

Topeka Capital Journal Nero Wolfe Character Created by THS alum

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By Jan Biles The Capital-Journal

The Capital-Journal Author and Topeka High School graduate Rex Stout wasn't very happy with the screen versions of his Nero Wolfe mysteries. In "Meet Nero Wolfe," Edward Arnold portrayed Stout's sleuth as difficult and demanding as he tried to solve two seemingly unrelated murders.

Lionel Stander played Wolfe's sidekick, Archie Goodwin, and a young Rita Hayworth was cast in a minor role.

"The League of Frightened Men" was adapted to screen in 1937 by Alfred E. Green. Walter Connolly replaced Arnold in the title role in a mystery about a band of former college chums who are being killed off one by one.

Rex Stout, who grew up in Topeka, created the fictional character Nero Wolfe. Stout is regarded as one of the world's best detective story writers.

A Variety critic wasn't thrilled with the movie.

"Hardly any audience likes to watch a character who just sits and thinks," he wrote.

The critic wasn't alone. Stout was disappointed in both movies.

"I think the telling of stories in pictures is the worst invention of the 20th century," Stout said. "It's going to stultify and finally abolish the human imagination."

Imagination is something that Stout had plenty of.

During his 88-year life, he had written about 50 books and 75 novellas and short stories, which had been translated into 26 languages and sold more than 100 million copies.

After his death, writer Robert Goldsborough continued the Nero Wolfe series, and other movies were made featuring the characters.

"Nero Wolfe," a 1977 series pilot, was built on Frank D. Gilroy's adaptation of Stout's "The Doorbell Rang." Thayer David was cast as Wolfe, the portly armchair sleuth, but the series had to be delayed four years after David's sudden death. Eventually, William Conrad was cast as the lead character.

The pilot was made into a television series called "Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe," which aired for about a year, according to Roy Bird, a Topeka historian. Most recently, the A&E Network broadcast its "Nero Wolfe," starring Maury Chaykin as Wolfe and Timothy Hutton as Goodwin. The series was canceled in 2002 after two seasons because of escalating production costs. The network said the show's budget had risen to more than \$1 million per one-hour episode.

A quick wit

Rex Stout was the youngest of eight children in a Quaker family headed by John W. Stout, which came to Kansas from Indiana when Rex Stout was 1 year old. He was born Dec. 1, 1886, in Noblesville, Ind.

From 1886 to 1895, the family lived on a 40-acre farm near Wakarusa, according to a Nov. 11, 1972, article in The Topeka Journal. They moved to Topeka in 1895, when John Stout was appointed superintendent of Shawnee County schools. He remained in that job until 1902. The family lived in a house at the corner of S.E. 8th and Jefferson.

Kansas State Historical Society

Rex Stout worked as a bookkeeper for Theodore Roosevelt on the U.S.S. Mayflower....

Rex learned to read at age 18 months and had a photographic memory, according to an April 1978 article in The Topeka Capital-Journal.

"At age 4 his mother urged him to start the Bible, saying that if he read three chapters a day and five on Sunday he would finish it in a year," the article stated.

"Rex met that timetable and, for good measure, read the Bible through again the next year. At age 4, he read Macaulay's essays, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' and Plutarch's 'Lives.' By the time he was 7 he had read a fifth of his father's library of 1,126 books, and by age 11 had read them all."

Rex and his sister, Ruth, enrolled at Lincoln grade school, where he was a math prodigy and graduated in June 1899. At age 13, he was the state spelling bee champion. He went to Topeka High School, where he stood out because he wore short pants, unlike his peers who wore long ones. He was a cast member in his senior play, "Striking Oil," and was poet laureate for his graduating class, according to Bird.

Stout was a teenager who liked to debate but rarely admitted defeat, according to The Topeka Journal article. He once challenged his Sunday school teacher at Topeka's First Congregational Church, S.W. 7th and Harrison, to prove that Jesus could turn water into wine. The teacher said the writing of it in the Holy Bible was enough proof for her. The next Sunday, he returned to the class with affidavits from local pharmacists who said that water couldn't be turned into wine unless fermentable substances were added.

