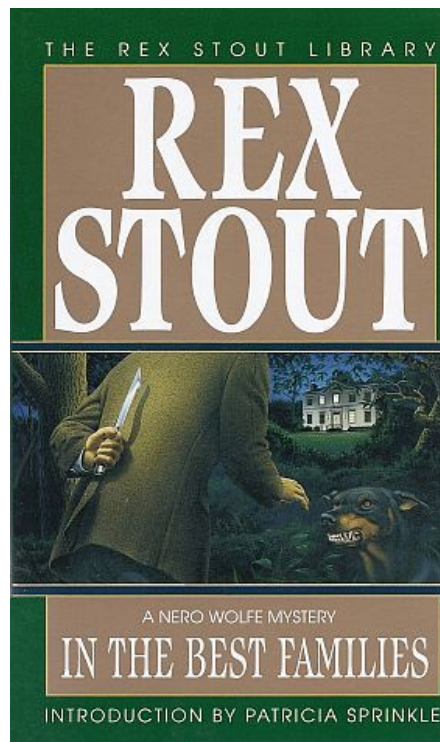




In the Best Families

Rex Stout , Patricia Sprinkle (Introduction)

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Aging millionairess Mrs. Rackham asks Nero Wolfe to find out where her penniless husband has suddenly been obtaining mysteriously large sums of money, a request that leads to murder and to threats against the master detective himself.

In the Best Families Details

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From Reader Review In the Best Families for online ebook

Kim Kaso says

Another wonderful entry in the series featuring great upheaval in the lives of all involved with Nero Wolfe. Great snarky remarks from Archie, and a central role for him. Highly recommended, these books always make me smile.

Anand Ganapathy says

I began this book a month back (read a chapter and could not continue) . Read it at a stretch over last couple of days. One of the best Nero wolfe mysteries by Rex stout. Wolfe escaping from his home for a few months, Archie as a free lancing detective , a gripping plot.... Need I say more ?

Bill Kerwin says

Nero Wolfe finds himself in a battle to the death with Arnold Zeck, and goes underground--leaving Archie in the dark--to prepare for his final confrontation with then master criminal.

This is the third and final volume of the Zeck trilogy. It is a fine end to the series, and a satisfying adventure in itself. One of Stout's best.

Jon says

The third in the Arnold Zeck series of Nero Wolfe novels. I read this one years ago, but I had forgotten just how good it is. There are two plots, each related to the other: one involving criminal genius Arnold Zeck who has Wolfe so frightened? determined? that he abruptly leaves his beloved brownstone and disappears, leaving Archie with nothing but a note saying "Don't try to find me." The other is a more-or-less standard mystery involving a body discovered by Archie early in the book, and his phone call to Wolfe describing the circumstances in detail. For most of the book the murder takes second place to the plot to bring down Zeck, even though Zeck is probably involved in it in some way. When, almost as an afterthought, Wolfe finally reveals the murderer, he astonishes us by doing it exclusively with information provided to him in Archie's original report, all the details of which we had known all along. I was certainly surprised, as I was supposed to be. A truly amazing feat of mystery writing.

Leslie says

[When, after ignoring another warning from Zeck, Archie discovers Wolfe's client's murdered body, he enters the strangest case of his career. Returning to the NY brownstone, he finds that Wolfe has disappeared and arrangements made for new jobs for Fritz and Theodore with the only message for Archie himself a command to not look for Wolfe. (hide spoiler)]

Evgeny says

You heard the beginning of this story often enough: a wealthy plain looking woman married a handsome younger guy (would "bought him" be a better term?) The only two things the latter has are exactly the ones I already mentioned: youth and good looks; the money comes from his wife. At one point he increased his demands for money; the wife refused him and - to her complete surprise - he continued his lavish lifestyle without visible means of supporting it.

Nero Wolfe avoids divorce cases like a plague, but this time it was only figuring out the source of the guy's income, so the detective decided to take a case; his bank account (poor state of it that is) helped with the decision. The problem comes when it turned out his investigation would make a very powerful person slightly inconvenienced. Such people think nothing about killing anything that stands in their way, like Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin in this case.

This is a very unusual Nero Wolfe novel as the latter has to break his routine of the previous sixteen books completely. I really cannot say anything at all to avoid spoilers, but the first time I read it I was in for a big surprise. My standard disclaimer applies here as well: do not read the book's blurb as it will spoil quite a lot. Let me just say Archie Goodwin has to work on his own here and he shows himself a very competent detective, even if not quite on the level of Nero Wolfe's genius.

