

The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

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DAILY NEWS

Sleuth Is Found Out

It was a mystery that confounded fans of Nero Wolfe for more than 60 years, but now they say they've solved the Case of the Missing Address.

This was such a big deal that even Henry Stern, the city's Parks Commissioner, showed up Saturday to see a plaque placed at the brownstone where Wolfe grew orchids and solved murders.

The address is 454 West 35th Street, in Hell's Kitchen, and if area residents thought the crowd was saluting a real person, it was understandable — to fans, Wolfe is as real as the guy next door.

"He was New York's greatest private detective," said Ellen Krieger, president of the Wolfe Pack, his Society.

"No," said Henry Enberg, librarian at the Practicing Law Institute, "He was the greatest in the world."

"I stand corrected," said Krieger.

So it goes in the world of literary Societys. New York is home to scores—

There's even an annual dinner honoring Charlie Chan. But, with 400 members, the Wolfe Pack is second only to the Sherlock Holmes Societies in size, and with its 20th year coming up, is one of the most durable.

Wolfe was the creation of mystery writer Rex Stout, who died in 1975. But the 73 stories that he wrote, starting in 1934, featuring Wolfe, and his assistant Archie Goodwin, are still published, (currently in 29 languages) and sell briskly around the world.

Krieger, who has been the society's president since its founding in 1978, has copies of every Wolfe book and reads them two or three times a year. "You always find something new," she says.

(Gazette Editor: Slight misquote—Ellen said she has read them "two or three times each" and not each year.)

Another member, Jonathan Levine, is such a fan that his wedding cake was topped with "NW" in Wolfe's favorite color, yellow, and he knows all the lyrics to "The Shad Roe of Your Smile," a parody composed for the annual dinner saluting Wolfe's favorite food.

"Unfortunately," says Krieger, who is a vice president at the Simon and Schuster publishing house, "I was the only person who ordered shad roe this year. (Mr. Wolfe) would say we're chicken."

What devoted fans knew from the stories was that Wolfe—who loved to eat, drank as many as three cases of beer a day, and rarely left home to solve his cases—lived on the south side of West 35th Street, in a brownstone between 9th and 11th Avenues, with a passageway along one side to 34th Street and a herb garden in the back.

As happens in many stories, the mystery was solved with some unexpected luck, and an only-in-New York twist.

About 10 months ago, a member named Kay Cullen died and named long-time friend Catherine Greene as executor of her estate, which included a lot of Wolfe memorabilia.

Greene telephoned Levine to tell him about the material, which Greene had stored in her apartment in a one-time derelict tenement rehabbed by the nonprofit Clinton Housing

Development Company. It is now home to 55 seniors, most of them formerly homeless or mentally ill. Levine went around to pick up the stuff and bingo.

"Everything fit," he said. "Passageway, garden, all of it." It helped, too, that no other building along the two-block stretch of West 35th Street fit Stout's description.

Along with the plaque ceremony, the society donated a couple of dozen Wolfe books to the residential reading room and more books to the Clinton South Community Center, a couple of blocks away.

Stout's grandson, writer Reed Maroc, joined the crowd. So did Greene.

"On this site stood the elegant brownstone of the corpulent fictional private detective Nero Wolfe. With his able assistant Archie Goodwin, Mr. Wolfe raised orchids and dined well, while solving over 70 cases as recorded by Rex Stout from 1934-1975," reads the plaque outside the entrance.

"I'm not a big Wolfe fan," said Greene, "but this could make me one."

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