

The Importance of Being V.I.

by

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First Reader: Dr. Nora Faires

Second Reader: Dr. Fred Svoboda

Handwritten signatures of Nora Faires and Fred Svoboda. The signature of Nora Faires is written over the text "Dr. Nora Faires" and the signature of Fred Svoboda is written over the text "Dr. Fred Svoboda".

It's a nickname,....I usually use my initials. I started out my working life as a lawyer, and I found it was harder for male colleagues and opponents to patronize me if they didn't know my first name. (Indemnity, 161)

To V. I. Warshawski, the fictional female private detective created by Sara Paretsky, her name is of critical significance. Christened Victoria Iphigenia, a symbolic title in itself for it combines the victorious queen with the sacrificial daughter and certainly V.I. combines both of these qualities. She chooses to go by her initials because doing so puts her on equal footing with men where employment and respect are concerned. Her initials are an expression of the essence of this relatively new genre character.

A new genre character may signify many things. It may signify the development of the genre in which she appears. Certainly the female is not new in detective fiction. She has often been the agonized victim. Occasionally, she is the cunning antagonist but even more often she is his wicked accomplice. In this century she progressed to crime solver, however, only in an amateur capacity. In the 1970's she becomes the professional private detective and this changes the genre because it put women on an equal footing with the male of the genre.

Along with a change in the genre itself, a new genre character can also reflect society itself. As women began to break into new realms, urged on by the feminist movement, the fictional female private detective appeared. She, also, seeks independence and acceptance. Just as her real sisters, this genre character wants those rights and privileges that men have always enjoyed.

A new genre character can also speak to the character of the country in which she was created. Since the female private detective was first created in America then surely she represents the characteristics of this nation. V.I. Warshawski is, in addition to everything else she represents, an American. When this detective chooses to go by her initials she is choosing to not only be an expression of the genre and an expression of the time; she is choosing to be an expression of her place, America.

This "initialied" character works and lives in modern Chicago. Her relationship with the mean streets of this city introduces some interesting comparisons with those older hard-boiled brothers who also walked the mean streets of detective fiction.

There are seven books that take place in Chicago's mean streets. In each of the books, V.I. takes on a corporate institution: the insurance business, the medical field, the church, the law conglomerate and many others. V.I. sees these institutions as victimizing those who work

within their perimeters and those, particularly women, who fall prey to their machinations. When V.I. takes on these institutions she redefines the role of women and the fictional private detective. In each of her novels, V.I. must investigate herself as well as the institution.

However, she does not investigate herself alone. From her past, she gleans much from her mother, an Italian Jew who escaped fascist Italy. This feisty woman gave V.I. her drive and "her insistence on fighting battles to the finish." (Indemnity, 29) V.I.'s father, Tony, was a policeman who never shot another human being. He taught V.I. the importance of idealism. Both deceased, their parental role seems to be continued in three other characters. Bobby Mallory, a policeman friend of her father's, fears for V.I.'s safety and urges her to take a more traditional woman's role. Mr. Contreras, a retiree, lives in her apartment building; he also cares for V.I.'s dog, Peppy, a golden retriever. Mr. Contreras both mothers and fathers V.I. He cooks for her, gives her advice and tries to protect her. Often, V.I. rejects his intrusions, as she does Mallory's, but she recognizes their caring intent. Dr. Lotty Herschel, who runs a ghetto free-clinic, is probably the strongest force in V.I.'s life. It is Lotty who literally and figuratively binds up the detective's wounds. It is Lotty who provides a sounding board for V.I.'s indignation and depression. Lotty must set V.I.'s

feet firmly on the ground and Lotty must remind V.I. of the agenda she must follow. That agenda is a moral one. From the people in her life, particularly her parents and Lotty, V.I. absorbs the moral agenda which colors her life and her work.

That moral agenda is apparent in all of the novels in which V.I. appears. In each of these novels she deals with an institution which has become corrupt. In Indemnity Only, 1982,, V.I. tackles a major insurance company and one of the most powerful unions. A missing co-ed and her dead boyfriend leads V.I. into the clutches of powerful institutions and the police. A most personal tie is created in Deadlock, 1984, when V.I.'s cousin, Boom Boom, is murdered and she must tackle a huge shipping company where Boom Boom's murder covers embezzlement. Killing Orders, 1983, "finds the private operative investigating a securities fraud involving a Roman Catholic priory that shakes up the stock market and sends shock waves all the way to the Vatican." (Stasio, 39) Involving another relative, V.I.'s aunt, not only the church becomes a target but Chicago's underworld is the cook that stirs the pot. The medical institution is invaded in Bitter Medicine, 1987, when V.I. encounters one of those corporate-like clinics where a young pregnant friend and her doctor dies. Is it a case of malpractice and coverup? V.I. must determine the answer. Blood Shot, 1988, presents

big business and its negligence. While V.I. searches for a missing person, she uncovers the toxic corruption which poisons her beloved city. The plight of a homeless alcoholic aunt, in Burn Marks, 1990, forces V.I. to face the corruption of developers and politicians who disenfranchise the pitiful poor who cling to those tenement dwellings that are their last vestige of hope. In Paretsky's latest novel, Guardian Angel, 1992, the detective finds herself under attack. The yuppie upwardly-mobile have invaded her neighborhood, expelling long-time residents while supported by a large law firm. In addition, the detective uncovers an industrial scandal and union fraud.

V.I. Warshawski, detective, comes to life in this crime fiction series and expressed in these pages are the elements that make her a significant study. She presents a new role model for women. She inhabits a setting which, heretofore, has been inhabited by males. V.I. follows an agenda not often used before in detective fiction, a moral system both drives and develops her. No matter which element we study, the one fact which remains with us is that in choosing to go by her initials, V.I. Warshawski becomes someone who must be identified through her behavior and her deeds, not labeled and judged by a feminine epithet.

The Female Private Investigator

A New Role Model For Women

Modern mystery fiction has produced a new genre character, the female private detective. A search for role models and reader demand created these ladies of crime. In analyzing their life styles, character traits and gender roles, these investigators reveal a woman new to literature. Sue Grafton, Marcia Mueller, Linda Barnes, Faye Kellerman and Sharyn McCrumb are only a few of the writers who by 1986 were writing a third of American mysteries. Among the most successful of these female sleuths is Sara Peretsky's V.I. Warshawski. This character does not emulate her male counterparts. Rather, she redefines what a woman can be. Warshawski is a flawed human being complete with psychoses and hang-ups. However, these flaws are integrated with the best qualities of womanhood and then mixed with traits new to women.

Warshawski makes her living as a private investigator. She is not an elderly snoop, curious bookstore owner or any other type of crime hobbier. She is not Dorothy Sayers's Harriet Vane who, no matter how sophisticated or intelligent she might be, practiced criminal detection only in her crime fiction. When Vane is herself accused of murder and brought to trial, she is saved by a male and though this

"obligation" bothers her for years, she ends up marrying her savior. V.I. Warshawski is a professional detective in business for herself. This is the way she pays her bills and puts food on the table. This characteristic alone makes her a new phenomenon in literature, however, combined with a viable role model for women, this female private investigator is a literary revelation.

In order to understand this new genre character and her influence as a role model, it is important to look at the popularity and readership of modern detective fiction. A graph in a 1989 U.S. News & World Report (70) visually demonstrates the popularity of this genre. The 4.1 million annual sales figure even towers above the 3.0 million attributed to those "bosom-heaving" romances. A 1978 survey reveals that one out of four books sold were detective stories. (Klein, 7) Judging by the shelf space relegated to mysteries at Young and Welshans, a popular local bookstore, the figures in 1992 must be much higher. A mystery bibliography compiled by Allen J. Hubin "...lists approximately 60,000 crime fiction titles." (7) That number of titles surely identifies the mystery novel as a literary force which should not be ignored. These sales figures and recorded titles denote a sustained popularity that clearly makes detective fiction a vital and expanding literary form. Its appeal appears to touch just about everyone.



In judging the appeal of detective fiction, it is interesting to note those who read this genre and it is also relevant to consider a thought or two about why we read it. The same U.S. News & World Report graph (70) reveals that 62% of all adult Americans have read at least one mystery in their lifetime. "Crime literature is almost certainly more widely read than any other class of fiction in the United States..." (Symons, 5) Edie Gibson in a Publishers Weekly article quotes a 1986 Gallup survey which "reported that six of 10 adult readers enjoyed mysteries and the majority of these were women." (37) Significantly, another element of readership is "That at least half the college graduates in this country are devoted mystery readers." (38) Although Symons calls one writer's claim an exaggeration when that writer claims that crime literature is the "'favourite of all that is most intellectual in the reading public,'" (6) the Gallup survey seems to enhance that writer's claim. Whether intellectually based or not, the most interesting issue about mystery fiction may be why we read so many of these novels and why women now seem to be the majority of the readers.

Much analysis is available concerning the reasons why we read mystery fiction. Dennis Porter writes that mystery fiction is popular because it follows a standard formula where readers find comfort and familiarity. (Klein, 13-14) A more cerebral interpretation by psychoanalyst Geraldine

Pederson-Krag sees the detective story as originating "in the 'primal scene' of infancy." (Symons, 7) The reader becomes the detective, investigating a crime while subconsciously the reader is a child seeking to solve the mysteries of adulthood. (7) Other interpretations of why we read mysteries include an Oedipal purging of guilt, a search for the eradication of guilt in order to become once more innocent and a desire for ritual so we can exorcise our feelings of guilt. (7) Along with these theories of why we read mysteries, it is well worth pondering why more women read mysteries. Perhaps the knowledge that the crime will be solved is reassuring to a woman whose life seems to be filled with only problems with few answers. To a woman, the detective must seem in total control and even if that control is temporarily lost there is the certainty that it will be regained. There is a certain order to mysteries: a crime, certain clues, various suspects, detection methodology and a solution. Certainly this order is an appealing prospect, particularly to women. Even more appealing to women is the surety that, in mysteries, there will be some kind of justice, a justice that is often missing in reality. Women often feel helpless, without power, and the detective must seem like a paragon worth emulating, particularly if that detective is a woman. Inspiring to any female is the woman who has control over her own life and a woman who has the strength to survive and flourish in a man's world.

These female detectives who survive and flourish are creations of authors who feel that women need new role models. Michelle Green's interview in People Weekly quotes Sara Peretsky, the creator of Chicago's V.I. Warshawski. Her "mission has been to stage-direct a character 'whom other women can look at and identify with.'" (132) In an article by Marilyn Stasio, Paretsky states that "As a reader of mysteries, I always had trouble with the way women are treated as either tramps or helpless victims who stand around weeping. I wanted to read about a woman who could solve her own problems." (2) Not only does Peretsky want to create a touchstone for women but she wants Warshawski to take on the power structures to which women often fall victim. These power structures include the insurance cartel, the medical establishment and the church. Paretsky's sleuth is for "women just beginning to be aware, who need strong role models." (Ames, 67) Paretsky says to women that nothing is beyond one's reach, that even the most powerful can be met and subdued.

