



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

Wolfe Pack Member Survey Corner Responses to Our First Survey Question

Compiled and edited by **Saul Panzer**
Submitted by **Ira Brad Matetsky, Survey Editor**

Never was the Fab Five - Kyan, Ted, Carson, Jai, and Thom - needed more desperately by a single straight man in New York City. Wolfe hasn't changed a thing since the 1970s when the death of his literary agent literally froze his life and ability to change.

Unfortunately, "Queer Eye for the Straight" is a reality television show, hence they declined my request to make over a fictional person. I have no such compunctions. Here's what I think the Fab Five would have suggested if they had visited the Brownstone.

From the Grooming Guru:

A little dab will not "do you." Healthy, sexy hair begins with a soy paste texture pomade.

Montenegrin = Swarthy. Let's wax that back!

From the Food and Wine Connoisseur:

Be your own leg man. We've replaced your beer with a wheatgrass shake to boost energy and increase sexual vitality.

Weight Watchers? South Beach? No, it's Atkins for you.

From the Fashion Savant:

Yellow shirts, yellow socks, yellow pajama. Who are you, Big Bird? What we want is a relaxed jacket and slacks with a simple silk t-shirt all in a single, neutral shade to give the appearance of being taller, and Hello!, thinner.

Does Batman live here? Ditch the cape.

From the Culture Vulture:

Homebody or agoraphobic? Our field trip to the National Institute of Mental Health is the first in a long, and possibly gut wrenching, treatment program.

Etiquette isn't a weapon and a guest isn't a jewel on a cushion. Take a playful approach to your next dinner guests, murders or embezzlers they may be, and dine picnic style on the floor in the front room.

From the Design Doctor:

Oversized desk, a single red power chair, and emasculating yellow chairs all serve to hamper conversation and inhibit murder confessions. While Wolfe is being evaluated by our team of psychiatrists, we'll replace the office furniture with a mauve sectional with oversized pillows and plenty of ottomans that invite guests to put their feet up and let their guard down.

Dark walls, heavy window treatments, I've seen mausoleums with more light. Let's take down the drapes, open the windows, and let New York City in the Brownstone.

With this issue, Lon Cohen and the *Gazette* editorial staff are pleased to introduce a new feature: the membership survey corner. Members of the Wolfe Pack will be asked to respond to a question dealing with things Wolfean, and the responses will be compiled and published in the *Gazette*. We are even more pleased to announce that Mr. Saul Panzer has graciously agreed to serve as compiler and editor of the Wolfe Pack Membership Survey. As we all know, Mr. Panzer has extraordinary talents and abilities, which assuredly will serve the *Gazette* well for many years to come. (To prepare the survey reports, Mr. Panzer will receive stenographic assistance from Steering Committee member Ira Matetsky.)

The current survey question will be announced in each issue of the *Gazette* and can also be found on the Wolfe Pack's website, www.nerowolfe.org. Responses may be submitted by e-mail to [Saul Panzer](mailto:Saul.Panzer@nerowolfe.org) or by regular mail to Saul Panzer, c/o The Wolfe Pack, P.O. Box 230822, Ansonia Station, New York 10023. Responses may be edited for space or grammatical reasons but content will be preserved intact.

Our first survey question was: "How did you discover Nero Wolfe and what attracted you to the stories?" Saul's Survey Report follows:

The *Gazette* received about 20 detailed replies to our first survey question, some from long-time members and others from relative newcomers, located throughout the United States. I thank Lon Cohen and the *Gazette* for providing us with space to publish them. Archie Goodwin asked me to contact all the participants to thank them for their assistance. Mr. Wolfe winced at Mr. Goodwin's diction but grudgingly assented that in making contact with the participants, his thanks might be conveyed as well. At this point, I asked Mr. Wolfe whether it was genuinely advantageous to replace the concise verb "contact" with the verbose phrasal verb "make contact with," in conflict with Messrs. Strunck and White's first maxim of avoiding unnecessary words. The resulting linguistic debate lasted for the balance of a delicious Fritz Brenner meal consisting of Cape Cod clam cakes and planked porterhouse steak accompanied by an excellent Chateau Latour and Dom Perignon to celebrate the successful resolution of what proved to be a highly instructive as well as lucrative case for all of us. But I digress; the culinary aspects of my meals with Mr. Wolfe are surely not of general interest to the *Gazette* readership.

