

# The Doorbell Rang Study Guide

## The Doorbell Rang by Rex Stout

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## Plot Summary

In *The Doorbell Rang*, eccentric New York detective Nero Wolfe goes up against J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Mrs. Rachel Bruner has sent a book critical of the FBI to 10,000 important people, and now she's under investigation and wants it to stop. With the lure of a \$100,000 retainer, Wolfe sets out to find dirt on the FBI. Instead, he uncovers the murder of Morris Althaus, not by three FBI agents on the scene, but by Althaus's rejected lover. Wolfe tricks the FBI into invading his home, and under threat of disclosure of their illegal acts, he forces the FBI to stop investigating his client.

At the beginning of the novel, Nero Wolfe is approached by Mrs. Bruner, a wealthy widow who wants the FBI to stop investigating her. Because she offers him a hundred-thousand-dollar retainer with no strings attached, Wolfe accepts her impossible-sounding job. He begins by gathering information about recent FBI activity in New York, but he finds little that might be useful. Archie begins his investigations, but he is frustrated at every turn. Then, a mysterious message is delivered to Archie to meet an informant.

The informant turns out to be Inspector Cramer of New York Homicide South, who has an unsolved murder on his hands. Cramer believes that an FBI agent killed Morris Althaus, a writer who was working on a story about the FBI. He turns over the information about the killing to Archie, in hopes that Wolfe can solve the murder. The crime gives Wolfe a dilemma, though, because if he finds out an FBI agent killed Althaus, it won't give him leverage he can use to stop the FBI from harassing his client. Wolfe and Archie set out to prove instead that someone else murdered Althaus.

Wolfe discovers that one of Althaus's articles sent a man named Frank Odell to prison, and Archie goes to meet him. Archie finds that Odell can be linked back to Mrs. Bruner, and then he discovers that Sarah Dacos, Mrs. Bruner's secretary lives in the apartment below Althaus's and witnessed the FBI agents leaving the scene of the crime. Archie investigates further and finds out that Sarah Dacos and Althaus were lovers. Archie breaks into Sarah Dacos's apartment and finds the gun that killed Althaus.

Meanwhile, Wolfe has decided on a plan to trap the FBI. He hires two actors to impersonate himself and Archie and creates the appearance that he, Archie, and his staff are going to a dinner, leaving the brownstone empty. Meanwhile, Wolfe has smuggled in three more detectives, and he catches two FBI agents red-handed breaking into his house. Wolfe takes their FBI identification and uses it as leverage to get the FBI to stop investigating his client. Then, he turns over the evidence about Sarah Dacos to Inspector Cramer, solving the murder as well as fulfilling the requirements of his job for Mrs. Bruner.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

In *The Doorbell Rang*, eccentric New York detective Nero Wolfe goes up against J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Mrs. Rachel Bruner has sent a book critical of the FBI to 10,000 important people, and now she's under investigation and wants it to stop. With the lure of a \$100,000 retainer, Wolfe sets out to find dirt on the FBI. Instead, he uncovers the murder of Morris Althaus, not by three FBI agents on the scene, but by Althaus's rejected lover. Wolfe tricks the FBI into invading his home, and under threat of disclosure of their illegal acts, he forces the FBI to stop investigating his client.

Mrs. Rachel Bruner, wealthy widow of Lloyd Bruner, comes to see Nero Wolfe. She asks Wolfe if he's familiar with the book *The FBI Nobody Knows*, which is highly critical of the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover. She read the book and thought it was important, so she sent ten thousand copies to important people all over the U.S., including businessmen, media, and politicians. Now, Mrs. Bruner, her employees, and her family are being followed. She is being investigated, and her phone is tapped. She wants Nero Wolfe to stop the surveillance and the investigation. She writes him a check for fifty thousand dollars, as a retainer.

Nero Wolfe refuses to help. The FBI is too large and too powerful, and he has no means of stopping them. Mrs. Bruner takes back the check and writes a new one for one hundred thousand dollars, saying that he can keep the retainer even if he fails. He can bill her for expenses plus any fee he likes. Archie Goodwin, Wolfe's assistant, is afraid Wolfe is being tempted by the huge check, and he wants to get Mrs. Bruner out of the office. He offers to walk her out and watch to see if she's being followed. Wolfe will let her know his decision the next day. Reluctantly, Mrs. Bruner agrees, and Archie sees two men follow her away in a car. They're not even trying to hide their surveillance. Archie takes the license plate number and phones it in to a contact who can look it up. Wolfe tells Archie to invite Lon Cohen, editor of a New York newspaper, to dinner.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Nero Wolfe is a detective in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes's even more brilliant brother Mycroft. Wolfe distains the physical and instead focuses solely on the mental. He does not leave his house on business, but merely sits and thinks to come to his conclusions. Archie acts as a foil to Wolfe as well as an assistant. Archie focuses on action. He performs physical acts and even thinks best while walking. Archie also acts as narrator, telling the story from his perspective.

Wolfe is also a hedonist, seeking pleasure above all else. He delights in the physical gratification of food and orchids, and he prefers not to work. Wolfe also has his own set of moral codes and guidelines that he follows. Wolfe's desire for pleasure instead of



work combine with his moral guidelines to cause him to take Mrs. Bruner's check. He is motivated by her money, and his moral outlook won't allow him to succumb to the pressure he knows the FBI could exert on him. Archie is a pragmatist. He doesn't want to take a job that will pit him against the forces of the FBI, but at the same time, he won't back away from the task once Wolfe decides to take it.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

After dinner, Nero Wolfe, Archie Goodwin, and Lon Cohen sit in Wolfe's office, having coffee and brandy. During dinner, Archie received the information that the tail on Mrs. Bruner was the FBI. Wolfe asks Lon about Mrs. Bruner, and he knows that she's sent copies of *The FBI Nobody Knows* to thousands of important people, calling it a status symbol. He doesn't know what the FBI is doing about it, or what Mrs. Bruner's motives might be, if not public service.

Wolfe asks Lon about current and recent FBI investigations around New York, and Lon realizes that Wolfe is considering working for Mrs. Bruner. Lon knows that many of the FBI's investigations are secret, but he can give Wolfe the rumors. He tells Archie what he knows and has heard, and it fills up five pages in Archie's notebooks. After Lon leaves, Archie starts to tear up the notebook pages, to show Wolfe how impossible it would be to take the job. Wolfe stops him.

Archie tells Wolfe that the job is impossible. They would somehow need to corner the FBI, and meanwhile, the FBI would be tailing them and tapping their phones, plus the phones of all their associates. They might even be framed. Their mail would be read and their house at risk. Archie also suspects that Mrs. Bruner is afraid the FBI will uncover something in their investigation of her. Wolfe says that the reasons are fear of the FBI and its bullying. He refuses to submit to fear and suggests that Archie take a paid leave. Archie refuses and phones the client to let her know they're taking her job.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Wolfe and Archie operate with a cast of helpers they've acquired over time, emphasizing the importance of a web of information and resources based on a network of trusted friends. Lon Cohen is one of these helpers. He acts as a source of information for Archie and Wolfe. From the writer's perspective, he moves the plot forward. From the characters' perspective, he moves the investigation forward. Lon's reaction to Wolfe's investigation emphasizes how difficult a foe the FBI is. Lon is amazed that Wolfe would find himself pitted against the formidable FBI organization. The FBI's abuse of authority is an open secret. It's common knowledge on the street, but it's taboo to talk about it or fight back against it.

Archie outlines what the FBI can and will do. The FBI's power is unchecked. They operate outside of the law, both according to Lon Cohen's discussion of rumors about FBI operations and according to Archie's outline of what the FBI will do if they get involved in this case. Archie is practical and pragmatic, but Wolfe's moral code wins the argument. Wolfe is the brain; Archie is the body. Once Wolfe makes a decision, no matter how counter-intuitive it is to Archie, he has no qualms about going along with it.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

The next morning, Archie comes downstairs, and Fritz, Wolfe's chef and housekeeper, begins making pancakes. He asks Archie why the doors and windows are to be kept locked, and Archie explains that they're investigating the FBI. He jokes about J. Edgar Hoover's nose to relax Fritz. Archie goes out to deposit Mrs. Bruner's check and then walks to Mrs. Bruner's office. He meets Sarah Dacos, Mrs. Bruner's attractive young secretary. Archie questions her.

Sarah has worked for Mrs. Bruner for three years. Before that, she worked at the Bruner Corporation, first as a stenographer and then as the vice-president's secretary. She's noticed a man tailing her from her home in the Village. She hasn't spoken to him or reported it to the police. Sarah only read the book *The FBI Nobody Knows* after Mrs. Bruner sent out copies, and she doesn't know if anyone suggested sending them out.

Mrs. Bruner enters and thanks Archie for getting Wolfe to take her case, but he tells her that he was against it. He has an agreement for her to sign, and somewhat reluctantly, she signs. Archie tells her that they'll have little contact during the case, and he asks her to come outside to talk in case the room is bugged. While she's getting ready, he flirts with Sarah.

Outside, Archie gives Mrs. Bruner instructions on how to get a message from him and Wolfe, if they need to communicate with her secretly. He also gives her instructions to contact them secretly if she must. Archie also confronts her, guessing that she must have something she's afraid the FBI will uncover. He asks if they're close, and the client simply answers no.

