

Meet Nero Wolfe: A Sherlockian Perspective

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Readers (unknowingly) said goodbye to Sherlock Holmes in 1926's *The Adventure of the Retired Colourman*. Only eight years later, a new detective who would not only evoke memories of the Holmes stories but also plough new ground arrived in the (oversized) form of Nero Wolfe. The seventy-four stories, written over forty-one years, would be collectively known as the Corpus, akin to the Sherlockian Canon.

For those unfamiliar with the stories, Nero Wolfe lives in a brownstone townhouse in New York City with Archie Goodwin, Fritz Brenner and Theodore Horstmann. This is a boy's club: no girls allowed (although Archie's romantic interest, Lily Rowan, holds a special status). Wolfe's attitude towards females makes Holmes appear to be a "whole-souled admirer of womankind." Quiz: Can you identify the Holmes tale that phrase is from? Answer at the article's end.

They are a self-contained unit, with Wolfe and Archie solving crimes, Fritz cooking and taking care of the household chores and Horstmann assisting Wolfe with his hobby, the cultivation of orchids in a rooftop greenhouse. Archie often comments on the beauty of the orchids, which is a far cry from the thoughts of General Sternwood in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*: "Nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men, and their perfume has the rotten sweetness of corruption." Po-tay-toe, po-tah-toe, I guess.

Because the characters do not age, the stories all have a comfortable familiarity about them. Also, they are set contemporary to their writing, so while in a Holmes tale it is 'always 1895', the Wolfe stories feel much more like modern mysteries, even though some are over seventy years old.

The Wolfe adventures are great reads on their own merits, but the Sherlockian, using those famous powers of observation, can detect elements of the Canon throughout the Corpus.

No, You Mean My Brother

Nero Wolfe bears a much stronger resemblance to Mycroft Holmes than to his more famous brother, Sherlock. Archie frequently tells us that Wolfe is lazy, and in fact his boss prefers to take cases only when financial necessity dictates. Archie tells us that one of his most important jobs is to browbeat Wolfe into working, which is certainly indicative of the latter's attitude towards accepting clients.

Sherlock Holmes says that his brother would rather be considered wrong than to exert the necessary energy to prove himself correct. Wolfe may not quite take things that far, but he will do his utmost to avoid taking on a case. He once said, "I am not interested, not involved and not curious." Unless forced by circumstances, that pretty much sums up Wolfe's attitude to work.

Physically, Mycroft is described by Watson as ‘corpulent,’ which means having a large, bulky body. Wolfe actually uses the word ‘gargantuan’ to describe himself, and while his weight varies over the years, under normal circumstances it is in the neighborhood of 285 pounds. Both Wolfe and Mycroft are very large men, but with extremely agile minds. One thinks of Sidney Greenstreet’s ‘The Fat Man’ in *The Maltese Falcon*. In fact, Greenstreet actually voiced Wolfe in a series of radio plays starting in 1950.

In *Fer de Lance*, the very first story, Wolfe is unfamiliar with the sport of golf. He has some clubs brought to his office and asks the delivery boy to demonstrate them for him. After watching a powerful swing, Wolfe mutters “Ungovernable fury.” Only a man who detests unnecessary physical exertion would view a simple golf swing in that vein.

Wolfe considered venturing outside the brownstone as something to be avoided in the extreme, with only three events regularly drawing him forth: voting, dining at Rustrmans, (the restaurant owned by his boyhood friend Marko Vukcic), and pursuing his orchid obsession. Other sallies forth were dictated by circumstances and universally disliked. Wolfe viewed riding in a car akin to a suicide mission. One wonders how he managed to board a plane and fly to Montana in *Some Buried Caesar*.

Both Wolfe and Mycroft are men of habits. Six days a week, Wolfe takes breakfast in his room, dresses in exactly the same fashion, spends two hours in the morning and two more in the afternoon upstairs in the plant rooms, has lunch and dinner in the dining room at set times and only deals with business matters in the office if he absolutely must. When Wolfe enters the office for the first time, he greets Archie with a “Good morning,” even if they have already spoken. Fritz must not open the beer bottles he brings to Wolfe, who does it himself, using a specific bottle opener each time. Few detectives follow as rigid a daily pattern as Wolfe.

Mycroft ‘has his rails’ and only frequents three places: his lodgings, his government office and the Diogenes Club. Holmes wonders what upheaval could have unsettled Mycroft’s habits so much to force a visit Baker Street. He compares it to a planet leaving its orbit.

“Give me your details, and from an armchair I will return you an excellent expert opinion. But to run here and run there... it is not my métier.” Though this was Mycroft himself, talking to Sherlock, it could very well have been Wolfe talking to Archie. But similarities are not limited to only Mycroft.

Moriarty? No, Zeck.

Professor James Moriarty was Sherlock Holmes’ great nemesis. The detective got the better of Dr. Grimesby Roylott, Charles Augustus Milverton, John Clay and many others, but it is Moriarty who is THE villain in the Canon.

There is only one adversary who appears in multiple stories in the Corpus, and he is clearly the most dangerous man Wolfe faces. Three times Wolfe comes into contact with Arnold Zeck, who, like Moriarty, is the head of a criminal organization. Also like

Moriarty, Zeck tries to warn the detective to stay out of his business. Failing, he has Wolfe's greenhouse destroyed with a barrage of machine gun fire. Later, he sends a tear gas bomb to Wolfe's office. Just as Holmes fled 221B Baker Street, Wolfe simply abandons the brownstone and goes deep undercover: Archie doesn't even know where he is.

