



## Backflash

*Richard Stark*

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## **Backflash** Richard Stark

After the publication of *Butcher's Moon* in 1974, Donald Westlake said, “Richard Stark proved to me that he had a life of his own by simply disappearing. He was gone.” And readers waited.

But nothing bad is truly gone forever, and Parker’s as bad as they come. According to Westlake, one day in 1997, “suddenly, he came back from the dead, with a chalky prison pallor”—and the novels that followed showed that neither Parker nor Stark had lost a step.

*Backflash* finds Parker checking out the scene on a Hudson River gambling boat. Parker’s no fan of either relaxation or risk, however, so you can be sure he’s playing with house money—and he’s willing to do anything to tilt the odds in his favor. Featuring a great cast of heisters, a striking setting, and a new introduction by Westlake’s close friend and writing partner, Lawrence Block, this classic Parker adventure deserve a place of honor on any crime fan’s bookshelf.

## **Backflash Details**

Date : Published April 15th 2011 by University of Chicago Press (first published 1990)

ISBN : 9780226770604

Author : Richard Stark

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Mystery, Crime, Fiction, Noir, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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## From Reader Review Backflash for online ebook

### **Mohammed says**

This is the first great Parker novel of the second series. Better, crisper, more hardcore Parker than in The Comeback.

Only Parker can satisfy me by thinking "do I kill that witness who might maybe be trouble with the law later "

The eternal question in the series for me is the arrogance of desperate people. Usually they are lowlifes who are too stupid, too much of a coward to trick, double cross regular people but to go after Parker who is more dangerous than a hitman.... Its fun reading it though like seeing animal documentary where the prey is too slow to outrun the lion :)

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### **John Culuris says**

As a professional thief Parker goes about his business with ruthless efficiency. In his eighteenth outing the heist involves a casino ship sailing the Hudson River in upstate New York and a fair amount of the book involves deciding whether the inside man is trustworthy, if the theft is viable, and the gathering of the crew once the decision to go ahead is made. Secrecy is compromised on several levels and Parker has a lot of cleaning up to do. Not among the best in the series but still 4 Stars because it delivers on what is expected: quick, light entertainment.

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### **Eric\_W says**

Another classic Parker from Richard Stark (aka Donald Westlake.) In this episode, Parker is approached by Cathman, a disgruntled ex-state employee who ostensibly has it in for gambling and the state wants to increase its revenue stream by allowing riverboat gambling. Cathman has blueprints of the boat and additional details, so Parker checks him out and decides it's possible to pull a heist.

As with all the Parker stories, you know there will be a glitch, there always is, so the suspense and interest come less from the planning and details of the heist (and this one is quite complicated), but as much from watching and enjoying how Parker manages to deal with the unexpected and odd difficulties.

Definitely one of the better Parker novels.

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### **Kemper says**

When Parker takes a boating trip along a river, you know that it's not gonna be a pleasure cruise.

After a narrow escape from his previous robbery, Parker is contacted by a retired government bureaucrat named Cathman who has a proposition. Cathman has the details on a new riverboat casino that is always

loaded with cash, and while Parker doesn't much like the idea of pulling a job on a boat, it's too tempting a target to pass up. Parker assembles a top notch crew of thieves to pull off the heist, but he's worried about Cathman's real motives. As always with a Parker story, there are some other monkey wrenches lurking around just waiting to be flung into the works at the worst possible moments.

This is second Parker book that Stark (a/k/a Donald Westlake) wrote a long lay off from 1974 until 1997. While I don't find the second phase of the books quite as strong as the early Parker novels, a weaker Stark is still better than most other crime novels, and this one was particularly fun to re-read. The riverboat heist is a nice change of pace, and as usual there are some clever gimmicks as to how the job gets pulled off. Another aspect I enjoyed was that for a while in the series most of Parker's problems were coming from loose ends that he would leave hanging. In this one, most of the obstacles come from directions he couldn't have reasonably anticipated so he comes across as smarter in this one as well as more ruthless in the way he deals with them.

Something that did strike me funny was the idea that there's a riverboat casino that actually goes up and down a river. When the riverboat fad hit Kansas City in the '90s there was the usual battle between the puritans and the capitalists, and the riverboat compromise was sold as being a way to do gambling with strict limitations. But then the so-called boats were essentially just buildings along the river.