Archie gets his lunch, corned-beef on rye with a glass of milk, while he waits for the taxi he's arranged. When the taxi driver arrives, Archie jumps in. He has the taxi driver drive around for a while to make sure no one's following. Finally, he gets to his destination, Evers Electronics, Inc. Archie visits Mr. Adrian Evers. He's learned the government is about to cancel a contract with Evers Electronics because of a security check of someone in the company. He's hoping Evers can give him information about the FBI's abuse of authority. Evers kicks him out, and Archie runs into an FBI agent on the way out.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

In addition to his other physical traits, Archie is a womanizer. He enjoys being around pretty women and talking to them. His physicality spills over into sexuality, and that's one reason Wolfe attributes to him an understanding of women. Archie is immediately attracted to Sarah Dacos, but he doesn't allow the attraction to interfere with his work.





Archie makes elaborate arrangements with Mrs. Bruner so that they can contact each other with information that they don't want the FBI to overhear. The arrangements are never needed in the course of the novel, but Archie's extreme caution emphasizes the danger of going up against the FBI and the power that the FBI holds over them.

Archie also uses his skills to get rid of his FBI tail. This again emphasizes the danger of the FBI, as well as emphasizing Archie's prowess with the more active side of detective work. Still, Archie immediately runs up against bad luck. The case has barely begun, and already, the results are disappointing. Archie is kicked out by Adrian Evers, whose fear of the FBI is palpable, again showing the power of the enemy Archie and Wolfe have taken on. On the way out of Evers' office, Archie runs into an FBI agent who is heading into the office. The FBI is ubiquitous; they are everywhere. This chapter brings home to the reader how daunting the FBI can be.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Archie returns to Wolfe's house late that night in a foul mood, having learned nothing and found no leads among Lon's most promising FBI rumors. He refuses food from Fritz and recounts the events to Wolfe. A man charged with conspiring to transport stolen goods got violent with him, and he could not find a woman who may have been framed for espionage. Wolfe says that they will think of a new strategy in the morning. Archie has a stiff drink of bourbon and prepares to sleep on the office couch, to prevent the FBI from breaking in.

The next morning, Archie is considering the possible lines of investigation, when Dr. Vollmer, who lives down the street, rings the doorbell. Vollmer received a phone message for Archie to go to a hotel room at 11:30 and make sure he's not followed. Archie says that Vollmer will need a cover story for coming to the house, and they decide he'll say he was getting a recipe from Fritz. Archie gets his gun and some money and arranges for the man at his garage to drive him off, hidden on the floorboard.

At the hotel, Archie finds the head of Homicide, Inspector Cramer. Cramer, often an enemy, has even brought Archie a carton of milk. Cramer tells Archie that the FBI is asking to have his and Wolfe's detective licenses revoked. Cramer is supposed to write up a report about them, and he wants to know how Wolfe is involved with the FBI. Archie tells Cramer about their job and then asks why Cramer brought him there.

Cramer tells Archie about the murder of Morris Alhaus, a writer who was doing an exposé about the FBI. He was shot in the chest at his apartment at 63 Arbor Street, and no gun or bullet was found. The night of the murder, three FBI agents were seen leaving the apartment and driving away. Cramer has traced the license plate. Alhaus's notes and manuscript for his article are missing. Cramer is convinced that the FBI men murdered Alhaus, and the FBI refuses to give him any information. He's offended that the FBI is getting away with murder in his territory. He's turning the murder over to Wolfe.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The case begins on a downbeat, with Archie finding only frustration in his early attempts to make an inroad into collecting damaging information about the FBI. He punishes himself for his failure by denying himself decent food or milk to drink. Though Archie's efforts have had no concrete results, they have set events in motion, as Archie realizes when Doc Vollmer arrives with a mysterious message.

The convoluted method of receiving the message again emphasizes the danger the FBI poses. Like Lon Cohen, Vollmer is one of Archie and Wolfe's helpers, assisting without question whenever medical help is needed, and in this instance, acting as a confidential

source of information. Archie and Wolfe's network of human resources outperforms the FBI's network of anonymous agents and electronic devices.

Cramer is yet another human resource. Although Cramer's relationship with Wolfe is adversarial, he acts as a colleague in helping Wolfe combat the FBI. Cramer is in an interesting position. He is part of the machine of government that includes the FBI and that Wolfe is pitted against. Still, he is a person, and he is part of Wolfe's network of individuals, with individual talents, means, and information. As a human being, Cramer is offended at the FBI's actions. His human desires outweigh his position as a cog in the wheels of government. That is why he sides with Wolfe and gives Wolfe an inroad in his fight against the FBI.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Archie walks to Arbor Street, and it occurs to him that Sarah Dacos, who lives in the Village, too, must live near Morris Althaus. He views the scene of the crime from the street and then takes a taxi home for lunch. Wolfe never discusses business at meals. After lunch, Archie brings Wolfe down to the basement, where he's positive they cannot be overheard and tells him about the meeting with Cramer.

Archie and Wolfe consider the issue. The murder does not seem useful to them. If the FBI killed Althaus, the only way they could use it would be by suppressing evidence of the murder to make the FBI back off. Still, Wolfe sees a possibility: they could discover that the FBI did not murder Althaus. Wolfe asks about Wragg, an FBI man Cramer mentioned. Richard Wragg is the head of the FBI in New York, and he likely believes one of his men killed Althaus.

Wolfe decides that he and Archie must investigate Althaus's death. Archie will start with a visit to Lon Cohen at the Gazette to get background information. Archie asks how he should bring interested parties to the house for questioning, and Wolfe says that they don't need to keep their investigation from the FBI. Archie won't need to worry about being followed, and people can come in through the front door.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Wolfe needs to take the information that he gathers and somehow use it to accomplish his main goal, getting the FBI to stop harassing Mrs. Bruner. Suppressing the FBI's involvement in a murder goes against Wolfe's moral code, and Cramer is convinced that the FBI is behind the murder. Instead of deciding that the information is useless, Wolfe proceeds on the idea that he might find out that the FBI is not guilty. Cramer is easily convinced of the FBI's guilt, but Wolfe's genius mind considers all possibilities.

Wolfe also decides to turn the FBI's surveillance of him to his own benefit. The FBI focuses on gathering information about Wolfe. Because Wolfe is aware of the surveillance, he can decide what information the FBI receives, turning the surveillance to his own advantage and controlling the FBI through its own system.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Archie gets the background on Althaus's murder from Lon. Althaus was a 26-year-old playboy writer, recently engaged to Marian Hinckley, who works for Tick-Tock magazine. Senior editors of the magazine include Timothy Quayle, who's been defensive of Marian Hinckley, and Vincent Yarmack, who was editing Althaus's FBI story. Althaus kept his investigation of the FBI secret. His father, David, is a dressmaker who was disappointed his son wasn't interested in the family business. His mother Ivana refuses to see reporters. Archie decides Ivana is the best in-road and arranges to meet with her and Marian Hinckley.

Archie goes to Ivana Althaus's expensive Park Avenue apartment. He tells Ivana that Wolfe has information that an FBI agent may have killed her son. She already suspected the FBI and agrees to help because she wants her son's killer to be caught. She doesn't think she has any useful information, though. Marian Hinckley comes in, and Archie explains the situation, adding that Wolfe thinks the police know the FBI killed Althaus and are covering up. The police seem to have dropped the investigation. Marian also agrees that she wants the killer caught, and they agree to come to Wolfe's house at 9:00 that night and to try to bring Mr. Yarmack. Archie warns them that the FBI is watching Wolfe's house and leaves.

Back at Wolfe's house, Archie motions for Wolfe to meet him in the basement. Wolfe is livid at being driven out of his office. He suggests they tailor their conversations to account for bugs, avoiding the most sensitive topics and inserting false statements. Archie is just finishing reporting his results when Timothy Quayle comes to the door. He marches into Wolfe's office and demands to know what Wolfe is doing. Wolfe tells Archie to throw him out, but on the stoop, Quayle promises to behave himself if he can ask Wolfe a question. He gets permission from Wolfe to come to the meeting that night at 9:00.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Once Archie begins to investigate Althaus's murder, the focus of the novel changes. The FBI moves into the background. Instead, Archie and the reader focus on Althaus and the people around him. The people in Althaus's life become murder suspects, including a stock cast of characters: the beautiful fiancé, her jealous admirer, a father and mother, and a boss. The story of the murder and its suspects is separate from the FBI, dealing with Althaus's personal and professional lives. The FBI remains mysteriously in the background. Only Wragg becomes a character with a name. The other FBI agents remain nameless throughout the novel. They are not human characters, but agents of the machine of government.



When Archie visits Althaus's family, he tailors what he tells them to the story he wants to present the FBI with. He doesn't reveal that he's working with Cramer. Instead, he presents Wolfe as an adversary against the police. He doesn't reveal that he wants to find an alternate suspect in the murder. Instead, he presents Wolfe as collecting evidence against the FBI. Archie and Wolfe must hide their real beliefs and intentions because of the FBI's power, as well as to get the cooperation of Althaus's family and friends.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

In addition to Quayle, Morris's father David Althaus and an attorney named Bernard Fromm show up. Wolfe tells the gathering that he intends to prove an FBI agent killed Morris Althaus to get back at both the FBI and the New York police. Yarmack admits that he thought Morris had research on the FBI in his possession, but nothing was found at his home. Yarmack suspects the FBI because of it. Wolfe says that the police must suspect the FBI but have dropped the investigation. Wolfe finds out that the police no longer seem to be investigating any of his guests, yet Yarmack might have a motive if Morris uncovered information about him. Wolfe claims that he needs to rule out the idea that the police and the FBI know who the guilty party is before he can attack the FBI and the police.

