



Ask The Parrot

Richard Stark

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Sometimes mystery master Donald E. Westlake is the author of uproarious crime capers. Sometimes he has a mean streak-and its name is Parker. From his noir classic *The Man with the Getaway Face* to his recent novel *Nobody Runs Forever*, whenever Westlake writes as Stark, he lets Parker run loose-a ruthless criminal in a world of vulnerable "straights."

On a sunny October afternoon a man is running up a hill. He's not dressed for running. Below him are barking police dogs and waiting up ahead is a stranger-with a rifle, a life full of regrets, and a parrot at home who will mutely witness just how much trouble the runner, Parker, can bring into an ordinary life.

The rabbit hunter is Tom Lindahl, a small-town lonely heart nursing a big-time grudge against the racetrack that fired him. He knows from the moment he sees Parker that he's met a professional thief-and a man with murder in his blood. Rescuing Parker from the chase hounds, Lindahl invites the fugitive into his secluded home. He plans to rip off his former employer and exact a deadly measure of revenge-if he can get Parker to help.

But Tom doesn't know Parker and that the desperate criminal will do anything to survive-no matter who has to die...

Ask The Parrot Details

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Author : Richard Stark

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From Reader Review Ask The Parrot for online ebook

Martin says

Ask the parrot, why don'tcha!

Possibly the *Parker* book with the strangest title, this novel is nonetheless just as well-written as any other in the series. The suspense level is high and constant throughout the book. Parker is on the run, hiding from the law following the events of *Nobody Runs Forever*, there are roadblocks all over, sheets bearing his likeness (or an artist's rendition of it) are distributed to anyone and everyone, and yet here is Parker, cool as a cucumber. He even joins a search party to find the missing bank robbers! I tell you, the balls on that guy.

Part Three, Chapter Eight is a nice change of perspective, as Stark describes things from the titular parrot's point of view, and it's actually quite funny. Out of left field? Maybe, but a pleasant break from the pervading suspense.

The three-part story concludes in the next - and last! - *Parker* novel, *Dirty Money*. I *want* to read the end of the story, but I don't want this series to end!

Josh says

Another strong outing from Stark, though I did find some of the subplots in the middle of the story to be somewhat unnecessary and felt to some degree as filler. But as it's not a particularly long story even with these additional subplots, it didn't do much to dull my enjoyment.

Lynn says

Parker is a great bad guy. He's in a tough spot running from the law, but he knows how to keep his cool. Great story.

Alecia says

It's always a good thing when I find a Parker novel I may have missed. It's always a quick and very enjoyable read. In this one, Parker is on the run from a bank robbery, and is being chased by barking police dogs, when he is approached by a local stranger who takes him to his secluded home. And yes, in that home is a parrot who doesn't speak. Yet. What can I say, I'm a fan.

James Thane says

Parker is on the run from a failed bank job. The money is lost; one of his partners has been caught, and the

other is on the run as well. Parker is fleeing up a hill, hoping to find some avenue of escape on the other side. The cops are right behind him and the hounds are baying at his heels. He finally reaches the top of the hill and finds a man with a rifle waiting for him...

Richard Stark's Parker series has always been one of my favorites and this was a good addition to it. Like most of these books, this is a fairly quick read and very enjoyable.

Josh says

The Parker series heads into uncharted almost YA territory in the simplistic and surprisingly two dimensional 'Ask The Parrot'. Being a huge fan of Stark's thief amongst thieves, Parker, I was disappointed by this latest venture. Parker is on the run, his accomplices looks down and out and he's on his last legs - only to find a savior in the form of a disgruntled former race track employee who see Parker as an opportunity for payback. While I enjoyed some of the traditional man on the run elements (hiding in broad daylight, mingling with those trying to capture him - for instance), the overall feel of the novel lacked the same rough edges I've grown accustomed too in the previous installments. Parker, himself comes off a little too nice (despite some nice true-to-form acts - notably when someone ends up in the boot of a car) and the more explicit scenes which were meant to be adult rated came off as little more than PG. That being said, 'Ask The Parrot' is a very quick read with a day-time-movie feel about it which will leave fans scratching their head while others utterly entertained who are new to the popular thief - 2.5 stars.

Leonard Pierce says

It's been ten years since Donald Westlake left us, and it's a loss that's still deeply felt for those of us with a taste for pure throwback noir novels. Westlake was the creator and author, under the pseudonym Richard Stark, of a series of novels featuring the enigmatic professional criminal known only as Parker; while the character was popular enough to spawn a huge number of imitations (and a series of loose film adaptations, none of which, with the exception of 1967's Point Blank, really managed to capture his essence), crime fiction has moved in a very different direction, and it's more than just nostalgia that creates a real sense of loss that we won't see his like again.

