

The Wolfe Pack

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Literary Society*

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TUNED IN

Nero Wolfe Is Back, With 'Too Many Clients'

By CAROLYN PATRICIA SCOTT, Special to The Times

Murder is a tragedy, except when it's an art form fit for the pages of a pulp novel, the wide screen or for television, as in Sunday night's Nero Wolfe mystery (8 p.m., A&E). In this case, murder is a brain-twisting exercise in logic. The ruminating detective created by Rex Stout in a series of novels begun in 1934 is played to perfection by Maury Chaykin in this latest TV incarnation (William Conrad played him in a 1981 series on NBC), now in its second season. Sunday's installment, the two-part "Too Many Clients" -- the case of the puzzling murder of one Thomas Yeager -- is expertly tailored for the portly sleuth and his loquacious legman, Archie Goodwin, superbly played by Timothy Hutton.

Wolfe and Goodwin form an uneven partnership of opposites. The weight -- both in pounds and in brain cells -- is thrown mightily to Wolfe, but it's Goodwin who drives and drolly narrates the story, as he hauls in the suspects in Yeager's demise -- the actress, the secretary, the landlord, the professor, the widow -- and parks them at Wolfe's door. When the mastermind attempts to sort through the lies and alibis, Goodwin enforces civility until they "cry Wolfe" -- and four suspects become clients, desperate to clear their names.

The setting is posh 1950s New York, but the dialogue -- full of wisecracking private detectives and cops, fast-talking mugs and the patois of pretentious society women and their high-priced mouthpieces -- tracks back to the noir detective sagas of the '40s. Watching Nero and Archie is a lot like reading a good mystery you can't put down.

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