The Private Lives of Private Eyes, Spies, Crimefighters, & Other Good Guys

by Otto Penzler

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Nero Wolfe

Sherlock Holmes was not the first detective, but he was the first character to become more real than the flesh-and-blood personages of his time. The only other detective in literature about whom that is true is Nero Wolfe. A few other detectives may be greater in that they have solved more complex cases, and a few may even be more famous in distant regions of the world, and a few may sell more books, but none has achieved an emotional rapport with readers to equal that of Rex Stout's fat man.

In book after book, from 1934 to 1975, Stout wove a pattern of intricate detail that brought the eccentric detective and his tough, wise-cracking assistant, Archie Goodwin, to life. The old brownstone on West 35th Street exists, almost as clearly as 221B Baker Street.

Wolfe and Holmes follow paths that cross at more than one point. Much like the greatest detective of them all, Wolfe has inspired a devout fandom that speculates on unrevealed details of his past, combing books for evidence, filling in gaps with inferences, suffering frustration at the hands of an author who changed facts, dates, names and other elements of his detective's history to suit the exigencies of the newest book.

Still, more is known about Wolfe's life than about most other detectives, thanks to the narrative efforts of his assistant and chronicler, Goodwin, who represents (particularly in the early books) the dominant form of American detective fiction for many years, the "Hard-Boiled School," just as Wolfe represents the classic English form, the puzzle story solved by an eccentric armchair detective.

Archie is not merely a stupid, worshipful acolyte, employed solely to feed the ego of the detective and ask foolish questions for the benefit of dull readers. Archie is an excellent detective on his own, a tough, cynical man of action, able to do many things beyond the power of Wolfe, just as Wolfe's intellect towers over Archie's. In an unusual and healthy relationship, the talents of the two men complement each other to produce the best detective agency in New York—and the best dialogue in mystery fiction.

Wolfe, of course, is still the mastermind, and

Archie has no choice but to stumble blindly along, as much out of his depth as Dr. Watson or Captain Hastings. The difference is that Archie doesn't care for it very much, and takes no pains to disguise the fact.

He is not above calling Wolfe a "hippo" or a "rhinoceros," nor is he reluctant to quit when he has had too much. He once tells Wolfe, "You are simply too conceited, too eccentric, and too fat to work for!" Not the reaction of the typical Boswell of crime literature.

Neither Wolfe nor Archie age during the forty-one-year history of their affairs, nor do the other recurring characters who populate their world.

Stout was a fast writer, completing a novel in four to six weeks, and he did not revise. Although his prose suffered not at all, his hard facts sometimes strayed, which may account for the ambiguity of Wolfe's and Archie's birthplaces, some fuzziness about Wolfe's early years, and some characters' undergoing a name change from one book to another.

Other facts are deliberately, not inadvertently, obscured. They are not the lapses of Stout; they are the flummery of Wolfe himself, who prefers to remain reticent about his biography. Sometimes the confusion is Archie's, although it is impossible to deny that his memory is superb and he is less susceptible to errors of omission or commission than Polton, Watson, Hastings or Dupin's anonymous chronicler.

Little is revealed about Wolfe's ancestry, for example, but that is not Archie's oversight so much as it is Wolfe's sense of privacy. There is some evidence, and a widely held belief, that Wolfe is the illegitimate son of a liaison between Holmes and *the* woman in his life, Irene Adler. Knowledgeable students of detective fiction will have no difficulty in noting the striking physical similarities of Wolfe and Holmes' older brother, Mycroft.

Like most other creators of memorable detectives, Stout did not intend for his books to undergo intense scrutiny, or to serve as subjects for profound scholarship. His purpose in writing the books was more noble. They were conceived to give pleasure.

"If I'm not having fun writing a book," he said, "no one's going to have any fun reading it."

There can be no doubt that Rex Stout had enormous fun writing his books about Nero Wolfe.

Every day, with a degree of constancy that does not fall short of incredibility, is a ritualistic agenda of small details, unwaveringly adhered to with a single-mindedness that borders on fanaticism, for the occupants of Nero Wolfe's New York City brownstone house. (The number, on Manhattan's West 35th Street, is either 506, 618, 902, 909, 914, 918, 922, 924 or 938, according to which of Archie Goodwin's chronicles one believes, though it is quite likely none of these, the various numbers serving to prevent an increase of traffic among idle tourists.)

For Wolfe, the day begins between 8 and 8:15 A.M., when his cook, Fritz Brenner, brings the breakfast tray to his room. The tray probably contains peaches and cream, eggs (but never fried), green tomato jam, and hot chocolate (never coffee or tea at breakfast).

Wolfe may eat in his bed (a large affair with a headboard of streaky enselmo, a black silk canopy and a matching coverlet), or he may pad barefoot in "half an acre" of bright yellow pyjamas across the room to a table by the window and eat there. While slowly eating, he reads two newspapers.

