



Paper Doll

Robert B. Parker

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She was a model wife and mother, bludgeoned with a hammer on the streets of Beacon Hill. Spenser's searching for a motive and a murderer--and finding more secrets than meet the eye...

Paper Doll Details

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From Reader Review Paper Doll for online ebook

Stephen Mettee says

Chewing gum for the mind.

As I was digging into my boxes and boxes of books stored two moves ago, I ran across this 1993 Spenser novel. I thought I'd read every one of Robert B. Parker's Spenser novels, but I hadn't read this one.

Would have liked more of Susan and Hawk, but still a great and easy read. Four stars.

It is interesting to note that the copy I have is a first printing that had been remaindered. (Sent back to the publisher unsold and then "remaindered" to a dealer to be sold at a discount. Remaindered copies often have a felt-tipped pen slash mark on the bottom of the book so they can't be returned to the publisher for credit again.)

In printing the book the publisher, Putnam, used an extra thick paper, apparently to make the book seem to be more substantial and longer than it is.

Kevin Doyle says

This one is a rarity among Parker's Spenser books. Don't get me wrong, I think most of his books are great. However, like a lot of people, they really don't do much in the mystery end of things. Action yarns, check. Character studies, absolutely. Fun, quick reads, most of them. Actual mysteries, not usually so much.

But with Paper Doll, Parker presents an actual mystery for his PI to solve, and he does so in layers. Most readers will no doubt easily figure out the true identity of the victim early on, and it's a bit of a bummer that it takes Spenser longer than the reader, by about fifty pages or so.

But even once we know the ID of the victim, that doesn't do anything at all towards helping the reader figure out whodunnit, and the actual revelation of the killer is, more than anything, kind of sad and bittersweet. One thing Parker definitely improved on over the years is setting a mood. If you read his earlier works, you see him taking four or five pages to describe a single scene, down to what everyone is wearing and every possibly physical feature, even of people who are mere bystanders. But as time went on he developed a much tighter control of his sense of scene, and that shows up in two major places in Paper Doll. The first when the murderer is revealed (I'm telling you, it's darned near heartbreaking, especially considering the violence of the act) and again in one of the final scenes where we finally get some profound insight into the motivations of a couple of the secondary characters.

For as much grief as a lot of people give Parker for his continual lovey-dovey scenes between S and S, when the man wanted to he could expose, down to the raw, human emotion and fraility in a way that few others can.

William says

(The word "maroon" appears 8 times in this novel!)

This is mostly a delicious Spenser-as-real-detective story. I love those. This one is well-plotted, even from the start.

The pacing is good and mostly even throughout, and contains several interlocked mysteries

Susan's part is mostly relaxed, with gentle mutual love and respect.

A good solid Four Star Spenser.

Enjoy !!

Bill Kerwin says

I like *Paper Doll* more than most later Spenser books, because of what it has, and because of what it doesn't have.

Let's start with the "doesn't have" part. *Paper Doll* doesn't have some former kid—April Kyle, say, or Paul Giacomin—wandering in from some old Spenser book with a new problem. *Paper Doll* doesn't have a little problem that leads to a major (or minor) crime syndicate, that then threatens Spenser's life, which in turn threatens Susan's life, which means not only must her autonomy be once again discussed but also that Hawk must be called upon once again to guard her. In fact, there is little of Susan in this book (good!) even less of doggie Pearl (even better!), no extended discussion of the meaning of the Susan/Spenser relationship (hooray! hooray!)

What *Paper Doll* does have is a mystery, a real honest-to-goodness mystery, with a corpse and at least one good clue. And Spenser solves it, not just by blundering around, but by brainpower, and the identity of the murderer is both surprising (though satisfying).

I think, though, what I like best about *Paper Doll* is the two distinct atmospheres Parker creates in the book. Spenser is looking for clues in the apparently random murder of wealthy wife and mother Olivia Nelson Tripp but disturbs him—as he questions her family and walks through the flawless, antiseptic rooms of her home—is the completely lack of any personality, any hint that there may once have been an actual person behind the perfect image of Mrs. Olivia Tripp. Then later, when he visits the sleepy little South Carolina town where Olivia went to school—among the riding stables, hunting dogs, and wary black servants that know more than they are willing to say—Spenser begins to discover the real story of the woman known as Olivia Nelson.

