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March Madness

"Intelligence Guided by Experience"
A Brief Look at Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe

by L. Neil Smith

Special(*) to TLE

On March 5, the Arts & Entertainment Network presented *Golden Spiders*, a Nero Wolfe adventure adapted from a novel of the same name by Rex Stout. If I were to describe the 40-odd books Stout wrote about Wolfe and Archie Goodwin between the 1930s and the 1970s as "novels of manners", likely you'd yawn, make some polite excuse, get up and leave.

Ostensibly a long series of murder mysteries featuring an obese, agoraphobic deep thinker and his tall, dark, and handsome (not to mention more mobile) assistant, the books are a family favorite with us. I've read them all aloud at least four times in the 20 years my wife and I have been together (one of Stout's great strengths is that he reads aloud very easily; another is that he rereads magnificently), and now my 10-year-old daughter is beginning to enjoy the books, as well.

Stout, who's often criticized by individualists for his politics -- I've heard him called everything from a Roosevelt Democrat to a Communist; I'm not sure which is worse -- was actually unclassifiable, what my friend cartoonist Rex "Baloo" May calls a "squarepegger". A rather quaint, 1930s-style advocate of World Government, I seriously doubt that he'd endorse the jackbooted thuggery of the New World Order today.

Stout did head up the notorious Writer's War Board, a typically Rooseveltian fascist instrumentality that centralized publishing in New York during World War II. But at the same time, he found excuses to rail against the graduated income tax. He was also an early and ardent advocate of political equality for blacks -- but never wrote a single word that would lead me to believe he approved of "affirmative action" and similar programs that actually deny and undermine racial equality.

I could be wrong.

Rex Stout's fundamental definition of government -- or perhaps more generally of civilization -- as an explicit agreement among the individuals comprising it not to kill or otherwise injure one another (or perhaps more importantly to tolerate anyone who does) is almost identical, at least in spirit and the vigor of its expression, to Ayn Rand's.

Stout's books have lots of romance -- Archie, who narrates the stories, is often compared by other characters to Clark Gable or Cary Grant. A deceptively misogynistic Wolfe accuses him of having dallied with thousands of women. But they contain no sex to speak of. They're full of adventure, but by today's standards they're almost nonviolent. Maybe a shot gets fired in every fourth or fifth book. Now I like sexy, violent novels, so there must be something else going on here, beyond the fact that I'm agoraphobic myself and tend to identify with Wolfe.

Two things make Stout's work something that should interest the individualist. The first is the nature of the relationships he describes and the nuances they involve. Over 30 years, Stout lays out a clear vision of a civility our culture seems to have hopelessly lost today.

The second -- and it's of great and increasing interest to me as a novelist -- is the growth we see happening in principal characters, especially Archie, who starts as a diamond-in-the-rough tough guy and evolves, over the decades, into a sophisticated observer of his own culture.

Read the Nero Wolfe books for their humor (they're very funny, especially once you get to know the characters), for their civility, for Wolfe's passion for justice -- which sometimes, given the poor substitute the law provides, leads him, just as it did his father(**), to become judge and executioner himself -- for the quirky interactions between him and Archie. Read them to see what we're missing today and what we might have again with a little help from "squarepegger", Rex Stout.

My personal favorites are *Black Mountain*, *The Doorbell Rang*, and *Death of a Dude* -- but *Golden Spiders* was pretty terrific, too.

** The identity of Nero Wolfe's father -- as well as of his infamous mother -- shall be left as an exercise for the intelligent reader.

Author: The Probability Broach, The Venus Belt, Their Majesties' Bucketeteers, Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu, Lando Calrissian and the Flamewind of Oseon, Lando Calrissian and the Starcave of Thonboka, The Lando Calrissian Adventures, The Nagasaki Vector, Tom Paine Maru, The Gallatin Divergence, The WarDove, The Crystal Empire, Brightsuit MacBear, Taflak Lysandra, Contact and Commune, Converse and Conflict, Concert and Cosmos, Henry Martyn, Pallas, Bretta Martyn, The Mitzvah (with Aaron Zelman), Forge of the Elders, Lever Action, The American Zone Order these books at: <http://www.lneilsmith.com//Insbooks.html>