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Brush Back

SARA PARETSKY ★ NEW YORK: G. P.
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At its heart Chicago is a city of neighborhoods, a checkerboard of small communities, each with its own distinct character and personality, its own set of rules. *Brush Back*, by Sara Paretsky (b. 1947), explores the deep and lasting impact of neighborhoods on the people who grew up in them and the relentless pull of place even on those, like her protagonist, V. I. Warshawski, who think that they have successfully escaped such bonds.

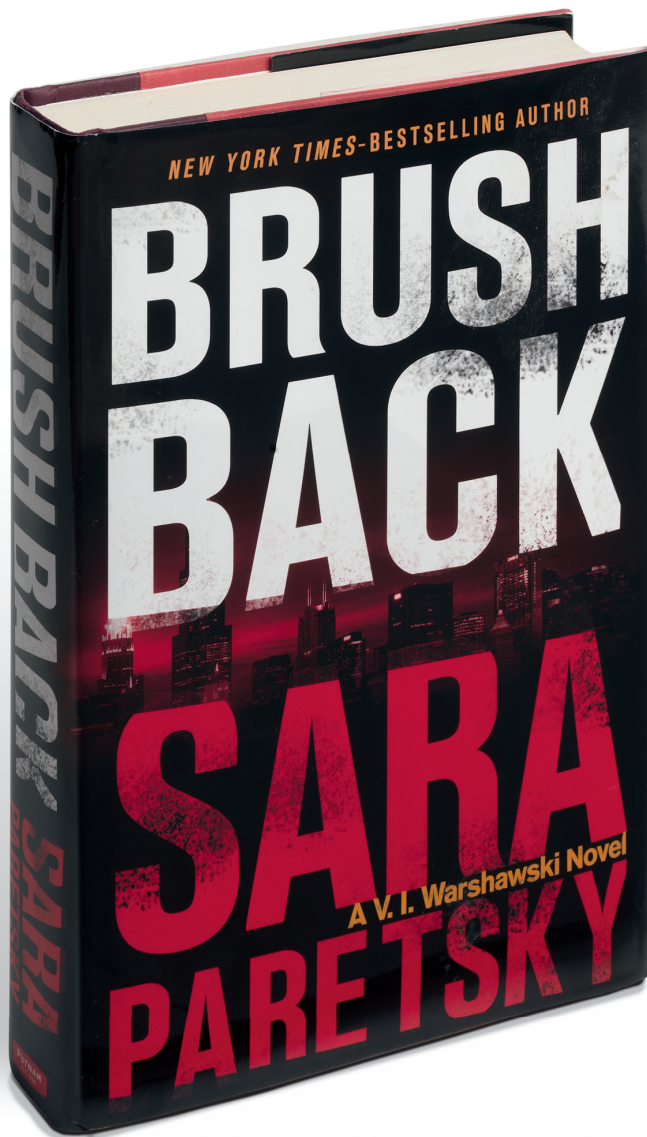
Warshawski, the lawyer turned hardboiled private investigator and protagonist of the seventeenth installment of Paretsky's popular and highly regarded mystery series, is a daughter of Chicago's Southeast Side. A strong female character who has paved the way for other tough female sleuths, Warshawski (Vic to her friends) made her first appearance in *Indemnity Only* in 1982. Vic believed that she had left behind the shuttered steel mills of the tough blue-collar environs of her youth when she went to the University of Chicago (Paretsky earned an MBA and PhD there) on scholarship and then moved on to law school and into more affluent and intellectually open parts of the city. But in nearly every book either she finds herself involved in some aspect of her earlier life or her earlier life finds her. In *Brush Back*, when an old high-school flame, Frank Guzzo, asks her to investigate a thirty-year-old murder, Vic is pulled back into old animosities and long-buried trouble.

It all starts when Guzzo shows up at her office to tell her that his mother, Stella, has just been released from jail after serving a sentence for beating his sister, Annie, to death, a crime for which she now insists she was framed. Vic starts asking questions, at first reluctantly, but finds herself drawn deeper into a mystery involving everything from corruption and crime to her own tangled past.

Set entirely in Chicago, *Brush Back* takes the reader to parts of the city that tourists seldom see: the inside of the Fourth District police station, the construction site of a downtown skyscraper, the edge of Calumet Harbor, where a body is found half-buried in a mountain of petroleum coke.

Described in rich detail, Chicago is woven into the narrative fabric of the book. As Vic battles traffic, rides the "L," and drops into her favorite bar, the city serves not merely as backdrop but rather as an important protagonist in the story. The Chicago we see through Paretsky's Vic is not just physical but metaphorical. Vic describes a retired judge, one of the witnesses she interviews during her investigation: "He threw his head back, laughing as if delighted that he had something I couldn't afford. It didn't surprise me: growing up behind the old stockyards, you competed for every beam of sunlight that filtered through the haze of blood and smoke."¹

The touchstones of the plot are also pure Chicago. Political corruption, organized crime, and professional sports—in this case, baseball (Paretsky



In *Brush Back*, Sara Paretsky's pathbreaking female investigator, V. I. Warshawski, is once again embroiled in the criminal life of Chicago's South Side. Paretsky's depictions of the ethnic neighborhoods and gritty industrial sectors in which her thrillers take place are as vivid as the dangerous exploits of her intrepid detective.

is a Cubs fan)—are all integral to the story. Guzzo had a tryout with the Cubs but wound up driving a truck. His son might have a shot at a scholarship if the patron saint of the neighborhood—an insurance agent with powerful connections—will put in a good word for him. Even the title of the book, *Brush Back*, is a baseball reference: the term refers to a fastball, high and inside, meant to intimidate the hitter, an apt metaphor for the ways in which the people from Vic's old neighborhood attempt to protect their secrets.