



BOSTON BEAUTIES
(above, from left) State House; skyline from Boston Harbor; *USS Constitution*
(below) A Swan Boat ride in Boston Public Garden



MYSTERY MAN



Detective-story writer Robert B. Parker reveals a few clues about Boston's best diversions.

Working on his doctorate in literature at Boston University in the late 1960s, Robert B. Parker chose the world of fictional private eyes as his dissertation topic. The city of Boston and detective novels—and his one-named Spenser (for hire)—have been constants in his life ever since. (His next book, *Resolution*, hits shelves in June.)

Today, he and his wife, Joan, live just across the Charles River on a quiet street in Cambridge. And though his

protagonists surface elsewhere at times—in rural parts of New England or the dusty Southwest—inevitably they return to the mean streets of the author's cherished Hub.

Boston has worked well for so many writers—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas H. O'Connor and Dennis Lehane. What is so evocative about the city?

"I'm not sure. For me, it's where I live. If I lived in Cleveland, I'd be writing about Lake Erie. It may be that, as a city of dense academic population, it may attract more writers than some

Boston Public Garden: Chee-Onn Leong; skyline: Artifan; State House and *USS Constitution*: Greater Boston CVB

other places—[and authors tend to] write about where they know. I've been asked this question so many times, and I've failed so badly in answering it, and now I'll have to do it again. It's a very manageable city. You can encompass it and know it pretty well. And you can walk out of it in a day."

Boston has had such a large role in American history. Where do you feel history comes most vividly to life?

"I always think about its historical impact when I'm on the **Common** and in the **Public Garden**. You look around and see the **State House** and the **Park Street Church**—Brimstone Corner.

The Common, with its wandering paths and odd shape, always makes me think of [how it was] in the 17th century, when people let their cattle graze there. And the **North End** (www.northendboston.com) still feels like it probably did back then. If you walk down **Charles Street**, you have the same sense—that this is what it must have been like, minus the paving and streetlights."

Are there other historical sites that interest you?

"I haven't paid much attention to them since my kids grew up. When they were little, I took them on the **Freedom Trail** (www.thefreedomtrail.org), and to **Faneuil Hall** (www.faneuilhallmarketplace.com) and the **USS Constitution** (www.ussconstitution.navy.mil)—"Old Ironsides."

Where do you and Joan enjoy dining?

"We like to go out to dinner once or twice a week. In Boston, I'm generally known as Joan Parker's husband. One of our favorites is **Grill 23 & Bar** (www.grill23.com; 617-542-2255). It's very noisy, but they have a little alcove



SEE AND TASTE
(clockwise from left) Sorellina; statue of George Washington in Public Garden; Grill 23 & Bar

where we can eat quietly. And we go to **Sorellina** (www.sorellinaboston.com; 617-412-4600), in Copley Square, a lot."

Your books call up images of Newbury Street boutiques and a drained Swan Boat lake on a drizzling day in the dead of winter. What's the site you'd want an out-of-town guest to see?

"The view from the roof of what used to be The Ritz-Carlton—now the **Taj Boston** (www.tajhotels.com; 617-536-5700)—is really grand. Joan and I had our 50th wedding anniversary there. It's only about 15 stories high, but you can see much of the city and the harbor from a relatively close vantage."

Framing a city in fiction is more than just trigger phrases. How important is landscape to you in telling a story?

"The more concrete the setting, the more credible the story. People can do fairly incredible things if you have them doing them on Boylston Street between a Ford Fairlane and a Buick Riviera, in front of a store that you name. Raymond Chandler used Los Angeles magnificently, giving you not only a sense of where you were, but also how you ought to have been feeling there. Again, I very much like the Common and Public Garden [as a setting of a crime] because it gives you a 'where' to talk about. You can have crimes in a dark alley, with two trash cans to the right, but that's boring. I like public spaces instead." ❧