Neither Yarmack nor Quayle has a solid alibi. Wolfe suggests a motive for Quayle, that he appears smitten with Marian Hinckley, Morris's fiancé. The lawyer, Bernard Fromm, objects that Wolfe has no right or real reason for questioning them as suspects. Wolfe asks another question. If the FBI is not guilty, who might be? Quayle suggests Frank Odell, a real estate agent who went to jail because of one of Morris's articles. Wolfe asks them to let him know if the FBI begins harassing them and then ends the meeting.

After letting the guests out, Archie joins Wolfe in the basement. To make doubly sure they aren't overheard, they turn up the TV and talk softly. Wolfe asks Archie about the Ten for Aristology, a group of gourmets that includes his friend Lewis Hewitt, and asks Archie to secretly arrange for Wolfe to go visit Hewitt the following day. The visit will not be secret, but Wolfe doesn't want the FBI to know he's inviting himself. When Archie returns from making the arrangements, he finds Wolfe in the basement hard at work, with his eyes shut and his lips pushing in and out. Wolfe tells Archie to find Frank Odell, but that he's making arrangements to combat the FBI, no matter who is guilty of the murder and even if they don't solve it.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

When the suspects gather at Wolfe's house, it gives Wolfe his first chance to make an inroad into investigating the murder. Wolfe must hide his true goal, finding an alternative suspect to the FBI. He disguises his investigation as precautions to make way for an attack on the FBI. In this way, he gets information. He gets to see Yarmack's and Quayle's reaction to Wolfe's suggestion of a possible motive for him, and he learns that Yarmack and Quayle don't have alibis. Because the investigation into Althaus's death is not truly Wolfe's main focus, though, these characters and their reactions remain secondary. David Althaus never says a word, and his lawyer, Bernard Fromm, only appears in this one scene.



The most important thing Wolfe uncovers when he interviews Althaus's family and friends is a name: Frank Odell. Still, the investigation doesn't seem promising, and Wolfe doesn't want chance to rule the results of his actions. Just as he looked for alternatives to FBI agents being responsible for Althaus's murder, he resists focusing only on the murder, looking for alternatives to solve his main problem, getting the FBI to stop surveillance on his client. Wolfe resists being confined to one path, always looking for more options to improve his path to success.





# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Saul Panzer takes Wolfe to Lewis Hewitt's, leaving Archie to the task of finding Frank Odell. Archie doesn't want to give the FBI any hint that he's looking for Odell, since it's important that the FBI is convinced Wolfe thinks one of the FBI agents killed Morris Althaus. He uses the phone at his garage to call Lon Cohen and find out Odell's address and work. Archie ditches the FBI agents who are following him and goes to the real estate office where Odell is working.

Archie asks Odell about Morris Althaus, pretending to be investigating a side-issue. Odell says he only met Althaus twice. Archie discovers that Odell worked for Bruner Realty before he was jailed, Mrs. Bruner's company. Mrs. Bruner even met with him and helped pay his attorney's fees. Morris Althaus was also at the meeting. Archie is certain it can't be a coincidence.

Archie arranges to have lunch with Mrs. Bruner at Rusterman's Restaurant and asks her about Frank Odell and Morris Althaus. She denies hiding anything from Wolfe or knowing anything substantial about the murder. Her secretary, Sarah Dacos, lives in Morris Althaus's building. On the night of the murder, she saw men she thought were FBI agents leaving Althaus's apartment. After lunch, Archie asks Mrs. Bruner to have Sarah Dacos meet him and Wolfe at Rusterman's at 9:00 that evening. After Mrs. Bruner leaves, Archie muses that Sarah Dacos can't be the person who told the police about the FBI agents, since she wouldn't have seen their license plate. He calls Wolfe to tell him to come to Rusterman's that evening and then calls Mrs. Althaus to say he's coming to see her.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The author doesn't reveal the plan that Wolfe has hatched. Although the narrator, Archie, knows what's going on, the reader is kept in the dark to create suspense about what will happen. Wolfe has no new information about the FBI. How can he have a plan to fulfill his client's nearly impossible task? The plan includes unlikely characters, fellow orchid-grower Lewis Hewitt and the Ten for Aristocracy, a club of ten men who enjoy fine dining. These are more characters in Wolfe and Archie's network of helpers. They seem unlikely suspects to assist in countering the FBI, which builds the reader's curiosity.

Meanwhile, Archie continues the investigation into Althaus's murder. Frank Odell leads Archie back to Mrs. Bruner. The novel never explains why Odell's connection with Mrs. Bruner is not coincidence. The reader might infer that, since Archie uncovers that Susan Dacos is involved with Morris Althaus, she met him initially when he came to Mrs. Bruner's office to meet with Odell. Archie is quickly led from Frank Odell to Sarah Dacos, who is revealed as another witness to the murder.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Archie is back at Rusterman's Restaurant when Wolfe arrives, out of sorts from being away from home. Archie reports what he's discovered, including what he found out from Mrs. Althaus, that she never heard her son mention Sarah Dacos. Then, Archie and Wolfe eat dinner, and afterward, Sarah Dacos comes to the restaurant. Mrs. Bruner has told Sarah why Wolfe and Archie want to see her, and to Archie, she looks less than happy. Wolfe asks how well she knew Morris Althaus, and Sarah says she did not know him well. She says that, when she moved into the building, she realized that she'd met Morris Althaus before at her employer's office. After that, they dated a couple times a month, but not seriously.

Wolfe asks Sarah about the night of the murder. Sarah says that she went out to a lecture on photography, alone. She returned to her apartment at ten minutes until eleven and was about to go to bed when she heard noises. She looked out the window, and saw three men exiting, presumably from Morris Althaus's apartment directly above hers. She did not see their faces or notice anything special about them. She hadn't heard them in Althaus's apartment, but she says that she knows it has a thick rug because she's been in it three or four times.

Sarah says she learned Althaus was dead the next morning, when the cleaning woman woke her up. Sarah phoned the police, and she says she told them about the three men. Sarah admits she has no real reason to think the men were FBI agents and says that she was, to some extent, playing to her boss's biases. Archie questions her, and Sarah says she last saw Althaus three days before his death and last dated him a month before. She didn't know about the FBI story, and she doesn't recognize the names of Marian Hinkley, Timothy Quayle, or Vincent Yarmack. Archie sees her out and then returns to Wolfe.

Archie tells Wolfe that he thinks Sarah is lying. She must have some reason for believing the men were FBI agents. He suggests that Sarah and Althaus were intimate and that she knew he was working on the FBI story. Wolfe tells Archie to get the truth. Archie says he'll think about it, but meanwhile, he suggests that they visit Cramer to encourage the FBI to think they've got hot information about Morris Althaus's murder. Wolfe doesn't want to give anything to Cramer yet, though. He tells Archie that they're going home.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Wolfe dislikes disruption. He doesn't like leaving his house and being out in the world. Archie enjoys action and excitement, but Wolfe prefers a protected calm. Wolfe's investigation of the FBI disrupts his life more than most jobs, and he is in a foul mood

when he arrives at Rusterman's. His routine is disrupted, and he has been torn away from his usual pleasures.

Sarah Dacos is the first real lead in the investigation into Morris Althaus's death. Archie is convinced that she is lying and that she has some reason to know that the three men leaving Althaus's apartment are FBI agents. He doesn't know what the reason is, but a lie is a clue. No one lies unless they have something to hide, and it's Archie's desire to uncover lies and secrets. Ironically, Mrs. Bruner's goal is to keep her own secrets hidden.

Wolfe and Archie have different motives. Wolfe is always driven by his main goal, to satisfy his client. Archie, however, wants to uncover the murderer and also help Cramer, who came to him for assistance. This leads to conflict. While Archie wants to turn over what he's uncovered to Cramer, Wolfe wants to sit on the information.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

The next morning, Saturday, an article appears in the paper announcing a dinner of the Ten for Aristology on Thursday, with Wolfe and Archie as guests and Fritz Brenner as chef. Wolfe's plan is underway. Archie feels pressure to finish his investigation of Sarah Dacos before the event, so he gets the key to Morris Althaus's apartment from Althaus's mother. Archie looks around Althaus's apartment, noticing the photos of Althaus's father and mother. He dislikes Althaus's choice of modern art, which doesn't look like anything to him. Archie searches the apartment thoroughly, and in a bottom drawer in the bedroom, he finds a nude photo of Althaus with a poem written on the back. The verse seems vaguely familiar to Archie.

Archie goes to see Mrs. Bruner and gets samples of Sarah Dacos's handwriting. Then he returns to Morris Althaus's apartment to compare them to the photograph. The handwriting matches. Sarah Dacos wrote the poem on the back of the picture, and so she lied about her relationship with Althaus. He phones Mrs. Althaus and casually asks her permission to take with him a photo of a man he found in her son's apartment. She agrees. He also takes a look at the lock on Sarah Dacos's apartment on his way out.

Before reporting to Wolfe, Archie calls Lily Rowan, his sometime girlfriend, and reads her the poem from the back of the photo. Lily recognizes it as a modified version of a stanza from Keats. Archie goes home and has dinner, and then he joins Wolfe in the office. They turn up the radio to talk without being overheard. Archie pretends to Wolfe that he recognized the poem on his own, and he says that Sarah may only be hiding the affair, or she might have killed Althaus out of jealousy. Archie wants to investigate, but Wolfe is afraid the FBI will find out they suspect Sarah Dacos instead of an FBI agent.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Wolfe's plans for dealing with the FBI are revealed slowly and tantalizingly to the reader to heighten anticipation and suspense. Archie reads an article in the newspaper announcing the upcoming dinner that it says Wolfe is planning to attend. The reader knows that the dinner is part of Wolfe's plans, but not why or how.

