

Ten Questions for Scott Wolven

By Cortright McMeel

Scott Wolven may very well be the best short story writer of my generation. Richard Ford in comparing him to both Updike and Andre Dubus, wrote “Wolven has turned raw, unreconciled life into startling, evocative ... short stories.” He has also been compared to both short story titans Denis Johnson and Thom Jones. However, as literary as his chops are, Wolven has also been embraced by the crime fiction community; Otto Penzler included Wolven’s work seven times in his *Best American Mystery Stories* yearly anthology. As if that wasn’t impressive enough, Wolven has been included in the *Best American Noir of the Century*, edited by James Ellroy and Otto Penzler. Clearly, Wolven is an American writer whose talent straddles genres and defies easy qualification. Wildly original storytelling, realistic blue collar characters, and muscular prose: a fiery, atavistic style that hurtles the reader into a realm where sympathy is nil, consolation comes from whiskey bottles, and the best fate is to die at birth—this is Wolven.

Noir Nation: Scott, you have Richard Ford touting you as the next Andre Dubus and Ellroy and Penzler including you in the most important crime anthologies. Do you consider yourself a crime writer or a literary one?

Wolven: It’s amazing just to be named in the same sentence as Richard Ford, Andre Dubus, James Ellroy and Otto Penzler. Being included in the *Best American Noir of the Century* was a real thrill. I just try to write a good story and many of my stories have elements of crime. But my main goal is to simply always write a decent story.

Noir Nation: How old were you when you started writing stories and what were they about?

Wolven: One of my favorite things to read early-on was Sherlock Holmes. I read all the adventures many times over. In Sherlock Holmes, sometimes the mystery isn’t what it seems. Holmes has to figure it out, accompanied by the faithful Watson. Baker Street and all of London came to life for me. If I can put even a little of that into my own stories, I’ll be doing very well.

Noir Nation: You have many stories where there’s this recurring character. Specifically, the main character’s brother in your short story “Los Millionaros” (available on the Amazon Kindle). He means well, he likes his booze, he’s not afraid of other men, but he seems bred for a former age, possessed of a barbaric ferocity...like the Scottish highlands in the 14th century or the Black forest of Germany circa 900 CE. DO you consider your characters as men unfit for the modern age?

Wolven: I often write about characters in difficult circumstances and along with that comes some rough territory. Certainly many of my characters are on a long stretch of bad road—they aren't here to make other people happy and the life they're living is a tough one.

Noir Nation: If I am a young crime writer and I want to write publishable crime fiction, what are the first three books I should check out of the library?

Wolven: *The Last Good Kiss*, by James Crumley. *The Killer Inside Me*, by Jim Thompson. Any of the Burke series, by Andrew Vachss. Toss in *The Onion Field* by Joseph Wambaugh, with the forward by James Ellroy. George Pelecanos works all the angles, including the social, into his writing and if you're not watching *The Wire* and reading George's novels, you're missing out. Anthony Neil Smith is working that noir/contemporary pulp in each of his books and that makes for great reading.

Noir Nation: What do you see as evil in the world and how do you depict it?

Wolven: I think all you have to do is look around and you'll see more evil in the world than any story could ever accommodate. I try to make things as real as I can—in the words of Joseph Conrad, "to make you see."

Noir Nation: The story "El Rey" in your collection *Controlled Burn* features a bare knuckles brawler named Tom Kennedy. The story has some of the best writing about boxing I've ever read. The fights described literally have the reader bobbing and weaving and throwing jobs. Did you ever box or witness a bare knuckle brawl?

Wolven: Thanks very much for that. I grew up in a boxing town—Catskill, New York—so there were always plenty of boxers and boxing around, including Mike Tyson, Floyd Patterson, Cus D'Amato. And sure, I've seen and been around a fair number of dustups.

Noir Nation: To date you've pretty much mastered the short story. Will we be seeing any longer works of fiction? If so, can you give the *Noir Nation* readers the skinny on what it will be about?

Wolven: My novel *False Hopes* will be out early next year from Grove/Mysterious Press and if readers liked my short stories, they'll like *False Hopes*. As you know, I'm excited that three novellas will come out from Bare Knuckles Press—they'll be more like the "roman durs" from Georges Simenon. I'm looking forward to all of it being available.

Noir Nation: Since this is a magazine about *noir* fiction when I say the word *noir* what novel (or writer) comes to mind and why?

Wolven: In *The Killer Inside Me*, Jim Thompson does something that writers have been trying to replicate ever since it came out—that hard-boiled noir style. James Ellroy makes noir—he almost forces his prose to submit to the Ellroy style and he does the same with his stories. It can be

impressive. David Goodis writes about the Philadelphia that some people would look away from.

Noir Nation: Your stories are populated with convicts, loggers, lawmen, brawlers, drifters, drunks and meth heads, if you weren't a writer what would you be doing?

Wolven: Probably running a chainsaw somewhere.

Noir Nation: Your tales possess the mad spirit of the freewheeling American like Kerouac, knowledge of the world of ritualized male violence and contest like Hemingway and the insane and incessant boozing of Charles Bukowski. You have a choice to sit down at McSorley's Bar in New York with one of them for an hour, who is it and what do you talk about?

Wolven: Ha! Ha! That would be great. I'd try to talk to all three, but if I had to pick one, it would be Ernest Hemingway. I'd ask him about stories. I'd certainly talk to him about fishing. Maybe I'd tell him not to kill himself, that he should keep enjoying these drinks with me at McSorley's. It would be worth a try.

Cort McMeel is the author of the novel, SHORT, published in 2010 by St. Martins Press. He was the founder and publisher of the literary crime magazine, MURDALAND. He is also the founder and publisher of soon to be launched (Fall 2011) Bare Knuckles Press. He lives in Denver, Colorado.