After dressing in a three-piece suit, tie, and yellow shirt (to be always fresh, he wears two shirts each day), he steps into his private elevator to the rooftop greenhouse which houses 10,000 orchid plants. Many of the plants are valuable; two (the famous Black Orchids) are unique. For the next two hours, Wolfe attends to the orchids (he calls them his concubines) with the assistance of Theodore Horstmann, the best orchid nurse alive but whose personality is suggestive of sour milk.

At 11:00, Wolfe takes the elevator down to the first floor and the combination office-sitting room, where he greets Archie the same way every morning: "Good morning, Archie, did you sleep well?" He places a fresh spray of orchids in the vase on his desk, then settles into "the only chair in the world he really approves of" and addresses himself to the requirements at hand, such as mail, germination records, etc.

Lunch is served at precisely 1:15, and it is a serious matter. Wolfe maintains that "a stomach long empty thins the blood and disconcerts the brain." There is little danger either of his blood thinning or his brain's being disconcerted. Archie claims that one of Wolfe's major objections to atom bombs is that they might disturb people eating.

Edward Arnold (center) portrayed the corpulent private eye only in Meet Nero Wolfe. *Lionel Stander (left), usually cast as a villain, is Archie. Victor Jory is a nervous visitor.*

Following a comprehensive lunch, at which discussion of business is permitted only under critical conditions, Wolfe returns to the office until four, when he returns to the plant rooms for two more hours; then the day's business is concluded from 6 to 7:15, when dinner is served. Coffee is had in the office, where Wolfe is likely to begin a conversation (on anything, from the most commonplace to the importance of the new moon in Babylonian astrology) or read a book (sometimes three books at the same time, reading a few pages of one, then a few of the next). At midnight, he turns in.

If he had a choice, not only the typical day would pass that way—every day would, with nothing more urgent than conversation, reading, orchids, eating and drinking beer (he has cut down—to five quarts a day).

Responsibilities, however, intrude. Salaries for Archie, Fritz and Theodore, taxes and maintenance on the old brownstone, the orchids, expensive food and incidental costs require a minimum monthly income of $10,000 for Wolfe to survive. That is why he is a private detective.

Unlike Holmes, who accepts cases for the mental stimulation, or Philo Vance, who finds it

Since he leaves his brownstone only under extreme provocation, Wolfe in a topcoat is a rare sight.

good sport, or Philip Marlowe, who sees it as a noble quest, Wolfe allows himself to be hired so that he can earn enough money to maintain his lavish lifestyle. Despite the economic necessity of taking cases, Wolfe takes them reluctantly. He hates to work.

Goodwin recognizes this failing in his boss, and accepts the resonsibility of acting "as the thorn in the seat of Wolfe's chair"; Wolfe appreciates Archie's chore—and occasionally admits the need for it. Archie's prime occupation beyond prodding Wolfe is to act as his legs or, rather, his body.

The only part of his body that Wolfe generally needs to use is his brain. The function at which he excels is thinking. He does it better than anyone else, knows it and is excessively immodest about it.

Inspector Cramer, the long-suffering New York City policeman who handles the homicides in Wolfe's precinct and therefore has to endure the detective's arrogance, has told him: "You're the worst thorn in the flesh I know of, but you are also half as smart as you think you are, and that puts you head and shoulders above everybody else since Julius Caesar."

Wolfe's self-analysis approaches humility—for him. "I have no talents," he admits. "I have genius or nothing."

Being a genius, Wolfe can get away with a lot. One character describes him as "the most improbable combination of ignorance and knowledge on earth." When Wolfe asks about the business hours of the morgue, or the simple geography of the New York metropolitan area, Archie is embarrassed to answer in front of strangers. Any moderately competent private eye should know such things, he reasons.

The questions do not embarrass Wolfe. Eccentrics do not embarrass easily. And Wolfe is an eccentric of the first rank. He does not, for example, ever leave his house, except under extreme provocation or "to meet personal contingencies"; they are rare.

All machinery he regards as personal enemies, although he seems satisfied with his four-by-six-foot, $7,000 personal elevator. It requires many years of pressure to get Wolfe to agree to have the brownstone air-conditioned.

Nothing frightens Wolfe more than automobiles. They are demons, he says, capable of destructive "whims," and he trusts only Archie behind the wheel. Even then, he sits on the edge of the back seat of his car (he buys a new Heron sedan every year), clutching the strap, ready to leap for his life. He would sooner cut his throat than step into a taxi.

Wolfe does not move any more than absolutely necessary. He is not built for it. According to Archie, he weighs somewhere "between 250 and a ton," with the most common estimate being a seventh of a ton (about 286 pounds); he is five feet, eleven inches tall. He once decided that he was too fat and went on a physical fitness rampage to slim down. For exercise, he threw darts for fifteen minutes a day (calling them javelins).

For all his bulk, his movements are smooth and efficient, almost graceful. Wolfe's corpulence is an integral part of him; he fits it. When a desperate situation forces him to assume a disguise, he grows a beard and drops a hundred pounds, making him "unrecognizable." Even

With his weight, he has been called handsome by women.