We all played along with the joke for a while. There was a brief period when you actually had to get boarding passes and could only step 'on-board' at certain times with a time limit that meant you had to leave the 'ship'. Most of those rules were tossed out pretty quickly so what we were left with are casinos along the rivers in areas no one goes to except to gamble which pretty much eliminated all the projections of bringing tourism in.

Anyhow, that's why I found the idea of a riverboat casino that actually cruises on a river hilarious. (Are there parts of the country where they actually do this? Anyone got an actual cruising riverboat?) Parker should have just hit one of these KC casinos, and he wouldn't have had to worry about any of that boat nonsense.

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### **Kwoomac says**

Another "fun" Parker book from Richard Stark. 3.5 stars because I felt like the set up for the heist dragged on a little too long. Once we get to the actual heist, the pace picks up. Parker's gang is the best of the bad guys. The rest are double-crossing hooligans with no respect for Parker's hard work. Think they can just swoop in and take what's his. Just one look at Parker with those dead eyes should be warning enough. Stark doesn't disappoint. Parker may not be the nicest guy, but he has his own set of ethics, and you can't help rooting for this antihero.

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### **Wilde Sky says**

A criminal gets involved in a heist but little does he know that his every move is being watched.

I thought the story was really good with a fast? pace and plenty of action. Some of writing was a bit clunky but overall it was a very entertaining read.

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### Erik says

“When the car stopped rolling, Parker kicked out the rest of the windshield and crawled through onto the wrinkled hood, Glock first.”

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### Greg says

Right after finishing this book I jumped right into the first book in the Parker series, *The Hunter*. I don't know if it is just the twenty year hiatus that came between *Butcher's Moon* and *Comeback* or if the change comes gradually in the first sixteen Parker novels, but the amoral criminal in the later books seems like an easy-going live-and-let-live type compared to the angry man in the rumbled suit that walks over the George Washington Bridge to exact revenge on the people who fucked him over in the opening novel to the series. I thought that Parker was a 'hard-as-nails' character in the this book and *Comeback* but now I'm seeing he's a much mellower version of what he once was.

But, not to mix up books that I'm talking about too much I'll just focus on *Backflash* for now and talk about *The Hunter* in my future review for that book. I'll probably end up repeating things I said in my last Richard Stark review. The story is no-nonsense. Parker is enlisted to rob a riverboat casino on the Hudson River in Upstate NY (518 Represent!), during what is supposed to be a trial period for New York to have some casinos of it's own that aren't run by Native Americans\*. And that is the story for the book, how Parker sets up and executes the heist. I was a little disappointed that the story was told in a more traditional and linear manner than the sort of cubist manner of *Comeback*. But my disappointment in formal qualities was soothed by the plot itself. I really liked this book, a lot. I even thought maybe I should rate this one higher than *Comeback* but I don't know if where the two Parker novels I've read stand in the entire body of Stark's work, so for now I'm giving it the four stars just so that if I'm totally blown away by some of the other books I have something higher to rate them with.

Brian commented on the last review that Stark (and Parker as a character) don't waste any words and that is dead-on accurate. The book is lean as fuck, there is nothing extraneous. Every line is necessary to the story there are no words in the book or said by Parker that aren't necessary. The text, like the protagonist, is single-minded and ruthless in its goal (which actually makes the first chapter of *The Hunter* a little jarring since it contains so much description compared to the leaner prose that even follows in later chapters of the first book, it's like Stark had to get all those extra superfluous adjectives out of his system to get the Parker ball rolling and then could get streamlined and economical).

\*side note, the basic premise of this book is wildly implausible taking into account the political climate of New York State, the massive influence of the New York Racing Association and general priggishness in the mid to late 90's regarding morality when it comes to adults risking money in different manners that don't involve horses running in a circle. Also in the logic of the book the trial run of river boat gambling would be overlapping with the start of the Saratoga racing season, something that at the time would *never* been allowed to happen. The very existence of a casino river boat thirty miles from the track that sits next to Yaddo would excite the ire of a majority of moral hypocrites in Albany and would have been a very different political climate from the one described by Richard Stark.... but this is fiction so ignore all of that.

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### **Lynn says**

One of my favorites so far in the Parker series. I think because it's one of the few that shows a job from start to finish. Parker's partners are familiar because he is the recruiter for the job. There are complications of course. Great tension in this one.

