

# Sudden Mischief Short Guide

## Sudden Mischief by Robert B. Parker

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# Characters

Most of the regular cast of a Spenser novel appear in *Sudden Mischief*: Spenser, Susan Silverman, Hawk, and Martin Quirk; Henry Cimoli makes a cameo appearance.

Rita Fiore, who played a lead role in the novel *Small Vices*, as a successful practicing attorney who is disenchanted with the legal system, also reappears. She gives Spenser some crucial advice about Francis Ronan.

Rachel Wallace, a feisty, sharp-tongued lesbian activist whom Spenser once protected, also reappears and provides caustic social comment and an amused assessment of Spenser and Susan's relationship.

All of the series's regulars play minor roles in *Sudden Mischief*. Hawk is limited to a background role as an assistant in Spenser's investigation of Brad's past, although his repartee and sardonic social commentary add humor and perspective to the novel.

Much of the novel's focus is on the relationship between Spenser and Susan and on the possibility that it will be threatened by her on-going relationship with her former husband. Although Spenser has misgivings about helping Brad and his efforts to do so bring about tension with Susan, in the end, the detective's involvement in the matter clarifies and strengthens his love for Susan.

Meanwhile, she re-examines her relationship with her parents, with Brad, and with others. In doing so, she comes to a better understanding of her emotional ties to Spenser.

Susan concludes that her problems with Brad had their roots in her relationship with her parents. It is revealed that her maiden name was Hirsch and that her father, a druggist by profession, had doted on her. As a result, Susan competed with her mother for her father's attention. Not only was Susan's relationship with her mother tainted by maternal jealousy, Susan's later choices in men were made because of their similarities to her father.

Susan decides she has been attracted to men more for their flaws than their strengths. This was true even of her original involvement with Spenser, whom she realizes she has misjudged. He is stronger and more understanding than she initially believed. This exercise in self-analysis ultimately helps Susan clarify and improve her relationship with Spenser, but not before there are some tense moments. Although Susan asks Spenser to help Brad because of the guilt that he inspires in her, she also resents the detective poking around in her past, and she becomes irate when he raises the subject of Brad's problems. In the end, Susan frees herself from her ex-husband by asking Spenser to come to her apartment when Brad seeks refuge there as a desperate fugitive. Realizing that Brad is probably a murderer, as Spenser had alleged, Susan finally sees his dark side and is freed from his influence over her. She turns him in to the police.



Although Brad once seemed to be a frightened victim—a social climber who attended Harvard, changed his name from Silverman, and adopted a veneer of "old boy" WASP respectability—he is really a lot more complex than that. Brad is a cunning murderer and a ruthless con man, who will do whatever it takes to cover his tracks.

On the surface, Brad is someone who has spent his life trying to appear affable; he is a personable self-promoter with a dark side.

He has abandoned his Jewishness, attended Harvard, played football, gone into the public relations business, and started working for charities. However, when his mounting debts forced him to turn to crime, Brad, with the help of Richard Gavin and his mob connections, becomes embroiled in the most ambitious scam of his life—the Galapalooza fund-raiser. This has led Brad to murder both a mobster and one of his ex-wives. By the end of the novel, Spenser knows that Brad is also capable of murdering Susan or anyone else who gets in his way.

Most of the novel's secondary characters are two-dimensional: they include Mrs. Ginzburg, who is Brad's sister; Jeanette Ronan; and the other women who are parties to the sexual harassment suit against Brad. However, Parker rounds out a couple of Spenser's foes, who emerge as real flesh-and-blood people. The mob-connected attorney, Richard Gavin, seems more human because he grieves over his murdered lover, Carla. As well, Judge Francis Ronan, who throughout most of the novel seems to be the archetypal evil power broker, turns out to have redeeming traits after all. Upon learning the truth about his wife's adultery and her fraudulent claims of sexual harassment, Ronan apologizes to Spenser for having hired a couple of thugs to attempt to intimidate the detective. In the final analysis, the judge shows that he has a sense of honor. This character twist is an unexpected one.



## Social Concerns

The plot of Robert B. Parker's *Sudden Mischief* deals with some important contemporary social concerns, including the use and abuse of charity fund-raisers, the relationships between divorced spouses, and the nature of sexual harassment. The wife of a retired judge and three other women have alleged that Brad Sterling (a.k.a. Brad Silverman), the ex-husband of a woman named Susan, is guilty of sexually harassing them. It turns out that Brad has been Jeanette Ronan's lover, and he has made indiscreet comments to the other women, but the sexual harassment charges are false; Jeanette has invented them to conceal her affair with Brad. Jeanette's husband, a retired judge named Francis Ronan, is unaware of all this and has filed a civil suit against Brad. If Brad seems unconcerned, it is because he has some love letters Jeanette has written. He also has more pressing worries. Brad has stolen money from a sham charitable organization that is run by the mob; he is fearful about what will happen to him if he is caught.

