

*A Birthday
Tribute to
Rex Stout*

December 1, 1965



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REX STOUT

by

JACQUES BARZUN

and

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ABOUT REX STOUT

by Jacques Barzun

I cannot speak about debts of honor, but debts of pleasure are a delight to pay; and it is in pursuit of this selfish indulgence that I unburden myself of a few thoughts about a writer whose stories have given me pleasure for a third of a century.

If he had done nothing more than to create Archie Goodwin, Rex Stout would deserve the gratitude of whatever assessors watch over the prosperity of American literature. For surely Archie is one of the folk heroes in which the modern American temper can see itself transfigured. Archie is the lineal descendant of Huck Finn, with the additions that worldliness has brought to the figure of the young savior. Archie is cynical but an idealist. He is of easy approach, simple speech, and simple manners, but he makes the sharpest, subtlest discriminations in his judgments of status, speech, looks, and clothes. He drinks milk, but can describe and savor *haute cuisine* like any freshly made aristocrat. He is body-proud and ready to knock any man down who disobeys *Robert's Rules of Order*—indeed he is not averse to clutching women by the elbow or the neck when they claim an equal right with men to disturb the committee work that goes on so tirelessly in Nero Wolfe's big room; yet Archie dislikes violence and carries firearms only as a badge of office. He also dislikes the policemen that his work compels him to consort with, but he is of course on the side of law-enforcement. He is promiscuous with his eyes and his thoughts, and a woman must be past hope herself or else wanting in civility or human feeling, before Archie ceases to

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interweave his erotic fantasies with his shorthand notes on the case; yet he clings to Lily Rowan with the fervent monogamy of a healthy man living in sin.

In short, Archie is so completely the standard American's embellished vision of himself that at times he helps one to understand the failures of American foreign policy and the paradoxical success that so many individual Americans achieve abroad while their government misrepresents itself. For Archie has vitality, candor under boyish guile, inventiveness, a remarkable memory, and an all-conquering efficiency. Above all, he commands a turn of humor that goes to the heart of character and situation: not since Mark Twain and Mr. Dooley has the native spirit of comedy found an interpreter of equal force. Our other professional humorists of the last half century have been solid and serviceable, but their creations are not in a class with Archie. His whole mind is a humorous organ, and not just his words. And here again the national fantasy comes out: it is our birthright to consider ourselves extremely funny fellows, whose humor, moreover, is pure philosophic gold. One proof of this is that we say, "Wise guy!" defensively when this enveloping stream of humor turns against what we conceive to be our interest.

Archie is spiritually larger than life. That is why his employer and companion had to be made corpulent to match. Archie is (as the close-reading critics would discover from his name) an arche-type. Nero Wolfe is a portrait—a portrait of the Educated Man. Unlike other detectives of fiction, Nero is not a know-it-all, much less a pedant. He hates work, perhaps the clearest symptom of a really fine education; for idleness is the only means discovered so far for civilizing the mind through the reading of books. I mean *read*, not use or consult for one's livelihood. Wolfe has to adopt these inferior

courses from time to time, but it is always under duress. Just once Wolfe reads as an avenger, and it is as the vindicator of faith in the Word. That occasion is the one dramatic scene in the otherwise pallid history of literary criticism. As the curtain goes up, Wolfe is disclosed at the chimney corner glumly reading in a huge work. Each time he comes to the end of a lefthand page, he tears it out and throws it on the fire. The book is Webster's International Dictionary, the third edition. And to Archie, who enters and protests, Wolfe, with a Johnsonian power for drawing distinctions, expounds the argument against bookburning.

This is not only wisdom but enlightened self-interest also, for (as I said) Wolfe's enviable leisure is filled with the reading of books (but one at a time, surprisingly), with the growing of flowers and the gratification of his palate, with beer and immobility.

