

Prolific Rochester writer remains a man of mystery

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Ed Hoch is a genial-looking man — the kind of man who would blend in easily at a church gathering. A man who smiles readily.

He does not look like someone who would plot a murder.

Nevertheless, the Sacred Heart Cathedral parishioner has done so — hundreds of murders, in fact, in a career spanning four decades.

But police investigators would be hard-pressed to find any bodies. Unless they are fans of mystery fiction, that is.

Hoch is arguably the most prolific writer of mystery short stories active today. Since his first story appeared in print in 1955, Hoch has penned more than 710 published short stories.

He has also written five mystery novels, produced essays on the history and craft of mystery writing, and edited a number of mystery anthologies, including 1989's *Murder Most Sacred: Great Catholic Tales of Mystery and Suspense*.

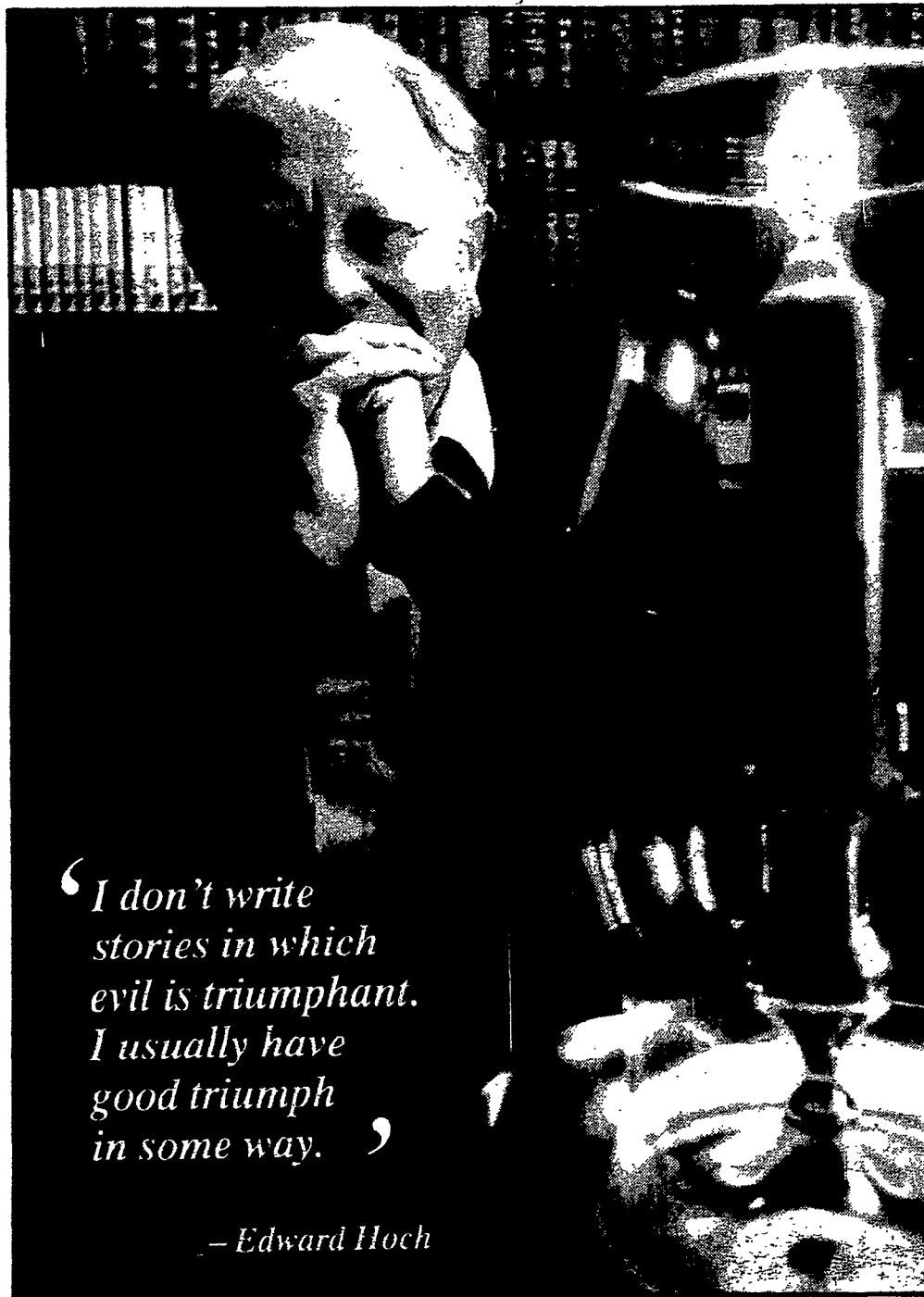
Several of Hoch's stories have also been adapted for film and television. Among the television series using his stories have been *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, *McMillan and Wife*, *Night Gallery* and *Tales of the Unexpected*.

