

REX STOUT'S NERO WOLFE NOVELLAS

by Robert J. Schneider

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Rex Stout wrote thirty-three novel-length Nero Wolfe/Archie Goodwin adventures beginning with 1934's *Fer-de-Lance* and ending with 1975's *A Family Affair*. Perhaps not as widely known, he also wrote thirty-eight (or forty-one, depending on how you choose to classify re-writes/re-adaptions) novella-length cases featuring his famous detecting duo. The novella string began with "Bitter End" in 1940 and concluded with "Blood Will Tell" and "Murder Is Corny" in late 1963/early 1964.

The novellas were geared to magazine publication where Stout serendipitously discovered a lucrative market. *The American Magazine*, which had published seven of Stout's first nine Wolfe novel-length adventures to that date, offered to double his usual fee if he would convert his recently completed Tecumseh Fox novel into a Nero Wolfe story.

Stout, the reading public and various magazine publishers were so pleased with the result that Stout wrote forty more novella length adventures over the next twenty-three years. That Stout could dash off a Wolfe novella in days or weeks as opposed to months for a Wolfe novel certainly must have added to the charms of the shorter format for him. Stout was fortunate that a high-paying slick-paper magazine market lasted for so many years. By the early 1960's that market was beginning to dry up and, at about the same time, the quality of Stout's novella writing was falling into a tailspin. The few surviving slick-paper magazines still publishing mystery fiction at that time were apparently looking for something different than Stout was producing. Additionally, Stout's tendency to avoid revising and polishing his stories prior to initial publication did not serve him well in this changing marketplace. Of Stout's final eight novellas only three saw initial slick-paper magazine publication. Three others did not see initial magazine publication at all and two appeared in a prestigious (but non-slick and presumably lower paying) digest. Had Stout not heavily revised "Counterfeit for Murder", each one of his final eight novellas would have to be considered weak and/or disappointing efforts.

In addition to *The American Magazine*, Wolfe novellas appeared either originally or as reprints in *Argosy*, *Look*, *Colliers*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Nero Wolfe Magazine*. Every few years Stout's publishers would collect the most recent novellas and release them in hardcover, mostly as trios, twice as duos and once as a quartet.

As opposed to the typical 60,000 plus word count for the Wolfe novels, the novellas usually range between 20,000 and 25,000 words.

The shortest being "Murder Is No Joke" and "Help Wanted, Male" (magazine version), each at about 15,000 to 16,000 words and the longest, "Black Orchids", near 34,000 words. More study has to be applied to the magazine versions of these stories. Besides "Help Wanted, Male", I suspect that many if not all the novellas were abridged to one extent or another for magazine publication. I wonder if Stout initially wrote a short version for quick magazine publication and then further fleshed out the story for later book publication or if he self-abridged the original longer versions before he sent them off the magazine editors.

Some critics and fans consider the novellas inferior to the novels. I disagree. The Wolfe novellas are, for the most part, tasty tidbits that can be gobbled up much faster and digested more readily than the novels. The best aspect of reading the novellas is that if you come across a clunker (yes, there are several) you have not invested a lot of time in a disappointing read. It seems to me that some of the most ardent detractors of the Wolfe novellas are, in fact, Stout's greatest fans. Fans in the sense of admirers of Stout in general and the Wolfe novels in particular. Because they prefer the longer length on principal, believing that the novels allow for more character development and plot intricacy, the novellas are often classified as inferior right out of the box. It is as if they believe that the worst of the novels is better than "Die Like a Dog", which is the best of the Wolfe novellas. This assumption is caused not by poor literary judgment but by

an incorrect approach to the whole matter. The Nero Wolfe novellas should not really be compared to the Nero Wolfe novels. They should be more properly be compared to novellas written by Stout's contemporaries such as Ellery Queen ("The Lamp of God", "The Death of Don Juan", "The Wrightsvill Heirs", "The Case Against Carroll") or John Dickson Carr ("All In a Maze", "The Third Bullet") or Agatha Christie ("The Mystery of the Spanish Chest"). a more recent benchmark for comparison might be Marcia Muller's novella, "The Broken Men".

The novella is a unique literary form that has its own inherent merits when properly executed. It allows for more development of plot and character than the short story length but in a more abbreviated and concise format compared to the novel length. In fact, many detective novels written over the past one hundred years would have been better served in the novella length. The economics of the publishing industry and perhaps the skill level of many mystery writers have made the novella an orphan literary form, much to the disadvantage of readers.

The plotting in the Wolfe novellas is as good as can be found in the novels. Some Stout critics believe that this is not saying much; the notion being that Stout was a weak plotter. Here again I disagree. At least half the novella plots are strong (and fairly clued) and a dozen or so are among the best of all mid-twentieth century American detective fiction.

Stout has often been labeled a formulaic writer. He was. Just as most of the novels follow a formula so do most of the novellas. Here is the formula:

Create a cast of vaguely suspicious (usually financially well off) characters. Kill one of them. Give the remaining characters motive and opportunity to commit the murder but provide none with an alibi. Show Archie cracking wise and Inspector Cramer getting ticked-off. Throw in a paragraph about the orchids and Fritz's cooking. Bring in Saul Panzer and company if the investigation stalls. Have Wolfe concoct an elaborate stratagem to expose the killer. Gather everyone in the brownstone for the dramatic solution to the case.

What elevates Stout from the typical formulaic hack genre writer is his injection of breezy narration, snappy dialogue, real detection, clever deductions, action, humor, suspense and good storytelling into his formula. Well, maybe not all the time but often enough for his books to remain in print and for people to still be reading and discussing them.

