

## ON THE CASE, AGAIN AND AGAIN, WITH NERO WOLFE

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*“What are you reading?” my wife asked me, unable to spy a title from the nondescript e-reader I held as I was propped on pillows in bed. And, as I had responded hundreds of times before to that same question, posed in the same circumstance, I muttered, “Nero Wolfe.”*

“How many times have you read the one you’re reading now?”

“Three or four, at least, I imagine,” I replied. The fact of the matter is I had taken to downloading the e-books of Rex Stout’s chronicles of his famous sedentary sleuth and his more active partner, and the narrator of the tales, Archie Goodwin, because all of the old paperbacks in which I’d first encountered the pair had fallen apart after repeated engagements: spines broken, pages loosened, the paper having aged along with me into a brittle and not especially attractive old age. Plus, the handiness of the electronic versions meant I didn’t have to scour a house full of less-than-optimally organized bookshelves to find one whenever I felt the urge to reenter the world of Wolfe’s distinctive and familiar Thirty-Fifth Street Manhattan brownstone.

The conversation I reference here took place a couple of months ago, but, as I suggest, it has been recurring for more than three decades. What was different in this instance was that I was nearing the end of my farewell tour of the Wolfe corpus, in the middle of the penultimate book-length Nero Wolfe case, *Please Pass the Guilt*, published in 1973, nearly four decades after the first one, *Fer-de-Lance*, appeared and introduced readers to Wolfe—only a handful of people across the seventy-odd novels and stories ever address him as “Nero”—and his Watson, whom nearly everyone calls “Archie.”

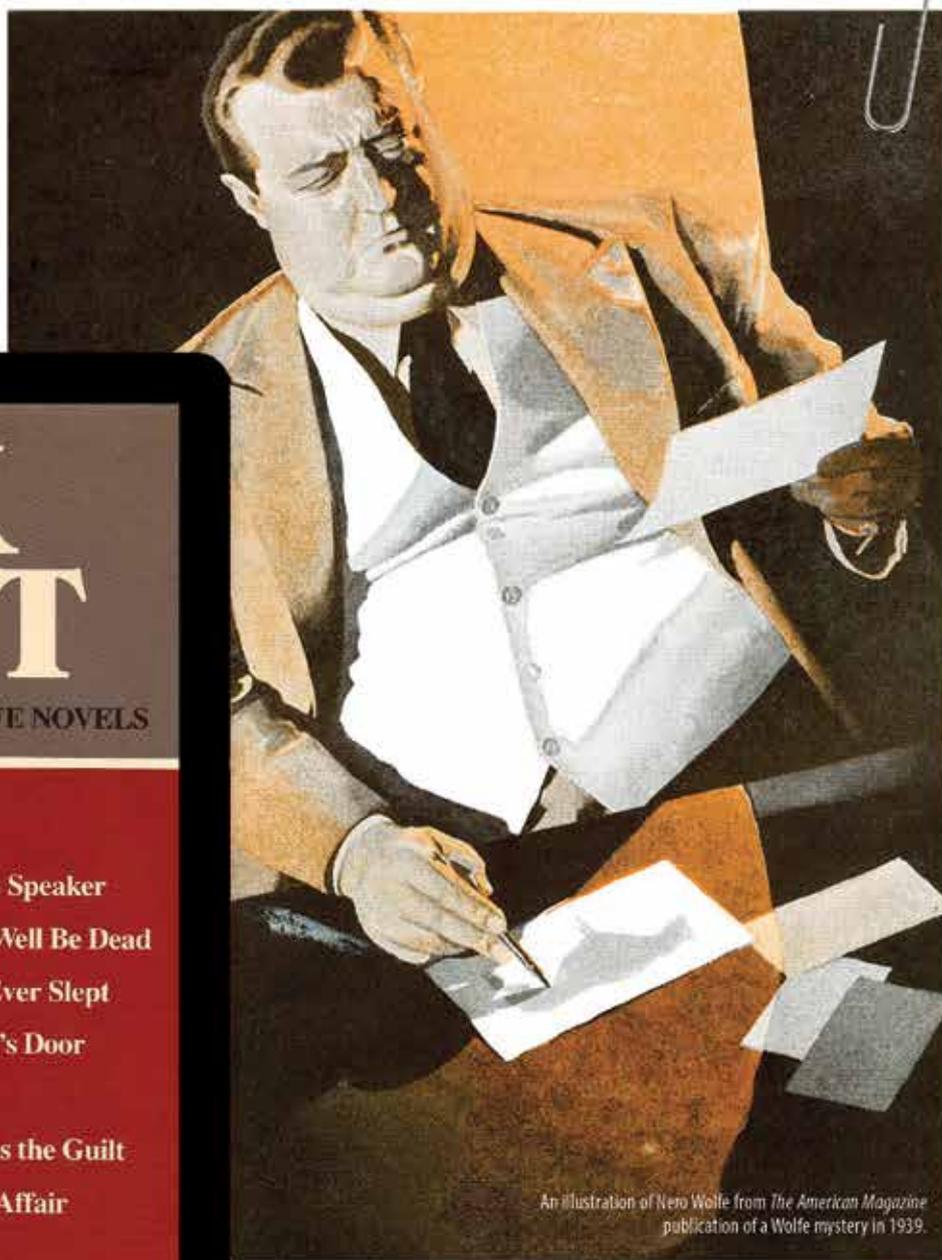
What do I mean by a farewell tour? About three years ago, realizing I’d probably read all of Stout’s tales about the private investigator and his sidekick, I wanted to make sure I hadn’t missed one. So I decided to begin at the beginning,

