

Gene Wolfe's favorite Nero Wolfe novels

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 15 Aug 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2783>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Michael Andre-Driussi — 15 Aug 2001, 15:47

Here's another bit of trivia that I've stumbled upon in correspondence with Gene Wolfe. Maybe someone can use it as an inspiration to write about Gene Wolfe and genre mysteries?

Gene Wolfe ranks the following as the best (not in any order): TOO MANY WOMEN BEFORE MIDNIGHT THE LEAGUE OF FRIGHTENED MEN CHAMPAGNE FOR ONE THE FINAL DEDUCTION IF DEATH EVER SLEPT PLOT IT YOURSELF THE DOORBELL RANG

He ranks the worst as:
THE BLACK MOUNTAIN
FER-DE-LANCE

Some while ago I had the madcap notion of reading, for the first time, some Nero Wolfe novels (all by Rex Stout, I hasten to add: Nero is the hero), and (here's the madcap part) I was going to read them in order of publication.

Well! First one is FER-DE-LANCE, and no sir, I didn't think it was very good. After a month or two, I read the next one, THE LEAGUE OF FRIGHTENED MEN, and it was much better! I mentioned this to Gene Wolfe and he gave me his list.

(I read a book of Nero Wolfe novellas, but they are too abrupt for me.) Most recently I found and read BEFORE MIDNIGHT, and yep, that's a good one.

=mantis=

Sirius Fiction
Has Moved To
<http://www.siriusfiction.com/>

Alex David Groce — 15 Aug 2001, 19:22 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Hmmm.. Wolfe's taste in Nero Wolfe sounds a lot like mine. I don't think I've read BEFORE MIDNIGHT or TOO MANY WOMEN, though.

I started a writeup on Wolfe & genre mystery (commenting on _PANDORA: BY HOLLY HOLLANDER) and sent a draft to Jonathan, but got sidetracked rather heavily (and my thesis expanding from comments by the narrator in IGJ was demolished by RTW).

For what it's worth, though, here's the start of that draft (unedited and rather annoyingly gushing):

The Mysteries of Gene Wolfe

It is likely that every serious reader of Gene Wolfe has, at

some point, stopped and considered the disturbing question: "Am I being led down the garden path?" Wolfe's labyrinthine puzzles and especially his sometimes highly opaque short stories ("Parkroads" and "A Solar Labyrinth" are particularly suggestive but puzzling) can be frustrating. Still, a great number of us are willing to put forth serious effort to "solve" the numerous mysteries presented in most of Wolfe's fiction. What keeps Wolfe's readers digging for clues?

The extraordinary quality of the prose and the dazzling invention and insight certainly contribute; we are willing to work for the stories because the rewards are so large and because the quality of the writing makes the effort itself enjoyable. However, the general confidence that the mysteries presented are, indeed, solvable is a product, in part, of an underlying approach in Wolfe's work: Gene Wolfe uses the methods of the detective fiction genre to convince us that there is, indeed, a light at the end of the tunnel.

I. "Slaves of Silver" and "The Rubber Bend"

One of the most obvious indications that Wolfe is a fan of the genre is that he has produced a number of stories and one novel that are indisputably detective fiction. Wolfe's most explicitly science-fictional works often undermine, reconfigure, or reverse the standard tropes of the genre; his detective stories are generally more conventional, and less significant ("The Detective of Dreams" is a major exception).

The simplest of these works are the two pastiches found in *STOREYS FROM THE OLD HOTEL*, "Slaves of Silver" and "The Rubber Bend." The first is a fairly standard Sherlock Holmes pastiche with the particular tweak being that the Watson figure, Westing, is a robot. The title is possibly taken from "Silver Blaze" (one of the most famous Holmes stories, thanks to the "curious incident of the dog in the night-time"), and the story features a meeting between Westing and March B. Street (Wolfe's Holmes) that, as in Doyle's *A STUDY IN SCARLET*, results from the doctor's search for lodgings.

"The Rubber Bend" is more convincing as evidence of Wolfe's interest in the genre--as Wolfe points out in his introduction to *STOREYS FROM THE OLD HOTEL*, almost every writer seems compelled to write a Sherlock Holmes pastiche at some point. The sequel brings in Wolfe's "favorite private eye" [1], Nero Wolfe. Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe mysteries are perennial favorites of the genre's fans, but considerably less well-known than Doyle's works. The title derives from Stout's 1936 book *THE RUBBER BAND* (originally titled *TO KILL AGAIN*), the third Nero Wolfe mystery. Like "Slaves of Silver," "The Rubber Bend" is a fairly minor, though quite enjoyable work, consisting of a number of puns and amusing concepts stretched across the standard framework of the science-fictional detective story. Structurally, these stories are very similar to the bulk of the Sherlock Holmes short stories, with robots and time-travel replacing Victorian elements.

