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Review by M. B. McLatchey

Spiritual Redemption in a World of Crime: Carolina Garcia-Aguilera and Barbara Parker

When an eternal judge joins forces with a Miami-Dade County judge, good guys do in fact finish first. As differently as they handle the topic of the eternal, crime novelists Carolina Garcia-Aguilera and Barbara Parker share an optimism regarding its place in the world of crime. In Garcia-Aguilera's *Lupe Solano* series and in Barbara Parker's *Suspicion* series, when the agents of justice cannot find the retribution that they are seeking through the legal system, they turn almost reflexively to religious systems. Like Parker, Garcia-Aguilera consciously introduces into her crime novels a plot line that encourages her protagonists to interpret the criminal world through a spiritual lens – in this case, Catholicism. As Garcia-Aguilera observed in a recent interview, “I wanted to bring in the Catholic perspective, which hasn't been done much in crime fiction” (*Florida Crime Writers* 51). But what exactly does Garcia-Aguilera mean by “Catholic perspective” and what does she think it adds to her work? Unlike Parker's protagonists, who find themselves cast onto a mythic stage rich with religious symbolism, Garcia-Aguilera's *Lupe Solano* seems to import Catholicism in order to boldly demarcate political and cultural allegiances.

Indeed, in Garcia-Aguilera's work, Catholicism and culture are one. However, because her most formative experiences with Catholicism and with cultural identity and pride occurred in Cuba during the repressive regime of Fidel Castro, Garcia-Aguilera's Catholicism is deeply anti-Castro. For decades under the rule of Fidel Castro, Catholic schools and churches were closed and Christian holidays such as Christmas were prohibited and declared illegal. Because this was the Cuba that Garcia-Aguilera's family knew before immigrating to the United States – and because, under Castro's reign, Cuba has persisted with many of these repressions – the tenets of Catholicism in her work are highly politicized. In her *Lupe Solano* series, her fictional sleuth is a Cuban-American Private Investigator, who is smart, sexy, and rabidly-religious. The primary tenets of *Lupe Solano*'s Catholicism might read as follows: *love and defend one's family at all costs; repay Castro for his sins at every chance.*

One of the many examples of Garcia-Aguilera's desire to link religion and politics occurs in a climactic scene in *Havana Heat*. When Lupe Solano comes upon a cemetery in Cuba where her ancestors were buried, she discovers an unexpected blend of the sacred and profane. The knee-jerk condemnation of Castro that this scene triggers is stunning:

The Cementerio de Colon housed the mausoleum the belonged to my family. My ancestors were buried there.... We drove past I looked through its enormous gates at the tombs, chapels, and stone crucifixes lining the rows of the venerable burial place. I was saddened as, flashing by in a blur, I saw a sign by the front entrance: *tours cost one dollar American*. I couldn't help but think that Castro was profiting from my ancestors, stealing from them in their eternal repose. (254)

What should be a hallowed place reserved for spiritual reflection has devolved into a carnival-like setting for mercenaries. The notion that Garcia-Aguilera presents here that Castro has not only disrespected the faith traditions of Lupe's ancestors, but that he is "stealing from them in their eternal repose" points to a central theme in the *Lupe Solano* series: namely, that in suppressing their religious freedoms and in rendering insignificant their cultural artifacts, Castro's regime has *stolen* their history from Catholic Cubans. Symbolically, he has rendered Cuba's Catholics as the ugly step-child of their own motherland. The motifs that emerge in this cemetery scene – restoring rightful ownership; reviving ancestral traditions; renovating a neglected landscape – are trumpeted throughout Garcia-Aguilera's novels, and they resound when she explores the link between Cuba and Catholicism.

Since the setting for the *Lupe Solano* series is *not* Cuba, but the United States; *not* Havana, but Miami's Little Havana, Catholicism in her novels is the faith of the exile. As such, Catholicism is summoned in Garcia-Aguilera's work not for its spiritual benefits, but for its nostalgic and revolutionary components. In *Havana Heat*, as she steers her boat toward the shores of Cuba, Lupe reflects on the meaning of a *mother* country. What we hear is a refusal of the Cuban-American to accept the identity of the step-child:

Cubans can never escape the influence of the island on their lives, and I was no different. As I began to make out a faint outline of land – little more than a smudge in the distance – I felt that *patria* that was embedded in my DNA. I could picture the power of Cuba over me as though I lived inside a bubble, sustained and nourished by the amniotic fluid that was the essence of the island. (247)