The following is a chronologically arranged critical survey of Stout's Nero Wolfe novellas offering a brief synopsis of each plot, a brief analysis of each story and my numerical ranking for each story. Although the rankings surely reflect my own personal preferences, I attempted to judge the stories primarily on plot strength and fairness of clueing. Also included are any alternate titles that Stout or others may have used over the years so identified with the symbol "AKA". I also provide first magazine and book appearance information. Magazine dates refer to either the issue that contained the entire story or the first issue of the story's serialization.

The first novella length adventure featuring Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin appeared in the November 1940 issue of *The American Magazine* and was titled "**Bitter End**" (6). That magazine had enticed Stout to re-write and condense his recently completed Tecumseh Fox novel, *Bad For Business*. Stout, in essence, replaced detectives Fox and Dol Bonner with Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. "Bitter End" is a dark, complex, fairly-clued story revolving around the complicated family, business and personal relationships of the owners and employees of Tingley's Tidbits---a specialty food manufacturer that Wolfe finds himself compelled to investigate because of his personal experience with the adulteration of one of their products.

The first book publication of "Bitter End" was in the hard to find *Corsage: A Bouquet of Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe* in 1977. It is more easily found in *Death Times Three*, published in 1985.

"**Black Orchids**" (3) was published in the August 1941 issue of *The American Magazine*. It showcases all of Stout's strengths: snappy dialogue, witty narration, clever misdirection, insightful deductions and effective humor. Stout had not quite yet gotten the novella form down pat, so the story feels more like a stunted novel than a true novella, but as my ranking shows, it is a high quality story featuring Wolfe's visit to a prestigious flower show, the murder of a seed company employee and a Gladys Mitchell-like dramatic stratagem exposing the murderer.

AKA "Death Wears an Orchid" and "The Case of the Black Orchids". First book publication was in 1942's *Black Orchids*.

"**Cordially Invited to Meet Death**" (7) first appeared in the April 1942 issue of *The American Magazine*. It is a

leisurely-paced tale evocative of an Agatha Christie-like country house whodunit. Archie is dispatched to a society party planner's estate to investigate the source of some nasty poison-pen letters. The party planner dies and suspicion falls upon the remaining members of her household consisting of suspicious servants, sponging relatives, jealous employees and scheming heirs. Clues are fairly placed and red herrings are plentiful. Wolfe solves the complex puzzle with deductive reasoning. Stout still did not quite have his novella formula down pat, yet. He will soon get future story word counts below 30,000 and keep them there for most of the rest of the series.

AKA "Invitation to Murder" which is not to be confused with the 1953 novella of that same title. First book publication was in *Black Orchids* in 1942.

The next three novellas have a WWII background beginning with "**Not Quite Dead Enough**" (18) debuting in the December 1942 issue of *TAM*. The plot is solid enough, revolving around the murder of one of Lily Rowan's (Archie's main, though not exclusive, squeeze throughout the series) acquaintances. Some of the interesting working class characters are pigeon breeders. Wolfe makes a brilliant deduction to solve the case. My only complaint with this tale is its length. Too much time is spent on the backstory of Wolfe and Archie's entrance into the war effort, which though of interest to diehard Stout fans, serves to unnecessarily pad out the word count for a typical mystery reader approaching the story today.

First book publication was in 1944's *Not Quite Dead Enough*.

"Booby Trap" (19) appeared in the August 1944 issue of *TAM*. WWII is raging. Major Godwin and private citizen Wolfe are both working for Army Intelligence (Archie for military pay, Wolfe for gratis). Industrial secrets entrusted to the government by the country's foremost manufacturers are being stolen for future profit. An investigation begins. A captain commits suicide. Or was it murder or just an accident? Another officer dies. Wolfe investigates, deduces, identifies the killer and administers his own brand of justice. This is a longish, slow-paced, fairly-clued effort with some nice misdirection but little humor. The military characters are cardboard-like except for a nicely drawn WAC. The explosive ending could have boomeranged on Wolfe and Archie had the murderer shown some ingenuity before his/her demise. First book publication was in 1944's *Not Quite Dead Enough*.

"Help Wanted, Male" (21) is set in 1944 and can be considered a sort of sequel to "Booby Trap". It appeared in the August 1945 issue of *TAM*. The war is still raging so Wolfe is without the services of his trusted Ops: Cather, Durkin, Panzer and Keems. Archie is present but aching for a transfer to the Pacific theater. The plot is set in motion by some of the events that occurred in the "Booby Trap" case. Wolfe's disinclination to take on a murder threat case eventually leads him to hire a double to protect his own life. Amusing situations follow. The story is fairly-clued but far-fetched. The murderer is sometimes bold and clever, other times hesitant and slow-witted. It is interesting to note that there are at least two versions of this story. I came across a 15,000 word short version in an anthology reprint. A longer version at about 25,000 words is found in the currently available Bantam paperback and I presume the Viking original hardcover of *Trouble in Triplicate*. The longer version's added paragraphs bring more humor, description and characterization to the story, considerably improving it. My rating is for the longer version. The shorter version's rating would be lower. I have not seen the original magazine version so I cannot say which is Stout's first version.

First book publication was in *Trouble in Triplicate* in 1949.

"Instead of Evidence" (23) appeared in the May 1946 issue of *TAM*. A married couple meets with Wolfe to discuss their fear that the husband's business partner seems intent on killing him in order to grab sole control of their novelty manufacturing company. A murder is committed. Saul Panzer does some top-notch investigating and Wolfe brings the killer to justice in a very gruesome manner. Here we have a strong John Dickson Carr-ish plot, numerous humorous incidents and a Maltese Falcon moment for Archie. A perceptive reader could possibly solve the mystery but it would help the fairness of the clueing if the results of Panzer's legwork were revealed to the reader at the same time Wolfe is informed. The murderer had to cram an awful lot of action into a 24 hour timeframe and needed some good luck to pull off everything.