There were an astounding 24 Parker novels produced by Westlake in his lifetime, but he took a prolonged hiatus from the character following the sixteenth (1974's Butcher's Moon). He felt burned out and a bit alienated from Parker, and wanted to work on other projects. It would be the last we would see of the coolly competent, implacable heist man for over twenty years. When Parker returned in 1997 with Comeback, there were concerns that he might not translate into the modern era, but such worries underestimated Westlake's extreme proficiency with the form, and other than a few awkward moments, he picked up where he left off without a hitch. Before his death in 2008, he planned to tell his final Parker stories in a trilogy of novels: Nobody Runs Forever, Ask the Parrot, and Dirty Money.

The second of the three was published in 2006, and it's uncharacteristic in a lot of ways. Parker is entirely out of his element: on the run and without any of his usual accomplices, he finds himself in a small town in rural New York state. He's wanted by the law for a major bank heist, he's flat broke, and he has no allies, no armament, and no identification. All his usual resources are out of reach, and in order to survive, he has to do the unthinkable: place his trust in one of the small-town nobodies to get out. One of the crucial elements of

Parker's character is that he trusts no one (an instinct that usually proves quite correct), and hates working with amateurs, who lack the skills, sense, and instincts necessary to stay out of trouble. By what seems to be a stroke of luck, he ends up as part of the posse that's meant to be hunting him — and makes the acquaintance of one Tom Lindahl, an embittered and lonely man who is his only protection, and might also have the inside track on a possible big score. Taking on the vague identity of one Ed Smith, Parker puts his trust in a man who has no criminal history, no skills, and a personality that sets off one warning bell after another in the heist man's mind. But it's his only chance; and anyone who's ever read a Parker novel before knows it's just going to get more complicated from there.

Ask the Parrot (the title is drawn from Tom Lindahl's pet bird, which can't talk and which he never bothered to name) is one of the best of the post-Comeback Parker novels, both for what it does and for what it doesn't do. It's remarkably well-adapted to its era; a lot of the early Parker books, as with many examples of pre-1990s crime fiction, had plots that simply wouldn't work in the age of high technology, the internet, the surveillance state, and the age of the mega-corporation. But *Ask the Parrot*'s semi-rural setting functions as more than just local color: its lack of sophistication and resources puts Parker out of his comfort zone, and also provides a justification for the relatively low-tech nature of the racetrack heist that acts as its MacGuffin. But the spirit of the age is present, and makes Parker (and Westlake) do some heavy lifting: there are automatic cameras, digital ID cards, and instant communications between law enforcement agencies to deal with. Parker finds himself trapped not by the severity of his crimes, but by his loss of a driver's license that could pass electronic inspection at a roadblock.

More than this, though, Westlake does a pretty amazing job of placing his story convincingly in the era of the severe national hangover of the late Bush years. The town of Pooley is very much like most of rural America in 2006: run down, decrepit, full of a graying population in the middle of realizing their American dream was not going to come true and ambitious young people trying to figure out angles to make up for its absence. We run into hangdog characters embittered by layoffs, business failures, mass incarceration, and the Iraq War. It isn't quite the nightmare collapse the country would undergo just a few years later (when Westlake, perhaps wisely, decided to check out on us), but it's still a real bummer of a look at small-town America, wracked by foreclosures and a lack of meaningful employment, drawn expertly by the hand of a master of lean, tight prose.

There's also a moral dimension to *Ask the Parrot* that gives it some real depth. It's almost a crime in itself to charge Parker with appearing in a novel with moral complexity; he's infamous, after all, for his extreme pragmatism and amoral approach to his chosen profession. But, surrounded not by greedy peers or hard-ass gangsters and lawmen, Parker finds something like mercy, if not actual pity, in his behavior towards so many people entirely out of their depth. Of course, he would never admit to feeling empathy towards the likes of the small-timer who accidentally shoots a derelict during the manhunt, or to the burnt-out shell that is Tom Lindahl; he'd argue that he was merely being practical and doing what was best to extract himself from a bad situation. But some of his behavior, combined with the characters he interacts with, infuses *Ask the Parrot* with meaning that's lacking in some of the earlier books.

Parker is the ultimate professional, functioning without emotion to do whatever is necessary to pull off a job with the highest reward for the lowest risk; Tom Lindahl is the ultimate amateur, overwhelmed with emotions he cannot fully understand or articulate, completely conflicted about everything including his own emotions. The fact that the two of them find a way to work together is proof that even towards the end, neither Parker nor Westlake lost a step, and may have even been getting stronger.

Dan Schwent says

When Parker was on the run from police dogs and chanced upon a rabbit hunter who unexpectedly aided him, he should have known the rabbit hunter had motives of his own. Now Parker's teaming with him to rob a racetrack. Can Parker get away with the robbery while a manhunt is going on for him?