Recommended to anyone who likes a good mystery.

Ellen says

Wow. Maybe the best Spenser book I've read. His characters had depth and complexity. The murderer could only have been found by the incredible Spenser. As always, good dialogue.

a few comparisons that I savored:

a fireplace spacious enough to roast a moose.

a receptionist with the efficiency of a Russian farm collective.

blue jeans as capacious as Delaware.

Ashley says

First let me get a few things out of the way. This is a book from 1994. I found it on the book exchange shelf at work and decided to check it out since I was between books. It is also #20 in a series of books about a Private Detective named Spenser although that really doesn't matter as it was pretty clear each book easily stands on its own.

The general plotline is...Olivia Nelson is the perfect wife to a perfect husband and together they have a perfect marriage. This perfect couple had two perfect children. Their lives were moving along perfectly until Olivia is walking home one day and is bludgeoned to death with a hammer to head. Who did it? and why?

It was a pretty good tale. It unravels in to a case of stolen identity and deceit but the downfall was that it was pretty predictable. The author wrote himself in to a corner when he went down this case of assumed identity because it severely limited the list of potential suspects and it became pretty predictable after his first trip to Olivia's hometown. I could see where the author did try to lead us away from the truth and he tried to cast suspicion on other characters but it fell just short of successful for me. It's a shame because it was a good book. I really liked the characters and I enjoyed reading the book. I enjoyed the mystery unravelling even though I knew where it was going to lead. Isn't that a sign of a good book though? I enjoyed reading it even though I already could tell what was going to happen. I won't lie. There were a few small surprises toward the end of the book, I would say in the last 15-20 pages, that made me say, "Hmm...I didn't quite see that coming" but they involved peripheral characters.

Overally, it really wasn't very mysterious but it was pretty good. I won't be rushing out to buy the series but if I ever come across another Detective Spenser book I would definitely check it out.

Trisha says

Good fun little P.I. book. I loved the ridiculous one-liners, the silly slang and banter. The outrageous police and security brutality and the dirty playing. It was all so funny and enthralling. This held my attention. I'm sad #20 something is the first book in this series I'm trying out. I didn't feel like NOT having read the first books in the series held me back at all.

His relationship with his girlfriend was interesting too. I like that, although he seemed to objectify every other woman in the book, he did seem to really respect and love her and listen to her when she talked.

Bobby Underwood says

“Quirk flashed his badge, and put it away. It could have said Baker Street Irregulars on it, for all the clerk had a chance to read it.”

Falling where this does within the Spenser canon, two books down the road from Pastime — where you could sense an undercurrent of Parker’s regret at changing the focus of the series to Spenser’s relationship with the perpetually annoying and snobbish Susan Silverman, rather than the mystery and plotting — Paper Doll is shockingly good. It is also shocking in that here, we get a backhand acknowledgement that something has gone askew. What is more, Parker does something about it, as though openly — if alas, only briefly — revolting against himself.

It’s been quite some time since I’d tackled this one, and found it marvelous. Though Spenser’s cloying interactions with the vain Susan Silverman are scattered throughout the narrative, they are lower-key than usual, and feel less intrusive. In fact, she doesn’t even appear until around chapter ten, because Parker has remembered what the Spenser series once was, and decided to write an homage — to himself. How do we know it was deliberate, and that Parker was revolting? Within the narrative of looking into the death of Loudon Tripp’s wife, Spenser finds they had been leading separate lives, while still living together. It bothers Spenser that the Tripps had separate bedrooms, for example. He is telling Silverman how something about the couple’s relationship feels all wrong. And then we get this gem of unadulterated irony —

SPENSER: “They’re perfect. She was perfect. His love was all-encompassing. His devotion is unflagging.”

SUSAN: “And there’s a legal limit to the snow here.”

SPENSER: “Yeah.”

Wow. Freud, heal thyself. It’s as if Parker is telling readers — no, he’s screaming at his readers — “I know, already!” And at least briefly, it creates a watershed moment, and a return to the kind of plotting and mystery we hadn’t seen in a long time in this series, so devoted was it to the snow job Parker had laid on with a scoop shovel. Parker acknowledged it, then he did something about it, and gave us Paper Doll.

