



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

Princeton Packet Book Notes

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Wolfe's contentious heritage attracts cult of devoted readers

I fell in love with Nero Wolfe when I was nine-years-old.

It didn't matter that he was a corpulent, arrogant, reclusive, much older man. He had a brilliant mind that solved the most intriguing mysteries.

My mother, who introduced me to him, shared my devotion to the famous New York City criminologist. After a year of wonderful companionship, Nancy Drew had grown tiresome, predictable.

In despair, I wailed, "What can I read now?"

My mother was an avid reader of mysteries and Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe series was one of her favorites. In him, I found a hero worthy of my attention and spent many happy hours with these sophisticated puzzlers and the intriguing characters of Wolfe and Archie Goodwin.

Wolfe has (for his readers, Wolfe's world exists in present time) a mysterious past. He claims he was born in Montenegro, though this is a contested fact, as we will see.

He may have been a soldier, a secret agent, a protégée — and more? — to the famous Sherlock Holmes.

What is known is that Nero Wolfe lives an opulent and oddly reclusive life in a fabulous brownstone at 454 West 35th Street. He has a chef who prepares his gourmet meals and a gardener who helps him tend the extensive and exotic collection of orchids in the top floor greenhouse.

Wolfe has said on many occasions, "I seldom leave my house, and never on business." Clients must come to him. He relies on young, energetic Archie Goodwin — who relates the tales — to act as his agent.

Archie conducts interviews, collects clues and generally organizes the data. This wunderkind has a fabulous memory for details and knows what questions to ask. He is as personable as Wolfe is taciturn.

Archie's reports to the great man are witty mini-masterpieces. With the facts at hand, the great Wolfe sits at his huge desk, ponders all the information — and solves the mystery.

"Bring them in, Archie." The case is solved.

Though this may sound formulaic, Mr. Stout manages to keep readers off-balance as he inverts expected details and up-ends anticipated outcomes.

Nero Wolfe never lets me down.

My enthusiasm for the books, however, pales in comparison to the devotion of a merry group of fans who call themselves the Wolfe Pack and will soon celebrate 30 years of vicarious adventuring with Nero and his "intrepid assistant" Archie.

The premise behind the Wolfe Pack's fun is that Nero Wolfe is an actual man, not a fictive character. The understanding is that Archie Goodwin shared his journals with Rex Stout who, acting as a literary agent, published Archie's adventures with Mr. Wolfe in a series of books.

I recently met Jean Quinn, who is the current editor of "The Gazette: The Journal of the Wolfe Pack," and several other dedicated Wolfe Pack members at Classics Used and Rare Books in Trenton. Ms. Quinn was presenting a paper on Nero Wolfe's heritage.

The club has about 450 members representing five continents, though the majority live in or near New York City. Ms. Quinn said that members meet "the third Monday of every odd numbered month, except July," in or near Greenwich Village, where Mr. Stout once lived. They seek out pubs that offer inexpensive meals, private rooms, "and are willing to write separate checks."

The objective of the book discussions is "to have some good, cheap fun" as fans (re-re-re) read and discuss Mr. Stout's 72 Wolfe titles in chronological order.

The group is on the second cycle.

Several times a year, the Wolfe Pack hosts socials that draw members from around the world. The Black Orchid banquet — named for Mr. Wolfe's prized orchid — is a formal affair, with fabulous food that replicates meals described in the books.

"We eat very well," Ms. Quinn noted, as the members faithfully follow Mr. Wolfe's Epicurean lead.

These assemblies also feature guest speakers who willingly enter into the Wolfe Pack's view of the Nero Wolfe world. They had, for example, a certified public accountant who calculated Mr. Wolfe's taxes, a New York City coroner who shared graphic images of the type Archie would view on behalf of his boss. A member of the Orchid Society elaborated on the finer points of cultivating orchids, and Wolfe Pack member Jean Quinn, herself a parent of an adopted child, reviewed Nero Wolfe's home study papers as, it has been revealed, the enigmatic Mr. Wolfe has an adopted daughter.

The group has also enjoyed several picnics at Rex Stout's home in Danbury, Connecticut, where his granddaughter now lives. Mr. Stout died in 1977, soon after the Wolfe Pack formed. From the beginning, the group has maintained a warm relationship with his family.

Upcoming plans include a social at the Greenbrier Spa in West Virginia, what members believe is the inspiration of the Kanawha Spa featured in "Too Many Cooks." The weekend centers around three elaborate banquets from the books, which will be recreated by the Greenbrier staff.

For the assembly in December, the group hopes to have the ambassador of Montenegro, in a nod to Mr. Wolfe's Montenegrin roots.

However, Mr. Wolfe's birthplace is a point of contention. At the recent gathering at Classics Books, Jean Quinn began, "It is nice to be here in Trenton, the birthplace of Nero Wolfe."

For those who follow fictive intrigues, this is a familiar story that sprung from The Baker Street Irregulars, ardent fans of Sherlock Holmes who "play a peculiar game," according to Marc Mappen, the noted New Jersey historian who wrote about Holmes's liaison with a woman from New Jersey.

Like the Wolfe Pack, the Baker Street Irregulars assume that their hero Sherlock Holmes is very much a real man. They maintain that Watson was writing fact not fiction. Like Mr. Stout has done for Archie Goodwin, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle served merely as Watson's literary agent.

Mr. Mappen shared the story of New Jersey's "best known fictional character" in a column titled "To Sherlock Holmes, She is Always THE {sic} Woman," that was originally published in "The New York Times" and reprinted in "Jerseyana: The Underside of New Jersey History" (1992, Rutgers University Press). Mr. Mappen examined the story behind Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia," first published in "Strand Magazine" in July of 1891.

That tale — both the original and the alternate telling — is worth pursuing. For our purposes, Irene Adler is THE woman who outwits the brilliant Holmes and captivates his mind — and heart.

Building on the details in the Doyle story, Sherlockians, and now the Wolfe Pack, maintain that Adler — who was from New Jersey — had an affair with Holmes and their love child is ...

Nero Wolfe.

In this story, Holmes sent Irene to her family in Trenton "for her confinement." With the evil Professor Moriarty in pursuit, Holmes sought to protect Irene and his son by living apart from them. He established a residence for Irene and the child in Montenegro, far from London and where "the citizens are discrete," as Jean Quinn put it.

Doyle/Watson refers to Irene at the beginning of "Scandal" as "the late Irene Adler." Ms. Quinn proposes that the boy, after the death of his mother, is adopted in Montenegro and becomes Nero Wolfe, which explains why he maintains that he is a Montenegrin.

Ah, but the Wolfe Pack knows the real story!

The Nero Wolfe books — in their own right — are wonderfully entertaining. But for readers who want to exploit the fun, look into the Wolfe Pack group.

Charter member Carol Novak designed and maintains a marvelous Web site at www.nerowolfe.com. She provides lists of all socials, book discussion times and places, and the Nero Award that the Wolfe Pack gives annually to writers of worthy mysteries.

The Web site is also the place to go for all Wolfe trivia which — it should be noted — is not trivial!

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