



## Critical Mass

*Sara Paretsky*

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**"Vic is at her stubborn, reckless, compassionate best in this complicated page-turner about selfish secrets passed down through generations. Paretsky has been on a roll lately, her long-running, trailblazing series at its most dynamic since the early days." —Booklist on *Critical Mass***

New York Times-bestselling author Sara Paretsky's brilliant protagonist V.I. Warshawski returns in another hard-hitting entry, combining razor-sharp plotting and compelling characters with a heady mix of timely political and social themes.

V.I. Warshawski's closest friend in Chicago is the Viennese-born doctor Lotty Herschel, who lost most of her family in the Holocaust. Lotty escaped to London in 1939 on the Kindertransport with a childhood playmate, Kitty Saginor Binder. When Kitty's daughter finds her life is in danger, she calls Lotty, who, in turn, summons V.I. to help. The daughter's troubles turn out to be just the tip of an iceberg of lies, secrets, and silence, whose origins go back to the mad competition among America, Germany, Japan and England to develop the first atomic bomb. The secrets are old, but the people who continue to guard them today will not let go of them without a fight.

## Critical Mass Details

Date : Published October 22nd 2013 by Putnam Adult (first published August 1st 2013)

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Author : Sara Paretsky

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## **From Reader Review Critical Mass for online ebook**

### **Lori says**

I do love the VI Warshawski series and think Vic is a great female character, tough when she needs to be and yet her concern and caring for the downtrodden, mistreated or misunderstood is always so very obvious in each story. This story in particular, however, was disappointing to me compared to Ms. Paretsky's other novels. I was intrigued by the plot that traversed back and forth between present day and pre and post WWII Austria. That glimpse into what VI's friend Lotty lived through during that horrible war was effective and appreciated. What was the miss for me this time were the nasties in this book; those out to get Martin, Vic and Martin's family. They were all just totally unbelievable both in their motivations and their actions. Honestly, would Homeland Security agents really behave that way? What about the Mastermind of the crimes and his minions? None of them rang true for me, resulting in a most chaotic climax that stretched reality and believability and a less than completely satisfying ending to this book. However, Sara Paretsky on a less than perfect day is still a far better read than most others in the genre. I am looking forward to the next book in this excellent series.

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### **Mazy's says**

Disappointed. Heard an NPR interview with Paretsky and thought this would be right up my alley: mystery! world war II history! physics! The flashbacks were reasonably satisfying, as were the scenes with Lotty and her harrowing story, but except for the tidbits about the Austrian nuclear research program's female scientists, most of it was pretty standard. (Nitpicking here, but there was an unfortunate research slip when she disparages Martina's position as a professor at a Hochschule as being "merely" a teacher at a "high school." Hochschule is not high school as any reader of a German dictionary could tell you. Or a quick googling . . . ) Physics? Well, sure, the Manhattan Project features as a plot device but the science part of the mystery doesn't actually have anything to do with critical mass. And what's with all the goons and the meth heads? OK, she'd be allowed a couple of goons and meth heads if the rest of the characters weren't drawn so two-dimensionally. Difficult/suffering from loss. Naive/sees the light. Brilliant/only out for the truth. Brilliant/megalomaniac. Brilliant/damaged.

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### **Sue says**

Critical Mass is a complicated, multi-layered mystery with its roots set in WWII Europe and the Nazi quest for scientific breakthroughs. The current situation is more mundane but also filled with everyday tragedy: the tragedy of drug abuse, the sadness of lost identity, fear of unknowns, even misunderstanding by those who are usually seen as "good." V.I. Warshawski is thrown into this because of her years long friendship with Lotty, herself a child escapee from Germany. She is sent on a search for a woman, a search which opens up a nest which takes so much to untangle.

As in several other books I've read over the past year, this is told in alternating narratives of different voices and different times. While this can be a bit disconcerting initially, I found that it worked. This busy story of computers, the Nazi and Cold War eras, meth labs, and so much else, ultimately is a story of family as so many novels are.

Another excellent entry in the series.

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## **Obsidian says**

After the last book in the VI Warshawski series I was tempted to just leave the series alone. But I am a completionist at heart and finally just buckled and bought this book. This one actually hangs together very well. VI is focused on figuring out how a daughter of one of Lotty's childhood playmates is doing after it looks like she may be in danger. The plot revolves around that, pre and post War World II, and the arms race. There were so many lines in this book that I found myself loving.