Wolfe has told Archie to find out if Sarah Dacos is lying, presumably expecting him to romance it out of her. Archie downplays his ability to romance any information required out of any young, available female. Instead, Archie continues his investigation of Sarah Dacos by quietly searching Morris Althaus's apartment. He immediately hits upon a clue, uncovering that Sarah did indeed have an "intimate" relationship with Althaus.

By phoning Lily Rowan to find out the origin of the poem, Archie shows his pride. He enjoys displaying his knowledge of poetry to Wolfe, even though he's exaggerated his own aptitude. The conflict between Wolfe and Archie that began in the last chapter

about how much emphasis to play on the murder continues in this one. Wolfe does not want to endanger his plan to trap the FBI, but Archie is driven to investigate the killing.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Archie is bothered by having a lead about the Morris Althaus murder and not being able to follow it. He's also concerned that Wolfe's plan won't go right. He calls Lewis Hewitt, and Hewitt confirms that he's gotten two actors. Archie is distressed that Hewitt's forgotten to ask if the actor who will play Archie can drive. Other arrangements are going as planned. Wolfe and Archie have decided that Archie shouldn't risk going to Wragg to try to sell him non-existent information they've uncovered on the homicide.

On Wednesday morning, Archie decides to break into Sarah Dacos's apartment and search it. He calls her office to make sure she's there, and then he goes to her apartment and enters with a key from his collection of generic keys. He searches her apartment quickly, afraid that the cleaning woman will come any minute, and he almost misses finding the gun hidden at the bottom of a hat box in the bedroom closet. Archie is convinced the gun is Morris Althaus's and that Sarah Dacos shot him. He doesn't want to remove it from the apartment, for fear it could get thrown out as evidence, so he hides it in Sarah Dacos's sofa, just in case she tries to get rid of it. When Archie returns home, he reports to Wolfe.

Wolfe's plan is about to come to a head. Archie checks on the arrangements. Arrangements have been made for four house guests. At twenty to two, a truck arrives carrying six large wooden boxes labeled as orchids. The movers transport the boxes inside and then leave. Wolfe and Archie begin unscrewing the crates. The first one contains Saul Panzer. Ashley Jarvis and Dale Kirby are in the next two boxes. They're actors Hewitt hired to play Wolfe and Archie, respectively. Hewitt has paid each \$500, and each will receive \$500 more from Wolfe. They know that they aren't to speak or appear at the windows, since the house is watched. The other three boxes contain two more private detectives, Orrie Cather and Fred Durkin, plus supplies. After the men stretch their limbs, Wolfe pays the actors and promises them another \$1,000 each for their trouble.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

The conflict between Nero Wolfe and Archie over investigating Althaus's murder comes to a head when Archie takes matters into his own hands. He is unable to sit still and let the murder go unsolved. Archie ironically resorts to the same kind of illegal activities that the FBI participates in by breaking into Sarah Dacos's apartment in the cause of justice. He finds the murder weapon there, but he cannot use it as evidence because his actions are illegal. Archie is on the same slippery slope as the powerful and unchecked FBI, except that his illegal actions are more dangerous to him, since he lacks the FBI's power.

As Archie uncovers evidence of the murder, the story of Wolfe's trap for the FBI begins to come to a climax as well. Two actors and three detectives arrive secretly at Wolfe's brownstone, packed into boxes labeled as orchids. Wolfe continues to use the FBI's surveillance against them. He begins this policy when he instructs Archie to insert untrue sentences into his reports, raising a finger to let Wolfe know what's untrue. Now, he continues controlling the information that the FBI receive by creating the illusion that no one is in the house but Wolfe and his normal staff.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

The next day, with the actors and detectives gathered in the house but disallowed from speaking or making noise, is torture for Archie. However, he is amused by Jarvis learning Wolfe's movements by studying Wolfe walking down the stairs. Archie also spends some time discussing his driving style with Kirby. On Thursday, Fritz heads to Lewis Hewitt's to prepare the meal, and Theodore Horstmann, Wolfe's orchid gardener, leaves early. Kirby and Jarvis, impersonating Wolfe and Archie, leave in the car for Lewis Hewitt's lunch.

Wolfe, Archie, Saul, Fred, and Orrie are left alone in the brownstone. They take up their positions throughout the house and wait in the darkness. After almost an hour of waiting, a shadow appears in the doorway. Two men are outside, picking the lock. Archie, who is stationed in the hallway, signals the others in the front room and the dining room. After about ten minutes, the front door opens. Archie moves into the office. When the FBI men enter, Archie turns on the lights and points his gun at them. Orrie and Saul have them covered from the other side.

Wolfe enters and tells Archie to call the police. The men wait until Archie has picked up the phone to identify themselves as FBI agents. They claim that the door wasn't locked, but Wolfe points out that he has five men to swear otherwise. He says he doesn't believe the men are FBI agents and tells Archie to go ahead and phone the police. The FBI agents produce their ID. Wolfe asks to examine the credentials, and then he locks them in his desk and tells the agents to leave. He is keeping the credentials as evidence that FBI agents broke into his house. The detectives celebrate their success, and Archie calls Hewitt and finds out that the dinner went well. The two actors were amusing. Special Agent Richard Wragg calls, as expected, and Archie makes an appointment with him for the next morning at 11:00.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

The detectives and actors must act out a lengthy charade, living in complete silence to fool the FBI into thinking that only Wolfe and his normal staff are in the house. Archie is a person of action, and the imposed silence and inaction weighs heavily on him. Wolfe, a person of inaction, is tortured not by the silence as much as by being run through physical hoops by being made to walk up and down the stairs so that Kirby can study his gait.

The final act of Wolfe's plan unfolds for the reader as the actors leave the house and the detectives wait for the FBI to appear. Wolfe has controlled the flow of information from the brownstone to the FBI through the FBI's own listening devices and surveillance. Instead of allowing the FBI to control him or stop him from doing what he wanted, he



turned the tables, in a jujitsu-type move. The FBI is powerful, but Wolfe uses their power against them. The control of information has put Wolfe in power. He has predicted the reactions from the FBI and caused them to make a misstep. Now, he has gained power and leverage over what seemed to be an all-powerful organization.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Fritz, Jarvis, and Kirby return at 1:10 in the morning. Kirby is drunk, but the car is undamaged. Archie gets up at quarter till eight, with only about six hours sleep. He arranges to talk to Mrs. Bruner at 9:45, and meanwhile, he breakfasts with the other men. When Mrs. Bruner phones him at a drugstore down the street, he tells her to be at the office at 10:45. Then, guarded by Saul, Fred, and Orrie, Archie walks to the bank to deposit the FBI credentials in a safe deposit box.

When Mrs. Bruner arrives, Archie introduces her to Saul, Fred, and Orrie and lets her know that Richard Wragg is on the way. Archie stations Mrs. Bruner at an alcove behind a picture in Wolfe's office, where she can see and hear what's going on without being seen. Then, Richard Wragg arrives, and Archie shows him into Wolfe's office.

Wragg asks Wolfe for the credentials Wolfe took from the two FBI agents. Wolfe refuses. Wolfe gives Wragg his agreement with Mrs. Bruner to read and tells Wragg that he plans to keep the credentials unless ordered to release them by a court of law, which would mean exposing the illegal actions of FBI agents. Wragg refuses to admit that the FBI has been spying on Mrs. Bruner, but Wolfe makes a deal with Wragg that the FBI will not, from this point on, spy on Mrs. Bruner or Wolfe in any way. In exchange, Wolfe promises to leave the credentials in his safe deposit box.

Wragg asks Wolfe why he's been investigating Morris Althaus, and Wolfe tells Wragg he's prepared to relieve Wragg's concern that his agents killed Althaus. He tells Wragg to be prepared to come back when Wolfe calls him and bring the bullet one of his men took from Althaus's apartment. Wragg objects and finally tells Wolfe that he'll have to think about it. Once Wragg has left, Mrs. Bruner congratulates Wolfe on fulfilling her job. Wolfe warns her that her secretary is about to be arrested for murder, or at least taken in for questioning. He suggests that Mrs. Bruner tell Sarah Dacos that she's having work done on the office and send her home so that at least Sarah won't be arrested in Mrs. Bruner's office.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

After successfully taking the FBI agents' credentials, Wolfe must be able to use them to accomplish his goal. The credentials become a symbol of power. For the FBI agents, the credentials symbolize their authority over others and their ability to fight crime. Mere identification becomes almost a pass of immunity against the law. Wolfe, by taking the credentials, takes away the FBI's power. He is able to wield them as a threat and control the giant FBI machine from the comfort of his brownstone.

Wolfe's ability to blackmail the FBI through knowledge of their illicit activities underscores a weakness of the FBI. If Wolfe can gain power through the FBI's fear of

being exposed, then couldn't a criminal take advantage of the same weakness? If Wolfe can blackmail the FBI, then the FBI is vulnerable not only to its own hubris but also to corruption from outside.



