Small Vices Short Guide

Small Vices by Robert B. Parker

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Contents

Characters

As is usual in a Spenser novel, both Spenser himself and Parker's crew of regular characters are given center stage.

In Small Vices, Spenser's own wounding and struggle to recover takes center stage.

In addition to giving evidence that the seemingly indestructible Spenser is mortal, Parker's handling of these episodes stresses Spenser's will to return from the dead, so to speak, and to achieve some kind of just ending to his quest for the truth about Melissa's murder.

Spenser's close friend, Hawk, is a helpful presence in the novel; he accompanies Spenser and Susan to Santa Barbara and acts both as protector and guide in Spenser's rehabilitation. During the long period of Spenser's rehabilitation in Santa Barbara, Hawk abandons his work as a professional hit man (and the money he might have made) in order to help Spenser. In other respects, however, Hawk plays a smaller role than usual; Spenser's dangerous capture of Rugar in New York City is achieved entirely without Hawk's help.

As another helpful and supportive presence, Susan plays a highly significant role. At first, her idea of adopting a child makes her seem a nuisance in the novel.

However, after Spenser's critical wounding by Rugar, she not only drops the idea, but abandons her professional practice as well to devote nearly a year of her life to helping Spenser recover.

Although Spenser's other allies are less visible in the novel, Martin Quirk plays a strong supporting role, arranging for the hospitalization of Spenser to be secret, and helping to create the myth of Spenser's death. Spenser's other friends, Sergeant Frank Belson, Officer Lee Farrell, the gay policeman, and Vinnie Morris, the triggerman for Gino Fish, also assist in the charade and in guarding Spenser's hospital room.

Rita Fiore, another old friend of Spenser from the 1980s, reappears to set the novel in motion. It was Rita, now twice divorced and cynical, but still shapely and attractive, who prosecuted Ellis Alves; a guilty conscience has now impelled her to get her law firm involved in finding out if he was indeed the true killer. Although Rita, at one time a possible rival for Susan, expresses bitterness about her two failed marriages, she continues to show a good deal of womanly fire and reveals that she still finds Spenser attractive.

Finally, Paul Giacomin, Spenser's surrogate son, makes a brief appearance near the end to provide further emotional support for Spenser. Paul's scene serves as a reminder that Spenser really does have an adopted son, although not precisely one who has been established as Spenser's ward by legal action.

The remaining characters, most of them antagonists of Spenser, are somewhat less admirable and some are given rather brief roles. Marcy Vance, for instance, the public defender who turned down a plea bargain and managed to get Ellis Alves convicted, is sketched as a well meaning liberal who is nervous about racial feelings.

The state trooper, Miller, who had arranged for the framing of Ellis Alves is depicted without much subtlety as a state policeman going bad. His heavy-handed effort to deflect Spenser's investigation suggests that Miller's lack of intelligence will result in his death—and he indeed becomes one of Rugar's victims.

By contrast, Ellis Alves, the black man framed for the murder of Melissa Henderson, is well drawn in his major appearances. Ellis readily acknowledges his guilt as a lesser criminal, and views all whites with suspicion and cynicism. It is clear that Ellis, after being freed, will probably return to a life of street crime in the inner city sections of Boston.

Of more importance are Spenser's major antagonists, namely, Clint Stapleton, the adopted black son of the Stapletons; Don Stapleton, the arrogant white plutocrat, who arranged for Ellis to take the rap for Clint; and Rugar, the former Israeli assassin who now operates as a freelance mercenary in the post-Cold War international scene. Parker's portrait of the Stapleton family is one of the book's major achievements.

Don Stapleton, the wealthy father figure, displays the arrogance characteristic of the very wealthy. It is his series of crimes which Spenser wishes to have known and punished. To protect Clint from retribution over his killing of Melissa (which may have been accidental), the elder Stapleton has influenced an investigation, bribed a state policeman, framed a minor black criminal for murder, and later, in order to cover up his actions, he has hired Rugar to kill both Miller and Spenser. Stapleton, who has more or less reduced his wife to a nonentity, regards himself and his class as impervious to the law. His attitudes have been passed on to Clint, who acts with a similar arrogance. It is, in part, because of Stapleton's assumption that he should escape the penalties that others must pay that Spenser prefers to see Stapleton exposed and indicted at the end of the novel—even if the cost is allowing Rugar to go free.