AKA "Murder on Tuesday". First published in book form in 1949 in *Trouble in Triplicate*.

It's 1945. The war, for all practical purposes, is over. New York City and Nero Wolfe are experiencing a meat shortage. In "**Before I Die**" (8), which was first published in *TAM* in April 1947, Wolfe's longing for a reliable meat supply causes him to take on Dazy Perrit (a dangerous gangster who just happens to control the black market in meat) as a client. Perrit asks Wolfe to perform various services related to his complex family problems. Archie is nearly killed,

twice. The body count really piles up in this adventure. Wolfe eventually makes some deductions and exposes a killer. This story is fast-paced, funny and violent; like a combination of Runyon's "Guys and Dolls" and Hammett's *Red Harvest*. The underworld characters are chillingly charming. Stout masterfully creates an atmosphere of tense fear punctuated by intervals of uproarious humor, all the while playing fair with the reader. First hardcover publication was in 1949's *Trouble in Triplicate*.

"Man Alive" (25) debuted in *TAM*'s December 1947 issue. Wolfe is hired by a young woman, who is just about to inherit half ownership of a successful Seventh Avenue fashion house, to find out how and why her presumed dead uncle has returned to the land of the living. The road to her inheritance was littered by accidents, suicides and disappearances. Wolfe untangles the web of death and deception surrounding the fashion house. This is a nicely paced story with compelling characters, snappy dialogue and an interesting plot until Stout carelessly gives most of the suspects' unbreakable alibis in the final quarter of the story thereby deflating the ending and undermining a potentially top-notch effort. "Man Alive" is Stout's homage to Christie's *And Then There Were None*, though it is not nearly a masterpiece like the original.

First book publication was in *Three Doors to Death* in 1950.

"Bullet for One" (20) first appeared in the July 1948 issue of *TAM*. A successful industrial designer is shot to death while riding his horse in Central Park early one morning. Suspects include his cold-hearted daughter, his slick salesman who is also the daughter's boyfriend, his hardworking ex-secretary, the ex-secretary's boyfriend who happens to work at the local stable, a disgruntled business partner and a jealous competitor. Stout uses misdirection to fool the reader into thinking that the solution is more complicated than it really is. Clues are presented fairly. Plot is perhaps too artificial. An entertaining story that should appeal to Dick Francis fans.

First book publication was in *Curtains for Three*, 1951.

"Omit Flowers" (16) first appeared in the November 1948 issue of *TAM*. Wolfe's closest friend, restaurateur Marko Vukcic, prevails upon our heroes to free his old chef friend from a murder charge. Wolfe and Archie are drawn into the milieu of the Landy family; heirs to the Ambrosia fast food restaurant chain. The cast of characters includes a bossy widow, greedy adult children, an opportunistic lover and a jilted girlfriend. Wolfe relies upon interrogation and deduction to sort out the truth from numerous family lies and secrets in order to catch the killer. Archie not only performs his fabulous legwork but also makes a startling deduction of his own which helps solve the case. This is a strongly plotted, slowly-paced, somber tale that plays fair with the reader.

First book publication was in *Three Doors to Death*, 1950.

As **"Door to Death"(31)** opens in the June 1949 issue of *TAM*, Theodore Horstman has temporarily abandoned Wolfe's orchids to care for his sick mother. Wolfe thinks he has found a replacement working on the estate of a wealthy Westchester family. Wolfe's desperate trip north to capture his man is spoiled by the discovery of the body of the orchidman's fiancée. The exasperated Wolfe must deal with suspicious police, uncooperative suspects and unfamiliar terrain before he solves the murder of the trampy, conniving fiancée with the aid of a hackneyed stratagem. This is not a detective story. It is a humorous adventure tale starring Wolfe, Archie and in a supporting role, Saul Panzer. This is a hilarious but flawed story with plenty of pace and action but virtually no detection.

First book publication was in *Three Doors to Death*, 1950.

In **"The Gun With Wings"(11)**, first published in the December 1949 issue of *TAM*, Wolfe is asked to take on a near impossible case: discover who killed, four months earlier, a moderately successful opera singer who the police assume committed suicide. This is an undeservedly neglected, low-keyed, fairly-clued, well-written story that could have been expanded into a full-length novel in a less talented (or more patient) author's hands. When *EQMM* reprinted this story in the early 1960's, baseball references to Jackie Robinson were changed to Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris. One wonders if Stout changed the names on his own to "update" the story of if Fred Dannay suggested the changes.

First book publication was in *Curtains for Three*, 1951.

"Disguise for Murder" (12), debuted in the September 1950 issue of *TAM*. Two hundred members of the Manhattan Flower Club descend on the brownstone to view Wolfe's orchids. Wolfe hadn't realized that half the members would be women when he allowed a newspaper garden columnist to talk him into hosting the event. By chance, a female

confidence woman attending the event recognizes the person who killed her friend several months earlier. She couldn't go to the police than because of her own criminal activities. Just as she is about to seek Wolfe's help she is strangled in Wolfe's office, practically under Archie's nose. Wolfe makes a brilliant deduction, Archie is almost killed and the case is solved, sans fee. Stout plays fair with the clues; in fact, the key clue is ingeniously planted in plain sight, however modern readers might miss it if they forget that the story takes place in 1950. This is a gripping and intense story with only small bits of humor to break the tension. Had Stout eliminated a long melodramatic action sequence, cut down on some lengthy interviews and clarified some of the characters behaviors then "Disguise for Murder" would have been a near perfect short story and a favorite of anthologists.