Convincing as is this catalogue of tastes, it is not the only thing that proves the man educated. Nor am I thinking of his dislike of cars as supporting evidence—that is a mere symbol of his unobtrusive divorce from the standardized life. Rather, I have in mind his astute and unexampled way of unraveling crime. He is the only detective to use the seminar method for finding out the truth, and his are surely the only seminars in which truth of any kind has ever been found. The performance should be taped and circulated in academic places.

Nero Wolfe's manner and manners also deserve attention. He is courteous where Archie is merely civil, but Nero pays himself back handsomely by telling people to their face what he thinks of their mental and moral confusion. He must be the only man today who can say "Pfui" and survive. Such are the wonders of education. And, of course, his penetration of motive owes as much to his knowledge of literature as to

his natural shrewdness. To a reader of Balzac and Dostoevski, how rudimentary must seem the turns of cunning of a self-made millionaire or a made-up "TV personality."

Doubtless it was to avoid the exertions of truth-telling and motive-hunting in the home, of repetitious seminars with the same cast of characters, that Wolfe renounced marriage. The sparring that goes on between him and Archie is limited to the question of replenishing the bank account: it is the battle, not of the sexes, but of philosophy and leisure against bodily needs and the balance of payments. Archie *must* win, or civilization itself would perish, beginning at the top, the fourth floor where the orchids are.

In this sublime duet of Don Quixote and a glamorized Sancho Panza who go tilting together against evil, there is no mystery, nothing but matter for admiration, edification, and (if desired) self-identification. The true mystery is in their inspired creator, Rex Stout. Not two characters alone, but a palpable atmosphere exists in that brownstone house on West 35th Street. And what sinewy, pellucid, propelling prose tells those tales—allegories of the human pilgrimage, rather—in which there is little or no blood, but rather the play of mind; no stagy antics, but much passionate drama, as ingenious and varied in its lifelike situations as certain other kinds of plots one could name are repetitious and standardized.

To the reader who has followed the evolution of this imaginary world and its chief actors, it is entertaining to go back to an earlier conception, say in *Bad for Business*, and find in the figure of Tecumseh Fox the outlines of both of the later men, each half formed. A mythologist would here make learned reference to Plato's theory of counterparts. I am more interested in speculating about the lesser mysteries that the

contemplation of Rex Stout's cosmos leaves us with. And first the higher mathematics of it: we are told that Nero weighs one-seventh of a ton. It is never made clear whether it is a short ton or a long ton—but oh, the difference to him!

Again, Nero is almost never ill, despite the prodigal use of condiments and cream sauces on the richest foods, accompanied by vintage wines and the swilling of beer. I can only ascribe this poise in the face of otherwise liver-corroding forces to the thorough—almost religious—lack of exercise.

The question of food raises that of the recipes. There should be a Nero Wolfe Cookbook, but there is not: I have asked the Librarian of Congress. Where then does Nero (or his chef) find those dishes with evocative names and dimly hinted ingredients? This is a lack that must be remedied soon, if a sit-in of cooks outside Nero's brownstone front, with pickets chanting "We want Wolfe! Let the Wolfe come to the door!" is to be averted.*

My only hypothesis about the source of these recipes is that the four hours a day that Wolfe is said to spend incommunicado in the plant room are not spent in horticulture at all. I am no gardener, but I doubt whether an intelligent man could spend that much time—one thousand four hundred and sixty hours a year—simply spraying and surveying some forty head of cattleyas. I believe instead that he engages in secret trials of night-born notions of food (cf. the significantly named *saucisse minuit*).

The only other possibility is that he retires up there to read the novels of Rex Stout and picks up in them his strokes of genius.

*A Nero Wolfe cookbook is now in preparation.

REX STOUT

A Biographical Note

"I was a prodigy," says Rex Todhunter Stout, in an understatement about his spectacular youth. One of nine children, Rex was born in Noblesville, Indiana, on December 1, 1886. When he moved to Topeka, Kansas, because he was "fed up with Indiana politics," he was one year old.

His father, John Wallace Stout, was a Quaker and a teacher who firmly believed that children should not be punished until they had marshaled all the evidence they could find in their behalf; Rex's quick wit and verbal skill can no doubt be traced to his early—and frequent—pleadings of innocence to the elder Stout.