While Paper Doll isn’t perfect, with elements of the case solving themselves, rather than being solved by good detective work, it’s still excellent compared to what the series had become. And while something is unresolved at the end of Paper Doll — another failing of later entries in the Spenser canon — this time it’s intentional, and as morally ambiguous as Spenser’s solution to April Kyle’s problem in Ceremony.

Loudon Tripp wants to know why his perfect wife was killed. With limited resources and high profile pressure because of who Tripp is, the seemingly random attack, is written off as just that. But Tripp doesn’t buy it, and Quirk sends him Spenser’s way, knowing no one can be more annoying than Spenser in his pursuit of the truth. And Spenser gets annoying real fast. Loudon’s teenage kids are brats, and everything Spenser discovers contradicts the glowing image of the important couple in Boston society. When he decides to go at it from the other end, looking into Olivia’s background, in case someone may have wanted to do her harm, things get suddenly ugly, and Spenser finds himself locked up and threatened.

Enter Martin Quirk, in what might be his finest moment of the entire series. Why Spenser and Hawk place Quirk in the same stratosphere of potential violence as themselves becomes all too clear. Though it's only a flash, what had only been implied about Quirk within the series is shown here. Though the violence is left to Spenser, it's clear that Quirk is just as formidable as Spenser, Hawk, and Vinnie, just as had been suggested time and again in earlier books. It's Quirk's moment to shine, and probably his most memorable appearance in the long-running series.

There is a lot going on here, plot-wise, from powerful political forces, to decades-old infidelities, and a husband in complete denial. And there turns out to be even more in this tough, violent and well-plotted entry more reminiscent of earlier books than post *Valediction* entries. Gay cop Lee Farrell is introduced in this one, Quirk having him liaison with Spenser. Again, in a return to earlier Spenser books, there is depth here, rather than preachy espousals. Farrell's lover is dying of AIDS, and it affects his ability to focus. Parker handles it in a low-key way, even when Spenser and Susan attend the funeral, adding quiet poignancy to Farrell's pain, rather than using flippant monologue to make it about how liberally cool Spenser and Susan were. Again, a return to the old Spenser books.

Rich and satisfying, with an almost out-of-the-blue revelation we should have seen coming due to someone's odd behavior, and an ending as unresolved as we as readers guiltily hoped it might be, this is — almost — a return to greatness for this series. There are still some excellent ones to come in this series, though they were scattered among the weeds. But here, Parker seems to tackle the problems — both in the case, and with fans who were growing weary of the series — head-on. The result is a Spenser entry like we hadn't gotten in a very long time. Sharp, crisp, moving and sometimes violent, this is a great read, and highly recommended.

Kemper says

Apparently the years of drinking improperly distilled corn liquor have caused more damage than I thought because I had previously rated this as one star and marked it as the place the Spenser series went off the rails. Actually, it's not that bad at all.

Olivia Nelson was the wife of Boston blue blood Loudon Tripp and they seemed to have a textbook family and a perfect life until Olivia screwed it up by getting whackity-whacked with a hammer to the noggin while walking down the street. With no obvious suspects or motive for the murder, Tripp hires Spenser to investigate. Spenser finds the story of a model wife and mother just a little too perfect and starts digging into Olivia's past.

I'd forgotten the ending of this one and found myself getting pretty wrapped up in the whodunit piece of this. This also has a great scene with police lieutenant Quirk, being a complete bad ass and giving long time fans some understanding of why Spenser and Hawk consider Quirk to be a kindred spirit. Parker also introduced another interesting supporting character in Lee Farrell, an openly gay cop. The Susan lovey-dovey crap isn't too bad, and she even gets one of the funniest lines in the book this time.

On the negative side, the plot becomes much less interesting when Spenser veers away from the mystery and starts getting involved in Tripp's issues of rampant denial about his wife and family. Parker too often made a character's psychological problems a part of the mystery for Spenser to solve, and the series was always much better when Spenser was battling thugs or trying to unravel a crime rather than playing armchair psychiatrist.

Next up: Spenser goes to the theater in *Walking Shadow*, but there hasn't been a play end this badly since Abraham Lincoln attended *Our American Cousin*.