Along with Paretsky, Sue Grafton, author of the Kinsey Millhone series, thinks "women are looking for a mirror rather than an escape." In that mirror, women see a "tough new breed" of womanhood, a reflection that presents a woman who is "smart, self-sufficient, principled, stubborn, funny and female." (Ames, 66) Here indeed is a new gender role. Role models of old; the self-sacrificing nurse, the

dedicated school teacher, the loyal wife and mother, have to make room for a new persona within their ranks. We no longer are satisfied with the adolescent Nancy Drew stumbling upon crime and accidentally solving that crime. We are no longer satisfied with women who are subservient to a system that gives men almost all power and authority. This new role model speaks with a loud clear voice that invites women to drink of a liquor that tastes of freedom and power.

Before meeting this new speaker, it might be well to investigate her birth and her creator. As a young writer, Sara Paretsky wrote short stories and poems. She graduated with a political science degree from the University of Kansas and an MBA from the University of Chicago. She then worked in a management position at an insurance firm. Encouraged to get her Ph.D. in history, she read 24 mystery novels a month while studying for her Ph.D. orals. She "found the pulp more powerful than the abstruse stuff she needed to know for her doctorate. 'I couldn't keep my mind focused,' she remembers. 'It took me a while to realize I was in the wrong field.'" (Green, 133) However, delving into insurance claims and digging into doctoral research must certainly provide fitting training for detective fiction. Paretsky then promised herself 12 months (it took her 17) to write a mystery and V.I. Warshawski was born. Publishers were not encouraging. For

one thing, they felt that V.I. should have a male partner to lean on, also, editors felt the Chicago locale would never sell. Indemnity Only was published in 1982 by Ballantine Books, complete with lone heroine and a Chicago setting, to rave reviews. (Shapiro, 64) With continued success, Paretsky became a founding member of Sisters In Crime, an organization dedicated to getting women mystery writers reviewed. With "its self-help brochure: 'Shameless Promotion for Brazen Hussies' women are more reviewed now." (Ames, 67) Paretsky's heroine has received, by far, the most favorable reviews of all the female private investigators, although V.I. was not the first American female PI. In 1977, "the first American woman to uncover skullduggery and prove herself as a PI was Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone (Edwin of the Iron Shoes, McKay), a San Francisco investigator employed by an office of lawyers, the All Souls Cooperative." (Gibson, 39) With Paretsky's success, however, publishers began "actively seeking more women writers with female protagonists." (37) Paretsky opened the way for other women mystery writers. She made female detectives popular with the reading public and, most importantly, she motivated new genre characters who give to women a path worth following.

V.I. is a new role model for women. This is clearly evident in the analysis of many areas in her life. Her past, her living conditions, her life style, her career as a

detective and her character traits, all reveal a woman who sets new standards and lives a new life. First, this detective lives continuously with her past. It is a vital and dramatic influence in her life. This woman recognizes the strong hold that her history has on her. From a solidly ethnic background, V.I.'s father was a Polish Catholic and her mother was an Italian Jew. Her father, a policeman, "...had been a bit of a dreamer, an idealist, a man who had never shot another human being in all his years on the force-." (Indemnity, 212) Her mother's flight from fascist Italy gave V.I. "...my scrappiness...she was a fighter..." (70) "I had my Italian mother's drive, and I try to emulate her insistence on fighting battles to the finish." (29) Although both of her parents are gone, V.I. realizes they would not approve of her profession. Even in their absence, V.I. realizes that it is their strength and energy that completes her.

V.I. "grew up on the South Side, Nineteenth and Commercial...lots of Polish steelworkers...The law of the jungle ruled in my high school-if you couldn't swing a mean toe or fist, you might well forget it." (70) Everything in her past is a part of her and she readily accepts and embraces it. The recognition that one's history is a living entity, part and parcel of what we all become, is a unique perspective in mystery fiction, although, certainly, Ross McDonald captures this same feeling in his detective

novels. A woman's role has always included the past as more than memory. Women seem to seek out the bits and pieces of their past in order to understand the present. Women tend to look back on their past seeking answers to their present behaviors. For example, women go into therapy far more often than men and in that therapy they find, in memory, possible answers to today's problems. V.I. does not deny her history, rather, she recognizes those elements of her past that create the woman she is today. This "modeling" validates one characteristic of womanhood.

Living conditions, including setting and food, reveal a woman who embraces her environment in a new way. Paretsky creates a rich setting through which the detective flows. This character really "sees" what surrounds her. As Warshawski drives along Lake Michigan "The night air was thick and damp....I could smell rotting alewives like a faint perfume on the heavy air....On shore traffic was heavy, the city moving restlessly, trying to breathe. It was July in Chicago." (Indemnity, 1) It is a vibrant landscape that pulsates to V.I.'s energy and it forms a perfect backdrop for her thoughts and actions. Observation skills are necessary to a detective and when combined with a woman's talent for detail, the setting becomes a tapestry of infinite possibilities. When V.I. personifies the city's suffocation, she is doing more than just providing setting;

she is demonstrating an awareness of detail that is so necessary to the solution of crime. A detective must notice every clue and motive, even male detectives do that. However, V.I. goes beyond the obvious; she notices the emotion that envelops a setting. Surely this talent can easily be transferred to the setting of a crime.

Another setting, of course, is the more personal one of the detective's living space. V.I. lives alone and likes it. Her apartment is always in disarray, dishes piled in the sink and when a man stays over she hurriedly brushes crumbs from the kitchen table. It is a place where she sleeps, eats and changes clothes. Clearly, this woman focuses somewhere outside her living space. The comfort she finds there is not in the accoutrements; the comfort is that she is alone there. This role presentation is new for women. Women, traditionally, have been the nesters and the home-makers, the firm foundation of our culture. When V.I.'s apartment is destroyed in a horrible fire in Killing Orders, the detective's concern with the loss of her home and possessions is minimal, except for the loss of her mother's red Venetian glasses, V.I.'s connection with her past. It devastates her when one glass is broken, however, the loss of her apartment is taken in stride. In V.I. we see that women must influence outside the confines of "home."



Another element of her living conditions is the relationship V.I. has with food. Women and food have a unique bond. What we put in our mouths is tied-up with self-esteem, image and success. Dieting and "eating healthy" is a woman's arena. Abstaining from "forbidden fruits" is somehow spiritually right, proof that one is truly a woman. Woman's role is to provide "good" food and live slim and free. "Never miss a meal." (Shapiro, 64) is V.I.'s motto. She relishes food with a deep and abiding desire. Her appetites include breakfasts of "coffee and some smoked herring," (Indemnity, 9) and broiled "sliced cheese, green peppers, and onions...on... pumpernickel." (25) This she rotates with salads and cream of wheat when guilt sets in. Food is a colorful and intrinsic part of her personality. There is no holier-than-thou attitude about food, rather, food represents V.I.'s chosen life-style. It takes on an earthy, almost sensual, enjoyment that may eventually result in guilt and indigestion but nonetheless relished for its instant gratification. Women become not paragons of virtue but humanly weak-willed and humanly understandable.

Since Warshawski often commits food sins, she turns to exercise for atonement. V.I. is a jogger, although not a faithful one. Running is something she endures rather than enjoys. Exercise is recognized as a necessity for health and career. "Four days out of seven, I try to force myself

to get some kind of exercise,...When thirty is a fond memory, the more days that pass without exercise, the worse you feel going back to it. Then, too, I'm undisciplined in a way that makes it easier to exercise than to diet, and the running helps keep my weight down. It doesn't mean I love it, though,..." (Indemnity, 9) There is nothing new about the role of exercise in our modern world. In fact, it has taken on cult status. However, V.I. does not kneel at the idol of physical fitness. Rather, she recognizes it for what it really is, a way to maintain weight and preparation for a job which can be physically demanding.

The physical demands of the job are evident in Paretsky's Indemnity Only. As V.I., held at gunpoint, yells at her captor, she "reached him in one spring and chopped his gun arm hard enough to break the bone. (Indemnity, 204) In a New York Times article, Marilyn Stasio states that Paretsky had

V.I. engage in more physical violence than the author felt comfortable with. "I've now developed enough self-confidence to see that I can do it my own way," she says, "Women are not interested in homoerotic sadism in the way men are. I don't feel that my readers need to learn how to fight any more than they need to learn how to have intercourse. So I just don't go in for

detailed descriptions of sex and violence anymore. V.I. sometimes beats up people, but now I make it a rule that she never kills anyone." (41)

This connection between sex and violence has always been a staple in detective fiction. When an author, a female, makes a conscious decision to downplay the role of explicit violence and sex then she not only changes certain elements of the genre, she changes the role of women in detective fiction. A woman is no longer the victim or the perpetrator of such demeaning acts, rather, a woman can employ her own devices. Obviously, in her first novel, Paretsky felt that she must make her female detective copy the males of the genre. Thank heaven she decided to create a new role rather than just parroting another. V.I.'s physicality is expressed in the necessity of the job rather than in the adherence to the detective genre, thus, creating a new role for women.

In considering all elements of lifestyle, certainly relationships with men cannot be overlooked. V.I. creates a new model for women because she treats men as equals and expects the same treatment from them. V.I. is divorced. She speaks of a fourteen-month marriage that "ended in an acrimonious divorce...some men can only admire independent women at a distance." (Indemnity, 24) This yen for independence presents women in a new light. Marilyn Stasio

says that it is "...important that the woman private eye work solo and keep her business dealings with men on a professional level. She must never lean on a man for protection or use her sexuality to manipulate." (2)

However, V.I. is not above companionable love affairs. She finds an attractive man tempting and sleeping with someone based on physical attraction alone often creates guilt but not abstinence. Sex without commitment has long been a male characteristic and some might consider it unattractive in women but the essential freedom it implies makes this characteristic symbolic of a new woman. It is also relevant to note that this PI does not rely on any man to help solve her cases. It is true that V.I. has male ties within the police department, namely Bobby Mallory, her father's old friend, but she usually disregards official warnings and there are no sudden rescues by the "men in blue." Men have a place in her life but that place is well-defined. The definition includes man as companion, confidant and informant but men are never rescuers.

V.I. defines herself as detective for several reasons. First, she has a law enforcement background but became disillusioned with the system. Warshawski worked for the public defender's office and then quit that power structure. The interesting note is why she quit this secure job. "I got disillusioned with working for the Public Defender. The

setup is pretty corrupt - you're never arguing for justice, always on points of law. I wanted to get out of it, but I still wanted to do something that would make me feel that I was working on my concept of justice, not legal point-scoring..." (Indemnity, 141) V.I. turns away from the system and in that turning away she says to women that it is all right to set one's foot on a new path, a path rarely trod by females. Intellectual and emotional indignation is not new to women, but when it becomes the spur that prods a woman into detective work, it gives women that certain kind of integrity that has often only been assigned to males.

