



Two for the Money (Hard Case Crime #5)

Max Allan Collins

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AFTER 16 YEARS ON THE RUN,
WOULD NOLAN BURY THE HATCHET WITH THE MOB...
OR WOULD THEY BURY HIM FIRST?

They don't come tougher than Nolan – but even a hardened professional thief can't fight off the entire Chicago mafia. So when an old friend offers to broker a truce, Nolan accepts the terms. All he has to do is pull off one last heist – and trust the Mob not to double cross him.

Fortunately, Nolan has a couple of things going for him: an uncanny knack for survival and an unmatched hunger for revenge...

Books #1 and #2 in the Nolan series

Two for the Money (Hard Case Crime #5) Details

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Author : Max Allan Collins

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Adam says

Two for the Money is an omnibus edition of two novels, *Bait Money* and *Blood Money*, that Max Allan Collins originally wrote in 1973 and then revised for re-publication in 1981. He wrote them partly as a tribute to Donald E. Westlake's Parker series, which Westlake wrote under his Richard Stark pseudonym. Unlike Parker, however, Nolan is about as convincingly tough as a five-year-old wearing an eyepatch and pretending to smoke a cigarette. At no point in either of these novels does Nolan ever seem like anything more than what he is; the one-dimensional creation of a fawning fanboy who never misses an opportunity to remind us that Nolan looks exactly like Lee Van Cleef, a particularly banal and lazy form of description, not to mention adolescent and pathetic hero worship. There are apparently three more novels in Collins's Nolan series. They might be better than these two, but I'll probably never find out. Life's too short.

Craig Childs says

Early 1970's Chicago, professional heist man Nolan has been running from the mob for the last 16 years, but now as he approaches retirement, he has a chance to make one last big score and wipe his slate clean. To do so, he must knock off a bank for \$800,000 working with three long-haired hippie college kids who have no skills, no experience, and no idea what they are up against.

I normally like Max Allan Collins' solo books (I am not as much a fan of the many collaborative novels he completed for Mickey Spillane after Spillane's death), but this one is a bit of a slog. It was originally published in two volumes--*Bait Money* and *Blood Money*. The former was Collins' first novel, which he wrote as an undergraduate in college. The second was a sequel written a few years later. They are presented together as a single novel for the first time.

It was clear Collins had talent, but this effort was marred by passages of stilted prose, redundant scenes, and some awkward characters. It was not all bad. The buildup to the heist was overlong, although the scenes in the bank themselves were taut and exciting, and the multiple double crosses in its immediate aftermath were fun, even if clearly influenced by Westlake and Cain.

Nolan himself was modeled on Westlake's iconic Parker character, according to the author. Collins felt he was doing something unique in the genre by teaming up an old school archetype with contemporary younger characters of his generation. Collins was in college, so maybe he felt the ideals of the hippie movement were a vital cultural force at the time, but I cannot say crime fiction was hurting from its overall lack of free love and flower power; the results here were... meh.

The back half of the story--the *Blood Money* section--felt like a bad Hollywood sequel. A bad guy emerges from the dead, the young apprentice thief is kidnapped, Nolan must hunt to get his money back.... again, meh. By the end, I had long since quit forcing myself to care.

Isidore says

"Bait Money" is remarkably good for a first novel, gritty and mesmerizing, but somewhat spoiled by the ridiculously commercial ending demanded by Collins' agent. The sequel, "Blood Money", is quite disappointing by comparison. It's unfocused and rambling, and far too much time is spent rehashing material from the first book; ironically, it has a more interesting conclusion.

Wesley says

Another enjoyable Hard Case Crime novel.

Jack Picone says

B+

Greg says

Compare,

When a fresh-faced guy in a Chevy offered him a lift, Parker told him to go to hell. the guy said, "Screw you, buddy," yanked his Chevy back into the stream of traffic, and roared on down to the tollbooths. Parker spat in the right-hand lane, lit his last cigarette, and walked across the George Washington Bridge.

...

Out in the middle, the bridge trembled and swayed in the wind. It does it all the time, but he'd never noticed it. He'd never walked it before. He felt it shivering under his feet, and he got mad. He threw the used-up butt at the river, spat on a passing hubcap and strode on.