Wolfe dreamt of writing a series of these pastiches [1] and in an online chat session reflected that writing a Father Brown pastiche would not be a bad idea [2]; although no further direct pastiches have appeared, the idea, as we will see, shaped one of his most significant works.

II. *PANDORA* BY HOLLY HOLLANDER (A NOVEL BY GENE WOLFE)

"Is this a historical novel?" Holly Hollander imagines the reader asking, on the first page of the Foreword to *PANDORA* BY HOLLY HOLLANDER. "Nope," she answers. Instead, it is a detective novel.

One of Gene Wolfe's best novels, *PEACE*, forces the reader to discover what genre it belongs to (only when it becomes apparent that *PEACE* is a ghost story do many of the pieces click into place). *PANDORA* BY HOLLY HOLLANDER doesn't explicitly state that it is a mystery story in the very beginning, but the first chapter ends with the appearance

of a mysterious box, reminiscent of the introduction of a MacGuffin in many mysteries. This is a particularly common beginning for mysteries targeted at a younger audience--a large number of the Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, or Three Investigators mysteries revolve around (and take their title from) a mysterious object, especially one with hidden or secret contents.

By page 17 (of the Orb edition) the genre of the story should be clear, barring a Lupine removal of the rug under the reader's feet: a mysterious stranger on the bus turns out to be "ALADDIN BLUE, Criminologist." No such reversal of expectations is forthcoming; PANDORA BY HOLLY HOLLANDER is, whatever else it may be, a detective story. It does break with convention in one interesting sense.

PANDORA's narration by a would-be cynical teenaged girl would seem to place it in the category of a Young Adult Mystery. PANDORA seems to be a first-person version of a Nancy Drew mystery, modernized with the sensibilities of Holden Caulfield and the inclusion of topics not found in the classic adolescent mysteries, such as murder and sex. However, in both the older and more recent YA Mysteries, the adolescent protagonist almost invariably solves the mystery. Adult helpers are sometimes present, but only in a secondary role--in fact, the adults are often used to emphasize the resourcefulness of the young detectives, in that older, more experienced sleuths fail where the protagonists succeed. In PANDORA, though, as the title of chapter 23 ("How Blue Did the Job") makes clear, it is the adult detective (another limping Gene Wolfe hero) who solves the mystery. Holly Hollander is another Dr. Westing, a Watson figure with little role in the actual detection. Aladdin Blue is really "on the case" before he meets Holly, and so she cannot even be said to have brought him onto the scene.

PANDORA BY HOLLY HOLLANDER has a curious place among Gene Wolfe's novels. It is probably the least read and discussed (other than the early and, Wolfe must hope, forgotten, OPERATION ARES). It is not badly written, and includes some clever Chicago-related inside jokes ("Barton" is presumably Barrington, where Wolfe lives), but despite vague hints of hidden meanings, it appears to be a very straightforward tale for Gene Wolfe. Some readers have suggested an underlying allegory of kinds of love [3], but the evidence is weak, and the allegory, even if present, isn't very compelling. The points Aladdin Blue makes about myth when discussing the box with Holly are fairly pedestrian shadows of themes explored elsewhere to great effect by Wolfe. Most damningly, if this is just a mystery, the mystery itself is quite predictable--many readers will guess that Holly's mother is the culprit midway through the book.

The book's existence does demonstrate Gene Wolfe's interest in the detective fiction genre; he took the time to write a murder mystery. Holly's thoughts about detection in chapter 13 ("How Me and Blue Deduced") appear likely to be those of Wolfe as well. Holly mentions Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe, commenting that when people read mysteries "they pick detectives they like best by peculiarities." She elaborates: "Nero Wolfe's fat, three points; Sherlock Holmes shoots dope, that's seven." One might add "Holly Hollander is a teenage girl, two points; Aladdin Blue has a bum leg, that's six." More importantly, she gives what would seem to be Gene Wolfe's approach to detection: "look at the clues and think, now who would do that?" This is not very radical or unusual, but Wolfe's work in general invites the reader to apply this approach to fiction.

In his introduction to Lafferty's EPISODES OF THE ARGO, Wolfe discusses readers who refuse to read with the proper investigative attitude: "I have had them tell me (for example) that they were completely baffled when a scene they had read was described differently, later in the story, by one of the characters who took part in it; because I had not told them, 'This man's lying,' it had never occurred to them that he might be." Though Wolfe does not explicitly state it in so many words, the idea here is one of fiction not simply as a given story, but as a collection of clues or evidence. Rather than passively accepting a given narrative, the Wolfe reader is expected to make logical connections and to consider "who would do that?" This idea of fiction as the clues to a mystery is presumably key to understanding why so many of Wolfe's works are "explained" in prefatory matter or a postscript. PANDORA BY HOLLY HOLLANDER mentions Wolfe's editor, David Hartwell, and explains how Gene Wolfe's name came to be on Holly's story

(with suitable improvement by Wolfe, of course). The Latro books are presented as Wolfe's translations of ancient Greek scrolls; Severian's narrative is, again, Wolfe's translation of a found artifact. Even stories that do not give an explanation for why Gene Wolfe is presenting this "evidence" to us are often similarly documentary: "Seven American Nights" is wrapped in a framing device that transforms the story itself into a piece of evidence collected by a "detective" in reporting to his client.