Where better to start our survey report than with the response of our own *Gazette* editor and my long-time poker buddy, Mr. Lon Cohen (aka **Jean Quinn**), who is one of a number of those who were drawn to the tales of Mr. Wolfe on a friend's or family member's recommendation:

I had just graduated from high school and started an office job in New York City. The long commute on the Long Island Railroad equated to 15 hours each week to read. After exhausting every author I ever knew, I wandered into the bookstore in Penn Station and picked *Fer-de-Lance* at random. I wasn't terribly impressed. My grandmother saw the book and said she read Rex Stout too — which was not exactly an endorsement to an 18-year-old. I moved on to other authors, only to rediscover Wolfe 12 years later when my grandmother suggested I give the books another try. This time I was hooked. Wolfe and Archie became so real to me that I would enter the library, head for the Ws and be crushed when all the books appeared to be out on loan. Then, I'd try to think, "Wait, wait, what is that man's name?" as my pre-schoolers begged to be taken to the children's section. Wolfe Pack member

Allen Rosen also reports having his attention first drawn to the series by a grandparent:

My introduction to the Nero Wolfe Mysteries came from my grandfather, Maurice M. Kahn, an accountant and avid mystery reader. It was, of course, the dialogue, especially between Archie and Nero, and the interplay of their personalities that hooked me. These books were never easy. He also hooked me into the A. A. Fair novels (an Earle Stanley Gardner pen name). There was a tension between the two main characters, Donald Lam and Bertha Cool that was nice but nothing like Nero and Archie. In any event, I owe hundreds of hours of pleasant reading to my grandfather.

In the case of Wolfe Pack Webmistress **Carol Novak**, it was her father who collected of the Wolfe books, eventually leading to her own interest:

When I was 11, I was a huge baseball fan. My father, my siblings, and I all read a great deal. I especially devoured books in the summer. That summer I saw that one of his books, *Three Men Out*, included a story with a baseball theme, so I picked it up to read. I was hooked. He was happy I liked them and got permission from the library for me to check out Rex Stout books on my own. Otherwise, I was stuck in the kids' section of the library. And no Mickey Spillane books for 11 year olds! Luckily my library had many Rex Stout books. I finally found a list so I could make sure I read them all. It took me three years to locate all the books. This was before the days of inter-library loans. By the time I was 16 (and had a job), I realized that I should buy all the paperbacks. It took me until I was about 27 to get all the books.

Eileen Wyatt also reports coming to the Corpus through a paternal introduction:

My father, who died this year at 88, introduced me to Nero Wolfe when I was about 12. When I was younger and could not sleep, I would walk up the seven steps, ring the doorbell and then go through each room of the brownstone in my mind. I don't think I ever made it to the plant rooms. Nero Wolfe introduced me to Jane Austen ("the best plotter") and to geography (and yes, I got my giant globe ... my husband gave it to me the first year we were married!). I love the people in these books: Archie, Fritz, Theodore, Saul, and all the other guys are like family. I have introduced Nero to my daughters and hope in time they will pass the family along.

Thank you, Ms. Wyatt, for the wonderful response and especially for the mention of myself - although even I, after all these years, have never presumed to refer to Mr. Wolfe as "Nero"

Another of the Wolfe Pack's longest serving Steering Committee members, **Saralee Kaye**, also reports being steered to the Corpus by a knowledgeable informant:

When I was newly married, in my very early 20's (many, many years ago), I was looking for something good to read. I knew that Marvin was extremely well-read, and asked his advice. He suggested a Rex Stout mystery. I sniffed, declaring as policy, "I don't read mysteries." But he persisted, and just to shut him up, I began reading *The Doorbell Rang*. And every other Nero Wolfe novel I could get my hands on thereafter!

("Marvin" is Marvin Kaye, himself a famous mystery writer and anthologist, as well as the editor of *The Nero Wolfe Files: From the Wolfe Pack Gazette*, a collection of past articles from the present learned journal.)

And Steering Committee member (and former *Gazette* editor and Book Discussion Coordinator) **Joe Sweeney** advises:

I have been a reader of the Wolfe books since the 1970's, having picked up the habit from my older brother who first started reading the mysteries. I read widely in mystery fiction — not just Wolfe stories.

Joe also reports being drawn to the Wolfe Pack — our organization — through an article in *The New York Times* about 10 years

ago. That would be a good survey question, too. But as Joe was brought to the Wolfe Pack through the mass media, other members first learned of the whole Wolfe Corpus through media popularizations of the Corpus. Such as the Wolfe Pack's newest Steering Committee member, **Jane O'Brien**:

I became interested by watching the A&E television series. I began reading the series with *Fer-de-Lance*, and loved Archie's narrative voice. He is such a New Yorker. I particularly enjoyed *The League of Frightened Men*. Stout's references to locations in the Bronx (where I grew up) closed the deal. I was hooked.