Like his father, Clint wears the mantle of arrogance assumed by the very wealthy, and this arrogance is reinforced by the arrogance of the natural athlete, as Clint is a first rate varsity tennis star at Taft University. (The choice of sport here is symbolic: Unlike basketball, which is an intense and sweaty game, associated with largely black athletes who have used it as an interstate highway to drive out of the ghetto, tennis continues to carry some of its traditional aura as a gentleman's game.)

Moreover, tennis is highly individualized, unlike basketball, or even the relatively individualized baseball, which requires a team effort. When questioned by Spenser, Clint takes on an air of well-bred hauteur. In fact, both Don Stapleton and Clint regard Spenser and his investigation more with contempt than with concern.

Clint, however, is more complex than his adoptive father. Spenser suggests that his killing of Melissa may have been an accident, the result of some kind of rough sexual experiment with a white paramour, rather than a premeditated crime. There are a few hints that Clint feels some remorse and regret for his actions, and when evidence of the truth is presented at last in the district attorney's office, Clint turns on his foster father with resentment, calling him a white "Bwana" who believes that he can fix everything.

Beneath the facade of Clint's upper-class manner, there is the psyche of a black man who has been forced to abandon his people and their culture, and his deeply nursed resentments surface at last in the climactic scene.

By contrast, Rugar is an enemy whom Spenser respects. Rugar is depicted as an emotionless "gray man," whose description vaguely suggests the film persona of Edward G. Robinson in his later films. As a thoroughly efficient and calculating professional assassin, Rugar cultivates an image of anonymity; yet he is a convincing incarnation of nightmare terror to those who know of his existence. Unlike Don Stapleton, he is a professional warrior himself, and therefore, Spenser feels a kind of kinship with Rugar, even though Rugar has come very close to ending Spenser's career. Since Spenser's primary goal is to establish the truth about Melissa Henderson's murder, the punishment of Rugar becomes a minor issue. Spenser, in fact, respects Rugar as a killer who does his job well; any desire Spenser might have for revenge on Rugar is canceled out by Spenser's successful capture of Rugar in a crowded office building in New York, an act that to some extent evens the score between them. Spenser, however, admits that allowing Rugar to go free in return for his testimony against Don Stapleton may not be a wise idea. Unlike a hit man for the mob, Rugar is too relentlessly professional to undertake a plan of private vengeance against Spenser; but the novel suggests that Rugar will not hesitate if hired by someone else to make another attempt on Spenser's life. It seems likely that readers of the series may expect to encounter Rugar in a future novel.

Social Concerns

According to a reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle, Small VicesRobert B. Parker's best novel in years, and the reason is obvious. His study of the way wealth is used to cover up a crime is a perennial subject of social criticism, and his concern with the effect of a young black man's reaction to being raised as a white person (one of the sources of Clint Stapleton's tragedy) is certainly timely. As Parker's novel demonstrates, a black man adopted by a wealthy white couple and raised in a socially privileged environment is not necessarily more moral or a better member of society than a black man from the ghetto who has a record as a habitual offender.

Moreover, Clint Stapleton's role as a killer who benefits from an expensive coverup offers an oblique parallel to the celebrated O. J. Simpson case. If Simpson did indeed commit criminal acts, he represented a case of a black athlete who found acceptance in the white world, yet may not have been entirely comfortable there. Clint Stapleton, a college tennis star, similarly has found acceptance in an upper-class white world, but in the pro iscess has lost a sense of his identity as an African-American.

Another obvious social concern is Parker's depiction of the way the Stapleton use of money and influence helped to conceal Clint's crime. Not only was a black criminal from the inner city framed for the rape and murder of Melissa Henderson, but a state policeman who handled the investigation was corrupted.

Moreover, Don Stapleton has hired the professional assassin Rugar to kill both the corrupt state trooper and Spenser. In short, the resources available to the wealthy in order to evade retribution for crime are enormous.

It is not only the Stapleton money which is to blame, however. Spenser's portrait of the attitudes of the president of Pemberton College stresses the anxiety of institutions, particularly wealthy institutions of higher learning, about reducing the public relations damage created by a violent crime. Clearly, it was easy enough to frame Ellis Alves, since Pemberton College wanted the crime solved and forgotten as quickly as possible.