AKA "The Twisted Scarf", "The Affair of the Twisted Scarf". Published in *Curtains for Three*, 1951.

"The Cop Killer" (9), *TAM* February 1951, features a cast of vaguely suspicious working class characters, rather than Stout's typical middle/upper class characters. It opens with a plea by an illegal-immigrant couple for Archie's help in dealing with a police investigation going on at the barbershop where they work. Both Archie and Wolfe are acquainted with the couple because they patronize the shop in question. Wolfe solves multiple mysteries with deductive reasoning. This is a fairly-clued, strongly plotted, realistic story with some well-drawn characters. The description of a 1950's era Midtown Manhattan barbershop rings true. The boys make use of Archie's reputation for "clowning" to avoid potential legal trouble. Stout would re-visit the problems of illegal immigrants in *The Golden Spiders*, a novel-length adventure published two years later.

AKA "Cop Killer". Published in *Triple Jeopardy*, 1952.

After ending the 1940's and beginning the 1950's with some strong stories, Stout then produced two of his weaker efforts, the first being **"The Squirt and the Monkey" (38)**, *TAM* August 1951. Wolfe sends a reluctant Archie on a seemingly simple case: help a client find out which member of his household entourage swiped the unlicensed handgun he kept in his desk. The client is the creator of a highly successful syndicated action comic strip called "Dazzle Dan". Most of the characters are surly or self-indulgent or both, and none are likable. A murder occurs that Wolfe eventually solves by reviewing three years' worth of "Dazzle Dan" comic strip adventures. Uninspired writing and too many loose ends turned a potentially interesting storyline into a dull read.

AKA "See No Evil", "The Dazzle Dan Murder Case". First book publication was in *Triple Jeopardy*, 1952.

Stout's other weak effort of the early 1950's was **"Home to Roost" (34)** published in *TAM* in January 1952. Wolfe is hired by a married couple to investigate the poisoning death of the husband's nephew. The young man was apparently a Communist although he had professed to be a secret FBI agent to at least one person. Wolfe expends little effort at deducing who may have put a poisoned vitamin capsule into the young man's pillbox. Instead, he devises a stratagem in order to expose the killer. The plot is weak. The typically vaguely suspicious characters are, for the most part, uninteresting. The killer acted illogically in planning the murder and only by mere chance avoided initial suspicion. Only Fifi Goheen, a former debutante, adds some spark to a dull story. What saves the story from an even lower ranking is the fact that it happens to be fairly-clued.

AKA "Nero Wolfe and the Communist Killer", "Nero Wolfe Devises a Stratagem". First book publication was in *Triple Jeopardy*, 1952.

From late summer of 1952 through late summer of 1956 Stout had his last burst of semi-sustained high quality novella writing. During this period magazine readers had the opportunity to experience four of his best stories, two fairly good stories and only had to suffer three weak efforts. Stout began his hot streak with **"This Won't Kill You" (2)** in the September 1952 issue of *TAM*. Wolfe and Archie attend Game 7 of the World Series at the Polo Grounds. Archie's beloved New York Giants are unaccountably committing error after error and trail the Boston Red Sox 11-1. The Giants' owner summons Wolfe to the clubhouse and hires him to investigate the drugging of four of his key players. A missing second baseman and a murder further complicate the situation. This story is chock full of humor, action, detection and great dialogue. The only flaw in this near perfect story is an unnecessary melodramatic action sequence (similar to what happened in "Disguise for Murder" two years earlier) that takes Archie away from the ballpark. Once he re-joins Wolfe at the Polo Grounds the case is satisfactorily concluded. First-rate humor, top-notch storytelling, fair cluing and solid detection make this one of Stout's best-efforts.

AKA "This Will Kill You", "The World Series Murder". First book publication was in *Three Men Out*, 1954.

"Invitation to Murder" (17), published in the August 1953 issue of *TAM*, opens with a pathetic, aging playboy hiring

Wolfe to investigate suspicious activities in his deceased father's East Side mansion. He had been disinherited because of his irresponsible and spendthrift behavior. He suspects that one member of the household may have poisoned his sister who had been secretly supplying him with an unofficial allowance. The household consists of various servants, a sponging nephew, a nurse, a secretary, housekeeper and his wheelchair bound brother-in-law who now controls the purse strings. The nurse, secretary and housekeeper are each competing for the affections of the grieving brother-in-law. Wolfe himself best describes the household situation as "sordid familial flimflam". Nevertheless, Archie goes to investigate. A murder occurs. Archie manages to trick Wolfe into joining him at the murder scene. Wolfe solves the murder and, for good measure, also solves the mystery of the sister's death. Wolfe uses deductive reasoning, keen observation and trickery to expose the murderer. The clues are fairly placed. The characters are well-drawn but the pace is slow.

AKA "Will to Murder" (which happens to be a better title). First book publication was in *Three Men Out*, 1954.

"The Zero Clue" (5) first saw print in the December 1953 issue of *TAM*. A mathematics/probability expert attempts to consult Wolfe regarding his suspicion that one of his own clients may have committed a serious crime. Wolfe considers him a charlatan and his methods highly suspect, so he refuses to see him. The mathematician is subsequently murdered. Cramer thinks he has enough evidence to implicate our heroes. Wolfe suggests that Cramer has misinterpreted a dying message clue and offers to solve the murder himself. This is the most atypical of all of Stout's Nero Wolfe novellas. The reader enters a surrealistic world where mathematics, probabilities, numbers and coincidences reign supreme. All the clues are present (although the key clue is highly esoteric) and a perceptive reader might be able to solve the puzzle before Wolfe does. On his website, Michael Grost maintains that this story was ahead of its time, near science fiction. It almost seems to me that Stout had met Isaac Asimov at a tavern and, after a night of food and drink, they both decided to collaborate on a story--and "The Zero Clue" was the result. Strong plot, humor, detection, suspense, diagrams and an Ellery Queen-like dying message clue: what more can a mystery reader ask of a story?