5 stars for highly entertaining value is the final rating.

This review is a copy/paste of my LeafMarks one: <https://www.leafmarks.com/lm/#/books/...>

Alexis Neal says

It starts with a seemingly simple chore: find out where a certain married man is getting his sizable income. But one package of tear gas and a dead dog later (along with a murder, of course), and Wolfe finds himself pitted against the powerful super-villain Arnold Zeck. There's no doubt about it--Wolfe is in a deep hole with only one way out. So he flees. Leaves the house, leaves the orchids, arranges for new jobs for his cook Fritz and his orchid nurse Theodore. The house is offered for sale. And Archie ... Archie is given only one instruction: 'Do not look for me.'

As I've mentioned before, Zeck is the Moriarty to Wolfe's Holmes--his evil counterpart. And that means that this is Wolfe's 'The Final Problem'. Wolfe's 'death' is more metaphorical than Holmes' showdown atop Reichenbach Falls--Wolfe merely disappears. He vanishes into the ether, leaving Archie without a clue as to his whereabouts or plans. But, as this is not the final Wolfe book, it is not all that long before Wolfe returns, ready to vanquish the one man who is his intellectual equal.

Along the way, we get to see Archie adapt to a life without Wolfe, hanging out his own shingle and even grieving the loss of his employer (and friend). In an interesting turn of events, Archie is himself offered an opportunity in the Zeck crime business, which leads to some interesting interactions and events. Wolfe is absent for the bulk of the story, which makes for a different feel than Stout's usual books. But when Wolfe returns, he more than redeems himself for his absences. Wolfe's plan to take down Zeck for good (combined with the lengths to which he will go to effect that plan) is itself worth the cost of admission.

Lily Rowan makes a brief but memorable appearance, and we also catch glimpses of Fritz, Theodore, Inspector Cramer, Lon Cohen, and Con Noonan (the Rowcliff of Westchester PD). And Zeck, of course, whom we finally meet (having previously encountered him only in phone conversations and through the actions of his emissaries).

Of course, you'll understand the backstory better if you've read the previous Zeck stories--*And Be a Villain* and particularly *The Second Confession*--but Stout does a great job summarizing the relevant events and instilling the appropriate sense of foreboding and dread.

Prichard, whose narration has never impressed me, does a great job here, and handles one voice in particular with such skill that I almost forgive him for the lackluster narration of previous books.

All in all, this is a great book, and well worth reading.

Adam Graham says

This was a great book throughout it's 2nd act. The most fascinating part of the book is when Wolfe disappears, leaving Archie and the rest to fend for themselves.

For Archie, there's the question of how to deal with feeling being abandoned by someone who was almost a father figure to him. The complexity of the Wolfe-Archie relationship is in full force here.

One thing that stands out in this book with Archie on his own is that Archie is, in many ways, as eccentric as Wolfe. However, Archie's eccentricities come off differently.

The Archie alone chapters are golden as we get to see Archie in Jail (again), Archie starting his own detective agency, and the type of adventures that Archie has apart from Wolfe. The adventures wouldn't make for interesting novels, but would make for a fun radio program.

There's a great deal in the middle that will delight and fascinate Wolfe fans.

The story suffers from one major defect and then defect is Arnold Zeck. Zeck is supposed to be Wolfe's Moriarty, but I just don't see it. Wolfe doesn't want to face Zeck. Zeck would rather not have to kill Wolfe and in this book and the previous used non-lethal methods to intimidate him. Rex Stout just didn't seem to understand how to create *mortal* enemies. Wolfe forestalls any action as long as possible and the final confrontation between Zeck and Wolfe: not at all satisfying.

However, even weak murder plots can be forgiven if we're given an interesting story with Wolfe and Archie. And this story is fascinating despite both the defects in the mystery and in the villain.

Mmyoung says

As is usually true of trilogies and denouements of the Moriarty Gambit this book didn't quite deliver all that was promised in the lead up.

Warnings: many spoilers to follow.

