

Hush Money Short Guide

Hush Money by Robert B. Parker

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Characters

The familiar cast of regulars in a Spenser novel is presented credibly in *Hush Money*, but there are some variations on the usual formulas. Lieutenant Quirk of Boston Homicide scarcely appears at all, but Sergeant Frank Belson has an important moment when he allows Spenser to photocopy the confidential files of the investigation of Prentiss Lament's murder. Henry Cimoli and his health club also make a minor appearance.

More important, new and unexpected features of Hawk's past emerge. It is Hawk who brings Spenser into the investigation of Robinson Nevins' tenure situation because Robinson Nevins' father is revealed to have been Hawk's mentor in boxing and a kind of surrogate father to Hawk.

Hawk also has a personal involvement through a brief former association with AmirAbdullah: as Hawk's freshman English instructor, Amir had impressed Hawk with a grasp of language and social issues, but had also disillusioned Hawk by making homosexual advances toward him, causing Hawk to withdraw from the course.

Hence this case contains a deeper emotional involvement for Hawk than most prior Spenser adventures. As a result, Hawk uncharacteristically complicates the investigation by involving himself and Spenser in an altercation with Amir's bodyguards.

Susan Silverman also becomes emotionally involved in the subplot concerning K. C. Roth. A deep emotional involvement with Spenser's cases is nothing new, and as readers of the series know, Susan's fortunes have sometimes been placed in the foreground, as when the serial killer Spenser pursues turns out to be one of Susan's patients in *Crimson Joy* (1988), or when most of *A Catskill Eagle* (1985) is devoted to Spenser's rescue of Susan from her captivity at the hands of the son of a right-wing militarist. In *Hush Money* however, Susan's role, aside from acting as Spenser's consultant on the psychology of the characters, becomes somewhat more comic, as she begins to feel jealousy over K. C.'s pursuit of Spenser, and finally drives K. C. away by socking her in the jaw. Moreover, in an effort to banish the ghost of the voluptuous K. C., Susan resorts to a playful surprise seduction of Spenser in his office on a newly purchased couch.

The characters involved in the case are generally an interesting lot, except perhaps for the villains. The murdered blackmailer, Prentiss Lamont, seems to have been an idealistic graduate student corrupted by greed and by Amir Abdullah. By contrast, Abdullah is a shameless betrayer of people and ideals, using the cause of gay rights to blackmail fellow gays, and seducing both his students and others such as Milo Quant, the white supremacist, apparently out of sheer perversity and destructiveness. On the other hand, Milo Quant is seen as an innocent victim of his own homosexual compulsions, although he does bankroll a private militia. The novel's seriocomic resolution with Quant and Abdullah surprised in bed together reveals Quant as a rather pathetic would-be fascist, but hardly the nightmare villain imagined by liberal opponents.



As for the novel's rapist, Louis Vincent is portrayed credibly as a success-oriented egotist who conceals his desire to control women and relationships under the veneer of an affable male camaraderie. Vincent's evil nature does not consist simply of his lack of emotional commitment in sexual behavior or in his boast that he views women as disposable items like Kleenex tissues; for if he were as emotionally detached as he claims, he would not have felt compelled to stalk K. C. and rape her. In fact, his egotism makes the rape of K. C. an assertion of dominance and control. However, in the final analysis, Vincent remains a rather shallow figure.

More interesting, perhaps, are the victims and secondary figures in Spenser's two investigations. Bass Maitland and Lillian Temple are portrayed as realistic and unsympathetic of academic careerists who are willing to damage Robinson Nevins' career for the sake of their own political orthodoxy and in order to avoid the appearance of scandal. While Maitland is a run-of-the-mill academic windbag with ambitious goals, Lillian Temple's portrayal is perhaps more disturbing to the reader: not only does she support the denial of tenure to Nevins, but she circulates the unsubstantiated rumors of his alleged homosexual relationship with the murdered Prentiss Lamont. Nor does she ever acknowledge her own brief liaison with Nevins, which might have provided evidence of his heterosexual outlook. Although she is allowed a moment of inarticulate regret at the end of the novel, Temple is portrayed as a contemporary educator who substitutes popular liberal values for the cultivation of a true conscience.

