The Black Mountain Short Guide

The Black Mountain by Rex Stout

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Characters

As always, Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin are the main characters. Stout had been developing them for two decades, yet in The Black Mountain he finds much that is new to say about them. The familiar elements of their personalities and interaction remain: Their constant bickering does not obscure their mutual esteem, loyalty, and interdependence. But this is the only novel that takes either of them abroad, and the setting generates unprecedented tensions even as it brings out latent strengths and weaknesses.

Nero Wolfe has always depended on his incomparable brain to make his way in the world, and it serves him well in this extraordinary set of circumstances. He relies on his fluency in several languages, his grasp of history, customs, and current affairs, and his knowledge of human nature to get them through the innumerable difficulties they face in New York, Italy, and Montenegro. The return to the scenes of his youth reveals his unsuspected skills as mariner, mountaineer, and knife-fighter. But he is more human than usual in this book, less the eccentric superman. He grieves for his dead friend, more philosophically than most people could, but with genuine pain and sense of loss. He cannot get along with his adopted daughter, and her death deprives him of any chance of repairing their relationship. He suffers as he sees what has happened to his native land, and must realize that his original home is gone, even though the stone hut where he was born is still standing. In his dedication to catching the murderer, he sets aside his cherished habits, but he cannot simply switch off his foibles, nor resume his youthful vigor. Moving vehicles still make him miserable, and a ten-mile hike through the mountains where he rambled as a boy leaves him virtually unable to move, and afraid to take off his shoes lest he never get them on again. We are dazzled by his brilliance, but it is his physical and emotional suffering, marked by his unabashed complaints, that makes us like him.

Archie, normally so witty and selfassured, spends most of the book in an agony of disorientation. He does not know the languages or the people and must rely on Wolfe at every turn. In self-defense he lapses into a caricature of the American tourist, griping about the "jabber" and the food and the roads. Stout is careful to temper Archie's bellyaching with his fair-minded appreciation of what is good in the places and people. And after all, the greater his discomfort, the more esteem he deserves for his loyalty to Wolfe.

Social Concerns

In The Black Mountain, Stout makes a remarkably eloquent and insightful contribution to the anti-Communist literature of the 1950s. Having chosen to make his master detective a Yugoslav by birth when he originated Nero Wolfe over twenty years earlier, Stout takes advantage of that fact by arranging for Wolfe to return to his muchchanged homeland in pursuit of a murderer. The victim is Marko Vukcic, Wolfe's oldest friend, but Stout never lets this become a tale of personal vengeance. Wolfe sees beyond his own grief, even after his adopted daughter becomes a second victim: "Many men are responsible for Carla's death, but if I were to name one it would be Georgi Malenkov. He is the foremost champion of the doctrine that men and women must be subjected to the mandates of despotic power." Throughout the narrative, Stout sustains a brilliant attack on that poisonous notion. Refusing to wear the blinders so prevalent at the time, he condemns Communism because he perceives that its leaders subscribe to "the intolerable doctrine that man's sole responsibility is to his ego. That was the doctrine of Hitler as it is now of Malenkov and Tito and Franco and Senator McCarthy; masquerading as a basis of freedom, it is the oldest and toughest of the enemies of freedom."

Wolfe exposes himself to grave personal danger, and to the equally grave risk of failure, because he will not let the enemies of freedom — regardless of their politics — get away with their crimes. Nor will he permit them to drag him down to their level. The exceptional circumstances oblige him to do many things that longtime readers will see as out of character, but he never relinquishes his goal: to turn the murderer over to the people of the State of New York for trial.

Techniques

Like all the Nero Wolfe stories, The Black Mountain is narrated in the first person by Archie Goodwin, always close to the heart of the action but forever a step or two behind Nero Wolfe in unraveling the mystery. The language barrier provides a new twist here: Archie must often wait minutes or hours to be brought up to date on the words, which sharpens his already acute attention to other nuances. Although Wolfe reports in full when time allows, Archie's usual breezy confidence as a narrator is undermined by his inability to know directly what is being said.

The Black Mountain differs from other Nero Wolfe books not only in the setting, but also in its wealth of action.

Archie shoots more villains in one scene than in all his other recorded exploits combined. In keeping with Stout's themes, however, Archie takes no pleasure in his gunslinging: he kills the three torturers because he must, without glamorizing his feat or gloating over it afterwards. Six people die in all, a bloodbath for Stout, but each death stands as a sobering moment in the narrative — a far cry from the casual slaughter and callous wisecracks of so many books and films in the genre.

Stout allows the plot to carry him outside his usual framework, just as Nero Wolfe reluctantly leaves New York to chase the murderer. Stout, Wolfe, and Archie all want to go home, and thus the novel fulfills a classic AB-A structure, ending with order restored and characters back where they belong. The journey to Montenegro is a necessary descent into the underworld, and the return to America is a reemergence into the world of light — and liberty.

Themes

Marko Vukcic was murdered by an agent of the Yugoslav government because he was sending money and supplies to a revolutionary group in the mountains of Montenegro. Wolfe's adopted daughter, Carla, is also deeply involved. Wolfe knows better: "I make my contributions to the cause of freedom — they are mostly financial — through those channels and agencies that seem to me most efficient." But the murder of his friend impels Wolfe to bestir himself and make a special contribution, one that is both practical and symbolic. In contriving, by means of an inimitable blend of ingenuity, stubbornness, and good luck, to learn the identity of the murderer and get him back within reach of the New York police, Wolfe does his job as a detective: He catches the malefactor. In refusing to set aside the laws of civilized society and simply stick a knife into Peter Zov, or let one of several volunteers do it for him, Wolfe makes a powerful statement for the rule of law and against politics by violence and terror.

