

THE ARMCHAIR DETECTIVE



REX STOUT

Newsletter

By John McAleer

Nearly 300 members of the Wolfe Pack were on hand at the Biltmore, NYC, on 1 December, for the first Annual Nero Wolfe Assembly and the second Annual Black Orchids Dinner, both sponsored by the Wolfe Pack. Assembly speakers including cartoonist Gahan Wilson, Viking's Barbara Burn (Barbara edited the Nero Wolfe Cookbook), Chris Steinbrunner, Jud Sapp, novelists Marvin Kaye and Bill DeAndrea, and your editor. As chairman, Marvin put together a program that pleased everyone. The Assembly will be a regular feature of the Annual meeting hereafter. The dinner, cooked from Wolfe's recipes by an Egyptian chef, also was perfect.

Climax of the evening's activities was the presentation of the first Nero Wolfe Award, for a novel published in 1979 which best upheld Rex Stout's standards. After reading 41 books submitted by 23 publishers, the committee of six (chaired by me) unanimously picked Lawrence Sanders' *The Burglar Who Liked To Quote Kipling* as this year's winner. Block, on hand to receive the award (a replica of Wolfe's gold bookmark), acknowledged it handsomely.

The dedication of Block's *Writing the Novel from Plot to Print* (1979) reads in part: "For John O'Hara, Evan Hunter, Fredric Brown, W. Somerset Maugham, Rex Stout, Dashiell Hammett, James T. Farrell, Thomas Wolfe, and so many more writers from whom I've learned so much."

Block says he finds Wolfe and Archie so real he sometimes thinks that if he rang enough doorbells on West Thirty-fifth Street, he'd find the right house.

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Rex Stout, whose 93rd birthday anniversary fell on 1 December, was born under the sign of the Archer (Sagittarius). The Emperor Nero also was born under the sign of the Archer (15 December, 37 A.D.). Archie, by the way, is not an Archer but a Scorpio (23 October).



The only extant photograph of Rex Stout in his sailor's uniform, when he was pay-yeoman onboard the presidential yacht *Mayflower* during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt; this was taken in 1905.

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High Meadow, Rex Stout's home for 45 years, may soon pass to new owners. Before that happens, though, Wolfe Pack members are in for a treat. Pola Stout is planning to receive the Pack for a picnic and romp over High Meadow's 18 acres when spring takes firm hold. That alone should be reason enough for true Nerophiles to join the Pack. Write to The Wolfe Pack, P.O. Box 822,

Ansonia Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10023. Rex's iris and day lilies will live forever in your remembrance.

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ABC at last screened the pilot film of *The Doorbell Rang*, slotting it for midnight viewing, 18 December. I wonder if ABC schedulers knew Rex began writing *The Doorbell Rang* on 18 December 1964? I wonder, too, how many fans stayed up till 2:45 A.M. to see the whole show? I did and so did my 14-year-old son, Paul. He thought it was better than a lot of prime time shows. And he wondered if ABC let the FBI pick the time slot. Smart boy, that Paul.

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In the ABC pilot, a youngster hits a ball through Wolfe's window, then comes around with his own glazier to repair it. The glazier plants an FBI bug when Fritz trustingly admits him. Rex would have sneered at this. He had too much respect for Fritz to use him for a chump. Or do you disagree?

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Margaret Farrar, widow of John Farrar, the publisher who launched the Wolfe series, and herself editor of the *New York Times* crossword for 35 years, tells me Winston Churchill once said: "The British crossword solver believes there is only one Roman emperor, and his name is NERO."

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What detective created by Rex Stout is part Indian? Tecumseh Fox? Wrong. Fox had no Indian blood. Rex told me his full name was William Tecumseh Sherman Fox—namesake not of the Shawnee chief but of the Civil War general. If you look on p. 16 of *Over My Dead Body*, you'll see that Archie Goodwin says he is one sixty-fourth Indian.

Was Rex himself part Indian? Conceivably. His great grandmother, Regina Hartman (no kin of Mary's), was, as a young woman, for 19 years a prisoner of Indians in Pennsylvania.

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Better take a close look at *The Fourth Wall*, a first mystery by science-fiction writer Barbara Paul, just published by Crime Club. Narrator Abigail James lives in a brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street. Coincidence? Sure, if you don't think it odd that when someone breaks one of her windows the damage is spotted and reported by a neighbor, "a Mr. Goodwin" (p. 149). For a clincher, the escaping villain (no, he's not from the FBI this time), is observed by a physician driving by—"a Dr. Vollmer" (also p. 149). Credit for pouncing on these allusions goes to Dan Andriacco, the Cincinnati *Post's* mystery whiz.

When Dan was a lad, by the way, he wrote Rex a fan letter. Rex wrote back:

"If your surmise, that Archie Goodwin wrote that gem 'Watson Was a Woman,' is correct, I would be silly to admit it, and I try not to be silly. So the answer to your question, what do I consider my best story, is 'Watson Was a Woman.'"

