

## BETTER THAN HOLMES?

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Until now, the only person to whom I've ever had occasion to say the word "werowance" out loud is my wife, so...thank you, Werowance! And thanks to all of you as well. I've been racking my brain in an attempt to come up with a suitable noun of assembly for a gathering of friends of Nero Wolfe—something as good, and as appropriate, as "a murder of crows." It finally came to me just the other day. The Wolfe Pack is an

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*inquest* of Wolfeans—or, as Inspector Cramer might have put it, a *goddam inquest* of Wolfeans—and I in turn am very greatly honored to have been invited to address this *goddam inquest*.

Let me begin, then, by laying down a marker: I started reading the works of Rex Stout when I was thirteen years old. I can still remember with perfect clarity how I happened to stumble across Wolfe and Archie. In March of 1969 I read a piece in *Time* called "The American Holmes." It was a profile of Stout, and it led with the

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highest possible card: "If there is anybody in detective fiction remotely comparable to England's Sherlock Holmes, it is Rex Stout's corpulent genius, Nero Wolfe."

By then I already knew my way around the Sherlock Holmes stories, and so, having subscribed to *Time* in order to widen my cultural horizons, I hopped on my bicycle, pedaled to the public library, and checked out a copy of *Trio for Blunt Instruments*. No sooner did I start reading it than I found myself even more intrigued by the complicated relationship between

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Wolfe, the orchid-growing, woman-hating genius who never left his Manhattan brownstone save under compulsion, and Archie, the wisecracking man of action who did Wolfe's legwork and served as the narrator of their published adventures in private detection.

As soon as I'd finished *Trio for Blunt Instruments*, I went straight back to the library to check out another Wolfe book. Within a few weeks I'd read everything by Rex Stout that they had on the shelves, so I got my mother to take me to the nearest

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used bookstore, where I bought a slightly tattered paperback copy of *Gambit*. My goal was to collect all of the Nero Wolfe books, no easy task in 1969, at least not for a thirteen-year-old boy living in a small Midwestern town. But I kept at it, and my collection was all but complete by the time I graduated from high school in 1974.

Rex Stout died the following year, a few days after the publication of *A Family Affair*, the last Nero Wolfe novel and the first one that I bought in its original hardcover edition. Now

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that Stout—and I—had completed the corpus, I naturally started from scratch and read the whole thing again. I've been doing so at regular intervals ever since.

What keeps me, and all of you, coming back? It is, I have no doubt, the fact that the Nero Wolfe novels, like all the best detective stories, are not primarily about their plots. They are conversation pieces, wonderfully witty studies in human character, not so much mystery stories as domestic comedies, the continuing saga of two iron-willed co-dependents engaged in a

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four-decade-long game of one-upmanship.

Much the same thing can be said, of course, about the Holmes stories. But the great literary critic Edmund Wilson believed that Rex Stout was second best to Conan Doyle—and he didn't mean that as a compliment, either. "Nero Wolfe," Wilson wrote in 1944,

was a dim and distant copy of an original. The old stories of Conan Doyle had a wit and a fairy-tale poetry of hansom cabs, gloomy

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London lodgings and lonely country estates that Rex Stout could hardly duplicate with his backgrounds of modern New York; and the surprises were much more entertaining.

Of course I needn't tell anyone in this room that a great many readers of note have begged to differ with Wilson, and continue to do so. In his lifetime, Rex Stout numbered among his fans such illustrious literary personages as Jacques Barzun, Somerset Maugham, P.G. Wodehouse, and Kingsley Amis. In 1934 Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in his old



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age had developed what he described as an "ignoble liking" for mysteries, read *Fer-de-Lance*, the first Wolfe novel, and found it to his liking. "This fellow is the best of them all," he scrawled in the margin of his copy.

That said, there can be no possible question that the Wolfe novels were based on the Holmes stories. In preparing this talk, I had occasion to re-read the first half-dozen Wolfe novels back to back, and I was very forcibly struck by the myriad ways in which Stout used Holmes and Watson as points of departure for Wolfe and

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Archie. I'm not just talking about the obvious borrowings, such as the title of *The League of Frightened Men* or the shared misogyny of Holmes and Wolfe, or the clever but equally obvious ways in which Stout turned Holmes upside down, most famously by making Wolfe fat and sedentary. No, the resemblances go far deeper, in ways both large and small.

As early as the first sentence of *Ferde-Lance*, Stout is already making teasing reference to Wolfe's earlier, unpublished cases, one of Conan Doyle's own best-remembered tricks.

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Surely Stout had the Giant Rat of Sumatra in mind when he has Archie "remind" us of "the time the taxi driver ran out on us in the Pine Street case" or "the time [Wolfe] sweated the Diplomacy Club business out of Nyura Pronn." He liked Nyura Pronn so much that he actually mentioned her a second time, in *The Red Box*, although he never did get around to telling us what she was doing at the Diplomacy Club.

