

Democrat and Chronicle

Applause

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Nero Wolfe

'A Family Affair' ends Wolfe story

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The Nero Wolfe chronicle is finished.

We'll be able to read no more of the elephantine genius whose physical exercise in solving crimes usually amounted to pursing his lips back and forth.

Nero Wolfe, the ultimate armchair crimesolver, will continue to live on in the old brownstone on 35th Street in New York. He'll continue to indulge in Fritz's gourmet delights, to drink enormous amounts of beer, to ride his elevator to the top floor of his residence to tend his beloved orchids, and along with his leg man, Archie Goodwin, he'll continue solving crimes.

But we won't read about it because Wolfe's creator, Rex Stout, died this week.

Stout, who had written 46 Nero Wolfe mysteries from 1934 to 1975, died Monday at his Danbury, Conn., home. He was 88.

Unlike Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's little Belgian detective who is killed off in the current bestseller, "Curtain," Wolfe apparently won't die.

A spokesman for Viking Press said

they know of no as-yet-unpublished Stout manuscripts. "A Family Affair," the Wolfe mystery published this August, apparently is the end of the chronicle and it concludes with Wolfe very much alive.

It's all rather fitting because now Nero Wolfe joins Sherlock Holmes as a great fictional character for whom time is of little importance. Holmes will always exist in a foggy, 19th Century London of the mind, and Wolfe will continue his eccentric ways in a 20th Century New York of the mind.

Connecting Holmes and Wolfe is a natural thing to do. Stout had long been a Holmes devotee and the use by both detectives of mental processes rather than brawn to solve crimes is quite similar.

William S. Baring-Gould, perhaps the most prominent Sherlockian commentator, once paid Stout the ultimate compliment by suggesting that Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler (of "A Scandal in Bohemia") had an illicit affair and that Miss Adler gave birth to an illegitimate son who became Nero Wolfe.

REX TODHUNTER STOUT was
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Rex Stout

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born to a Quaker family in Noblesville, Ind., on Dec. 1, 1886. His early life was spent in Kansas and he went to public schools in Topeka. He was a state champion speller and remained throughout his life a superb speller.

After a stint in the Navy, Stout gave up his designs on law school when he sold a poem to "Smart Set" for \$14.

He spent his early adult years in a variety of jobs, including the creation of a school banking system through which children put away money in some 400 towns in America.

He continued writing fiction—although not detective stories—until the Crash in 1929 took most of his money. He then turned to mystery writing.

PERHAPS THE MOST amazing thing about the consistently successful and numerous string of Wolfe stories is that Stout didn't begin them until he was 48 years old.

In 1934 he published "Fer-de-Lance," and the highly intelligent and crotchety Wolfe was created. For a narrator for the stories Stout chose Archie Goodwin, Wolfe's assistant, executive secretary, and detective legman.

Archie gathered the victims, the information and the suspects, and Wolfe solved the crimes. And Archie then told us the stories. Archie has more savvy and pizzazz than Holmes' Dr. Watson and, accordingly, contributed much to the success of the Wolfe tales.

With rare and often exciting exceptions, Wolfe never left the brownstone in which he lived and worked. The books usually ended with the suspects gathered in Wolfe's office, nervously awaiting the crime's solution.

Detective work for Wolfe is hard-



Wolfe paperback.

ly ever emotional. Nearly always Wolfe solves crimes for the same reason some people solve crossword puzzles; for intellectual exercise. That's also a good definition of Stout's purpose in writing the books and the readers' purposes in reading them.

Stout once said, "Writing one of the three best mystery stories in the world would satisfy my soul as much as anything else I can think of." It can probably be argued that he may have done just that with several of his books—perhaps most likely with "Too Many Cooks" in 1938.

The story is a flawless and mentally



The last book.

exciting puzzle which has Wolfe on stage almost continually and also allows Wolfe to indulge considerably in his Epicurean avocation. If the book has a fault it's only that it's an atypical Wolfe story. It's one of the rare cases when Wolfe is out of the brownstone. The crime is not solved at home.

"A FAMILY AFFAIR," the current novel that ends the string, is a fitting finale for several reasons. The story is top-quality Stout with strong doses of character, wit and excitement. While you'd think there's little more

to learn about Wolfe after 45 books, the detective is pushed to a new dimension of involvement because this murder occurs in his own home.

And the ending has a strange twist for long-time Wolfe devotees—an ending I'm not about to divulge. Now that we know there are exactly 46 Wolfe stories, all 46 endings must be protected.

But it's not just the crime-solving that will be missed. The true strength of Stout's work was the author's ability to sketch wonderfully interesting, amusing and realistic permanent characters—and the most interesting, amusing and seemingly real is Nero Wolfe.

One will not only miss the major elements of Nero Wolfe's style, but also the minor things. The way he stores bottle caps from beer in his desk drawer. The way he argues gourmet intricacies with his cook, Fritz. His aversion to leaving his home or altering his daily schedule. His interesting and widely acknowledged reading habits.

And maybe most of all, we'll miss his one-word epitaph for all the frivolous and distracting things of this world—"Pfu!"

The late Alva Johnston, writing in a profile in "The New Yorker," commented that there is indeed little physical resemblance between the obese Wolfe and the bearded and thin Rex Stout, but there is a striking identification of the spirit between them.

"Nero is odd and a trifle grotesque because he has all the foibles and peculiarities of the man inside of him . . . The fat detective can't help being a knowing and versatile operator, since he gets his stuff from the varied experiences of the author."