If Wolfe attempted to be a private detective in the ordinary sense, his near-immobility would make it impossible for him to function. But he needs only two elements to handle any case successfully, and he has them both—brains, and Archie Goodwin.

"I am not a policeman," Wolfe says. "I am a private detective. I entrap criminals, and find evidence to imprison or kill them, for hire." It is a highly specialized skill, and he admits that, in nine cases out of ten, Inspector Cramer's services "would be more valuable than mine." But in the tenth case, Wolfe has no peer. His genius transcends logic and deduction to encompass intuition and insight as well; Wolfe calls his talent "a feeling for phenomena."

Before he can begin to exercise his genius, however, Archie must locate and bring to him data. "I'm chiefly cut out for two things," Archie modestly says, "to jump up and grab something before the other guy gets his paws on it, and to collect pieces of the puzzle for Wolfe to work on."

To accomplish his tasks, Archie uses a variety of techniques. With women, his major weapon is his charm and good looks. Just under six feet tall, with broad shoulders and narrow hips, he has brown eyes and a pleasant baritone voice. One person compares him to Clark Gable, but he claims that "No one can say I resemble a movie actor, and if they did it would be more apt to be Gary Cooper." Whomever he looks like, he is attractive to the opposite sex. Wolfe pretends to believe that no woman under thirty can resist his assistant.

Archie is also able to use guile in his search for information. Wolfe has taught Archie that "We use a great many lies in this business, sometimes calculated with great care, sometimes quite at random." The secret of success, he says, is to "tell only useful lies, and only those not easily exposed." He has apparently taught the lessons so well that Archie has surpassed even Wolfe. "For barefaced lying," Cramer says to Archie, "I'd play you on the nose."

Although he doesn't use disguises, Archie has impersonated a personnel expert, a financial secretary, a florist, a photographer and, of course, a policeman. He has also pretended to be corrupt to gain a criminal's confidence.

Among other of his talents, Archie has successfully burgled more than one apartment, knows more than a smattering about fingerprints and locks, and says "there are very few blocks in Manhattan I don't know." He is also "exceptionally strong," according to Wolfe, and a good fighter—clean or dirty. His best punch is a right to the kidney.

He can also handle a gun, with a variety of medium-calibre revolvers and automatics at his disposal. Since an incident dating back to February 1935, Archie does not leave the house without arming himself if he is involved in a murder case.

When data have been gathered, Archie reports back to Wolfe. With practice, he has developed his memory to the point where he is able to provide mental pyrotechnics unique in criminal literature. Incredibly, he can repeat an hour-long conversation among five people verbatim, complete with inflections, gestures and facial expressions. "The only difference between me and a tape recorder," he says, "is that you can ask me questions." It is his goal to be so accurate and complete that questions are unnecessary. A good job earns Wolfe's favorite word of praise: "satisfactory"; a job of surpassing excellence merits "most satisfactory."

For additional information, Wolfe likes to question clients, witnesses or suspects in his office. It is here that Wolfe is at his best. To reach Wolfe's office, one has to locate the four-story building on the south side of West 35th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues (less than a half block from the Hudson River), climb the seven steps and ring the doorbell. Archie (or Fritz, in his absence) looks at the visitor through the one-way glass panel in the door.

One is then ushered into either the office or the "front room," which has windows facing 35th Street and is used as a waiting room. It is soundproofed (as is the entire first floor) and contains its own fireplace, a table, sofa with six velvet cushions, a piano and bench, and a checkerboard. It shares a lavatory with the office, and a door leads directly into the office, enabling Wolfe to play a shell game with the police if they happen to be hunting his client.

The office is spacious, high-ceilinged and lined with shelves. Those behind his desk contain books (1,200 volumes); the rest contain files and cabinets. The cherrywood desk has eight drawers. In the middle drawer Wolfe keeps the caps of the day's beer bottles so that he can keep track of how many he has had. A murderer once hid a poisonous snake in that drawer.

On top of the desk is a gold bottle opener (a gift from a grateful client), a vase for orchids, a paperweight (a block of wood once used as a murder weapon) and a bookmark—sometimes a counterfeit ten-dollar bill, sometimes a thin strip of gold. The bookmark is used only for the

books Wolfe admires; bad ones are dog-eared. The letter opener is a horn-handled knife thrown at Wolfe by a man named Bua; Archie shot him. Into the desk is built a buzzer which Wolfe uses to summon Fritz, usually for more beer.

Behind Wolfe's desk is a picture (first of the Washington Monument, later of a waterfall) covering a panel through which one can see and hear everything that takes place in the office. The office also has facilities (rarely used) for electronic eavesdropping.

At right angles to Wolfe's desk, eight feet away, is Archie's desk, in which he keeps the guns and ammunition, and the letterhead stationery and calling cards used by the firm. On top of the desk is the telephone, a notepad and pencil, with which he takes down information in a shorthand of his own invention.