Virginia Wilhelm also came to us through what in this instance, at least, we will not refer to as the idiot box:

I discovered Nero Wolfe by watching the television series starring Maury Chaykin and Timothy Hutton. However, I had a delayed reaction. I did not begin reading the books until after the series had been cancelled. In fact, I only started reading them a few months ago, bearing in mind that a co-worker of mine made me vow to read them in order.

I'll offer a few words about my reading habits, which will show that Rex Stout and I are not an obvious match. First of all, I have never been a detective story addict. As a youngster, I read the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, and during my college years, I fell under the sway of Lord Peter Wimsey and his creator, Dorothy L. Sayers. In addition, I have read *The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey, because I was preparing to see a favorite actor play *Richard III*. You have doubtless noticed that these are all products of British writers, which brings me to another significant factor in my reading choices: I read British fiction almost exclusively. My favorite writers are Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope. Until I read *Fer-de-Lance*, I had never read a detective story by an American writer.

I've begun slowly, setting the goal of reading the books to be discussed this year. Right now, I've just started *Too Many Cooks*, while my co-worker friend keeps encouraging me, telling me *Some Buried Caesar* is absolutely the best, because I will be introduced to Lily Rowan. Of course I have already met her as portrayed by Kari Matchett in the series, but I know I am going to love hearing what Mr. Stout has to say about her in his inimitable prose. And he's such a refreshing change from all the Brits! I live on West 49th Street, and it's a real kick to read about the super-detective who ruled from a brownstone only a few blocks away — and during a time when New York seems, in retrospect, a city of dreams. I've waited a long time to start reading American detective fiction. I may be a novice, but I can already tell that Rex Stout, Nero Wolfe, and Archie Goodwin are worth the wait — I've started at the top.

I don't think I'll will share that last entry's praise for Mr. Goodwin's writing at next Thursday's poker game. His ego is big — or as Mr. Wolfe would say, "robust" — enough already. On the other hand, Ms. Wilhelm's literary tastes will be appreciated by our sometime British collaborator, Mr. Ethelbert Hitchcock.

If some came to Mr. Wolfe via the television program, others happened upon one or another of Archie's books (to me, they will always be Archie's books written with Mr. Stout's assistance, just as this will always be my survey report even if Ira helps type it up), and pick it out as something they might enjoy. **Linda Cianci** reports:

The year is 1969 and we are teaching in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. The apartment complex we called home had an outdoor mailbox area that also functioned as a "library." We shared paperback books. One day I picked up Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the exact title, but what I do remember clearly was being impressed with Wolfe's attitude and his one seventh of a ton stature. I visited the very nice public library in St. Thomas, and Nero Wolfe was available.

We returned to the continental United States for the next school year. The Nero Wolfe "habit" was still with me except now I decided to collect. At that time I did not know the difference between a book club and first edition. A visit to The Mysterious Bookshop in New York City and a lesson from Otto Penzler himself soon sent me down the path of being — as Al Diamond says — a lycanthrophiliac! And that is how I discovered Nero Wolfe and what attracted me to the stories — an outside library and the "fat man."

Another of our confreres (or in this instance would it be consoueurs?), **Jeanna L. Emert**, also credits her local library:

I remember reading my first Nero Wolfe book — *Black Orchids* — when I was nine or ten. I'd already devoured all the Agatha Christie and Simenon the Nashville Public Library had to offer, so I suppose I just picked it randomly out of the Mystery section. I remember enjoying the book, but I didn't pick up another of Stout's works until a good friend gave me a paperback copy of *Fer-de-Lance* for my sixteenth birthday. I'm not ashamed to admit that I read it through algebra, science, and English classes, finished it at home that night, and bought a copy of *The Golden Spiders* that weekend. When I moved to Boston for college, I discovered a used bookstore next to my freshman dorm room, and the damage was done — I don't think I've stopped reading Stout since. I'm lucky to have grown up in the Internet age, since the availability of online searches and sites like eBay have made my addiction easier to support (and nearly unstoppable, I should add).

What attracted me to the stories is more difficult to pinpoint. Growing up as an only child I had a fairly active imagination, the ability to get completely lost in a good book, and the feeling that I'd possibly been born in the wrong decade. What other eight-year-old daydreams about travelling the Nile with Hercule Poirot? Or, at age ten, announces that she's dedicated her life to medieval history? (I haven't yet traveled the Nile, but I do have a degree in Medieval History, so one out of two isn't bad.) Stout introduced me to an incredibly intriguing world I'd never explored, populated with private chefs, hired killers, and beautiful widows, with a fat genius and a smart-mouthed Midwesterner as guides. It may sound cliché, but I just fell in love with everything about Wolfe's world. Each time I pick up one of Stout's books, I never fail to fall back into that brownstone as surely as I did the first time I picked up *Black Orchids* and *Fer-de-Lance* — even if it's the thirtieth time I've read those words.