"Critical Mass" has a 50 year old or 50 plus year old VI off to help a childhood friend of Lotty's daughter. Lotty actually washed her hands of the friend and though she tried to help the daughter, eventually gave up on that too. When VI shows up at a meth house, she finds a man dead (the scene described is stomach turning) and realizes the woman is missing. From there VI finds out the woman's son is also now missing and huge tech giant is scared he has stolen their plans and is out there selling his secrets to the highest bidder.

VI does what she does best, asks questions, and goes investigating via libraries, the internet, and just using old fashioned intuition to put two and two together. She manages to once again find herself in a gun standoff (seriously that part is getting old) and once again has to deal with being so run down and tired but managing to push through. One wonders though when VI is going to just have to retire. I cannot see her still taking punches and getting shot in her 70s. It's already pushing realms of belief that she is able to walk after some of her run ins.

VI is still in a romance with Jake. I do like him and was surprised to see how well they mesh.

The secondary characters of Lotty and Max were welcomed. I was so glad to see Petra (VI's cousin) banished to the Peace Corps. I wish Mr. Contreas would go with Petra. I don't see how a guy pushing 90 is even doing running around with VI.

The writing was good and of course we get some historical facts mixed in to make this more realistic. I do love that Paretzky has made VI an unapologetic feminist and pushes for more individual rights over the government, cops, and anyone that could oppress them. Even though these are fictional characters, reading about what the fictional Nazis did to people during the Holocaust was awful.

The flow was actually pretty good in this one and I was able to follow the plot easily enough.

The setting of Chicago continues to surprise and Paretzky manages to make things fresh.

There were some surprises here and there and the ending was a surprise. We find out a lot of secrets that even the main participants in this one didn't know.

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## **Kelly Hager says**

I feel like every time we talk about Sara Paretsky and VI Warshawski, I mention that this is one of my favorite series ever, and that both Paretsky and Warshawski are personal heroes of mine.

This book is a huge example for why. The thing about VI Warshawski is that she will always do what's right, even when there's a huge threat to herself. It's almost like the bigger the threat is to herself, the more determined she becomes to get to the bottom of whatever is going on. (In a marked contrast to myself, because I would probably be the biggest coward evereverever.)

I love when the stories focus on her friends, and this one centers a lot (at least initially) on Lotty Herschel, who I LOVE. And I love the fact that we get to learn even more about her past.

But ultimately the best things about any VI Warshawski novel is VI herself. She's clever and opinionated and just awesome.

This book isn't quite as political as her other novels---well, at least not as overtly political. The focus instead is on science in general and physics in particular. As you can probably guess, I know next to nothing about physics but that ignorance didn't at all affect my enjoyment of the book. (Kudos to Sara Paretsky for the research she did and her ability to adequately dumb down that research for her English major readers.)

I think everything about this book is just perfect. If you haven't read any Sara Paretsky novels, this is an excellent one to start with.

Highly recommended.

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## **StoryTellerShannon says**

Complex clue trail told in flashbacks with a wide variety of characters particularly focused over the generations. Definite nods to the Jews of WWII which is arguably becoming a worn out topic.

The audio person, Susan Ericksen, for this was amazing with some of her voices/accents. I really like how she did the Old School Chicago neighbor. That was awesome.

Now, why am I only giving this a B? It had a slow start and the clue trails and flashbacks were a mixed bag at times.

Still I recommend it, especially for the fans.

**OVERALL GRADE: B.**

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## Dorothy says

I've long been an admirer of the writing of Sara Paretsky. As such, I have faithfully followed her V.I. Warshawski series over the years. Having now finished with *Critical Mass*, I can say that I have read them all.

They are all workmanlike and suspenseful mysteries and some are downright enthralling page-turners, but I have to admit that I was less than enthralled with this latest one. While I really like V.I. and I'll always care about her, I found it hard to care very much about the other characters in this book.