AKA "Scared to Death". First book publication was in *Three Men Out*, 1954.

"When a Man Murders" (26) first appeared in the May 1954 issue of *TAM*. In it we meet a newly married couple seeking Wolfe's help in unraveling their complicated marital and inheritance problems. It seems that the woman's first husband was not killed in battle in Korea after all. He was held as a POW and is now returning home more than two years after his reported death. A murder occurs. Wolfe believes that Cramer has arrested the wrong person. Archie and Saul Panzer pursue two different angles. Archie gets punched in the jaw. Saul gets the goods. Wolfe clears the suspect and fingers the real killer in a typical Stoutian effort featuring scheming heirs, manipulative and mendacious women, disagreeable playboys and complex family situations. The "return from the dead" theme has been used many times before, and often to better effect, by other writers. Stout himself even tried it seven years earlier in the equally mediocre "Man Alive". Most readers will spot the killer and motive early on. At one point it seems as if Stout will put an unexpected twist in the plot but it turns out he doesn't and the story ends disappointingly.

First book publication was in *Three Witnesses*, 1956.

The best of all the Nero Wolfe novellas appeared in the December 1954 issue of *TAM*. In **"Die Like a Dog" (1)** a visitor to a small Greenwich Village apartment house is murdered. Each of the primary suspects occupies one of the four floors in the building. A raincoat and a dog are the key clues. Wolfe has no client in the story but, along with Archie and Fritz, he forms a strong attachment to an orphaned Labrador Retriever and therefore feels obligated to bring the murderer of the dog's owner to justice. The plot, clues and characters are reminiscent of an Ellery Queen type story. Wolfe performs some of his best deductive magic in this complex and highly satisfying adventure which features a gradual unveiling of relationships. The only mystery that remains unsolved from this gem of a story is why Stout never mentions the dog again after making it plain that Wolfe intended to adopt the pooch at the story's end.

AKA "A Dog in the Daytime", "The Body in the Hall". First book publication was in *Three Witnesses*, 1956.

Stout paid homage to Earle Stanley Gardner when he wrote **"The Next Witness" (24)** which first appeared in *TAM*'s May 1955 issue. While waiting to testify during a murder trial Wolfe hears some testimony that causes him to suspect a possible miscarriage of justice. He abruptly leaves the courtroom with Archie in tow and remains AWOL for almost 24 hours while tracking down clues to support his theory. Wolfe returns to the courtroom the next morning and pulls off a neat Perry Mason legal gambit, which leads to the downfall of the guilty party. A telephone answering service business was an interesting backdrop for the story and certainly offered potential for criminal activity although I am not sure that Stout exploited this setting to its fullest potential. The withholding of the content of an important conversation until late in

the story compromises the "fairness" factor. On the other hand, this is a nicely paced story populated with interesting characters. One especially well-written scene describes Wolfe's stealthy visit to Saul Panzer's apartment. An entertaining and enjoyable read but not a first-rate puzzle plot.

AKA "The Last Witness". First book publication was in *Three Witnesses*, 1956.

In "**Immune to Murder**" (32), appearing in the November 1955 issue of *TAM*, Wolfe allows himself to be talked into traveling 300 miles north to an Adirondack fishing lodge in order to prepare fresh caught brook trout for a foreign diplomat. Archie bumps into a corpse while fishing and Wolfe becomes extra cranky because the ensuing murder investigation delays his return home to the brownstone. Wolfe proceeds to solve the murder almost out of spiteful revenge because the killer has unintentionally insulted him. None of the characters were particularly likable or interesting. Once the key clue is finally revealed most readers will probably spot the killer, especially since the title of the story is itself a clue.

First book publication was in *Three for the Chair*, 1957.

"A Window for Death" (15), May 1956 *TAM*, features a Ross MacDonald-like plot. Twenty years before the story opens, a successful Hudson Valley real estate investor died under mysterious circumstances. Bitter accusations and an inconclusive murder trail divided the remaining family members and caused one of the deceased patriarch's sons to go off and seek his own fortune. That son has now returned loaded with Canadian mining riches and seeks to reconcile with the remnants of his family. The reconciliation goes badly and he dies in a manner similar to his father. His relatives suspect his mining venture partner. The partner suspects the relatives. A family doctor and his nurse also fall under suspicion. Wolfe is called in to sort things out and he does so with clear thinking and solid deductions. The characters are both interesting and believable, The key clue pre-supposes some esoteric knowledge about the way particular food product was packaged in certain New York restaurants of the era but a perceptive reader can still solve the puzzle without this knowledge. This could have been a top-notch story had Stout rearranged some dialogue, clarified some actions and avoided some coincidences but he didn't, so this remains a slightly flawed yet highly entertaining tale.

AKA "Nero Wolfe and the Vanishing Clue" First book publication was in *Three for the Chair*, 1957.

"Too Many Detectives" (4) appeared in the 09/14/1956 issue of *Colliers Magazine*. Wolfe and Archie are summoned to Albany, along with other private detectives, by high-ranking New York politicians to be questioned as part of a wide-ranging wiretapping investigation. Our heroes mingle with several of their competitors most notably another Stout detective duo: Dol Bonner and her assistant, Sally Colt. Before long, a potential witness is murdered in a room down the hall from where the detectives are assembled. All the PI's become suspects but only Wolfe and Archie are arrested. While out on bail, Wolfe mobilizes his fellow detectives and, with their help, unmask the killer. The plot is complex, fairly clued and reminiscent of an Ellery Queen-type story.

