

Murderess Ink

The Better Half of the Mystery



Perpetrated by Dilys Winn

MISOGYNIST REX

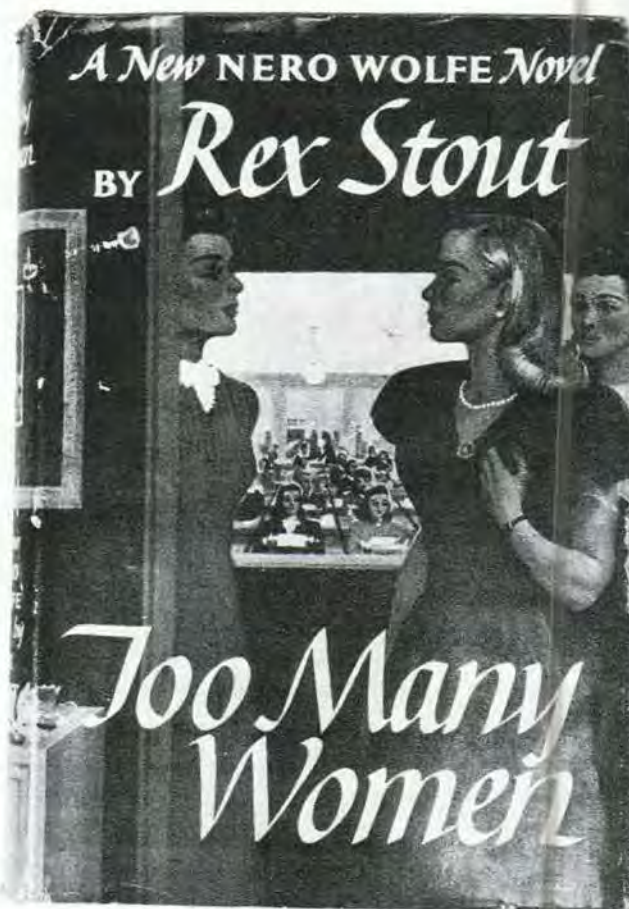
John McAleer

In "Blood Will Tell," Archie Goodwin watches Nero Wolfe devour the title page of a new book "with the same kind of look a man I know has for a pretty girl he has just met." Add to this the disclosure that Wolfe's "orchids were his concubines: insipid, expensive, parasitic and temperamental," and we perceive, in ample outline, a man bent not merely on excluding women from his life but on thinking of them as avoidable nuisances. Evidence strengthening this supposition is readily mustered. Clara Fox, in *The Rubber Band*, after inspecting Wolfe's brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street, pronounces it "the most insolent denial of female rights the mind of man has ever conceived." Why? "No woman in it from top to bottom, and the routine is faultless." Chance does not account for that. Archie tells us "it would suit Wolfe fine, if one never crossed the doorsill."

Additional, well-placed cudgel blows would seem to establish, beyond cavil or stricture, Wolfe's stance as an unyielding misogynist. Wolfe says: "You can depend on a woman for anything except constancy." And: "When they stick to the vocations for which they are best adapted, such as chicanery, sophistry, self-advertisement, cajolery, mystification, and incubation, they are sometimes superb creatures."

Rex Stout himself seems to block Wolfe's every avenue of escape from this slough of bias. I asked him if Wolfe agreed with Geoffrey Chaucer that the three things women most excel at are "weeping, weaving, and lies." He replied: "Not quite. Nero Wolfe doesn't think women are good liars."

Since Rex Stout is the source of Wolfe's ex-



Published in 1947, *Too Many Women* involves Nero and Archie with a Wall Street firm that has 500 female employees — and one dead male stockbroker.

istence, how responsible is he for Wolfe's alleged misogyny? Of the 103 authors Rex says Wolfe read, in the course of the Wolfe saga, only seven are women. Five of these — Dorothy Osborne, Edith Hamilton, Rachel Carson, Laura Z. Hob-

COURTESY GUYMON COLLECTION, OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE LIBRARY

son and Miriam Schneir — get no more than cursory mention. Another, Mary McCarthy, actually is “ditched” by Wolfe after a two-chapter trial. Although Wolfe is hardly gracious about it, the seventh, Jane Austen, receives her due homage — “Wolfe held it against Jane Austen for forcing him to concede that a woman could write a good novel.”

Possibly Rex's intention, in making Wolfe's reading habits one-sided, was to make the characterization consistent, but there is ample reason for doubting that. Eighteen of the writers Wolfe read were friends of Rex Stout. Only one, Laura Hobson, was a woman. Yet Rex was on solid footing with many other women writers — Edna Millay, Rebecca West, Margaret Pulitzer, Kay Boyle, Pearl Buck, Dorothy Fields, Elizabeth Janeway, to mention some. None is on Wolfe's bookshelves. Their exclusion from the saga amounts to an intentional snub.

“Women are the caretakers of the earth but a biological trap.” Thus does Jack Kerouac damn womankind with faint praise. Dostoevsky, Conrad and Verne held like opinions. Rex Stout (who once said that, as a boy, he dreamed repeatedly of being held captive in the marsupial pouch of a possessive kangaroo) knew Conrad personally and read “every word he ever wrote.” He also admitted, in a phrase that appears to replicate Wolfe's grudging recantation, “I used to think that men did everything better than women, but that was before I read Jane Austen. I don't think any man ever wrote better than Jane Austen.”