Yeva says

I could not find a writer I like more than Robert B. Parker. I found this book the other day at the library, and I did not remember reading it. This thrilled me, because I've not read one of Mr. Parker's book in quite some time. Paper Doll is a great story. It was definitely interesting, and I liked reading about my favorite characters again. Farrell is introduced in this book, and Spenser was considerate and a good friend, as Farrell went through the death of his partner. Spenser is such a multi-faceted character; I never tire of reading about him.

Mark says

After socialite Olivia Nelson is murdered in an apparently random attack, Spenser is hired by her husband Loudon Tripp to find out the killer. Consulting with Quirk and Belson, along with new detective Lee Farrell (a gay man whose lover, Brian, is dying of AIDS), Spenser follows a trail that leads him through old money Boston and the sleazy grasp of Senator Bob Stratton to Olivia's hometown in South Carolina, uncovering fake identity, delusion and abuse in several forms. After the relative disappointment of "Double Deuce", this is a real return to form as Spenser doggedly uncovers clues and works his way to the root of the case, with Parker expertly peeling away the layers of plot to a cracking denouement. Susan plays a good role in the proceedings - and there's a lovely intimate sequence as Spenser cooks her dinner then lifts her over the counter - but the downside is that Hawk has very much a background role, though it's nice to see Henry Cimoli back at the Harbour Health Club. Strangely melancholic, with a nicely downbeat feel the further the novel goes on, this is a good story told at a good pace and I would very much recommend it.

Brent Soderstrum says

I have read all the previous Spenser books and have enjoyed them. This book though is my favorite so far. There is a mystery in this one and some twists and turns which I enjoy. The final resolution and how Spenser handles the matter was also satisfying.

Spenser is hired by a man to discover who killed his wife with a hammer and why. The client says his wife was perfect and their marriage was great. Spenser goes back into her past and finds out that things were not necessarily so hunky dory and that the murder victim is really a mystery. Spenser gets roughed up by South Carolina police who were instructed to find out what Spenser knows about the murder victim. Turns out a Senator who plans on running for President of the United States is the one who wanted Spenser roughed up.

Despite not a lot of Hawk this is still a very good story with a surprise ending. Quick and enjoyable read.

Joy says

What a refreshing book, even though it showed a dark side of the political world. There were lots of quotable gems. Spenser:

"I am trustworthy, loyal, and helpful. But I struggle with obedient."

Fun: "How old were you when you dropped out of charm school?"

Observation: "If he really saw me at all, it was peripherally. In his public self he probably saw everything peripherally. His focus was on him." Observation of Susan: One of the many things about Susan that I

admired was that she never made conversation. When she asked a question

she was interested in the answers. Her curiosity was always genuine,

and always engendering. When you got through talking with her you usually knew more about the subject than when you started. Even if it

was your own subject."

Nanosynergy says

Spenser is hired by a wealthy, old-money, high society widower to solve who bludgeoned to death his too-perfect wife (clue #1). Not finding clues in her current life, Spenser tracks back to her Southern roots looking for possible clues in her past. Her husband and two adult children believe her parents are dead and have never met any of her relatives (clue #2). When Spenser arrives in her hometown, the authorities forcefully try to stop him from investigating (clue #3). Then his retainer check bounces (clue #4). Soon, not unsurprising at this point, it is discovered that she has a past she has hidden from her family and her family is also in denial about several ugly elephants in the room. The murderer is a bit unexpected and their motivations are bittersweet. Probably would have given it 2.5 stars except for this and because Spenser's decision to be judge and jury at the end both disturbed and worked for me.

Kellie says

This was a really good mystery. The plot was about a woman who was murdered and her husband hires Spenser to investigate. Quirk is the one who recommends him. Quirk plays a bigger role in this book than others in the past. We also meet Detective Farrell who is gay. Hawk is rarely mentioned and Susan plays a minor role as well.

The investigation takes Spenser down South to Alton County South Carolina where he learns there was more to this woman than was first thought.

I really liked the mystery part of this one. It kept me engaged and I couldn't wait to learn more.

One of the reviews I read mentioned something about how this book had a lot less Susan and the reader was glad. I noticed this seemed like a different type of Spenser book myself. The focus wasn't on Spenser and his personal life like some others. This was a good thriller and you learned about other characters besides Hawk and Susan. Kind of refreshing.
