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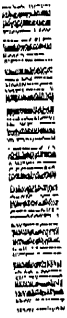
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**ELAINE STRITCH**

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*I recall that you were engaged to Jack Cassidy, Ben Gazzara, Kent Smith, all actors, and another one of my favorites, Gig Young. Why didn't you marry any of those great guys?*

**ES:** Well, in my mind, it was because of my religious upbringing—the fact that these men all had been previously married. I didn't want to marry outside the Church.

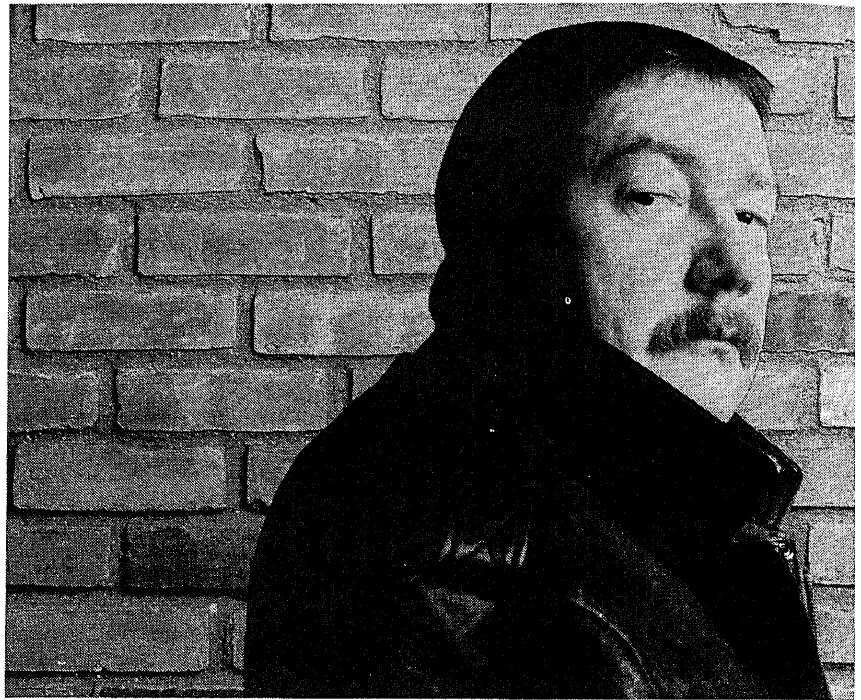
**LS:** *Outside of spiritual considerations, what is the most important thing in your life? I mean, I don't want you to feel you have to say God or something like that.*

**ES:** No, no. I'd like to meet Him so I could talk to Him about all this stuff. But the most important thing to me is peaceful laughter. And something by Pascal from the little Alcoholics Anonymous book I read each morning. I used it at an AIDS benefit in Southampton, when I was looking at all the rich people in the audience. It says we are never happy unless we are living or doing something for somebody else. I think that could cover performing, love, marriage, the works. If you don't do it, you haven't got a flying chance of being happy.

*Liz Smith is a syndicated columnist for "The New York Daily News" and a reporter for WNBC TV in NYC.*

# talking to...

**ROBERT PARKER:** "We weren't blessed with an ideal close relationship. We earned it."



## IN FASHION! THE WINES OF ITALY



The Italian Wine Center, 499 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10022

**R**obert Parker, the best-selling author of the "Spenser" detective series, looks today, at fifty-five, the picture of mid-life machismo. As he leans back in a bottle-green studded leather chair and surveys his ultramasculine home office near Harvard Square, in Cambridge, it's hard to imagine him in the 'fifties, completing his Ph.D. and cleaning house while his wife, the "former Joan Hall and woman of my dreams," worked downtown in Boston. When Parker was a housewife, he lifted weights. "Maybe *because* I was a housewife," he muses.

Parker would never describe himself as "liberated." He chose to do what some have called "woman's work" during a conservative decade because he was "simply undeluded about how the world works." Being undeluded has meant, for instance, balancing cooking (he's known around Boston as a celebrity chef) with writing novels of violence in which the hero goes blood simple now and then and pummels people's faces.

