Too Many Cooks Short Guide

Too Many Cooks by Rex Stout

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Characters

TooMany Cooks, like all Stout's Nero Wolfe books, has two fully realized characters, Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, and a large supporting cast of deftly-sketched minor figures. Nero Wolfe dominates every scene in which he takes part with his sheer physical presence (Archie guesses his weight at 310 pounds), his matchless brain, and his overwhelming rhetoric. No one can ignore him; no one can intimidate him; no one can resist for long his combination of persuasiveness and stubbornness. He manages equally well whether he is lecturing European chefs on American contributions to haute cuisine, extracting information from suspicious black waiters and cooks, or defying the coercion of the authorities. While stirring from his chair as seldom as possible, he contrives to make the world come to him.

Stout keeps Wolfe from seeming insufferably superhuman by allowing Archie Goodwin to narrate. Partly to maintain his own self-respect and to assert his own unquenchable personality, Archie constantly sticks pins in his employer, both in direct conversation and in his descriptions as chronicler.

He gleefully points out Wolfe's morbid fear of moving vehicles, his inability to take off his own trousers on a train, his willingness to butter up Jerome Berin.

When Wolfe seems inclined to neglect business, Archie lets him know about it. Archie is perhaps the one person Wolfe can never bully; Wolfe values him for that, as well as for his versatility, courage, and loyalty. Although he calls himself Wolfe's "secretary, bodyguard, office manager, assistant detective, and goat," Archie is no flunky: He is a formidable individual in his own right.

The other characters are too numerous to be fully developed. The most interesting minor figure is Dina Laszio — daughter of one of the chefs, ex-wife of another, widow of the murder victim, and catalyst of the mischief. As a siren who reduces otherwise civilized men to howling on hillsides, Dina Laszio incarnates all that Wolfe rejects in his quest for the Good Life.

Social Concerns

In Too Many Cooks, the fifth of the Nero Wolfe books, Stout says things about the treatment of blacks in this country that only became fashionable twenty-five years after the publication of this novel. During one of his rare excursions from his New York brownstone, Wolfe investigates a murder at a West Virginia spa. Although the local sheriff, who "knows how to deal with niggers," has learned nothing from them, Wolfe questions fourteen members of the kitchen staff as a group. He overcomes their understandable reluctance to get involved in a "white man's murder" by treating them precisely as he would any other group of men. His speech on their responsibilities to their society and their race — so unlike what they are accustomed to hearing from whites, neither bullying nor patronizing — moves the key witness to speak up. His patient follow-through elicits valuable supporting information from the others. Most importantly, Wolfe honors his bargain with them in full: He obliges the sheriff and district attorney to refrain from maltreating the witnesses, and the manager to refrain from firing them. The message is clear: These blacks are men like other men and deserve more respect than many of the whites in the book. Stout must have felt proud of this scene, for in 1964 he brought back Paul Whipple, the key witness, in A Right to Die (1964), even having him quote long passages from Wolfe's speech verbatim.

Techniques

Already by this time Stout was making good use of the special advantages of the series. Reading Too Many Cooks, for the many who know the earlier novels, is a return to a well-loved context. The novel is self-contained, however. The references to established elements are self-explanatory or peripheral, and thus a first-time reader of Stout would not get lost. If one ignores the intertextuality of the Nero Wolfe saga and examines Too Many Cooks on its own, one finds a variation on the classic country house murder. Stout brings together a group of quirky characters in an isolated setting, strews the ground liberally with motives and clues and red herrings, and invites the reader to match wits with the detective. Although the characters do a great deal of eating and talking, there is enough conflict, suspense, and action (even Wolfe gets shot at) to keep the pages turning. The culprits are caught, and order is restored. There is even a romantic interest, since it is Wolfe who is a misogynist, not Stout.

Themes

Nero Wolfe is the most truly philosophical of fictional detectives. His famous eccentricities, already wellestablished by the preceding novels in the series, stem from the same preoccupation that motivates him in Too Many Cooks: a quest for the Good Life. Having formed his opinions regarding how one ought to live, he defends them with ferocious integrity. His disagreements with Archie Goodwin, a man of equal integrity, arise from their differing views on what constitutes the Good Life and how one should go about seeking it. His clashes with others result from their moral, ethical, and aesthetic confusion, and their efforts to impose on Wolfe.

The novel opens with a journey by train, which Wolfe grimly endures because he is the guest of honor of Les Quinze Maitres, a group of famous chefs who gather once every five years.

He accepts on general philosophical grounds, out of reverence for "the greatest living masters of the subtlest and kindliest of the arts," but he has a more specific motive as well: to get a recipe. He offers the Catalan chef Jerome Berin five thousand dollars for the privilege of being able to enjoy saucisse minuit at his own table, musing, "I have only so long to live — so many books to read, so many ironies to contemplate, so many meals to eat."

His single-minded pursuit of the recipe is sometimes comic, but is saved from absurdity by his conviction that "that sausage [is] high art." This is aesthetics, not greed.