Ask the Parrot was one of the better books of the new era Parker. Parker is his ruthless self, evident in the way he handles most of the supporting cast. Unlike some of the more recent Parker books, Parker doesn't seem soft in this one. The way he handles Thiemann after Thiemann accidentally kills a bum is vintage Parker, cold and calculating. The robbery was pretty simple but the petty crimes Parker pulled along the way were pretty good. Parker showed he was as ballsy as ever, participating in his own manhunt.

Ask the Parrot also shares many of the flaws that have marred the more recent Parker books. For one thing, the style is long winded compared to the earlier ones and the story feels padded. For another thing, there's a chapter from the damn parrot's point of view! WTF, Stark? That's okay for a Dortmunder book but not for Parker. This isn't a Monty Python sketch, though the parrot does wind up deceased.

The gripe list was shorter than usual for a post-Butcher's Moon Parker. Good, not great, the earlier ones are better, etc. I'm a little sad that I only have one Parker book left to read after this one.

Jim says

[The money was marked yet the brothers were after Parker to get it? (hide spoiler)]

Still says

"In the first place," Parker said, "let's get rid of that thirty-six hour fantasy of yours. You can't go on the run, because you can't hide. Where do you figure to be, thirty-six hours later? Oregon? Where do you sleep? Do you go to a motel and pay with cash? A credit card places you, and the law by then is watching your accounts. So do you pay cash? The motel wants your license plate number. Oh, from New York State?"

"Jesus."

"Anywhere you go in this country, everybody's on the same computer. It doesn't matter if you're across the street or across the country, as soon as you make any move at all, they know where you are. You gonna try to leave the country? You got a passport?"

"No," *** said. He sounded subdued. "I've never traveled much."**

"Not a good time to start," Parker told him. "You can't run away, you don't know those ropes. So instead of being the guy that did it and you're thumbing your nose and they'll never get you, you're the guy that *didn't* do it, and you're staying right there where you always were, and sure, let them go ahead and search, and you were home in bed last night

same as any other night, and you don't spend any of that cash for a year. You want to pull the job and not do time for it? That's how."

Advice to a first time heister-wannabe from a long-time professional mechanic.

This is one of maybe the 2nd or 3rd times in the Parker series where you have to read the book that precedes the events depicted in this novel, .

Quite a few innocents in this one that Parker has to bestow mercy on.

SPOILER ALERT:

(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Harold says

One to go.

Tosh says

Richard Stark (Donald Westlake) should be studied at all writing schools. To write a Parker novel is more of a math problem than a series of moments inspired by passion. The ultimate anti-hero, Parker represents a professional who will do what he has to do, to survive or excel in his line of the profession - which is being a professional criminal. Parker is in a pickle, somewhere in the backwaters of a small community, avoiding an arrest, he teams up with a hermit of sorts, who is still sore about being fired from a horse racetrack. Parker, who is quick with psychological profiles on everyone he comes upon, he acts on not emotion, but intellect. Stark is just as great as a writer as Patricia Highsmith, another narrative writer who plots with the skill of a surgeon under tense conditions. Recommending the best Richard Stark "Parker" novel is pointless. All are equally readable and addictive.

David Schaafsma says

Ask the Parrot, #23 of the 24 Parker novels from Richard Stark/Donald Westlake, is the continuation of the story begun in *Nobody Runs Forever*, to be concluded in *Dirty Money*, the last of 24 Parker novels Stark wrote. It begins where that last book ended, with Parker running in the woods, with bloodhounds barking in pursuit. What happens next? Parker meets a rabbit hunter, Tom Lindahl, who also happens to be a whistleblower with a grudge against the racetrack that fired him. Lindahl figures out Parker is one of the bank robbers he has seen on the news, but feels a kinship with Parker—they're both outsiders, with no love lost for big corporations—and strikes a deal: I'll help you get out of the state if you help me revenge my old boss by robbing their safe.

Lindahl, you'll not be surprised, has a parrot. The title of the novel and the parrot's very presence in the novel function in some ways like a joke, in that the parrot doesn't speak, and then he does. On the manhunt, one guy kills a wino he mistakes for a bank robber. They agree to keep the killing a secret, but you know how secrets have their way of leaking out.

"Why would anybody kill a parrot?"

"To keep him from talking!"

So someone does, of course (sorry, but you already knew this. As with the famous example of a gun, if you put a mute parrot on the stage in the first act, you will have to kill him in the last act, especially if he begins to talk). Stark even includes a section of the novel *FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARROT*. This is either a strength of the novel or a weakness, depending on your view of hard-nosed Parker novels—you either want to keep them mean and lean or you want to lighten them up, but from my perspective it is a weakness.