Sometimes Stout actually went so far as to crib key plot devices from his great predecessor. The next-to-last

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"reveal" in *The League of Frightened Men* is borrowed almost literally from "The Man with the Twisted Lip," just as the backstory of *The Rubber Band* is a fairly straightforward variation on the backstory of *A Study in Scarlet*. And speaking of Clara Fox, who can doubt that she is Wolfe's Irene Adler? Archie puts it well when he calls Clara "one of the few women [Wolfe] would have been able to think up a reason for."

Edmund Wilson, then, was right, up to a point: Wolfe and Archie, at least in the Thirties, are closely related to

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Holmes and Watson. But were they really "dim and distant" copies? Or might Justice Holmes have been right when he called Rex Stout "the best of them all"? Was he thinking specifically of Conan Doyle? That I can't say, but after spending nearly half a century with Wolfe and Archie, I've come to the settled conclusion that the Nero Wolfe novels aren't as good as the Sherlock Holmes stories. No...they're better. Considered in their totality, they are a vastly more substantial and successful literary achievement, one that I believe to be comparable in

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quality only to the work of Georges Simenon.

Now I don't want to leave anyone uncertain of my admiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. To have created Sherlock Holmes was a considerable feat of the romantic imagination, and to have paired him with Dr. Watson was a stroke of something not unlike genius. But Conan Doyle, lest we forget, didn't think all that much of his most memorable literary creation. His objection to the Sherlock Holmes stories, and to detective stories in general, was that (in his words) "they

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only call for the use of a certain portion of one's imaginative faculty, the invention of a plot, without giving any scope for character drawing."

In fact, this objection comes perilously close to inverting the truth about Holmes. The puzzles that he solves are certainly clever enough, but their cleverness exhausts itself on first reading. It is, instead, Holmes the character who fascinates us—and it is his failure to develop other than superficially that is to my mind the principal weakness of the Holmes

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stories, especially when they're read in bulk.

Anyone who returns to the Sherlock Holmes stories in adulthood after having put them aside for half a lifetime, as I did a few months ago, will likely be startled by this weakness. The Holmes and Watson of *A Study in Scarlet*, it turns out, are already fully developed as personalities, and while we learn a certain number of new things about them in the tales that follow, they do not grow, nor does their relationship alter in any truly significant way.



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Hence there is no dynamism to the Holmes canon: reading it from beginning to end is not a journey, but a long string of discontinuous events.

Not so the Wolfe novels and stories. It's true that Wolfe and Archie remain the same age, more or less, throughout the series. But they *develop* in a way that Holmes and Watson do not.

I was talking about the first point with my wife the other day, and she put her finger on something that had never before occurred to me. In the

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early novels, Archie is a very young man—immature, really. It isn't just a matter of his authorial voice not yet having developed fully. He's also immature in his attitudes. Not only is he filial toward Wolfe, but he regards him with more than a touch of youthful hero worship.

As for Wolfe, he's showy, even stagey, forever trotting out the kinds of meant-to-be-quoted aphorisms that the Brits call "made dishes." "I am merely a genius, not a god," he goes out of his way to tell Archie in *Fer-de-Lance*, and we roll our eyes in

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response, just as we do when he repeatedly asserts that he is an "artist." Real artists don't have to tell us they're artists—we know it already.

Moreover, Wolfe in the Thirties is habitually condescending, at times almost sneeringly so. An all-too-typical example is this exchange from *The Rubber Band*. Wolfe: "Pleasant afternoon, Archie?" Archie: "No, sir. Putrid." Wolfe: "Indeed. A man of action must expect such vexations." You can imagine his tone of voice when he says it, too.

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But while these over-obvious traits grate on the sensitive reader, they gradually dry up and disappear as Wolfe and Archie cease over time to be dresser's dummies for made-up affectations and grow into their now-established characters. By the mid-Forties Wolfe has evolved, not dramatically but noticeably—and significantly. His conversation, both on and off the job, has acquired an Johnsonian force and authority that is far removed from the self-conscious posing of the early novels. And when, in *The Silent Speaker*, Archie has occasion to refer to him as a “genius,”

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he does so to Wolfe's face, and he does it not to praise him but to tease him. Wolfe sends Bill Gore to the office of the NIA to "compile certain lists and records," and Archie responds by asking, "Fifty dollars a day for the dregs. Where is there any genius in that?"

Wolfe's response, by the way, is no less revealing: "'Genius?' His frown became a scowl. 'What can genius do with this confounded free-for-all?'" This tells us everything about Nero Wolfe in his maturity. He knows how impressive he is, and so feels no need

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to assure us of his singularity. Likewise his creator: instead of asserting that Nero Wolfe is an eccentric genius, Stout now *shows* us. The postwar Wolfe burns up a dictionary out of sheer pique. He quizzes his bootblack on classical Greek culture. He goes into hiding, loses a hundred pounds, and grows a beard in order to track down Arnold Zeck—and lets Lily Rowan neck with him to boot!

If anything, the transformation that Archie Goodwin undergoes is even more striking. I have a feeling that

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Archie, like so many other young men of his generation, was matured by the war in which he served, though the process was already under way by the time he put on his uniform in 1942. Whatever the timing, he's evolved into a noticeably different person when he returns from the war. Yes, he's still a confirmed bachelor who takes love lightly and is quick with a wisecrack. But he's also acquired a touch of gravity, a recognition that the world is a place in which bad things happen to good people, and though he never wears that understanding on his sleeve, it's still visible.