with the aforementioned *Fer-de-Lance*, and read my way through the Wolfe bibliography in order of publication date, with the goal of bidding these nearly constant companions a fond farewell. I’d been reading these books since the late 1970s, when I had been intrigued by the devotion a mother of a friend exhibited toward them: There was always one in view whenever I visited their house. Borrowing one, I found that Wolfe’s eccentricities and Archie’s insouciance caught my fancy; no doubt the effects of both were intensified by the particular volume I happened to pick up—*Plot It Yourself* (1959)—in which an elaborate plagiarism scheme that turns deadly is unraveled by Wolfe’s attention to niceties of punctuation, diction, and even the shaping of paragraphs. I was hooked, and, from that point on, whenever I was going on a trip, anticipating a snowstorm, or so stung by the slings and arrows of everyday fortune that I felt the need to curl up with the literary company of old friends and apply the peculiar balm of intellectual hypnosis that a murder mystery can offer, I’d look for a Nero Wolfe I hadn’t read.

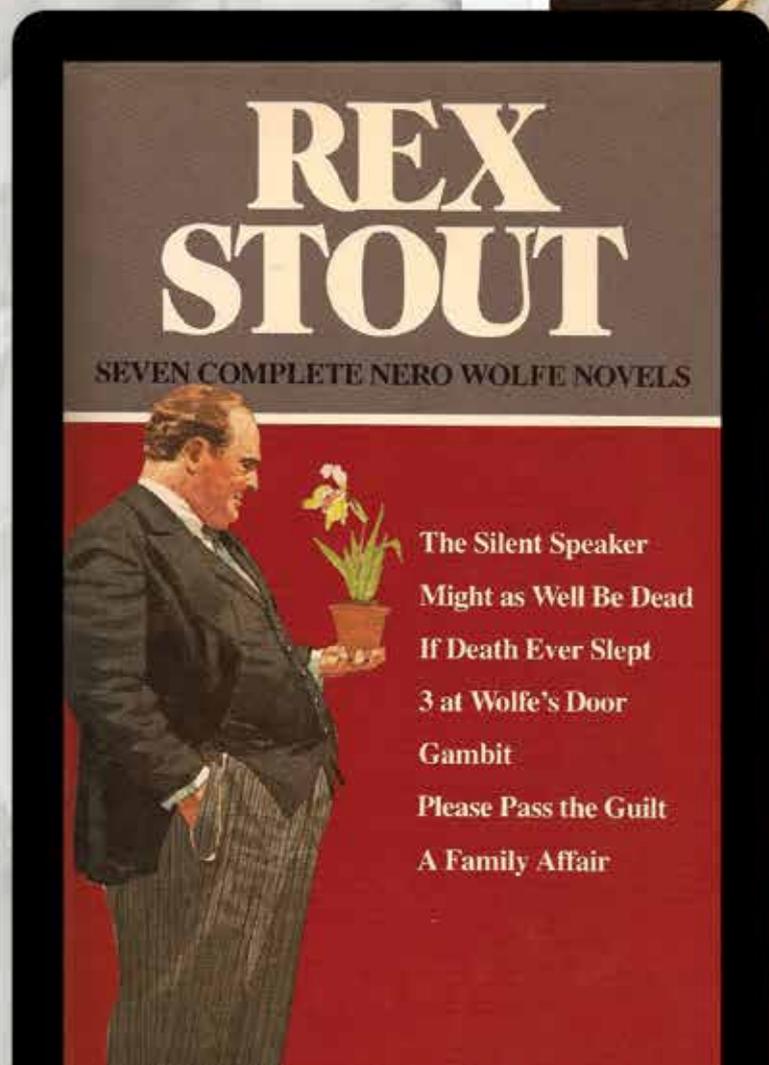
Wolfe’s lifestyle, and the unchanging daily routine that housed it, was part of the charm. Four hours—two in the morning and two in the afternoon—were devoted to the tending of his beloved orchids, thousands of which were housed in the plant rooms on the brownstone’s roof, supervised by the detective’s full-time, private horticulturist, Theodore Horstmann. More time, and much talk, is applied to indulgence in the pleasures of the table, prepared to Wolfe’s exacting, and informed, standards by the live-in chef, Fritz Brenner. Wolfe’s office is lined with bookshelves,

and Archie always lets us know what book is currently engaging his boss's attention. That the sleuth is sensitive to language is evidenced by his sometimes delightfully arcane vocabulary, and was memorably dramatized—or, Wolfe being Wolfe, and larger than life, *melodramatized*—in a scene from *Gambit* (1962) in which, as Archie explains, Wolfe perched his large frame on a small chair in the front room, tearing the sheets out of a book and burning them. The book is the then-new third edition of Webster's *New International Dictionary*, and Wolfe, Archie reports, "considers it subversive because it threatens the integrity of the English language."