This is not Parker novel material. Noir is not supposed to be comedy. But if you are not a Parker purist, it's entertaining, and as Goodreads reviewer Dan reminds us, the joker Stark may have (he agrees, inappropriately) included the parrot as an homage to the great Monty Python sketch about a dead parrot:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vuW6...>

(Now wasn't that the best part of my review about a book that none of you will just randomly pick up?!)

Another kind of "joke" dimension of the plot is that Parker, introduced by Lindahl as his old friend Ed Smith from Chicago, participates in the county-wide manhunt for himself. This is not played for laughs, exactly, but it is an entertaining aspect of the tale. People naturally come to get suspicious about Ed Smith, which will come to complicate the planned racetrack heist.

Over all, this is a good and entertaining story that features a still pretty consistently brutal Parker, which is what we want. That aspect of the book is no joke. And there is an actual heist, also no joke. Also, to be resolved in the last book, I suspect, there is a million bucks stashed somewhere in the vicinity from last book's heist.

Jane Stewart says

Ok. Not as good as some of the others, but I still enjoy reading Parker.

Parker is in the woods fleeing after a robbery. A local guy Tom sees Parker and realizes he's one of the robbers. Tom wants Parker to help him rob a racetrack. Tom introduces Parker to other locals telling them Parker is a friend visiting. Parker joins the locals as they hunt for Parker. It's pretty good watching Parker interact with various local people.

Minor complaint. A security guard sees car lights at an unusual time. He goes to investigate, but the author did not tell what happened as he investigated. (Or maybe I missed it.)

The narrator William Dufres was ok, but not good for this series. He made Parker sound too ordinary.

THE SERIES:

This is book 23 in the 24 book series. These stories are about bad guys. They rob. They kill. They're smart. Most don't go to jail. Parker is the main bad guy, a brilliant strategist. He partners with different guys for different jobs in each book.

If you are new to the series, I suggest reading the first three and then choose among the rest. A few should be read in order since characters continue in a sequel fashion. Those are listed below (with my star ratings). The rest can be read as stand alones.

The first three books in order:

4 stars. The Hunter (Point Blank movie with Lee Marvin 1967) (Payback movie with Mel Gibson)

3 ½ stars. The Man with the Getaway Face (The Steel Hit)

4 stars. The Outfit.

Read these two in order:

5 stars. Slayground (Bk #14)

5 stars. Butcher's Moon (Bk #16)

Read these four in order:

4 ½ stars. The Sour Lemon Score (Bk #12)

2 ½ stars. Firebreak (Bk #20)

(not read) Nobody Runs Forever (Bk #22)

2 ½ stars. Dirty Money (Bk #24)

Others that I gave 4 or more stars to:

The Jugger (Bk #6), The Seventh (Bk#7), The Handle (Bk #8), Deadly Edge (Bk#13), Flashfire (Bk#19)

DATA:

Narrative mode: 3rd person. Unabridged audiobook length: 5 hrs and 53 mins. Swearing language: none.

Sexual content: none. Setting: around 2006 New York. Book copyright: 2006. Genre: noir crime fiction.

Mike says

Wow. I haven't blown through an entire book in a single sitting in quite a while. It wasn't until I put "Ask the Parrot" down that I realized I had read it cover-to-cover without a break. I guess I liked it. This one gets a full "4".

This is a very late Parker book (2006), coming a few years after "Firebreak" (previous entry read & reviewed.) Although it has some of the "mellowness" in "Firebreak", I thought this book was closer to the much older book I've read ("The Man With the Getaway Face") in pacing and style. Although Parker again goes to great lengths to avoid unnecessary killing (and has a good explanation for this in multiple scenes), he quickly and efficiently wipes out those he must. He shows us a chilling calculus of who can live and who dies that makes him seem the Parker of old.

I also liked how this book starts off with Parker in a major bind. The plot starts on high speed and stays on track throughout the story. Like a great impresario, the author manages the reader by changes in pacing, plotting, and character relationships. I did not get the "wordy" sensation, although in hindsight there is a passage or two this is a shade long-winded. I thought that the book flowed very well and held my interest better than most. Granted it is written and sized to be a quick read, but I really surprised myself yesterday.

Taken by itself, this is one of the better action-driven, hardcase novels I have ever read. As part of this long-lived series, I think it stands out as a stellar offering. (Remember we are talking *fun* here, not "literature".)

If you had to read only one Parker novel, this one will show you the consummate skill and style of Richard Stark (Donald Westlake), but it will do very little to introduce you to Parker himself. Since I have a very small sample to go by (3 so far), I can't tell if this is the pattern for all of the books: give out very few personal traits in each story so that Parker can always surprise the reader.

I have a couple of earlier (still from the 21st Century) entrants to read in the next couple of weeks. I'm looking forward to my next whirlwind of crime.
