

Books in Review

Literally Literary

Rex Stout's 38-Day Wonders

By JOHN BARKHAM

ONE DAY next month, after all the Christmas and New Year hullabaloo have subsided, Rex Stout will sit himself down in front of his typewriter, stare out of the window at his 15 wintry acres near Danbury, Conn., and settle down to the writing of his new book—his 54th.

It will be another full-length mystery involving that unfazable sleuth,



Rex Stout

Nero Wolfe, and his sidekick, Archie Goodwin. For day after day thereafter Mr. Stout will pound his typewriter, tug at his straggling white beard, and sweat out the murder and its solution. On the 38th day it will all be over.

Why 38? "I don't know, but nearly every one of my book-length mysteries has taken me 38 days.

Once or twice I've brought it down a day or two, but usually it's 38. I guess it's because they're all about the same length."

At 77, Rex Stout is the doyen of American mystery writers, not merely by reason of his output (33 Nero Wolfe novels to date), but because Wolfe himself is a carry-over from the vintage years of the mystery, when sleuths were distinctive figures familiar to readers everywhere. Mr. Stout's mysteries have been translated into 26 languages, which makes him better read than many a Nobel prizewinner.

Nero Wolfe himself remains as vigorous and formidable as ever, which is not surprising, since his creator exhibits the same durability. Mr. Stout's sonorous voice and commanding personality are seemingly untouched by time.

Unlike some of his contemporaries in the crime story field, he is reluctant to concede that the mystery has fallen on parlous times. Conceivably this might be tactfulness on his part, since he is president of the Authors' League. He was willing to allow, however, that young mystery writers of the caliber of

the older generation are not in evidence, and that English mystery writers are doing better by the genre than their American counterparts.

"The British have a greater respect for, and love of, tradition than we have," he explained. "One reason their books read better than ours is because they write better than we do. There are more things to a mystery, of course, than style, but in their writing they certainly have it all over us."

Mr. Stout spends less time weaving his mysteries than you might suppose. All he needs to get started, he says, is a beginning. Thereafter the story works itself out as he goes along. But while it is in the works he lives it every waking minute of the day—thinking, planning, plotting, putting it on paper.

"I've sometimes allowed myself to accept party invitations during these 38-day stints, but I was not really there, if you know what I mean. I've been off with my characters, wherever they may have been."

Mr. Barkham is a well-known New York literary figure and a member of the staff of the Saturday Review.

Mr. Stout is much more than just a spinner of mysteries. Believe it or not, he was one of that storied group of Paris expatriates in the 1920's. He refuses to be numbered among them. He prefers to be known merely as one who joined them for a year or so—Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and the rest. He even told me a Hemingway story I hadn't heard before.

"The two of us spent an evening carousing at the Deux Magots, and got the idea of driving out to Chartres to see the sun rise. Parisians might have laughed at us, but for Americans it was normal. We hired a taxi and set off. On the way there the driver suddenly slammed on his brakes, stopped the car and got out. He came back with a dead rabbit he'd run over, and placed it carefully under the seat. When we got to Chartres he charged us 900 francs. I think it was, for the ride, less 60 francs for the rabbit. Ernie roared at that one."