



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

Working with Rex Stout

By Barbara Benjamin

This speech was presented at the December 7, 2003 Black Orchid Banquet.

How wonderful it is that the memory of Rex Stout and the kind of special human being he was is being kept alive by all of you. It goes without saying that the memory of Rex Stout keeps Nero Wolfe and Archie alive as well.

I thank you for inviting me tonight. However, I want you to know this was not my MY idea. If my aging memory of the time I spent working for Rex Stout seems to be somewhat slimmer than anticipated, I urge you to blame my dear friend and neighbor Mike Schwartz. He can be very, very persuasive. He is the person to whom you can complain. Actually, if the truth be known, I blackmailed Mike by telling him I would not come tonight unless he and his wife Judy made a contribution to a group I'm involved with that's working to prevent the environmental destruction of our hometown, White Plains. I like to think they caved in, but I feel certain they would have made the contribution anyway.

If anyone had told me, well over 50 years ago, that the secretarial job I held at the time would lead to my appearance here tonight, I would have insisted they get some psychiatric help in a big hurry. But here I am, and I confess it's kind of fun to reminisce out loud about my adventures during that period of my life. Perhaps it's an exaggeration to call my experiences adventures, but I was very young at the time, and they seemed adventurous to me.

To talk about Rex Stout without providing a picture of the world as it was in the forties would be to discuss him in a one dimensional vacuum without giving appropriate weight to his remarkable leadership and the passion he had for what he believed to be the only possible road to universal humanity.

I had absolutely no idea who Rex Stout was when I started my job, and I had never read a Nero Wolfe mystery. But even as I became a Nero Wolfe fan and got to know Rex Stout, it was not until many years later that I fully realized what an unusual person he truly was. At the time I worked for him I was mostly struck by his incredible fund of knowledge; his wonderful sense of humor; his intimidating ability to spot poor grammar and misspelled words; his genuine respect for women even before the women's movement; his mind-boggling acquaintance with what seemed to be every living famous writer, everyone in the New York world of theatre, politicians from the President on down, and every liberal I had ever heard of — and then some. However, the full extent of his passion, the degree to which he dedicated his life to the causes he believed in, and the high respect with which he was regarded by those who knew him were things of which I was unaware.

Earlier today I was watching the news on television and it reminded me of how incredibly different the world was during World War II. Of course we didn't have television; plans to go to war were not announced beforehand; it never occurred to anyone we would start a war or that the government would allow, and even encourage, public discussion of where and how we would strike. Young men in college were not exempt from the draft, and once drafted and sent overseas, their only way to communicate with worried family was by sending slow mail that was censored by the army. In addition, we had Jim Crow units and open bigotry against black and Jews. Much as I viewed the Roosevelts in very positive terms — particularly Eleanor — it was no secret that the president was anti-Semitic. The only visual view of war was out-of-date newsreels shown in movie theatres and the limited number of pictures printed in the papers. Bombers could not fly the Atlantic and return home safely, so although we had blackout drills in New York City, we really felt completely safe.

It was into this ridiculously complacent society that accepted bigotry and a sense of superiority and safety that Rex Stout marched with all his verbal guns blazing.

If you want to know how the Writers' War Board came into existence and what it accomplished, I recommend you read the McAleer book. But I will tell you that the writers Rex Stout persuaded to work with the Writers' War Board made the very first genuine and successful effort to remove negative stereotypes from the media: newspapers, magazines, books, and radio. And after the war, when Rex Stout tried to keep the organization going under the new name of Writers' Board, the effort was continued.