Also in the office is an old-fashioned, two-ton safe which contains important documents and petty cash—$5,000 in used tens, twenties and hundreds. There are a radio and a television set (Wolfe likes to turn them off). On the walls are hung Holbein reproductions, a wall clock, an engraving of Brillat-Savarin, a portrait of Sherlock Holmes and maps.

Although Wolfe rarely travels, he likes maps, and Archie sometimes finds him studying the atlas, possibly indulging in vicarious wanderlust, possibly thinking about the house in Egypt which he owns. For similar purposes, whatever they are, Wolfe uses the globe, custom-made by Gouchard at a cost of $500, which stands in the corner.

On the floor of the office is the fourteen-by-twenty-six-foot rug given to him by an Armenian. It is either a Keraghan or a Shirvan.

For guests there is a big yellow sofa, some straightbacked yellow chairs and, for the guest of honor, a big red leather chair. Cramer uses it, and so do clients. A small table of massaranduba stands close by, to facilitate the writing of checks by clients.

When someone occupies the red leather chair, Wolfe is probably preparing to work. He usually does not rise when someone enters his office (although his manners are, generally, impeccable), claiming that "engineering considerations" keep him in his chair. To acknowledge the entrance of a welcome guest, he nods his head curtly about an eighth of an inch; if he is being genuinely effusive, his head will incline a full quarter of an inch.

When Wolfe sits behind his desk and a visitor faces him from the red chair (or the scene may be more crowded), the stage is set for Wolfe's interrogation. It is an art, and Wolfe excels at it. Even the police sometimes ask him to question a particularly difficult witness. He is relentless and thorough. "When gathering eggs," he says, "you must look in every nest."

Engaged to clear a client of a crime, Wolfe invariably points out that he can accomplish that only by finding the guilty person. "Innocence is negative," he says, "and can never be established; you can only establish guilt."

Regardless of his objective, Wolfe has to think on a case and, when he does, he leans back in his chair and goes into what Archie calls his "lip act." With his eyes closed, Wolfe pushes his tightly closed lips out a fraction of an inch, then pulls them back in a puckering movement. Out and in. Out and in. It may last for a few seconds, or it may continue for hours. It is a sign that Wolfe has discovered the key to the investigation and he is deep in concentration, attempting to unravel the confused threads of the case. It is impossible to disturb Wolfe while he is thus engaged. When the lip act is concluded, the normal next step is what Archie calls "Wolfe's charade"—the gathering of all suspects, clients, witnesses and police in Wolfe's office for the denouement.

Only Wolfe knows what is planned at these gatherings. He prefers not to reveal too much information to Archie because, he says, he does not want to "strain Archie's powers of dissimulation," which outrages his assistant, who counters with: "When the day finally comes that I tie Wolfe to a stake and shoot him, one of the fundamental reasons will be his theory that...everything inside my head shows on my face."

The real reason he keeps everything secret until the last moment, Archie claims, is that "Wolfe likes to have the curtain go up revealing him balancing a live seal on his nose." He has never dropped the seal. The culprit is revealed and hauled off to jail, and he collects his fee, which is considerable (Wolfe has several times collected fees of $100,000; "I do not soil myself cheaply," he says).

He has come quite a distance, both geographically and socially, since his youth, which was spent in Montenegro (now part of Yugoslavia). Wolfe is now a citizen of the United States, but whether he was born in this country or Montenegro remains unclear. On several occasions he has stated that he was born in that small Balkan state (Lovchen, Monte Nero, the Black Mountain, for which he was named), but in 1938 he told an FBI agent that he was "born in this country."

Following Meet Nero Wolfe, *which was based on* Fer-de-lance, *only one other Wolfe film was made. Rex Stout was unhappy with them and refused to allow further cinematic productions.*

Wherever he was born, the event occurred sometime during the 1890s, and his entire childhood and beyond was spent in Montenegro. Here, he played with his dog and his best friend, Marko Vukcic, and climbed the Black Mountain for the first time at the age of nine. Wolfe says that he was an agent for the Austrian government "as a boy," but this seems to have been a few years before World War I, so he was not a young boy. When that war erupted, he turned against Austria, joined the Montenegrin army, and "starved to death" in 1916, when the Austrians attacked, and "fought machine guns with fingernails." Further heroics in the war included a six-hundred-mile walk to join the American Expeditionary Force, along which he claims to have killed two hundred Germans.

After the war, he returned to Montenegro and, in 1920 or 1921, adopted a three-year-old orphan girl, leaving her behind when he was forced to leave the country. In 1929, he returned again to attempt to see his adopted daughter, and was once more forced to leave the country.

He soon turned up in what was to become his permanent residence. "Coming to this country in 1930, not penniless," Wolfe recalls, "I bought this house."

If the information concerning the first thirty-five years or so of Wolfe's life seems vague or sparse, it is because he is personally reticent or deliberately contradictory about it. Archie explains it best when he says that Wolfe "has fifteen or twenty pasts."

