

Another Father Hunt

By Jean Quinn

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If we were doing a word association and you said "Nero Wolfe," I might say detective, genius, eccentric, orchid fancier, New Yorker. I might even say "handsome" as Mrs. Barry Rackman did, although I'm not sure I would mean "moderate large," as Archie seemed to think it did, or if Mr. Wolfe bears a resemblance to Antonio Bandaras. We'll wait for the unveiling of Kevin Gordon's portrait to decide about "handsome."

But I digress. I don't find it surprising that I'm turning the conversation away from my very own topic because I just don't think of Nero Wolfe as a father. Now I know what you're thinking: Wolfe and Archie have a very close relationship and in many instances Wolfe does act in a paternal way toward Archie. I won't disagree – especially since Fred Gotwald includes a very interesting study of the relationship in *The Nero Wolfe Handbook*. However, I am talking about Wolfe as an actual father to a child.

Allow me to explain my somewhat unique view of Wolfe as a father. Compared to many Wolfe fans, I was a late bloomer. I didn't begin reading Nero Wolfe until I was 18. *Fer-de-Lance* was the first Wolfe novel I read and I wasn't terribly impressed. Wolfe seems somewhat obnoxious. I didn't break any speed records getting through the rest of the Corpus. I was in my thirties – and an adoptive mother – by the time I read *Over My Dead Body*. I was greatly surprised to learn that Wolfe was a father.

To refresh your memory, in *Over My Dead Body* an immigrant princess, as Archie calls her, turns to Wolfe for help on a theft charge. When he refused to assist her – based on her objectionable politics – the young lady plays her trump card. The accused is actually Wolfe's daughter. When Archie expresses his surprise, Wolfe admits to adopting and losing the child almost 20 years before.

Now, perhaps I shouldn't have been shocked if Wolfe was the biological parent of this young woman. After all, Wolfe is a fascinating man and not without charm, even if he does occasionally act obnoxious. It was Wolfe decision to avoid women; the females of the world did not force this lifestyle upon him. But that he should be an adoptive father was a surprise.

When I read *Over My Dead Body*, I had just completed the adoption process twice. To adopt a child, the person or couple is subjected to an intensive background search, and sharing personal history is not something Wolfe does well. I've always been curious as to how Wolfe ever passed muster with an adoption agency. For the purpose of this talk, I asked my friend – and director of the adoption agency who placed my children – for the guideline a social worker would use to complete a home study. Using this outline, I wrote a home study for Mr. Wolfe. I ran into trouble with the very first question --- name and date of birth!

Before we review the home study, let's look at how Wolfe became a dad. We'll set the stage with a **Montenegro timeline.**

January 7, 1919	Montenegrins stage national uprising to protest Serbian occupation.
1922 – 1923	Resistance crushed in severe military campaign.
1924 – 1926	Guerilla resistance continues and emigration to the U.S. accelerates.

Wolfe's timeline:

1914	Wolfe is a secret agent in the service of Austria.
1916	He switches his allegiance to the Montenegrin army and fights the Austrians, machine guns versus fingernails. This is the year he starves to death.
1917	The United States enters the war and he walks 600 miles to join the AEF, the American Expeditionary Force.
1918	When the war ends, he returns to the Balkans and sheds another illusion.
1919	Wolfe comes to America probably in early 1919.
1921	Wolfe adopts Carla, a three-year-old girl.
1926	Wolfe loses contact with Carla. He continues to send support money for three more years.

1929 Carl is 11 and Wolfe is no longer lean. He returns to Zagreb to search for her. He is arrested and given ten hours to leave the country.

Carla's timeline:

1918 Anna is born.

1918 Three-year-old Anna's parents die and she is adopted by Nero Wolfe. He arranges for the child to live with Pero Brovnik and his wife in Zagreb.

1921 – 1926 Anna lives with the Brovniks.

1926 The Brovniks are killed and eight-year-old Anna is placed in an orphanage

1927 Name change to Carla? Child leaves orphanage under the care of Mrs. Campbell, the English secretary of Price Donevitch. The Donevitch family believes the connection to Wolfe may prove valuable some day. Carla knows Nero Wolfe is her father and is taught to hate him.

Reviewing Wolfe's home study in 1999 in the comfort of the Gramacy Park Hotel it would be easy to quickly decide – No adoption for you! However, within the context of the war and starvation, a man willing to share what he has to keep a child alive would be a blessing a social worker wouldn't want to examine too closely.

We're not talking of an ideal situation here. In the book Wolfe says, "I accepted responsibility for her." True, that is one of the basic functions of adoption, that the adult accepts all responsibility for the child until the child reaches its majority. A willingness to feed, clothe, and shelter the child isn't enough. A child needs love and I don't think Wolfe ever felt affection for Anna before or after the adoption. He certainly chose a lifestyle that guaranteed he would see very little of her. Freedom fighters don't have much of a home life.

So, why did Wolfe adopt Anna? Guilt? Pity? Idealism? Because she napped from 9 to 11 and 4 to 6? The most acceptable explanation to me is that Wolfe knew the parents, either he fought beside them or they were close friends. Having promised them, perhaps in the hour of their death, to make sure Anna was safe, Wolfe may have gone one step further and made a lifetime commitment.

In Wolfe's defense, he has always known his limitations. Perhaps he knew his political commitments would never give him a lifestyle appropriate for raising a child. Times were desperate and food was scarce – as a soldier he survived on dry grass. He was able to provide for a child financially and give her the protection of his family name – whatever that name might be! His arrangement for having the child live with the Brovniks might have been a precursor to life in a boarding school. Image for a minute a teenage girl coming home to the brownstone for the holidays. Archie and Carla battling for supremacy over the phone, Fritz creating his gourmet snacks for anorexic teenage girls, and Wolfe bellowing, "And where do you think you're going in that outfit, young lady?"

Amusing, but I don't think so. Carla would have been in harm's way. Wolfe entertains way too many murderers, not to mention members of organized crime. A home that requires two-way glass and a sound proof living room that doubles as a detention center is no place to raise a child.

Poor Anna, she had a short and unhappy life. Anna was orphaned at three and raised in a war-ravaged country. She suffered tremendous losses: her birth parents, her foster parents, her adoptive father, her husband, and her name. Even as an adult she was forced by circumstances into political intrigue and an association with a maniacal princess. She was only 36 when she was murdered.

Was Carla better off for having Wolfe as a father? I think so. Her association with Wolfe may very well have been the reason she survived the war. He put himself at risk to return to Montenegro to find her. He helped her avoid being arrested for theft. He helped her establish herself in New York City. He attempted to maintain a relationship, sending orchids on her birthday and New Year's. Father of the year? No. But he did the best he could. And when Daddy is Nero Wolfe, that can be satisfactory.