If Lillian Temple finds identity through her public role as a professor defending women and minorities, K. C. Roth is a victim of popular psychology, or at any rate, popular attitudes about romance and a woman's need to attach herself to a man.

Having broken up her conventional marriage in an effort to snare Louis Vincent, and then ended her affair with Vincent to punish him for staying with his wife, K. C. is in many ways a sexual predator or adventuress herself, although her game plans do not include the contingency of an ex-lover becoming a stalker or rapist. Although Susan offers a sympathetic rationalization of K. C.'s conduct by suggesting that K. C. must have a male protector to feel important, K. C.'s conduct is not so easily explained. At bottom, K. C. seems obsessed with taking a man away from another woman in order to assert her feminine superiority. Having failed to take Louis Vincent from his wife, K. C. makes a dogged effort to steal Spenser from Susan, until finally driven away by Susan's punch in the jaw.

Though K. C. is the victim of a brutal rape, she is also a subtle version of the feminine sexual predator.

In contrast to these characters, Robinson Nevins is a portrait of the African-American professor as a symbol of academic integrity. Not only does Nevins annoy many colleagues by teaching students about the importance of dead white writers like Herman Melville, but he behaves with maddening stubbornness in the face of the scandalous rumors which influenced the tenure decision. Refusing to assert his heterosexual nature, he allows Spenser to discover the truth in his investigation; moreover, Nevins refuses to name publicly the women who shared his bed, out of a sense of Victorian



gentlemanliness or gallantry. Though vindicated by the scandal which Spenser and Hawk uncover about Abdullah and Quant, and though finally granted tenure by the university's tenure committee, Nevins' action seems extremely quixotic, even to Susan and Spenser. To Susan's remark that Nevins' behavior showed "either great integrity or great foolishness," Spenser replies with the witty judgment that "integrity is often foolish."



Social Concerns

As usual in a novel by Robert B. Parker featuring the private investigator known as Spenser, an enormous burden of social commentary is presented in a variety of ways, ranging from casual conversations of Spenser and his lover, Susan Silverman, a practicing psychologist, and Spenser's idle badinage with his ally Hawk, to more serious comments on society offered through development of plot and action. In the foreground of *Hush Money* is Spenser's investigation of the circumstances surrounding the decision of the English Department of an unnamed university to deny tenure to Robinson Nevins, an African-American scholar with conservative political and literary views.

In this novel a number of contemporary issues are treated with intelligence and irony. Spenser's investigation of the "suicide" of Prentiss Lamont, a graduate student and gay activist, leads to the revelation that the practice of "outing"—revealing a person's until-now secret homosexual lifestyle—of prominent people may be a practice conducive to blackmail. The moral issues involved in the process of bringing gay people "out of the closet" are subjected to scrutiny and, it is implied, the practice rests on questionable ethical assumptions.

Another issue of considerable social importance in *Hush Money* is the practice of university departments in their tenure committee deliberations. It becomes obvious from Spenser's investigation that Robinson Nevins has been denied tenure by the members of his own department committee because of scandalous gossip connecting him with the alleged suicide of Prentiss Lamont, one of his students. But it is equally obvious that many department members have been easily influenced by the gossip because Nevins is not "politically correct," or at least politically liberal enough for most department members. In other words, Nevins is too much of a nonconformist for this group of professors.

Of course, the novel makes clear that some professors voted against Nevins for reasons that were personal as well as political. Although Professor Amir Abdullah needed a plausible cause of Lamont's suicide which would direct attention away from himself, it is also obvious that the shallow Amir resented Nevins' intellectual depth and honesty, and that Amir feared Nevins as an African-American intellectual rival. Though less malicious, Professor Lillian Temple also voted against granting of tenure to Nevins for personal reasons: she too found Nevins' intellectual views confusing and his presence on the faculty inconvenient since she had enjoyed a brief and secret affair with Nevins while involved in a highly visible relationship with Professor Bass Maitland. Maitland, in turn, appears to have opposed tenure for Nevins for purely pragmatic reasons, not wanting to be associated with Nevins because of the scandalous rumors swirling around him.

