

Rex Stout, Creator of Nero Wolfe, Dies

By Lawrence R. Meyer
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Rex Stout, creator of the master detective, Nero Wolfe, died Monday in his Danbury, Conn., home of natural causes. He was 88.

Mr. Stout was one of the most prolific and successful American writers of the 20th century. After making a fortune through a school ranking system he created, Mr. Stout retired in 1927 to begin writing novels. He eventually wrote seven novels, seven mysteries, one cookbook and 46 Nero Wolfe books. The Wolfe series, printed in 22 languages, has sold more than 45 million copies.

Nero Wolfe ranks with Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Ellery Queen and Perry Mason as the most famous detectives in literature.

Mr. Stout's first novel, "How Like a God," was published in 1929, and was quickly followed by four others.

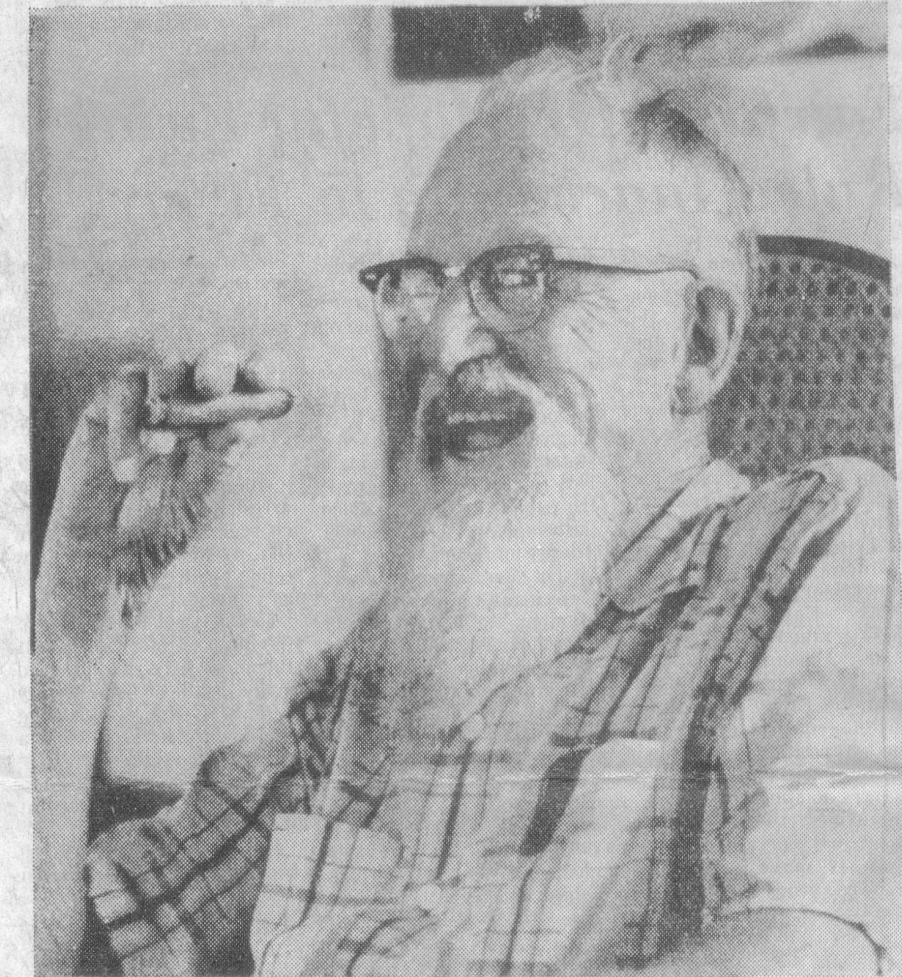
"They were all well received," Mr. Stout later said. "But I discovered two things — I was a good storyteller and I would never be a great writer."

In 1934, in "Fer de Lance," Mr. Stout introduced the corpulent, brainy Nero Wolfe and his wisecracking factotum, Archie Goodwin, to a Depression-weary America. But if Wolfe ever was hard up for cash, Goodwin — who reported on Wolfe's adventures in all 46 books — never let on.

Wolfe lived lavishly in his Manhattan brownstone on West 35th Street near the Hudson, solving murders, infuriating Inspector Cramer of the New York City police department, and entertaining generations of readers.