Some found the Corpus at the library, others at the bookstore. **Bob Byrd:**

I was in my early twenties, without an automobile. To make the long bus ride to work more endurable, I read. I've always been partial to mysteries. I had read the last Ngaio Marsh book and was at a loss. I enjoyed Marsh, but not enough to re-read them. I stopped by a used bookstore hoping to pick up a few Perry Mason books, a series I'd torn through as a teenager.

The shopkeeper recommended a Wolfe novelette collection; I don't remember which one. The book was all of fifty cents, so what did I have to lose? I finished the book that night, and the next day was back at the used bookshop. I read a few more novelette collections and then picked up *Some Buried Caesar* and never looked back. I was lucky enough to read the books more or less in order, but it took me a while to find *The Second Confession*. I've read them all since then, the last one being *Too Many Women*. I tried to read it as slowly as possible, knowing it was my last "new" Wolfe book. Unlike Marsh, Stout's books hold up to frequent re-readings.

What attracted me and kept me coming back for more? Two words: Archie Goodwin. Never at a loss for words, always irreverent — he is what I aspire to be. I'm told I have the irreverent part down pat, and I rarely have nothing to say. The only thing preventing me from attaining true Archiehood is my complete inability to grasp the fundamentals of pinochle.

Flattery for Archie again — positively the last thing he needs. **Mike Cullers** had a similar experience (similar to discovering the Wolfe books at a store, I mean, not similar to Archie's ego):

At the local drugstore, the book cover of a pocket paperback book in the mystery section caught my eye. The book was *The Doorbell Rang* and the picture on the cover was of a check for One Hundred Thousand Dollars payable to Nero Wolfe. I bought and read the book and was hooked forever after.

And other members don't even remember specifically how they came to the Corpus — they just know that they enjoy it. (I do remember how I first came to know Mr. Wolfe and Archie — but that is a story that Archie never shared with Mr. Stout, so I won't spoil the secret here.) **Monica Williams:**

I really don't remember how I got started reading the adventures of your boss. I was hooked by being allowed to enter the world of the famous brownstone.

Candidly, I enjoy a special feeling every time I enter that brownstone as well. Technically, though, I'm a freelance operative, and Mr. Wolfe isn't always my boss — just on the good cases!

Longtime Steering Committee and annual Wolfe Pack Assembly coordinator **Ettagale Blauer** similarly reminisces:

I picked up my first Nero Wolfe book, *The Black Mountain*, at home. I have no idea how it wound up in our little collection of books. I really liked it, but I didn't go about finding other titles in any kind of systematic search. I also didn't realize at first how very out of character that plot was for Nero Wolfe.

I seem to have just collected the paperbacks par hazard through the years. Since this began while Rex Stout was still turning out a book a year, I had discoveries to make for at least ten years. I didn't even know there was a concluding novel for years and years, and was, therefore, truly shocked, when I read that final book. I won't divulge the significant fact here in case anyone still has that pleasure to come.

Well, living through the events of *A Family Affair* wasn't a pleasure for me, but I'll let that pass and turn the floor over to the detailed reminiscences of **Mr. Robert Morris:**

During the 1970's, while working as an engineering manager for a major food company, I was also active in the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. I was attending a national conference and participating in a committee meeting when I discovered Nero Wolfe. The committee in question had not had much success in completing the task assigned by the Institute's leaders and the discussions this day had been testy. A member of the Institute's Board of Directors, a classic southern gentleman with whom I had worked at an earlier employer, had been trying to gently prod the group forward. My lack of patience bubbled up and I began to ask a lot of not so gentle questions of the group. As answers needed to be pried out of the participants, my questions became more pointed and finally awakened some people to admit that nothing was being accomplished because no one was really accepting responsibility for the work needing to be done. That led a few of the participants to step forward and accept some specific responsibilities. Further questions helped define those responsibilities and even more questions defined time commitments for completion of the work as well as agreement on how and when progress would be communicated within the committee.

As we gathered up our notes and were leaving the room, my former associate came up to me and said, "Bob Morris, you are the Nero Wolfe of the food industry!" Since at that moment I had never heard of this Nero Wolfe and did not know whether I should be complimented or insulted, I responded, "Who the h - - - is Nero Wolfe? Looking aghast, Bruce replied, "You can't be serious! You mean you have never heard of the greatest American fictional detective and grand inquisitor." I smiled and said, "Since I've never read a detective story in my life, I guess I have a perfect excuse for not knowing who is Nero Wolfe."