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### **David says**

This is the sort of Parker novel that I like best: it focuses fairly narrowly on Parker planning and executing a heist and then dealing with the aftermath. So why didn't I like it more? Why did I actually find it a wee bit tedious? The answer, I think, is that while Starklake ably executes the Parker formula, it *feels* like a formula this time out. Starklake doesn't play with his own conventions as he sometimes does--he just marches through them. Of course, this wouldn't be my reaction if this were my first encounter with Parker, in which case I would probably think this was a great book. More than anything, this all suggests that I ought to take a break from Parker. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT ALERT: In *Backflash*, Parker laughs at a joke.

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### **David Schaafsma says**

“We live and learn, Ray.”

And then Parker shot him”—Stark

The second Parker book Stark wrote after a 23 year hiatus, #18 of 24, and it is better than Comeback, the previous book. Feels a bit like they are getting back in their stride, Parker and Stark. A solid entry in the series, with just the right mix of details about the planning and execution of the crime, and when things go inevitably south, the careful planner Parker improvises his way out of a couple jams. Part of the attraction to these novels is that we get to see things from the perspective of a cold-blooded criminal. We think: How would we pull this off, get guns on a boat with heavy security, how would we get the money off, and so on.

“People get used to everything but being dead”—Parker

The story is about a hired heist of a riverboat gambling casino. Some of it is a little far-fetched, but that's okay. The best part of the story is the intense car ride with Ray, Parker in handcuffs, a kind of coiled snake waiting to spring. And you know he will. But overall, Parker seems less angry or brutal than in the best of these novels: The Hunter, The Deadly Edge, Slayground, Butcher's Moon. Now those are inspired entries; Backflash is good, don't get me wrong. Just not among the very best of the series. 3.5.

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### **Mark says**

Another fun read while travelling to and from work.

The book opens with a robbery gone bad, at least from some but Parker gets away with his share. And goes home to Claire.

He gets contacted by an individual who proposes a deal/robbery based upon the knowledge he got from the partner that died in Parker's last heist. Parker being suspicious does what he does best and sets forth to investigate the man and his deal/job.

Parker and friends prepare the heist and then all goes according plan, were it not for some folks who want to benefit from other peoples' labor. Parker has to use all of his wits to get out in one piece.

A great book to enjoy if you like the genre and the characters on the other side of the law. Donald E. Westlake did write another enjoyable thriller with the popular Parker. While the recent movie might not have done the character all the justice he deserved this book does him service.

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### **Jim says**

Another good addition to the Parker novels. He was at his best again. A fast, tangled adventure.

Lawrence Block wrote the intro & it is specific to this book, different than the one he did for the last one. That's important to note since a block of earlier books all had the same intro & it contained spoilers for later books, which sucks. Block has a lot of good insights into the series.

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### **Jeremy Hornik says**

Pretty meh for a Parker.

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### **Mike (the Paladin) says**

You'd think that after a while these might sort of run together or become repetitive, but they don't. They even stand up well to re-reading. I suppose it has to do with the quality of the writing and how well we get to know Parker.

I mean (generally) the books open with Parker being introduced to a "job" or coming up with a job himself. Then he plans said job and pulls together a crew. Then however things always (somehow) go off the rails and we get a suspenseful thriller ...yeah, there is actual suspense. Stark (Westlake) is simply a good (great?) writer.

Here there is a kind of double blind set up in the job (jobs) and while you may figure it out going along it's still an absorbing read with characters you get to know (some more than others of course) set in a thrill filled plot.

Like it, recommended.

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## **Still says**

Among the best of the Parker entries.

I was spurred to rush on and read this particular Parker entry by my Goodreads friend Christopher.

He recognized that much of this book takes place in my part of the universe.

As we know it.

Parker goes pirate here... plots a heist on a riverboat with the help of a shifty lobbyist.

So many twists and turns in this one the entire job almost goes into the crapper.

If I've met his crew on this gig in previous jobs, I don't recall them.

Part-timers, all of them. Like Parker - heists are means to an end.

One guy is a pro-wrestler. Another one builds race-cars and competes in racing events.

Another is an impressionist -a mimic- who just wants to live a gentleman's life back in London - his adopted home.

And we meet the lovely Noelle Braselle.

For the first time, I think.

Highest Recommendation!

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## **Dave says**

“Backflash” is the eighteenth novel in the Parker world. It is wedged between “Comeback” and “Flashfire” and, as Lawrence Block points out in the introduction, this is Westlake (aka Stark) having fun with his titles and connecting them. It is part of the second set of Parker novels, published from 1997 to 2008 after a 23-year hiatus from the series. These are longer novels than most of the original sixteen. In some ways, they feel smoother, more professionally finished.

