

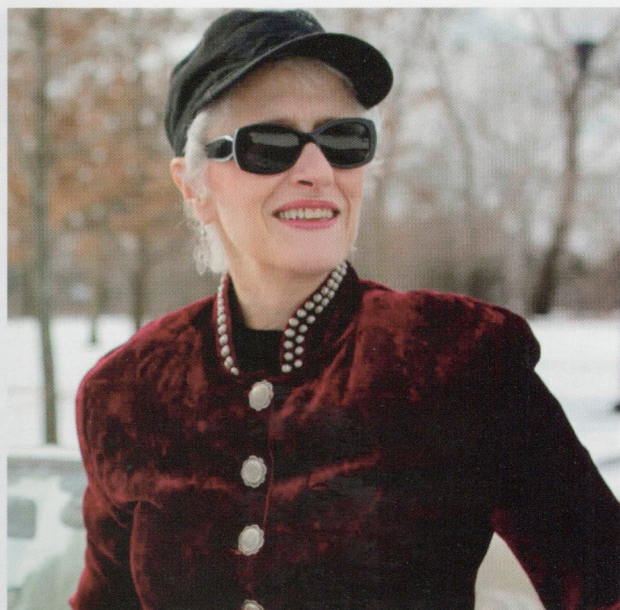
From Damsels in Distress to Women in Charge

By Karin Slaughter

As a teenager, I devoured every Sara Paretsky novel I could get my hands on—which wasn't easy, because my local bookstore was packed with manly writers who kept gender roles as starkly defined as an X-ray of a broken bone. Trust me, they were giving the people what they wanted. I can clearly remember the day my father took me to the new dentist in town. A woman came into the room and introduced herself as the dentist. I started laughing because it was completely unbelievable to me that a woman could be anything but an assistant, a teacher, a mother or (if she wore glasses) a librarian. It was into this world that a friend's mother dropped my first VI Warshawski novel. What a revelation! The writing was so clean and precise, there was no central love story to signal this was a demure lady novel, and VI didn't need a man to rush in at the end and save her. Shockingly, she managed to save herself.

It's only in retrospect that I understand VI straddled two very different generations. In my world, "too" women (too strong, too independent, too ambitious) were suspect—no more so than by other women. What was wrong with these feisty gals who didn't want to be confined to stereotypical roles? Why were they so pushy and opinionated? Why did they want to be men? They would never get married or have children, and they would die alone, and their wasted old bodies would be devoured by cats.

I remember when I dragged my stepmother to see the VI movie adaptation (which was years ahead of its time). I marveled at Kathleen Turner tough-talking my favorite lines. And I was shocked when,



afterward, my stepmother said, "Eh. I don't buy a woman getting punched in the face like that and not falling apart."

•The thing that my stepmother didn't understand was that VI was just as much a hero to me as John McClane or Indiana Jones. She had a strong moral code. She wasn't afraid to defend herself. She spoke her mind, and people respected her for it. To paraphrase the famous line, she took every punch the boys took, but backward and in heels.

It's not just me who feels this way:

"When I was a young law student who read a ton of crime fiction, I decided I wanted to be VI Warshawski. When I learned more about the woman who created her, I decided I wanted to be Sara Paretsky."

—Alafair Burke

"Sara Paretsky is what all mystery writers should aspire to: talented, intelligent, and ferocious."

—Charlaine Harris

Sara Paretsky isn't just a fantastic writer. She has shown women—and men—that it's okay to make women heroes instead of damsels, fully developed characters rather than objects to be saved or screwed. Sara turned the genre upside down and trail-blazed the way for all the writers who came after her.



Karin Slaughter is the *New York Times* and #1 internationally bestselling author of *Cop Town* and the Will Trent series. Her novels have been translated into thirty-two languages and have sold thirty-five million copies worldwide.