

# Thin Air Short Guide

## Thin Air by Robert B. Parker

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# Characters

Most of the characters in Parker's recent Spenser novels are pretty familiar to anyone who has been following the series. Spenser, himself, continues to mature in his sensitivity to his own shortcomings and in his relations with others. Nevertheless, he must maintain a certain protective distance at times in order to deal effectively with the forces of evil. There are still times when he must be hard and unyielding in order to survive and to do his job. The dialectic between openness and sensitivity and control and professionalism Parker developed early on in the series continues in this book.

While he changes he also remains largely the same.

Lisa Belson is also reminiscent of other women Spenser is hired to find or rescue. Plagued by an unsavory or at least hidden past, she must help the detective uncover her dark side in order to resolve the narrative and to also become healthy again. The heavies are largely Hispanic but retain a tangential relationship to the criminal elements from the other books. The fact that Spenser hires a Chicano shooter from an L.A. gang to replace the missing Hawk provides only a minor difference. Both Hawk and Spenser's current backup function in the same way, watching Spenser's rear and providing a contrast to his basic humanity. The police remain on the periphery, if still on Spenser's side. The detective still walks a thin line between the forces of good and evil.



## Social Concerns

Many of the social concerns in the Spenser novels are those of crime fiction in general: decay of urban life, growing levels of violence in American life, increasing lack of community, decreasing sense of safety, and the usual human failings of betrayal, lust, greed, jealousy, and murderous rage.

Parker puts his particular spin on these themes by having them filtered through the consciousness of his P.I., Spenser, who has a special view of the world, part humorous detachment, part passionate engagement, which helps to balance out the world Parker explores in the series.

*Thin Air* is a fairly typical, late Spenser novel with the exception that Hawk, Spenser's dark alter ego, is missing, but his role is taken by a hard-nosed Chicano enforcer Spenser borrows from an underworld acquaintance in L.A. who owes him a favor from years back. The plot is fairly simple as is often the case with the series: Spenser is hired to find a missing woman and that investigation plunges him into a larger, darker criminal world and provides the occasion for him to right some other wrongs. It is questionable how much Spenser is one of those knights of the streets critics like to write about so much, but he does seem to have a tendency to poke his nose into trouble in order to help his friends and clients out of trouble.

As has been true from the very start of the series, the books deal in part at least with raising Spenser's consciousness about gender issues, and by the time of *Thin Air* he has come a long way, thanks largely to the continuing tutelage of his longtime, and often long-suffering, female companion, Susan Silverman, who manages to keep him aware of his sexist leanings. Frank Belson, Spenser's old friend from the Boston Police Department, comes to him to report that his new, and much younger wife, has gone missing, and he asks the private investigator to look into the case because Spenser can go where the officials cannot by using contacts and methods denied the police force. The search for Lisa Belson turns out to be far from a straightforward missing person's investigation, however, because Lisa has largely hidden her past from her husband. What Spenser uncovers about her and how he goes about rescuing her from her abductor forms the basis for the broadening of the plot and plunges Spenser into the scary world of the Hispanic-controlled drug trade in a midsized, economically-depressed Massachusetts town now run by two rival gangs.

The search for Lisa is also about the crime of stalking, and the need some men have to control the women in their lives, exploiting them for their own ego gratification. The stalking issue also brings to the surface of the novel the issue of relationships, a persistent theme of all of the Spenser books. This time the relationships are multiple and unusually complicated by Lisa's dark history and an affair she had with a Chicano just before meeting Frank and her recent marriage. In Parker's world a character's past usually comes to haunt his or her present.



Thin Air also explores the consequences of the breakdown of social norms caused by the money and extralegal power generated by the enormously lucrative drug trade that allows underworld thugs to wrest political control from the legal authorities. The economic decline of the community produces poverty and hopelessness which provides the background against which the criminals are able to flourish. In this story two drug lords are fighting over turf and Spenser and Lisa get caught in the middle. As is often the case in the Spenser series the conclusion of the narrative does not resolve the larger social issues but merely provides a momentary stay against the destruction of the central characters. In the end, one of the drug kingpins is destroyed leaving the territory firmly in the hands of the other. And Spenser is unable to control the larger world in any reasonable way. He just rescues Frank's wife and helps to restore the status quo while the organized forces of crime remain in power.

It is true that he does help to eliminate the worse and most unpredictable of the evil men, but he is unable to restore innocence to this most flawed of worlds.

## Techniques

If anything, Parker's prose has become smoother and faster-paced in the later novels, and they now provide one of the quickest reads in contemporary crime writing. It is an achievement hardly equaled in the hard-boiled tradition. The quality of the prose, however, is deceptive and often leads critics to misperceive the larger qualities of the books. It is only on repeated readings that the accomplishments of Parker's writing become really evident.