On the purely “I figured things out before Wolfe/Goodwin revealed it” front I nailed Leeds as at least involved with Zeck by the time Zeck called the house post sausage warning. After the detailed description of the dogs and their reactions to Goodwin my first question after the murder itself was “how did the murderer get so close to Mrs. Rackham” and my second was “why aren’t the police checking everyone for dog bites?” On one level this made it believable that Wolfe was able to deduce who the murderer was. On another level it makes the police and Goodwin seem extraordinarily stupid.

On the second front, the believability of Wolfe worming his way into the world of Zeck I was completely unwilling to swallow the idea. The number of reasons why this was unlikely are many: Wolfe was a very overweight man and Roeder a man who had extraneous flesh hanging from his face, surely any criminal mastermind would have found that interesting if not suspicious; Zeck would have done background checks on anyone who rose to the level of a “D” and Roeder had no existence prior to the disappearance of Wolfe, again setting off warning bells; after several speeches from Wolfe about the degree to which a series of cut-outs meant that Zeck could not be connected to any actual crimes Zeck is rather forthcoming about his involvement in crimes to someone as low as a “B” (Goodwin); Wolfe, he tells us, got the attention of Zeck by inventing a new way of fleecing people and yet there is no discussion after Zeck is killed of whether those people are recompensed or indeed whether Goodwin or Wolfe feel the need for that; Zeck’s fortress of solitude was easily breached and his entire criminal enterprise collapses on the death of its leader without any explanation of how that would happen; and finally there is no discussion of the fact that even if Zeck is dead there are many underworld (and even overworld) people who would welcome the death of Wolfe for bringing down the Zeck empire and possibly exposing dangerous information to the world.

I was cheering for this book but found it stretched my credulity to the limit. If Lily Rowan was able to figure out that Roeder was Wolfe then so should have Saul at least and perhaps Fred and Orrie. If the Roeder gambit had been played out over a longer period of time, let us say 2 or 3 years, it might have been more believable but as it was it was a very mundane working out to what had been a great setup.

Other comments: while it was a nice detail to have them use Lily Rowan as “the girl” when they needed a reason for Roeder to be out of contact for several hours it again stretches credulity that Zeck wouldn’t have run a background check on her. Rowan, we are told in many books, is a well known heiress and frequenter of the New York social scene. This would bring up a problem because her background would indicate that she didn’t spend nights with anonymous criminals and even more problematic would be her long term relationship with Goodwin. Since Archie had to cancel a planned trip to Norway with Rowan in order to fall in with Roeder’s plans it seems unlikely that the evening with Roeder would not have raised suspicion. It could have been handled by having Archie openly drop Roeder off with the suggestion that Roeder had dirt on Rowan and she was paying it off in favours than in the manner it is presented.

On the plus side, Stout’s writing seems to have returned to its prewar level. I forgive him the rather idiot murder plot since it had to be something trivially easy to work out else Wolfe would not have been able to unravel it by long distance and without investigations.

David Monroe says

In both *And Be a Villain* and *The Second Confession*, Nero Wolfe’s Moriarty analog, crime boss, Arnold Zeck had sharp but long-distance encounters with Wolfe. These episodes hinted that in some future book Zeck would play a leading role -- and now he does.

It all begins when a lonely, wealthy and self-described “homely” woman comes to Wolfe’s office wishing to discover the source of her husbands’ new income. She had cut him off, but somehow he was suddenly rolling

in it. She suspects her younger and handsome husband is mixed up in crime. Within hours of her visit, Wolfe answers his phone and Zeck warns them to "Lay off this case." Later that night, the client and her pet Doberman are found stabbed to death in the woods near her house. Archie phones Wolfe to report and, after dealing with the local officials, returns to Manhattan. When he arrives at the brownstone, Archie finds the front door ajar, Fritz and Theodore in confusion, and Wolfe gone. A brief note, inarguably from Wolfe, instructs Archie not to look for him.

One of the few Nero Wolfe books to play with the established formula of Wolfe never leaving his Brownstone while Archie acts as his eyes, ears and legs. While Wolfe is gone, Archie even sets up his own detective agency. He later claims to Wolfe that he made more than he did working for him. Wolfe is doubtful. So am I, after all, he was still living at the Brownstone, rent free and sharing the cost of food with Fritz.

A good one. One of the best.