The quest that takes Wolfe back to his native land confronts him again, in a sense, with the alternatives he weighed when he originally chose to emigrate. He decided to become an American citizen because he valued liberty, and embraced that society which offered him the greatest freedom to live as he saw fit. He left a country with a centuries-old tradition of repression; on his return, he finds that Communism has reduced most Montenegrins to abject skulkers: "In ten centuries the Turks could never make him whine. Even under the despotism of Black George he kept his head up as a man. But Communist despotism has done for him." Those few Montenegrins who have not knuckled under have become hard, bitter, treacherous, brutal. The Spirit of the Black Mountain, led by Danilo Vukcic, Marko's nephew, consists of bleak men whose main purpose seems to be to kill as many Communists as they can before they die. In the most memorably awful scene, Danilo receives the severed finger of an eighteen-year-old boy, murdered for spying on the group, and cremates it in the kitchen stove as he and his wife have their after-dinner coffee with Wolfe and Archie.

Wolfe does not indulge in self-righteous and futile reproaches of the members of the Spirit regarding their methods. No doubt he recognizes the truth of what Meta Vukcic says to her husband: "We try to pretend there is hope, but our hearts are dead, and we can only pray that someday there will be real life for Ivan and Zosha, but we know there can be none for us." Wolfe cannot save his country from Communist repression, nor give Danilo and Meta back their lives. He can only catch one murderer, refuse to act according to the traditions of vendetta, and thus defend his vision of a better way to live. In a maneuver to hoodwink Peter Zov, the murderer, Wolfe pretends to protect him from the members of the Spirit. Archie has to back away with Zov, gun at the ready, to complete the charade. To guide his steps, Wolfe recites from memory the Preamble to the Constitution and the first four articles of the Bill of Rights — a theatrical flourish, but wholly in character, and a profound reaffirmation of the dominant themes of the book.

Key Questions

Communist repression may not be the burning issue it was in 1954, but Stout's insights on the importance of freedom and the withering effects of the police state are still worth discussing. The topical interest that has been lost because of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe is restored to some extent by the current mess in what was Yugoslavia. Stout has much to say about what was wrong with life under Tito, and it would be natural to explore the cause and effect relationship between the blight of those years and the present obsession of Yugoslavians with killing each other. In addition, the murder of Marko Vukcic is a classic example of 1950s-style terrorism, and as such has many intriguing points of similarity to, and difference from, the terrorism of the 1990s.

Wolfe's return to his boyhood home offers rich material for analysis, as does Archie's wretchedness in the alien environments into which his loyalty drags him. The incidents of their brief but eventful stay in Montenegro provide ample topics for those interested in the economics, politics, sociology, and psychology of the police state. The novel is dated in its details, but not in the essential issues it raises.

1. Wolfe concocts an elaborate cover story to account for his presence with Archie in Montenegro. How does the tale of "Tone Stara" resemble Wolfe's true situation as an expatriate returning to his homeland? Is Wolfe (or Stout) using this fiction to explore the emotional conflicts?

2. By insisting on getting Peter Zov back to New York without resorting to illegal methods, Wolfe risks letting him escape. There is no doubt of Zov's guilt, and he will certainly receive the death penalty. Would it have been better just to kill him?

3. As trustee of Marko Vukcic's will, Wolfe can choose whether to use his friend's money to continue to support the Spirit of the Black Mountain. Will he do so? Should he?

4. Stout describes the Montenegro of 1954 as a miserable backwater, riddled with treachery and intrigue and corruption. Does he enlist our sympathy for any party? Do you see any parallels between the problems he depicts and the situation in the area today?

5. An accidental tourist if ever there was one, Archie does a lot of complaining about the foreign countries he visits. Does he learn anything from his travels?

6. Nero Wolfe is an enigmatic man, always hard to read and interpret. How does Stout convey the depth of his grief for his daughter and his friend?

7. All the Nero Wolfe books include frequent mentions of his meals. Is there some special significance in the haphazard and unusual meals he shares with Archie in this novel?

8. Everything works out very neatly in the end, despite the imposing odds.

Is Wolfe just lucky? Does Stout convince you that Wolfe makes and deserves his luck?

9. Stout kills off his characters sparingly, and never casually. Why is each of the deaths in The Black Mountain necessary to the plot and themes? How does Stout ensure that we will not take the deaths lightly?

Literary Precedents

Stout borrows many of the old standbys of the spy thriller, even as he continues to pay tribute to his precursors in detective fiction. No one will ever mistake Nero Wolfe for James Bond (although Ian Fleming once proposed a joint venture), but he functions quite passably in the thick fog of international intrigue, even though he despises it. There are double agents, icy torturers, cyanide capsules, night crossings — all familiar enough cliches of the Cold War spy novel, although infrequent in Stout's work.

Related Titles

Over My Dead Body (1940) had introduced Carla Wolfe, with a very different Yugoslavia in the background and British and Nazi agents clashing in New York. "Home to Roost," a novella published in the collection Triple Jeopardy (1952), involves Wolfe in the exposure of a clandestine Communist and murderer. Stout makes no bones about his contempt for Communism; consistently, however, he avoids jingoism and phobias: the Communists thwarted by Wolfe and Archie are punished for what they have done, not for what they believe.

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