First book publication was in *Three for the Chair*, 1957.

Stout's mid-1950's burst of quality novellas begins to peter out with the publication of "Christmas Party"(28) in the 01/04/1957 issue of *Colliers Magazine*. The story opens with a wonderfully described domestic spat between Wolfe and Archie. The McGuffin from that point onward is a questionable marriage license. Archie attends an office party at a small home decor company. While Santa Claus is tending bar the head of the company drinks a poisoned beverage, Due to his own unbelievably uncharacteristic behavior, Wolfe is forced to solve the murder without having a paying client. Wolfe flushes the murderer out by way of a stratagem. Much of the entertainment in this story comes from the insults exchanged and catfights engaged in by three female party attendees. At slight yet amusing effort with little deduction/detection exhibited.

AKA "The Christmas Party Murder". First book publication was in *And Four to Go*, 1958.

"Easter Parade" (39) was published in *Look Magazine's* 04/16/1957 issue accompanied by several color photos that readers were supposed to examine for clues to the solution of the mystery. Wolfe's lust for a unique orchid variety results in Archie hiring a street criminal to steal a corsage from the wife of a rival breeder on Easter Sunday. The woman is then promptly murdered. Cramer suspects that Wolfe and Archie are involved but can't pin anything on them. The orchid

breeder, ironically, hires Wolfe to investigate his wife's murder. Wolfe exposes the killer not by deductive reasoning but through a questionable observation. The story is farcical without being humorous. All the bad traits that Stout's detractors accuse him of are on display here: weak plot, nil characterization and little detection.

AKA "The Easter Parade Murder". Included in *And Four to Go*, 1958.

"Fourth of July Picnic" (40) continued Stout's novella related downward quality spiral of the late 1950's. It was first published in the 07/09/1957 issue of *Look*, completing a holiday themed threesome of magazine stories for that year. Wolfe is inveigled into giving an Independence Day speech to restaurant workers gathered in a Long Island park. A labor union official is murdered just before the start of Wolfe's speech. Wolfe and Archie become suspects. Wolfe resorts to a lame trick to trap the killer. This story has little humor, no detection, no deductions, weak characterization and a murderer who is arbitrarily plucked from a group of suspects. The reader cannot solve the puzzle with the clues provided, The motive for the murder is never fully explained.

AKA "The Labor Union Murder", "Fourth of July Murder". Included in *And Four to Go*, 1958.

"Murder is No Joke" (13) apparently did not see magazine publication prior to its hardcover appearance in early 1958 in *And Fourth Go*. According to J. Kenneth Van Dover in his wonderful little book, *At Wolfe's Door*, "Frame Up for Murder" (also 13) is an expansion of "Murder is No Joke" undertaken at the request of *The Saturday Evening Post*, which published the novella under the new title in June-July 1958.

The sister of a prominent dress designer tries to induce Wolfe to help her brother rid himself of a mysterious woman who seems to have undue influence over his personal and business affairs. Wolfe and Archie soon become entangled in a murder investigation in which all the suspects have airtight alibis. Wolfe thinks his way through a thicket of red herrings, clues, lies and motives in order to finally unmask the killer. No tricks, stratagems or charades here---just good deductive reasoning. This is a solid, fairly-clued story despite improbable behavior by three characters. The transformation of "Murder is No Joke" into "Frame Up for Murder" mainly involves the dress designer's sister, Flora Gallant, whose character was both expanded and altered by Stout.

Some fans prefer the longer version, which was reprinted in *Death Times Three* in 1985. I favor the shorter version and apparently so did Jacques Barzun who included "Murder is No Joke" in his 1961 anthology *The Delights of Detection*. This story signaled the end of Stout's late Fifties dip in quality and began a brief renaissance lasting through 1961.

"Method Three for Murder" (14) first appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* issue of 01/30/1960. Within the first few pages Archie has quit Wolfe's employ, found himself a paying client and draws Wolfe into the case as a consultant. The plot revolves around the numerous intrigues and betrayals among a group of friends and acquaintances. This solid, well-plotted effort is somewhat evocative of a Freeman Wills Croft type story in which detailed knowledge of the movements of the various suspects during a certain timeframe is key to the solution. The characters were believable though some of their behaviors weren't. Wolfe does some good thinking, deducing and detecting. The motive for the murder was a bit of a stretch. Sgt. Purley Stebbins, usually present in stories to do Inspector Cramer's heavy lifting and to serve as an antagonistic foil to Archie's verbal barbs, actually shows some initiative while attending Wolfe's climactic summation in the brownstone. FYI, methods one, two and three are not ways to commit murder but instead are strategies for extracting oneself from a murder investigation.

First book publication was in *Three at Wolfe's Door*, 1960.

"Poison al la Carte" (22) did not see magazine publication before its first book appearance. Wolfe and Archie are invited to attend a special dinner at a gourmet club. Wolfe's chef/housekeeper, Fritz, has been selected to prepare all the courses. Twelve attractive, out of work actresses have been hired to serve the food while dressed in purple ankle-length stolas. One of the club members (a lecherous Broadway angel) is poisoned and dies. Wolfe makes some good deductions based on Permutation Theory to narrow twenty suspects down to five of the actresses. He is stymied at that point and has to rely upon a stratagem to expose the killer. This is a misogynistic story featuring snappy dialogue, breezy narration and interesting characters. The killer was lucky in the beginning and foolish at the end. This would have received a higher rating had the clueing been fairer and the solution determinable through deductive reasoning.