In the same scene, upon boarding the boat that will take her to her assignment in Cuba – indeed, when embarking on *any* of her assignments – we are told that Lupe Solano "touched the [holy] medals pinned to [her] brassiere, and made the sign of the cross" (245). It is an apparently unconscious, reflexive gesture that Lupe does throughout the *Lupe Solano* series. For people of faith, this might look like an expedient way of invoking divine help. However, for Lupe, who still hides (and in turn, *sustains*) her Catholic faith by pinning it to her underwear, her medals and benedictions remind us of what Castro's regime *cannot* crush. Since she is a P.I. in Miami, an equally important part of Lupe's wardrobe is her Beretta. In scenes that portend danger, Lupe's hands

brush over her holy medals and her Beretta in such a choreographed manner that it is as if she assigns equal importance to them:

I reached into my purse for the white linen handkerchief Aida insisted I carry because a lady should have one at all times. I carefully placed it on the rusted doorknob....To my surprise it moved easily. I almost wished it hadn't... To hell with the handkerchief. I put it back in my purse and took out the Beretta instead. I double-checked to make sure it was loaded, then pushed the door open a few more inches. I'd begun to sweat from fear, and I had to blink to clear the perspiration from my eyes....I touched the three medals of the Virgin pinned to my brassiere, which my sister Lourdes had given to me to wear at all times for protection, said a brief prayer to Her, then pushed open the door all the way. (139)

In *Havana Heat*, the odyssey-like adventure of smuggling an invaluable tapestry and other original art out of Cuba that Lupe Solano undertakes has nothing to do with solving a criminal case and everything to do with resuscitating her ancestral and Catholic heritage. But what makes it an irresistible case is the built-in opportunity to square accounts with Castro's regime:

The two situations that had been dropped in my lap – both involving reunifying original art with their rightful owners – were a departure from the usual criminal and civil cases in which I specialized. And, because I relishes and reveled in my Cuban heritage, I felt proud to be associated with any endeavor that contributed to it.... But now I had to wonder ... How in the hell was I going to get it out of Havana, right from under the nose of the Cuban police state? If the Cuban government got wind of the fact that a tapestry was hidden in a secret basement in the Vedado district, they wouldn't hesitate to confiscate it and, probably, sell it to the highest bidder to generate cash. The government had been dismantling private art collections and selling them abroad for years....I had to admit, I was tempted to be the one who returned it to the Mirandas, who at least had a long-standing claim to possessing it – a better claim, at least, than Fidel's government. As far as Angel's plan was concerned, nothing would make me happier than to know I played a part in outfoxing the Cuban government. (54)

Smuggling invaluable art out of Cuba almost certainly falls outside of Lupe's job description of Miami P.I. Of the two motives that ultimately compel her to accept the assignment, the first is raw resentment. "I had to admit," Lupe confesses, as she mulls over the assignment, "the prospect of screwing Fidel Castro had a certain appeal" (49). Secondly, there is the more profound and moral motivation of returning treasure to the rightful owners. For Lupe to accomplish this goal, she will need to successfully complete several complex steps, one of which will involve replacing several Cuban masterpieces with convincing fakes. Significantly, from the moment Lupe is offered this assignment, thoughts of her deceased mother haunt her. What Garcia-Aguilera seems to suggest is that even more compelling than "the prospect of screwing Fidel Castro" is the prospect of going home again – the motherland inflected through remembrances of Lupe's deceased mother:

My mind felt pulled in different directions, but it returned to thoughts of my mother. Mami loved the sea fiercely, and she often took my sisters and me to the beach. I very much felt her presence with me there on the deck. Ever since Lucia Miranda told me about the tapestry [that Miranda left in Cuba when she emigrated to the U.S., and that she

now wants Lupe to smuggle out of Cuba], I had felt Mami occupying my feelings even more than usual. (53)

However, as long as Castro continues his choke hold on Cuban Catholics and others labeled as threats to the state, then a large population of Cuban-Americans can never go home again. In *Havana Heat*, it would seem that if Cuban-Americans cannot go home to their motherland Cuba, then they will bring the motherland to America – piece by piece. Embedded in Lupe’s difficult assignment of smuggling out of Cuba a family treasure for a dying grandmother is the harder challenge of helping her family come to terms with the world of troubling dualities that the Cuban-American inhabits: Cuban/American; Havana/Little Havana; original art/fake art; Catholicism/ secularism; God/state.