Office women in passing cars looked at him and felt vibrations above their nylons. He was big and shaggy, with flat square shoulder and arms too long in sleeves too short. He wore a gray suit limp with age and no pressing. His shoes and socks were both black and both holey. The shoes were holey on the bottom, the socks were holey at the heel and toe.

His hands, swinging curve-fingered at his sides, looked like they were molded of brown clay by a sculptor who thought big and liked veins. His hair was brown and dry and dead, blowing around his head like a poor toupee about the fly loose. His face was a chipped chunk of concrete, with eyes of flawed onyx. His mouth was a quick stroke, bloodless. His suit coat fluttered behind him, and his arms swung easily as he walked.

and Contrast.

A woman was usually a night to a week in Nolan's life, yet this one had lasted a month and five days. But then, before it was different-before he'd never had so bad a need for one.

He sat up in bed, aware that the pain in his side was lessening, and scanned the room. He took in its drabness, and a slight smile came to his lips. Christ, had he really been staring at these four suffocating walls for over a month now? He closed his eyes, seeking not rest but relief from pink stucco walls and second-hand furniture.

I could have gone on for a few more paragraphs of the first example, the opening paragraphs of *The Hunter*, the Richard Stark novel that first stars Parker. The next paragraph. The next paragraph in the second example begins some dialogue that mostly lets you know that Nolan, the similarly single named thief of Max Allan Collins, *Bait Money* doesn't say many words to women.

I shared these two opening bits from *Bait Money* (the first of two novels in this book) and *The Hunter* to show how much better Richard Stark is than Max Allan Collins. Is this fair to do? Sure, since Collins is writing a homage to the Parker novels, and wrote *Bait Money* when the first series of Parker novels were either done, or else coming close to coming to a close. What's important about Nolan? What is the first thing the reader is given? Well he likes ladies, but doesn't like relationships. Then we learn he's been injured in someway and that he is critical of the interior design of where he is staying. Parker? Well we learn he's pissed off, he's scary looking, he's more concerned with whatever is pissing him off enough to make him walk across the the GWB than with the holes in his shoes, the ill-fitting suit or getting it pressed. But besides those details, the opening passage of *The Hunter* is immediate and memorable, who gives a shit about some dude waking up in some woman's bed that he's managed to shack up with for a whole month? That's not really the best opening of a book out there.

Collins is very clear in his afterword that he set out to write a Parker homage, and I guess I'm happy he admitted it. This is basically a bit of a twist on the first couple of Parker novels. A guy gets double-crossed in someway, and he runs afoul with the Mob (or whatever you want to call them) and goes to war with the Italians. Both characters only have one name. Collins' character is slightly less elusive though, he makes it clear that Nolan is a last name. Stark never gives up (well through the first twelve books or so that I've read) if Parker is a first or last name, and when someone asks Parker he doesn't answer. They also both have a knack for planning and running heists. Nolan seems to have just stumbled upon this talent after he had to leave being a night-club manager, Parker, you get the idea, he learned it by always being a criminal.

Yeah, Collins writes that Donald Westlake liked *Bait Money* and didn't mind if Collins continued using the Nolan character for a series of books, but that still doesn't make (at least the first two novels, which are here in this volume) a second rate version of the Parker novels.

If you like the Parker novels and want something that is written in pretty much the same style, with generally the same narrative structure then you will probably enjoy these. Story-wise they are about as good as the lesser-Parkers. There is something formulaic about the way the main characters are introduced and reading these two novels back to back in one book the reader has to slog through some whole introductory paragraphs that feel like they were just cut and pasted out of the earlier book. This reminded me of the awful action adventure serial novels I used to read and love as a kid, and is something very pulpish. Stark seems to avoid that general cut and paste feeling in his re-introducing of Parker for each novel, I'm not positive of this but Stark seems to have created a way of telling his story that would allow a new reader to quickly get a handle on the back-story, but also not making continuing readers feel like they are just reading the same old stuff again.

Am I being unfair though? Is this like whining about how shitty a Guns n' Roses tribute band is because they aren't the real thing? Probably.

Ok, last whining gripe.

Why is Max Allan Collins so icky ewwww when it comes to women and sex? Seriously, I thought maybe you were just a creepy old man when I read *The Last Quarry* but apparently the younger you was like this, too.