The story here is that V.I.'s friend Lotty hires her to look for a drug-addicted patient of hers who had called her in a panic to ask for help and then disappeared. The detective tracks her to a derelict drug house in a rural town outside of Chicago. She finds the place in shambles and the body of one dead dog with another injured and extremely dehydrated. She follows a trail into a cornfield where she discovers the corpse of a man that had been picked over and mutilated by crows. But the woman whom she is seeking is no longer there, if she ever was.

Trying to discover more about the woman and get an idea of where she might be brings V.I., quite unexpectedly, into the history of physics and invention, dating to before World War II. The woman's family history is linked to Dr. Lotty Herschel's all the way back to the Vienna of seventy years ago. Both families were touched by the Holocaust, indeed they were decimated by it. Lotty and the mother of the missing woman had been children together at the time and were sent to England to escape the war.

The grandmother of the missing woman was a physicist with a connection to a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who escaped from Vienna with his family and ended up in the United States. The grandmother, Martina, was caught in the war and was sent to be a slave laborer for the Nazis. She later disappeared from all records and was presumed dead.

Martina had been a gifted physicist and inventor and she held the American patent for a machine that was later instrumental in developing modern computer systems. This, it turns out, is significant in the disappearance of her drug-addicted granddaughter in Chicago, as well as the granddaughter's twenty-something son who, it seems, has inherited his great-grandmother's love of and abilities with math and physics.

But what made these two disappear? Who are they hiding from, if indeed they are hiding? And what does it all have to do with the Holocaust and with Vienna of the 1930s and 1940s?

I had a hard time keeping track of all these people and their relations, as the action switched back and forth in time. Perhaps that was because there just didn't seem to be a strong central figure here. I think that role might have been meant for Martina and/or her great-grandson and namesake, Martin, but their plights just didn't engage me, at least not in any meaningful way.

Obviously, we are supposed to be moved by the Holocaust connection, but perhaps I am jaded (although I do fervently hope not) by the repetition of this particular theme in several of these books. V.I.'s friends, Lotty and Max, both suffered from the Holocaust and they work to succor Holocaust survivors and their descendants. But the continual repetition of the theme has only served to immunize me a bit from its effect.

In the end, of course, all the loose ends are tied up, V.I. gets her man, solves the case, and justice is served.

But the whole thing just left me curiously unsatisfied.

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## **Jill Meyer says**

I am comparing Sara Paretsky's new book, "Critical Mass" to her previous novels, not to novels in general.

Sara Paretsky has written 19 books. Most of them - 17 - were VI Warshawski novels and the other two are "stand-alones". Having read them all, I think her newest, "Critical Mass" is the deepest and best written so far. I suppose the title could refer to both the "critical mass" needed to produce an atomic bomb and the "critical mass" of people and plot needed to produce a good book. The atomic bomb stuff I can't explain - way above my pay grade! - but the second, the contents of this novel, I can try to explain.

"Critical Mass" is set in both Vienna and Chicago, the past and the present. The past is the 1900's to the 1940's and focuses on VI's old friend, Lotte Herschel's, family and friends as they find that being Jewish in Vienna, particularly after the Anschluss in 1938, as an increasingly dangerous business. Lotte and her brother are rescued at the last minute and sent to London - and safety - on the Kindertransport. Her family was left behind and all perished in the Holocaust.

Also sent with Lotte and her brother was Kathe Saginor, the daughter of a single mother, Martina Saginor, who was raised with Lotte in Vienna. Kathe, later Kitty, was regarded as a "poor relations" both in Vienna, and later in Chicago, where both women settled after the war. Martina Saginor was a genius who worked in the scientific academies looking into atom. She was later arrested by the Nazis and served as a slave laborer and vanished in the war.

But the Saginor family is not the only family in Paretsky's book. Martina's lover and father of her daughter, a Nobel prize winner, Benjamin Dzornen, has fled to Chicago with his family before the outbreak of war. He worked on the US atomic bomb development. He is joined in after-war effort to make a computer by Edward Breen, also a Chicagoan. As the years continue, Edward Breen has developed a large company around computers and programs. Members of these three families meet up in current-day Chicago and the murders and disappearances begin and VI finds herself in the center of it all.

Okay, I'm going to stop with plots and character descriptions because "Critical Mass" is so deeply written that there's no way I can do it justice here. Just know that everything - and everybody - meet up and get their lives resolved. Sort of, anyway, and in sometimes melancholy ways.