Perhaps no point is more obscure than the question of Wolfe's married life, if there was one. When asked by the FBI if he had ever been married, he replies, "No. Married? No." On a different occasion, however, he obviously

relished telling an anecdote about a woman who tried to kill her husband by cooling his brow with a rag soaked with poison. "The man on whom she tried this experiment," he says, "was myself." In all likelihood, this is probably the Montenegrin woman to whom Wolfe refers as the only person from whom he has ever "skedaddled, physically."

Montenegro and its politics continued to play a large role in Wolfe's life. In 1938, his long-lost adopted daughter reappears, using the name Carla Lovchen, teaching dancing and fencing in a New York salon. She is deeply involved in an international plot involving Nazis, Bosnian forest concessions and murder. Wolfe clears her, but their relationship is sporadic. She actually seems closer to Wolfe's friend, Marko Vukcic, and becomes a dedicated member, with Vukcic, of The Spirit of the Black Mountain, which exists to fight for the liberation of Montenegro from the rule of Tito's Yugoslavia.

This type of activism is characteristic of Vukcic, "the oldest and best friend Wolfe ever had," and the only man in New York to call Wolfe by his first name. According to Wolfe, Vukcic was "headstrong, gullible, over-sanguine, and naive." A big man with a swarthy complexion, "magnificent" white teeth, and a thick tangle of dark brown hair, Vukcic resembled nothing more than "a lion upright on his hind legs."

An outstanding chef, he came to New York in 1927 and founded the best restaurant in New York, Rusterman's. Commensurate with his stature, he is a member of "Les Quinze Maîtres," an organization of the world's fifteen greatest chefs. As much as he loved food, he loved women more.

Sergeant Purley Stebbins of the N.Y.P.D. articulated it vulgarly but accurately when he described Vukcic as a "chicken-chaser." Felix, one of the restaurant's employees who inherited Rusterman's (under Wolfe's trusteeship) on Marko's death, put it more tastefully when he said that Vukcic "had a warm eye for women."

Marko is murdered, and Wolfe fulfills a boyhood pledge by going to the morgue and placing gold dinars on his friend's unseeing eyes. As he attempts to track down the killer in the United States, Carla returns to Yugoslavia to carry on Marko's work with the resistance until she, too, is murdered. Incredibly, Wolfe breaks the habits of nearly a lifetime to pursue the villain to Europe. Archie accompanies him, stupefied by this new vision of Wolfe. "It's quite a shock," he says, "to see a statue turn into a dynamo without warning."

The adventure in Montenegro strains Archie's linguistic ability. He is limited to fluency in one language. Wolfe, however, is totally comfortable with eight (English, French, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Bari, Hungarian, Italian and Albanian). Wolfe's background required a thorough knowledge of various tongues. Archie's (in either Canton or Chillicothe, Ohio) did not.

Born in 1910 (or 1911, 1912, 1913 or 1914) as James Arner Goodwin (he once says his father's name is Titus, but he was probably joking), he has stayed in touch with his family. He has at least one sister, and his mother came to New York to visit him and Wolfe.

An outstanding athlete in high school, excelling at baseball and football, he graduated, he said, "with honor but no honors." Afterward he "went to college two weeks," he recounts, "decided it was childish, came to New York and got a job guarding a pier, shot and killed two men and was fired, was recommended to Nero Wolfe for a chore he wanted done, did it, and was offered a full-time job." He has held it ever since.

Archie has remained a bachelor for a combination of reasons. The first, he explains, is that "I love to do a good job more than anything else I can think of, and I suppose that's what shorts the line." His job simply comes first with him. But it was not always that way. "The only girl I had ever been really soft on," he says, "had found another bargain she liked better. That was how I happened to meet Wolfe."

If he ever does marry, the girl will have to be Lily Rowan, a blue-eyed blonde who is the best dancer he knows. She is also very rich. Her father was a Tammany Hall Democrat who made millions installing sewers. He also used his influence to get Cramer on the police force. Lily used to live at the Ritz, but she now has a penthouse on East 63rd Street, a place near Katonah in Westchester County and a ranch in Montana. Archie has a key to her apartment.

Because of an incident that made her brag that she was "the only woman alive who has necked with Nero Wolfe," and that made Wolfe smell of *Houri de Perse* perfume, he pretends not to like her, calling her "rich, intemperate and notorious."

During World War II, Wolfe assisted the government in ferreting out domestic enemies, taking no pay for his work, and Archie, a major in G-2, was assigned to assist him for the duration.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Wolfe engaged in the greatest struggle of his career, matching wits with Arnold Zeck, a criminal

mastermind in the tradition of Professor Moriarty and Ernst Stavro Blofeld.

He lives in Eastcrest, a "large, luxurious mansion" on "the highest hill in Westchester." Wolfe explains how Zeck makes ends meet. "He has varied and extensive sources of income," the detective says. "All of them are illegal and some of them are morally repulsive. Narcotics, smuggling, industrial and commercial rackets, gambling . . . blackmailing, political malfeasance," which is not an exhaustive list. Zeck, continues Wolfe, has an "unexcelled talent, a remorseless purpose, and a will that cannot be dented or deflected." Like other arch-villains, Zeck remains above suspicion by keeping several levels of underlings between himself and the actual perpetration of crimes, with only the very top men knowing of his existence.