Garcia-Aguilera tells us that the tapestry that Lupe smuggles out of Cuba is the completing piece in a 16th-century series known as “The Hunt of the Unicorn”. In actuality, the series is currently on display in The Cloisters in New York City and is believed to have originated in the Southern Netherlands. According to pagan mythology, the series portrays a lover’s tale where the unicorn can be subdued only by a virgin maiden, hardly a theme that Garcia-Aguilera seems to intend given Lupe Solano’s obvious non-virginal status – a point that we will return to later. Instead, the Christian interpretation of the series would seem to apply: in this case, the unicorn symbolizes Christ and the series portrays the Passion of Christ. As a parallel to the dangerous boat trip to Cuba that Lupe undertakes, the Passion story woven into the tapestry serves to remind us of the heroic nature of such journeys.

In his study of the mythic hero, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, scholar Joseph Campbell identified what he calls the three seminal points of any heroic adventure: first, the departure into the unknown; secondly, the literal or figurative death of the hero; and finally, the return of the newly enlightened hero, a new life after death. Lupe’s boat trip to Cuba and back features all three of the components of the heroic cycle. In order to commit herself to her assignment, she must sever her relationship with her Cuban-American lover, who strongly objects to her trip. In terms of the archetypal heroic cycle, she leaves behind the familiar and enters the zone of the unfamiliar:

At times, Alvaro thought I was a typical knee-jerk, right-wing Cuban exile; in turn, I thought he excused many of the Cuban government’s actions in the name of expediency and survival... Ay, Cuban men. Maybe I should have stuck to Americans. Everything would have been easier and less complicated. As it was, nothing between Cubans was every simple. It was a fact that I should have remembered before I opening my mouth to Alvaro. (*Havana Heat* 60)

Secondly, she must re-ally herself with an old friend and warrior-like figure, who will navigate Lupe’s route to Cuba and back – what Campbell would refer to as the seminal step: embracing a cause larger than herself, and advancing toward the threshold of her adventure. Significantly, Lupe’s friend Barbara embodies the qualities of the Santeria tradition’s goddess, Yemaya – a fertility and creation goddess, and a fierce protector of women. What we see in Lupe’s reunion with her friend Barbara is a dying of the old Lupe and an awakening of the warrior within. Suddenly forgotten is the Cuban-American Lupe who settles for a café con leche and mojito as badges of her Cuban

heritage; newly emerged is the Cuban-Warrior Lupe who smokes cigars, drinks Anejo, and plans an art heist whose main objective is to return to Cuban-Americans what is rightfully theirs – to retrieve for them their piece of their motherland – and, in the process, to “screw Castro”:

Normally I shied away from physical contact with woman, but with Barbara I broke all the rules. Barbara Perez was a unique woman, and I loved and respected her in a way that defied easy explanation. She was fierce, brave, loyal, and she had an unmatched knowledge of the sea. She was the one person who could help me. . . . Barbara remembered our last trip to Cuba very well. She remembered the bodies in the countryside and the blood in the waters of the Florida Straits. Neither of us could ever possibly forget. “To success,” I said holding out my glass. “To success,” she repeated, clinking hers to mine. (*Havana Heat* 120)

The new Lupe that emerges in the final scenes of *Havana Heat* will become the Cuban warrior at the center of Garcia-Aguilera’s subsequent *Lupe Solano* novels. No longer self-consciously Cuban-American, no longer the step-child of American culture nostalgic for her homeland, the new Lupe is at once assimilated into American culture and boldly Cuban; at once, Catholic-schooled and fiercely non-doctrinal in her Catholicism.

In a recent interview, Garcia-Aguilera explained that she named her protagonist, Lupe, after the Virgin de Guadalupe – but the problem with this given name is that there is nothing even remotely virginal about Lupe Solano. “Lupe is the nickname for Guadalupe, as in the Virgin de Guadalupe,” the author explained, “and because that is a part of her Catholic and Hispanic culture I wanted to bring it out” (*Florida Crime Writers* 53). The key to understanding the nature of Lupe Solano’s Catholicism is to note the ease with which Garcia-Aguilera seems to secularize religion in the statement above. For Garcia-Aguilera, as for her protagonist Lupe, “Catholic and Hispanic culture” are simply two sides of the same national identity: *Cuban*. To identify Garcia-Aguilera’s Lupe as *Catholic* in the doctrinal or spiritual sense would be a stretch indeed. In *Bloody Twist*, Lupe’s assignment as P.I. is to confirm that the highest paid escort in Miami Beach is a virgin – a bizarre enough case, but not half as bizarre as Lupe’s interpretation of Catholicism. In reviewing the clues that tipped her off regarding the escort’s duplicitous nature, Lupe mulls over the escort’s use of the Virgin Mother’s name, Mary:

She told me Madeline’s street name was Mary, which could have been a play on her middle name, Marie. But a true practicing Catholic would never mock the Virgin’s name that way. At least, no Catholic that I know would ever do that. That was another red flag that she [the escort] was not telling the truth.” (253).

