

CLOSE-UP



*NERO WOLFE TAKES ON A SURPRISING VILLAIN*

## Author Rex Stout vs. the FBI



REX STOUT  
CONTINUED

Hand raising is a frequent accompaniment to Stout's hearty belly-laughter.

*"My wife judges people by the way they shake hands. I've known her to bawl out perfect strangers for shaking hands like a fish. The result is all our friends have good firm handshakes."*

## 'I don't know a thing about Nero. He does what he pleases'

"The FBI can't touch a writer and I'm not worrying about it. All I need is a typewriter," says Rex Stout, who at 80 is the dean of U.S. detective story writers. In 41 books over 40 years Stout's 286-pound fictional hero, Nero Wolfe, has taken on an awesome assortment of murderers with fearless irreverence and consistent success. But in his most recent thriller, *The Doorbell Rang*, Nero Wolfe is pitted against a different kind of villain that Stout personally considers "odious, overbearing and unprincipled"—the FBI. Wolfe catches the FBI in a blatantly illegal piece of skulduggery and turns the tables on J. Edgar Hoover's boys without, as usual, ever budging from his famous chair.

Irreverence is one of the few things Stout and Wolfe have

in common. Wolfe is irascible and taciturn; Stout is agile and affable. Wolfe is a gourmet cook; Stout likes good food but will not refuse a hot dog. Wolfe spends at least four pages out of every Stout novel contemplating his prize orchids; Stout doesn't have an orchid in his greenhouse. Wolfe hates women; Stout has had the same wife for 35 years and still likes her. Wolfe never goes anywhere; Stout left his Kansas home at 19, bummed around the world for years before settling down to write and now produces his books in a mountaintop house he designed and built himself. Stout claims that the details of his plots come out of his subconscious. "Nero Wolfe just appeared," he says. "I don't know a thing about him. He does what he damn well pleases."