Parker created Spenser, the hip Boston-based detective who stars in his Spenser novels, in the early 'seventies. In thirteen years, fourteen Spenser novels have been published and translated all over the world. In the most recent, *Pale Kings and Princes* (Delacorte), Spenser blows apart a suburban Boston coke ring. English readers don't like him (too violent) *(Continued on page 178)*

## ROBERT PARKER

(Continued from page 176)

but the Japanese do (just violent enough)—in Japan, Parker endorses products including Santori beer and a whole line of Shiseido cosmetics for men called "Spenser's Tactics." And for the last two years, the private eye has also become the hero of the eponymous *Spenser: For Hire*, the ABC-TV series starring Robert Urich, whom Parker approved for the part.

Analyzing Spenser annoys Parker as much as analyzing himself. He admits there's a blur between him and the hard-boiled detective creation who "lurked in my mind since childhood. A shrink might say he represents my inner extremes; a bunch of repressed feelings; some sexual conflicts; blah, blah, blah." Parker will say that Spenser and Urich share his own squarish weight-lifter's frame, beer-broadened middle, and chest described as "bigger than Celtics' center Robert Parish's."

The author prefers to talk about Joan, long the center of his personal universe. He relishes their love story, reciting it as smoothly and seriously as a mantra. They met at a freshman college dance when he was seventeen, and married in 1956. Joan, who works "as a Team Leader—a honcho" for the Massachusetts Department of Education, still calls him "Ace."

Joan's presence fills Parker's books.

"That's what Joan Parker would do" is his way of approving a woman character's toughly decent behavior. He once complained about a *Spenser: For Hire* script (he's the show's script consultant) because Spenser's independent girl friend, Susan Silverman, a sharp-minded psychotherapist played by Barbara Stock, was asked to "gasp quietly" at Spenser's bloody face. "She's an adult," Parker fumes. "She knows what he does for a living. She'd ask, 'What's the other guy look like?' And if the other guy ever messed with her, she'd

helps him admit he feels rotten about this. Without undue sappiness, she also ends up loving him anyway.

In some ways, the two couples are similar: the men act hard while the women ask the hard questions. Parker and Spenser live amidst violence and chaos and human darkness; Joan and Susan flick on the lights with their intelligence and personal strength.

Robert and Joan Parker collaborated on one book, *Three Weeks in Spring*, an account of her mastectomy; and they co-wrote a pilot for a TV show starring a woman de-

## "If the other guy ever messed with Susan, she'd whack him in the mouth"

whack him in the mouth." When Spenser gets battered, Susan doesn't go all floral and wilt in a vase. She breaks out the brandy.

Like Parker's, Spenser's emotional life is anchored in a relationship with one woman. It's Susan's job to articulate the moral hang-over Spenser feels when he has to set up a few guys, then mow them down with his .38 (*Ceremony*, 1982), his pearl-handled "General Patton" .45 (*God Save the Child*, 1974), his 12-gauge Iver-Johnson pump gun (*Mortal Stakes*, 1975), or his Python and his shotgun (*Pale Kings and Princes*). Susan

protective. Marriage, Parker believes, is a collaboration between "adult equals." It can only work if you're "undeluded." He says this brusquely, impatiently. "Look. Relationships are achievements. Joan and I separated once, for two years, two months, two days, and two hours. Roughly. We've got an ideal close relationship now. We weren't blessed with it. We earned it." Parker is impatient with the way people try to make real marriages resemble movieland "with the woman acting like a baby."

But where security and marriage are the center of Parker's life ("I'd much rather be a husband and a father than a writer," he says), an edgy, sexy distance characterizes the relationship between Susan and Spenser, who, he says, "will never marry." They're committed to their relationship, yet each works best alone.

Susan disappeared from *Spenser: For Hire* during the '86-'87 season, replaced by Rita Fiori, a less charismatic character, played by Carolyn McCormick. Viewers skeptical about the security and longevity of strong-women television roles wondered if Susan had grown too popular. Perhaps *Spenser* was getting to be too much like *The Susan Silverman Show*.

But according to ABC-TV, Susan was withdrawn because "the character wasn't going anywhere." She was brought back by popular demand—ten thousand letters protested her absence. As Jim Butler, *Spenser: For Hire's* publicist, admits, "There's no other relationship like theirs on television."

But Parker doesn't talk about *Spenser: For Hire*. He claims he doesn't even watch it. He watches the Red Sox, the Celtics, and random cable sports from his office that looks out on T.S. Eliot's former home.

He's pleased Susan is back, though. She'll give *Spenser: For Hire* a better chance of making it this season. Besides, life without her was a lot like Hollywood. It was just too silly. —SARAH WRIGHT

Sarah Wright is executive features editor of "The Middlesex News" in Massachusetts.

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