Integrity pushes V.I. into detective work and the methodology she uses in that work defines another role. V.I. is a rather haphazard sleuth who uses instinct and chance to solve cases. "But my whole plan was based on a series of shots in the dark....I'd just have to add one more assumption to my agenda, and hope..." (Indemnity, 133) Sue Grafton, the creator of another female detective, Kinsey Millhone, presents a much more methodical sleuth who writes facts on index cards and displays them on a bulletin board. Millhone does a lot of paper work and boring surveillance, feeling that she is culturally prepared for this kind of labor because of all the tedious, mind-numbing tasks that have always been relegated to women. "The basic

characteristics of any good investigator are a plodding nature and infinite patience. Society has inadvertently been grooming women to this end for years." (Grafton, 27) Somehow both methods work. Women excel at using both styles. They have always employed instinct and "gut reaction." Feelings are the bailiwick of the female gender and it is refreshing to see them put to such an appropriate use. Routine and methodical tasks also have always been a part of a woman's life. The drudgery of housework and the unchanging procedure of office tasks seem to be excellent preparation for a new role, private investigation. Traditional roles are validated in a new profession.

Most basic to the grasp of this new role model for women is the examination of V.I.'s character traits and emotions. She combines traits of patience, impatience, introspection, caution, tension and, most significant, independence. V.I. exhibits those most basic feelings, however, one emotion which sets her apart from many genre detective types is that most feminine of traits, caring. That caring is there in V.I.'s relationships with her clients and witnesses and in her relationships with other women.

Being most human, V.I. demonstrates conflicting traits. In one instance, while questioning a key witness, she forces herself to keep silent, patiently letting the story unfold.

(Indemnity, 181) At almost the next moment, V.I. pounds "the steering wheel in impatience" while waiting in a traffic jam. (199) This duality is not ironic, rather it is a sign of a wholeness that gives V.I. dimension and life.

One trait rarely seen in detective fiction is introspection. Of course, there are introspective male detectives, Parker's Spencer for example, but they are few and far between. PI's tend to "act" and the thinking they employ seems to be limited to solving the case rather than solving themselves. While V.I. talks to a witness who opens up about a loss she has just experienced, the detective opens up concerning her own time of mourning. "All mourning takes a long time, and you can't rush it along. My dad's been dead ten years now, and every now and then, something comes up that lets me know that the mourning is still going on, and another piece of it is in place. The hard part doesn't last so long. While it is going on, though, don't fight it-the more you poke away the grief and anger, the longer it takes to sort it out." (Indemnity, 209) This discovery process is woman at her best. It is the inner discovery that denotes the fearless quest to dive within.

Being involved in a sometime dangerous career, V.I. must live with the caution and tension that come with the territory. When leaving her home, V.I. cautiously checks

the stairwell and the sidewalk before going into the street. Before getting into her car, she checks the backseat and the engine. (Indemnity, 105) There is no "devil-may-care" attitude when confronting danger. Females have been taught to be careful and here we see this trait put to a new use. Obviously, Warshawski lives on the edge but, perhaps, no more on the edge than the woman who must live with abuse and poverty and discrimination. The significant difference is that V.I. has chosen this life because it fits her natural bend for independence.

V.I.'s independence is often exemplified in encounters concerning her name and the reason she became a private investigator. "Known as Vic only to her friends, Victoria Iphigenia Warshawski uses her initials otherwise because patronizing her is more difficult when men don't know her first name." (Klein, 212) Her independent spirit makes her choose to muddy her identity so that she will not be prejudged. The very reason she chooses to be a PI is a need for independence. "'I'm the only person I take orders from, not a hierarchy of officers, aldermen, and commissioners.'" (163) The need to be her own boss, the need to take complete responsibility for her life and the need to direct her own destiny is a statement for all women. She has stepped out of traditional feminine roles and she has



stepped out of those new career roles that have recently opened up for women. Instead, she has chosen to follow a lonely road. In choosing that road, she says to women that they can have a completeness within themselves. That completeness means others are meant to complement one's life, not control it, which introduces a vital element in V.I.'s character, her relationships with other women and her great capacity for caring.

Caring has always been a woman's strength and it is no less a strength in the character of this female detective. In dealing with witnesses and victims, particularly women, V.I. reaches out with sympathy and empathy. V.I. does not hesitate to put her arm around the shoulder of a weeping victim. (Indemnity, 184) With another victim, who blames herself for her brother's death, V.I. "...patted her hands but didn't say anything else for a while. Finally, though, as the sobs quieted a bit, I said, 'Tell me what did happen, honey, and then we can try to figure out an answer to it.'" (108) Caring flows easily from this woman. It is not an emotion V.I. has discarded because it is too womanly or too weak. It is an essential complement to her work and it gives her an emotional bond with those she helps. Caring makes her stronger because caring involves going beyond the facts in a case. This emotional involvement has often been cited as a weakness in the female sex but V.I. accepts it

as a way to reach out and to receive.

This feminine sleuth often reaches out to other women. V.I. is very blunt about her feelings concerning friendship and women. "'I have some close women friends, because I don't feel they're trying to take over my turf. But with men, it always seems, or often seems, as though I'm having to fight to maintain who I am.'" (Indemnity, 141) V.I. often has to establish herself with men, particularly as a private detective. Often, men gape in disbelief when she introduces her profession. This disbelief is frequently followed by laughter. At this point, V.I. usually has to demonstrate her toughness through tough talk or actual physical aggression. Women, on the other hand, seem to find her profession interesting but not threatening. Dr. Lotty Herschel is V.I.'s closest friend. "I'd known Lotty for years...about fifty, I thought, but with her vivid, clever face and trim, energetic body it was hard to tell....She held fierce opinions on a number of things, and put them to practice in medicine." (Indemnity, 73) Lotty is more than a friend though. She not only patches V.I.'s wounds but she is a sounding board and, most important, she is a moral exemplar who influences the very core of V.I.'s life. Essentially, V.I. Warshawski does know who she is because she accepts herself and because she accepts other women. It is time that women stop seeing other women as

threats and competition and V.I. can lead the way down that path.

V.I. Warshawski's life is full of nuances that respond to analysis and interpretation. She opens up the possibilities and opportunities available to all women. Of course, we are not all detective material but in V.I.'s lifestyle, beliefs, and behaviors is the key to completeness. V.I. is not a perfect woman. She is a role model because she offers the strength that women need. It is this strength that will complete women. It is not a strength found in success, power or money. It is a strength found in the affirmation of what women have always possessed. V.I. says that each woman has the potential to find within herself those qualities that will elevate her to a new status, a status worthy of respect and emulation. That respect, in part, is due to the fact that V.I. was born into a time and place which accepted and welcomed her.

V.I. Warshawski and Miss Jane Marple  
Comparatively Speaking  
A Product of Her Time

V.I. Warshawski is a role model for women. She can be that role model because she was created in a time and place that encouraged her development. In the America of the 1970's and 1980's, women were allowed to enter new territories. Much of this expansion was due to feminism, a realization that women are able to do much that men can do. However, much more than that realization, it is the admission that women should be able to do anything that men can do. As a natural development, if women in the real world can enter into new fields then that growth was mirrored in the fiction that we read. So, the fictional private detective, aggressive and independent, enters the scene, a creation of her time and place. This development is clearer still if a comparison is made with another female detective, born in another time and place. V.I. Warshawski, the Chicago detective of today, is as much a product of her time and place as Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple is the product of the restrictive British society of the 1930's and 1940's.

Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple is the quintessential amateur detective. Her character is the stereotype for the elderly British spinster who snoops

until her intuition solves the crime. However, Miss Marple is much more than that. First, she is a reflection of what the British society expected of women during the 1930's and 40's. Second, she is a direct ancestor of the American female private detective who appears in the 1970's, a woman who also reflects the woman's role of her time. Embodied in Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski, this modern American woman demonstrates startling similarities to her elderly British counterpart in addition to understandable contrasts.

In considering these comparisons and contrasts, it is pertinent to look at several facets of the British and the American representative of the fictional female detective. These mystery genre characters come into clearer perspective, first, by considering the inception of Marple and Warshawski and their respective insights and career choices. Other aspects: detection techniques, methodology analysis, physical aggression, male relationships, and personal insight, reveal two fictional characters who depict the all too real world which spawned them.

Born into a British world, Agatha Christie created one of the first female detectives. "Agatha Christie was just a mid-thirtyish young woman when the character of Jane Marple was forming in her mind. I find it distinctly praiseworthy that, for her, a true heroine was not bound by cliches of

age or physical attractiveness." (Rader, 65) In other words, Christie did not have to rely on youth and physical beauty in creating a popular fictional female detective. So begins the life of Miss Jane Marple. This elderly spinster comes into existence as the rare female amateur detective and a representative of what was expected of the English woman of her time. A female detective, whether amateur or professional, was rare in the 1930's and 1940's mainly because "...employment discrimination on the basis of sex has barred women from jobs as police detectives or private investigators until fairly recently." (Reddy, 6) Miss Marple simply did not have any options open to her except as the village snoop who sees and hears all and who also possesses powerful intuitive insight. This conforms to the conventional attitudes of the British toward elderly spinsters who use the advantages of woman's thinking to infringe into the lives of others. Of course, in the case of Miss Marple, this enables her to solve crimes. It is relevant to note that Miss Marple must hide shrewdness and the awareness of potential, sure evidence of a sharp mind, behind the facade of an irritating snoop. (Reddy, 19) The town constable relates, "'I really believe that wizened-up old maid thinks she knows everything there is to know. And hardly been out of this village all her life. Preposterous. What can she know of life?'" (Christie, 66)

Miss Marple knows plenty about life but because she is appears to be the British stereotype, a meddling old woman, she is ridiculed and doubted. She fits the expectations of her time.

V.I. Warshawski also fits the expectations of her time. During the 70's, we saw women doing so much that fiction had to expand. (Paretsky, A Woman's Eye,x) Women were breaking through into new territories and fiction had to reflect that expansion. It expanded by adding the female private detective to the mystery genre. This new career choice for women speaks of a time that permits women more freedom and choice. "The new female sleuths are more intellectually vital, more physically capable and more likely to hold down legitimate jobs." (Stasio, 3) These women do not dabble in crime. They are professionals and they must work in order to live. In addition to being working detectives, they also reflect the political activism of the time. (Ames, 66) The most important part of what they are is that they are women, women who must constantly be on the defensive, seeking out and confronting the injustices and inequities of the world. This detective "sees her work as more important than a social engagement" with a man. V.I Warshawski relates such an incident when she explains that her marriage failed because her husband felt that "their relationship should

take precedence over work in the woman's life, but not necessarily in his own." (Reddy, 106-107) V.I.'s husband expects her to extinguish her own independent fires, warming herself only by his flame.