Another tale had Stout debating a group of farmers' assertion that every ear of field corn they had seen had an even number of rows of kernels. Stout said he could grow corn with an uneven number of rows of kernels. The following spring, Stout secretly visited a field of growing corn, where he cut out a single row of kernels on each of several marked stalks. At harvest time, he showed the ears of corn, with their uneven rows of kernels, to the farmers, who were baffled by Stout's crop.

Stories to tell

During his summer vacations, Stout worked as a bookkeeper in the Santa Fe General Offices. After he graduated from Topeka High in 1903 at the age of 16, he kept books for Peoples Ice and Coal.

Stout, who was short in stature, attended The University of Kansas for two weeks and left because he thought he could learn nothing new there. He joined the U.S. Navy in 1907, and at age 19 was a petty officer assigned to be the bookkeeper on President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht.

He bought himself out of the military with money he had won in bridge games, according to an article published Nov. 10, 1975, in Publishers Weekly. He roamed throughout the United States, took odd jobs and started writing short stories for magazines.

He also invented a school savings bank system, which he sold to about 400 schools and earned \$400,000. Although he lost most of his money in the Great Depression, he began to travel extensively in Europe and wrote his first psychological novel, "How Like a God," in 1929 while in Paris.

After three more successful novels, he returned to the United States and began writing detective stories.

At age 47, Stout created sleuth Nero Wolfe and his wisecracking sidekick Archie Goodwin for a mystery titled "Fer-de-Lance." The book was published as a serial in the Saturday Evening Post and then as a book in 1934. In this novel, Wolfe was kitchen-testing Prohibition beer; in his last, he was concerned about Watergate.

Stout took less than six weeks to write each subsequent book. He wrote them without doing any research, using an outline or doing rewrites.

The seeds for Stout's interest in crime solving were sown in April 1905, when the Stout home in Topeka was burglarized and Rex's Edison phonograph and a collection of 100 records were stolen.

"A week passed without a trace of the stolen property. Then one day the police received a very hot tip from Mrs. Alonzo Thomas, who with her husband owned and operated the Santa Fe Watch Co., where Rex had purchased the machine," a November 1975 article in The Topeka Journal said. "A suspicious looking character who was then in the store, wanting to buy a crank for a phonograph that, from the description, could be the one stolen from Rex, as being detained by Mrs. Thomas on the pretext of hunting for the particular crank. The customer's confession led to the recovery of the phonograph and landed the culprit in jail to await trial and, finally, conviction."

It is likely that Nero Wolfe's sidekick, Archie Goodwin, got his name from the Topeka police chief, A.G. Goodwin, who worked the case. The police chief was a music lover and played the phonograph daily until it could be presented as evidence in police court.

Stout, however, insisted his characters were fictional.

"Most decisions are made below the level of consciousness," he told Publishers Weekly in November 1975. "Your frontal lobes think up reasons for things your guts have told you to do."

Epilogue

Stout died Oct. 27, 1975, at his home in Danbury, Conn., which he had built in 1930. He was survived by his second wife, Pola, a fabric artist (his first wife was Fay Kennedy, of Topeka; they divorced in 1933), and their two daughters, Rebecca and Barbara.

His last mystery, "A Family Affair," was published a month before his death.

In addition to writing books, he was a master of ceremonies for the "Speaking of Liberty" radio programs in 1941 and the "Voice of Freedom" radio programs in 1942. Over the years he was chairman of the Writer's War Board and Writer's Board of World Government. He was president of the Authors Guild and Authors League of America.

During World War II, he wrote propaganda for the war cause and spoke out against the Nazis. He was active in liberal causes and ignored a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee of the McCarthy era. However, he supported the Vietnam War because of his stance against communism.

Bird said he didn't know whether Stout ever returned to Topeka after he left. Clearly, he didn't feel the same close ties of other authors and poets who left Kansas to make their way in the literary world. "Langston Hughes made a comment that books began to happen for him after visiting the Topeka library," Bird said. "We don't have that kind of quote from Stout."

A couple of years before his death, Stout was tending 300-some plants and waxing philosophically about his future to a Publisher's Weekly reporter: "The only thing I want is something I can't have," he said, "and that is to know if, 100 years from now, people will still buy my books."