Eric_W says

Two for the money is, of course, a pun, and the book contains two novellas, sort of. No spoilers. You will just have to read this book to understand why I can't tell you about Book Two or provide much of the plot.

Excellent Nolan the thief story. Nolan is getting old, or at least to an age that he thinks is old (he's forty-nine but [spoiler coming: turns fifty in Book Two.] He's also an Iowan, or at least Iowa has become his locale of preference given his problems with Chicago.

Iowa City depressed Nolan. It wasn't the Midwestern atmosphere that bothered him, or even Iowa itself—he liked being left alone, which was basically what people did to each other in Midwestern states, as opposed to East Coast rudeness, West Coast weirdness and Southern pseudo-hospitality. Iowa City was a college town, and that depressed Nolan. Or more specifically, college-town girls depressed him. Maybe it was this new awareness of what he was beginning to view as the onrush of senility. Or just an awkwardness that came from being around people he couldn't relate to. But these young girls, damn it, all looking so fuckable and at the same time untouchable, in their jeans and flimsy tee-shirts. . . . He guessed it was ego; he didn't like looking at a desirable woman without at least the remote possibility of getting in. Not that he'd ever been much for playing the stud, that wasn't it; sex was a gut need to be filled when time and circumstance allowed. But with young girls like these, daughters and possibly granddaughters of the one or two generations of women he'd had intercourse with, he had no basis for rapport, no way, man, none at all to relate with such creatures. Conversation was enough of a pain for Nolan without having to struggle for whatever wave-length these children were on this week. So Nolan is alone.

He has returned to the Chicago area where he is recognized and shot by a member of the "Family" with which Nolan has a long-standing grudge. He had killed the brother of "Charlie," one of the Family bosses who has sworn revenge and who has had a contract out on Nolan for fifteen years. Nolan, tired of hiding, running, and thieving, seeks a reconciliation with Charlie so he can have access to all the money he has squirreled away from assorted heists over the years under an alias that Charlie now controls. Charlie agrees, but with a condition: he must pay \$100,000 for the privilege.

"You heard me, Nolan. Go out and get it for me. Earn it. Steal it. Counterfeit it if you can do a good enough job. But you got to be able to show me where you got it. I want to pick up the newspaper and see such-and-such jewelry store got hit, or so-and-so rich bastard was robbed. Don't even think about using any of the Earl Webb money to pay me off." "Why the hell not?" "Because I don't want you to. Because it would be too goddamn fucking easy."

So Nolan is stuck planning a bank heist with some amateurs. The heist goes well but things begin to go very wrong. He has the money to pay off Charlie, but is he just being set up?

Collins has the ageism and worry for the future dead on. It's uncanny how this book has the feel a Richard Stark Parker novel. High praise, indeed. Kudos to the publisher who resurrected these these early novels as

ebooks.

There's a very interesting historical afterword that's worth reading [spoiler alert] in which Collins discusses the origin of his pen name Michael Allan Collins, his real name. He had originally written under the name Max Collins (even though he had submitted the books under the name Allan Collins – his father's name was Max.) But another writer, Michael Collins, whose real name was Dennis Lynds asked him to stop using the name. He didn't at first and both of them wrote books entitled *The Slasher*, "and the two 'M. Collins' mystery writers caused all sorts of bibliographic nightmares." He later used the pseudonym, Max Allan Collins, which is his real name.

Collins also expresses accolades to Donald Westlake/Richard Stark for the Parker series which became a sort of model for Nolan. BTW, if you find Nolan's first name listed anywhere, in some old card catalog, perhaps, as "Frank," that's incorrect. It was added by an editor who felt Nolan should have a first name for the cover copy, much to Collin's distinct displeasure. Nowhere in the books is Nolan's first name identified.

Chris says

Two for the Money is a fun pair of novels packaged together, which has its pluses and its drawbacks. When you read a book and its sequel, I suppose a bit of recapping is to be expected, but when the two novels appear together, it seems sort of silly to have to reread the same backstory solely because it appears in both books. On the other hand, there's an interesting shift in style between the first and second novels that I may not have noticed if I'd read the books separately.

Collins characterizations are pretty standard here- he's good at fleshing the characters out to a point, but they are still a little stereotypical. The exceptions here are the counter-culture folks that he seems to have a better idea of, maybe because he is closer to their generation than to the old-style underworld figures contained within. The mobsters are a little over-the-top, but I think one expects that in a crime novel.

