INTERVIEW WITH REX STOUT

BY JOHN & ANDREW MCALEER

McALEER: When you were writing for the pulps, between 1912 and 1917, did you see yourself as a hack writer or as an aspiring young writer on his way to the top?

STOUT: I have never regarded myself as this or that. I have been too busy being myself to bother about regarding myself.

McALEER: Julian Symons says the Holmes series falls off in the last two collections?

STOUT: Symons? I don’t know him. I don’t agree with him either. I think one or two of the later Holmes stories are among the best.

McALEER: Anthony Burgess says that those who write series detective stories are artists—like Wodehouse and Faulkner—building a world. Do you agree?

STOUT: Depends on the writer. Conan Doyle and Simenon yes; Christie or Gardner, no.

McALEER: I take it that Conan Doyle is one of your passions?

STOUT: Every Sherlock Holmes story has at least one marvelous scene. And there’s Holmes himself. Doyle stokes in a thousand shrewd touches with no effort at all. Wonderful.

McALEER: Did Archie hang up the picture of Sherlock Holmes that is found over his desk, or did Wolfe put it there?

STOUT: Did I say that at one point? I was a damn fool to do it. Obviously it is always an artistic fault in any fiction to mention any other character in fiction. It should never be done.

McALEER: Your culprits always capitulate plausibly. Do you take care to see that they do?

STOUT: Everything in a story should be credible, but one of the hardest things to believe is that anyone will abandon the effort to escape a charge of murder. Therefore it is extremely important to "suspend disbelief" on that. If you don’t, the story is spoiled.

McALEER: Simenon says characters must never be too thought out or willed. Is he right?

STOUT: A character who is thought out is not born, he or she is contrived. A born character is round, a thought out character is flat.

McALEER: How do you control your novelettes so that they seem just as intricate and entire as your novels?
STOUT: You might as well ask a shortstop how he avoids tripping when he whirls to throw.

McALEER: Is a novelette easier to write than a novel?

STOUT: In a way, short fiction is harder to write than long. An unnecessary page in a long novel doesn’t hurt it much, but an unnecessary sentence in a three-thousand-word story spoils it.

McALEER: Steven Marcus, a professor at Columbia, says that Dashiell Hammett, by a succession of "complex devices. . .was able to raise the crime story into literature." Is he right?

STOUT: "Raise?" No. It had been done before, for instance by Collins and Poe.

McALEER: Yet you hold Hammett in high regard?

STOUT: Certainly. He was better than Chandler, though to read the critics you wouldn’t think so. In fact, The Glass Key is better than anything Hemingway ever wrote. . .Hemingway never grew out of adolescence. His scope and depth stayed shallow because he had no idea what women are for.

McALEER: Kingsley Amis says that you must be as Johnsonian as Wolfe is, that is, "a moralist before anything else." Do you accept this estimate?

STOUT: I am not any kind of an "ist." I have a strong moral sense—by my standards.

McALEER: Kingsley Amis thinks that Wolfe’s speech carries the flavor of the eighteenth century. Do you think so, too?

STOUT: No.

McALEER: How many times have you read Boswell’s life of Samuel Johnson?

STOUT: All of it, twice.

McALEER: Amis sees Wolfe as a latter-day Samuel Johnson. Do you find that an agreeable compliment?

STOUT: Yes. Since I like Johnson, I’d like to think that Wolfe invites comparison with him.

McALEER: To many readers Wolfe is the epitome of the rational man.

STOUT: If they want to feel that way, God bless ‘em. They’ll probably buy another book, and that’s all I care about.

McALEER: Then you don’t think man is a rational animal?

STOUT: The minute those two little particles inside a woman’s womb have joined together billions of decisions have been made. A thing like that has to come from entropy. All men are reasoning animals more than any other animal. Of course they are. That’s perfectly obvious. They have a bigger brain and a better brain. And we reason with our brain. But to say that man is a reasoning animal is a very different thing than to say that most of man’s decisions are based on his rational process. That I don’t believe at all. But of course he’s a rational animal. He damn well better be in this complicated world, believe me, or he isn’t going to last very long.