What I do want to write about is how Paretsky's novels and focus has evolved over the years. When she began writing VI as a character, VI was the daughter of a Polish-Catholic Chicago cop and an Italian mother, who was an opera singer. I sort of surmised that the mother was a Jewish refugee in Chicago, but apart from a few "hints", I never knew exactly what she was and what her "story" was. But as the books evolved, the parents and their backgrounds grew dimmer and VI's relationship with Dr Charlotte Herschel came to the forefront. While her previous books did allude to Dr Lotte and the Holocaust, this book is based upon what happened back then and how it has impacted today's world.

What I'm trying to write is that those readers used to Paretsky's older plots might be surprised at the plot of "Critical Mass". I enjoyed it, being both a former Chicagoan and a reader about the Holocaust. This book is

so densely plotted, though, that perhaps the new Paretsky reader might want to begin with a previous book. For the old Paretsky-hands, "Critical Mass" is well worth diving into.

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### **Alan Mills says**

As usual, V. I. Warshawski delivers! A detective in the hard boiled tradition--with the twist that she is a woman, working in Chicago--vaguely in Uptown and surrounding neighborhoods.

This time, a missing young drug addict (daughter of a friend of V.I.'s close friend, Dr. Herschel, is missing. This simple errand sends us back along a path to Dr. Herschel's days in the Jewish Ghetto in occupied Vienna before WWII. Nazis, computers, Holland security and the atom bomb all make appearances--as does a near death experience.

Paretsky, as always, turns what sounds like a formulaic plot into a tour de force of a novel.

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### **Jane says**

I'm less a fan of Paretsky than some. I find her character development limited and her handling of sometimes over-complex plots clumsy. I approve of her politics, but they sometimes lie a little heavy on the story or are simply given in speeches by V.I. rather than being entwined in and revealed by the plots of the novels. This book, though, is one of her best among those I've read. The historical underpinnings, involving both WWII and cold-war era politics that interconnect with the present lives of the characters and with 21st-century technology companies, are interesting and clearly well researched, and the character of Martina Saginor, the scientist at the center of it all, is engaging and well developed. V. I. is always predictable, as is her faithful neighbor, Mr. Contreras, and the plot is needlessly complicated; the drug-dealer subplot could have been ditched or truncated, for instance. By the end, I was getting seriously impatient. It takes her too long to wrap up the story--and Paretsky has even published an epilogue on her website that extends the narrative further. A shorter and crisper book would have been better. But despite my criticisms, I enjoyed the book well enough most of the time.

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### **Jerry B says**

We continue to read each of the (now 16) stories about Paretsky's private eye V.I. Warshawski. Her leading lady is a bit more hard boiled than Grafton's Kinsey Malone and tends to stir up a lot of trouble as she roams around Chicago solving cases for which she is often unpaid. Other than her neighbor, there are few recurring characters (although she has a boyfriend now), and sometimes the action gets a bit over the top. Therefore, while we stick with the set, we don't necessarily look forward to each new novel with the fervor associated with our "A"-list authors.

"Critical Mass" was not particularly one of our favorites either. The plot is hugely complicated, and much of the story consists of flashbacks to the days after WWII and the impact of Nazi terrorism on various characters in this story. The gist of it is that a company that basically and supposedly invented magnetic core memory for the early computers may well have stolen the idea/patent from someone else, and is apparently willing to commit several serious crimes to prevent that discovery. It would take us several more paragraphs



to provide much additional plot summary, but suffice to say, we were not that enamored with this complex and convoluted story line.

So while we agree that Paretsky can write well and craft a serious mystery plot, this one, despite the “Mass” of favorable reviews, just did not strike an entertaining chord for us.

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### **Phrynne says**

Number 16 in the series and I have nearly caught up with the author! Soon I will be in the position of having to wait for her next book to be published.

Critical Mass was slightly different to most of her books in that quite a few chapters went back in time to provide back story. There was a lot of historical fact to absorb as well as Paretsky's usual political soapbox. Not that I try too hard with the politics. I agree with some, not so much with the rest and I tend to let it wash past me. It is just part of her style.