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To promote a new terror novel, *The Wolfen*, Bantam mailed complimentary copies to 400 people named Wolf. "Sales were so-so," relates a Bantam marketing executive, "but the company did get nasty letters from Wolfe complaining of invasion of privacy."

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In November 1979, The Royal Bank of Canada devoted the whole of its monthly newsletter to "The Great Detectives." The Newsletter singles out a handful of detectives who stand "on that transcendental plateau of literature where their fictional doings are, to the reader, intimate reality." Holmes, Maigret, Poirot, and, of course, Nero Wolfe. Our compliments to the Royal Bank's discriminating, if anonymous, editor.

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On 22 January 1980, I helped launch a new course on Detective Fiction at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a two-hour lecture on Rex Stout and the detective story as an art form. Norbert Weiner, the father of cybernetics, and Rex's old pen pal, was not, it seems, the only M.I.T. genius to rate Rex Alpha Plus.

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Mike Greenbaum, of Tucson, Arizona, reminds me that the following blurb, supplied by Rex Stout, appears on the rear flap of A. H. Z. Carr's *Finding Maubee* (Putnam, 1971):

"A marvelous picture of a small Caribbean



Rex Stout pitching horseshoes at his home, High Meadow, a few weeks before he created Nero Wolfe, in the fall of 1933.

island and the native-tourist frictions, but the story is so good that I didn't realize that as I went along. So I had to do some rereading, and I wasn't sorry."

"This book," says Mike, "won an Edgar in 1971 for best first mystery, but obviously Rex Stout saw its qualities before the award."

I should not further that when *Finding Maubee* was released in paperback, by Bantam, in 1973, a King Features Syndicate's comment, used as a blurb, read: "Not since Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe stories has there been a thriller so intricately and artistically woven." Maybe the Syndicate's reviewer really believed this, but it looks as though he was riding pick-a-back on Rex's blurb.

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If you are looking for friendly references to Wolfe and Archie in the novels of other authors, try these for a starter: P. G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves and the Ties that Bind*; Donald Westlake, *God Save the Mark*; Elliot Paul, *Waylaid in Boston*; Erle Stanley Gardner, *Pass the Gravy*; Clayton Rawson, *The Footprints on the Ceiling*; Ian Fleming, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*; and Frank Thomas, *Sherlock Holmes and the Golden Bird*. How about sending me the titles of other books to add to this list?

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Ann Ball, who captains the Houston den of the Wolfe Pack, says that when she was a senior at the University of Houston, an English prof asked her to write a paper discussing an author's style. She chose Stout and got an A-plus. With the grade came this gratuitous comment: "Anyone who has the courage to critique a mystery writer's style in a serious college English class deserves a good grade if for no other reason than gall." For a

start this largesse-bestowing prof might check out "Homicide West": Some Observations on the Nero Wolfe Stories of Rex Stout," a 7000-word critique of the Wolfe saga, written by Professor Mia I. Gerhardt, Utrecht University, published in the Netherlands' scholarly *English Studies* in August 1968.

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From my Mailbag:

"I knew Rex and had some fun times with him at the Baker Street Irregulars dinner. We were once speakers and as I weigh in at 280 pounds and he at about 1/10th that he had some remarks about it. Also it was at the time he took on J. Edgar what's-his-name and he found out that I belonged to a church order that had the Canonical power to legitimize bastards and he wanted the rite to use on J. Edgar."

John Bennett Shaw, B.S.I., Santa Fe, N.M.

"Three of the most difficult Wolfe editions to locate are the two Armed Services editions, P-6, 468 and 906, of *Not Quite Dead Enough*, and the single edition, in the same series, of *The Silent Speaker*, #1222. #468 was published in February, 1945; 68,000 copies were printed. #906 came out the following February; another 90,000 copies. #1222 was published in January 1947. A printing of 25,000 sufficed. By then WW II was over and the armed forces were shrinking rapidly."

Melville C. Hill, Spring Valley, California

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So far as I have been able to tell, "Watson Was a Woman" first was published in book form in *The Pocket Mystery Reader* (#172), in June 1942. Before that it was published as an article in the *Saturday Review* (1 March 1941). If you think otherwise, tell me about it.

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In January, I succeeded novelist Gregory McDonald (who has won two Edgars for his Fletch novels) as vice-president of the Mystery Writers of America, heading up the MWA's New England Chapter. In that capacity I hope to represent Stout fans at the Third International Congress of Crime Writers to be held at Stockholm, 14-19 June 1981. I was glad to see that the logo of the Congress, appearing on my invitation, displays Nero Wolfe, beer glass in hand, in the front rank.

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Little, Brown has boosted the price of my biography of Rex Stout to \$17.50. You still can order an inscribed, postpaid copy from me for \$13.50.

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Your letters are great. Keep them coming to: John McAleer, Mount Independence, 121 Follen Road, Lexington, Mass. 02173 U.S.A.