The allure of Wolfe's habits—from the orchid and food obsessions to the daily regimen of bottled beer, from his fastidious dressing, including the yards of yellow silk pajamas needed to outfit his enormous bulk, to his overriding unwillingness to leave his favorite chair, much less his house—is as comforting to encounter from book to book as the generally steady cast of recurring characters. Chief among these are the unassuming but preternaturally gifted gumshoe Saul Panzer, occasional operatives Orrie Cather and Fred Durkin, journalist Lon Cohen, and, ever-exasperated by Archie's snark and Wolfe's high-handedness, Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Purley Stebbins of the Homicide Department of the NYPD.



An illustration of Nero Wolfe from *The American Magazine* publication of a Wolfe mystery in 1939.



Even Wolfe's small mannerisms, to which Archie is always attentive, are part of the dramatic machinery that Stout employs again and again, especially the detective's habit of circling a finger on the arm of a chair, or closing his eyes and moving his lips in and out, sometimes for minutes, sometimes for an hour, which signals that his powers of intellection are most deeply engaged. And that—fingers circling, lips moving in and out—is pretty much as active as Wolfe ever gets (with memorable exceptions, such as his heroic exertions in *The Black Mountain* (1954), in which he travels back to his native Montenegro to track down the killer of his oldest friend, and *In the Best Families* (1950), which finds him leaving the brownstone for an extended adventure in order to — well, I'll only spoil it; you should let Archie tell you). While Wolfe, generally speaking, sits behind his desk drinking beer, with daily excursions to the plant rooms or to the kitchen to plan his next meal with Fritz, the athletic Archie traipses about the city, interrogating suspects, wooing witnesses,

*Some books might be more meaningful or informative. But is there a better reason to revisit a book than its promise of familiar pleasure?*

throwing punches, and, occasionally, dodging bullets. The division of labor means the books provide the reader with the satisfactions of both the classic mystery of ratiocination and its more hard-boiled descendent.

But the center of attraction, whatever the murderous matter at hand, is the relationship between Wolfe and Archie. At the start of the series, the wise-guy assurance of Archie's narration is laced with both amusement at his boss's idiosyncrasies and amazement at Wolfe's uncanny acumen. Over the seventy-odd adventures they share, however, both amusement and amazement are dulled into a kind of grudging habit; like an old married couple, the pair have grown inured to each other's charms and resigned to each other's foibles.

That's one thing that became clear to me in my chronological traversal of the books. Another was that I never quite remembered whodunnit, so the pleasure of even those books I had read several times over was undiminished. But it was a third finding that was most surprising: Reading the books in sequence revealed to me how wrong my mental picture of the layout of Wolfe's office has been for the past four decades. While I started to update it this time through, I soon stopped, unwilling to disrupt the entrenched errors I had somehow formulated and become fond of. (I take solace in the fact that even Stout's attention to Wolfean detail strayed over his

long years of composition: He variously gave the house number of the Thirty-Fifth Street brownstone as 506, 618, 902, 909, 914, 918, 924, and 938 in different stories, and in *The Silent Speaker* (1946) alone he couldn't agree with himself, giving the address as 922 West Thirty-Fifth Street in Chapter 2 and 919 West Thirty-Fifth Street ten chapters later.)

A couple of years ago, as I toured bookstores and libraries around the country in the wake of the publication of my book, *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die*, I was often asked what volumes I found myself returning to the most. In retrospect, it strikes me that I seldom thought to mention Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe tales. While no doubt my failure to call them to mind on the spot was colored by a desire to appear ingenious or erudite to my audiences, it may also be explained by the fact that Wolfe and Archie have been so woven into the pattern of my everyday life that, like family members and other familiar props and stays, I take them for granted. But as the literary critic Hugh Kenner once put it, what we're taking for granted is always more important than whatever we have our minds fixed on; and while some volumes may be more meaningful or informative or inspiring or treasured, can any be more comforting to someone whose livelihood has been shaped by books than the ones that have most easily reminded him, night after night for years and years, that he just loves to read?



**JAMES MUSTICH** cofounded and was the primary voice of the lively mail order book catalog *A Common Reader*. It has now passed from the scene, but its sensibility remains very much intact in his guide to lifetime reading, *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die*.