His father had an extraordinary library of twelve hundred volumes of biography, history, fiction, philosophy, science, and poetry. At the age of three, Stout says, he had read the Bible through twice, and by the time he was ten he had consumed all twelve hundred books. His favorites were the works of Bacon and Macaulay.

In his ninth year Rex became a public sensation because of his uncanny ability to add up formidable columns of figures at computer speed. He was exemplary in other subjects too, but nineteenth-century educational views held that rapid advance was harmful: so the boy was withdrawn from school for whole terms to retard his development. Nonetheless, he won the spelling championship of Kansas, and at the age of sixteen sold a rather bizarre poem to *Smart Set*.

After his graduation from high school, Rex, who had been headed for the University of Kansas, decided to act on his ambition to see the world. He also yearned to see the ocean, as only a Midwesterner can. Arriving at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, he zipped through a bookkeeping course and was assigned to the coveted position of yeoman on President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht, the *Mayflower*. The excitement of mingling with the Presidential coterie was balanced, unfortunately, by the harsh discipline im-

A Biographical Note

posed on the crew, and in 1908—after two years in the service—Stout bought his discharge and left the Navy.

Once liberated, the young man answered want ads in New York City. For the lordly sum of eighteen dollars a week he was employed as bookkeeper of *Pharmaceutical Era* and *Soda Fountain*; the job was short-lived, for the management discovered their employee was hustling advertisements on the side. Roaming the country as an itinerant bookkeeper, Stout also tried his hand at being a cigar salesman in Cleveland, a salesman of Indian baskets in Albuquerque, a guide to the Indian pueblos near Santa Fe, a barker for a sightseeing bus in Colorado Springs, a bookstore salesman in Chicago, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee, and a stable hand in New York. In fact, he ran up a staggering total of thirty jobs in four years. During this period Stout dipped into journalism only once, and with remarkable success: he wrote, and sold to the *New York World* for two hundred dollars, a piece analyzing the palm prints of William Howard Taft, then the Republican nominee for President, and Tom L. Johnson, a prominent Democrat.

In 1912 Rex Stout decided to become a magazine writer, and until 1916 he ground out—and successfully sold—reams of fiction. Money never burned a hole in his pocket; he spent it as fast as he earned it. Wanting to acquire wealth enough to give himself leisure for full-time serious writing—two hundred thousand dollars, he thought at first, then upped his sights to four hundred thousand—he created and implemented the school banking system, which was installed in four hundred cities and towns throughout the country. In each of the schools that adopted Bank Day, Stout would explain the ideals of thrift to the students. Only once in his proselytizing of America's youth did he encounter irreducible opposition: one adamant youngster in Pittsburgh insisted that "If you put a dollar in the bank, you'll never see it again."

During the 1920s the thrift system was thriving sufficiently for Stout to indulge in some travel. Every summer for several years he went to Montana and took thirty pack horses and a pair of cowboys into the high Rockies, where for three months he fished,

read, and walked; it was on one of these retreats that he cultivated his beard. In the same decade he traveled through Europe. He once walked a hundred and eighty miles to see Thermopylae. Carthage, however, was the place that impressed him most deeply. "There were no ruins," he recalls, "just a lovely meadow with yellow flowers." Stout also lived in France for two years, although he refuses to be numbered among the Paris expatriates of that era; he prefers to be thought of merely as one who joined them for a year or two.

In 1927, having accumulated enough money, Stout retired from the world of finance and went back to writing. His first novel, *How Like a God*, was published in 1929, and it was followed by four other nonmystery novels. "They were all well received," he recalls, "but I discovered two things: I was a good storyteller, and I would never be a great writer." In 1934 the first Nero Wolfe novel, *Fer-de-Lance*, appeared. Alexander Woollcott insisted to the last that he himself was Stout's model for the corpulent, lucid detective. Christopher Morley proposed that the original of Nero was none other than the son of Sherlock Holmes's brother Mycroft. Bernard de Voto, in a 1954 *Harper's* magazine essay, went to great lengths to reconstruct Nero's genealogy. And, of course, Stout himself has been imagined to be the prototype of Nero Wolfe.