# Chapters 14-15

## Chapters 14-15 Summary

Archie visits Inspector Cramer at Homicide South and gives him the nude photo of Althaus with the poem written by Sarah Dacos on the back. He also gives Cramer the other samples of Sarah Dacos's handwriting. Then, he bets Cramer that if he gets a warrant and searches Sarah Dacos's apartment, he'll find something interesting. Cramer accuses Archie of planting something in the apartment, but Archie says he didn't. He says he has no more information for now. Cramer wants to question him, but Archie leaves.

Back at Wolfe's brownstone, the actors have breakfasted and left. The free-lance detectives are also gone. Archie thinks of heading home to sleep, but instead he goes to 63 Arbor Street. He still has the key to Morris Althaus's apartment, and he goes in and waits. Sarah Dacos comes home. Then, nearly an hour later, two police cars pull up. About 20 minutes after the police go into Sarah's apartment, they leave, taking Sarah Dacos with them. Archie finally goes home, and he reassures Fritz that the house is no longer being spied on.

Archie reports to Wolfe, and Wolfe tells him to call Wragg. Before Archie can dial, though, Cramer comes to the door. Cramer is angry, but Wolfe puts him off and tells Archie to call Wragg. Wolfe gets on the phone and tells Wragg to come to his office and bring the bullet. While they wait for Wragg, Wolfe reports to Cramer everything that has happened. When Wragg arrives, Wolfe convinces Wragg to give Cramer the bullet and tell him where it came from. Cramer agrees not to call on Wragg's agents to testify, agreeing to have one of his men claim to have recovered the bullet from the scene of the crime.

Three days later, Wolfe and Archie argue about whether to include lunch at Rusterman's as an item on Mrs. Bruner's bill, even though Wolfe's food there is always on the house. Archie accuses Wolfe of trying to pad the bill so he won't have to work the rest of the year. He points out that Mrs. Bruner has agreed to pay for an expensive lawyer for Sarah Dacos, even though Sarah has confessed. They are still arguing about the bill for Rusterman's when the doorbell rings. Archie looks through the window and returns to the office. J. Edgar Hoover is at the door. Wolfe doesn't want to see him and says to let him keep ringing the bell.

## Chapters 14-15 Analysis

Once Wolfe has successfully completed his job for Mrs. Bruner, he is free to help Cramer clear up his homicide. Cramer has not quite gotten the result he wanted. He did not only want to solve a murder. He also wanted to give the FBI a black eye for interfering with his police investigation. Wolfe appeases Cramer's desire for revenge



against the FBI by telling Cramer everything that he's done. Cramer gets a kick out of the FBI being put under Wolfe's power, even though he would be appalled if Wolfe used such tricks against him.

Wragg and Cramer are clearly adversarial to each other. Wolfe has difficulty mediating between the two, although both ultimately want the same thing. Since Sarah Dacos is the killer, the solution of Cramer's homicide is good for both the FBI and for the NYPD. The clear wrangling between the local and federal law enforcement reveals another weakness in the system. If the FBI and the NYPD had cooperated to begin with, Sarah Dacos might have been arrested long ago.

Wolfe shows his ultimate opinion of the FBI when J. Edgar Hoover, who is never named in the novel but called "the big fish" appears at his doorstep. Wolfe does not even want to talk to Hoover, one of the most powerful men in the country. He leaves the head of the FBI ringing his doorbell, the final snub.

# Characters

## Nero Wolfe

Nero Wolfe is an eccentric but brilliant New York detective. He encases himself in the cocoon of his New York brownstone, preferring as little contact with the outside world as possible. In his carefully controlled environment, he enjoys gourmet food cooked by a private chef, exotic orchids grown by a world-class orchid grower, beer, and books. His goal is to work as little as possible (and charge as much as possible) to maintain his protected lifestyle. Wolfe is all about brains and rationalism, never leaving his brownstone on business.

Wolfe is drawn in to accepting Mrs. Bruner's job when she offers him a one-hundred-thousand-dollar retainer. The large check offers him months of not having to work, and Wolfe is willing to face even the most daunting of foes for that opportunity. When the job is begun, Wolfe focuses on the main task of forcing the FBI to stop bothering his client, showing little interest in uncovering the truth about Morris Althaus's murder, except as it affects his plans for dealing with the FBI.

Wolfe is extraordinarily confident in his own abilities. While Archie concentrates on all the things that might go wrong with Wolfe's plans, Wolfe offhandedly takes for granted the fact that everything will unfold properly. His plan is entirely conceived and created based on Wolfe's thoughts and predictions, with only the slightest amount of outside information. The only information Wolfe uses to build his plan is the knowledge that Wragg likely suspects one of his men of murdering Morris Althaus. With that one piece of information, Wolfe is able to manipulate the FBI into his control.

## Archie Goodwin

Archie Goodwin is Nero Wolfe's assistant. A top-notch, tough detective in his own right, Archie acts as Wolfe's surrogate when an investigation requires legs and muscle. Archie is quick-witted but also more emotionally included than Wolfe. He likes to move when he's tense and when he wants to think. He knows how to fight and how to handle a gun, and he's at home in almost any situation. Archie enjoys action and women. He is able to think, but he's better at reacting.

Archie's first reaction to Mrs. Bruner's case is to reject it. He sees the job as impossible and the FBI as a foe that's too large to defeat. Wolfe says that Archie is reacting out of fear of a bully, but Archie refuses to acknowledge his reaction as cowardice, while not giving a reason or explanation why it's not. When Wolfe says that part of Archie's argument is irrelevant, Archie calmly quips that he's often irrelevant, showing that Archie does not focus on pure logic. As soon as Wolfe agrees to the job, Archie jumps on board, if not wholeheartedly.



Archie's motivation isn't merely to fulfill an obligation to Mrs. Bruner. Wolfe is only secondarily concerned with the murder of Morris Althaus, but Archie fills a personal obligation to find the murderer. Wolfe is completely rational when he tells Archie not to disrupt the bigger plan against the FBI by continuing the investigation into Althaus's death. Archie, though, does not share this complete rationalism. He must fulfill his own personal desire to find out who the murderer is and expose her.

## **Rachel (Mrs. Lloyd) Bruner**

Rachel Bruner is a wealthy widow who read the book *The FBI Nobody Knows* and thought it was important. She sent 10,000 copies of the book to important people across the U.S. Now, the FBI is spying on Mrs. Bruner. She hires Nero Wolfe to make the FBI stop their espionage of her, giving him \$100,000 as a retainer.

## **Lon Cohen**

Lon Cohen is the editor of the *New York Gazette*. He is a friend and contact of Archie Goodwin and provides him with information in exchange for stories. Cohen provides Wolfe and Archie with a list of rumored illicit activities of the FBI in and around New York.

## **Fritz Brenner**

Fritz is Nero Wolfe's live-in chef. He becomes nervous at the warnings that the FBI will be investigating them and listening to phone calls.

## **Sarah Dacos**

Sarah Dacos is Mrs. Bruner's beautiful secretary. Archie meets her when he first visits Mrs. Bruner's office, and later he makes the connection that Sarah Dacos lives in the Village, and Morris Althaus did as well. When he realizes that Mrs. Bruner has a connection with Morris Althaus, Mrs. Bruner reveals that Sarah Dacos lives in Morris Althaus's building and that she saw men she assumed were FBI agents leaving the apartment on the day of the murder. Archie finds evidence that Sarah Dacos was having an affair with Morris Althaus, and finally, he finds Morris Althaus's gun hidden in Sarah Dacos's apartment. Sarah Dacos is the murderer Wolfe has been searching for. Wolfe convinces the FBI to give the New York police the bullet they found in Althaus's apartment, so that Cramer can arrest Sarah Dacos for murder.

## **Adrian Evers**

Adrian Evers is being investigated by the FBI. Archie visits him to try to find out information on illegal FBI activities, but Evers is afraid to talk.



## **Dr. Vollmer**

Dr. Vollmer is a physician whose house and office is down the street from Wolfe's brownstone. Vollmer is both a physician and friend to Wolfe, and Cramer uses Vollmer to deliver a message to Wolfe in secret.

## **Inspector Cramer**

Cramer is the head of Homicide in Wolfe's local police division. Cramer meets with Archie secretly to tell him that the FBI is trying to revoke Wolfe and Archie's detective licenses. Cramer knows that three FBI agents were at the scene of Morris Althaus's murder, and he thinks one of the FBI agents is the killer. He gives Wolfe the information because he doesn't want the FBI to get away with murder in his city.

## **Morris Althaus**

Morris Althaus was a writer who was writing an article exposing the FBI's wrongdoing when he was murdered. Cramer knows that three FBI agents were at Althaus's apartment the night of the murder, and he's convinced that one of the FBI agents killed him. Althaus was also a womanizer, who had an intimate relationship with his downstairs neighbor Sarah Dacos. Wolfe investigates Althaus's death and discovers that Sarah Dacos killed him and that the FBI agents stole Althaus's manuscript and notes and also took the bullet from the crime scene.

## **Special Agent Richard Wragg**

Wragg is the head of the FBI in New York. He believes that one of his men has killed Morris Althaus. Using the identification of two FBI agents who broke into Wolfe's house, Wolfe blackmails Wragg into stopping surveillance on Mrs. Burton. Wolfe also convinces Wragg to give the bullet from the Althaus murder scene to Cramer, so that Cramer can convict the real murderer.

## **Marian Hinckley**

Marian is Morris Althaus's fiancé.

## **David Althaus**

Morris Althaus's 60-year-old father, David Althaus is disappointed that his son became a writer instead of taking over the family clothing business, Peggy Pilgrim dresses and suits.