Wolfe first learns of Zeck's activities in 1938 but, since his interests do not conflict with Zeck's, he does not pursue the matter. Five years later, on June 19, 1943, Zeck personally telephones Wolfe to offer advice on a case. A second telephone encounter ends with Zeck's veiled warning: "I have a strong admiration for you, but I admit I am much easier to get along with when I am pleased."

His interest piqued, Wolfe learns everything possible about the criminal, including the rumor that he "owns" twenty Assemblymen and six district leaders. According to Lon Cohen of the **Gazette**, a friend of Archie's and Wolfe's, if a newspaperman printed something unfavorable about Zeck, his body would be found "washed ashore at Montauk Point, mangled by sharks."

One encounter between Wolfe and Zeck results in gunmen's spraying Wolfe's plant rooms with machine gun fire, causing $40,000 worth of damage.

Of Zeck, Wolfe said, "He is the only man on earth that I'm afraid of. I'm not afraid he'll hurt me; I'm afraid of what he may someday force me to do to keep from hurting him."

In April 1950, the titans, each on opposite sides of the law, meet again, this time in a duel to the finish. With Zeck aiming his heaviest weaponry at the detective, Wolfe announces his retirement and disappears. "His will failed him," exults Zeck. But in June, a drastically changed Wolfe, now unrecognizable, returns, and meets Zeck face to face for the first time.

Goodwin also met Zeck, and recalled that their adversary was "nothing but forehead and eyes. It wasn't a forehead, actually, it was a dome, sloping up and up to the line of his faded thin hair. The eyes were a result of an error on the assembly line. They had been intended for a shark and someone got careless. They did not now look the same as shark eyes because Arnold Zeck's brain had been using them to see with for fifty years, and that had had an effect."

Engaging Wolfe in mortal combat dooms his foe, of course, and Zeck pays the ultimate price for his arrogance. Almost without a stir, the routine of the Wolfe brownstone resumes its normal undeviating pattern. Next to Wolfe himself, no one is more responsible for the smoothly running operation than Fritz Brenner, the major domo.

Neither Fritz nor Wolfe shares Archie's affection for women. Wolfe says, "You can depend on a woman for anything except constancy," and "the vocations for which they are best adapted [are] chicanery, sophistry, self-advertisement, cajolery, mystification, and incubation." Pressed on the subject, however he admits that women are "astonishing and successful animals," that his misogynist pose is "counterfeit" and that he carries his excessive fat "to insulate my feelings."

Fritz' objection to women is simpler; he fears they will upset his household. He lives in the basement of the brownstone with his framed menus, pictures of famous chefs, his collection of utensils and a pet turtle. In addition to the cooking, he is responsible for cleaning the entire house except for the office and Archie's bedroom (Goodwin's responsibility) and the plant rooms (Horstmann's).

A Swiss whose native language is French, he enjoys sitting in his stockinged feet, reading a French newspaper, but with slippers nearby "on account of things left on his toes and feet by the war to remember it by." He has a sweet smile, and is the only man Archie knows who can giggle without giving one doubts about his fundamentals.

As a cook, Wolfe rates Fritz just below the greats and he could easily work in New York's best restaurant (Rusterman's) at double his present salary (which exceeds $1,000 a month). When cooking, he is quite serious, wears a chef's hat and apron, and does not like to talk to anyone. He grows his own herbs in a garden in back of the house.

Fritz once tosses off an epigram ("Starving the live will not profit the dead") which Wolfe mistakes for Montaigne; he congratulates his cook.

Language is important to Wolfe. Archie says, "Which Wolfe loves most, food or words, is a tossup." He loathes clichés, says that "contact is not a verb under this roof," and is scrupulous about literal meanings of words, often sending

Archie to the dictionary for reference. Wolfe's dictionary is Webster's Second Edition; the third edition he found subversive for, among other transgressions, condoning the interchangeable use of "imply" and "infer"; he burned it. Profanity is used rarely, his favorite expletive, "pfui!", frequently.

Wolfe has considerable knowledge of legal terminology, but he relies on Nathaniel Parker (also referred to as Henry George Parker) when, as Archie says, "only the law will do." He has freed Wolfe and Archie from jail more than once, and may be depended upon "for everything except fee-splitting."

Even more indispensable to Wolfe's operations is Saul Panzer, a free-lance private detective he hires when Archie has too many chores to handle on his own. Goodwin calls him "the best operative south of the North Pole," and he demands (and gets) double the standard fee of other private eyes. He is worth it.

At trailing a suspect, he is a "nonpareil" and he literally never forgets a face. "I have developed my faculties," he explains. Saul is five feet, seven inches tall, 140 pounds, has a big nose that hides his "wrinkled little mug" that always looks as if he shaved yesterday, and has clothes that look similarly disheveled. The best poker player that Archie knows, partly because of a tender smile, Wolfe nonetheless trusts him "farther than might be thought credible."

