

The William D. Farley Rex Stout Collection

Bill Farley started his Stout collection casually. He'd first read a Nero Wolfe mystery years before, from libraries in the city or in the military. One day that changed. Looking over a table of used books in – of all places – a music shop, he ran across a Wolfe hardcover. He thought to himself that he'd like to start owning the series. From that tiny seed of a thought grew his collection, as vast as the orchids grown on the top floor of that famous brownstone.

I doubt even Bill knows which came first: the desire to gather the Nero Wolfe books or the idea to be a bookseller, but they became intertwined. As new Stout books were published, he'd buy them. But he also began to match the trade edition – the edition sold in a retail store – with the book club edition. And, as they came out in paperback, he'd buy that edition too. He would buy editions of earlier titles in paperback and hardcover, in any edition that he didn't yet own or thought he didn't already have – or if he thought a given copy was in better condition than what he already have at home.

As you can understand, he was collecting a beloved author in two directions: new releases as they were published and earlier books that he'd missed the first time around. And the earlier books had been out, in some cases, for decades.

A slight diversion here for a definition: 'completist'. There are all types of collectors and all are not the same. A completist is a particularly rabid and intense sort. They want EVERYTHING that pertains to their subject in EVERY form. A completist collector of an author, therefore, wants everything that author published and in every form. When it came to Rex Stout, Bill evolved into a completist.

Rex Stout began publishing in 1914. The first Wolfe book, *Fer-de-Lance*, was his tenth published novel. There are, officially, 47 Wolfe "books". I put that in quotes because those 47 hardcovers are made up of full novels and collections of stories or novellas. Some "books" have two stories – such as *Black Orchids*, the 9th book – and some have three – *Not Quite Dead Enough*, the 10th. In most cases, shorter works appeared first in a magazine and would be gathered into one volume for the next hardcover.

Now, remember that used hardcover was bought at that music shop in 1956. By that point, as the completist bug took root, he had XX titles to find and, in many cases, their original appearance.

The last Nero Wolfe novel published during Stout's lifetime was *A Family Affair* in 1975. In 1985, *Death Times Three* was published posthumously. When the Seattle Mystery bookshop first opened, he was still stashing away new paperback editions as the books went through yet another round of reissues. He'd laugh at himself, saying it sure was a good thing that he was no longer "collecting".

He also offered the cautionary story: he knew that he'd gone too far when he began collecting Rex Stout's sister's books on gardening.

After he sold the bookshop to me in 1999, he began to muse about putting the collection out for sale. For as long as he'd had the shop, he'd taken names and phone

numbers of folks who wanted a crack at his books should he ever decide to sell it. The date on the earliest Want Slip is 19...

In 2004, he surprised me by giving me the collection to sell. I was and am honored, humbled and overwhelmed.

How many books made up his collection? I really couldn't say. There were seven or eight large moving boxes of books, and a couple of smaller boxes of paperbacks – those 1990s Bantam reissues that, at first, had introductions from living mystery authors. We have always tried to have a great selection of Stouts available for sale in the shop and those – especially the out of print titles – went onto the shelf for sale first. I made no count of them. Wish I had. In nearly all of the hardcovers, in Bill's neat hand, is written a number in pencil on the upper right corner of the first page. Some of those numbers are in the upper 1800s. I asked him if that meant that there were that many books in his collection, but he didn't think so. I don't know what those numbers mean, but I like to think of those numbers as a mute testament to the scope of the collection.

Adjectives that fit are massive, monumental, huge – the kind of words that Archie would employ to describe his boss. Like Wolfe, the collection was brilliant and infuriating in its scope and breadth, as well as in its immobility.

About 30 years ago, I read the first Nero Wolfe as part of an elective college course, *The Detective in Literature*. I really don't have much of a memory of it as I was drawn more to Hammett and Chandler. In the decades since, I've read a wide range of crime and mystery fiction, both in the traditional, whodunit style and in the hardboiled vein. I've listened to Bill pontificate on the glories of Stout for 15 years. I hadn't picked one up, believing that I'd not like it. But, having worked with this collection for months, I thought I should try one again. And you know what happened? I got hooked.

Do I really have to part with this collection?

Can I keep them all, Bill?

Please? You, of all people, can understand that desire.