The story itself is excellent, fast paced and full of action. Vic Warshawski is a danger magnet and it is amazing she is still alive after 16 outings. Petra is fortunately overseas, Mr Contreras is still in excellent shape for a man his nineties, Peppy and Mitch are full of beans and the boyfriend is away but phones every night. All very comfortable.

Looking forward to book 17:)

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### **Barbara Mitchell says**

There is only one problem with Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski novels. She can't write them fast enough for me. Every time I think she's decide to abandon the series, finally another one is published and I'm happy again.

This one, Critical Mass, is her best yet in my opinion. As usual, it takes place in Chicago and takes me back to that city I love. However, there are flashbacks to Austria during WW II. If you have read this series, you know that one of her best friends is Dr. Lotty Herschel who grew up in Vienna and escaped with many other children on the Kindertransport to London in 1939. She lost her family in the Holocaust.

Now Lotty is trying to help another woman, the daughter of another child who escaped with her. She asks V. I. to help and with good reason. What a messed up family. The mother is a recluse who thinks evil people are after her. The daughter is a drug addict. Then there is a son, Martin, who is brilliant like his great-grandmother, Martina Saginor, a physicist. He has disappeared suddenly and is probably in great danger.

I don't have room to go into the other people and companies involved in this great novel, but the story is gripping. One truly evil character was a closet Nazi. She delighted in torturing Jews such as Martina who were caught and imprisoned. The last she knew, Martina was on a train bound for Sobibor for execution. Whether you know the history of Austria during the Nazi occupation or not, you will be horrified.

One thing I enjoyed in this novel was getting to know Lotty better, as well as her friend Max. It was edge of

your seat time following V.I. as she tried to find Martin and learn the story of his family. This story even takes V. I. and her musician boyfriend/neighbor to Vienna.

Highly recommended

Source: LibraryThing win

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## **Judy says**

This crime thriller was on my stack of reading for the last week in 2016, consisting of books I had meant to read during the year but hadn't gotten to. It is Ms Paretsky's 18th novel and I have now read them all. One more to go and I will be caught up before her next one comes out later in 2017. She is one of my top favorite mystery/crime novelists. Every book so far has been amazing for its genre.

V I Warshawski, fearless and crusading private investigator, once again finds "the crimes behind the crimes" as Marilyn Stasio of the New York Times puts it. In her hometown of Chicago she ferrets out corruption and destructive inequalities, taking down criminality and standing up for the forgotten people. If we had a few like her in every major American city, our country would be more like what our Founding Fathers hoped they were founding.

*Critical Mass* uncovers secrets and lies going back to the WWII arms race with its competition between Germany and the United States to develop the first atomic bomb.

Reading coincidence: Michael Chabon's *Moonglow*, read earlier in December, covers similar territory. In both books the traumas of Nazi concentration camps and the use of Jewish scientists to further that research are key plot elements.

The fast pace, multiple characters, extreme danger to V I's life, and her biting yet comedic take on all events are as present here as in all her books. I always make a list of characters as they appear, tedious near the beginning but eliminating the need to turn back the pages and remember who's who so I can enjoy the ever accelerating pace that invariably makes up the last 100 pages.

In *Critical Mass* (a physics term meaning the minimum amount of material, such as plutonium, necessary to maintain a nuclear chain reaction), Paretsky honors Jewish Austrian physicist Marietta Blau. She was a researcher whose scientific work deserved a Nobel Prize she never got because she was Jewish. Paretsky's fictional character Martina Saginor is based on Ms Blau.

Even more impressive, the story makes clear the destruction of so many lives due to secrets that were kept both by members of the researcher's family and by some sorry practices of government and corporations, hidden behind actions justified by national security.

No matter what your politics or your patriotic views, *Critical Mass* will challenge you to pay more attention and look more deeply into our current times. Also it is more fun than watching Twitter fights!

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## **Brenda Hawley says**

This is by far the best Paretsky novel yet. V I Warshawski not only gets involved in mysteries with unique and interesting characters and conflicts, but she also delves into historical situations where the reader actually learns through the process. This novel combines a meth lab murder, a Nobel prize winner whose lover was left to suffer through the Holocaust in Austria, physics professors involved with the nuclear bomb during World War II and the first computers after the war and mother/child relationships gone awry. I could not put this down and yet was sad when it ended.

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