## **Ivana Althaus**

Ivana Althaus is Morris Althaus's loving mother. She wants his murderer caught.

## **Timothy Quayle**

Quayle is a senior editor of Tick-Tock magazine. He is infatuated with Morris Althaus's fiancé, Marian Hinckley.

## **Vincent Yarmack**

Yarmack is a senior editor of Tick-Tock magazine. He was working on Althaus's FBI story before Althaus was killed.

## **Bernard Fromm**

Bernard Fromm is an attorney who represents David Althaus.

## **Frank Odell**

Frank Odell is a real estate agent. He went to jail because of an article about fraud written by Morris Althaus. Archie learns that Odell worked for Bruner Realty before he was jailed.

## **Ten for Aristology**

The Ten for Aristology is a group of gourmets. At a previous meeting of the group that Wolfe attended, one of the members was murdered. Wolfe arranges a meeting of the Ten for Aristology, pretending that he and Archie will attend and that Fritz will cook, leaving the brownstone empty.

## **Lewis Hewitt**

Hewitt is a fellow orchid-grower and friend of Wolfe who lives on Long Island. He is also a member of the Ten for Aristology. Hewitt helps Wolfe arrange a meeting of the Ten for Aristology.

## **Saul Panzer**

Unobtrusive Saul Panzer is the best free-lance private investigator in New York and the first person Wolfe and Archie call on when they need an extra hand.



## **Lily Rowan**

Archie maintains a romantic relationship with wealthy and unattached Lily Rowan. She is able to identify the poem that Sarah Dacos adapted and wrote on the back of the photo of Morris Althaus.

## **Fred Durkin**

A friendly but menacing-looking family man, Fred Durkin is one of the private detectives that Nero Wolfe hires to help with his plans.

## **Orrie Cather**

Orrie Cather is a good-looking, smooth private detective that Nero Wolfe hires to help with his plans.

## **Ashley Jarvis**

Jarvis is an actor hired by Lewis Hewitt to impersonate Wolfe at the gathering of the Ten for Aristocracy and trick the FBI into thinking Wolfe's brownstone is empty.

## **Dale Kirby**

Kirby is an actor hired by Lewis Hewitt to impersonate Archie at the gathering of the Ten for Aristocracy and trick the FBI into thinking Wolfe's brownstone is empty.

## **Theodore Horstmann**

Horstmann is Wolfe's orchid gardener.



## Objects/Places

### Nero Wolfe's Brownstone

Wolfe's office and home are in an old New York brownstone with four floors plus a basement. Wolfe rarely leaves his brownstone, and he almost never leaves it on business. The brownstone forms a protective cocoon for Wolfe, who dislikes disruption.

### The Check for One Hundred Thousand and 00/100

Mrs. Bruner entices Nero Wolfe to take her job against the FBI with a retainer check for an even one hundred thousand dollars.

### The FBI Nobody Knows

The FBI Nobody Knows is a book critical of the FBI and its tactics. Mrs. Bruner bought 10,000 copies of the book and sent them to 10,000 influential people across the United States.

### 63 Arbor Street

63 Arbor Street is the apartment building in the Village where Morris Althaus and Sarah Dacos both live. Morris Althaus's apartment is above Sarah Dacos's.

### Tick-Tock Magazine

Morris Althaus was writing his exposé on the FBI for Tick-Tock magazine, and his fiancé Marian Hinckley works for Tick-Tock.

### The Nude Photo of Morris Althaus

When Archie searches Morris Althaus's apartment, he finds a nude photo of Althaus with a poem written on the back of it. He discovers that the poem is in Sarah Dacos's handwriting, revealing that she's lied about her relationship with Althaus.

### The Smith & Wesson 38-Caliber Gun

Morris Althaus owned a 38-caliber Smith & Wesson that has gone missing after his murder. Archie finds the gun in a hat box in Sarah Dacos's closet and hides it in the box spring of her sofa, so she can't get rid of it before the police find it with a proper search warrant. The gun is the murder weapon.



## **The Brownstone's Basement**

Fritz lives in a room in the basement of Wolfe's brownstone. The basement also houses a pool table where Archie sometimes plays. Wolfe and Archie use the basement to hold private conversations, in case the FBI have a means of eavesdropping on conversations in the office.

## **Bruner Realty**

Archie discovers that, before he went to prison, Frank Odell was working for Bruner Realty, one of Mrs. Bruner's companies.

## **Rusterman's Restaurant**

Rusterman's Restaurant was once owned by Wolfe's good friend Marko Vukcic, who has passed away. The restaurant was one of the best in New York but has declined since Marko's death. Archie takes Mrs. Bruner to Rusterman's for a private conversation, and later Wolfe meets with Sarah Dacos there. All of Wolfe and Archie's meals at Rusterman's are on the house, and Archie objects to charging Mrs. Bruner for the meals as expenses.

## **The Bullet**

The bullet that killed Morris Altaus was taken from the scene of the crime by the FBI agents who visited his apartment soon after the killing. Wolfe convinces Wragg to turn over the bullet to Cramer.

## **The FBI Agents' Credentials**

Wolfe takes the credentials of the FBI agents who break into his house to use as leverage to stop the FBI from harassing his client.



## Social Sensitivity

The Doorbell Rang begins with "a private citizen who thinks the FBI is getting too big for its britches." Rachel Bruner, a very wealthy widow, having read *The FBI Nobody Knows* by Fred Cook, responds with a spectacular gesture of public-spirited indignation: She buys ten thousand copies of the book and sends them, to important people all over the country. The Bureau reacts by subjecting her, and those close to her, to intensive surveillance and investigation. Her lawyers and her influential friends shrug helplessly when she asks them to do something about this persecution, so she hires Nero Wolfe.

Even Wolfe is not so arrogant as to take on the FBI lightly. Archie Goodwin, ever intrepid and willing to tweak the nose of institutions, assumes that they will refuse the job. But Wolfe perceives the real issue at stake; looking past the common sense of Archie's objections, he points out what his advice amounts to: "I should decline it, not because it would be difficult and perhaps impossible — I have taken many jobs that seemed impossible — but because it would give offense to a certain man and his organization and he would retaliate." Wolfe will never let himself be bullied, not even by the government. Rachel Bruner has committed no crime, and yet she is being hounded. Wolfe believes that not even the FBI is above the law, and so he undertakes to curb J. Edgar Hoover and his minions.

By writing and publishing the novel, Stout undertakes a similar mission. He feels so deeply about this issue that he discards the usual polite convention, not even deigning to soften his attack on Hoover by inventing a pseudonym for him. In effect, he and Wolfe say the same thing to Hoover and to the public: the FBI may not trample on the rights of American citizens.

## Techniques

As a series goes on, the fiction accumulates and matures until it takes on almost the nature of reality. Although they never age, Wolfe and Archie acquire more of a past with each volume.

Myriad details of their relationship, their routines, their methods, and their connections with others become so well-established that they function as facts. Thus, although Stout claimed that he never revised or even reread anything he wrote, he had ever-increasing intertextual resources at his disposal, and he knew how to use them. Most of what appears in *The Doorbell Rang* has a familiar flavor; the few genuinely new features have a heightened effect. Rex Stout has exploited the potential of the series more felicitously perhaps than any other author of popular fiction. *The Doorbell Rang* may or may not be his best Nero Wolfe novel, but as one of the latest it exists in a rich context. It can be read with pleasure on its own, but the more preceding volumes one knows, the greater the pleasure.



# Themes

## Power and Authority

The FBI in *The Doorbell Rang* has almost unlimited power and authority. This gives the FBI the ability to control nearly anyone. When Mrs. Bruner performs an antagonistic action, sending out books critical of the FBI to important people, she finds herself under attack without recourse. The FBI has the power and authority to investigate her illegally without repercussions. Nothing controls or contains them. They have manpower, technology, funding, and immunity to prosecution. They have too much power. The excess of power leads to the abuse of power, since Mrs. Bruner is persecuted only for spreading her ideas and beliefs, not for any wrongdoing.

When Wolfe first takes the case, Archie is against it. He sees the power and the authority of the FBI as insurmountable, that it is impossible to fight against them. The authority of the New York Police Department, which should include the ability to find and prosecute murderers, is undermined by the superior authority and power of the FBI. Though the NYPD might have legitimate authority over the FBI, it has no practical power. Wolfe, on the other hand, has no authority whatever to oppose the FBI. He is a private citizen, without any official support.

Wolfe must gain power over the FBI. To do this, he finds leverage to use against them. Wolfe knows that one of the FBI's weaknesses is the desire to keep its agents safe and secure against bad press. To maintain authority and power, the FBI must keep its illicit activities secret. Wolfe gains power by goading the FBI into an illicit action and getting evidence of what they've done. The FBI agents' credentials give Wolfe power over the FBI, and he is able to bend the agency to his will.

## Secrets and Privacy

In *The Doorbell Rang*, the flow of information is crucial. The FBI may be able to listen in to conversations in Wolfe's brownstone, even down in the basement. Wolfe and Archie must cover their conversation with noise from the TV and radio. They must carefully keep their secrets if they are to defeat the FBI, which trades in overcoming the secrets of others. Mrs. Bruner herself has secrets to hide, and so Wolfe and Archie become the protectors of secrets and the privacy to keep secrets. Yet, Archie is also a revealer of secrets. He wants to reveal the murderer of Morris Althaus, just as Althaus strove to reveal the secrets of the FBI.