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Once again, let's go back to *The Silent Speaker*, the first postwar Wolfe novel, in which Archie meets a classy dame, Phoebe Gunther, and clearly has it in mind to romance her—until the dame in question has her skull caved in by an unknown assailant lurking in the areaway of the brownstone at West 35<sup>th</sup> Street. And how does Archie respond? He's jolted. *Really* jolted. So much so that when he reflects on how the murderer covered his tracks, he says the following: "Very neat management, I told myself....Very neat, the dirty deadly bastard." That's



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serious stuff—not quite Chandleresque, but also not at all the kind of thing Philo Vance would say. It is, in fact, the reaction of a real person, authentic and mature.

And what of Archie's postwar relationship with Nero Wolfe? He's still Wolfe's hired hand, but he's also become an undefinable combination of servant, goad, trusted confidant, and court jester. It's an *uneasy* relationship, intimate but never affectionate. You can still see that Archie loves Wolfe like a father, but it's inconceivable that he'd admit such

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a thing, or even hint at it. As a result, their intimacy is transformed into a daily contest for dominance—and at least half the fun of the Wolfe books comes from the way in which Stout plays their struggle for laughs, in exactly the way that he might have portrayed a marriage of similarly long standing.

Such relationships lend themselves to close scrutiny, and this is the first and most important way in which Stout surpasses Conan Doyle: we learn more and more about Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin as the series

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progresses, and the more we learn about them, the better we understand them and the more interesting—and human—they become. Compared to Wolfe and Archie, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are little more than fabulously well-dressed stick figures.

In addition, Stout was also much more sophisticated than Conan Doyle when it came to building into his novels a continuing cast of comparably memorable secondary characters. First come Fred, Orrie, Saul, Fritz, and Theodore, then Inspector Cramer, then Lily Rowan and Lon Cohen—and

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unlike Lestrade and Moriarty, they are not stick figures but highly distinctive personalities in their own right. Stout could have spun off whole novels about them (and did, of course, with Cramer, though unsuccessfully so). Wouldn't you have gladly read a book about Saul Panzer? But Stout was careful never to tell us *too* much about any of them, not even Saul. He knew who his stars were.

He also understood that Archie is more essential to the artistic success of the novels than Wolfe, and so took care to make him a richer character

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than Dr. Watson. Archie is also smarter than Watson, and in my opinion a better writer as well. For therein lies the *real* genius of the Wolfe novels—Archie's literary style. It drives the books and is the main source of their enduring interest, and it wouldn't be nearly as effective on a smaller scale.

Which brings us to the last key difference between Rex Stout and Conan Doyle: Stout uses the novel, not the short story, as the basic building unit of his canon. It is, of course, a pleasure to read the Wolfe novellas,

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but my guess is that most Wolfeans would probably agree that the novels are better, and the reason for this is that they contain more room for character development. In the novellas, Stout is forever cutting to the chase. He has to. In the novels, he has time to digress, to tell us something new about Wolfe or to let Archie sound off on one of his own pet peeves.

I could quote *ad infinitum* to prove my point, but let me settle for one of my all-time favorite digressions. It's from *Before Midnight*:

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I would appreciate it if they would call a halt on all their devoted efforts to find a way to abolish war or eliminate disease or run trains with atoms or extend the span of human life to a couple of centuries, and everybody concentrate for a while on how to wake me up in the morning without my resenting it. It may be that a bevy of beautiful maidens in pure silk yellow very sheer gowns, barefooted, singing *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning* and scattering rose petals over me would do the trick, but I'd have to try it.

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That's Archie Goodwin to the letter, and in my opinion it beats Dr. Watson all hollow.

And is it art? Of course—not in the same way that Proust and Tolstoy are art, but what of it? Man cannot live by masterpieces alone, nor can any writer, however gifted, hope to produce them every time he sits down at his desk. It is in the nature of things that there must also be well-made pieces of intelligent entertainment to keep our fancies



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tickled, and that's where Rex Stout came in.

When I wrote about Stout on my blog six years ago, I quoted something that Evelyn Waugh wrote about one of his own characters, a man who wrote detective stories for a living:

There seemed few ways, of which a writer need not be ashamed, by which he could make a decent living....to sell something for which the kind of people I liked and respected, would have a use; that was what I sought, and detective

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stories fulfilled the purpose. They were an art which admitted of classical canons of technique and taste.

That is what Rex Stout did: he supplied his readers with tasteful, intelligent, impeccably artful literary entertainment of a kind that is not merely readable, but *re-readable*—infinitely re-rereadable, in my long and happy experience.

Others have done it as well, but except for Simenon, no one has ever done it so consistently well over so

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long a span of time—forty-one years, all told. That's an achievement rare enough in any kind of literature and unique in the annals of what H.L. Mencken liked to call "sanguinary literature," one for which I have long been and will always be profoundly grateful. No other writer has given me as much pure, uncomplicated pleasure as Rex Stout. I bless his memory.