What Lupe misses here is that “a true practicing Catholic” would not make prostitution her profession either. What renders Lupe positively nonplussed is the question of *how* the escort demands such a high hourly rate while still maintaining her virginity. In a swift analogy between virginal escort and the Virgin Mary that would make the Catholic Church cringe, she chalks it all up to “another improbable claim of virginity” (*Bloody Twist* 4). Either Garcia-Aguilera has consciously decided to mock one of the most profound tenets of the Catholic Church – in this case, one of the four dogmas in Roman Catholic Mariology – or else she is simply imparting here a light-hearted and non-

doctrinal skepticism that defines her cultural attachments more than it identifies a spiritual foundation. Given the Lupe who animates the latest novel in Garcia-Aguilera's *Lupe Solano* series, one would have to choose the latter of these interpretations. What Garcia-Aguilera delivers in the new Lupe is a decidedly-unmarried, archly-Cuban, and persistent P.I. with a variety of sex partners and a weakness for rich foods and wine that would make the Sisters of our Lady of Lourdes blush – and that keeps her readers sympathetically engaged. In Garcia-Aguilera's mysteries, the spiritual dimension – Catholicism – at once, marks out her protagonists as the exiles that they are and buoys them with the hope of national reunification.

By contrast, in Barbara Parker's crime thrillers, the spiritual dimension provides an alternative path for her protagonists to make sense of their lives and to ultimately discover justice outside of the constraints of secular judicial systems. For Parker's protagonists such as Gail Connor or Dan Galindo, as long as they entertain the company of spiritual mentors and feel their influence, redemption and personal renewal look possible.

In Barbara Parker's legal thrillers, good guys finish first, in part thanks to the good detective work of her protagonists, but primarily thanks to a kind of cosmic and redemptive justice operating in the natural world. If the police and the courts fail to deliver justice – which is often – then a kind of Old Testament judge embedded in her plot lines *will* deliver it. When bright and intuitive criminal lawyers somehow misread a trail of clues that should lead them to their man, then circumstances *outside* of their control lead them to him instead. The laws of nature in Parker's universe appear wired to deliver justice. And, like the God-force of the Old Testament, this moral conscience that emerges in her novels is short on mercy and ultimately delivers what theologians would call a *retributive* justice. In other words, people get what they deserve.

In an interview shortly before she died of cancer in 2009, when asked about the possibility of a unifying philosophy in her crime novels, Parker seemed to surprise even herself with a response that emphasized the spiritual world rather than the criminal world:

If you really want to know about my philosophy, you can probably look at the final scene of Chapter Two of *Suspicion of Innocence*, or the very last chapter of *Blood Relations*.... I am not particularly religious, but both of these scenes involve older men, who are spiritual guides. One is a priest, the other a Torah scribe. Come to think of it, the protagonist of *Criminal Justice*, Dan Galindo, undergoes three (a significant number in the Christian church) instances of immersion and revelation. And in the chapter of *Suspicion of Vengeance*, in which Gail's client is executed, take a look at the symbols of renewal and rebirth, especially in the last few paragraphs. Interesting. I'll have to think about this. (*Florida Crime Writers* 159)

Even beyond Parker's specific references, the contest between spiritual guide and secular guide seems to be the very contest that drives her narratives. Inevitably, Parker's protagonists find themselves having to face the hard challenge of choosing between systems of moral justice and systems of legal justice – and, in turn, examining the difference between the two. In Parker's legal thrillers, trials are aborted because of the "Double Jeopardy" rule, material evidence is ignored because of police sloppiness and mishandled Miranda rights, and rapists and embezzlers escape sentencing and carry on

unsanctioned, while the would-be guardians of the law – criminal prosecutors, defense attorneys, and P.I.'s – suffer professional hardships and personal losses that rival those of Job from the Old Testament. Parker's protagonists – characters such as the career-minded attorney, Gail Connor in the *Suspicion* series; former federal prosecutor, Dan Galindo in *Criminal Justice*; and world-worn, criminal prosecutor, Sam Hagan in *Blood Relations* – all struggle with the same thorny concept: *namely, they work in a justice system that, because of its inherent nature, cannot deliver justice*. Reflecting on the corruption inherent in man-made systems such as the U.S. judicial system, Hagan's wife sourly advises him, "You're stuck in a justice system that has no connection to justice, only to expediency, or to whoever has the most money or power" (*Blood Relations* 49). Inevitably, to one degree or another, Parker's protagonists arrive at the same question: *what can a religious system do for us that our legal system cannot?*