This expression of independence seems a natural lead-in into the idea of feminism, one of the most important expressions of V.I. Warshawski's time. Klein states that "Sara Paretsky comes closer than any other novelist to writing a feminist private-eye novel." (215) Sara Paretsky, the author herself, writes that "female detectives...mirror the struggles many American women have gone through in the last twenty years." (A Woman's Eye, xi) That struggle is a conscious choice. V.I. Warshawski chooses to always behave according to feminist principles. Two representative examples of this choice are found in Deadlock. The crime is murder to cover embezzlement. A shipping company executive chooses to embezzle money in order to support a lavish lifestyle and his ballerina-lover chooses to aid the embezzlement by seducing V.I.'s cousin Boom Boom, who also works for the shipping company. Along the way, as Boom Boom gets closer and closer to their discovery, he has a convenient "accident." These examples are in the questions that V.I., and the reader, must ask. First, what makes a man value a shipping company over a human life? Second, what makes a woman prize economic



security over love or integrity? (Reddy, 11-12) The feminist critique here lies in the male-dominated society and the sacrifices made for material power and success. When V.I. asks these questions then she is criticizing a world that has been in the hands of men for too long. As meaningful as this example of feminism might be, there is no better example of the importance of feminism to V.I. Warshawski than in the subject of her name.

"This struggle over the name of the detective acquires increasing significance with each repetition, eventually coming to stand for larger struggles, most especially women's fight for equality and autonomy..." (Reddy, 90) V.I. notes that, professionally, men are referred to as Mr., while women are Jane, Sally, Meg. Her initials safeguard her against this demeaning practice. "Women exist in a world of first names in business. Lois, Janet, Mr. Phillips, Mr. Warshawski. That's why I use my initials." (Deadlock, 76) However, this dedication to feminism does not stop with her name.

"As a feminist," V.I., "devotes considerable thought to women's roles and their treatment in explicit gender-role terms." (Klein, 212) One of these roles is the oppression caused by powerful, male-dominated institutions. In Killing Orders, several women, deprived of power by the Roman Catholic Church, unknowingly contribute to murder in

the misconceived notion that they are serving that same church. One woman is even an accessory to her own daughter's death. This horrifying reality speaks of women who serve a church run by male bishops and cardinals and in doing so they destroy their own lives, a strong feminist statement. (Reddy, 103) That statement is that the age-old male-dominated society, represented by the church, requires women to sacrifice, both ceremonially and literally, to their power. This mention of a such a society reminds us of that British world in which Miss Jane Marple dwells, a world where an elderly spinster must constantly remain in her place, a world where an elderly spinster must constantly appease men.

The world of Miss Marple expects a certain role of their women. A telling example of these expectations lies within the reality of Agatha Christie's own life. Ironically, during the 1920's, Christie "wrested total artistic control for production from her publishers," surely a dramatic and unheard of action on the part of a woman. Yet, "she often told reporters that she regarded herself as a wife first, a writer second." (Paretsky, A Woman's Eye, x) At her death, Christie's residuals brought in over a million pounds a year, yet, she relegates herself to the woman's role that is expected of her by her place and time. This same role is seen in the fictional world Christie creates for Miss Jane Marple.

In the world of the mystery, women heroes were few and far between. When writers did create women detectives they made sure that these female characters did not upset the male apple cart. Miss Marple fills the bill. First, she is elderly and a spinster, thus, immediately she is at the bottom of a highly structured society because she has no male defender and because she is not able to use youthful attractiveness. Second, although she is sharp and perceptive, she modestly refuses to accept credit for solving a crime, often deferring to the closest male. She has to take on the invisibility of the female, unmarried, un-young domestic. Third, the essential fact that Miss Marple is an amateur detective adds to her location on the fringes of society, since she is neither married nor young, making her acceptable in her world because she does not threaten the system. (Paretsky, A Woman's Eye, x) If we view Miss Marple in conjunction with her masculine world and if we view V.I. Warshawski in conjunction with her feminist world, there are clear and dramatic contrasts. However, if we view these two women comparatively then we can find startling similarities, one of which is their detection techniques.

What is fascinating about Marple's crime detection is its comparison to the devices of V.I. Warshawski. But first, Miss Marple. "The amateur is allowed extraordinary

scope for error, foolishness, and luck as she solves a mystery; she has no client, no responsibility, and no commitment to investigation as a profession." (Klein, 5-6) Since Miss Marple is allowed the freedom of an amateur, she uses her hobby to alert her "...to every human foible." (Rader, 65) Her love for village gossip, an acceptable womanly trait of her time and place, and her almost photographic memory are her detecting devices. (Keating, 198) With these two invaluable talents and her ability to make unique associations, there is not a criminal alive who can escape her. "'I wish you'd solve the case, Miss Marple, like you did the way Miss Wetherby's gill of pickled shrimps disappeared. And all because it reminded you of something quite different about a sack of coals.'" (Christie, 76) Miss Marple's abilities are inherent in the same traits that are always attributed to women; gossip, observation and intuition, therefore, she can be accepted and tolerated. Her powers of observation are worth a closer look.

"..She leans...upon the sort of sixth sense that reads truth or falsehood in people's eyes...sees guilt in the set of their mouths, recognized worlds of meaning in their manner or deportment." (Keating, 201) Her keen intelligence sees things that others do not see. Again, this is perfectly acceptable in her world for this is a

womanly trait. As long as she only uses her "womanly wiles" then she is safe, and she is sometimes even worthy of praise. The vicar "stared at the old lady, feeling an increased respect for her mental powers. Her keen wits had seen what we had failed to perceive." (Christie, 78) A feeling of respect can also be directed toward Miss Marple's modern cousin, V.I. Warshawski, for she too uses her womanly wiles but she is allowed to augment them with feminism.

"My theory of detection resembles Julia Child's approach to cooking: Grab a lot of ingredients from the shelves, put them in a pot and stir, and see what happens." (Orders, 58) Even V.I. uses feminine images to describe her detecting technique much like Marple's detecting devices are also distinctly feminine. Marple uses the ruse of bird watching in order to focus her ever-ready binoculars on suspects. An even closer parallel between Warshawski and Marple is revealed in another V.I. quote. "These are all assumptions. I have no proof at the moment that could be used in court, but I have the proof that comes from watching human relationships and reactions." (Indemnity, 163) V.I., too, is an observer, closely watching body language and facial expression in order to deduce and detect. She still relies on those age-old techniques which make Miss Marple acceptable in her time, however, when combined with new feminist techniques, V.I.

Warshawski can use those techniques long used by men.

The new feminist techniques employed by V.I. are simply techniques that American male detectives have been using for years. First, she is aggressively pushy. She is not afraid to put her life in danger, whether it be questioning a tough thug or breaking into an office in order to get evidence. Second, V.I. is physically aggressive, although still physically vulnerable. She is in top physical shape and she can kick and jab with the best of them. "Whirling reflexively, I snapped my knee and kicked in one motion, delivering directly onto my assailant's exposed shinbone. He grunted and backed off but came back with a solid punch aimed at my face. I ducked and took it on the left shoulder." (Indemnity, 49) V.I. is aggressive and assertive, and that makes her a target which puts her life in danger.

Miss Marple's life is rarely in danger because her aggression takes a purely feminine form, suspicion. "'But I always find it prudent to suspect everybody just a little. What I say is, you really never know, do you?'" (Christie, 119) While V.I. is free to use new traits, among them physical aggression, to accomplish her goals, Miss Marple must employ a more restrictive aggressive trait. The freedom to employ aggressive traits comes with V.I.'s time and place. Due to the feminist movement, this female

private detective can follow new pathways, pathways which were not open to Jane Marple in her tightly constricted world. However, whether the world is constricted or open, the analytical mind seems to have a place in it.

In the British world of Miss Marple, a female with an analytical mind might only be able to use this talent in planning social functions. Miss Marple, however, finds new ways to use the female analytical mind. The village vicar says, "Of all the ladies in my congregation, I consider her (Marple) by the far the shrewdest. Not only does she see and hear practically everything that goes on, but she draws amazingly neat and apposite deductions from the facts that come under her notice." (Christie, 191) For example, Marple is able to deduce the purpose and destination of anyone who comes down the neighboring path simply by noting the speed at which they walk and the expression upon their face. Likewise, V.I. Warshawski's analytical talents allow her to studiously peruse complicated shipping company audits, determining a major reduction in premium, proving that the business is failing. (Deadlock, 226) This seems to demonstrate that the feminine analytical mind has a place in two worlds. The British world of Miss Marple allows, and even recognizes, her analytical accomplishments as long as she stays in her place. If she suddenly decided to hang up her own PI shingle and go into business for

herself, however, there would be a public outcry. On the other hand, V.I. Warshawski's analytical mind can be put to professional use. Although a female private detective might be rare, she is able to get clients and earn a living. She is able to do this because this time and this place allows her the freedom and independence that is denied to Miss Marple. Marple is denied that freedom by a male-dominated society while V.I. is grudgingly allowed to operate in a man's world.

Since both of these detectives must operate in a man's world, it is an enlightening revelation to compare how these women react to men. Both women hold men at a distance, however, Marple must hide her feelings about men behind a facade while Warshawski views men through a feminist perspective. Even though Jane Marple often bests policemen and constables, she must obscure her feelings about their incompetence. "Miss Marple shook her head slowly and pityingly. The pity was, I think, for two full grown men being so foolish as to believe such a story." (Christie, 64) She cannot verbally berate these men, pointing out their weaknesses, simply because they are men. It is significant to note that she has no compunction about "speaking up" to women about their faults. In Marple's world, men are to be treated respectfully and with deference, thus, she must hide her disapproval behind sly



nods and pitying looks. In direct contrast, V.I. Warshawski has difficulty containing her rage when a lover/informant/client becomes overly protective because it reminds her of a typical woman's role. "I was clenching and unclenching my fists, trying to keep rage under control. Protection. The middle-class dream. My father protecting Gabriella (V.I.'s mother) in a Milwaukee Avenue bar. My mother giving him loyalty and channeling her fierce creative passions into a South Chicago tenement in gratitude."

(Orders, 188) The modern development of feminism, plus her own personal psychology, makes V.I. acutely aware of the age-old protective instinct on the part of a man. If she let a man protect her then she would be giving up a part of herself. If she lived to serve and complete a man then she would have to give up those energies and talents which make her an individual. Both of these female detectives must live in a man's world but each must use different methods in dealing with men because of their time and their place. They are both relatively successful in their dealings with men because of their insight and understanding.