Physically, Stout bears no resemblance to his creation. Nero tips the scale at over two hundred and eighty pounds and is notoriously lazy; Stout has for many years been a lean hundred and fifty pounds and has the energy of a draft horse. Nero is smooth-shaven; Stout has a beard, recently described by a *New York Post* writer as "a wishy-washy thing that looks as if he stole it off a billy-goat, or maybe G. B. Shaw." Nero is an avowed misogynist; Stout is devoted to his wife, Pola, the textile designer, and has an eye for pretty girls, including his and Pola's two married daughters, Barbara and Rebecca. Nero is an inveterate stay-at-home; Stout relishes fishing, hunting, and tramping through country paths or city streets. The case for Stout's resemblance to Nero improves, however, when their intellectual attributes are considered: both

are formidable antagonists in verbal battle; both often stoop to irregular means to prove a point. Then, too, Nero's hobbies resemble Stout's. Nero is obsessed by orchids; Stout has won blue ribbons at country fairs for his mammoth pumpkins and strawberries. His garden abounds with fruit, vegetables, and flowers (one year five thousand of his tulips were consumed by deer), his home contains three hundred plants, and from the ceiling of his garage hang countless gourds. Stout also considers himself a good cook and a connoisseur of good food; Nero is a gourmet *par excellence*.

Although Rex Stout has often been queried about the creation of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, and asked to explain the origin of their characteristics and idiosyncrasies, he insists he hasn't the faintest idea where they came from. "Most decisions," he maintains, "are made below the level of consciousness. Your frontal lobes think up reasons for things your guts have told you to do."

In 1930 Rex Stout interrupted his literary career to build High Meadow, a unique house located on a thousand-foot elevation that straddles the state line between Westchester County, New York, and Fairfield County, Connecticut. During a vacation on the Mediterranean, Stout had seen the palace of the Bey of Tunis and decided to model his home after it. The result was a concrete, U-shaped structure of fourteen rooms built around an inner court. "We didn't put in a eunuch well," he explains indulgently, "because there aren't enough eunuchs in this country to make it worth while." Determined to have the best possible building materials, and to use the best construction techniques, Stout studied the various phases of construction—from concrete-mixing and pouring to cabinetmaking—and either directly supervised or executed all the work himself. He recruited labor from the local farm populace, who referred to him as "the guy who's building the monkey-house." Some four years after High Meadow was completed, Frank Lloyd Wright, standing on the terrace and surveying the panorama of countryside below, commented dryly, "Good spot. I would have liked to build a house here."

The activities of Nero and Archie were again disrupted in 1938 when Stout devoted himself to writing propaganda for American participation in World War II and to making speeches for preparedness and later for lend-lease and the draft. He edited a book, *The Illustrious Dunderheads*, an analysis of isolationists and anti-preparedness members of Congress. During World War II he was master of ceremonies for the Council for Democracy's radio program, "Speaking of Liberty," and chairman of the Writers' War Board from 1941 to 1946. He has been chairman of the Writers' Board for World Government since 1949. From 1943 to 1945 he was President of the Authors Guild, and since 1951 he has been President of the Authors League of America. In this connection he is currently campaigning in Washington to reform America's copyright laws. Stout is also a member of the Board of Directors of Freedom House.

Nero Wolfe's activities were resumed in 1946 with the publication of *The Silent Speaker*, the first Nero Wolfe novel to appear under the Viking imprint. In addition to the thirty single mysteries, there are eight Nero Wolfe threesomes, consisting of novelettes or long stories, and one foursome. Mr. Stout is also the author of four other mysteries, seven novels, and three Tecumseh Fox mysteries—a total of fifty-three new books published in thirty-six years. There are, finally, four omnibus collections of previously published Nero Wolfe books.