For Parker, this will become a question inflected through the professional or personal struggles of her most upstanding citizens. In *Blood Relations*, and to a varying degree in all of her novels, the broken and imperfect characters marched before us for our scrutiny are not the corrupt and the criminal element of society, but the guardians of the law. In *Blood Relations*, our subject is not the real estate mogul, who rapes and sodomizes a teenager in a Miami club; not the male fashion model who parlays his celebrity status into a license to sexually exploit aspiring young male models; nor is it the fashion photographer, who – lacking a moral core – can produce nothing more in her photos than one American cliché after another. Instead, our subject is the forsaken and broken character presented in the law-abiding protagonist and – as if marked out for their very association with him – the members of his immediate family: a desperately lonely teenage daughter and a wife immobilized by grief after the tragic death of their son. All of this is because, in Parker's universe, the criminal world is simply the foreground to a more mythic world where questions of loyalty, love, and personal responsibility will be examined in the protagonist's quest for legal justice. As Parker explains it:

There are generally two basic plot lines unfolding simultaneously in a mystery. First, the crime. Who did it and why, and how does the bad guy get his (or her) just deserts in the end? Second, the hero's journey. (I'm stealing that phrase from Joseph Campbell.) The hero is on a quest to (a) help a friend; (b) save himself; or (c) save or understand the society in which the action takes place; or (d) any combination of the above. The two major plot lines are the wheels that carry the story. They move forward at the same speed. They both propel the plot (quickly, we hope). They are metaphorically similar. They must work together so that neither the solving of the crime nor the resolution of the hero's journey can happen without the other. (*Florida Crime Writers* 155)

In *Blood Relations*, a twist of events in the criminal world leads us back to the mythic world – and, in turn, returns us to the philosophical debate regarding forms of justice that permeates Parker's fiction. When Sam Hagan, head of major crimes for Dade County, discovers that the murder victim whose case he has been assigned to is a gay model that had lured Hagan's son into a secret life of homosexuality and drugs, he offers up at once the despair of a grieving father and the righteousness of a criminal prosecutor. Reflecting on the forms of justice that might be delivered to the man who murdered the gay model (the model, who in Hagan's mind metaphorically "murdered" his own son) Hagan

ruminates, “Do I send him [the murderer] to the chair or give him a medal?” Confused about what justice looks like now that he is so intimately involved, now that the criminal world and the mythic world have collapsed upon one another, Hagan confesses to a colleague, “I don’t know [what justice is]... And I’m losing the ability to pretend I do” (240).

Throughout the novel, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, Hagan’s wife appeals to her husband to reflect not just on the laws that he had to learn to pass the Florida Bar, but to consider more universal laws and to reflect on alternative and morally-based systems of justice. In an effort to justify the apparently accidental death of her once-vibrant son – a young man in his early-twenties and a rising star in the world of male fashion models – Dina Hagan engages her husband in a line of inquiry regarding justice and absolution that will resonate throughout the rest of the novel:

“Sam, do you suppose we’re being punished for something?”

“By what?”

“God. Eternity.”

“No.” Sam rested his forehead on his fists. “I don’t believe in that.”

“Strange thing for a lawyer to say....The universe has laws, doesn’t it? And laws imply judgment. You know that well enough. If someone suffers, there has to be a reason. A system of laws must be rational. If one is punished, the next question is *what* is the punishment *for*?” (49)

Dina Hagan’s questions fail to interest her husband for the same reason that absolute truths fail to interest a court of law. They are simply outside his purview as a man of the law. What she needs is a man of the cloth. And, Parker will appoint one in due time. In lieu of her prescribed Prozac or her weekly appointments with her psychiatrist that her husband recommends to help her cope with the loss of her son, Dina Hagan opts for spiritual healing: a sacristy in a Greek Orthodox Church. Answers through prayer rather than through a criminal case log. Wisdom through revelation rather than through a witness’s testimony. Inspired knowledge rather than rational deductions. Religious ritual rather than police protocol. Dina Hagan’s methods of discovery depart from those of her husband because her questions are so radically different from his: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why, if there is a universal order, does evil seem to vanquish goodness so often? If there is a God that judges us, then when does that judgment come? What Sam Hagan’s wife challenges her husband to consider is precisely what the Torah scribe implies at the conclusion of the novel: *that redemption cannot be realized through a court room in Miami, Florida*. This is an ideal that only religious systems and mythologies can hold out to us; and to the extent that redemption is an ideal, it becomes the Holy Grail of the lives of Parker’s chief characters.