Spare, concise, tightly descriptive, these novels nevertheless provide one of the most carefully sustained and developed series going. His prose style has allowed Parker to explore the maladies of the contemporary world in both depth and clarity, and by keeping the narrative firmly focused on Spenser's consciousness, Parker has also been able to provide his readers with tales both surprising and satisfying, consistent and yet full of innovation.

## Themes

The concurrent themes of official and individual corruption form the grounding of the plot. The drug lords have seized control of the local environment and established compounds from which they operate their illegal activities. The corporate nastiness spreads beyond the confines of their covert operations and when one of the drug dealers kidnaps Belson's wife, it brings together the two themes. Lisa becomes involved because in her past she for a short period was the lover of one of her abductors. In the course of his investigation Spenser discovers that at one time she was also a prostitute.

Before she can be successfully reunited with her husband and presumably restored to her present conventional life, her past must be brought to light just as the hidden drug world must be exposed. This is a plot trajectory characteristic of many of the other novels in the series.

Just as it is necessary to expose the truth of Lisa's past before she can hope to develop a lasting relationship with her husband, it is also necessary for the community of the small town to acknowledge the presence of the corruption created by the secret drug operations before it can hope to achieve some measure of corporate health.

Although by the end of the novel it is implied that Lisa and Belson may be able to resolve their problems, it is more problematic for the body politic.

Most of the underworld remains intact and capable of continuing its corrupting activities.

Spenser once again proves to be capable of rescuing the woman in distress, which allows Parker to explore such issues as stalking and other feminist questions about woman's empowerment, or lack thereof, but the narrative does not allow him to do more than raise these issues. As one of his continuing themes, the questions about women's powerlessness remain largely unanswered. One could read such a dilemma in two ways: either Spenser represents traditional patriarchal attitudes about women's need to be rescued and therefore provides a limiting view or he provides a more liberating attitude by uncovering the plight of women and exposing the injustices meted out against the sex. The critics have discovered both readings in the series.



## Key Questions

Because of the varying topical nature of the subjects dealt with in the Spenser series and because of the changing nature of the central figure, Parker's crime novels offer a particularly rich subject for discussion.

1. *Thin Air* offers an especially good starting point for discussing the entire run of books. An evocative way to begin might be to compare the character of Spenser in the first book *The Godwulf Manuscript* (1974) with his portrayal in a middle novel like *Early Autumn* (1981), to his appearance in this book of the series.
2. One could also trace the development of other characters like Susan Silverman or Hawk throughout the series.
3. Since Parker obsessively returns to the same themes, tracing their development would also prove interesting, especially since the books have evolved over time.
4. What about the use of setting through the books? Parker no longer confines himself to the Boston area and has had Spenser travel to other parts of the country in pursuit of his cases.

How does he use these other locales?

Are there similarities in the sense of place?

5. The Spenser books play with the idea of gender — what it means to be a man or a woman. Is there a pattern in Parker's use of such a theme? If so, how so?
6. The group might read a classic hard-boiled detective novel like Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) or Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939) and compare how these writers create character or use place or develop plot with how the same elements work in *Thin Air*.
7. Since Hawk functions as Spenser's alter ego, it has allowed Parker to explore sides of the detective and in ways unavailable to other writers in the mystery tradition. How has Parker worked this element of his fiction?

8. How does the presence of the Hispanic drug gang affect the novel?

What ethnic questions does it raise?

9. How does the fact that both Hawk and Susan Silverman are largely missing from this Spenser book affect our reading of it in light of their importance in the other books in the series?





10. Through his connection with Frank Belson, Spenser seems to be more closely associated with the official forces of law and order in this book. Does that affect how we view his actions as a dispenser of justice?

## Literary Precedents

No one can read the Spenser novels without recalling the Hammett/Chandler/Ross Macdonald tradition out of which he works. But, like so many other contemporary crime novelists, Parker plays with the particulars of the form. Spenser, while retaining many of the characteristics of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and Lew Archer, does exhibit personal traits at odds with his predecessors. Parker has expanded and updated what was becoming an all-too predictable genre. In Spenser's relationship with Susan and his friendships within the police force Parker has made him much less of an outsider, more fully an individual. These changes are consistent with the achievements of many modern mystery writers, but Parker must be credited with being among the first to create a character so well rounded. Spenser is still a series figure who maintains a fairly consistent persona, but he is just less programmatically so.

## Related Titles

Spenser of Thin Air can be fairly easily related to the character appearing in the previous Parker books. He also can be compared to such series as those of Michael Z. Lewin's featuring Albert Sampson or Ed McBain's Matthew Hope books, both of which contain a flawed, often very human protagonist of the soft-boiled type. William Tapply and George V. Higgins have mined the Boston environment and helped to establish a real tradition of crime fiction set in the area. But the Spenser of the novels has evolved in quite different ways, and his on and off relationship with Susan is quite unique in both the prominence it receives in the books and in the importance it has on the developing character of the detective.

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