The true strength, particularly in the second novel, is evoking of sympathy that comes from the main antagonist's family members. The strain of the life on his family is probably the most nuanced part of this book, and it really makes you feel a little sad for the maniacal figure that the villain is.

Gregory says

Nolan is a solid, tough-guy character and he's made better in these two books by linking up with Jon, the comic book collector. Together, they make an odd but interesting pair. I did feel a bit of a fizzle towards the end of the second book but it never made me want to put it down for a "rest" like some books do. Collins shows here that he is a student of the genre and has some very good writing skills even in these, his first two books. Looking forward to reading further adventures of this character.

Dan Schwent says

Bait Money: In order to pay off the Family and get his access to his old cover identity and savings, Nolan takes on a heist no one else would take: a bank, with three amateurs as his crew. Can Nolan pull it off and will the family keep their end of the deal if he does?

According to the afterword, Nolan was created as an homage to Richard Stark's Parker and it shows. Nolan is an older, slightly softer version of Parker. The thing that keeps him from being a Parker ripoff is his relationship with Jon, one of the youngsters that's helping him with the bank heist. There's a little bit of a father-son vibe between them. Grossman and Shelly were a little thin as characters and the angle with Shelly, Nolan, and John was fairly predictable, as was Grossman's reaction. The heist was believable and the car chase was done well. I liked the supporting characters Tillis and Irish. All in all, Bait Money was a solid yarn.

Blood Money: Someone took out The Planner, snatched the money from the bank job, and took Jon hostage, and Nolan goes looking for him. Only all signs point to someone who is supposed to be dead...

Blood Money is a better-crafted story than Bait Money. The action is better, there are more shocking twists, and Collins even works in some parallelism, contrasting the relationship of Nolan and Jon with that of Walter and his father. I caught a Donald Westlake reference early on. Afganistan Banana Stand indeed. The final twist of the story was a jaw dropper. Jon continues to be my favorite character in the series. He's a comic collecting Robin to Nolan's Batman.

So, after reading Two for the Money, I'm prepared to admit that Nolan rose above his roots as a Parker rip-off. I'll be snatching up the rest of the series as I find them. For affordable prices, of course.

Michael Borshuk says

Interesting, imperfect two-fer republication from a crime fiction heavyweight. Great ambivalent ending, in any case.

Manosthehandsoffate says

This is actually two novels by Collins - Bait Money and Blood Money. According to the Afterward, Bait Money is the first novel he had published. Compared to many of the Hard Case Crime books I've read it's quite good - impressive for a new author.

In fact I enjoyed Bait Money more than Blood Money. Blood Money suffered from quite a bit of clunky exposition that retold bits of the story from Bait Money. Considering the two novels were combined into one book for Hard Case, someone should have done a bit of editing.

Still, the books were entertaining. I'd read more Nolan novels if they were still in print. . .

Ken Schloman says

Hard Case Crime put the first two Nolan novels into this one volume---Bait Money and Blood Money. The character pays homage to the Donald Westlake's, writing as Richard Stark, Parker novels. He captures the hardboiled anti-hero style and character wonderfully. Collins is one of the most prolific writers today that follows the hard boiled heritage that came before. Almost any of his novels are worth a read.

Loren says

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THREE-AND-A-HALF STARS

We all know the old saying about imitation being the sincerest form of flattery, and that aphorism holds no less true in the world of writing. Homages to the works of famous authors not only honor the individuals but show the extent of their influence in their chosen fields. The eldritch imaginings of H.P. Lovecraft have gotten mileage far beyond their original iterations thanks to artists as diverse as Brian Lumley and Neil Gaiman. Entire swathes of fantasy are basically testaments to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. What happens, though, when a pasticheur can't quite imitate another's excellence? Can the resulting work be considered a success? It's a question I found myself asking while reading *Two for the Money*, hardboiled author Max Allan Collins's tribute to Richard Stark's Parker novels.