A lifelong woman hater, Wolfe lived with Goodwin, his cook, Fritz Brenner, and his horticultural assistant, Theodore Horstmann, in the brownstone.

Wolfe's patterns of behavior were almost as predictable as the charting of the stars. He breakfasted in bed, went every morning to the plant rooms atop his house where he grew prize-winning orchids in a greenhouse, had at least one beer after coming down on his elevator at 11 o'clock, would



Mystery writer Rex Stout enjoys a cigar at his Danbury home in this 1974 photo.

see no visitors prior to 11, prohibited discussion of business at meals and would permit no visitor — however much he disliked the person — to remain hungry in his presence.

Above all, Nero Wolfe refused to leave his office on business — a rule broken only in extraordinary instances.

The origins of Wolfe, the character, are obscure. Born of uncertain parentage in Montenegro, he emigrated to the United States. Little is known about his early years or his family, although some devotees argue that Wolfe was, in reality, Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock Holmes' younger brother.

What attracted readers to the Wolfe mysteries was less the intricacies of plot than it was the general spirit that pervaded the Wolfe books — the ambiance of the brownstone with its gourmet meals, good talk and luxurious furnishings.

Columbia Professor Jacques Barzun wrote in a 79th birthday tribute to Mr. Stout that Wolfe and Goodwin were a "sublime duet of Don Quixote and a glamorized Sancho Panza who go tilting together against evil."

Goodwin, who respected midable genius, nonetheless did not stand in awe of him — describing Wolfe's nearly 300-pound frame in unflattering terms and nagging Wolfe into action when his frequent bouts of laziness threatened to leave his bank account empty.

Wolfe's dour, humorless demeanor was offset by Goodwin, an irrepressible, charming character who was a blend of sophistication and midwestern folksiness.

Barzun wrote: "If he had done nothing more than to create Archie Goodwin, Rex Stout would deserve the gratitude of whatever assessors watch over the posterity of American literature. For surely, Archie

is one of the folk heroes in which the modern American temper can see itself transfigured. Archie is the lineal descendent of Huck Finn with the additions that worldliness has brought to the figure of the young savior ... Above all, he commands a turn of humor that goes to the heart of character in situation: not since Mark Twain and Mr. Dooley has the native spirit of comedy found an interpreter of equal force."

In 1938, Mr. Stout suspended his writing career to devote his energy to propagandizing for American involvement in Europe against Hitler. He then wrote and lectured extensively, trying to draw the United States into the European war.

During World War II, Mr. Stout served as master of ceremonies for the radio program, Speaking of Liberty, was chairman of the War Writers Board and was president of the Authors

Guild. He also served on the board of directors of Freedom House.

In 1946, Mr. Stout resumed the Nero Wolfe series with "The Silent Speaker." The last Nero Wolfe mystery, "A Family Affair," was published by Viking Press last month.

Mr. Stout's books often had a topical quality. Before World War II, Wolfe tangled with pro-Nazi spies. After the war, Wolfe brushed with the Communist Party, the civil rights movement, women's liberation and J. Edgar Hoover, whose FBI agents Wolfe had lured into illegally breaking into his home.

Mr. Stout lived in a 14-bedroom house — High Meadow — that he had designed and built himself on the New York-Connecticut state line.

Mr. Stout was born in Noblesville, Ind., and moved with his family to Topeka, Kan., when he was a year old. At age 16, he joined the Navy and served on President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht, the Mayflower, before buying his discharge after two years of service.

Prior to his writing career, Mr. Stout held numerous jobs, including bookkeeper, cigar salesman, tourist guide, bookstore clerk and Indian basket vendor. He calculated that in a four-year period he had held 30 jobs.

In his prime, Mr. Stout turned out a book a year, setting aside six weeks in the winter to write the book.

"Working six weeks a year is a damn good way to make a living," he once commented.

When he had finished the first draft of his book, Mr. Stout was basically finished, since he never rewrote or revised a book. Above all, he insisted that he should have a good time writing. "If I'm not having fun writing, no one's going to have any fun reading it."

Like Wolfe, Mr. Stout was an accomplished horticulturalist and a lover of good food. His first marriage ended in divorce. In 1932, he married Pola Hoffman, a fabrics designer.

Mr. Stout is survived by his wife, two daughters, Barbara Selleck and Rebecca Bradbury; two sisters, Ruth and Mary Stout, and five grandchildren.