Sheila Beaumont says

The final installment of the Zeck trilogy, this is one of my favorite Nero Wolfe mysteries. Master criminal Arnold Zeck is Wolfe's counterpart to Sherlock Holmes' Moriarty. This book is unusual in that homebody Wolfe actually leaves home for almost five months to prepare for a showdown with Zeck. Archie Goodwin doesn't know where he is and has to carry on by himself. If you're familiar with the Sherlock Holmes canon, you'll notice parallels between this novel and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Final Problem" and "The Empty House," which adds to the enjoyment.

Cherie says

It has been several months since I listened to Michael Pritchard narrate one of the Nero Wolfe stories. I really missed listening to his voice.

What a shock that Wolfe could walk out and disappear and leave Archie to establish a business of his own. For the details, sorry, you need to find out for yourself! This is one of the best of them.

Vicki says

What an absolute treat to read this book! I was actually looking for something else in Barnes & Noble, and saw this series featuring detective Nero Wolfe. I have known the name of the fictional detective forever, it seems like, but have never, til now, read one of the books. But Mystery Lovers, this is a treasure, as I am sure the other books in the series are, so let's start enjoying Rex Stout's witty dialog and intriguing plots that our parents and grands likely ate up!

This title, In the Best Families, was published originally in 1950, but it has aged beautifully. You might even brush up your vocabulary a little bit without even trying!

Yes I had heard of Nero Wolfe but really knew nothing about him and his distinctive detecting style. He is super intelligent, like Sherlock Holmes, but he never leaves his office. He is grossly overweight and really

into his exotic orchid collection...so how does he detect, you may ask. He has a personal secretary/private eye combo on staff, Archie Goodwin, who is also the narrator of the book. Archie does the onsite detecting and Wolfe does the analyzing and crime solving, with lots of quick wit and sass along the way.

In this story, the aging millionaire Mrs. Rackham comes to meet Wolfe in his office with her cousin in tow. She insists on absolute secrecy and discretion, but she wants Wolfe to find out the source of her much younger husband's flow of money, since she knows she has not been giving him any of late. Nero Wolfe is not inclined to take the case, and as he is telling her this, she is writing him a \$10,000 check. Upon reflection, he decides to take the case.

The next morning, a package Wolfe had been expecting is delivered, but it turns out to be a tear gas bomb, followed in short order by an ominous threatening phone call suggesting that Wolfe decline the Rackham case. And before Wolfe has lifted a finger to solve the case, Mrs. Rackham and her pet Doberman pinscher are murdered on the grounds of her estate. The next thing Archie knows, Nero Wolfe has abandoned his home and left no forwarding address. His brief written message to Archie includes the directive NOT to search for him!

Looks like Archie has a difficult choice: either return the money to Mrs. Rackham's estate, or figure out her husband's mysterious source of income, and along the way, perhaps solve the murder mystery as well!

Lisa Kucharski says

Just finished this, practically at the edge of my seat the entire time! It's showdown time between Wolfe and Zeck. Zeck's presence was seen in *And Be A Villian*, and *The Second Confession*. Zeck is like a Moriarty for Wolfe. Wolfe has known a showdown would be inevitable at some point, and had mentioned what would have to happen if the two ever at cross purposes. If only Zeck had left well enough alone! Archie, the heart and muscle of the Wolfe team, has his world pulled out from under him. And without his ability to land on his feet and keep a cool head, the spectacular plan Wolfe unleashed could have easily been their last! I would highly recommend reading the previous two books where Zeck is mentioned, as it will help to have this background immensely. There is an omnibus called *Triple Zeck* (that contains all three of the Zeck stories in one book.)

JZ says

1950

Oh, yes! My favorite Nero Wolfe book to date. Funny, suspenseful, moralistic, pompous, satisfying. More Archie, less Wolfe. If it had been the new book that I was reading in 1950, I might have even wondered if this was a way for Stout to finish off the hero, like Arthur Conan Doyle killed off Sherlock Holmes when he got tired of writing about him. Since I have a whole bookshelf of books after 1950, I could guess the ending, confident that there will still be more.

So many things to like about this book. The departure from the norm was entertaining, Archie on his own was marvelous, the wisecracking was better than usual, and the battle of wits was suspenseful. There were a few problems, logistically: why did Archie have to go with Roeper to get a woman, and stay the whole time, how did they manage not to be killed in the automatic gunfire, how did Roeper gain credence so fast with no back history, etc. But, this series is not known for its tight plots, but for the atmosphere and dialogue. It delivered for me.

