# Potshot Short Guide

## Potshot by Robert B. Parker

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

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# Characters

Spenser represents the questing knight, a force for good through violence on behalf of those whom violence has harmed but who are powerless to resist it themselves. In Potshot, as elsewhere, Spenser represents the rugged individualist holding himself to a high standard of personal behavior, creating his own small stronghold of order through honorable behavior in a dishonorable world. Staying on the case and solving it despite Buckman's wishes in Potshot demonstrates his commitment to his chosen profession over any incidentals, even the demands and interests of his client.

Susan Silverman has been Spenser's primary love interest since the second book in the series. Now a psychotherapist, Susan assists Spenser with insights into the possible motivations of those involved in the case. Although she is a fully developed character capable of her own self-protection, she also often represents the damsel in distress whom Spenser must protect, as she is present when two gunmen attempt to warn him off the case, and the reader becomes very aware of her presence in the situation through the first-person narration of Spenser.

Spenser's companion, the African-American career criminal known only as Hawk, may appear at times to be merely a sidekick, but is actually Spenser's equal in physical and intellectual terms. Only in morality do they differ, and thus Hawk serves as a contrast to illuminate what differentiates Spenser from some other violent men.

Hawk's motivation to violence is financial— his first comment to Spenser when being told of the "gig in the desert out west" regards money—but he understands and respects Spenser's more romantic vision of himself, and defends it to others.

Hard-boiled detective fiction often seems misogynistic, and Parker's portrayal of Spenser's client Mary Lou Buckman serves as one possible example of such misogyny.

Completely self-serving, Buckman kills or has killed at least two men, engages in extra-marital affairs, and sexually manipulates both the chief of police and a member of organized crime. She cannot or will not accept responsibility for her actions, and in fact cannot even bare to hear them described. To Spenser, this failure to accept individual responsibility constitutes a major character flaw.

Parker describes Potshot Chief of Police Dean Walker as an experienced and competent professional who has been seduced by Lou Buckman into what amounts to a dereliction of his duties. Walker left his wife in Los Angeles to follow Lou to Potshot, has at least turned a blind eye to her criminal activities there, and may in fact be an accessory to murder on her behalf. Nonetheless, Spenser sees in Walker at least a shadow of himself, and allows him to take Lou and run, honoring Walker's ability to choose freely and to take the responsibility for his choice, if disagreeing with that choice.

# Social Concerns

In Potshot, Robert B. Parker returns to a number of the same concerns he has addressed in some of the twenty-seven earlier works featuring his Boston private detective Spenser. Spenser, always a fairly liberal thinker for such a tough guy, goes out of his way to gather a self-consciously multicultural group of gunmen to defend the small town of Potshot, Arizona, from "a big gang of mountain trash" known by the name of their dwelling place, the Dell. His group includes the African-American Hawk, Latino Chollo, Native American Bobby Horse, and gay bouncer Teddy Sap, as well as the "compact" Las Vegas private investigator Bernard J. Fortunato and mafia hit man Vinnie Morris, all of whom have appeared in previous novels. Parker does not ignore the cultural, racial, and sexual differences between these men, but instead highlights them through their conversational banter and preparations for battle. In some cases, Parker reinforces racial or cultural stereotypes, as when Bobby Horse uses his Native-American skills as a hunter and tracker to scout the Dell's headquarters silently. In other instances, however, Parker breaks those types—Hawk, for example, speaks with a ghetto accent most of the time, but clearly does so out of choice rather than necessity, and tough Fortunato enjoys not only cooking but also setting a pleasant table, and makes statements unconventional to hard-boiled detective novels, like "Try the blue cheese . . . nice lingering bite to it."

Parker consistently breaks the tension that could exist among these diverse men with humor, often self-deprecating and generally playing on those cultural differences.

Thus, Chollo refers to his friend Bobby Horse as "the great Kiowa scout, He-whowalks-everywhere-and-is-never-spotted" and Horse, in turn, answers Spenser's inquiry about sunburn with, "Use 'um sunblock."

Spenser defends his choice of handgun by calling it "cute." Hawk states proudly, "I educated in head start," to explain his use of the word "surreptitious." Spenser claims to be "naturally smart" because he's a "tall straight Anglo white guy," a comment which should effectively alienate him from the rest of the group, but which instead further bonds them together because they all agree to the same code: words do not matter; actions do. Humor therefore becomes a tool to acknowledge the fact of their differences while discounting the importance of those differences, a tool Parker seems to advocate here and in much of his other work (see, for example, Love and Glory, 1983) for building bridges across boundaries of race or culture.