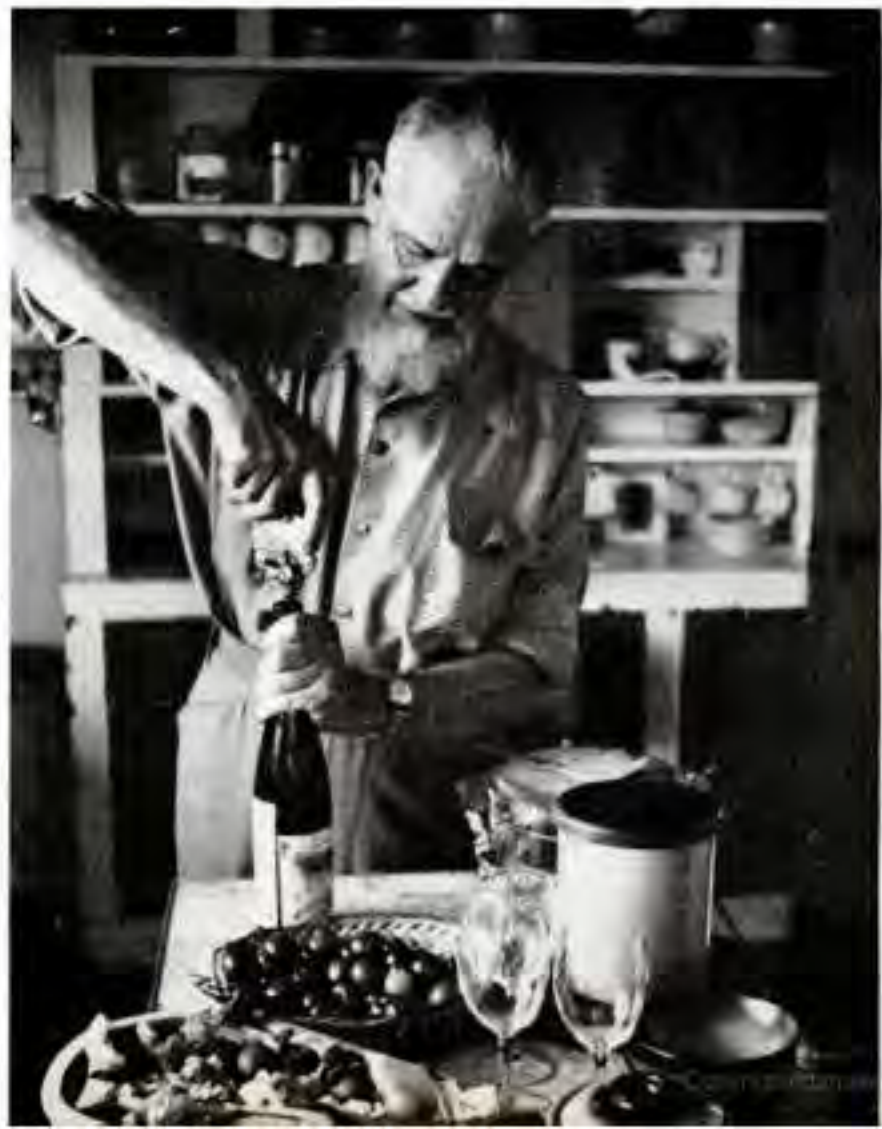


At home, Stout shows friend Mark Van Doren through greenhouse (above), opens some wine (right).

*"I worked like hell 14 hours a day for months while I was building*

*this house. I had nine men, and three and a half boys, all amateurs, working with me. A professional contractor would have had his own ideas and I wanted to have it done my way in my house."*

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Stout trudges daily down the steep, mile-long driveway of his 58-acre farm near Brewster, N.Y., to collect the mail.

*"In the spring and summer I work hard enough in the yard and garden not to need more*

*exercise, but late in the year a man needs an excuse to breathe once in a while. Still, one of the ambitions I'll probably never fulfill is to have an elephant go all the way down that drive, open the mailbox with his trunk and bring the mail back to the house."*

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## 'I know who will do the killing and why'

In conversation with LIFE Reporter Sandra Schmidt, Rex Stout made the following observations about writing, living and himself:

► What do I believe in? Belief means faith, and there's only one damn thing in the world I have any faith in. That's the idea of American democracy, because it seems to me so obvious that that's the only sensible way to run human affairs.

► Every book takes me from 35 to 41 days to write. I don't know why that is. I've tried to get it down to 30 or 31, depending on the length of the month, but it won't work. I don't drink while I'm writing because it fuddles my logical processes, but when I finish a book I go down to the kitchen and pour myself a big belt.

► I don't know much about the details of a story when I sit down at the typewriter. I know the names and ages of the four or five major characters and I know who will get killed and who will do the killing and why. I guess it's worked out by a curious sort of reasoning process that happens more or less by itself. In *The Doorbell Rang*, I knew that the bullet wouldn't be found in the room, but I didn't know why. Later, when it turned out that the FBI took it, I was delighted.

► The only difference between me and most people is that I'm perfectly aware that all my important decisions are made for me by my subconscious. My frontal lobes are just kidding themselves that they decide anything at all. All they do is think up reasons for the decisions that are already made.

► Painters get into trouble when they try to think. Picasso started to fancy himself as a thinker and look what happened to him. El Greco never thought; Rembrandt never thought. And they were better off. It's an artist's job to worry about pictures, not ideas.

► A person who does not read cannot think. He may have good mental processes, but he has nothing to think about. You can feel for people or natural phenomena and react to them, but they are not ideas. You cannot think about them.

► I don't approve of open fires. You can't think, or talk or even make love in front of a fireplace. All you can do is stare at it.

► I saw every performance Nijinsky danced in New York, and I see every baseball game I can get to. You watch a good second baseman digging for a badly thrown ball without letting his foot leave base and it's the same beautiful impossibility as a good *pas de deux* in *Swan Lake*.

► What makes a marriage last for a man and woman is to continue to have things to argue about.

► I don't like to talk much about myself. For *me* thing, it's a sure way to bore people. I'm answering all these questions for you because you have to go and write about me, but I'd much rather ask other people questions.

► Any man who undertakes to write a play is either a damn fool or a hero, I don't know which. When you write a book, you pull it out of the typewriter and that's that. When you write a play you've got to go on with the producer and the director and the actors and the rehearsals and the . . .

► I think the FBI syndrome will collapse when J. Edgar dies. Hoover has what I call a self-made halo. The next man won't have it so good.

► I'm not a collector. I don't keep letters, or books, or souvenirs. But I do keep one copy of each translation of my books into a foreign language. Have you ever seen a murder story printed in Singhalese? Wow!