Having married my handsome uniformed hero at the ripe old age of 19 (not the least bit unusual in those days), I had switched from being a full-time day student at NYU to nighttime classes and was looking for a job. Since I was now a married woman, I did not want my family to continue to give me an allowance, particularly since I was still living at home rent-free. I had already had one dreadful, boring job where I worked five and one-half days for \$30 a week. Work in the commercial world was something I decided I did not want to do. Not-for-profit seemed more appealing. Fortunately a friend of my mother's knew of someone at the American Jewish Committee who was looking for a secretary. So, I applied for the job and was hired. Heaven! It was only five days a week and the salary was \$35 a week. Although my boss Selma Hirsch was indeed an employee of the AJC, her assignment was to work for Rex Stout doing public relations at the Writers War Board. So now you know. I'm here under a somewhat false pretence. I did not start out as Rex Stout's secretary.

We were a very small office and everyone who worked there simply took care of what needed to be done, regardless of our specific assignment. The world of office work was as different then as was the world outside the office. We did not have electric typewriters, computers with spell check, copy or fax machines, not even telephone answering machines or call forwarding. We took dictation in shorthand, made copies with carbon paper or occasionally a mimeograph machine, and made certain there was always someone present to answer the phone.

When I arrived at the office on my first day of work, neither Selma Hirsch nor Rex Stout was in yet. Even before I had taken my coat off, the phone in my office rang. Although I had no idea who was calling the voice at the other end of the phone had an eerily familiar ring to it. I asked if the caller would like to leave a message and he said, "Yes, please tell Mrs. Hirsch that Melvyn Douglas called and would she please call me back. She has my number." There was a moment of dead silence on my part and then, with remarkable maturity and sophistication, I said, "Oh, oh, oh, OH, yes, of course, Mr. Douglas I'll be absolutely certain to give her the message just the very first minute she comes in." This was followed by a moment of silence on his part (it seemed like a million years) and then he said soothingly, "That will be just fine. Thank you." And hung up. I could barely breathe. Melvyn Douglas was one of my very favorite movie actors, not as a romantic figure, but rather because of his remarkable resemblance to my father. It strikes me as fortunate I didn't tell him that at the time.

The interesting thing about Melvyn Douglas as representative of the kind of people who were involved with the WWB was that he was married to wonderfully liberal Helen Gahagan Douglas. Years later, in a campaign for a California seat in the House, her opponent, an unknown new politician, became famous for his despicable, nasty, lying campaign against her when such campaigns were very, very rare. His name was Richard Nixon.

Sometime later I had another experience I have never forgotten. Since we lacked fax machines, Rex Stout asked me to take a manuscript to Clifton Fadiman, moderator of the top-10 radio hit "Information Please," who lived in midtown and not very far away. He lived on an upper floor of a brownstone. I rang the bell downstairs and Fadiman buzzed me in. Then I took the elevator up to his apartment, totally unprepared for what awaited me. There were two apartments on the floor and in front of the open door to one apartment stood Clifton Fadiman wearing nothing at all except his undershorts. I did the best I could not to allow my reaction of horror to show on my face, but I could feel it getting very red. He greeted me cordially and invited me in. To be perfectly honest, I was scared to death, but I couldn't figure out any polite way to refuse. Facing the front door as I entered was a couch with a bed pillow at one end and a floor model sun lamp behind it. Obviously Fadiman had been getting a winter suntan, a fact that was, at most, only moderately reassuring. The problem I had was that for the time I was in the apartment, I simply could not figure out where to look because I was too embarrassed to look at Fadiman. I shook for days after, but I never mentioned it to Rex Stout.

Much of the work Rex Stout did with the members of the Board was done at lunch, Algonquin style, so it was not a bit unusual for him to be gone for a very long time in the middle of the day. On one occasion he was gone for an unusually long time. To our absolute amazement, the Rex Stout who returned to the office did not look one bit like the Rex Stout who had left for lunch. He never said one single word about his change in appearance, and neither did we. But it took us a very long time to get used to Rex Stout without white hair and a white beard. He had dyed them while he was out for lunch!

We were all the recipients of his very generous nature. He often brought us such things as great big, gorgeous, delicious peaches and other food he had grown, and one year for Christmas he gave us house seats for one of the great musicals that was on Broadway at the time.