The FBI's illegal means of investigation is an open secret. Everyone knows what's going on, although it's taboo to talk about it. In part, this is because the FBI is powerful, but also because people turn a blind eye to the invasion of privacy in the pursuit of justice. No one in *The Doorbell Rang* favors complete openness. Mrs. Bruner wants to keep her secrets. Wolfe and Archie want their privacy. The FBI wants its secrets.



Still, as investigators, the FBI and Wolfe both make a living on revealing secrets. The FBI covertly investigates, planting illegal wiretaps. Archie, similarly, uses illegal methods to investigate. He breaks into Sarah Dacos's apartment to find out the truth about the murder of Morris Althaus. When are privacy and secrets appropriate, and when are they inappropriate? The novel never clearly defines a line between privacy and openness. Secrets that are wrong, like murders, should be exposed, but privacy should be preserved. How can privacy and exposing wrongdoing be balanced?

## Mind versus Muscle

In the duo of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, Nero Wolfe represents the power of the mind, while Archie Goodwin represents the power of the body. Archie is active and quick, while Wolfe is a genius who sits in his comfortable, cushioned home and thinks, like a brain cushioned inside its skull. As a pair, they have all the elements necessary to solve crimes, but Wolfe is the most powerful motivator, often leaving Archie in the dark as he comes up with schemes that will lead them to victory.

As Wolfe comes up against the FBI in *The Doorbell Rang*, Wolfe's mind must battle against a powerful machine of muscle. The FBI is not a single physical enemy, but it acts as a strong physical force, overpowering its enemies. The FBI uses bullying force to attack its enemies and get what it wants. It controls the flow of information and can react with hundreds of agents to a threat. Its physical force and power is overwhelming.

In the novel, Wolfe's powerful mind overcomes the force of the entire FBI. Wolfe never finds much outside information about the FBI. The only information he uses is that Wragg probably thinks one of his agents is guilty of murdering Morris Althaus. With this small piece of information and only a ragtag group of human contacts, Wolfe is able to orchestrate a trap to bend the powerful FBI to his will. While the FBI has the means to control information, Wolfe is just as powerful at controlling what the FBI knows. While the FBI has the means to attack, Wolfe is just as powerful at evading. Mind wins out over muscle.

## Significant Topics

The dominant theme of *The Doorbell Rang* is that the FBI has become the enemy. Stout does not question the need for such an agency, or call for its abolition. As he repeats throughout, however, the Bureau seems to have lost sight of its purpose and blurred its ideals. Every operation it carries out in the novel is for its own defense as an institution; it persecutes people whose only crime is daring to criticize the FBI. Federal agents tail Rachel Bruner and her associates, bug their homes and workplaces, tap their telephones, and interrogate anyone who will answer. Archie sees the purpose of all this at once: "They're not just riding her; they're after something that would really hurt, and that would take a lot of sting out of the book." The Bureau gets involved in the murder of Morris Althaus because three agents have been sent to his apartment to do a "bag job" — that is, to steal material he has gathered for an article on the FBI. Wolfe gains the





upper hand by trapping two agents who have been dispatched to his home to do another "bag job." Stout wants the point to be absolutely clear: These are not the proper activities of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A related theme involves the reactions of honest citizens to these abuses.

It is appropriate for Al Capone to snarl at the very mention of the FBI in old television shows, but in this book everyone hates it. Lon Cohen, a canny newspaperman, supplies Wolfe with unpublishable information about recent illegal operations of the Bureau. The wealthy orchid fancier Lewis Hewitt takes a boyish delight in helping Wolfe set his elaborate trap. Most significantly, Wolfe's eternal nemesis, Inspector Cramer, joins ranks with him against the common foe. He thwarts an attempt to take away Wolfe's license as a private investigator, and astonishes Archie by telling him all about the murder of Morris Althaus. He does so because he is convinced that agents of the FBI committed the murder, and that Wolfe is the only man living with any chance of proving their guilt. He growls: "I'd give a year's pay to hook them and make it stick. This isn't their town, it's mine. The New York Police Department. They've had us gritting our teeth for years. Now, by God, they think they can break and enter people's houses and commit homicide in my territory, and laugh at me!"

By uniting so many disparate people in common cause against the abuses of the Bureau, Stout is expressing his faith in the power of vigilant citizens to resist and correct the excesses of their own government. Unaided, Wolfe would have failed; with a representative sample of the American public on his side, he wins. So complete is his victory that J. Edgar Hoover in person comes ringing his doorbell, and can be ignored: "Let him get a sore finger."

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first person perspective, from the point of view of Nero Wolfe's assistant, Archie. The reader tags along with Archie as the story unfolds, uncovering the solution to the mystery as Archie learns it. The major exception to this is when Nero Wolfe reveals to Archie his plan to outwit the FBI and collect a healthy fee from his client, Mrs. Bruner. Wolfe seems to have no real leverage to use on the FBI, but nonetheless, he has developed a plan. The reader first learns of the plan when Archie comes back from an errand to find Wolfe sitting in a chair, eyes closed, lips pushing in and out, thinking. Though Wolfe tells his plan to Archie, it's kept a secret from the reader.

As the reader follows Archie from this point, Wolfe's plan is tantalizingly revealed bit by bit. Lewis Hewitt and the Ten for Aristocracy, unlikely allies against the powerful FBI, are part of the plan. Hewitt has hired two actors and Archie insists that one must know how to drive. A dinner is arranged with the Ten for Aristocracy, and announcements appear in the paper. The reader has only a vague anticipation of events as they near their climax. The actors and detectives arrive confined in orchid cases and cannot speak a word during their 24-hour wait. The actors leave, impersonating Wolfe and Archie, and the supposedly empty house is filled with five private investigators. The reader's excitement is increased by realizing what is happening as the trap unfolds and is finally sprung on the unwitting FBI agents whom Wolfe anticipated would take the opportunity to break into the house.

## Setting

The novel is set in New York City during the reign of J. Edgar Hoover at the FBI. One of the main stars of the novel is a book called *The FBI Nobody Knows*, an exposé on the FBI written by Fred J. Cook in 1964. The book is critical of the FBI, calling it above the law and calling out its illegal methods, which would be revealed more fully in the 1970s. By writing *The Doorbell Rang*, starring his popular detective Nero Wolfe, Rex Stout effectively did the same thing Mrs. Bruner does in his novel. Mrs. Bruner sends 10,000 copies of Cook's book to important people throughout the U.S. Rex Stout makes Cook's book a star of his detective story, publicizing it to his wide readership. Like his character, Rex Stout is trying to create change in his society by calling attention to the wrongdoings of the FBI.

Although Archie Goodwin ranges throughout New York in his quest to find a murderer and also to defeat the FBI, the most important setting in the novel is Nero Wolfe's brownstone. Wolfe retreats into his comfortable home to protect himself from the "maelstrom" of life outside. When a guest gets aggressive, Archie can physically evict him. All Wolfe's needs can be met through messengers and deliveries to his safe haven.



The brownstone is secure and calm. However, when Wolfe finds himself pitted against the FBI, the brownstone is no longer secure. Wolfe finds himself forced to go to the basement for private conversations and unable to speak his own mind in his own office. The brownstone is sacrosanct to Wolfe, making its invasion by the FBI's listening devices and ultimately agents a horrible crime.

## Language and Meaning

Nero Wolfe loves language, and he chooses words carefully. When Nero Wolfe talks, he uses long words, but he also uses favorite words, like "flummery," "fatuous," and "futile." Archie remarks that Wolfe might be better at reporting events than he is, if you like long words. Wolfe's words are carefully chosen, though, for meaning and connotation. Wragg, Cramer, and Archie are as careful in their words as Wolfe, picking and choosing the right meanings to convey, which is especially necessary in a battle where the FBI is always presumed to be listening. Wragg even refuses to admit that he's had Mrs. Bruner under surveillance, and Wolfe must reword his demand to account for Wragg's denial.

Archie also likes words. When Wolfe and Archie interview Sarah Dacos, they ask if her relationship with Morris Althaus was "intimate." She denies that it was, no matter how the word "intimate" is defined. Because speaking of sex is taboo, the word "intimate" becomes a euphemism for sex. Sarah denies both closeness and a sexual relationship with Althaus, but the word "intimate" becomes a banner for Archie. He refers to it again and again as he investigates and finds Sarah Dacos's poem written on the back of a nude photo of Althaus. Archie also uses metaphor in his narration, equating Wolfe's fight against the FBI to a baseball game, a fittingly American sports metaphor. Archie talks about Wolfe stealing a base by tracking down Frank Odell, and when he confronts the FBI agents that have broken into the house, he says, "Play ball!"

## Structure

Rex Stout's novel has an unusual structure because it balances multiple stories. Wolfe's main task is to stop the FBI from investigating and annoying Mrs. Bruner, his client. Wolfe's enemy, the FBI, isn't a single person, like the typical criminal antagonist of most Nero Wolfe novels. Instead, the FBI is an institution. Its agents are faceless and nameless. It spreads over the city, ubiquitous and nebulous. There is little for Wolfe to latch onto and struggle against. After Wolfe takes on the case, Archie quickly begins investigations of several possibly criminal affairs of the FBI. The reader is introduced to several stories that don't play a part in the later novel to show the scope of the FBI's activities, including possibly framing someone for espionage.