Holmes stayed in hiding until the opportunity arose to get Moriarty's chief lieutenant, Colonel Moran. Wolfe engaged in a similar ploy, slowly, anonymously, working his way into Zeck's organization. When the timing is right, Wolfe sets a trap for his foe, just as Holmes did for Moran.

War Service

During World War I, Holmes came out of retirement to go undercover and break up a German spy ring. In World War II, Nero Wolfe essentially sets aside his private practice and works for the Army. In *Booby Trap* we watch Wolfe and Archie solve a wartime industrial espionage case fraught with murder. Wolfe and the Holmes brothers are both great patriots and serve their respective countries.

Archie!

It can be argued that Sherlock Holmes would have done just fine without Watson. While the good doctor was a more than capable chronicler, Holmes could probably have completed his investigations without Watson. Things might have been more difficult, but a successful conclusion would likely have been reached, nonetheless. This is partially because Holmes was a very energetic and physically capable detective.

Nero Wolfe most certainly is not. Archie does all of the legwork. Well, not quite all; he does have assistance sometimes. However, Wolfe, quite simply, does not investigate. He thinks and he issues orders. Archie is a far more capable sidekick than Watson. He is, in fact, a licensed private investigator in his own right. When Wolfe disappears as part of his campaign against Arnold Zeck, Archie sets up shop on his own and does quite well.

Archie is brave, wise-cracking, attractive to women, athletic and tough. He is a detective in the style of Sam Spade and gumshoes in the pages of *Black Mask Magazine*. In fact, Wolfe is an intellectual detective in the Sherlock/Mycroft era, while Archie is typical of the hard boiled genre. Thus, Rex Stout created a detective series that was characterized by the two periods of detective fiction which bookended the Golden Era of mystery stories (of which Agatha Christie is a prime example).

Perhaps it's in the Blood?

Sherlockians have oft speculated that there was a romantic relationship between Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler, with several films and pastiches utilizing the premise. John Lescroart wrote a pair of novels featuring Auguste Lupa (a name with linguistic connotations of Nero Wolfe), *Son of Holmes* and *Rasputin's Revenge*. The brilliant Lupa is the offspring of Holmes and Adler. Though it is never overtly stated, it's hard not to conclude that Lupa, who heads off to America with his Swiss chef, Fritz, at the end of the second novel, becomes Nero Wolfe. In fact, it's elementary.

Now, don't get the impression that the Wolfe stories are just pale copies of the Holmes tales. Rex Stout excelled in both plot and characterization and the Wolfe stories hold a unique and enduring place in the mystery pantheon. But Stout was a well known fan of Sherlock Holmes and traces of that admiration and respect for the world's first and greatest private consulting detective can be found in the Corpus.

Beyond Stout

Unlike Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe is still copyright protected, so you won't find a plethora of pastiches (There's a good name for a mystery story) for sale in bookstores and online. However, if you've worked through the Corpus a few times and want more, there are still some options out there.

Robert Goldsborough, with permission from the Stout Estate, published seven novels featuring Wolfe and Archie. Like Stout's originals, they are contemporary tales and the last book, *The Missing Chapter*, pokes fun at pastiches of popular series.

Lawrence Block created Leo Haig, star of two novels and several short stories. Haig has learned everything that he can about Nero Wolfe, who he believes to be a very real person: Rex Stout is merely a pseudonym. He lives as a shadow of Wolfe, keeping tropical fish instead of orchids, venturing out for business only when he has to and employing his own Archie, Chip Harrison, to do the legwork. Haig's dream is to be invited to dinner at Wolfe's brownstone, which is a clever bit.

H Paul Jeffers, who includes two Sherlock Holmes titles among his list of works, wrote three books featuring Sergeant John Bogdanovic. The policeman finds himself immersed in the world of a famous fictional detective in each novel. The third, entitled *Corpus Corpus*, centers around an annual Wolfe Pack Dinner. As expected, Wolfeian details abound throughout the tale.

In 2008, Loren Estleman began a series of pastiches featuring amateur private detective Claudius Lyon, whose life mission is to emulate Nero Wolfe. Lyon's Archie is an ex-convict named Arnie Woodbine, who also serves as narrator. Estleman has long been known to Sherlock Holmes fans for two pastiches, one featuring Dracula and the other Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Glen Cook is the author of the excellent (and rather dark) fantasy series starring The Black Company. He is also the creator of Garrett, PI. The series is as light as the former is dark. Garrett is a private investigator in the fantasy world of Tunfaire. Over a dozen books strong and still ongoing, Garrett combines the best of the hardboiled pulp school with dragons and elves fantasy. And there is no denying that the Wolfe books are a STRONG influence. While they are far from carbon copies, The Dead Man is Wolfe; Dean is Fritz; Garrett is Archie; and they even live in their version of the Brownstone. The series is excellent and while the influence is felt in every book, they are far more than merely Wolfe pastiches.

Very Satisfactory

If you have only a passing acquaintance with Nero Wolfe, you would do well to read up on the Corpus. For the more visually minded mystery lover, there is also a Nero Wolfe series available on DVD. It aired on the A&E network in 2001 and 2002 and features Maury Chaykin and Timothy Hutton. Hutton, in particular, excelled, also serving as director and executive producer on the series. It is a high-quality production with an excellent jazz soundtrack and happily, is quite faithful to the original stories.

Quiz Answer: Holmes tells Watson that he is NOT such an admirer of women in the fourth and final novel, *The Valley of Fear*.