Another free-lancer employed by Wolfe from time to time is Fred Durkin, a bear-like, "bald and burly," five foot ten, 190-pounder who can tail people better than anyone except Saul Panzer. Married to an Italian woman (they have four children), he has the map of Ireland on his face.

Archie said that Fred was "as honest as sunshine, but he wasn't so brilliant as sunshine." He is an effective private eye, however, because "he knows what to expect from his brains, which is more than you can say for some people with a bigger supply." Wolfe will not allow Fred to eat at his table because he "puts vinegar on things." Fred thinks Wolfe could prove "who killed Cock Robin" any time he had the notion to.

Wolfe's third choice for a free-lancer to help out is Orrie (for either Orville or Orvald) Cather, whose strong point is his ability to get people to tell him things. It isn't that he is a good questioner, Archie points out, but there is "something about his face makes people feel he ought to be told things."

A handsome, six-foot, 180-pound former professional football player who moves like a cat, he has a good singing voice, confident brown eyes, wavy lips, and was "born with the attitude toward all attractive women that a fisherman has toward all the trout in a stream." He has never found a reason to change, including his marriage.

Other operatives employed by Wolfe include John Joseph Keems, who looks like "a Princeton boy" and thought "it would be a fine thing for the detective business" if he got Archie's job; Theodolinda ("Dol") Bonner, who has her own detective agency, caramel-colored eyes, long curling lashes, and is considered "dangerous" by Fritz; Sally Corbett (also known as Sally Colt) who assists "Dol" and whom Archie thinks of as a younger sister; and the mysterious Mister Jones, seen by no one except Wolfe, who delivers (for cash in advance) information on the inner workings of the American Communist Party.

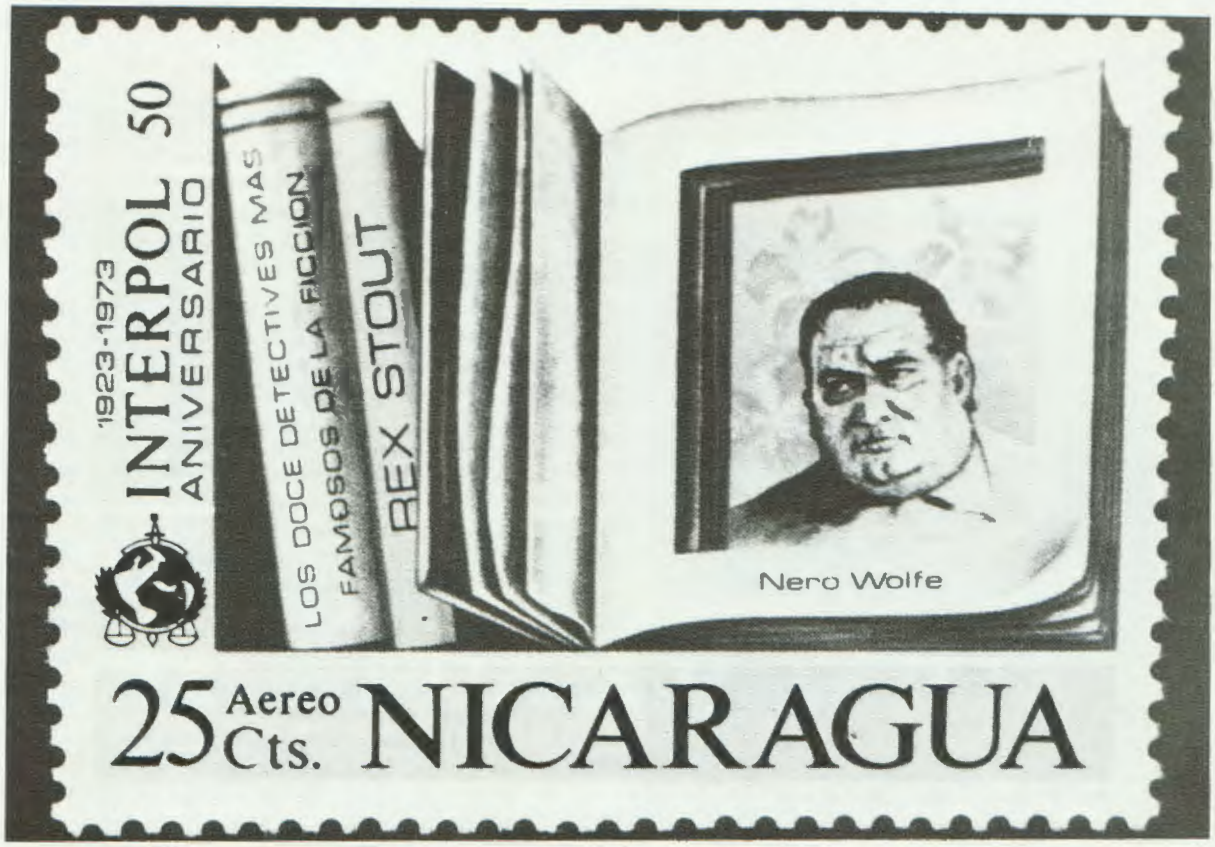
For more general information, Wolfe and Goodwin consult Lon Cohen, assistant to the publisher of the **Gazette**. An excellent journalist, he demands information in exchange for the information he supplies; he often gets it.