We could be wrong about Rex's misogyny. Authentic misogynists, including the androgynous Agatha Abbey in “The Zero Clue,” see women as inferior. Rex, quite otherwise, delighted in intelligent women. His mother was just such a person, as was her mother, a collateral descendant of Benjamin Franklin. (Indeed, Rex assigned to Nero Wolfe many of his grandmother's characteristics.) Moreover, Rex's immediate family consisted of his brilliant wife and two daughters as sharp-witted as their parents.

When Margaret Pulitzer died, Rex spoke of her “quick and sharp mind, good judgment, wide information, accurate and effective use of words.” He admired the novels of Josephine Tey and was dismayed that she had not received

PLAYING SECOND FIDDLE TO NERO

When Stout's publishers asked him, in 1936, to create a detective to switch off with Nero Wolfe, Rex filled the order with Theodolinda (“Dol to a few”) Bonner, a lady sleuth whose behavior patterns overlap those of Wolfe. Dol is “immune” to men. She dislikes being touched. She is informed, quick-witted, decisive and competent, though once, when thwarted, she labels herself “a damned female quidnunc.” Dol has the further attribute of being beautiful, though we hear perhaps too much about her caramel-colored eyes and curling canopy of long, black lashes.

After Dol first appeared, in September 1937, Rex's New York editor wrote to her London counterpart: “*The Hand in the Glove* is doing almost as well as Nero, but whether or not there will be another Dol Bonner mystery we can't be sure.” In fact, Dol's agency prospered; however, we don't encounter her again till twenty years later, when, mink-clad, she turns up as Wolfe's operative in “Too Many Detectives” (1956), then in *If Death Ever Slept* (1957) and *Plot It Yourself* (1959). While Dol is Archie Goodwin's age, it is Wolfe, as Anthony Boucher noted, who makes “sheep's eyes” at her. He even invites her to breakfast and dinner, and seats her at his right. Archie is nonplussed, of course, but enough intrigued by Dol and her lovely assistant, Sally Colt, to wonder if “there might be some flaw in my attitude toward female dicks.” With predictable brio, he concludes: “If she hooks him and Sally hooks me we can all solve cases together and dominate the field.” *J.McA.*

the acclaim due her. Rex's foremost female characters — Lily Rowan ("I would tackle a tiger bare-handed to save her from harm"), Lucy Valdon, Hattie Annis, Julie Jaquette, Clara Fox, Rachel Bruner, Cora Ballard, Mrs. Jasper Pine, Mrs. Barry Rackham — all are women of intel-

WATSON WAS A WOMAN

When, on the last Friday of January, 1941, Rex Stout declined to toast "Dr. Watson's Second Wife" at the annual meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars, the 25 members present knew something was amiss. And so it was. Rex had astonishing news for them. Watson was really Irene Watson (Irene Adler, if you like), and Holmes was her spouse. With such phrases from Watson as "I am one of the most long-suffering of mortals," Rex gave awesome credibility to his thesis. The Irregulars were staggered. Spitefully, Frederic Dorr Steele, the renowned illustrator, told the others that, should occasion offer, he would depict Charles Augustus Milverton (whom Holmes called "the worst man in London") with a Stoutian beard. Later, Dr. Julian Wolff, mounting a formal rebuttal to Stout, recalled that Inspector Lestrade had said Watson was a "strongly built man — square jaw, thick neck, mustache," an argument which regrettably carries little weight in the present day, when women have infiltrated the docks as stevedores. A graver peril to the Stout thesis is "A Scandal in Baker Street," the work of Britain's Colin Davies, who says Holmes himself was — a woman! Watson speaks of Holmes' "high voice," "smooth chin" and long white fingers with "their extraordinary delicacy of touch." Moreover, he is unfamiliar with rigger jargon, the birth-right of any Victorian lad. But why labor the obvious? *J. McA.*

lect. "Dad could never stand a dumb woman," says Rex's daughter, Barbara. "If she was beautiful it helped for a little while, but not for long."

And there is the matter of murderers. Doyle and Chesterton were reluctant to let women commit murder in their detective stories. In nearly a third of the Nero Wolfe stories (twenty-two out of seventy-two), the murderer is a woman. Did Rex see himself as ungallant? His retort: "I bow, uncover, stand, and open doors. GKC and Doyle overdid it."

"Am I wrong in contending that Wolfe is not a bona fide misogynist?" I asked Rex.

"No," he replied.

The evidence is there to support him. Archie says: "If woman as woman grated on him you would suppose that the most womanly details would be the worst for him, but time and again I have known him to have a chair placed for a female so that his desk would not obstruct his view of her legs . . . the older and dumpier she is the less he cares where she sits." But Wolfe can and does speak for himself: "Not like women? They are astonishing and successful animals. For reasons of convenience, I merely preserve an appearance of immunity which I developed some years ago under pressure of necessity." What was that pressure? Could it be the bonding instinct — primitive man's urge to segregate himself for the hunt? A detective is a continuator of that tradition. In that role a woman could be, to him, an incumbrance. Emotional involvement with her could cloud his judgment. Seen from that vantage point, Wolfe's wariness of women actually is complimentary.

To consider one last point. Archie says Wolfe once was married and his wife tried to kill him with compresses steeped in a penetrating poison.

"What became of Mrs. Wolfe?" I asked Rex.

"Archie doesn't record her fate," he told me, "but I have reason to believe Wolfe murdered her."

Now, I ask you, is this any man on whom to pin the petty label of misogynist?

John McAleer received the Mystery Writers of America Edgar award for Rex Stout: A Biographical Study.