That insight extends into other arenas. It is that both of these women have authentic insights into themselves. There is a basic honesty and forthrightness in the way they consider themselves. "Warshawski in Killing Orders mocks both herself and the hard-boiled tradition when she longs

for a bodyguard and then mentally corrects herself: 'Of course, a hard-boiled detective is never scared. So what I was feeling couldn't be fear. Perhaps nervous excitement at the treats in store for me.'" (Reddy, 96) Miss Marple reveals the same type of thinking when she realizes that she may have made a mistake. "'I must go home and think things out thoroughly. Do you know, I believe I have been extremely stupid - almost incredibly so.'" (Christie, 198) Although V.I.'s statement is sarcastic and Miss Marple's straight, both reveal personal insight. It is doubtful that this similarity can be attributed to where and when these women exist. Rather, it is a direct link between two women who choose to lead their lives alone and who choose to involve their lives with crime. One chooses crime because she is fascinated by motives, suspects and agenda while the other is involved with crime because of the chance to right wrongs and establish justice (and, of course, because it is a pretty interesting and independent way to earn a living). In many ways, Miss Marple and V.I. Warshawski are not separate entities but are, in essence, two sides of the same coin. Even though they come from different times and places, they employ a common methodology and they express common insights into crime.

Here in the 1990's it would be easy to relegate Miss Jane Marple to a stereotype, the elderly British spinster and snoop. It would also be easy to identify V.I. Warshawski as a natural product of feminism. Both assessments would be correct because they each represent their own time and place. The British system of the 30's and 40's produced Miss Marple just as the woman's movement of the 1970's gave birth to V.I. Warshawski. In Miss Marple's world, a female detective could only be accepted if she also presented a nonthreatening persona, elderly and unmarried. She doesn't threaten the status quo because she is safe. V.I. Warshawski glories in upsetting the status quo. Her position is one of strength and influence because she has been empowered by the feminist movement. This does not mean, however, that V.I. does not have to struggle. She still exists in a man's world and must continually battle that same power in which Miss Marple more peacefully exists.

So both women seem to face patriarchal societies, although V.I. has more freedom to establish a profession in an otherwise male-dominated field. Miss Marple must conform to the expectations of her time; she cannot step out of the tight circle which defines what an elderly spinster can do. V.I. often is first judged as a woman and then she is ridiculed when men find out she is a detective. Each has a patriarchal society which wants them to behave

as a woman should. V.I. has the freedom to be aggressive and assertive, although, in reality, Miss Marple may be just as aggressive and assertive but she must hide it behind a "safe" facade. There are other startling similarities as both women are independent, analytical, and insightful. Even their attitudes toward men ring with similar feelings. The major contrast between these female detectives lies in the use of physical aggression. V.I. can battle with the best of them while Miss Marple would probably perish at the thought.

This writer began her research expecting a series of dramatic contrasts between these two fictional female detectives from different times and places. Instead, startling similarities could not be ignored. In her own way, V.I. is a direct descendant of Miss Jane Marple. They share much. Marple broke ground for V.I. Warshawski who, perhaps in sixty years, may be the stereotype for the feminist detective.

After a comparison of these two female sleuths from different times and a recognition that each is a product of her time, it seems relevant to look at that most recent female detective and the elements of her existence. Let us begin by considering some questions. Is the female private detective viable in an urban setting where once only her hard-boiled male counterpart roamed? Can the private detective have a definite moral agenda?

After attempting to answer these questions, one more aspect about this fictional character, V.I. Warshawski, must be discovered. Since the fictional female private detective is an American invention, is there a cultural base which caused this creation? Does this female private detective fulfill American characteristics? It is in the mean streets of detective fiction where we investigate a setting which, in part, defines this woman's existence.

## Walking The Mean Streets

Historically, the mean streets of detective fiction are inhabited only by men. For many years, the urban setting, in all its wicked sordidness, can only be handled by the American male. In the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the city is the dark and evil place where the lone private detective wages war against those malevolent powers which seek to destroy and maim. These powers range from the lowly denizens of the criminal underworld to the mighty and powerful of the upper class. But no matter the evil perpetrators, it is only the male private eye who dares to roam the mean streets of fictional urban America.

It is not until the late 1970's that a new detective appears on the scene. She is just as hard-boiled as her elder brothers but the city where she roams is not the epitome of evil, rather, it is the modern urban landscape, pitted and flawed as usual, but filled with the dynamism and the vitality of change. Her city is loved while those Hammett and Chandler heroes hate the city from which they cannot escape. It is in the novels of Sara Paretsky that the city of the private eye seems to change. Her female detective, V.I. Warshawski, sees Chicago through the eyes of a woman and she appreciates the city's urbanness rather than condemning it as those Hammett and Chandler males did before her. In the contrast between these two

presentations of the city, it is relevant to look at the importance of the city in detective fiction, the villification of the city in American literature, the negative image of the city as presented by Hammett and Chandler and the energized portrait of V.I. Warshawski's Chicago as painted by Sara Paretsky. Initially, it is the importance of the setting to the mystery novel that must be determined.

Perhaps the best summation of the importance of setting to the mystery comes from P.D. James, the popular British mystery writer.

Setting, of course, is important in the novel, but I think in a mystery it is particularly important because it can enhance atmosphere, it can influence character, and it can influence events. It can also provide a contrast between order, normality, decency and goodness and the extraordinary contaminating crime." (Herbert, 30)

The last statement is particularly true of the British mystery where the serenity of the countryside is often in direct contrast to murder and mayhem. However, in the American mystery, the setting becomes "the source and extension of the crimes reported," (Porter, 190) especially in those hard-boiled detective novels of the 30's and 40's. Of course, this setting is the city and that landscape has a unique perspective in American literature.

In American literature, our dreams and myths are inherent in our environment. Our literature reflects our dreams and myths and "in the twentieth century...its implicit theme has so often been the shattering of the pastoral dream on the concrete surfaces of the urban wasteland." (Porter, 198) In Europe, the city is often considered the hub of civilization, but, in America, we created no such myth. Our myth revolves around the frontier and the great expanses that send us always searching forward. It is the agrarian that fosters virtue and goodness; it is in the countryside where the American dream is realized. "The frontier and pastoral myths have never been matched by an equally generous, countervailing urban myth...city life could be regarded not as the norm but as a fall from the norm...." (200) In our literature, our suspicions, our prejudices and our fears are embodied in the treatment of the city.

The city holds within its boundaries all that is wrong. First, "the city is a conglomeration of individuals without a sense of community, where people become lost or lose themselves among the faceless." (Hamilton, 26) In Stephen Crane's Maggie, A Girl of the Streets, the young heroine loses herself to the evils of prostitution when she comes in contact with the urban. Second, "The city housed many of the vast wave of foreign immigrants who threatened, in the eyes of many, to dilute true Americanness." (26) How



many read Upton Sinclair's The Jungle and see not the evils of the meat packing industry but, instead, see the city as a dangerous hive breeding foreign bees? Third, in the 20's and 30's, the city becomes "also the world of the flapper, the gangster and the party machine - each a travesty of some aspect of American values." (26) There is no better presentation of this corrosion than in the detective novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler for in their cities "crimes are committed frequently and with relative ease; murder, blackmail, fraud, extortion, bribery, theft, and assault follow in rapid succession..." (Hamilton, 129) In this labyrinth of corruption, only the lone detective stands witness.

The detectives of Hammett and Chandler find their cities beyond redemption. "Resources and space are limited. The inhabitants are dwarfed by the buildings which block their horizons and intrude, drab and ugly, on their lives." (26) The city is their only recourse for they seem to have no other place to go. These lone fictional detectives are often compared to another literary character, the Western hero. Just as the Western hero can clean up a town so the private eye can exert his will upon the urban landscape but there is one significant difference; the cowboy can move on into that vast frontier; the PI "observes a moral wasteland and, with no 'territory' to flee to he retreats into himself." (Grella, 419) In

that retreat, he seethes in desperation at the breakdown of those American values which flourish in the countryside but seem to wither and die within the city.

One essayist who comes to grips with this view of the city is John Paterson in his essay "A Cosmic View of the Private Eye." Concerning Hammett, he writes, "I think, with so many of his literary contemporaries, (Hammett is) protesting the horrors of a savagely competitive society, the horrors of an urban-industrial civilisation."

(Hamilton, 29) Hammett, like Chandler, sets his novels in the urban sprawl where the city has replaced America's last frontier. (Grella, 421) So Hammett's short fat Op in Red Harvest battles the city alone like the frontier hero who takes on the town singlehandedly. (415) The city is called Personville which is soon corrupted into Poisonville. The physical description itself speaks of the city's nature. "The city wasn't pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they had been successful at first....The result was an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains...." (Porter, 197) Reflecting the physical ugliness of the city is the crime and corruption which feeds off the innocent, leaving them no where to turn for the officials and the politicians are just as evil as those criminals who run rampant through the streets. (198) Of course, little Op can bring this city to its knees but he

cannot redeem it. Even he becomes infected by its horrors when he feels himself "going blood-simple like the natives." (Grella, 419) There is no cure for the city and even after one of the most notorious bloodbaths in literary history, Poisonville is "as essentially corrupt as when the Op started." (Hamilton, 28) Just as Hammett portrays the malevolent city, so too, does Raymond Chandler.

"As Chandler put it, 'Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective...must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything.'" (Grella, 424) Chandler's mean streets are usually in Los Angeles but he does not measure them in the same way that Hammett sees his streets. Hammett sees Poisonville as simply the way things are; only the city can produce this corruption. Chandler, on the other hand, sees the urban corruption through comparison. Phillip Marlowe, Chandler's detective, remembers the old Los Angeles, a simple almost country-like setting where things were better. "I used to like this town....A long time ago. There were trees along Wilshire Boulevard. Beverly Hills was a country town....Los Angeles was just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but good hearted and peaceful." (Hamilton, 156) In The Little Sister, Chandler seems to theorize that when the city is infected by a "neon-and-plastic civilization," then it falls from the grace that ruralness imbues. Evil comes with paved

highways and steel high-rises and only the detective wages war against the blight. California is a land that has been raped and pillaged and it is in the city where sin rages. "Instead of a fertile valley, he (Marlowe) discovers a cultural cesspool...." (Grella, 421) But even though the detective fights against the evil, there is no hope; the city is doomed to wallow in the pits of hell. Again from The Little Sister, Captain Gregory verbalizes the terrible anxiety that is created by the city. "'Being a copper I like to see the law win, I'd like to see the flashy well-dressed mugs like Eddie Mars spoiling their manicures in the rock quarry at Folsom....You and me both lived too long to think I'm likely to see it happen. Not in this town, not in any town half this size, in any part of this wide, green and beautiful U.S.A.'" (Hamilton, 157) Of course, the implication is that justice will never be found in any city because the city has lost the rural goodness where space and greenness prevails. That American myth of rural superiority still prevails but there is another myth about cities that deserves notice.

