

Entertainment Outlook

Mystery buffs will have taste for Bitter Medicine

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By R.R. CORNWELL
Halton Hills Public Libraries

BITTER MEDICINE By Sara Paretsky

The amateur female sleuth is almost as old as the mystery novel but the recent appearance of professional female private investigators is a relatively new phenomenon. One of the top two names that stand out in this subgenre is Sara Paretsky's V.I. (Vic) Warshawski. V.I. comes to the business after an unsatisfying career among the desks and boardrooms of law firms. A more activist role in the field seems to suit her iconoclastic and humanist temperament.

A characteristic of these feminist P.I. novels is a downplaying of the physical contact coupled to a more realistic portrayal of the research, checking and simple information processing so essential in the uncovering of modern crime. Warshawski's specialty is business crime and each of her novels turns the spotlight on a particular topic, insurance in Indemnity only, the Great Lakes shipping industry in Deadlock, and the American hospital industry (terminology mine) in this latest tale of medical malpractice.

Warshawski's stamping ground is that urban monster, Chicago. As a typical product of the ethnic stew that makes up the city's unique character V.I. is peculiarly adapted to coping with its folkways and paranoias. While no superwoman, V.I. is no pushover either and doesn't always come out on the losing end of a physical encounter. Neither does she require a masculine cavalry charge to rescue her from the villains. Most often the denouement is accomplished by a neatly set up piece of entrapment requiring nerve and brains, not brawn.

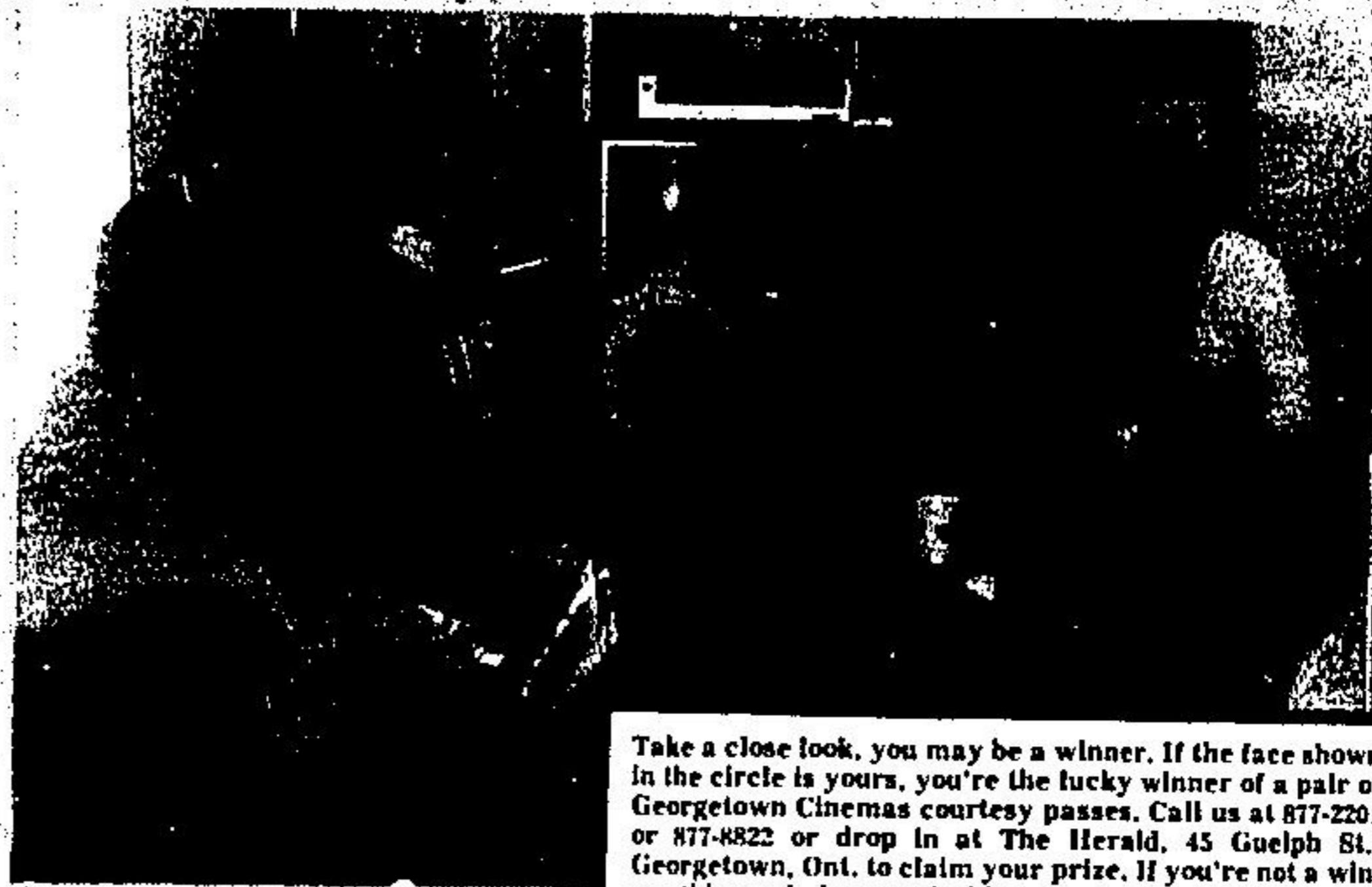
While author Paretsky has successfully adapted most of the P.I. conventions to the feminist mold there are two she could modify further. The amount of alcohol consumed in detective novels would float the national debt and the typically male version of casual sex doesn't ring true with the character the author has been at such pains to establish. Both these quibbles are minor discordances but V.I.'s emotional

life seems singularly unrewarding for such an otherwise sympathetic heroine.