In short, the depiction of the injustice of the departmental tenure process toward Nevins encourages readers to question whether such a process should not be reformed and made more open in nature. The novel frequently implies, however, that faculty members jealously guard the power they have acquired.



Finally, Spenser's involvement in the subplot involving Susan's friend, K. C. Roth, who is both a victim of her empty relationship with Louis Vincent and a sexual predator obsessed with Spenser, raises questions about the confused and troubled emotional attachments of men and women in an era of sexual freedom and collapsing moral values. As the victim of a stalker and eventual rape victim, K. C. should evoke sympathy; but her quest for sexual adventure has destroyed her marriage to a decent man, and her fixation on Spenser as a protector and emotional anchor becomes boring and annoying. Robert B. Parker's portrait of K. C. provides a study of the way a self-centered woman can cloak her interests in the rhetoric of romance and finally become a model of self-delusion, while ignoring the social consequences of her acts.

Techniques

As in other Spenser novels, Parker relies almost entirely on Spenser's first-person narrative. It is worth noting that in some more recent Spenser novels, such as *Thin Air* (1995), Parker has also tried to increase drama by using occasional third-person accounts of certain events, such as the point of view of the victim of an abduction (following a narrative device developed by James Lee Burke and other writers of suspense stories). But *Hush Money* relies entirely on Spenser's narration, a restriction of point-of-view that is not a defect. Little would be gained, for instance, by describing the rape of K. C. Roth from the victim's point of view.

Other familiar Parker techniques also work well. The laconic and self-deprecating repartee between Spenser and Hawk continues to express their shared world of masculine warrior values, and the dialogue between Spenser and Susan provides serious analysis of the psychological forces which motivate the characters. Although this dialogue seems more assured and serious, and less archly witty than in some Spenser novels, the effect is not unwelcome.

Spenser's narrative style employs its usual variety of resources. The narration appears at its most humorous in the scenes with K. C. Roth, where he is placed in the unusual position of a man defending his chastity.

On the other hand, in dealing with the hypocrisy of Lillian Temple, Spenser relies on understatement. Indeed, it is hard to express the moral indignation aroused in him by the contrast between Temple's professed moral values and her inability to acknowledge that she has not only lied about Robinson Nevins' homosexuality, but has enjoyed a weekend tryst with the man.

On the other hand, Parker shrewdly allows other academics to summarize the professed values of Lillian Temple and Amir Abdullah, rather than having his nonacademic private detective describe them overtly.



Themes

The major themes of the novel emerge from Spenser's investigation of the injustice of the English Department's tenure decision regarding Robinson Nevins. One major theme of the novel is widespread social hypocrisy. Spenser's investigation reveals that Nevins was the victim of political enmity within the Department and that the votes of many department members were influenced by rumors of scandal. The entire process of tenure review is subjected to an ironic treatment by Parker, since the faculty of the English Department is supposedly committed to learning the truth, rather than making decisions on rumor and hearsay.

Moreover, the majority of the Department advertises itself as seeking justice for minorities, yet makes little effort to evaluate Nevins' case on the basis of hard evidence.

In fact, the Department is chiefly represented at the final hearing by Professor Bass Maitland who doesn't take the time to read the police reports regarding Amir's crimes as a blackmailer and conspirator to commit murder.

Aside from discovering the hypocrisy of most of the English Department, Spenser's investigation also uncovers the additional hypocrisy of Amir Abdullah and several gay activist students, whose efforts to "out" secret homosexuals have devolved into a lucrative blackmail operation. Amir's hypocrisy is compounded by his courting of his students and by rumormongering in an effort to destroy his chief rival as an African-American professor, Robinson Nevins. Such large-scale hypocrisy is counterbalanced, however, by the hypocrisy of Milo Quant, the right-wing political ideologue who preaches white supremacy and homophobia, yet who secretly enjoys a compulsive affair with a black gay activist, none other than Amir Abdullah.

