

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolfe? Certainly Not the FBI

BY RICHARD WILSON

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Millions of admirers of Nero Wolfe, the great private investigator, were disturbed when they heard that he was lending himself to a campaign to discredit the FBI.

Wolfe could not be expected to have more than a polite and correct relationship with the FBI under the best of circumstances. But it was not supposed that the fat criminologist would get himself involved with the liberals inasmuch as his own tastes and preferences are far from egalitarian.

Wolfe does not stir from the old brownstone house in the west 30s in New York except under the most unusual circumstances, shunning human contacts as much as practical in the solution of the most exasperating criminal puzzles.

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He is quite reluctant to accept any clients at all until forced to do so by the economic pressure of maintaining his collection of thousands of orchids as well as paying the best cook in New York.

This was the case recently in Wolfe's acceptance of a \$100,000 fee from a lady who was under surveillance by the FBI for having distributed to everyone who counts in public life 10,000 copies of the uncomplimentary book, "The FBI Nobody Knows." Money was no object to the lady. She wanted the FBI off her back. J. Edgar Hoover's men regarded her as an obvious security risk, and it was true that she was trying to stir up trouble—for the FBI, at least.

Wolfe hesitantly took on

the New York police department, were to blackmail the FBI into getting off the lady's trail. He correctly reasoned that if he threatened to expose the FBI's methods — in this case a reported murder by an agent during the course of an investigation — the FBI would then see the wisdom of laying off the lady who was trying to discredit it. In this instance, Inspector Cramer, who has his own problems with the FBI, was a fellow conspirator.

By this time, readers of this column who have not heard of Nero Wolfe will begin to suspect that the above related events are fictional. They are. Nero Wolfe is a character created by Rex Stout in dozens of mystery novels and with such authenticity that millions of readers fondly and possessively regard Wolfe, Archie Goodwin, Inspector Cramer and others not as fictional characters but as real people.

Therefore, if the great Wolfe was tangling with the FBI there must be something wrong with the FBI.

This, in fact, was the impression conveyed in literary reviews of Stout's latest, "The Doorbell



Hoover

the assignment, mindful of the great power of the FBI in contrast to his own slender resources which consist largely of his own wits and the muscular help of his assistant, Archie Goodwin.

Wolfe's methods, always questionable and continually exposing him to the fury of Inspector Cramer of

Rang." These reviews gleefully heralded a dagger thrust at the FBI from Wolfe's skilled hand. But the reviews revealed more about the reviewers than about Wolfe, and not many readers of his latest adventure will think that the FBI has been done much harm, but they will be con-

firmed in their view that the FBI is devious as well as rugged.

The interesting point is that the literary community should speak in conspiratorial whispers about Stout's coup in unmasking the FBI through the medium of fiction when it could not be done so well otherwise. As the day of J. Edgar Hoover's retirement inexorably approaches, Hoover's adversaries wish to hasten it by debunking his FBI. Hoover is pictured as a dictatorial oppressor who is finally losing his grip. Much of this criticism is inspired by Hoover's refusal to act as an enforcer and protector of civil rights and civil rights workers in the absence of legislation directing him to do so.

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The Johnson administration proposes to alter Hoover's attitude by passing legislation giving federal protection to civil rights demonstrators. But what Hoover's liberal opponents wish to do is a flagrant contradiction of the liberal principle. They wish to see the post-Hoover FBI expanded into what amounts to a national police force for the enforcement less of laws as written than as liberal principle demands that they be enforced.

In confining the FBI strictly to those functions explicitly provided in federal law, Hoover has been the opposite of the oppressor. The main thrust of his many years as head of the FBI has been to confine its activities strictly and narrowly within the requirements of existing laws and not to expand its functions into areas of local and state police administration, nor into areas of social reform.

Nero Wolfe could find nothing to the contrary and at the risk of giving away the plot of "The Doorbell Rang," it was not found that the FBI had transgressed in any horrendous way on personal freedom.

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