Since it was lunchtime several of us agree to eat together and Bruce regaled us about Nero Wolfe and Rex Stout, assuring me that if I would just read one of these mysteries, that I would become a devotee. He couldn't resist throwing in the dig that since I was rapidly approaching a personal weight of one seventh of a ton, that I might find more than Wolfe's inquisitorial style to be the reason for the comparison. I left the conference and headed for the

airport to return home. As I waited for my plane, I sought some casual reading for the wait and the flight. As luck would have it, the bookstore had a number of Nero Wolfe paperback novels on display. I bought one and started to read it. Before we landed, I had devoured it. Not only had I enjoyed it but also I was truly complimented by the comparison that Bruce had made.

Just to be sure that my random choice of one story was not a fluke; I bought two more to read on my next trip, going and coming. By the time I returned home this time, I was hooked on Wolfe. I sent Bruce a letter, thanking him for the introduction to Wolfe and the compliment. I saw Bruce once or twice at other conferences but we haven't corresponded in many years. We both are retired for a long time.

However, let's get back to Mr. Wolfe. I have read the entire Corpus over the years as well as other Rex Stout stories, none of which spark the Wolfean attraction. I've read all of the Goldsborough novels and found them credible if not always satisfactory. The genre of detective novels has become along with sea adventures (notably the Aubrey, Maturin stories) my favorite light reading. Tony Hillerman and Sue Grafton are my second favorites after Rex Stout but P. D. James, Ellis Peters, John Mortimer, Diane Mott Davidson and Jeffery Deaver also get a lot of my attention. With the possible exception of Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael none of the detective creations of these other authors has the character development so well executed by Stout in the Wolfe stories. This is particularly true of the supporting characters. Both Cadfael and Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme are, like Wolfe, essentially homebound, one by vows and the other by disability.

Occasionally, I reread one of the Wolfe novels, usually when I buy a first edition for my small collection or when I stumble across a hardbound original but since I have good memory, I lose the sense of mystery I experienced on the initial reading. I have seen all of the television efforts and have enjoyed them but wonder if they would be more believable in black and white. My childhood memories do not include the glitz and garish colors so prominent in the most recent efforts. I joined the Wolfe Pack as soon as I learned of it and have purchased and read many of the publications with interest.

From those wonderful thoughts (which I've regretfully had to trim a bit for space reasons), we will conclude with the meanderings of one **Ira Matetsky**:

I've enjoyed detective fiction since I was a young teenager, beginning with the writings of the first two winners of the Wolfe Pack's new Archie Award for lifetime achievement (as announced elsewhere in this issue of the *Gazette*) - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dame Agatha Christie. During my twenties, I look for new mystery authors to read, and found a few, but was never sure whom I should devour next.

Somewhere along the way, I found myself on the mailing list for something called "Mysteries by Mail." This was a rather oddball catalog, in pre-Internet times, of mystery novels and related books and paraphernalia, each advertised with an amusing description. This was just before the Bantam paperback reprints of virtually the entire Corpus during the 1990's, and there were, I believe, only four Wolfe books advertised for sale. Although I am sure in retrospect that I had previously heard the names of Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe in passing, I did not recognize them. But something in the cataloguer's description of the series enticed me. I wish I had those words before me. At the end of a couple of descriptive sentences there were three short words or phrases in a row. I believe one of them may have been "New York City." I am certain that the last of them was "food." In any event, something grabbed me and I sent away \$20 or so for the four books.

They arrived and, to their putative author — "I must say, Archie, satisfactory." My first was *The Golden Spiders*. It was not the best place to begin: I found the use of a child as the murder victim disturbing, the "hard-boiled action" unbelievable, and the plot incomprehensible. Yet I loved the book, as well as the three others that accompanied it. I worked in those days a few short blocks from the old uptown Forbidden Planet store, which had a few mystery shelves along with the science fiction and comics, and bought up everything else in print (and learned much about Stout's life and times from Ellen Krieger's introduction to *Fer-de-Lance* and John McAleer's to *Death Times Three*). A few months later, while browsing for more titles at The Mysterious Bookshop on 56th Street, I saw an index card on the bulletin board announcing the Wolfe Pack's annual Black Orchid Weekend (yes, an entire weekend then), and I was truly and forever hooked. And I hope to be rereading the Nero Wolfe novels — and participating in Nero Wolfe events, including editing this Survey for many years to come.

This concludes our first Wolfe Pack Survey.

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