In addition to addressing issues of cultural differences, Parker plays on the lack of confidence many Americans have in the ability of law enforcement agencies to protect them fully from criminal activity. In Potshot, the local police chief and his small force is not corrupt so much as simply unable to confront successfully the criminal element threatening the town. The Dell gang represents the visible threat that much of society assumes exists invisibly most of the time. Moreover, the Dell gang, though organized after a fashion, is not the only representation of organized crime in the novel; they

receive support from Morris Tannenbaum, who is just as clearly a criminal, if a more outwardly respectable type.

While these might be the most obvious criminals in the novel, the citizens of Potshot are also being fleeced via a plot by a group of civic leaders including a prominent real estate agent, the head of the local bank, the city attorney, the mayor, and Spenser's own client, to drive real estate prices lower. Thus Parker demonstrates that social constructs such as commerce and government in and of themselves are no protection from crime and disorder. That "The Preacher" now leads the Dell gang allows Parker to include by implication religion in his list of organizations that fail in their duty to protect society, as well.

Thus, Parker returns to a common postmodern (and particularly hard-boiled) leitmotif—that in a fallen world, there is no one to trust.

# Techniques

First-person narration adds an additional level of identification between the writer, the reader, and the protagonist. In addition to allowing the reader to perceive the world through Spenser's eyes, and therefore, as colored by Spenser's philosophies of life, this point of view also serves to hide important truths from the reader about the mystery to be solved, thus enhancing the level of suspense. Also, because Spenser appears to live in a realistically-conceived world, the reader derives perhaps more satisfaction from his triumphs over the criminals through the greater identification associated with first-person narration. Moreover, this type of point of view has become something of a tradition in the detective genre, beginning with Edgar Allan Poe's short stories featuring C. Auguste Dupin and continuing in the earliest hard-boiled fiction of Carroll John Daly, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler, among numerous others.

Wise-cracking sarcasm, particularly selfdeprecating humor, plays an important role in Potshot as well. Spenser also uses this technique both to put people at ease and, at times, to unnerve them. By reacting to threats, either real or perceived, with humor, Parker both humanizes Spenser and makes him more than human, able to laugh, as it were, in the face of danger. Simultaneously, Parker heightens the sense of tension in the novel by the unlikely but immediate juxtaposition of menace and comedy. Finally, Spenser often recognizes his allies by their sense of humor—anyone capable of taking the world too seriously is unlikely to agree with Spenser's outlook on life, and the opposite often proves true, as well.

# Themes

As in much hard-boiled literature, Parker addresses the effects of man's imperfect nature on society as a whole. The town of Potshot, Arizona, is limited in its growth potential by its water supply, most of which comes from one large aquifer. Spenser's client Lou Buckman finds another source, but rather than make her finding public so that the community can profit together, she enters into a conspiracy with a few other individuals—already empowered by their positions in local government or commerce—to fleece the residents of Potshot to maximize her own profit. In the course of these arrangements, she kills or has killed both her husband and a man with whom she had an affair. Then, when her plan fails to work as she had hoped—or, rather, works better than she had hoped because the Dell gang has driven property values through the floor but now refuses to leave the area as originally agreed—she hires Spenser.

Although Parker never quite makes clear her motive for so doing, Lou apparently hopes that Spenser will determine that the Preacher, the leader of the Dell gang and therefore the most obvious suspect, committed the murder, thus removing the main obstacle between Lou and her goal of dishonest enrichment. Lou fails to consider that Spenser, an admitted cynic, would fail to rule Lou out as a suspect simply because she hired him. He understands the imperfect nature of the world and will not assume that a hardened criminal like the Preacher must be the guilty party—to Spenser, everyone is guilty.

That being the case, answering the question of how to be a good man in a fallen world becomes problematic, at best. For Spenser recognizes in himself the same potential for self-serving acts that exists in others and has worked hard to ensure that he does not become a slave to that potential.

This can make his life difficult, however.

For example, in dealing with the Dell gang, his own group of seven chosen gunmen must face approximately forty armed men.

His group advocates a surprise attack on the Dell's headquarters in a canyon, a possibility that Spenser likens more than once to a "massacre" equivalent to "shooting fish in a barrel." His confederates, less bound by conscience than Spenser, suggest that, as they will probably have to shoot the entire gang anyway, an ambush might allow them to do so with minimal personal risk. Spenser's code, however, will not allow him to act this way—shooting a person who has shot first at you is one thing, but shooting a person to eliminate the possibility of his or her shooting at you is another. For Spenser, the end simply does not justify the means.

Of his six shooters, only Hawk understands that this is Spenser's way of differentiating himself from men like them.