Meanwhile, he has been honored by fellow mystery writers, earning the Edgar Allan Poe ("Edgar") Award for the best mystery short story of 1967. This May, he will be recognized for having stories in every issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* since May of 1973.

Yet Hoch still lives in the modest Lake Avenue house he and his wife, the former Patricia McMahon, moved into when they married June 5, 1957. The couple attend Sacred Heart Cathedral, where, except during military service and a brief stint in New York City, he has been a member since childhood.

Most of his fellow parishioners are probably unaware that each Sunday they are sitting in the pews with an internationally renowned writer.

Indeed, Hoch observed, he is sometimes even overlooked at gatherings of



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Babette G. Augustin/Photo Editor

mystery writers because he is primarily a short-story writer.

"It's an oddity," he mused. "I will go to a mystery convention, and people, if they read the magazines, will say, 'I love your writing.' But if they read just novels, they don't know who I am."

Hoch caught the mystery bug while growing up in Rochester. Born Feb. 22, 1930, he relates that his early memories include listening to radio mystery programs. One of his favorites was the Ellery Queen program, and once he began reading mystery fiction, he naturally turned to the pages of the Ellery Queen magazine.

A self-described "great reader," Hoch said he was especially influenced in his early years by the Father Brown mystery stories of G.K. Chesterton and the works

of Graham Greene — both fellow Catholics who, he noted, brought religious sensibility to their works.

During Hoch's senior year at Aquinas Institute, the Ellery Queen magazine ran a mystery story contest. He thought about creating a detective who was also the president of the United States, but never actually wrote the story.

To his surprise, the winning story was about a president of the United States who was a detective.

Hoch recalled thinking, "Gee, if I'd written my story I might not have won, but they would have at least mentioned my name because I'd had the same idea as the winner."

The incident spurred him to begin writing — and collecting rejection slips. He estimates receiving hundreds of rejections during over

Still, he persevered with his writing — even as he graduated from Aquinas, studied at the University of Rochester, worked at the Rochester Public Library, served in the Army during the Korean War, then worked briefly for a publisher in New York City. He returned to Rochester in 1954 to work for an advertising company.

Hoch finally sold a story in 1955. It was about a mystical detective named Simon Ark, who claimed to be a 2,000-year-old Coptic priest. He sold several other Ark stories, then branched out into other characters — including a Roman Catholic priest.

Some of his early stories were a little heavy-handed with respect to religion, Hoch acknowledged. Gradually, they became less overtly religious, but the stories still point to his faith "in a lot of nebulous ways," he said.

In Hoch's Edgar winning story, "The Oblong Room," for example, a college student kills his roommate — a powerful figure who had become like a teacher to the killer — at the roommate's request. The killer then sits in the room with the body for 22 hours — waiting for his teacher to rise from the dead.

Many of Hoch's stories contain off-beat twists, but by contemporary mystery standards they are gentle, with little graphic description of violence. And perhaps in light of his Catholic upbringing, "I don't write stories in which evil is triumphant. I usually have good triumph in some way," he said.

Hoch was able to quit working full-time at the advertising agency in 1968 after winning his Edgar and getting a contract to write a novel — *The Shattered Raven*, published in 1969. But although he published several more novels, he prefers the short-story form.

"For me, the plots come easier than the writing," Hoch said. "I like puzzle stories, and the short story form lends itself to those kinds of stories."

His house is clearly the home of a writer. He does his writing in a book-lined office, and his basement is a virtual library containing thousands of fiction and reference works.

"I pride myself on not having to call the library," Hoch chuckled. "I just come down here and look (facts) up myself."

Although he has slowed down in recent years — by his standards, anyway — Hoch still writes 20-25 short stories a year. He also edits annual collections of mystery and suspense stories, and such special collections as *Murder Most Sacred*.

Hoch said he does not foresee ever retiring from his craft.

"A lot of my classmates have retired," he observed. Then he added with a smile, "Writers don't retire."

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