Spenser's investigation of hypocrisy also uncovers the emotional hypocrisy of K. C. Roth, Susan's friend, in a subplot involving K. C.'s stalker. Although K. C. is being stalked, she evades suspecting the obvious person, Louis Vincent, a former lover, and suggests that the stalker might be her blameless ex-husband. After being raped by Vincent, K. C. is persuaded to name him only as a result of a stratagem conceived by Spenser and implemented by the police. Finally, after being liberated from the threat of Vincent, K. C. shamelessly tries to attach herself to Spenser and to steal him from Susan.

Dishonesty about one's emotions is clearly a theme of this subplot.

Adaptations

An audiobook version of the novel is available, with the reliable Burt Reynolds providing interpretations of the characters.

Reynolds shows great variety in presenting the male characters, but his female characterizations, primarily Susan Silverman and K. C. Roth, seem to rely on rather breathy and whispery voices. But this cassette tape has the added value of being unabridged.

There is also the possibility of a film version being produced for cable, bringing back Joe Mantegna as Spenser, since the film version of *Small Vices* (1999), produced for a cable channel and starring Mantegna, has been regarded as somewhat successful.

Key Questions

Discussions of *Hush Money* probably should assume some familiarity with the characters of Spenser, Hawk, and Susan Silverman, either as a result of discussants having read earlier novels in the series or as a consequence of casual acquaintance with the television series, or at least one or more film versions for television. If readers lack this familiarity, however, a brief summary of the characters of these three principals and some of the subsidiary characters in the series may be helpful.

It is less likely that readers of *Hush Money* will be knowledgeable about the tenure system used by university faculties and administrations, which system takes a variety of forms in different institutions, but which is presented in a fairly standard form in the novel.

Perhaps readers need to be informed that tenure decisions are made after a faculty member serves a certain probationary period (usually five years) and the professor has attempted to establish evidence of teaching ability and scholarly performance.

These decisions are made initially by a committee of an academic department, usually comprised of the faculty in that department who are already tenured. Hence the tenure vote on Robinson Nevins was made by a large number of the core members of the English Department at the fictional univer-4. Discuss the contrast drawn between city. It is a common practice of tenure Robinson Nevins and Amir Abdullah.

committees to maintain confidentiality about Why does the reader perceive Amir deliberations, and in fact, only a minimal Abdullah to be less likable and trustamount of documentation is employed. worthy than Robinson Nevins? Has Hence investigations of tenure decisions Parker created a caricature of the politiare often based largely on oral testimony, as cally correct African-American activist in this novel. It is also rather commonplace in his characterization of Amir? for departments to refuse to review or to reverse tenure decisions, however contro-5. What is the history of Robinson Nevins' versial or unpopular such actions may seem relationship with his father, Bobby to the rest of the university, or to the world Nevins? Why does the father support outside. Nevins' quest for justice in the tenure decision?

However, tenure decisions must also be approved by higher levels of administra-6. Discuss Hawk's relationship with Amir tion, such as college deans, university Abdullah. What is the nature of Hawk's provosts and presidents, and ultimately involvement with Robinson Nevins?

boards of regents or trustees. It should be noted that the university committee which 7. Is K. C. Roth a victim, or a predator? Or reverses an English Department's recom-can she be considered as both? mendation is not necessarily a standard 8. In discussing



homosexuality, Susan feature of institutions of higher learning. comments that homosexual and hetReaders may therefore wish to discuss erosexual orientations are not as simple various aspects of the tenure system as it is as they are presented by various pubpresented in Hush Money. lic "authorities." Are her statements 1. What view of university politics is pro-borne out by Robinson Nevins' conduct? Could her statement be extendvided by Spenser's investigation of the ed to questions of victimization and tenure decision regarding Robinson criminality in the subplot involving Nevins? Do the reasons for the tenure K. C. Roth? vote against Robinson Nevins seem weak and contrived rationalizations for 9. How could K. C. Roth's sexual identity deeper motivations? Why? be accurately described? Why does K. C. consider herself a romantic?

