

Nero Wolfe, the Spy

by Gayle Lynds

Keynote Speaker at the Bouchercon 2010 Rex Stout Banquet
October 15, 2010

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Like most of you, I love the Nero Wolfe books. I read them years ago, long before I admitted to myself that all I wanted to do was write novels. I found them inspirational. During that period I was reading them against Agatha Christie's terrific body of work. But Agatha lost, because her formula for the villain was clear, and her writing was not nearly as good and the voices of her characters not nearly as strong and as memorable as Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe adventures.

I suspect Inspector Cramer would think of Nero Wolfe as 300 pounds of blubber and sputter. I think of him, however, as 300 pounds of brains, brawn, and bravery. Brains, of course, because all of us know how smart he is. The brawn is because he can, despite his enormous girth, still lift a beer -- as long as the quality of it is worthy. And finally, he is brave, because he is constantly being sniped at by lesser mortals who expect him to leave his brownstone on the West Side. Would he ever leave that brownstone? Not for all the insults in Manhattan. Or, as he would explain, "Light travels faster than sound; that is why some people appear bright, until you hear them speak."

That's Nero Wolfe's indelible voice. Now here it is again: "I was born in Montenegro and spent my early boyhood there. At the age of 16, I decided to move around. In 14 years, I became acquainted with most of Europe, a little of Africa, and much of Asia, in a variety of roles and activities. Coming to this country in 1930, penniless, I bought this house and entered into practice as a private detective." That wonderful excerpt is from the short story "Fourth of July Picnic."

Nero's early years were full of derring-do, loyalty, and espionage. I want to thank Jane Cleland, Carol Novak, and Jean Quinn for sending me three old copies of *The Gazette*, where I discovered fascinating tidbits about the colorful history of our favorite private detective.

In *Over My Dead Body*, Wolfe reveals, "I thought it romantic, when I was a boy 25 years ago, to be a secret agent for the Austrian government." That would have been 1913 when Nero was only 17 years old. So it was just a few years before the globe erupted into World War I that the teenage Nero was given a position in the Austro-Hungarian civil service.

You won't be surprised to learn that he grew bored quickly, and his solution was to join the Empire's Secret Service. Now he was a spy, and soon was sent to Catalonia, Spain, on a confidential mission of which the canon, unfortunately, gives us few details. But we can surmise that it must have been an exciting operation, because the chase took him to Algiers, then to Egypt, and finally to Arabia.

A few years ago when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was Director of Central Intelligence, he said something I find evocative of what it must've been like for Wolfe: "When a spy smells flowers, he looks around for a coffin." Espionage can be an addictive life. In fact, it's said there are no ex-intelligence officers, just as there are no ex-German shepherds.

For those of you who know your history, you realize that during this period Nero Wolfe was an enemy spying against the West. So what happened to change his mind?

The canon tells us only that a year or so later he was involved in a desperate conflict in the Balkans that resulted in his being jailed in Bulgaria. It must have been an eye-opening experience, because at that point Wolfe, who was the most loyal of young men, switched his political allegiance and joined the Montenegrin army. That was 1915, and the army was pitiful, with no money, old weapons, few uniforms, and no hope of winning. Still, he joined it. Then he led a little group of guerrillas into the mountains and took up the brave fight against the Kaiser.

A year later, in 1916, German Field Marshall Von Sonders, who was the commander of the Constantinople front, discovered his officers had been disguising the huge number of their soldiers killed by guerrillas by reporting instead that they'd been "killed by wolves." No officer likes to admit he's suffering losses in an area he's supposed to have pacified, so the Germans successfully used the made-up reason [until] the German officers' lies were revealed.

Wolfe later bragged that he personally shot and killed 200 Germans, a number stunning to those of us who've read his stories, since we know how much the older Wolfe disliked guns and would seldom even touch one.

As a side note, there seems to be general agreement among experts that "Nero Wolfe" is a pseudonym, and if it is, it's likely his surname came from this era -- he and his ferocious Montenegrin guerrillas were called the Black Wolves.

Finally, the next year, in 1917, at the same time that the United States entered the war, Wolfe left Montenegro. As he tells FBI Special Agent Stahl in *Over My Dead Body*, he joined the American Expeditionary Force in Salmonica, Macedonia. Typical of Wolfe, it was no simple enlistment. He walked an incredible 600 miles to get there.

After the war he continued to move around, eventually arriving in the United States with enough money to buy the brownstone. Settling into it, he opened his detective agency, solved many cases, and became famous, thanks in part to Archie Goodwin's faithful recording of his cases. He also became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

When World War II erupted, one would've expected Wolfe to offer his services to his beloved America. One would be right. He put himself on a strict diet and not only left the brownstone but did

so to – shock – exercise. The Federal government had ideas, too. It sent Archie Goodwin to entice the World's Greatest Detective back into the espionage profession.

"Satisfactory" is one of Wolfe's favorite words. But by the 1940s whatever satisfaction Wolfe had found in the world of espionage had evaporated. Perhaps he was remembering the 200 soldiers of the Kaiser he had successfully killed. In any case, his goal was ambitious – to be back on the front, in the middle of battle, despite the fact that he was well into his forties.

But the government wasn't going to let talent like his be risked. It was a stalemate: There was no way Wolfe was going to get what he wanted, and there was no way the government was either. The result was that Wolfe grumbled loudly and then returned none too graciously to his detective work. Of course he ultimately made a true and sometimes heroic contribution to the war effort by solving the cases sent his way.

The Wolfe stories have fascinated us, surprised us, and delighted us for eight decades. As one considers the fullness of his life, one is struck by his many talents and his marvelous idiosyncrasies. He takes life with a grain of sea salt, a slice of Florida lemon, and a pint of Newcastle Brown. To remember his culinary and flora interests and peculiarities is to swoon: We know that in the center of his dining room table will be a superb orchid, and the dinner conversation will never touch on business.

Thinking about the Wolfe stories reminds me of something Christopher Marley wrote: "When you give someone a book, you don't give him just paper, ink, and glue. You give him the possibility of a whole new life." We live that exciting, exotic life through Fritz, and Lily, and Saul, and Inspector Cramer, and Archie, and all of the others, but especially we live it through the mysterious, the confounding, and the utterly delightful Nero Wolfe. He is, as Wolfe himself would say, a magnificent concoction.