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Donald E. Westlake, Mystery Writer, Is Dead at 75

By JENNIFER 8. LEE



David Jennings for The New York Times

Donald E. Westlake, a prolific, award-winning mystery novelist who pounded out more than 100 books and 5 screenplays on manual typewriters during a career of nearly 50 years, died on Wednesday night. He was 75.

Mr. Westlake collapsed as he was headed to New Year's Eve dinner while on vacation in Mexico, said his wife, Abigail Westlake.

The cause was a heart attack, she said.

Donald E. Westlake in 2001.

Mr. Westlake, considered one of the most successful and versatile mystery writers in the United States, received an Academy Award nomination for a screenplay, three Edgar Awards and the title of

Grand Master from the Mystery Writers of America in 1993.

Since his first novel, "The Mercenaries," was published by Random House in 1960, Mr. Westlake had written under his own name and several pseudonyms, including Richard Stark, Tucker Coe, Samuel Holt and Edwin West. Despite the diversity of pen names, most of his books shared one feature: They were set in New York City, where he was born.

Mr. Westlake used different names in part to combat skepticism over his rapid rate of writing books, sometimes as many as four a year, his friends said.

"In the beginning, people didn't want to publish more than one book a year by the same author," said Susan Richman, his publicist at Grand Central Publishing.

Later in his career, Mr. Westlake limited himself to two pen names, each generally focusing on one primary character: He used his own name to write about an unintentionally comical criminal named John Dortmunder, and as Richard Stark wrote a series about an anti-hero and criminal

named Parker.

Mr. Westlake occasionally wrote about other characters, such as Burke Devore, the downsized executive turned murderer in “The Ax,” whom The New York Times described in 1997 “as emblematic of his time as George F. Babbitt and Holden Caulfield and Capt. John Yossarian were of theirs.”

The full panoply of Mr. Westlake’s books was a spectacle to behold, his friends said. “We were in his library, this beautiful library surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of titles,” said Laurence Kirshbaum, his agent, “and I realized that every single book was written by Donald Westlake, English-language and foreign-language editions.”

Mr. Westlake’s cinematic style of storytelling, along with his carefully crafted plots and crisp dialogue, translated well on the screen. More than 15 of his books were made into movies. In addition, he wrote a number of screenplays, including “The Grifters,” which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1991.

Mr. Westlake wrote seven days a week, his friends said. His productiveness was honed in part by an era in which publishing houses churned out books at a relentless pace. During that time, he also wrote erotic literature, science fiction and westerns.

Mr. Westlake resisted computers and typed his manuscripts on manual typewriters. “They came in perfectly typed,” Mr. Kirshbaum said. “You felt like it was almost written by hand.”

Otto Penzler, a longtime friend of Mr. Westlake’s and the owner of the Mysterious Bookshop in TriBeCa, said, “He hated the idea of an electric typewriter because, he said, ‘I don’t want to sit there while I am thinking and have something hum at me.’ ”

Mr. Westlake kept four or five typewriters and cannibalized their parts when any one broke, as the typewriter model was no longer manufactured, his friends said.

“He lived in fear that he wouldn’t have his little portable typewriter,” said Mr. Penzler, who once gave him a similar typewriter that he had found in a secondhand store.

Donald Edwin Westlake was born to Lillian and Albert Westlake on July 12, 1933, in Brooklyn, and was raised in Yonkers and Albany. He attended colleges in New York, but did not graduate. He married Abigail Adams in 1979, and the couple settled in Gallatin, N.Y. He was previously married to Nedra Henderson and Sandra Kalb.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Westlake is survived by four sons, Sean Westlake, Steven Westlake, Paul Westlake and Tod Westlake; two stepdaughters, Adrienne Adams and Katherine Adams; a stepson, Patrick Adams; a sister, Virginia VanDermark; and four grandchildren.

Mr. Westlake was productive until his death. His next novel, “Get Real,” is scheduled for release in April.