strong central character through a series of entertaining novels and at the same time to create other believable characters and wide variations in storylines so that his novels can be read singly and enjoyed just as much as when a reader is familiar with all of them.

Hugger Mugger is related to all the other Spenser novels, of course, in the sense that it continues the story of Spenser and Susan while introducing the stories of other characters, but it is especially related to two recent Spenser novels, Hush Money (1999) and Small Vices (1997), in that it shows Parker's continuing concern with classdriven politics and with virulent prejudice as a still-prevalent and destructive force in American society. Spenser is still feeling the effects of his serious injuries in Small Vices, too, because he finds it hard to climb a flight of stairs.

However, in a way Hugger Mugger balances out the heaviness of the two earlier books with its many instances of comedy and with its overall tone of optimism, in spite of the evil inherent in Penny Clive and Jon Delroy. These illicit lovers and conspirators are lightweights compared to the villains in Hush Money and Small Vices, the latter of which features a cold, professional killer named Rugar, who comes very close to ending Spenser's life. Hush Money shows Parker at his acidic best as he pushes the political commentary envelope almost to bursting, and the climax of the novel, which shows the mean-spirited leader of a rightwing paramilitary group literally in bed with an African-American leader who has a high position in the academic community, comes close to satirical farce in its overtly bitter sarcasm. Hugger Mugger returns Parker and Spenser to the familiar territory of the detached-but-concerned detective who mildly, but pointedly, comments on the injustice and ludicrous behavior he sees around him.

Violence is rare in the book, and when it does occur, it is not graphic. Thus, Parker seems to have mellowed a little after getting some vitriol out of his system in Hush Money and Small Vices. (An intervening Spenser novel, 1998's Sudden Mischief centers on Susan and some deep trouble that her ex-husband has fallen into, and Parker seems more concerned in this case with domestic love, illicit passion, and social justice than with politics and prejudice.)

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