

Rex Stout essay on detective fiction

on the back of the dustjacket of *Four Five and Six* by Tey (Josephine)

READING AND WRITING DETECTIVE STORIES

The first detective story I ever read was a five-cent paper-bound affair—a daring and ingenious exploit of Old King Brady. That was on a Kansas farm half a century ago. I have been reading detective stories off and on ever since, and I have been writing them for sixteen years, and I still can't decide which is more fun—reading them or writing them.

The difference is somewhat the same as the difference between watching a baseball game from the grandstand and getting out on the field and playing. To see, from the grandstand, the short-stop make a brilliant play on a sizzler is a delight; but the short-stop's own delight, though surely as keen as yours, is of quite another sort. Similarly, to read of a detective's daring finesse or ingenious stratagem is a rare joy; but it is a joy too (and regrettably rare) when, after prolonged pacing up and down or pressing your forehead against the cool metal of the typewriter frame until your blood has warmed it so that it is no longer cool, the plan of the detective's masterstroke comes clear and whole, you lift your head, and your fingers start to hit the keys.

As a professional writer of detective stories, I string along with the ballplayers. When one of them has a free afternoon the place he is most likely to head for is the nearest ball park, to watch—and not for profit but for fun. Me too; I love a ball game. But if it's evening and I'm at home with no urgent chore at hand, and a package of books has come, the television set and the chess board and the unanswered mail will have to manage without me—if one of the books is a detective story. That's for me. As I get settled in my chair and light on the first paragraph, I would swear that reading them is more fun than writing them.

But then again

—Rex Stout