While investigating the civil suit against Brad, private eye Spenser studies the Massachusetts law on sexual harassment, a statute that is so narrow in its scope that the case against Brad looks tenuous. By implication, Spenser's investigation considers the notion that many sexual harassment charges (possibly even some of the ones that have been made against President Clinton) are questionable; in the strict, legal sense, "sexual harassment" involves offering enticements for professional advancement, threats of retaliation against an employee, or creating an unpleasant work environment.

Another of the social concerns dealt with in *Sudden Mischief* is the existence of fraudulent charities and fund-raisers. Brad's most recent enterprise has been a huge charity fund-raiser called Galapalooza. However, Spenser's investigation reveals that none of the groups supposedly involved in the event got any money from it—none, that is, other than one called Civil Streets, which is run by Carla Quagliozi, another of Brad's exwives. That agency turns out to be a front for a crime syndicate operation. Carla's current boyfriend, a mob-connected attorney named Richard Gavin, is the legal officer and brains behind Civil Streets. Although Brad has also cheated that organization and, therefore, has reason to fear the mob, author Parker's depiction of the activities of Civil Streets serves as a warning to readers to be careful about the charities they support.

Another of the novel's social concerns is embodied in the character of Brad Sterling, Susan's former husband. Brad is a parasite who preys on the guilt and pity of his former wives to get money, until they—as his sister Mrs. Ginzburg does—decide they can no longer help him. Brad's involvement in charity scams is a logical next step in his criminal activities. Author Parker suggests that the ingratiating former spouse is a new kind of social parasite.



## Techniques

As is usually the case in the Spenser books, *Sudden Mischief* relies heavily on the central character's crisp, witty first-person narration. One of the secrets of Spenser's appeal is his no-nonsense candor and the way he skewers many of the things we take for granted in society. The dialogue between Spenser and Hawk (and to a lesser degree between Spenser and Susan), gives voice to Parker's views on a diverse range of topics and pokes fun at everything from political correctness and contemporary sexual mores to the fitness craze and the rantings of self-help gurus.

In most respects, *Sudden Mischief* does not introduce any fresh narrative techniques or innovative plot complications, although having a male private detective attempt to help the former husband of the detective's "significant other" is an off-beat plot development. Like most detective novels, this one features a slam-bang ending. Brad returns to Susan's apartment, and Spenser confronts him there. At the same time, Susan is forced to deal with the reality that her ex-husband really is a ruthless con man who is more than capable of murder if it suits his evil ends.



## Themes

As is the case in other novels in this detective series, *Sudden Mischief* spotlights Spenser's relationship with Susan. His feelings lead him to take on the unpleasant and unrewarding task of helping her to help Brad. However, the private eye also reaffirms his code of values in other ways, especially when he discovers the truth about Brad's activities, despite intimidation from Judge Ronan, Richard Gavin, and from Brad himself. As is usually the case in a Spenser novel, the hero uncovers a major crime—the true nature of the Galapalooza fundraiser, which most people seem willing to forget about in order to avoid bad publicity.

Yet another theme of *Sudden Mischief* is Susan's need to deal honestly and directly with her emotions and to understand what once drew her to Brad. Although for a time she reveals a deep-rooted anger in flashes of temper which she directs at Spenser, Susan finally confronts the demons that haunt her. By the end of the novel, she has sorted things out and also has realized that Brad is probably a murderer who must be turned in to the police.

*Sudden Mischief* makes the case for courage and honesty in emotional relationships.

This theme is reinforced in a subplot involving Judge Ronan and his wife Jeanette.

Ronan appears to be a stronger man after Jeanette abandons her bogus sexual harassment story and confesses to her adultery. In a surprising character twist, the Judge then apologizes to Spenser for having threatened him.



# Adaptations

There is a Dove Entertainment audiotope version of *Sudden Mischief*, which is read by actor William Windom. No film adaptation of this novel has been made yet, but there was an ABC television series *Spenser for Hire* (1985-1988), which featured the character- husband? How does Brad play upon actors of *Spenser*, Hawk, Susan, Martin the emotions of his ex-wives?

