

Wolfe Pack to honor late Hoosier writer

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A mystery. A brownstone. A Black Orchid weekend.

The Wolfe Pack, fans of the great detective Nero Wolfe — is gathering next weekend in New York City to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of Rex Stout, who created Wolfe and his sidekick Archie Goodwin.

In the past two weeks, Italian and German TV crews have filmed special segments to mark the birth of Stout, who was born Dec. 1, 1886, in Noblesville, Ind., lived most of his life in High Meadows, N.Y., and died in 1975.

Boston College, where Stout's papers and manuscripts are kept, has arranged a special display to mark the centennial.

Stout's six dozen mysteries feature the large detective — 285 pounds at one point who brilliantly solved mystery upon mystery, even though he rarely ventured outside his brownstone on West 35th Street in New York City. The legwork was the job of that suave sidekick Archie Goodwin.

Stout's biographer, John McAleer, a professor of English at Boston College, says "Archie was Stout's spontaneous self, Nero Wolfe was his achieved self.

"Stout's wife [Pola] never knew who she was going to wake up to," McAleer said.

The popularity of Nero Wolfe was such that when he died, 57 of his novels still were in print, more than for any other U.S. author, McAleer said. Readers have snapped up more than 100 million copies of the books.



Rex Stout in 1942

Stout's fans have included Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Graham Greene, Hubert Humphrey and Marlene Dietrich.

The books became a TV series. Author Robert Goldsborough has taken up the tradition and is writing more Nero Wolfe mysteries, with the permission of Stout's estate.

What makes the Nero Wolfe novels last is "the simple elegance of Stout's writing," providing a fine framework but not interfering with the plot, said Wolfe fan Andy Tully III. "It doesn't get in the way of the story as it does in, say, Dorothy Sayers' mysteries."

Stout began his writing career with three mainstream novels, "How Like a God," "Seed on the Wind" and "Golden Remedy," written between 1929 and 1934.

"He was compared to Faulkner at the time," said McAleer. But the books were not a commercial success and Stout "decided to enjoy himself. In 1933, at the age of 47, Stout began to write the Wolfe series and published the first the following year."

That first was the classic "Fer-de-lance," which was followed by such great stories as "Too Many Cooks" and "The Doorbell Rang," with Wolfe, Goodwin, the cook Fritz Brenner, Inspector Cramer, and the criminal Arnold Zeck.

"Stout put a lot of himself in Archie in the early years. More of him showed up in Wolfe as the years went by," said McAleer.

McAleer said that Stout and Wolfe read the same books; that Stout, like Wolfe, became more and more of a recluse in his later years.

"Stout also was a horticulturalist, but instead of Wolfe's orchids, had one of the finest collections of irises in the country," said McAleer.

And both men were strict followers of schedule.

"His wife said you could tell at any minute of the day what he'd be doing,"

McAleer said. He related how on one occasion Pola Stout was out with a friend and asked to call her husband. It was 8:02 p.m. She said she couldn't call until 8:07 because he would be playing chess. But she relented and when Stout answered, McAleer said the response was "Why did you call now? You know I'm playing chess."

No-one can mention Wolfe without referring to food, for the detective's passion — apart from orchids — was fine cooking. To interrupt a meal at the brownstone was tantamount to sin.

McAleer says Wolfe's creator was a man who was "a great appreciator of food, but his wife said he cooked dinner probably twice.

"Anyone who dropped in might find him eating cornmeal mush," said McAleer. "Stout hired Sheila Hibbens, food editor for the New Yorker magazine, to develop recipes for the early novels." Stout himself never weighed more than 140 pounds.

He didn't oppose the idea

As for the oft-discussed theory that Wolfe was Sherlock Holmes' illegitimate son, McAleer said "Stout didn't oppose the idea that Wolfe was patterned on Holmes' brother Mycroft and he greatly admired Holmes. He thought the theory was amusing and good fun."

That theory and others will surely come up for discussion next weekend when the Wolfe Pack meets. Those of the 400 members who gather will attend a Black Orchid dinner, discuss the corpus, as they call Stout's work, and solve a mystery.

They will raise a toast to Stout, to Wolfe, to Archie and to Fritz.

And most assuredly, for those who do not share their admiration for the detective and his creator, they will mutter a collective "Pff!"