This one involves what looks for most of the book more like a con game from The Sting than a simple show your guns and rob them kind of caper. The subject of the caper here is a gambling boat running a route up and down the Hudson River in upstate New York. “It looked like any small cruise ship, white and sparkly, a big oval wedding cake, except in the wrong setting. It should be in the Caribbean, with Tommy Carpenter, not steaming up the Hudson River beside gray stone cliffs, north out of New York City.”

This is a trial run for the boat and estimates of how much dough is traveling on the boat range in the neighborhood of several hundred thousand. A retired, but still well-connected state bureaucrat has got the idea for the caper and engages Parker to do it. Parker likes the money angle, but for the life of him, can't figure out why this straight- laced career bureaucrat is even involved in such a thing. Parker himself organizes the crew in this one and it includes a number of characters from other Parker novels, including a couple from the art caper in Plunder Squad such as Noelle, whose main job there was to take off her clothes and distract the sheriff's deputies and Mike Carlow who explains that people get used to everything, but being dead. The wonder of this book is how Parker's crew cons their way onto the boat and then off it with the loot and I won't spoil it by telling about it.

The great characters in this book don't stop with Parker's crew, but include the state bureaucrat that engages Parker on this enterprise and others that try to get in his way. Some of the descriptions are hysterically funny like the motel clerk with the “neat egg-shaped head with straight brown hair down both sides of it, like

curtains at a window, and nothing much in the window" and the bartender who looked "like a retired cop who'd gone to seed the day his papers had come through." Then there's Susan Cahill, who is in charge of guest relations on the gambling boat, "she in low-heeled pumps, dark blue skirt and jacket" and "her smile looked metallic, something stamped out of sheet tin. The hand she extended, with its long, coral-colored nails, seemed made of plastic, not flesh."

The book is simply another great addition to the Parker universe. It is written in Westlake's tight prose and filled with action and planning and double-crosses.

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### **Martin says**

In this masterful crime novel, Parker, Wyczka, Sternberg, Carlow, and Noelle Braselle team up to rob a casino boat. The heist is daring and impeccably carried out, but would you know it, there's a few hitches right after and Parker has to tie up quite a number of loose ends. Terrific writing throughout, one of Richard Stark's best. Sad to think there are only six *Parker* books left.

Up next: Flashfire.

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### **Jane Stewart says**

This one was good. It didn't grab me like some of the others, but it was ok. I still want to read the whole series.

This is about a heist from a riverboat gambling casino. The plans are a little more intricate than normal, including getting a guy to pretend to be a politician with body guards. A woman pretends to be wheelchair bound. The main suspense is after the heist when other parties make a play for the money. The best part was when a bad cop put Parker in handcuffs. I enjoyed the way Parker got out of that one.

The narrator Keith Szarabajka is my favorite narrator for the Parker series. He does a great Parker voice - menacing.

#### **THE SERIES:**

This is book 18 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 1/2 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 1/2 stars. The Sour Lemon Score (Bk #12)

2 1/2 stars. Firebreak (Bk #20)

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

2 1/2 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: 6 hrs and 16 mins. Swearing language: strong, including religious swear words but rarely used. Sexual content: none. Setting: around 1997 New York.

Book copyright: 1997. Genre: noir crime fiction.

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### **Dan Schwent says**

When a retired bureaucrat told Parker about the job, it sounded like a good score; rob a riverboat casino and take nearly half a million dollars, cash. Only other people know what's going down and want the money for themselves. And what's in it for the bureaucrat anyway? Will Parker finish the job with his money and his life intact?

Parker's back and still up to the same old tricks. I wonder how much money he's stolen and spent over the years. As always, the plan is both believable and well-executed. Dan Wicza, Noelle, Mike Carlow and Lou Sternberg all return to give Parker a hand. Cathman, the guy who tipped Parker to the job, is an odd bird and I was glad he got what was coming to him. I really liked the way Parker came up with to get the money off the boat. (view spoiler)

But Dan, you ask. You've only given this a 3? What gives? I'll tell you, Arnold. My problem with Backflash was the same as my problem with Comeback. It read a lot more like a Donald Westlake novel than a Richard Stark. Some of the economy of the prose was gone. It felt a little watered down, like I was drinking a MGD 64 instead of a Miller Genuine Draft. I know I shouldn't expect Westlake to be the same writer he was at the time of the original Parker run but it's definitely noticeable.

Other than that, I don't have any complaints. It was a solid caper and a worthwhile entry in the Parker series.

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