To the Editor:

As Archie Goodwin and I have recently celebrated our joint birthday (Oct. 23), and as I was blessed with a copy of "Rex Stout" on that auspicious date, I felt it my duty to respond to Julian Symons's review (Nov. 13) of the book. Although I have read and admired Symons previously, I believe he is totally mistaken and unfair in his view of John McAleer's biography. As one who read the more than 500-page book in somewhat less than 48 hours, I find it hard to accept Symons's assertion that the book is dull. Rex Stout, as Symons agrees, is an extraordinary man; I feel, as Symons does not, that this book does him full justice. The many sides of Stout's character fully deserve to be explained by the lengthy background of his family story; obviously, Stout's unique family had much to do with his uniqueness. Far from finding McAleer's comments "banal," I thought admirably showed the many facets of Stout, without yielding to the temptation, as do so many biographers, to intrude his own thought or personality into those of his subject.

While I agree that Stout's prose is not on the level of Hammett's or Chandler's, to call it simply "energetic and efficient" is ludicrous. To rank Stout below Ross Macdonald (who is much more repetitive) or Ellery Queen (whose unrealistic devices and pretentious speech make his novels seem mocking and faded) is Sy­mons's loss that his strong feelings about Stout's characters and ease of effort blind him to the merits of both the biographer and the subject.

Rex Stout

To the Editor:

I have received, enjoyed and profited from John McAleer's excellent biography of Rex Stout. (I'm writing a book on Stout's works, and I've found McAleer's book immensely helpful.) Therefore, I was at first mystified by the hostility of Julian Symons's review. When a crime is committed, one looks for motive, and I think it appears later in the review. Symons attacks Stout's detective stories at great and fatuous length, as he did in a book five years ago. Stout is the real target, and McAleer is a surrogate. There is "evidence" that Symons scarcely read McAleer at all, and missed the point of nearly every passage that he cites. As a fair and successful mystery writer himself, Stout splendidly attacks a biographer, when his real target is the biographer's subject.

Rex Stout's "Gambit," in which the murderer poisons somebody he doesn't even know, to frame somebody of whom he's jealous.

Richard H. Reis
North Dartmouth, Mass.

To the Editor:

This letter is in protest of the manner in which Julian Symons reviewed John McAleer's biography of Rex Stout. My annoyance is because of the apparent lack of balance shown in his review. How dare he make snide allusions to possible perceptions about two characters with whom he should become "alive," and use this as "evidence" of Symons's loss that his strong feelings about Stout's characters and ease of effort blind him to the merits of both the biographer and the subject.

Julian Symons

To the Editor:

I have been an ardent reader of the stories written by Rex Stout. Recently, the first book of its kind, analyzing the life and works of Stout, was compiled by John McAleer. It was reviewed and mercilessly downgraded by Julian Symons. He summed up years of painstaking research by pronouncing it "dull," among other biased epithets.

To the Editor:

While I agree that Julian Symons reviewed John McAleer's biography of Rex Stout, I also agree, an­nexed because of the apparent lack of balance shown in his view. To rank Stout below Ross Macdonald (who is much more repetitive) or Ellery Queen (whose unrealistic devices and pretentious speech make his novels seem mocking and faded) is Symons's loss that his strong feelings about Stout's characters and ease of effort blind him to the merits of both the biographer and the subject.

Rex Stout

To the Editor:

The complaints come under two heads:

1. Symons unfair to Rex Stout: I think some of your readers regard Nero and Archie as sacred objects, which Stout himself wouldn't have wished. I admit that I'd put Stout as a crime writer below Doyle, Ross Macdonald and Ellery Queen, though it's not what I invited such a comparison; I also remember that when "Mortal Consequences" appeared, one reader complained that I'd been unfair to Ellery Queen. I have not "attack[ed] Stout's detective stories at great and fatuous length" anywhere or at any time. I have said, and repeat, that the books declined steeply after the end of the 1940's. And thanks, Marilyn Brooks, but I have what I regard as the best of Stout on my shelves, and do reread them.

2. Symons unfair to McAleer: Well, I'm sure that his book will be useful to Professor Reis, it's excellent source material. But what does he mean by writing about "evidence" (his inverted commas, not mine), that I've scarcely read the book. How do you prove such a negative, and why is Professor Reis so gratuitous insulting? If I were jealous of Stout shouldn't I be jealous of Christie too? In general, there'll always be fans fascinated to know how often their hero changed his socks and what he did for dinner on a particular day, but recording such things doesn't make a biography. As a researcher Professor John McAleer is fine: as a biographer he doesn't exist.

Author's Query

For a gazetteer of fictional places which figure significantly in American novels, short stories and poetry, I would appreciate any information on appropriate titles and authors. Please include dates of publication wherever possible.

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