In addition to this concern about lack of justice for the wealthy, and the institutional zeal to control the publicity relating to violent crimes committed on college campuses, Parker's novel also comments on the social condition of black people who come of age in the ghetto. Ellis Alves, the man framed for Melissa's murder, is freed by discovery of the real truth and by Clint and Don Stapleton's confessions, but everyone involved, including Spenser, expects Ellis to return to a life of inner city crime and to be back in prison within a few months. Early in the novel, a black police officer named Jackson gives a grim account of Ellis's early life, with a teenage mother and a thirty-two year old grandmother, an unknown father, and a life of early indoctrination into gang life and street crime.

As in Double Deuce, Parker refuses to offer a comforting optimism about the possibilities of life for the black population of the metropolitan ghettos.

Finally, a lesser concern, although still an interesting one, is the matter of adopting children. The Stapletons had adopted Clint and tried to turn him into an upperclass white. Susan, Spenser's significant other, wants Spenser to join her in adopting a child as well (probably a girl), and perhaps raising this child in accordance with Susan's own advanced values. Parker raises the many and complex reasons why people enter into the enterprise of adopting children.

Techniques

Parker does not introduce any radically new techniques in Small Vices. As usual, Spenser narrates the story in a series of sharply observed encounters and vignettes, punctuated by Spenser's own sardonic and self-deprecating humor.

However, when Spenser is wounded, his fall into the Charles River and his period of unconsciousness afterward, with haunted dreams, are vividly described.

During the period of Spenser's convalescence and rehabilitation in Santa Barbara, Spenser's perceptions of reality are presented in a form showing Spenser's intense concentration on the physical details of his life. Spenser's description of his struggles to climb a certain high hill in Santa Barbara are used to dramatize the progress of his recovery.

Themes

Parker's major theme is, as always,Spenser's desire to learn the truth about a murder and to see some kind of justice done. Spenser's investigation of the Melissa Henderson murder at Pemberton leads him into an upper class world where crime may be swept under the carpet and a poor criminal from the inner city can be framed for a rich college boy's crime.

Spenser's investigation also leads him into the secondary problem of what parents may do when they adopt children.

The Stapletons appear to have tried to turn the black child Clint into a replica of themselves, thereby denying him an identity as a black man in a particular culture.

Similarly, Susan's friend, by applying politically fashionable theories of child care, is shown to be raising a girl who will be horribly antisocial if she is not punished. Spenser himself fears conflicts with Susan over rearing the chid that Susan contemplates adopting.

Finally, Small Vices employs the death and rebirth of the hero theme, represented in Spenser's nearly fatal wound from the gun of the hired assassin, Rugar, and Spenser's return from limbo after a period of convalescence in Santa Barbara, California. This event reminds Spenser of his mortality, although it strengthens the bond between Spenser and Susan, and dissuades Susan from pushing on with her adoption idea. Spenser's return to the East is a triumphant one, since he is able to capture Rugar and negotiate with the former Israeli assassin to get a deposition which will implicate Don Stapleton in his attempted murder.

Adaptations

There have been no film adaptations of recent Spenser novels, perhaps because the 1985-1988 television series was not a memorable hit or perhaps because the role of Spenser is strongly identified with Robert Urich, whose work has been somewhat limited since his recovery from cancer. There is, however, a powerful Dove Audio audiobook version with Burt Reynolds doing all the voices effectively.

Key Questions

Readers unfamiliar with the Spenser series may want to discuss Spenser's character, his code of values, and his relationships with Spenser, Hawk, Martin Quirk, and others. In particular, Spenser's relationship with Susan, which is clouded by Susan's interest in adopting a child, may be an opening for exploring the novel.

Other areas of approach might concern the Stapletons' cover-up of the crime and the nature of Clint Stapleton's crime itself. Readers may wish to consider the extent to which wealth and power in the novel seem to be effective in influencing the criminal justice system, and to offer their views as to whether such forces actually do influence the criminal justice system in reality. Another area of interest is the question of whether the very wealthy can actually hire assassins like Rugar to execute troublesome antagonists.

1. In view of the current social ridicule of lawyers, what sympathetic qualities does Parker attribute to Rita Fiore and the naive Marty Vance, whose ineptitude as a public defender led to the conviction of Ellis Alves? Which attorney in the novel comes closest to living up to the stereotype of lawyers as deceitful and parasitical opponents of justice?