As if to offer us a glimpse of the Holy Grail, Parker concludes her protagonist’s mythic cycle by leaving him in the care of a Torah Scribe. What we glean from this spiritual guide in the final chapter of *Blood Relations* is a variation of a message that we have heard before in Parker’s crime novels: namely, that in releasing ourselves from the straitjacket of secular laws, we can intuit the existence of universal laws. And, for Parker, universal laws will always be discovered through spiritual exercises. In the same way that the Torah scribe releases himself from the daily modicum of existence when he meditates

over the laws of his Torah, we can release ourselves from our relentless regimen of hopes and unsanctioned betrayals – and, in turn, regain a sense of optimism, and even redemption, regarding the human condition. In drawing Sam Hagan, the non-believer, into the monastic-like exercise of inscribing the first letter of his deceased son's name into a parchment, Rabbi Perlstein helps Hagan to literally create a new memorial to his son – and in effect, to reconcile their once- troubled relationship:

Finally, Perlstein straightened up and leaned back in the chair. “Okay, you see how it goes? [he said, addressing Sam Hagan] I’ve stopped so the next letter is *mem*. Like an *M*. For Matthew, your son. Now, put your hand on mine. Not so heavy. Lighter. Yes, like that. We’ll put him here, on this line. (438)

Significantly, Parker ends her novel, *Blood Relations*, by drawing her protagonist into a synagogue – a place, she tells us, that felt like “another country” where Hagan’s eyes needed “adjusting” (436). It is the same kind of “adjusting” to a new light that Plato’s Cave Dweller experiences when he exits his cave of material evidence and false reality:

He [Hagan] put on the yarmulke that Perlstein handed him, patting it down onto his hair. “You’ll have to excuse me for not remembering much. I haven’t been in a synagogue since I was a kid. “I know. You told me. You’re not religious. That’s all right.” Perlestein led him through a side door. “Come on. I’ll show you around”. (436)

Hagan’s unease is the discomfort of the Cave Dweller who suspects that he has been living a lie by settling for less: shadows on the cave wall as material evidence of the truth. Simply put, Hagan sees the light. The sordid details of his deceased son’s life and the scenes of father-son collisions that have haunted Hagan throughout the novel now fade out in this new light. In ceremoniously putting on the yarmulke, Hagan puts on the mind of the Rabbi’s apprentice – and, in turn, discerns the kind of redemption and reconciliation that can only be found *outside* a court of law.

In *Suspicion of Innocence*, a Catholic priest engages attorney Gail Connor in a similar spiritual exercise. In his effort to prepare his eulogy for Connor’s deceased sister, the priest asks Connor to describe her sister – a simple question that almost instantly engages Connor in the Catholic rite of Final Reconciliation. In an effort to come up with a response, Connor stumbles. Although her childhood memories of her friendship with her sister are positive, Connor is rendered speechless by a kind of guilt that the sisters drifted apart during their adult years:

Gail’s throat felt tight. “I thought sometimes we should start over, you know. For our mother’s sake. But...we never did.” Turning the pages, he [the priest] found the right place in his book, then closed it on his thumb. “I think,” he finally said, “that in our last hour, we are all forgiven.” He looked up smiling at her. “Go take your place. I shall say Renee Michelle, beloved daughter and sister. It’s enough.” (52)

By advising her to “go take your place” the priest effectively initiates Connor as a participant in the Catholic ritual of Reconciliation. In granting her sister her Final Rite of Reconciliation – a last confession of one’s sins and omissions, in the Catholic tradition – the priest indirectly grants Connor the same absolution. Because this appears to be only the second time in her life that she has participated in a religious ceremony – the previous

time, for her father's funeral – Connor's engagement with the spiritual here is stiff and highly ritualized. Connor joins the other celebrants in attendance at her sister's funeral the way any new initiate might: by finding herself feeling swept up in its ritual aspect. The refrain, "Hear us, Lord, and have mercy," resounds and the *Ave Maria* pours into the room "like light" (53). In contrast to this highly-formalized engagement in her sister's funeral ceremony, Gail Connor remembers her deceased sister, Renee, at her father's funeral:

When her father had died, it must have been June because the Poinciana in the park across the street were in full bloom. Blood-red blossoms made an arching canopy. Renee had run across the street, legs pumping, hair streaming out behind her. Irene screamed for her to stop. But Renee was already in the park, grabbing handfuls of blossoms from the lowest branch. Ben carried her back, kissed her, then lifted her up to let the red flowers fall into her father's casket. At thirteen, Gail had looked sullenly on, wishing she had been the one to think of it. (54)

Renee's engagement with religious ceremony trumps Gail's because of its emphasis on the heart, rather than the head – precisely the disposition for inspired insight. While Gail is the observer, her sister is the participant. This is a difference that at once makes Gail a better lawyer than her sister could ever be, and affords her a healthy skepticism regarding religious ideas. On the other hand, it is a difference that clearly inhibits Gail's capacity to engage on a more profound level with religious ideas.