However, Parker seems to indicate that Spenser's is not the only possible method for living an honorable life in a dishonorable world. Bernard Fortunate, who agrees with the

rest that a massacre of the Dell gang is preferable to waiting for them to make an aggressive first move, nonetheless refuses to part ways with Spenser over the disagreement. Fortunato agreed to work for Spenser and to take his money, and to Fortunato, that agreement—illegal though it may be—cannot be broken. His word may be all, or nearly all, that Fortunato has, but he does indeed have it, and, as he says, "You got to keep your word more if you're small." His argument persuades the other members of the group, all of whom could potentially replace "small" in Fortunato's quote with their own minority designation— African American, Native American, Latino, homosexual, etc. The individuals remain a cohesive force for the restoration of order to Potshot because each realizes that such order begins on the individual level.

# Adaptations

BDD Audio Publishing released an audio cassette version of Potshot, narrated by actor Joe Mantegna, concurrently with the hardcover edition in March 2001. Random House Audio Publishing Group did the same with a compact disc version of the audio book.

# Key Questions

1. In what ways is Potshot representative of the hard-boiled detective novel? In what ways does the novel vary from the traditions of the genre?

2. Discuss Parker's portrayal of women in Potshot, including Susan Silverman, Mary Lou Buckman, and Bebe Taylor.

In what ways do these portrayals seem feministic, misogynistic, or realistic?

3. What role does violence play in this novel, or in Spenser's philosophy in general? Could the situation in the Dell have been solved in some other way?

4. At one point, Spenser tells the Preacher, "you gave them pride," referring to the Preacher's style of leadership and organization. What does he mean? Why is this important to the novel?

5. What seems to be Parker's view of humanity's essential nature? How does he suggest a good person should act in light of that essential nature?

6. What binds the men of the Dell together? What binds together the men hired by Spenser to clean out the Dell?

Compare and contrast these two groups of men with the group of Potshot citizens who hire Spenser.

7. Describe Spenser's moral code, particularly as it relates to his unwillingness to shoot the Dell from an ambush position. Compare and contrast this code with those held by Hawk, Vinnie Morris, and the rest of Spenser's hired gunmen.

8. What are the benefits and limitations of Parker's telling this story from Spenser's point of view?

9. Why does Spenser let Mary Lou Buckman and Dean Walker go at the end of the novel?

10. What is it about Parker's work that has made him such a popular success?

# Literary Precedents

Detective fiction in general originated with Edgar Allan Poe's short stories set in Paris and featuring C. Auguste Dupin, the first of which was "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841. The hard-boiled detective story, more specifically, originated with Carroll John Daly's "Three-Gun Terry" in 1923 (although Daly published hard-boiled crime fiction somewhat earlier), and was popularized by Daly and such authors as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane, and Ross MacDonald (Kenneth Millar).

In fact, Potshot shares some important characteristics with Hammett's Red Harvest (serialized in the pulp detective magazine Black Mask in 1927). In both cases, a private detective is sent to a relatively small western town to defeat a large gang of outlaws.

A similar plot drives the 1960 film "The Magnificent Seven," which is closely related to the 1954 Kurosawa film "The Seven Samuri." Parker makes several obvious references to the former in Potshot, and Chollo borrows one of Steve McQueen's lines from the film when he tells Spenser after the gun battle with the Dell that, "We deal in lead, friend."

# Related Titles

From just another wise-cracking Philip Marlowe impersonator in The Godwulf Manuscript (1974), Spenser has evolved into something larger-than-life, almost mythic. In his first novel, however, Parker indicts those who would sacrifice individuals in the name of some greater, abstract cause—in this case, radical quasi-Marxist politics. Parker returns most obviously to this theme in The Judas Goat (1978), in which Spenser and Hawk hunt terrorists in Europe and Canada.

In God Save the Child (1974), Spenser for the first time meets Susan Silverman, the woman who becomes his lifetime companion. Parker rescues a young boy from a seductive, predatory homosexual bodybuilder and returns him to his loving but inadequate parents, demonstrating a commitment to traditional ideas of family that some critics have seen as heterosexist. Parker treats issues of homosexuality in later novels more sympathetically, most notably in 1980's Looking for Rachel Wallace (one of the few titles in the series not taken from a wellknown work of literature), in which Spenser bodyguards a lesbian client and learns that his code of honor is not necessarily the only way to live a good life.

Spenser struggles with competing needs and values in 1975's Mortal Stakes, in which he finds himself torn between honoring his commitment to his client and protecting the family of the young pitcher whom the management of the Boston Red Sox has hired Spenser to investigate. Spenser finds his moral code inadequate to the needs of the situation, and therefore questions his ultimate ability to act with perfect honor in an imperfect world.