Archie enjoys poking fun at Wolfe's obsession, but knows and respects his employer well enough to accept it. And Wolfe's quest has dignity when contrasted with the rapacity and vengefulness rampant among the others at the spa. As he gently reminds Paul Whippie, who has questioned the worth of a sauce-tasting competition: "each of us has his special set of values, and if you expect me to respect yours you must respect mine." He snaps at his oldest friend, Marko Vukcic, who has fallen once more under the sexual spell of his ex-wife: "You know very well what life consists of, it consists of the humanities, and among them is a decent and intelligent control of the appetites which we share with dogs. A man doesn't wolf a carcass or howl on a hillside from dark to dawn; he eats well-cooked food, when he can get it, in judicious quantities; and he suits his ardor to his wise convenience." He tells the siren exactly why he does not like her — because of how she has warped Marko: "It is not decent to induce the cocaine habit in a man, but it is monstrous to do so and then suddenly withdraw his supply of the drug."

Wolfe solves the murder, of course, and fulfills his function as a nemesis of crime and a restorer of order. But he does so not for his amusement, or for pay — although he gladly accepts his special fee. Ultimately, his work in Too Many Cooks is a defense of the humanities against those who have let their appetites take over.

Adaptations

Stout despised film and never authorized any cinematic or televised versions of Nero Wolfe.

For a television series, there was a two-hour pilot episode, loosely based on The Doorbell Rang, starring Thayer David as Nero Wolfe and Tom Mason as Archie Goodwin. Written and directed by Frank Gilroy, it was shown on ABC on December 18, 1979. The series eventually ran for one season on NBC: thirteen episodes, January 16, 1981 to August 25, 1981, with William Conrad as Wolfe and Lee Horsley as Archie.

Key Questions

It is tempting to play with trivia and quote one-liners when discussing Stout's Nero Wolfe books. Such amusements have their place; Stout was fond of them himself as a member of the Baker Street Irregulars. But there is a great deal to talk about, on several levels. Any of Nero Wolfe's pithy statements on women, racism, civic responsibility, or ethics could provide a starting point for reflection and vigorous debate. Archie Goodwin supplies another voice and another set of stimuli: Even when he is wrong, he manages to be interesting about it. Stout's blend of political liberalism and cultural conservatism is bound to incite readers to react.

Too Many Cooks vividly depicts American society almost sixty years ago; while some of Stout's opinions are strikingly modern, the novel is distant enough in time to be of historical value.

1. The murder victim seems to have richly deserved a knife in the back.

Why is it necessary to capture and punish the killer of such a man? Will justice be served?

2. Several characters outside the circle of Les Quinze Maitres consider their obsession with cuisine and their epic meals to be frivolous, if not worse.

Certainly it could be considered a breach of good taste to eat so lavishly in an America still in the throes of the Depression. Does the book offer any viable defense of the gourmandizing?

3. Wolfe regards all women with suspicion; Archie surveys them with an appreciative eye, but with no intention of getting entangled. Are Stout's portrayals of the female characters distorted according to the quirks of his protagonists? Do they reflect typical attitudes of the time?

4. Wolfe is prepared to leave for home with the case unsolved, until the murderer takes a shot at him. Is he just being lazy and eccentric? Does his justification of his departure ring true?

5. Wolfe declares that the best way to deal with black men is to treat them as men, and he takes great pride in having learned more from them than the local sheriff had. Does he in fact approach them without adjusting for their color?

6. As a naturalized citizen, Wolfe thinks and speaks at some length about his adopted country. How does Stout integrate Wolfe's pronouncements on the subject with the action of the novel?

7. Wolfe and Archie are outrageously high-handed in their dealings with the authorities, as usual.

How do they get away with it? Should they get away with it?

8. Will the miniature society represented by the surviving members of Les Quinze Maitres be able to recover from the disruption caused by the murder? Does the ending invite optimism about the order of society as a whole?

9. Wolfe's eccentric manner of living suits him well, and he has the verbal, intellectual, and financial resources to sustain it. Does he have anything of value to teach us about how to live?

Literary Precedents

No one can miss Stout's indebtedness to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He takes the basic concepts of the Great Detective and the sleuthing duo, and exploits the possibilities even more thoroughly than had his precursor.

Thus, he portrays Wolfe as a superman, but humanizes him by giving him some engaging weaknesses, as Conan Doyle had done with Sherlock Holmes. Archie Goodwin takes Watson's roles, but puts up with much less superciliousness from the Great Detective. As Baring-Gould and others have pointed out, Nero Wolfe physically resembles Sherlock's obese and indolent brother Mycroft. And the two authors share a set of priorities: One reads Conan Doyle and Stout for fine writing, good yarns, and fascinating characters, not to find out who did it.

Stout also looks back to Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, among others, in letting readers experience vicariously the luxuries of the rich. As usual, the readers also get to watch the rich and powerful taken down a peg, so that they may go back to their humdrum lives feeling somewhat pleased with themselves.

Related Titles

The book most closely related to Too Many Cooks in the Nero Wolfe series is A Right to Die. Paul Whipple, now a middle-aged professor at Columbia University, returns to find Wolfe and Archie essentially unchanged, and gets them involved in another case charged with racial tension. The two novels lend themselves admirably to comparative discussion.

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