When Wolfe and Archie learn about Morris Althaus's murder, that story takes center stage and becomes a more traditional Nero Wolfe mystery. Archie sets out to find the murderer, interviewing the victim's friends, family, and associates. However, just as Archie begins getting a break in the murder, Wolfe moves off on a different tack. Wolfe's



main goal is to get the FBI to stop bothering his client, and the murder is only an indirect route to that. Wolfe sees a better route, by merely making the FBI think he is primarily interested in the murder and gathering evidence against a murderous FBI agent. Wolfe's plan builds up in the background of the novel while Archie continues his investigation. Both stories climax at nearly the same time, which Archie finding the evidence against the murderer on the same day as Wolfe's helpers arrive to pull off a charade to trap the FBI.



## Quotes

"Knowing him, I knew what he was considering. Not the job; as he had said, it was preposterous; he was looking at the beautiful fact that with a hundred grand in the till on January fifth he would need, and would accept, no jobs at all for the rest of the winter, and the spring, and even into the summer. He could read a hundred books and propagate a thousand orchids. Paradise." —Chapter 1, page 6

"You are cowed. You are daunted. Not, I concede, without reason; the hands and voices of many highly placed men have been stayed by the same trepidation. Possibly mine would be too if it were merely a matter of declining or accepting a job. But I will not return that check for one hundred thousand dollars because I am afraid of a bully. My self-esteem won't let me." —Wolfe, Chapter 2, page 17

"The client showed at the door. I hadn't heard her footsteps. That was bad. Miss Dacos was attractive, but not enough to keep me from hearing footsteps, even though I was talking. That could only mean that my opinion of the job wouldn't let me get fully on it, all of me, and that wouldn't do." —Chapter 3, page 27

"'Capable of being wounded,' I said. 'Liable to attack or injury. That's what "vulnerable" means. It should be quite a trick to get any more vulnerable than we are now.'" —Chapter 4, page 36

"To show the kind of thinking that comes on top with no effort when I'm walking, as I crossed Washington Square I was thinking that it was a coincidence that Arbor Street was in the Village and Sarah Dacos lived in the Village. That couldn't be called a hard thought, since a quarter of a million people lived in the Village, more or less, and I have known fancier coincidences, but it's a fair sample of what my mind does when I'm walking." —Chapter 5, page 53

"I should ask a thousand questions—all night, all week. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is a formidable foe, entrenched in power and privilege. It is not rodomontade but merely a statement of fact to say that no individual or group in America would undertake the job I have assigned myself. If an agent of the FBI killed your son there is not the slightest chance that he will be brought to account unless I do it." —Wolfe, Chapter 7, page 80

"The one conclusion was that there was a needle in this haystack, and it had to be found. Wolfe had stolen another base. He had merely asked Yarmack if the articles Althaus had written for Tick-Tock were innocuous, and had merely told me to find Odell because he couldn't think of anything sensible for me, and here this was." —Chapter 8, page 96

"'I have decided,' he said, 'that every man alive today is half idiot and half hero. Only heroes could survive in the maelstrom, and only idiots would want to.'" —Wolfe, Chapter 9, page 103



"I am not a handwriting expert, but it didn't need one. The person who had written the samples had written the poetry on the back of the photograph. Probably she had also taken the photograph, but that didn't matter. I formed a conclusion. I concluded that Sarah Dacos's memory had failed her when she said that it had not progressed to intimacy." —Chapter 10, pages 118-119

"It bothered me for four days and four nights, from Saturday afternoon, when Wolfe said we would forget the murder, to Wednesday morning, when I did something about it on my own." —Chapter 11, page 125

"We didn't know the house was bugged, only that it might be. If Jarvis or Kirby caught a finger in the bathroom door and yelled ouch or goddammit, it might wreck the act, but only might, and that was the hell of it. Every time I made a trip upstairs to check that Saul or Fred or Orrie was there in the hall, and that they hadn't got fed up and started talking, I felt foolish. Grown men don't look under the bed every night to see if there's a burglar, though there might be one." —Chapter 12, page 137

"Bah. If you—no. It's simpler to rephrase it. Disregarding the past, you engage that from six o'clock today there will be by your bureau no surveillance of Mrs. Bruner or her family or associates, or her house, which includes a wiretap, and no surveillance of Mr. Goodwin or me, or my house. I engage to leave the credentials where they are, in my safe-deposit box, to take no action against your men for their invasion of my premises, and to make public no disclosure of it. That's the situation, and that's my offer." —Wolfe, Chapter 13, page 155

"When he came to the scene in the office, with the two G-men completely surrounded by guns and him dropping their credentials in his drawer, ?I saw something I had never seen before and will probably never see again, a broad smile on the face of Inspector Cramer. And it was there again when, reporting the conversation with Wragg that morning, Wolfe came to where he had told him that his word was much better." — Chapter 14, page 172

# Adaptations

Stout despised film and never authorized any cinematic or televised versions of Nero Wolfe.

For a television series, there was a two-hour pilot episode, loosely based on *The Doorbell Rang*, starring Thayer David as Nero Wolfe and Tom Mason as Archie Goodwin. Written and directed by Frank Gilroy, it was shown on ABC on December 18, 1979. The series eventually ran for one season on NBC: thirteen episodes, January 16, 1981 to August 25, 1981, with William Conrad as Wolfe and Lee Horsley as Archie.



## Key Questions

Although *The Doorbell Rang* was published thirty years ago, the events of the intervening decades have not made it irrelevant, but rather even more suitable for discussion. In his very last novel (*A Family Affair*, 1975), Stout shows Wolfe beside himself with excitement at the possibility that he might get a crack at the Watergate investigation. Wolfe is ever-alert when it comes to abuses of trust by elected or appointed officials of the government, and his words and deeds have lost none of their punch.

Aficionados of the detective novel will enjoy talking about this unusual example of the genre, in which the inevitable murder and exposure of the culprit are incidental to the real conflicts. Purists may find it stimulating to argue about whether this is, strictly speaking, a murder mystery.

1. Does Stout assign a definite and plausible motive to Rachel Bruner?

Does he expect us to approve of her sending out the ten thousand copies of the book — a gesture Wolfe calls "quixotic"?

2. Does Stout attack the FBI as an institution, or rather the "megalomaniac" J. Edgar Hoover? Does he ever state or imply what the proper functions and procedures of the Bureau should be?

3. Stout does without the painstakingly-researched details that fill more recent novels about the covert operations of government agencies. Does he succeed in creating a credible tale without such background?

4. Do the humorous touches serve merely as comic relief? Or do they reinforce in some way the themes that Stout develops in the novel? It might be helpful to try to arrive at consensus about which moments are genuinely funny.

5. Does Stout neglect the murder too much in his preoccupation with the FBI? Does the murderer — a very minor character — seem adequate for her role?

6. Is justice served by Wolfe's deal with the FBI and Inspector Cramer at the end?

7. Does Stout play fair with his readers, supplying them enough clues to enable them to match wits with Nero Wolfe?

8. Archie has his own pride and integrity, apart from his mutual commitments with Nero Wolfe. How do his ethical conflicts confirm his individuality? In what ways does his personal drama parallel Wolfe's?

9. Wolfe and Archie have the opportunity to watch actors mimic their body language. Does the experience have more than a superficial effect on them?





10. What is the point of Wolfe's cherished routines? Stout may have several purposes as a novelist; does he tell us enough to allow us to guess at Wolfe's reasons for regulating his life so stringently?



## Topics for Discussion

Archie breaks into Susan Dacos's house illegally. Is this different or more justifiable than the FBI breaking into Wolfe's house when they believe it's empty? Why or why not?

Wolfe accuses Archie of being afraid to investigate the FBI, but Archie denies the accusation. Is Archie's argument for not taking the job based on fear of the FBI?

Explain Wolfe's motivation for taking Mrs. Bruner's job.

Why does Archie feel driven to solve Morris Althaus's murder, even though Wolfe has thought of another way to fulfill his obligation to Mrs. Bruner?

Would Wolfe's plan to deal with the FBI work in real life? Why or why not?

Is Frank Odell's connection with both Mrs. Bruner and Morris Althaus coincidental?

Was it a good decision or a bad decision for Mrs. Bruner to send out copies of *The FBI Nobody Knows* to important people throughout the U.S.?

Is Nero Wolfe's investigation successful because it's skillful, lucky, or both?

Why does Inspector Cramer dislike the FBI?

If Wolfe is able to force the FBI to obey his will, what weakness does this reveal in the FBI?

## Literary Precedents

The Doorbell Rang has distant ancestors in the classic detective novel and in whistle-blowing fiction. The lone detective against the corrupt official force is a staple of crime writing; the rebellion against overweening government is standard fare. By this point in his career, however, Stout was following precedents he had set himself. He may have considered *The Maltese Falcon* "the best detective story...written in this century," as Baring-Gould claimed, but Stout was fiercely independent in all matters, and by 1965 was writing like no one but Rex Stout.

## Related Titles

The Doorbell Rang has its closest counterparts in the novella "Before I Die" (in *Trouble in Triplicate*, 1949) and the novel *In the Best Families* (1950). In both cases, Wolfe contends with formidable overlords of organized crime; in the second, he finally declares war on his Moriarty, Arnold Zeck. As in *The Doorbell Rang*, Wolfe defies an organization that even brave men say cannot be beaten. He refuses to be intimidated, and resorts to the most unorthodox measures of his career to emerge unscathed and victorious. The differences between the megalomaniacs of the underworld and those in Washington, as Stout portrays them, are negligible: He mistrusts any power not limited by law.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994