

V. I. Warshawski's older, smarter sister comes to York

by Ira Nayman

There is great irony here. Sara Paretsky, creator of tough, wise-cracking, hard-boiled PI V. I. Warshawski, is a soft-spoken, self-effacing woman.

"I really don't know how to write," she told a full house in the Calumet College Common Room last Friday. She had had no technical training, she explained, and she didn't want to analyze her writing too closely for fear that the gift would vanish.

Paretsky was in town to promote *Guardian Angel*, her latest Warshawski novel (for review, see accompanying article).

Paretsky does share a strong sense of humour with her creation, although it seems softer, less angry. "I like being in Toronto," she remarked. "It feels to me like what Chicago would be if we ever got civilized."

Paretsky, whose first Warshawski novel was published in 1982, was introduced as the writer who opened the door for all women hard-boiled mystery writers who came after her. Margaret Cannon-Mays, a Fellow of Calumet who writes "Murder and Mayhem," a weekly column of mystery reviews, for *The Globe and Mail*, claimed she informally counted 75 of them.

As well as her own novels, which feature strong female characters and issues of concern to women, Paretsky helped form Sisters in Crime, an organization which promotes female detective fiction, in 1986. Last year, she edited an anthology of the best female crime writing called *Sisters in Crime*.

"Yes, I am a feminist," Paretsky stated. "And, I'm not ashamed of it, either."

Several factors led to the creation of Sisters in Crime. Paretsky said that there was an interest in creating more realistic characters in detective novels, people who related to each other like adults. A reaction to this trend, which many writers identified solely as feminist-influenced, led to a lot of books featuring violence against women and extensive sadism. Paretsky became aware of this



Sara Paretsky, author of seven novels featuring feminist hard-boiled detective V. I. Warshawski, appeared at Calumet College last Friday to talk about her life and her work. *Globe and Mail* mystery reviewer and Calumet College Fellow Margaret Cannon-Mays introduced Paretsky as "V. I. Warshawski's older, smarter sister." Paretsky accepted the praise with good grace.

libraries won't buy a book unless it has been reviewed by at least two national publications. Not being reviewed was holding back a lot of female writers.

Sisters in Crime was created to help raise awareness of crime fiction that didn't demean women, particularly in stories written by women. Its main targets were industry executives, mainly men who pushed mainly masculine, frequently demeaning works, and reviewers, although the ultimate goal was to increase the appreciation of the reading public.

Coming of age as the feminist movement crested in 1970s gave

without conviction."

During the question period which followed the talk, the inevitable question about *V. I. Warshawski*, the film based on her novels starring Kathleen Turner, was raised. Despite the fact that the film was not a critical or financial success, Paretsky claimed,

"I think I made the right decision," in allowing it to be made.

When Tri-Star bought the rights to her novels in 1985, she worked for an insurance firm; the money allowed her to quit and write full-time. Paretsky also points out that the exposure the film gave her character

LECTURE

Sara Paretsky
Calumet College Common Room
Friday, March 27

helped boost sales of her novels, bringing her a wider audience than she previously had.

Paretsky, whose aid wasn't sought in making the film and whose advice was ignored, admitted that Turner didn't physically fit her conception of V. I. Warshawski. "She was very committed to the character," though, and fought the studios on what she could, Paretsky said.

"What she couldn't do was have Disney give her a better script," Paretsky sighed.

She added that the film wasn't as bad as critics portrayed it. Male reviewers felt threatened by a film with a strong female lead, she claimed, and were hostile to Turner, who "is not ashamed of having a woman's body," that doesn't conform to the thin, pseudo-masculine feminine ideal.

"They trashed it with more rage than it deserved," Paretsky insisted.

In response to another question, Paretsky claimed that, outside North America, her books were most popular in Japan. A fascination with American westerns lead the Japanese to an interest in hard-boiled detectives, she explained, who were similar in many ways to frontier cowboys.

She added that Japanese women particularly admired Warshawski's self-reliance. She once received a letter from a female Hitachi executive who reads a few pages of Paretsky every morning to give her the strength to get through the day.

According to Peggy Keall of Calumet's Master's Office, the College may try to get other writers to speak next year.