The summer after the war was over, while the Board members were trying to decide how to keep the organization going, they concluded they should keep the office open during the summer and have someone there to answer the phone and mail. I accepted the job, lonely though I knew it would be, and was given a small petty cash fund to use for postage or whatever. About halfway through the summer, as I was running low on cash, I put together a report for Rex Stout with all of my carefully collected receipts for Scotch tape and the like because I needed to replace the \$20 or so I had spent. The response was typical Stout. "Obviously," he wrote, "you think I don't trust you. I do. I neither need nor wish to have receipts of any kind. Just tell me how much money you need and I'll send it."

It saddens me that Rex Stout never knew that eventually I became a cookbook writer and editor. I know it would have delighted him.

And finally, I wanted to make some observations about some of the ways in which Rex Stout appears, or does not appear, in the characters of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. And although it may not be the most prudent thing for me to do, I somehow feel obligated, in memory of Rex Stout, to relate those characteristics to the television series. If my remarks disturb some of you I would hope that you empty your coffee cups before you throw them at me.

Let me begin by referring to an earlier comment I made regarding Rex Stout's rigid adherence to proper English. Several weeks ago I heard a character talking to Archie in the television series. I don't remember the exact sentence, but I still cringe at the grammar. The essence of what she said was, "They told Carlos and I." It would seem there is absolutely no one in the entire television industry — writers, actors, producers, or anyone else — who knows how to speak or write proper English. But whatever gross grammatical errors are made on other programs, it is unthinkable that Rex Stout would ever, ever have written an ungrammatical sentence.

A big difference between Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe lies in Nero Wolfe's attitude toward women. In this respect it is Archie who is Rex Stout. Archie had a genuine respect for women, a good relationship with a longtime female friend (at least in the books), and a healthy enjoyment observing attractive women. Archie is never callow or disrespectful of women in any way. Wolfe, on the other hand is terrified of women, which Rex Stout certainly was not. The Wolfe that Rex Stout created would never have physically grappled with a woman in his office as he did on television recently. Wolfe did not even want to shake hands with a woman.

Although Rex Stout was very casual in dress, his characters were not. In this respect, Rex Stout would never have had Wolfe wear

a ridiculous outfit out of the office as he did when he wore a knit cap in the country.

I was delighted to find the flapper era gone from the introduction when I saw the last show. It was hopelessly inappropriate. I may be wrong, but I think only one Nero Wolfe book was written in the twenties. The thirties were not the flapper era, nor were the forties or fifties.

Good manners were important to Rex Stout and historically, polite men never wore hats indoors when I was growing up. They took them off to greet a lady, in elevators, and on every indoor occasion. And I never saw any well-dressed man wearing brown and white shoes with a business suit. Rex Stout would have cringed.

Archie, like Rex Stout, was highly intelligent, and in no way a shallow "gofer." It was his sophistication and intelligence that were indispensable to Wolfe. And although Archie was perfectly willing to enjoy a hamburger now and then, he had a serious appreciation for good food and was quite knowledgeable on the subject.

I cannot imagine a time when Archie would have allowed Cramer to barge in on Wolfe while he was eating. In the event Archie could not stop him, Wolfe would never have continued to eat while he debated with Cramer. Nor can I imagine a time when Archie would open the front door without looking through a peephole to see who was on the other side of the door.

I often found Wolfe portrayed as a childish fool in spite of the fact that he was never portrayed that way by Rex Stout. He was difficult and stubborn. But he was not churlish. He never made a fool of himself. And Archie was a thoroughly grown up man, and not a flippant jerk.

It was rare that I watched Nero Wolfe on television as it makes me sad. I was looking forward to the series. But I truly cringe at what I feel Rex Stout's opinion of the television portrayal of his beloved characters turned out to be. They completely lack the depth of their creator.

It's been fun to be here tonight and, if you have any questions, I'll be happy to answer them if I can.

Question: Ms. Benjamin, did Rex Stout base Archie's extraordinary secretarial skills on your talents?

Answer: No!

©The Wolfe Pack