In Bitter Medicine the friends of a brutally murdered young doctor pressure a reluctant Vic into making enquiries independent of the police. It is a measure of the resignation of American city dwellers that they have almost no faith in official ability to solve such apparently motiveless crime. Naturally, the reader and even the novel's protagonists gradually begin to realize that a series of violent incidents and attacks are somehow linked not only to the murder in question but also to the death in childbirth of a young acquaintance of Vic's who was also a patient of the doctor.

In the process of solving this puzzle Canadian readers will learn a few of the interesting aspects of "profitable" hospital operation that TV serials don't dwell on. (P.S. If you are travelling south of the border take out extra hospital insurance - OHIP doesn't cover everything.)

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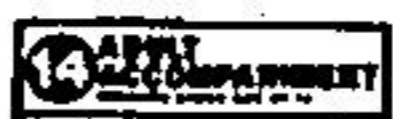
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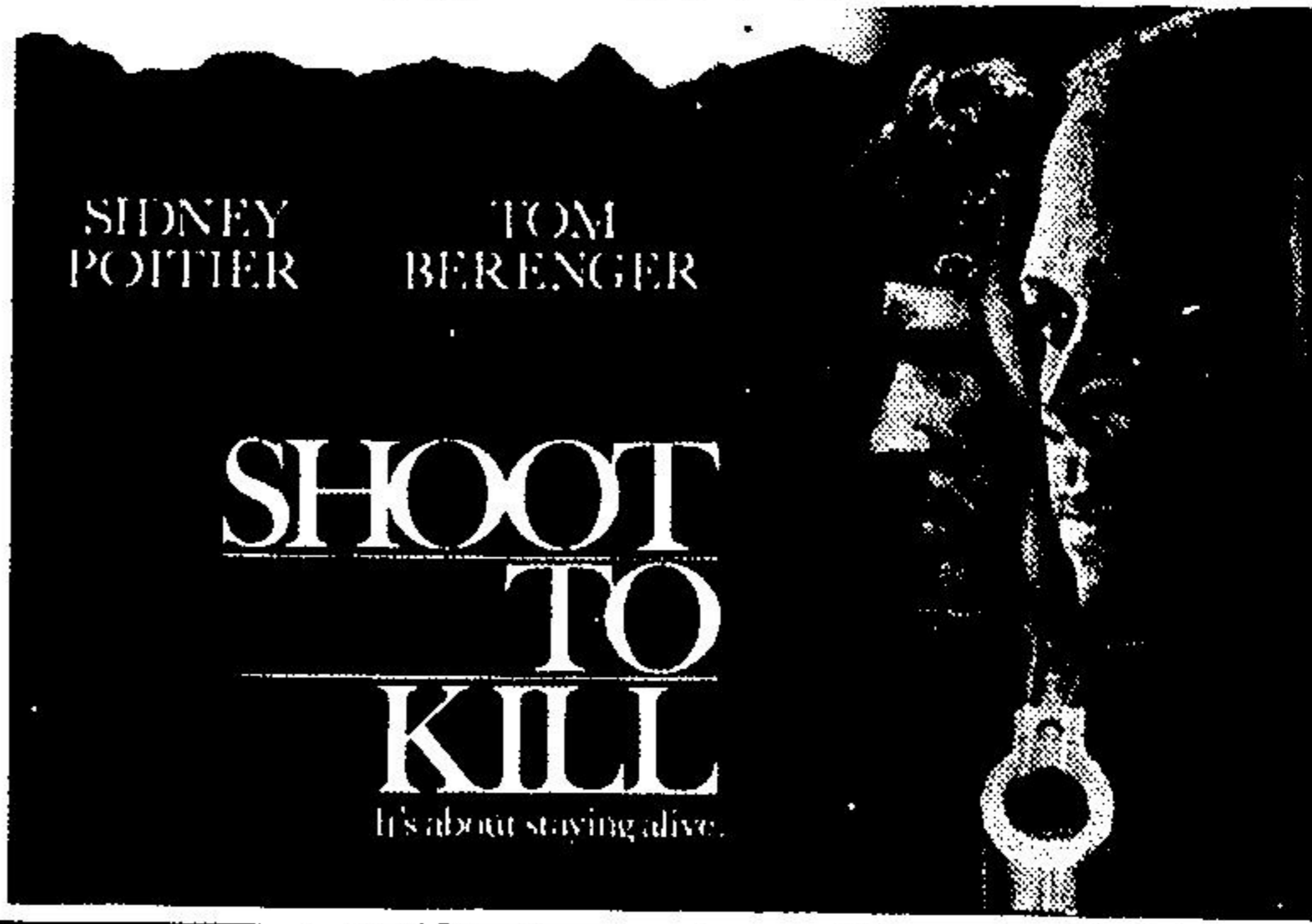
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