Paradoxically, Wolfe's most valuable information generally comes from his fiercest rival, the New York City Police Department, especially the Homicide Bureau and its head, Inspector L.T. (also referred to as Morgan) Cramer, a cigar-chewing, red-faced, irritable man of thirty years whose talks with Wolfe range from helpful, good-humored sweetness to outright rage.

Wolfe is often willing to exchange the products of his thinking for the results of police investigation. "Mr. Cramer's indefatigable routine," concedes Wolfe, "does have its advantages." Nevertheless, Wolfe has his reservations and tells him, in a fit of pique, "your acceptance of your salary constitutes a fraud on the people of New York." In calmer moments, they drink beer together in Wolfe's office, and Wolfe once saves his career.

Archie, too, has ambivalent feelings about Cramer, once admitting that he is "by no means a nitwit" and on another occasion saying: "I wouldn't give an unconditional guarantee on his brains, but there is nothing wrong with his guts."

Of himself, Cramer says he is "not exactly a boob" and is proud of his honesty and good reputation. The only time he becomes physically violent in the brownstone results from Archie's suggestion that he is on Zeck's payroll. He earns $10,000 a year. Often exasperated by Wolfe and claiming to look forward to the day he can lift



Selected as one of the twelve great detectives of literature, Nero Wolfe adorns one of the commemorative stamps issued by Nicaragua for the fiftieth anniversary of Interpol.

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his license, he admits that, over the years, "Wolfe has been better than square" with him.

Cramer's right-hand man is Sergeant Purley Stebbins, who is never at his best around Wolfe because, according to Archie, he is controlling his impulse "to see how many clips it would take to make Wolfe incapable of speech." Stebbins hates to visit Wolfe but does it anyway, rather than pass the buck to subordinates.

Lieutenant George Rowcliff is used mainly by Cramer to harrass Wolfe and Goodwin, both of whom hate him. Wolfe will never forgive him because he came to the house with a warrant and searched it. To Archie, he is just a jerk, so he torments him. Rowcliff stutters when he gets agitated, so Archie begins to stutter first, then accuses Rowcliff of mocking him.

Although both Wolfe and Goodwin have their differences of opinion with the representatives of the law, and occasionally flout the law (Wolfe drank bootleg beer during Prohibition; they often withhold evidence and hide suspects; Archie breaks and enters), they have strong codes of morality and ethics.

One of Wolfe's tenets concerns his substantial fees. "It is desirable that you earn your fees," he says, "but it is essential that you feel you have earned them. . . . Never collect or accept a fee that you feel you haven't earned; if you do, your integrity crumbles and your ego will have worms. With that one reservation, get all you can."

Despite that dictum, Wolfe considers himself a romantic and will often take a case because he feels a moral obligation, or as a gesture, with no prospect of a fee. On the whole, Archie shares the view, and is quite satisfied to work for a principle, rather than financial gain. It is one of the many traits shared by Wolfe and Goodwin. Although they fight often and bitterly (Archie calls Wolfe "pigheaded" and "childish"; Wolfe says to Archie: "Your head full of ideas? Even my death by violence is not too high a price for so rare and happy a phenomenon as that"), they have enjoyed one of the happiest and closest alliances of the many great detective teams in literature.

In a late published adventure of Wolfe and Goodwin, **In the Best Families**, Archie returns to the old brownstone, the door standing open, and finds a note announcing Wolfe's retirement. "If I actually had seen the last of Nero Wolfe," he says, "it was a damn sad day for me."

It was not the end then, but there will be no new adventures. It is a damn sad day for us all.

Robert Stanley depicted Wolfe in his pajamas for the Dell paperback of Too Many Cooks.

REX STOUT (1886-1975) Born in Noblesville, Ind., one of nine children, Rex Todhunter Stout was a child prodigy, reading the Bible twice by the time he was four, reading more than one thousand classics before he was ten, and being the state spelling champion at the age of thirteen. After dozens of diversified jobs, he invented a school banking system which earned him a small fortune, and gave him the leisure to write. He sold numerous tales to early pulp magazines, but his first novel was a literate psychological study, **How Like a God** (1929), which he wrote in Paris. **Fer-de-Lance**, the first Nero Wolfe book, appeared as a serialization in **The Saturday Evening Post** and as a book in 1934. Both it and the detective were extremely popular, and scores of books followed. Like the more notorious Dashiell Hammett, Stout was politically active in left-wing causes, particularly during the 1930s and 1940s.

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