In Parker's fiction, religious skepticism can look like a flaw to the extent that it short-circuits a character's capacity to fully realize his or her humanity. Look, for example, at the final scene of *Suspicion of Innocence*. As in many of Parker's novels, it is not a court of law's justice that ultimately prevails here, but a Christian God's retributive justice. Through a series of dramatic events that transpired *outside* of the courtroom, the criminals and child-molesters have all been summoned and, through one method or another, killed – hence, delivered their retributive justice. In the final scene of *Suspicion of Innocence*, Gail Connor stands accompanied by her daughter, by a Native American, and by her new lover, attorney Anthony Quintana at her sister's graveside in the Memorial Park Cemetery. What has apparently propelled the narrative up until this moment has been the effort to vindicate Gail Connor, who has been falsely accused of killing her sister. But, that accounts only for what Parker refers to as "the basic plot line – the crime." On the mythical level, and in terms of the heroic cycle, Gail Connor has vindicated herself on another level: by becoming a participant in spiritual ritual, she has properly buried her sister. This motif of the need to grant one's loved one a proper burial has appeared in world mythology for centuries in some of the most powerful of love stories – the myth of Isis and Osiris, for example, where Isis travels the earth to find her husband's body and his murderer, and to ultimately celebrate their love for one another through a proper burial. In attendance at these mythical burials are the parties who honor the deceased, but also in attendance is the concept of justice. Evil has been ousted through one means or another, and the righteous are properly memorialized. Likewise, Gail Connor has come full circle in what Parker recognizes as the heroic cycle: from the novel's opening scene where her sister's dead body is discovered floating in the marshes of the Everglades, to Gail Connor's fledgling attempt to participate in religious ritual, to her failed effort to celebrate her love for her sister, to her capacity to truly memorialize

her sister. The glue between Connor and Quintana in this novel has been Quintana's trust in Connor's innocence, while logic and hard evidence points to her guilt. What Connor discovers in her growing love for Quintana is exactly what many of Parker's protagonists come to discover: the importance of the unseen, as well as the power of faith, trust, and loyalty – all concepts that make us more fully human, but that do not hold up well in a court of law.

Whether the setting is a synagogue, a funeral home, or a suburb of Miami, location matters to Parker. In the genre of Miami-based crime novels, she excels in mapping out for us the seedy side of Miami Beach – crime-ridden, urban, paved, and unnatural. In *Blood Relations*, as if to underscore the novel's preoccupation with the themes of spiritual absence and justice, the Miami nightclub where the book's central crime occurs – the rape and sodomizing of a teenage girl – is appropriately called *The Apocalypse*. A gathering place for celebrities and rising stars in Miami's world of fashion, *The Apocalypse* is a dance club that used to be a synagogue, but now recalls the decadence of a Roman bacchanal:

In the middle of the next block she spotted The Apocalypse, looking pretty tame in broad daylight. Just another white concrete front with an awning over the door, except this building used to be a synagogue It had curves like Mosaic tablets at the roof – two curves and a dome with silver paint. She supposed the congregation had died off, or moved a few miles north, or off the Beach entirely. (66)

When synagogues undergo refacing, the spiritual world has clearly been displaced. Indeed, the dramatic setting for Parker's crime fiction is often as it is here: where the "congregation" has "died off" – or at minimum, has been sent into exile. As a landscape, it parallels the spiritually-bankrupt character of Parker's protagonists. In *Blood Relations*, Sam Hagan confesses that he "used to be Jewish," to which a Rabbi responds, "Used to be. How does a person used to be Jewish? What are you now?" And, when Hagan answers, "I'm not religious," the Rabbi assures him, "That can be fixed" (275).

Like the spiritual world, the natural world in Parker's fiction is a place for the nostalgic. A subtropical, marshy region that Miami Beach impinges upon, the natural world beckons Parker's protagonists like a kind of Paradise Lost. But nature, in *Blood Relations* – like most of the population of Miami in her novels – is fallen. In Biblical terms, the natural world in Parker's novels is post-expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Dina Hagan's preoccupation with the unwieldiness of her garden, and the intensity and regularity with which she prunes its flowers and trims its bottlebrush suggests a kind of yearning for an Edenic existence:

Fingertips moving quickly over the damp earth, Dina Hagan scraped together the leaves and twigs, then tossed them into a brown paper grocery sack. She nudged the piece of cardboard she'd been kneeling on farther along the walkway. Herringbone bricks bordered the screened terrace, leading across the thick Bermuda grass to the redwood gazebo where she had hung her orchids and staghorn fern. She had planted a low hedge of ixora as a border – a mistake, for the plants were far too uncontrolled. It would take some effort to trim them back....Of course one did not have a garden behind a house in the flat, monotonous suburbs southwest of Miami; one had a backyard. But this was a garden, designed with an eye to color and shape and to the dry and rainy seasons as

well, so that the yellow tabebuia would flower in one corner while the red bottlebrush stood dormant in another. (36)

Nature – like human kind – needs constant pruning and correcting. Like humankind, left to its natural impulses, Hagan’s garden becomes “uncontrolled”.