"In 1950 Chandler published an important essay, 'The Simple Art of Murder,' in which he denounced the British, feminine current in mystery writing. Hammett, he claims, had purged the genre, made it American by making it 'hard-boiled.' Hard boiled meant real, male, and populist:

....the American hard-boiled detective novel was inspired, from its debut, by scorn for women...." (Kaplan, 28) The only women who appear in these hard-boiled novels are either whining innocents or tainted vixens. It is clear that a woman can only be a victim of the city; she cannot handle the evil forces within. She must rely upon the stalwart male detective who will either save her or discard her. It will not be until the 1970's that a new detective will appear on the scene and that PI will not only be female, she will embrace the city in which she lives.

Sara Paretsky loves Chicago and that love is expressed through V.I. Warshawski and this private eye's view of an energetic but flawed city. Chicago's energy is expressed in the throbbing pulses of the people who live there and in the flaws which seem to dominate everything. These flaws are the problems which plague every American city: crime, pollution, urban blight, and official negligence. It is through these flaws that Paretsky reveals her true feelings for this city. One might ask, "How does this view differ from that of Hammett and Chandler? They, too, realized the flawed city." However, their flaws are deeper; they are a pervasive evil that infects all within. The flaws of Paretsky's Chicago are not evil; they are realistic expressions of modern urbanness. V.I.'s view is more like Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago."

Come and show me another city with lifted head  
singing so proud to be alive and coarse and  
strong and cunning.

Through her eyes, the imperfect city is not the corruption of the American dream, rather, Chicago is a representative of all of the ills that infect our society. Hammett and Chandler hated the city and its wicked influence while Paretsky loves it much like a mother loves a wayward child; she does not turn away from or abandon the child just because it behaves badly. She stays close by, doing her best to combat the ills that infect her child, knowing that, at times, she will accomplish little. V.I. Warshawski stays close by, loving that flawed city, and unafraid to walk its mean streets.

"The right of women to wander through the city, which Paretsky claims for her hard-boiled detective, V.I. Warshawski, was the subject of musings by Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 classic The Second Sex that are regrettably still pertinent today. Girls are kept at home, 'little mothers,' she observes, while their brothers are free to wander the city." (Kaplan, 26) V.I. Warshawski does not stay at home; rather, she confronts Chicago on its own terms; she walks, runs, jogs and stumbles through this city, never once considering that this might not be the place for her. Sara Paretsky, herself, knows that Chicago

is her city even if there is a very flawed beginning.

Paretsky's introduction to Chicago is a dismal South Side-six room apartment she shares with some roommates. It is a cockroach infested dwelling which rents for a hundred sixty-five a month. She recounts one harrowing night. "We killed two hundred and fifty of them one night, spraying the oven where they nested and stomping on them when they scampered out. You'd have to be twenty-one to count the bodies." (Anthony, 175) In the same apartment, during Chicago's deadly winter, the temperature never registers more than fifty-five; the city code says it has to be sixty-two. When the city inspectors arrive, their thermometer registers fifteen degrees higher than Paretsky's. She would later learn that her landlady is a precinct captain for the Daley machine. (176) Certainly this is not an auspicious beginning. First, she encounters the horrors of insect infestation and then she is confronted by the urban political machine. However, this does not turn her off the city, rather, it seems to vitalize her, making her a real urban child and making her create a female detective who claims her right to the city. Not only does the city vitalize Paretsky, it probably teaches her a great deal. After all, when V.I. tackles huge institutions and the injustices they create, surely that is a reflection of Paretsky's own small experience with a

corrupt city machine.

Paretsky says of her city, "When you live in a place and it really gets into your blood, it takes over your imagination. The reason I write about Chicago is because I know and I love this city really passionately." (Herbert, 31) V.I. Warshawski is a true reflection of that love. It is not the love represented in the "romance of the loner knight that Marlowe and Spenser like to pretend."

(Burn Marks, 29) There is no romance in her recognition of her city and its flaws.

Central to the problems of any modern American city is crime and its hold on everyone. V.I. recognizes that even a seemingly peaceful area can hide the presence of crime. "Perched on top were tiny bungalows and liquor stores. A peaceful urban sight, but not a place to stop in the middle of the night. A lot of unwary tourists have been mugged close to the Dan Ryan. (expressway)" (Deadlock, 86) V.I. is very aware of the crime within her city, after all, she earns her living from that crime. Occasionally, she rants and raves against this element that makes her city so flawed but she doesn't see the city as the embodiment of evil. Even the city morgue, that receptacle of so much crime, is viewed with cynical practicality. "Some practical bureaucrat put the county morgue on the Near West Side, the area with Chicago's highest murder



rate--it saves wear and tear on the meatwagons having to cart corpses only a few short blocks." (Burn Marks, 101) In her world, crime is a matter of course and it isn't the city that produces the crime, rather, the crime seems to be a pollutant that infects but does not destroy. As pervasive as robbery and murder might be, there are other crimes, crimes produced by a negligent and money-hungry power structure, that take up much of V.I.'s time.

In Blood Shot, that power structure has produced a pollutant that literally eats away at her city.

It's been over a century since the Army Corps of Engineers and George Pullman decided to turn the sprawling marshes between Lake Calumet and Lake Michigan into an industrial center. It wasn't just Pullman, of course--Andrew Carnegie, Judge Gary, and a host of lesser barons all played a part, working on it for sixty or seventy years. They took an area about four miles square and filled it with dirt, with clay dredged from Lake Calumet, with phenols, oils, ferrous sulfide and thousands of other substances you not only never hear of, you never want to. (Blood Shot, 47)

Here the city is not the perpetrator; it is the victim. The greed and negligence of industrial giants have turned at least part of the city into a rotting corpse. The evil

that dwells within her city is the evil that pervades our entire world, the pollution that is just as much a part of the rural as it is a part of the urban.

Further negligence is represented by the urban blight that seems to scar every city. Whether the blight is caused by a lack of funds to save our cities or the failure of urban renewal, it is not the city itself that creates such blight; the blight is a reflection of a society that, too, is in real need of attention and repair. In Burn Marks, Deadlock, Bitter Medicine, and Blood Shot, Sara Paretsky, through the eyes of V.I. Warshawski, sees an urban scene that seems to be crumbling away. Whether it be South Chicago which seems to be "frozen somewhere around the time of World War II" (Blood, 29) or the lone survivor of urban renewal, a building which stands alone amidst blocks of rubble (Medicine, 121) or the deserted auto wrecks that line Halsted where her friend has a free clinic (Deadlock, 118) or the faded facade of a once great hotel (Burn, 31), the blighted city seems more an abandoned orphan than a vicious villain.

In many ways, it is abandonment that seems to be the real evil in Paretsky's city. The condemnation of the city, as seen through Hammett and Chandler, is replaced by a real sympathetic understanding that our cities have fallen victim to negligence. When V.I.'s friend's free

clinic is ravaged by "right-to-lifers," the street is littered with broken glass, rocks, and bricks. "So the city would incur some cost--they'd have to send a crew around to clean up the mess. Eventually. In this neighborhood it wouldn't happen right away." (Medicine, 105) Nothing seems to "happen right away" if one lives in the wrong neighborhood. Uptown Chicago has been deserted even by the "reform-minded Harold Washington" (the now deceased mayor of Chicago) for only a few of the streetlights function as V.I. drives through the streets. (Medicine, 145) This lonely and forlorn Chicago bears witness to all the cities that droop and sag under the weight of negligence. The evil force at work here is not the city itself. The evil is in the absence of change. The evil is that we have allowed certain areas in every city to lie dormant simply because they are no longer needed.

However, this does not mean that change does not occur in our cities. V.I., herself, is experiencing a change that is infecting many cities. "My apartment is the large, inexpensive top of a three-flat on Halsted, north of Belmont. Every year the hip young professionals in Lincoln Park move a little closer, threatening to chase me farther north with their condominium conversions, their wine bars and their designer running clothes." (Deadlock, 47) In

Paretsky's latest novel, Guardian Angel, the yuppies invade V.I.'s neighborhood. The weird old lady down the street, after suffering a heart attack, is quickly carted off to the hospital by the local yups and her beloved dogs are sent to the pound for destruction. As she lies in a coma, the resident upwardly mobile gains her power of attorney so he can have her house. V.I., who glories in the great varieties of her city, sees this as destructive as the urban blight that plagues other areas of her city. When these yuppies take over a neighborhood they displace people. While they renovate and remodel, they push people out of their homes and send them God knows where. So V.I. must confront all that which makes a city suffer, whether it be the invasion of young professionals or the negligent abandonment by the powers that be.

As aware as V.I. is of the suffering of her city, there is an energy and a vitality that infuses itself within her and that feeling is the vibrancy of the people. To her, the "restless flow of people always out on nameless errands in a great city" (Deadlock, 85) is like the life-blood that flows through her veins. The noise of the city is like the beating of her own heart. "...the lakefront on warm nights. Radios blared. Children shrieked in the background behind necking couples. Bands of youths with six-packs and reefer stationed themselves with fishing

gear on the rocks, prepared to intercept any passing young women." (Medicine, 88) In recognizing the vitality of her city, V.I. embraces it, flaws and all. Unlike Hammet's and Chandler's PIs, the city energizes her. Chicago does not weigh her down with fatalistic despair. It seems that Op and Marlowe deny their cities, seeing only dark corruption. Warshawski also sees the dark corruption but she also feels the city's life force.

It would be interesting to arrange a meeting between V.I. and those Hammett and Chandler detectives. Op and Marlowe would berate their cities and yearn for the goodness of the countryside. They would continue walking the mean streets, trying to save those who have fallen victim to the evil city. They would probably advise V.I. to stay off the streets, to go someplace safe and peaceful. V.I. would stare in disbelief and then laugh at these prophets of doom. She would defend her city in all its flawed splendor. She would speak of the negligence and the abandonment and she would describe the energy of its people. She would tell them that they are only purveyors of the myth of the evil American city and she would tell them that she does not believe in myths. And the last thing she would tell them? "The mean streets of detective fiction are not intended for males alone. The streets can echo the click of high-heels as well as the flap of wing-tips. In

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the city, there is a place for woman." That rightful place must be earned and V.I. Warshawski earns that place because she has a strong moral agenda which leads her into her constant battle with injustice.

## The Moral Agenda

Sara Paretsky, the creator of the female private detective V.I. Warshawski, tells more than a good story. While her feminine sleuth broke ground for a new genre character who represents feminism and who becomes a role model for women, Paretsky also has a strong moral force within her novels. Certainly, a moral force is not new to detective fiction and if Paretsky's background and analysis is considered, a moral agenda seems to be a natural expectation. Of course, one expects that within the pages of a detective novel, the crime and the criminal are immoral and their defeat is a victory for morality. However, in Paretsky's novels, there is a clear pattern in her choice of immoral villains.