Quirk, Frank Belson, and Rita Force. This series, which starred Robert Urich as *Spenser* 6. Names are important in *Sudden Misand Avery Brooks* as Hawk, lives on in chief. Why do you think Brad Silverman rerun syndication on cable television. had adopted the surname Sterling? Why has Susan chosen to remain Susan IDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS Silverman, rather than returning to her maiden name of Susan Hirsch?

The *Spenser* novels usually contain elements of satire and author Parker's com-7. Why did Brad get involved with Jeanette ments on contemporary social ills and scanRonan? What were her motives?

dals. One of the targets of *Sudden Mischief* is the world of professional charities: Brad 8. How has Brad managed to continue a Silverman organizes a charitable event that successful business career and an affluis a scam, with Richard Gavin and his mob friends raking in the money. Readers might ent life style despite the ups-and-downs discuss the world of professional charities of his life? What is his relationship with and how some fund-raising efforts some-his sister? With his ex-wives? times fail to help worthwhile causes.

Another topic is to explore the nature of 9. During the course of their investigasexual harassment. Since Parker quotes the tion, *Spenser* and Hawk burglarize Massachusetts statute on sexual harassment Brad's office. Do you think this apin the novel, readers may wish to discuss proach was valid?

whether such a law is precise, and how it may be abused. 10. What do you think of Richard Gavin, Readers may also wish to consider Brad's the crooked attorney? Discuss the genrelationship to his former wives and how eral view of lawyers presented in he is able to take advantage of them even this novel. after they have split up.

1. What is the nature of the sexual harass-11. What hidden aspects in Brad's characment suit against Brad Silverman? Why ter have driven him to commit two does he seem unconcerned about it? murders? Do you think Brad would 2. Why does Jeanette Ronan launch a sexu-have killed Susan as well, if it had al harassment suit against Brad suited his ends?





Silverman?

3. Is the character of Judge Francis Ronan 12. Why does Spenser feel that Susan must credible and believable? be the one to call the police about Brad?

What knowledge about Brad does Su4. What is it about Brad Silverman that Spenser dislikes? How does Brad fail to san finally acquire in the climactic scene live up to Spenser's code of values? at her apartment?

## Literary Precedents

Robert Parker has identified crime writer Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) as the major influence on his fiction. In fact, Parker paid homage to the British-born novelist in 1989 when he completed Chandler's unfinished novel *Poodle Springs*, and again two years later when he wrote *Perchance to Dream*, a sequel to Chandler's 1939 classic *The Big Sleep*. What is more, Chandler's famous detective Philip Marlowe provided a heroic model for Spenser, and it is clear that Chandler's wise-cracking and ironic dialogue is echoed in Parker's writing.

However, apparently it was not Chandler, but rather the mystery writer Ross Macdonald (1915-1983), who inspired Parker in his writing of *Sudden Mischief*.

Macdonald (whose popular *Lew Archer* series includes such novels as *The Moving Target*, *Underground Man*, and *Blue Hammer*), along with Dashiell Hammett (*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Thin Man*, *The Glass Key*, etc.) and Chandler, are considered to be the godfathers of the hard-boiled detective fiction. Aside from its roots in this genre, Parker's fiction owes a nod to the influence of Ernest Hemingway, who pioneered the lean and terse narrative style that has become a hallmark of Parker's writing. The Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser provided Parker's detective hero with his surname, and the poet Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) celebrates romantic and chivalric ideals in an allegorical setting. For the first time, Parker's title *Sudden Mischief* and epigraph (a quotation that appears at the beginning of a book or a chapter) are taken from *The Faerie Queene*; other Spenser novels have used titles and epigraphs from Elizabethan poets (including William Shakespeare and John Donne) and nineteenth-century and twentieth-century romantic poets (such as William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Robert Browning, and W. B. Yeats) as reminders of Spenser's loyalty to a code of romantic ideals.

## Related Titles

Although all the novels in the Spenser series are interrelated to some degree, *Sudden Mischief* echoes the novels *Valediction*, *The Widening Gyre*, and *A Catskill Eagle*.

In those novels, Susan is estranged from Spenser and struggles with her involvement with Russell Costigan. In *Crimson Joy*, Spenser's pursuit of a serial killer who was one of Susan's patients, introduced tension into their relationship. However, in *Small Vices*, the book before *Sudden Mischief*, Susan and Spenser's love was reaffirmed by Spenser's nearly fatal encounter with the assassin Rugar and by Susan's heroic commitment to helping Spenser recover and rehabilitate himself.

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