First book publication was in *Three at Wolfe's Door*, 1960.

"The Rodeo Murder" (29) did not see magazine publication prior to its first book appearance. Lily Rowan's penthouse apartment terrace becomes a murder scene when a lecherous rodeo sponsor is killed during a silly roping contest. Ms.

Rowan hires Wolfe to unmask the killer. The cast of characters consists mostly of cowboys and cowgirls. All the suspects seem to lying about one thing or another. The key clue is available to the perceptive reader. I suppose Stout wanted to contrast the mostly straight-arrow Western cow-hand/rodeo performers with the typical sneaky, rude, self-absorbed New York characters who usually populate his books. Stout does create some good misdirection by tricking the reader into favoring one type of motive while having Wolfe pull another motive almost out of thin air, which perhaps plays unfairly with the reader. Quite frankly, this is a dull story.

AKA "The Penthouse Murder". First book publication was in *Three at Wolfe's Door*, 1960.

The final top-notch novella that Stout wrote appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 01/14/1961 under the title of **"Counterfeit for Murder" (10)**. Hattie Annis hires Wolfe to, among other things, find out which of her tenants might be a counterfeiter. She owns a rundown boarding house for aspiring and/or down-on-their-luck show biz types. A murder occurs shortly after our heroes enter the case. Miss Annis turns out to be quite a handful for Wolfe, Archie, the police and the criminal. Stout uses some clever misdirection to confuse the reader and he does play fair, to a certain extent, with the clues in that a perceptive reader might be able to name the murderer prior to Wolfe's revelation. The plot itself is slightly above average for Stout but the Hattie Annis character elevates the story to a top ten rating. She calls Archie---Buster; she calls Wolfe---Falstaff; she treats the police with contempt and gets away with it all. She has a heart of gold, a deep sense of honor and is simultaneously charming and exasperating. According to the research of Stout's biographer, John McAleer, the first version of "Counterfeit for Murder" was found wanting by the author. Stout re-worked the plot by elevating the Hattie Annis character from victim to its proper prominence and downgrading the Tammy Baxter character from Archie's love interest to that of victim. McAleer rescued the inferior first version from obscurity and published it for the first time in *Death Times Three* in 1985, ten years after Stout's death, under the title of **"Assault on a Brownstown" (37)**. Stout was correct in re-writing the first version because its plot was rather weak and the storytelling was dull compared to the second version.

AKA "The Counterfeiter's Knife", "Counterfeit Murder". First book publication was in *Homicide Trinity*, 1962.

In **"Death of a Demon" (27)**, first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* on 06/10/1961, a naive young woman hires Wolfe for half an hour to listen to her marital difficulties and to note her pronouncement regarding a certain gun. Her husband is soon discovered shot to death, but by which gun? This story reminds me of two different Sherlock Holmes tales: "The Empty House" and "Charles Augustus Milverton" because Archie has some adventures in a supposedly empty house and a blackmail scheme drives the plot in Stout's story. This is a fast-paced, entertaining piece of writing with a good puzzle plot, interesting and believable characters, plenty of action and a good deal of suspense. The clues were nicely laid out until near the end when Stout has Wolfe name the killer before the final (and most important) clue is revealed. Stout relies, even more than usual, on coincidence in this story. Two examples: Wolfe's client happens to make a big life decision on the same day the killer chooses to act. The blackmailer and one of the victims both happen to possess the same type of gun. Despite all the coincidences this story would have rated higher had Stout played fair with the reader.

AKA "The Gun Puzzle". First book publication was in *Homicide Trinity*, 1963.

"Kill Now--Pay Later" (36) was published in the 12/09/1961 (or possibly the 11/09/1961) edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Wolfe and Archie's favorite bootblack becomes involved with a suicide, or was it murder? The bootblack ignores Wolfe's advice and pays a steep price. His daughter soon seeks Wolfe's advice and, showing more sense than her father did, follows it. The plot revolves around the actions of a group of employees of a Manhattan bobbin (of all things) manufacturer. Saul Panzer discovers the key clue but Stout withholds it from the reader until after Wolfe names the killer. Stout deserves all the criticisms his most vocal disparagers usually heap on him for this effort. The only defense I can offer is that Stout does provide a slim half-clue at the beginning of the story which perhaps he thought would give readers a chance to solve the puzzle. He was wrong. Two interesting, self-absorbed female characters and a bit of humor save this story from an even lower rating.

First book publication was in *Homicide Trinity*, 1962.

"Eeny Meeny Murder Mo" (33) saw first publication in the March 1962 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Wolfe removes his necktie (because it has a food stain on it), leaves it unattended on his desk and someone proceeds to strangle a potential client right there in the brownstone. The plot revolves around treachery and betrayal at a Manhattan law firm during a big divorce case. The story had possibilities but Stout did not do much with it. He could

have gone in several more promising directions than the course he wound up taking. Some character's behaviors are never explained. Other character's behaviors, although explained, still didn't make much sense. It just did not seem that the murderer had a good enough reason for doing the deed. Archie does perform some detecting and Wolfe does make some good deductions. Misdirection attempts were not overly successful. Another instance of Stout's careless writing sinking a potentially good storyline.

First book publication was in *Homicide Trinity*, 1962.