Paretsky chooses her crimes and villains carefully:

all are associated with corruptible institutions or systems...The criminal underworld and organized labor in Indemnity Only, a captialistic empire in Deadlock, the Roman Catholic Church in Killing Orders, and the medical establishment in Bitter Medicine stand behind the individual killers, offering not only motives and rewards but also fostering arrogance which grows from the

long-time assumption of undeserved superiority."

(Klein, 215-216)

It is this arrogant superiority which lies at the heart of Paretsky's moral indignation. Paretsky sees large powerful institutions as immoral because they represent that impersonal, dehumanizing force which reduces the individual to a baser level. These individuals may be innocent victims or they may be the criminals who use the "motives and rewards" of these institutions to carry out their crimes. Either way, whether victim or perpetrator, each is a piece of that institution which seems to manipulate lives as easily as pawns upon a chessboard.

That manipulation is not new to detective fiction. It can be traced back to the presentation of the wealthy. "The generally unsympathetic portrayal of the wealthy in the hard-boiled novel...they are empty souls who hide behind a showy facade, or manipulative brokers ready to consider any commodity as a medium of exchange, or they are outright hoodlums." (Hamilton, 27) In Dashiell Hammett's Red Harvest, Op, his short fat detective, battles as much against the powerful corrupt officials of Poisonville as he does against the criminal class. Raymond Chandler sees the wealthy as using "their power, carelessly disregarding the corruption which ripples from their intended goal. The Grayles in Farewell, My Lovely and the Sternwood family in The Big Sleep exert the shadowy influence of vast family



fortunes; their indiscretions are not pursued by officialdom." (157) Certainly this presentation of the wealthy demonstrates a moral force within these detective classics and that moral force seems to be aimed towards one type of institutional system, however, there is a difference between Hammett and Chandler's moral force and Paretsky's moral agenda. Op and Phillip Marlowe, Chandler's detective, are cynical and pessimistic because of the immorality they encounter. They are bitter and hollow men, lone knights battling the dragons of the world. V.I. Warshawski has a strong moral center, represented by her mother, father and Lotty Hershel, a close friend, which drives her to confront immorality. It is this core which makes Warshawski a breed apart from those classic elder brothers.

This core is easily understood when considering Paretsky's own background. She "once worked in community service, trying to ease tensions in her city (Chicago) during the tense summer when Martin Luther King marched there for open housing, and as one who also succeeded in climbing up the corporate ladder in the insurance industry, it is not surprising that she can portray V.I.'s gritty, homeless aunt (Blood) and slick politicians or businesspeople with equal ease." (Herbert, 31) It seems perfectly natural that someone who has been involved with important social issues and who also has been involved with

corporate America should have a unique perspective. Paretsky has seen both sides of the coin, the victims of injustice and the institutions that make them victims. Is it any wonder then that a very flawed justice system is an important part of her novels? "Paretsky often portrays the inequities of the legal system, with all of her novels incorporating in some way the theme of the ability of the rich and powerful-big labor, big business, organized religion, the Mafia, big medicine-to manipulate the legal system, from the police to the courts to the lawmakers." (Reddy, 117) Paretsky's moral agenda comes from her own involvement with social injustice and it is expressed in her novels through her choice of villains and her choice of a detective heroine who expresses her own moral philosophy.

V.I. Warshawski, that detective heroine, calls herself Dona Quixote, but she certainly does more than battle with windmills. Once a Cook County Public Defender, she

got tired of poor innocent chumps going off to Stateville because the police wouldn't follow up our investigations and find the real culprits. And I got even more tired of watching clever guilty rascals get off scot-free because they could afford attorneys who know how to tap-dance around the law. (Deadlock, 38)

V.I. leaves the public defender's office and becomes a private detective "to redress the imbalances between guilty

and innocent." (Klein, 213) In that choice, V.I.'s and Paretsky's moral agenda is clear. At the core of all of her novels is an institution or system which manipulates both victim and perpetrator and the moral agenda demands that V.I. become that lone knight, like Op and Marlowe, who takes on these giants but, unlike Op and Marlowe, a moral core defines her battles and her triumphs.

The institutions present in Indemnity Only, Paretsky's first novel, are a major insurance company and a powerful union. V.I. must confront these institutions because of her moral core. "I had my Italian mother's drive, and I try to emulate her insistence on fighting battles to the finish." (Indemnity, 29) This drive is V.I.'s moral center which not only enables her to take on giants, it demands that she do so. Of course, this demand is also, in part, present due to V.I.'s past experiences with large impersonal institutions. At one point, V.I. compares insurance department heads to gynecologists who schedule more appointments than time permits. (64) The idea here is that arrogance reduces "those who wait" to faceless drones who must patiently sit until they are called into a superior presence. This attitude is what V.I. sees in all large impersonal institutions and when this attitude leads to criminal activities then Warshawski not only solves the crime, she moves against immorality. The crime in Indemnity Only is using the union as a front for collecting phony

insurance claims. The payments from these claims support the lavish lifestyle that is expected of an insurance executive. Along the way, of course, there is murder and mayhem, including union hired goons who attack V.I. Again, there is that arrogant superiority which permits a large institution, the union, to deal with people in a violent criminal way. There are many victims here, those innocents who must pay because they know too much and those perpetrators who feel that the only way they can meet certain expectations is through crime. Whether it be the target or the perpetrator of the crime, they are both victims. It is the corrupt institution which stands at the helm, a captain who blissfully guides his ship toward success, arrogantly unaware of those victims who travel with him.

A ship seems an appropriate metaphor since Paretsky's second novel, Deadlock, deals with the shipping industry. "Here V.I. solves four murders, tracks down the villain who has blown up an \$80 million dollar freighter and saves the entire North American shipping industry from sabotage." (Stasio, 39) Quite an undertaking for one woman, even one with a strong moral center. Here, V.I.'s mother again appears when, after weeks of investigation, V.I. feels sorry for herself because she knows nothing concerning her cousin Boom Boom's death. Boom Boom was an executive for a

shipping company and his discovery of dirty dealings led to murder. "In my mind's ear I could hear my mother chewing me out for self-pity. 'Anything but that, Victoria. Better for you to break the dishes than lie about feeling sorry for yourself.'" (Deadlock, 136) V.I. plunges into the investigation again, urged on by that moral core. This time Grafalk Steamship is the institution and Mr. Grafalk himself is the perpetrator. Fearing failure because of his antiquated ships, Grafalk engineers the four murders and the destruction of the **Lucella Wieser**, his competition's modern sleek ship. Unable to build new ships himself, "'the steamship company was overleveraged by then. I'd mortgaged a lot of my other holdings and I couldn't find anyone to lend me that kind of money.'" (282) It would be simplistic to put the entire blame upon the shipping industry. After all, it is the individual who makes the ultimate decision to act. However, it is the institution that thrives upon competition; it is the institution that fixes itself upon profit and advancement, ignoring the individuals who fall by the wayside.

Other types of institutions come into view in Paretsky's next two novels, Killing Orders and Bitter Medicine. The Roman Catholic Church and the medical establishment become the significant influences, providing both reward and motive for crime. In both of these novels Dr. Lotty Hershel, V.I.'s best friend, proves to be

Warshawski's moral teacher. In Killing Orders, a distraught V.I., upon the revelation of her mother's terrible secret, an affair with the husband of a woman who literally took V.I.'s mother in off the streets, feels her middle name, Iphigenia, means she too, like her mythological namesake, has been sacrificed for her mother's sin. Lotty reminds her that in Greek legend, Iphigenia is also Artemis the huntress. (Killing, 277) It is Lotty who pulls V.I. from a terrible sorrow and restores V.I. to her true role. In Bitter Medicine, Lotty's moral teaching is one of example. When Lotty's slum-located free clinic is attacked by right-to-lifers because abortions are performed there, Lotty simply cleans up and goes on. V.I., apartment ransacked, face slashed, sympathies tortured, also must clean up and go on. In each case, it is V.I.'s moral core that enables her to confront massive and complex institutions.

"Killing Orders finds the private operative investigating a securities fraud involving a Roman Catholic priory that shakes up the stock market and sends shock waves all the way to the Vatican." (Stasio, 39) There is a strong moral order to which V.I. subscribes. Since one of the major issues in the novel is abortion, "Warshawski grapples with the major political issues of feminism....For instance, her spar with a priest on the subject of abortion, the Catholic church, and tax exemption is one of

the great working-woman repartees in contemporary fiction." (Kaplan, 28) Just as dramatic is the issue of the Catholic church and its influence on women. In Killing Orders, several women who consider themselves loyal servants of the church find themselves accomplices to murder; "most horrifyingly, one such woman is an accessory to her own daughter's death, representing in fiction the feminist analysis that women who ally themselves with the patriarchy destroy their own and their daughters'-actual and metaphoric-life chances." (Reddy, 103) Within the pages of this novel is perhaps Paretsky's strongest moral agenda. After all, when V.I. takes on the Roman Catholic Church she is attacking an institution that is rooted in tradition and ultimate power. Again, it is the church's arrogant assurance of that power that infests itself within the individual. When three-million-dollars is stolen from the priory there are many conspirators, each representative of a large institution; a big law corporation, the Chicago underworld, and, of course, the church itself. Each has assumed the arrogant superiority that power imbues; each reduces the individual to a baser level, offering them a taste of that power.

Another powerful institution, the medical establishment, lies at the heart of Bitter Medicine, "... V.I. Warshawski (is) ... concerned with what we used to call the moral force of detective fiction. Paretsky

takes on the medical establishment this time, and you don't need her writing skills to discover what a pack of impersonal money-grubbers doctors tend to be, but it helps." (Heilbrun, 78) That seemingly inherent greed of the medical field is the motivating force behind this novel. V.I. must also confront the incompetence and the unfeeling care that is given to a young friend whose premature labor forces her into a fancy private hospital where she dies. What V.I. uncovers is more than incompetence, it is that eternal greed which seems to be a part of every large institution. As the case unravels, Dr. Peter Burgoyne reveals the temptations to which he succumbed. "'I mean, once I'd swallowed the Friendship (the private hospital) financial bait, it was easy to push me each step of the rest of the way wasn't it?...You know, money isn't all it's cracked up to be.'" (Medicine, 237) It is the institution which supplies the bait and it is the individual who takes it. Anyone can argue that, obviously, not everyone succumbs to that institutional bait. There are honest, caring people who are a part of institutions but Paretsky picks on large institutions because she is a materialist. "Hospital fraud, insurance fraud, overbilling: the crimes she (V.I.) investigates are crimes of capitalism, of white-collar men who use Mafia thugs to do their dirty work." (Kaplan, 28) Paretsky's materialism is an expression of the distrust we all feel toward those massive bureaucracies which seem to



infect our lives at every turn.