"I call myself a writer, but I do so feebly, without conviction."

backlash when she sat on an industry awards committee in 1985: she found that all but one of the books submitted by publishers contained "graphic violence against women and children." Paretsky was so disgusted she didn't want to give the award to any of the books.

"I don't think women have to be the heroes of every book they're in," Paretsky said. "I don't think women even have to play a significant role in every book they're in." But, she added, she believed that women characters had to be treated with the same respect as male characters, not defined by their sexuality.

Looking into how female writers were dealt with in the trade, "We found that while women wrote about a third of the reviews," only six to 20 per cent of books getting reviewed were written by women, depending upon the publication. Male writers were seven times more likely to be reviewed, even though they didn't publish seven times as many books.

This has important financial repercussions. Library sales are vital to the financial success of a book, but

Paretsky a sense of control over her life. "My life has been very lucky," she claimed; given her background, which made it highly unlikely she would develop into a feminist author, this seemed more than false modesty.

Paretsky grew up in rural, Protestant Kansas. As she described it, schools barred Blacks from college stream courses; abortion was a crime (but also considered a punishment for any girl who dared to have sex outside of marriage); girls grew up knowing they were destined to become mothers.

"Our dreams were of weddings," Paretsky remarked.

Although she wrote when she was young, "The messages I got at home were persistent and invidious." Her father was particularly discouraging, claiming that everything which she wrote was "derivative," although he never explained of what.

It took her 20 years to submit her writing anywhere. Even now, after seven books and a lot of critical and popular success, Paretsky still questions her ability, can still say, "I call myself a writer, but I do so feebly,

Expanding detective fiction boundaries

by Ira Nayman

Detective fiction is not highly regarded in literary circles. The assumption being that when you strip away the conventions of the genre, there is little room left for grand statements about the human condition.

Feminist literature is likewise devalued. It is assumed that if a book has a political agenda, it cannot be great literature. (This assumption that "literature" is not political has been challenged in recent years, but that hasn't penetrated too far into mainstream critical thinking.)

Guardian Angel, the latest V. I. Warshawski novel from Sara Paretsky, being a feminist detective story, would seem to be doubly damned. Nonetheless, it aspires to greatness, and almost succeeds.

An old woman in Warshawski's neighbourhood falls and is taken to hospital. A local lawyer, who leads the charge to gentrify the somewhat run-down area, steps in, becoming guardian to the woman and, with unseemly haste, putting the five dogs she lives for to sleep. Warshawski, who never much cared for the woman, is incensed that the lawyer could do something so insensitive, and decides to become involved.

In the meantime, her landlord asks her to investigate the disappearance of an old union buddy. The investigation leads to the uncovering of corruption in one of Chicago's most respected industrial families.

For the first hundred pages, Paretsky convincingly paints a portrait of a city that is becoming divided between the chronically poor and heartless, unconcerned wealthy people. Paretsky's clear vision of inner-city decay, with its casual and overt forms of racism, permeates *Guardian Angel*, elevating it above typical novels of the genre.

The ending is surprisingly bittersweet, leaving a number of relationship questions unresolved. This subverts genre convention in at least two ways: it goes against the mythical conception of the detective as a loner who has no emotional contacts.

In addition, the detective is usually a white knight who, when a crime destroys the natural order of things, steps in to restore it. Thus, although the mystery in the novel is solved, unresolved issues at the end give it a more realistic, less mythic or archetypal, edge.

BOOK

Guardian Angel
written by Sara Paretsky
published by Delacorte Press
370 pages, \$25

In between is a serviceable mystery story with a number of elements we've come to expect based on Paretsky's six previous Warshawski novels: a story linking upper and working classes; characters who don't immediately recover from assaults, physically or emotionally; a detective who sometimes makes mistakes, blundering even when her heart is in the right place.

Guardian Angel would be a truly great novel if Paretsky's prose style matched her ambitious themes. Unfortunately, it rarely rises above adequate; it is solid prose, acceptable for her purposes, but never quite poetic.

This problem notwithstanding, *Guardian Angel* is excellent, a rare detective novel with a social conscience.