"Blood Will Tell" (30) appeared in the 12/1963 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. The story opens with Archie receiving a blood-stained silk necktie along with a cryptic note in the mail. Then he receives a cryptic phone call. He investigates and eventually stumbles across a body in the house of a wealthy dilettante (who is a self-described musical genius). The victim's spouse then winds up hiring Wolfe. Once again, we meet a typical Stoutian cast of vaguely suspicious characters who share complicated relationships and scandalous love lives. Although Stout tries his hand at a bit of forensics he eventually has Wolfe unravel the puzzle by spotting a simple lie told by the murderer. The logic he uses to spot the lie seems plausible upon initial reading but really doesn't hold up once you think it through. Wolfe devises a clever stratagem to acquire a piece of evidence, which he then uses to trick the murderer into self-exposure during the climactic scene at the brownstone. The real mystery here is why did a supposedly smart killer choose a first-rate detective like Archie Goodwin to serve as a dupe in a murder scheme when a second-rate detective would be more suitable. This is an entertaining story because of the interesting character relationships but ultimately an unsatisfying story because the plot contains too many holes. "Blood Will Tell" along with the next entry, "Murder Is Corny" would be the final Wolfe/Goodwin novellas that Stout would write.

First book appearance was in *Trio for Blunt Instruments*, 1964.

"Murder Is Corny" (35) did not appear in a magazine prior to its book publication. A woman's careless (or was it calculated) lie makes Archie the prime suspect in a murder investigation. Archie and Wolfe proceed to grill the woman and her admirers in order to clear Archie. Had Stout put more effort into the story maybe he could have saved it. For example, he could have constructed a better clue out of the quality of the corn that was to be delivered to the brownstone but after making a half-hearted effort he just dropped that line. Plot is weak, clues and deductions are not first-rate, characters are even more cardboard-like than usual. Stout provides one slim clue early in the story and then essentially phones this one in. Magazine editors showed good judgment in not buying this story.

AKA "The Sweet Corn Murder". First book publication was in *Trio for Blunt Instruments*, 1964.

Some of this material has appeared, in a different form, on GAdetection: "The Golden Age of Detective Fiction" discussion group website, (groups.Yahoo.com/group/Gadetection?) and its sister wiki site. In addition to the GAD website, the following were helpful in allowing me to complete this article:

- "The Thrilling Detective" website: www.thrillingdetective.com
- The Wolfepack website: www.nerowolfe.org
- The monthly Wolfepack book discussion meetings.
- Michael E. Grost's treasure trove of analysis website: "Guide to Classic Mystery and Detective Fiction": mikegrost.com/classics.htm
- *Rex Stout, an Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography*
Guy M. Townsend, John J. McAleer, Judson C. Sapp and Arriean Schemer
- *At Wolfe's Door*
J. Kenneth Van Dover
Which is a wonderful little reference book mostly concerned with Stout's mystery stories. My only quibble is Van Dover's lack of specific literary criticism of each story. In other words, you get a general sense of what he regards as the best and worst of Stout's work but he does not give a clear ranking/rating analysis of the stories. That small shortcoming is what spurred me on to create the above work.

This article first appeared on <http://www.mystericale.com>.

Nero Wolfe is a fictional detective created by the American mystery writer Rex Stout in 1934. Wolfe's assistant Archie Goodwin is portrayed as having recorded the cases of the detective genius in 33 novels and 39 short stories written by Stout between 1934 and 1975, with most of them set in New York City. *Fer-de-Lance* is the first Nero Wolfe detective novel written by Rex Stout, published in 1934 by Farrar & Rinehart. The novel appeared in abridged form in *The American Magazine* (November 1934) under Stout's name. Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and the Vanishing Clue I Nero Wolfe, behind his desk, sat glaring at the caller in the red leather chair. I was swiveled with my back to my desk, ready with my notebook, not glaring. Wolfe's glare was partly on general principles, but more because David R. Fyfe had not phoned for an appointment. You might think it didn't matter. There was the office, on the ground floor of the old brownstone house on West 35th Street. There was Wolfe in the chair he loved, sharpening his penknife on the old oilstone he kept in a drawer. There was I, Archie Goodwin, eager to earn my money. At first glance, Rex Stout's NERO WOLFE might seem out of place among the hard-bitten, world-weary, pavement-pounding P.I.s to which this site is usually devoted. Massively overweight, a cranky, agoraphobic and sedentary gourmet who virtually never leaves his Manhattan brownstone, Wolfe is in nearly every sense an armchair detective. And yet, Stout provided a real shot in the arm to the then-fledgling genre when he published his first Nero Wolfe novel in 1934. Wolfe and his investigator/bodyguard/secretary ARCHIE GOODWIN are just as much "eyes" as their predecessors Holmes and Watson. Related Series: Nero Wolfe novellas by Rex Stout, Tecumseh Fox, and Allan Lane. The Nero Wolfe book series by Rex Stout includes books *Fer-de-Lance*, *The League of Frightened Men*, *The Rubber Band*, and several more. See the complete Nero Wolfe series book list in order, box sets or omnibus editions, and companion titles.

1. *Fer-de-Lance*. Rex Stout. From \$3.99.
2. *The League of Frightened Men*. Rex Stout. From \$7.49.
3. *The Rubber Band*. Rex Stout. From \$3.99.
4. *The Red Box*. Rex Stout. From \$5.09.
5. *Too Many Cooks*. Rex Stout. From \$6.19.
6. *Some Buried Caesar*. Rex Stout. From \$3.99.
7. *O Rex Stout* wrote over 70 Nero Wolfe novels, novellas, and short stories over the course of an unusually prolific writing career that stretched from pre-World War II (*Fer-de-Lance*, 1934) to post-Vietnam (*A Family Affair*, 1975). Politically progressive, he was a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union who famously ignored a subpoena from Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee. Between 1934 and 1966, Stout consistently published two to four Nero Wolfe novels, novellas or short stories per year—a prodigious output for most writers working full-time. Only Stout didn't work full-time. He worked for 39 consecutive days each year, he is quoted in his *New York Times* obituary.