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Sara Paretsky

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SARA PARETSKY

Sara Paretsky is the creator of a street-smart feminist series detective, V. I. Warshawski, a former attorney who now investigates white-collar crime. Each novel in the series further fleshes out her character and life story as readers are introduced to various friends and relatives, some of whom become staples.

A native of Ames, Iowa, born in 1947, Paretsky grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, the only girl among the five children of David, a college professor, and Mary Paretsky, a librarian. Although she began to write stories and plays at the age of five, Paretsky was not expected or encouraged to pursue a career, as she recalled in a 1988 interview. Unlike her four brothers, she had to put herself through college. After completing studies in political science at the University of Kansas in 1967, Paretsky moved to Chicago. She became socially and politically active after spending the summer of 1966 working at an inner-city project for the presbytery of Chicago. Later, she lobbied to legalize abortion and joined the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL). In 1977, she completed a Ph.D. in history at the University of Chicago. While writing her dissertation Paretsky worked for John Naisbett at Urban Research Corp. and as a freelance business writer. From 1977-1985, she was the manager of advertising and direct mail marketing programs at Continental National America, an insurance company.

The sale of the film rights to what became V. I. Warshawsky (1991) provided the financial release Paretsky needed to leave her insurance job in 1985 and concentrate on her writing. She founded Sisters in Crime and served as its

president from 1986-1988 to promote greater recognition for women mystery writers. She is also a member of Private Eye Writers of American and the Authors Guild. In 1987 Paretsky became a director of NARAL. Since 1976 she has been married to Courtenay Wright, a college professor and father of three children.

Paretsky began her first novel, Indemnity Only (1982), following a New Year's resolution to write a mystery novel in 1979. After beginning work on it she enrolled in a class on "Writing the Detective Novel" taught by Stuart Kaminsky, to whom she dedicated the final product. Kaminsky helped her develop her writing style as well as the character of Virginia Iphigenia (Vic) Warshawski, a tough native of Chicago's southside who is the daughter of a Polish cop and an Italian opera singer.

In Indemnity Only, Warshawski is hired to find a missing woman and soon finds the corpse of her murdered son. As in subsequent cases, Warshawski uncovers schemes that involve powerful businessmen, politicians, and crime figures. In Deadlock (1984), which provides grist for the Hollywood film starring Kathleen Turner, Warshawski uncovers corruption in the shipping industry when she investigates the supposedly accidental death of her favorite cousin, Boom Boom Warshawski, a former hockey star. In Killing Orders (1985), she goes to the aid of an aunt who is suspected of stealing stock certificates from a Chicago monastery only to discover a conspiracy that involves insurance executives, organized crime, and church officials. The death of a pregnant woman in Bitter Medicine (1987) leads Warshawski to investigate malpractice and fraud at a

private hospital. In Blood Shot (1988) Warshawski takes on pollution and liability insurance while investigating the deaths of workers at a chemical plant. Burn Marks (1990) revolves around building contractors and the homeless while Guardian Angel (1992) concerns lawyers and politicians. In Tunnel Vision (1994), the eighth and latest novel in the series, Warshawski uncovers a conspiracy of bankers, politicians, and corporate pirates who are diverting social services funds into their own pockets. Paretsky has also edited an anthology of detective stories by women, A Woman's Eye (1991).

Drawing upon a combination of intellect, intuition, and martial arts skills, Warshawski gives a lighter touch to the hard-boiled genre she inhabits by sharing her personal life with her readers. The series features an extended family of regulars, including Lotty Herschel, Mr. Contreras, and Peppy the golden retriever, while Lieutenant Bobby Mallory provides a target for her frustrations with traditional gender roles.

The series has received largely favorable reviews from the start. She has won awards for her writing, including a Silver Dagger for Blood Shot. Unlike the typical hard-boiled detective, "Warshawski has a strict moral sense and a rigorous political agenda that guide her decisions." As a consequence, Laura Wyrick notes that Paretsky has been "criticized for displaying her political agenda too ostentatiously." Nevertheless, critics praise her work as a well-written and important contribution to popular detective fiction.