What is the process of creation behind this prodigious output? "At the age of four I was storing away impressions at the rate of eleven thousand a minute," Stout explains. "At my age, they've slowed down, but they're still coming in. When I start to write, all the things I've heard and stored come into play."

Given that subliminal approach, Mr. Stout's *modus operandi* for writing a novel is quite simple. "I get at some time or other the central idea from which the story grows—perhaps a motive, a method of killing, or a milieu. As soon as I have accepted that as a basis, I begin to make up characters."

Using 5½ x 8 paper, Mr. Stout creates miniature dossiers for

each character, but that is his only preparatory writing before the actual typing of the manuscript. His small book-lined office affords him no opportunity to stalk around; and, working straight through, with no diversions, in about forty days—always during the winter—he has finished another Nero Wolfe novel. He never revises or rewrites. "Working six weeks a year is a damn good way to make a living!" he says exultantly, and then he flinches as he recalls that Joseph Conrad, whom he once visited, was totally exhausted after a day's output of 172 words.

At least half of Stout's current reading material consists of books he has read before—for example, Shakespeare's sonnets, which he has committed to memory and which he considers the most nearly perfect use of words in the English language. Yeats, he feels, is the only poet of the twentieth century to whom the word "great" may be accorded. "The thing I regret most," he confesses, "is not being able to read the classics—*War and Peace*, for example—in the original language." He indicts German fiction and drama on the grounds that they contain no real people, just stereotypes. He once voiced that opinion to a nonplussed Thomas Mann, whose daughter consoled him by saying, "That's all right, father. You're half Brazilian."

To Rex Stout, good storytelling and the masterly use of words are the paramount literary achievements; the two books he wishes he could have written, which embody those qualities, respectively, are to him Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

There are more good storytellers doing detective stories today, Mr. Stout thinks, than there are doing any other form of fiction. He considers Ian Fleming to have been a good storyteller, but refused Fleming's suggestion that M, James Bond, Nero Wolfe, and Archie Goodwin appear in the same novel. "Bond would have gotten all the girls," Stout admitted ruefully.

Above all else, Rex Stout's ruling principle is enjoyment. "If I'm not having fun writing a book," he emphatically asserts, "no one's going to have any fun reading it." He does, and we do.

—J. I. C., *The Viking Press*

Books by Rex Stout

NOVELS

How like a God	Golden Remedy	Seed on the Wind
O Careless Love!	Mr. Cinderella	Forest Fire
The President Vanishes		

NERO WOLFE MYSTERIES

Fer-de-Lance	The League of Frightened Men	
The Rubber Band	The Red Box	Some Buried Caesar
Over My Dead Body	Black Orchids	
Where There's a Will	Not Quite Dead Enough	
Too Many Cooks	The Silent Speaker	
Too Many Women	And Be a Villain	
Trouble in Triplicate	The Second Confession	
Three Doors to Death	In the Best Families	
Curtains for Three	Murder by the Book	
Triple Jeopardy	Prisoner's Base	The Golden Spiders
Three Men Out	The Black Mountain	
Full House: A Nero Wolfe Omnibus	Before Midnight	
Three Witnesses	Might As Well Be Dead	
Three for the Chair	If Death Ever Slept	
And Four to Go	All Aces: A Nero Wolfe Omnibus	
Champagne for One	Plot It Yourself	
Three at Wolfe's Door	Too Many Clients	
Five of a Kind: The Third Nero Wolfe Omnibus		
Homicide Trinity: A Nero Wolfe Threesome		
The Final Deduction	Gambit	The Mother Hunt
Trio for Blunt Instruments	A Right to Die	
The Doorbell Rang		
Royal Flush: The Fourth Nero Wolfe Omnibus		

TECUMSEH FOX MYSTERIES

Double for Death	The Broken Vase	Bad for Business
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MYSTERIES

The Hand in the Glove	Mountain Cat
Alphabet Hicks	Red Threads