2. In what ways does Robinson Nevins gain the respect of the reader? In what 10. Why does K. C. scoff at the idea that ways does his conduct seem somewhat Susan Silverman could be an ardent absurd and quixotic? lover and a satisfying sexual partner?

What common misconceptions about 3. Given the small percentage of African-intellectuals are suggested by K. C.'s American professors in the academic comments?

world, isn't it likely that Robinson Nevins—supposedly the author of sev-11. Is Milo Quant a credible portrayal of a eral books—would easily find another right-wing ideologue? Why or why not? position at a different university? What How is Milo's compulsive attachment motives compel Nevins to seek vindi-to Amir Abdullah—supposedly the emcation through the investigation of bodiment of all Quant professes to hate Spenser and Hawk? and detest—explained by one observer?

12. Is the portrayal of Louis Vincent realistic? Is there any particularly rational or commonsense reason for Vincent to become a stalker or a rapist? Are Vincent's motivations more complex than they appear?

13. Is Spenser being fair when he allows Susan to discover that K. C. is stalking him? What does Spenser gain from having Susan take charge and warn K. C. to stay away from him?

14. What motivates Susan's innovative approach to a romantic tryst at the novel's close? Is Susan's sudden interest in imaginative sex uncharacteristic?

Literary Precedents

Parker's detective novels generally follow in the tradition of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe novels, particularly in their emphasis on the anatomy of society's corruption and in their concern with testing the nearly incorruptible conscience of the detective-hero. Parker, in fact, has written a couple of passable Marlowe novels, one completing an unfinished Chandler manuscript. Of Chandler's novels, however, *The Long Goodbye* (1984) deals with an atmosphere which was predominantly intellectual, and for the most part, Chandler's tales do not deal with conflicts generated by universities.

Although other private-investigator novels have occasionally examined the flaws of intellectuals and university people, the university scene is not the usual setting for such detective tales. Two notable examples of private-eye novels using the campus as a background for much of their drama are a pair of memorable Lew Archer novels by Ross MacDonald (Kenneth Millar), *The Chill* (1964) and *Black Money* (1966). Explorations of the corrupt or compromised private lives of such political leaders as Milo Quant is, of course, a common theme in the classic "hardboiled" detective novels of Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

Related Titles

Obviously, other novels in the Spenser series must be regarded as related works.

However, two of these in particular deal with corruption and betrayal in academia: *The Godwulf Manuscript* (1973), the first in the series, in which a pretentious professor, supposedly a champion of the counterculture, turns out to be a villain, and *Playmates* (1989), which examines the circumstances surrounding a star basketball player at Taft University who is involved in a point-shaving scandal. Academic politics and the forces that corrupt the university are presented in some detail in that novel: for instance, Spenser discovers that the basketball player cannot read, yet some faculty members are too busy with research to discover this fact. Indeed, the pressures on a younger woman faculty member to publish a book are too strong to make it worthwhile for her to pursue the problems of a student.

Thus the university's surrender to social imperatives and intellectual competition distracts it from its primary mission, which is to give a decent education to all of its students.

Yet another related title is *Small Vices* (1997), which describes Spenser's investigation of a murder (and a cover-up) at a fashionable Massachusetts women's college.

Another related title is *Looking for Rachel Wallace* (1980), in which the chief villain is exposed as espousing a right-wing political philosophy, somewhat similar to that of Milo Quant in *Hush Money*. Finally, the K. C. Roth subplot echoes motifs found in other Spenser novels, especially *Walking Shadow* (1994), in which a young woman who is allegedly being stalked is revealed as a clever sexual predator. Although K. C. Roth in this novel is indeed the target of a stalker and is eventually raped, her obsession with Spenser and her effort to steal him from Susan motivate K. C. to become a stalker in her own right.



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