Parker introduces Hawk in Promised Land (1976), often considered Parker's best work.

He again addresses the question of how a good man acts in a bad world, in this case bringing the definitions of "good" and "bad" into question. Hawk, a career criminal, can be trusted to do what he says he is going to do, but Spenser's own client cannot—which makes Hawk the more honorable person according to Spenser's philosophy.

Spenser teaches this philosophy to Paul Giacomin, who becomes something of an adopted son to him in Early Autumn (1981).

Involved in a custody battle between Paul's parents, Spenser decides that neither of them is worthy and essentially kidnaps Paul (although the boy is not unwilling) and teaches him carpentry, boxing, literature—in short, how to be a man, at least by Spenser's definition.

Again confronted with a code of behavior other than his own in A Savage Place (1981), Spenser's respect for his woman reporter's wishes to do her job her way results in her death. Spenser's unorthodox kidnapping of the guilty party and forcing of a confession from him on live television does not fully make amends for the death of his client, the

only woman with whom Spenser had allowed himself to fall in love since meeting Susan Silverman.

In Ceremony (1982), a pair of dysfunctional parents (Parker never seems to acknowledge an alternative type of parents) once again attempts to hire Spenser to find their runaway daughter. When Spenser discovers that April Kyle has become a prostitute and has no ambition to be anything else, he arranges for her to work for a high-end call girl service in New York, where she will receive some level of social education and where he can be assured of her safety.

The title of 1983's The Widening Gyre refers in part to the beginning of Spenser's estrangement from Susan Silverman, who is completing her psychiatric residency in Washington, D.C., as part of her doctorate.

Spenser once again learns that his code is not the only honorable code, this time from an evangelical fundamentalist Christian senatorial candidate whose wife has been indiscreet with the son of Joe Broz, the Boston mob boss.

Susan leaves Spenser for an opportunity to define herself outside of his terms, and for another man, in Valediction (1984). Feeling ungrounded and somewhat betrayed, Spenser searches for a woman, Sherrie Spellman, who has also left her lover, but in this case the lover refuses to believe that she has done so voluntarily. Spellman appears to be a victim of controlling males, but actually manipulates the men in her life and almost kills Spenser in what some critics have called Parker's most misogynistic novel. Spenser comes close to death again in Small Vices (1997), but at the hands of a master assassin.

Susan's relationship with Russell Costigan in California degenerates until in A Catskill Eagle (1985) he virtually holds Susan captive and Spenser must rescue her. Abandoning most of his moral code along the way, Spenser argues for the supremacy of love and romantic commitment over its other aspects as he does whatever seems necessary—including at least two counts of cold-blooded murder—to ensure Susan's safety. Spenser refers to himself as "not of woman born," as his mother died in an accident while pregnant with him and he was then delivered by Caesarian section, thus enhancing Spenser's status as a hero of mythic proportions.

Taming a Sea-Horse (1986) is the first of several novels in which characters from earlier works re-appear in Spenser's life.

Here, prostitute April Kyle has left her relatively high class New York call girl service and taken up with a pimp. In Crimson Joy (1988), Boston homicide detective Martin Quirk enlists Spenser's aid in tracking down a serial killer. Quirk's partner Frank Belson gets help from Spenser to find his missing wife in Thin Air (1995). Attorney Vince Haller brings a new case involving point shaving in college basketball in Playmates (1989). Spenser helps Susan in relation to a television show for which she consults in Stardust (1990), a local theatre company on whose board she sits in Walking Shadow (1994), and her ex-husband's financial affairs in Sudden Mischief (1998). He helps Paul

Giacomin find his missing mother in Pastime (1991). Hawk convinces him to help clean a particularly violent gang from a housing project in Double Deuce (1992) and to investigate the denial of tenure to his boyhood mentor's son in Hush Money (1999).

In Pale Kings and Princes (1987), Parker's tribute to Dashiell Hammett's masterpiece Red Harvest (1927), Spenser cleans out a small town in western Massachusetts that has been a central distribution point for illegal narcotics. Parker explores the discrepancies between the lives people think they live and the realities behind those lives in 1993's Paper Doll. Spenser again deals with the ability of love to overcome obstacles— this time gambling addiction—in Chance (1996). And in Hugger Mugger (2000), the novel immediately preceding Potshot, Spenser once again finds himself involved in a complex web of manipulation with a woman at the center.

Also worth noting here are the three Jesse Stone novels, Night Passage (1997), Trouble in Paradise (1998), and Death in Paradise (2001). These novels take place in the town of Paradise, Massachusetts, and feature a number of characters who also appear in the Spenser novels, including state police homicide commander Healy and mobster Gino Fish.

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