In *Criminal Justice*, Dan Galindo’s three immersions in the waterways of south Florida exemplify Parker’s willingness to use the Miami landscape as a canvas for exploring spiritual questions. The degree to which each of these underwater experiences calls up concepts associated with the Catholic sacrament of baptism is stunning. In the first instance, Galindo nearly drowns while diving in an area south of Key Biscayne in a place curiously-enough called *Triumph Reef*. If something triumphant occurs here, it would appear to be the fact that Galindo manages to get to the water’s surface quickly enough to avoid drowning. However, on closer examination, Galindo’s near-death underwater drama seems to point to a much more profound triumph: namely, the spiritual renewal that occurs through the sacrament of baptism. The Roman Catechism defines baptism as the sacrament of regeneration by water. Through baptism, we are symbolically “resuscitated” or brought back from the dead. Upon his initial descent into the ocean, Galindo entertains ideas of dying, and to the extent that his life passes before his eyes he *does die*:

The thought of not going back up drifted morbidly through his mind. In two weeks he would turn thirty-five. The number was somehow portentous. The halfway point. The zenith. And then what? Between hangovers and periods of generalized funk, when he dared to reflect on the tattered state of his psyche, Dan slammed up against the horrifying vision that he would never get beyond that ratty office where he worked now, with its cheap, cigarette-burned carpet and wheezing air conditioner. That one day he would be washed up, living on memories of better days... If he drowned, what difference would it really make? (26)

While he is submerged, images of his father and son pass before him, and he is filled with precisely the same kind of joy that one associates with that aspect of baptism that unites one with Christ’s mystical body. Lastly, if baptism is a sacrament intended to confer upon us the beginnings of a spiritual life and to initiate a kind of spiritual metamorphosis – where we shift in our postures from denying God’s existence to embracing God and the larger human condition – then we can make good sense of Galindo’s euphoria and renewed optimism after he emerges from the water and discovers that he has been given back his life:

There was a splash as he broke through. He dragged in a breath. The rush of oxygen made him drunk, almost euphoric. He rolled over, wheezing, barely keeping his face above the surface. The sun blasted his eyes...[Once onboard the boat] he stood up behind the wheel and let the wind rush into his lungs. The sky was incredibly, intensely blue, the water a sheet of silver. The boat danced over it. A gull dipped, then swung away. Dan laughed out loud. (29)

Galindo’s subsequent immersion – and once again, his near-drowning – in the Florida waters occurs as part of a foiled attempt to carry out a kind of “sting” operation. Again, his life passes before his eyes, but this time he is buoyed by thoughts of his son and of newly-restored friendships with old colleagues:

Curling up, losing his strength, he felt the water break past his mouth. He thought of Josh. And of Elaine, waiting terrified on the opposite shore, unable to help him. He would rather have died in the ocean, where the water was clean and free. Not in this ugly, dark water with a bottom of unyielding rock covered by ooze (410).

The fact that it is not simply thoughts of loved ones that sustains Galindo, but also his peculiarly strong preference to die “in the ocean, where the water was clean and free” seems worth noting as well. In administering baptism, the Catholic Church requires that the water used be consecrated and not putrid. Galindo’s keen awareness regarding these conditions suggests that he is not afraid of dying; he is simply afraid of living without spiritual ceremony. In choosing the conditions for his death, Galindo identifies the new principles of his life. Thus, we see a renewed and stronger Galindo than we saw in the first immersion.

In projecting her protagonists onto these mythical landscapes, Parker allows them to probe questions about the human condition beyond the purview of the court of law and far outside the scope of the typical protagonist in the canon of legal thrillers. Similarly, as long as Garcia-Aguilera’s Lupe Solano keeps her holy medals pinned to her brassiere and her Berretta within reach, a brand of justice – a redemption that the legal system cannot deliver – seems within reach. Ultimately, it is this inflection of the spiritual through the secular – what Parker calls “these two basic plot lines unfolding simultaneously” – that distinguishes Parker and Garcia-Aguilera as both literary artists and mistresses of whodunits.

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