(more to come, hunting for the "one must by lying quote" and considering if I want to move the discussion that's about to follow)

Rough Outline:

I. The Professionals (Explicit Detective Fiction):

1. "Slaves of Silver" / "The Rubber Bend"
Wolfe as detective fiction fan
2. PANDORA BY HOLLY HOLLANDER
Wolfe as Carolyn Keene
3. "Cherry Jubilee"
4. "The Detective of Dreams"
"Let us now proclaim the mystery of faith"
5. FREE LIVE FREE
(not sure if this belongs here)

II. The Amateurs

1. PEACE
"Solving" the mystery of stories
2. "Alien Stones"
The mystery of the alien
3. THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS
A possible exception to the rule
4. The Soldier Books
Mysteries of the ancient world (and memory as a puzzle)
5. THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN
Severian as detective
6. THE BOOK OF THE LONG SUN
Silk as Father Brown; the priest as detective
7. THE BOOK OF THE SHORT SUN
Horn as detective; "there are those who enjoy mysteries for their own sake; I try to eliminate mystery whenever possible" (paraphrase, don't have the book with me at the moment); IGJ's mysteries

III. The Wolfe Reader as Detective

IV. Theological Significance (A glass darkly)

[1] Wolfe, Gene. STOREYS FROM THE OLD HOTEL. New York: Tor. 1988. xiii.

[2] <http://www.scifi.com/transcripts/gwolfe.txt>

[3]

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)

Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department

8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

Michael Straight — 16 Aug 2001, 08:57 · follows Alex David Groce

Alex quoted from PANDORA:

Holly mentions Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe, commenting that when people read mysteries "they pick detectives they like best by peculiarities." She elaborates: "Nero Wolfe's fat, three points; Sherlock Holmes shoots dope, that's seven."

This explains why Nero Wolfe is GW's favorite. Given GW's love of playing games with his name (wolf motifs, the narrator of FIFTH HEAD, etc.), his personal detective rating must go something like this:

"Nero Wolfe has my last name, seventy-five points."

-Rostrum

William Ansley — 17 Aug 2001, 00:28 · follows Michael Straight

At 3:47 PM -0700 8/15/01, Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

Here's another bit of trivia that I've stumbled upon in correspondence with Gene Wolfe. Maybe someone can use it as an inspiration to write about Gene Wolfe and genre mysteries?

Gene Wolfe ranks the following as the best (not in any order):

TOO MANY WOMEN
BEFORE MIDNIGHT
THE LEAGUE OF FRIGHTENED MEN
CHAMPAGNE FOR ONE
THE FINAL DEDUCTION
IF DEATH EVER SLEPT
PLOT IT YOURSELF
THE DOORBELL RANG

He ranks the worst as:

THE BLACK MOUNTAIN
FER-DE-LANCE

I pretty much agree with the above, except that I would include Counterfeit for Murder in the best category.

Some while ago I had the madcap notion of reading, for the first time, some Nero Wolfe novels (all by Rex Stout, I hasten to add: Nero is the hero), and (here's the madcap part) I was going to read them in order of publication.

I wouldn't say the notion of reading a series of books in order of publication madcap; it is the way I prefer to read multiple books by any author, if I have the opportunity.

Well! First one is FER-DE-LANCE, and no sir, I didn't think it was very good. After a month or two, I read the next one, THE LEAGUE OF FRIGHTENED

MEN, and it was much better! I mentioned this to Gene Wolfe and he gave me his list.

Fer-De-Lance is the first of the Nero Wolfe novels and the worst, I agree. I have read all of the Nero Wolfe books (there are over 30 of them) more than once. I guess you'd have to call me a fan of the series. I think most of them are good and some are very good indeed.

For anyone who has read any of these books in the past and enjoyed them or anyone who thinks they sound interesting, I highly recommend the new TV series based on the books which is on the A & E cable network. The good news: these shows are very well done. The bad news: the first season is over and I have no idea when the programs will be repeated.

The actor who plays Nero Wolfe, Maury Chaykin, was once suggested (tongue in cheek and not by name) as Baldanders in a long ago attempt to cast a movie based on _The Book of the New Sun_.

William Ansley