2. Is Rita Fiore's concern about justice in the Ellis Alves case credible? What other motives may have led her to engage Spenser for the case?

3. Is Ellis Alves a realistic picture of a street hardened African-American criminal? Why is the effort to free him from the murder charge rather quixotic?

4. Discuss the attitude of the Pemberton College authorities toward the murder of Melissa Henderson. Why do colleges tend to be so nervous about dealing with the crimes that regularly occur on campus?

5. What is the attitude of Melissa Henderson's parents about the murder?

What might be fairly typical about their attitudes?

6. What are the main character traits of Clint Stapleton? Why is he rather unpleasant even before the question of his involvement in Melissa's death comes up?

7. Describe the characters of Don Stapleton and Mrs. Stapleton. In what ways do the Stapletons show their arrogance?

8. Is Spenser's narrow escape from death at the hands of Rugar credible?

What factors of good luck played a role?

9. Is Spenser's managed disappearance believable? How did authorities such as Martin Quirk have to exercise their influence in order for this to happen?

10. What is the effect of the sections describing Spenser's slow rehabilitation from his nearly fatal wounds? How does this section affect Susan's and Spenser's relationship?

11. Discuss Susan's desire to adopt a child. What is the effect of the scene describing the behavior of the adopted child of Susan's friend? Is Parker caricaturing certain social attitudes here?

12. How believable is it that a hired assassin such as Rugar might be available and willing to commit a crime for the right price? Is Rugar given a credible past?

13. Why does Spenser choose to make a deal with Rugar, rather than having Rugar prosecuted for attempted murder?

Does Spenser make a mistake in letting Rugar go free?

14. Why is it so important to Spenser to have Clint Stapleton acknowledged as Melissa's killer? Why does Spenser try so hard to bring Don Stapleton to justice?

Literary Precedents

Spenser's major antecedent is Philip Marlowe, in novels by Raymond Chandler, as Parker has acknowledged in a variety of ways. Parker also is indebted to the hard-boiled private detective tradition, and indirectly to the stylistic innovations in American fiction by Ernest Hemingway and, prior to Hemingway, such writers as Sherwood Anderson, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain, who made use of the American vernacular as a literary medium. Parker also draws on the canon of Elizabethan and nineteenth-century Romantic poetry for many of his titles.

Small Vices takes its tide from King Lear (c.1605), as its epigraph shows while making a sweeping comment on society's hypocrisies.

It should be noted that Spenser's personal origin in Laramie, Wyoming, identifies him in part with the tradition of the Western hero. Finally, this book suggests another precedent: since Spenser is taken to Santa Barbara by Hawk and Susan to recover from the nearly fatal shooting, the choice of town may suggest an indirect homage to the Lew Archer novels of Ross MacDonald (Kenneth Miller).

The detective hero's pretended death, disappearance, and reappearance in a victorious rebirth is a well-known motif in a series involving the extraordinary detective. Probably the first widely known instance was the disappearance of Sherlock Holmes in "The Final Problem," and his reappearance in "The Adventure of the Empty House." Rex Stout's In the Best Families (1950) also portrays Stout's arrogant and seemingly fearless detective, Nero Wolfe, as being forced to go undercover, to feign death, and even to lose a great deal of weight, in order to escape a threatened death at the hands of his personal underworld antagonist, the mysterious crime lord, Mr. Zeck.

Eventually Wolfe makes a spectacular return, much like Spenser, astonishing Archie Goodwin, and ultimately defeating his archenemy.

Related Titles

Small Vices is obviously related to other books in the Spenser series which deal with Spenser's own personal trials, such as Early Autumn (1981; Spenser's virtual adoption of Paul Giacomin); Valediction (1984; Spenser's loss of Susan); and A Catskill Eagle (1985; Spenser's rescue of Susan from Russell Costigan), and Pastime (1991; which explores Paul Giacomin's failed relationship to his mother and Spenser's own origin in Laramie, Wyoming).

In its study of the problems of race, the novel may also be compared to Playmates (1989), dealing with point shaving actions by a black basketball player (who, it turns out, is a student in good standing at Taft University, despite being unable to read), and Double Deuce (1992), which offers a grim study of life in the ghetto.

Spenser's dramatic confrontation with Rugar suggests Spenser's dangerous showdowns with Joe Broz in Pastime and in The Widening Gyre (1983).

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