Nolan is feeling his age. No, scratch that, he definitely feels older than his forty-eight years. Running from the Family will do that to you, and Nolan can't exactly blame the Chicago crime syndicate for chasing him. He'd been doing fine as Family nightclub manager until Gordon got promoted, the thug. You see, Gordon told Nolan to off an old friend, and ... Well, let's just say things got messy. Killing Gordon might've been excusable on its own, but absconding with \$20,000 of Family money? That definitely wasn't. Now after sixteen years of hiding from Gordon's brother Charlie, Nolan's ready to call it quits. But to do so he'll have to pull off the most difficult job of his career, a bank robbery where he has a crew of amateurs, a bullet in his side and no other options.

You can't say Collins doesn't line up the Parker tropes like a row of dominos. An amoral, single-named protagonist. A high-stakes heist. A deadly double cross. Plenty of blazing guns and down-n-dirty fisticuffs. Yet despite such similarities, *Two for the Money* never quite feels like a Stark book. It simply doesn't read the same. Stark's name could describe his style. His novels are bare and unadorned, peeled all the way back to the bone. In fact, the actions of Parker and his associates often seem a little mysterious at first because Stark doesn't let readers into their heads or comment on their actions. He's almost a hardboiled Hemingway. Conversely, Collins lets his characters unspool paragraphs of internal monologue, ruminating at length about most everything under the sun. That isn't to say the book's bad. *Two for the Money* does what pulp ought to, namely entertain. But somehow it never quite adds up to the works which inspired it.

Paul says

Description:

“AFTER 16 YEARS ON THE RUN,
WOULD NOLAN BURY THE HATCHET WITH THE MOB...
OR WOULD THEY BURY HIM FIRST?

They don't come tougher than Nolan – but even a hardened professional thief can't fight off the entire Chicago Mafia. So when an old friend offers to broker a truce, Nolan accepts the terms. All he has to do is pull off one last heist – and trust the Mob not to double cross him.

Fortunately, Nolan has a couple of things going for him: an uncanny knack for survival and an unmatched

hunger for revenge...

Books #1 and #2 in the Nolan series” - Quoted from book's description.

Max Allan Collins wrote these first two instalments (& a further six) as a homage to Richard Stark's (Donald E. Westlake) Parker series. Admittedly he wrote Nolan's #1+#2 at the beginning of his career, in his early twenties, but that hardly excuses the sloppy editing apparent in these first two books. Collins concedes these two books are in fact meant to be one book, as they together constitute one story. When it was decided to publish both books together, why didn't Collins edit them into one coherent book?

Forgetting for a moment these are a pastiche of the 'Parker' novels, the story itself is o-kay. My problem with these two books are twofold (at the least):

1. The first 15% of book #2 repeats all the salient points from book #1 to such an extent, it renders book #1 redundant.
2. It seems every second page makes some reference to Nolan's age (49-50) & that he's “getting too old for this shit” & yet he still kicks ass at every opportunity, making repeated references to his age another irrelevant redundancy.

Since these are presented as a homage, it begs comparison to the original 'Parker' series by Richard Stark & on that basis, it sucks. Stark's writing is brutal, brilliant, spare & lean, with not a word or praise wasted. 'Parker' is a sociopath, a complete bastard, with no empathy for his fellow man (or women). He doesn't kill for pleasure, but kills when it's expedient or he has no other choice. Nolan by comparison, is a complete pussy. He doesn't kill once, even though his actions may cause others to kill in his wake. Nolan has a naive comic geek as a sidekick & this (apparently) is enough to set it apart from the 'Parker' series. Not enough of a difference, in my opinion. Parker also had a companion in a couple of books (Alan Grofield) & although he was far from naive, he was at least an appropriate sidekick. I can't help but think Collins was inserting himself into these 'Nolan' books as the comic loving twenty year old off-sider.

Many contemporary crime writers admire & seek to emulate in some way their heroes, but the best ones bring their own special touch to their art, in a way that breathes fresh air into their creations. Max Allan Collins adds nothing to Richard Stark's 'Parker' series, but neither does he take anything away, since his homage is of so little import. I have the six 'Nolan' books in the series following these first two, but I can't imagine ever wanting to read them. If I feel like a hit of Parker, I'll just reread one of Stark's original 16 in the 'Parker' series. Even the eight 'Parker' novels written after a twenty year hiatus (by Stark) would be better than these egregious efforts by Max Allan Collins.

As a work of Hard-boiled crime I give these first two 'Nolan' books 3 stars, with the reservations outlined above. As a homage to the 'Parker' series, I give the above work a rating of 2 stars.
