

The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society



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Fact or Fiction? Only Shadow Knows for Sure at No. 454

By Al Amateau

A fictional house on West 35th Street became a real house last weekend. Or should it be—a real house on West 35th Street became a fictional house?

The fictional house, established by the late mystery writer Rex Stout, belongs to Nero Wolfe, the sedentary private detective and raiser of orchids who tips the scales at more than 250 pounds.

The real house at 454 West 35th Street was renovated last year by a community-based housing company as a home for 55 formerly homeless adults.

The real and imaginary houses converge because a band of fanatics, known as The Wolfe Pack, determined that the tenement complex at 454 is the location of the brownstone where Wolfe, his fast-talking legman Archie Goodwin, his cook, and his gardener, all live in Stout's 73 stories and novels.

"In some books the address is 700, which would put it in the Hudson River," said Ellen Krieger, Werowance of the Wolfe Pack. ("Werowance" is an American Indian word for leader, which Archie called Wolfe in one of the books.)

Wolfe's house is as far east as Ninth Avenue in some stories. A recurring character, Dr. Vollmer, lives on "the same street nearer Tenth Avenue." The real house on the downtown side of 35th Street is between Dyer and 10th Avenues.

"This address is in between the extremes," Krieger explained.

"It's a lot better than the Javits Center, where we were also considering putting the plaque," said Ettagale Blauer, a writer and Wolfe Pack member from Greenwich Village. The house at 454 also has an alley, now a small playground and sitting area known as Bob's Park, which also figures in some stories.

The bronze plaque memorializing Rex Stout (1886-1975), along with the fat, orchid-loving detective and his assistant, Archie, was unveiled in a June 22 ceremony. Doing the honors along with residents and neighbors was Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, whose imaginary name is "Star Quest" because his real name means star in German.

Reed Maroc, Rex Stout's grandson, was there, too. So were youngsters who belong to the Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association which meets in the public space on Tenth Avenue at 35th Street.

The Wolfe Pack found the place through Catherine Greene, a resident of 454 who was executrix of the estate of Kay Cullen, a research librarian and mystery story enthusiast who died in December 1994.

Greene met Cullen, who was wheelchair-bound, when both were living in a Times Square Hotel on West 43rd Street and Eighth Avenue.

“She had every book that Rex Stout wrote—The Nero Wolfe Cookbook— and an artist’s rendering of Wolfe’s house,” said Greene. “She had a Maltese Falcon statue (figures in the Dashiell Hammett novel) and I can’t remember what else.”

Greene sold most of the books to Murder Ink, at West 92nd Street (on Broadway), and donated the money to the Meals on Wheels program at Encore, the senior center at St. Malachy’s Church on West 49th Street. “Kay wanted to pay back people who made her life bearable,” Greene said. The Nero Wolfe memorabilia went to the Wolfe Pack.

In addition to being a mystery fan and book lover, Cullen was a football fan, especially of the team at Michigan State, where she went to school, Greene noted. “I wound up with her ashes after she was cremated, so I called the Michigan State Alumni Association and asked if they would scatter them on the field,” said Greene. “No one had ever done that, but they said O.K., and did it last June. The marching band played and a few football players were there.”

The coincidences of art and life are compelling. CHDC’s director of housing management at 454 is Orchid Cruz; her nickname is Archie. CHDC’s administrative director is Tom Kramer, and an Inspector Cramer, of the New York City Homicide Squad, is a character in nearly every Nero Wolfe mystery. Cramer’s fictional headquarters, incidentally, is on 20th Street, just about where the real 10th Precinct is located. How’s that for a set of harmonic convergences.

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