It is easy to point out the moral agendas in Paretsky's last three novels, each representing one of those institutions which infect our lives. Again, V.I.'s moral center drives her to do battle with giants. In Blood Shot, the poisoning of our environment by industrial giants brings to light one of the most pressing issues of our time. As V.I. gets off the expressway at 103rd street, she witnesses the blight left to the city by Pullman, Andrew Carnegie and the rest of those now nameless institutions.

...I had the familiar sensation of landing on the moon, or returning to earth after a nuclear decimation. Life probably exists in the oily mud around Lake Calumet. It's just not anything you'd recognize outside a microscope or a Steven Spielberg movie. You don't see trees or grass or birds. Only the occasional feral dog, ribs protruding, eyes red with madness and hunger. (Blood, 48)

In Paretsky's sixth novel, Burn Marks, another important social issue, that of the homeless, is presented and the institutions encountered are politicians, police and developers. V.I.'s homeless aunt is Warshawski's moral stimulus. This time the detective must confront the institutions which have, in part, created that homelessness. When V.I. goes in search of her missing aunt she goes to

Chicago's Emergency Housing Bureau. There she is exposed to the sad desperation of people who have no where to go.

"There were women with children of all ages, old men muttering to themselves, rolling their eyes wildly, women anxiously clutching suitcases or small appliances—a seemingly endless sea of people left on the streets from some crisis or other yesterday." (Burn, 12) One of those crisis is the destruction of cheap hotels by developers. In the developers' eyes, they are destroying urban blight and providing new expansion and profit. In the eyes of those who live in those hotels, they have lost the only home they know. Again, the institution disregards those they dispossess, callously maneuvering people because of greed. Paretsky's moral agenda relevantly speaks to issues that are a part of all of our lives.

A similar issue is found in Paretsky's latest novel, Guardian Angel. An institutional system has moved into V.I.'s own neighborhood, backed up by a prestigious law firm. The upwardly mobile have started to move into older homes, renovating and redecorating, raising property taxes and encouraging older, poorer residents to either fix-up or move out. The disagreeable recluse down the street who only loves her dogs has a heart attack. Her young yuppie neighbors quickly acquire her power of attorney, have her dogs destroyed and proceed to clean up her house, preparing to sell it to a suitable buyer. V.I.'s own personal

aversion to "hip young professionals" is only urged on by her moral agenda. That agenda involves fighting for those who are weaker than the corrupt institutions which plague them.

Paretsky's moral agenda is a part of all of her novels and she clearly states during a Sunday Morning interview her feelings about having such an agenda. "'I don't want to preach. It's easy to get up on a soap box, but I think it makes really bad fiction. And I-I want to be a storyteller, and that's what I try to be. I do think that mysteries, because they deal with issues of law and justice and society, that those are the upfront issues; that in a way they make a better vehicle for treating social issues than maybe a so-called mainstream novel might.'" (29)

When she specifically talks about the issue of abortion, Paretsky's moral agenda is further defined. "'This is such a fundamental issue to me because it has to do very much with, in my opinion, with the way that women are perceived. Are they perceived as adults or are they perceived as children? Can they make up their own minds or is-or is Daddy going to tell them what they must do?'" (28) Sara Paretsky's own words reveal a determination to include a moral agenda in all of her novels. This agenda, indeed, seems to be the heart of her books, a heart that beats in rhythm to a genre that seems a fitting place for the investigation of social issues.

It might be argued that detective fiction is not a place for a moral agenda, however, there has always been a moral force within this genre as evidenced by Hammett and Chandler. Paretsky's moral force is a bit different, however, because V.I. Warshawski has a strong moral foundation which gives her the strength to take on institutional giants. It would be silly to identify all institutions as evil villains for, after all, it is the individual who carries out the crime. However, we cannot overlook the influence of large impersonal institutions whose values lie in indiscriminate advancement and profligate greed. It is there that the immorality occurs. The institution must feel some responsibility for the attitude and the message it sends to the people who carry out its work. Paretsky is simply looking at those attitudes and messages, revealing a moral agenda that reminds us of the social issues that should be a part of our lives.

To end this thesis upon a moral note seems a bit abrupt. Rather, it seems more suitable, since V.I. Warshawski was born and bred in the U.S.A., to close with a brief investigation into this fictional detective as an American. Does V.I. Warshawski exhibit characteristics that are uniquely American?

## To Conclude

## V.I. As An American Character

There are many books and articles which analyze the American character. They list basic characteristics and then go into each in depth; each seems to be searching for the keys which can unlock who Americans really are. I found myself searching for those signatures which seemed to belong to V.I., thus making her an example of an American. For example, in investigating Zelinski I found that the characteristics just didn't seem to fit. "An intense, almost anarchistic individualism": That, in part, would fit V.I., after all, she certainly delights in being an individual and I'm sure she wouldn't be against a bit of anarchy in order to defeat some of those mighty institutions. "A high valuation placed upon mobility and change": This one really doesn't seem to fit, for, although she would like to change the injustice in the world, she, herself, would rather stay in her messy comfortable apartment rather than move on to greener pastures. "A mechanistic vision of the world": V.I.'s world is certainly not a well-oiled one. She often blunders and stumbles along without a plan in sight. "A messianic perfectionism": Although some might argue that V.I.'s search for justice is like a savior seeking salvation, she is hardly perfect. V.I. is about as flawed as a human can be. She loses her temper too much. She hurts her friends as well as her

enemies. Her imperfection is as much a part of her as that initialed name she uses. Certainly, Zelinski does not work; V.I. is not Zelinski's American.

I searched through many volumes searching for V.I. as an American and I was just about to give up, deciding that she was such an original that she did not fit any predescribed standards. Then I found Rupert Wilkinson's The Pursuit of American Character. This book searches for a specific key which defines American and that key is fear. Wilkinson's American is based upon four fears, fears that motivate and determine what we are as a nation. These four fears are: the fear of being owned, the fear of falling apart, the fear of winding down, the fear of falling away from a special American promise. In considering V.I. Warshawski carefully, she is a creature who is ruled by fear.

Clearly, V.I. has a great fear of being owned. After being involved in a car accident caused by someone tampering with the brakes, the detective feels "owned" by the hospital which now seems to control her. "'I don't want my temperature taken. I want to see the police.'...My fury was mounting, fueled by the helplessness of lying there attached to the ceiling while being ignored." (Deadlock, 88) Even in close friendships, V.I. must set the limits. She cannot be owned by anyone else. She must be

totally self reliant. "In Bitter Medicine, V.I. gets close to an older man (Mr. Contreras) who wants to play father to her, but she is able to work out the limits of their relationship with him." (Reddy, 111) Often, V.I. rejects the old man's offers of help while she will always come to his aid. When she does accept his help, it really bothers her because she does not want to be obligated to him. If she owed someone something that means some "other" owns a part of her and she fears that ownership. Surely, in this respect, V.I. is an American.

Somehow, the fear of falling apart and the fear of winding down seem to be related. After all, isn't falling apart a result of winding down? V.I.'s fear of falling apart is clearly seen in a scene from Deadlock where she comes face to face with those dark feelings which we all keep at bay. "I skirted the runway and stumbled through the weedgrown rocks down to the water's edge, shivering at the nameless menace in the black water. The water slapping at my feet seemed to call me to itself. Let me enfold you in the mysteries of my depths. All the dark things you fear will become your delight." (Deadlock, 178) That call always seems to be at the edge of V.I.'s world. She has a terrific fear of falling apart, of losing control. V.I. continually questions herself about the decisions she has made. She wonders if she has made the correct choices, if she has taken the right path. In Guardian Angel, V.I.'s

fears seem to be realized. In this latest novel, V.I. endangers the life of her most precious friend, Lotty Herschel. That endangerment is caused by V.I.'s reckless and ruthless behavior. At the end of the book, V.I.'s world does seem to be falling apart. "'It's Lotty. I'm so scared - scared she's going to leave me the way my mother did. It didn't matter that I loved my mother, that I did what I could to look after her. She left me anyway. I don't think I can bear it if Lotty abandons me too."

(Guardian, 370) It is significant to note that V.I. sees Lotty's retreat as abandonment. The detective does not realize that it is her own carelessness which has driven Lotty away and perhaps that carelessness is the realization of V.I.'s own fear of closeness and dependence. Is V.I. winding down? Is part of her fear tied up with that universal fear of growing old and being alone? She seems to answer these questions in the final lines of Guardian Angel. "Maybe that's why I reacted so roughly every time Mr. Contreras, or Lotty, or anyone else worried about my safety. It could even be why I pushed myself to the brink time and again. When my muscles slowed down, would I find other strengths to get me across those chasms?" (370)

Clearly, V.I. fears she is losing something, and she fears that she will not be able to cope with those losses.

Another loss is one of American promise. Part of that promise lies in the surety that everyone will receive



justice. V.I. sees this promise broken every day. The innocent do not always receive justice; indeed, they often fall victim to those who are truly guilty. The powerful do not always receive justice for they can purchase innocence until their guilt recedes into a frail system of manipulation. V.I. does feel a promise has been broken for "What I wanted was to decamp for some remote corner of the globe where human misery didn't take such naked forms." (Burn, 121) V.I. Yearns to escape from the injustice around her. She fears that the promised justice will simply disappear and she fears she will no longer be able to battle the unjust. Certainly, V.I. would never run away from what she feels driven to do, but, when V.I. is afraid of the threats to justice, she also fears the falling away of a promise that has been given to all Americans.

V.I.'s fears seem to make her an American. In other words, she possesses the same fears that we all possess. She is not a superhuman heroine who always succeeds. Often, she is humanly flawed and humanly understandable. Her fears make her human. It might be disappointing to think that we are Americans because of what we fear. After all, isn't fear a weakness? Don't we all think that we should hide our fears? Isn't it preferable to always appear brave and sure? Maybe fear is really the supreme motivator. Maybe fear is that which keeps us alert to all the possibilities. Maybe fear is what keeps us moving on.

In that respect, fear is what makes V.I., and all of us, an American.

It really is not easy to define an American nor is it easy to define V.I. Warshawski. Do I believe she is a uniquely American character? Yes. Do I believe she is unique within the detective fiction genre? Yes. However, as unique as she might be, she is also an expression of what is going on in this modern world of ours, a world opening to women, a world full of problems, a world of individuals. The story of the world is not only the story of great events or the story of powerful people. The story of the world is the story of each and every individual who lives and works here. One of those individuals, fictitious though she might be, is V.I. Warshawski. She is a woman who chooses to be called by her initials. The initials can obscure her gender; the initials can misrepresent her identity to others, but, those initials are as significant as the character herself. V.I., Victoria Iphigenia, Warshawski chooses to go by her initials because she chooses to be an individual, an individual who can be judged upon her character and her actions, not qualified because of her gender, and those ascribed behaviors. What is in a name? In V.I.'s case, everything.

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