

WRITING (AND) CRIME TUNNEL VISION: A V.I. WARSHAWSKI NOVEL

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Sarah Paretsky. *Tunnel Vision*.
London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994. \$19.95

If fiction has a role to play, not in our fantasies or escapist dreams, not as just addictive trash but as conceptual fodder, then Paretsky has pulled a fast one by creating Warshawski, the kinda hopeless, but astoundingly resourceful Italian American female private detective. A been-around feminist, she does what she can, and the figure of Vic serves as a witty and contemporary vehicle for Paretsky's perspective. This perspective relocates the tunnel vision(s) within the novel to particular characters, and in so doing creates a cleverly disguised commentary on politics and the personal. The great irony of *Tunnel Vision* is its capacity to lead one through a very precise tunnel, and implicate, not simultaneously, but in conclusion, its conditions of possibility.

While the tunnel is literally a location in the book, and Warshawski spends a lot of time getting out of tunnel-like situations, this novel is not just the intertwining of numerous linear narratives. This latest Warshawski is a prime testimony to both the rigidity of the genre, and the infinite potential for reinscription that the popularity of its recent sibling demands. Changing the perspective on a classic content perverts its form in such a smart manner that a reader is thoroughly seduced without realising it's not to the usual ends.

There is now an established genre, with debt to an already signature detective novel history, of women detective novels. The woman detective is often the same rough diamond with a heart of gold, but, usually, she does the laundry as well, or, in this case, is hitting forty, sits on the board of a women's housing organisation for abused women, and wonders if her activism is to any effect. This adds a behind-the-scenes specificity to a traditionally one-dimensional character. A particular tension for the other characters, and a plus for her popularity with a reader, this means Warshawski is not just her job. This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the subgenre: the women's lives intrude messily into the narrative and resist any attempt to maintain the anonymity and work-defined identity of the main character. This makes for greater intimacy between the reader and her projection onto the detective, and greater intrigue within the text. The stylistic and literary clichés echo, like the voice of Bogart, in the first sentences of this extensive but punchy-short-chapter-filled tome. Even from the outset there is an irresistible reader/writer/detective identifica-

tion and detective/author confusion: once one is hooked, its 400 odd pages refuse to be put down.

If the detective is the reader par excellence, then *Tunnel Vision* is the cryptic undoing of the detective's status. All the clues are contained in the first four chapters, but we must travel Warshawski's tunnel until the final turn to find out whodunnit. This is a clever ploy on the part of Paretsky because it implicates us in the dilemmas of her highly political, if neatly disguised, polemic. This is a very clever book. The complexities of its plot go beyond the limits of a review. At this level, however, it's a pretty gripping read. On another level, and under the facade of a simple series of simultaneous investigations, the law and the law of crime are woven together to draw the reader from questions of fraud to those of murder and vice versa. This is underscored by an exploration of the relation of women to the law, be it criminal or more generally, and more veiledly, logocentric. Lets face it: Paretsky, and Warshawski, know their Freud, and with an extensive but practised hand, dispatch his hysteria on a pragmatic level. The family is brought to centre stage and articulated in relation to the mythical outside of a contemporary American world. Paretsky runs the gamut of fraud, arson, murder, alcoholism, incest and domestic violence with great dexterity, creating a number of characters it can only be hoped will become stereotypes. In particular, the crazed, hysterical professor who beats his wife, rapes his daughter and charms senators and police alike, and who is the lynch pin of each of the crimes, vindicates every aspect of feminist research collated in the last 50 years and probably the 50 years before that.

Central to the plot and the politics of the novel is the death of the do-gooding drunkard wife of a well regarded and ambitious professor: she is murdered in Warshawski's office. This is the crime Warshawski has to solve. The murder, however, is caught in an intricate web of embezzlement and coverups which traverse bankers and banks, senators and police, charities and construction companies. The ever resourceful lever that lifts the lid on every aspect of the novel is the question "what is women's place in, and what can women say about" the situation.

Inevitably, Warshawski is three steps ahead of the boys-own police squad, which is admirably blemished by an overachieving female officer. At the same time, her lover is a black cop called Conrad, which gives Paretsky room to introduce the complexities of race. This allows Paretsky to remind us that all the issues she's raising are intimate as much as professional. It is crucial, too, that Warshawski is continually criticised, her opinions minimised, her expertise negated; as with the other female characters, who are represented as criminal (guilty until proven innocent), no-one believes her. Fortunately for the other characters, and the reader, she carries a Smith and Wesson and doesn't do as she's told. While often berated, even by friends, for her convictions and actions, in the long run Warshawski saves those at risk or accused: the girls

from the law and from their father/husbands.

In fact, as Warshawski even articulates to the correct authority—an expensive shrink—disbelieving the daughter ain't on. By the end of the novel this pays off quite literally for Warshawski: as the subplot of her employer's son's criminal record lands her ten thousand in payment, and she earns a priceless amount of recognition from saving lives.

The most skilful trick, however, is Paretsky's capacity to seduce the reader through *Tunnel Vision's* catalogue of detail, and Warshawski's search for the right reasons and the right answers, on the pretext of solving a crime rather than that of exposing the law of the father. Perhaps Paretsky would say they're the same thing, but Warshawski still drinks scotch.