

*The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society*

A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

Wolfe these mysteries down:

Rex Stout's stories

A&E's mystery movie that is smart, witty and eminently watchable

The Reviews

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I love a good mystery. Reading whodunits is my favorite leisure activity. There are several classic authors whose works I really enjoy, several of whom I shall try to publicize in upcoming reviews.

Right now, I want to talk about one of America's greatest mystery novelists, Rex Stout.

Stout's mysteries bridge the stylistic gap between American and British mystery fiction. Usually, a brilliant and idiosyncratic detective, with the help of a sidekick, solves Golden Age British detective stories.

Early 20th-century American mysteries were generally of the hard-boiled variety, solved by a tough-as-nails gumshoe on the mean streets of the big city.

Stout successfully married the two styles with his creations Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin.

Wolfe is a character, to put it exceedingly mildly. He is instantly recognizable by the fact that he weighs one-seventh of a ton. (Don't reach for your calculator- it comes to a bit over 285.7 pounds.)

He's a gourmet with a gargantuan appetite and a temper to match, tends to his greenhouse full of orchids, is fiercely misogynistic, lives each day by a rigid schedule, and hates to leave the house.

He's the ultimate armchair detective, but he wouldn't solve anything if he didn't need the funds to pay for his mammoth living expenses.

Since Wolfe is a sedentary soul, he leaves the legwork to his private secretary, Archie Goodwin. Goodwin is the physical opposite of Wolfe: a young, amiable, handsome ladies' man with a smart remark for every occasion. Goodwin is always ready for a fight, a case, a meal, or a date with a beautiful woman.

Goodwin narrates all of the stories, and he is a delight. On a purely plot-wise basis, the cases can be kind of routine, but Archie's narration makes every story a unique gem. The inevitable clash of wills between these two dissimilar characters sparks some of the most enjoyable scenes in the series.

There are other great characters: Fritz, Wolfe's devoted private master chef; Lily Rowan, Archie's on-again, off-again favorite girl; Inspector Cramer, the stubborn, cigar-chomping, straight-laced cop who is simultaneously appreciative of Archie and Wolfe's help and infuriated by their unconventional means of catching killers; and Saul, Fred, and Orrie, Wolfe's loyal band of private detectives. They all appear regularly, and it's always a joy to see the team working together.

There are several dozen Wolfe novels and lots of short stories. Unfortunately, only a fraction of them are available on the general market today. The rest are out of print, although the publishers have been promising to bring them back for years. They're all of pretty good quality, and readers can jump in anywhere in the series.

Some highlights are *And Be A Villain*, where they solve the on-air poisoning of a radio talk-show guest; *Some Buried Caesar*, where the murder happens on a ranch and a bull sickened with anthrax is the prime suspect; *The Doorbell Rang*, Stout's page-turning indictment of the excesses of J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I.; and *Over My Dead Body*, where Wolfe's long-lost adopted daughter is a suspect in a case of murder and international espionage.

Recently, a number of the Wolfe stories were adapted into a superb television series on A&E. It stars Timothy Hutton as Archie and Maury Chaykin as Wolfe. They are the living embodiments of their characters. The series is lovingly faithful to Stout's novels, and the cast always seems to be having fun.

Alas, the series was canceled for some insane reason, but the first season has just been released on DVD, which is an answer to my prayers because I don't have cable. With luck, the remaining episodes will also be made available shortly.

But please, read the books. I have yet to find a living American mystery writer who can hold a candle to Stout. And when you've read some of the books and seen some of the television adaptations, please join me in writing to Bantam Books and the A&E television network, asking them politely to please bring the rest of the books back into print and to waste no time putting the second and regrettably final season of Nero Wolfe on DVD.