The Washington Post STYLE The Arts SHOW

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1969

Rex Stout Is Alive and Arguing in Fine Fas ion

By Phil Casey

Rex Stout, who is, not too much to his surprise, one of the most popular and financially happy writers in the entire history of wordsmenship, is alive and kicking and happy in at least two states.

He can be found, though not without difficulty, in either New York or Connecticut, all depending on which part of his 58-acre estate he happens to be standing and arguing.

Stout, the lean, bearded creator of Nero Wolfe, the famous fictional detective noted for his fat and aplomb, is 82 and then some. His love for talk and debate remains strong. His birthday score will be 83 this Dec. 1, and on him old age looks good.

"Yes," he said over the phone the other day, "I'm expecting you and I expect to be here. I have heard nothing from St. Peter."

What Stout means by "here" is confusing. If you were to ask, he'd probably claim that he lives in Brewster, N.Y., but the chances are he'd be wrong. High Meadow, his beautiful piece of earth (most of it woodland, caressing deer, raccoons, squirrels and other animals that are okay with Stout if they leave his flowers and fruit and vegetables alone) straddles the New York-Connecticut line.

His 14-room house, which he designed and built in 1930 and modeled somewhat after a place of a Bey of Algiers, is in Fairfield County, Conn. But if Stout and his wife, Pola, a vivacious, happy and talented textile designer, go outdoors in the right directions, they'll find themselves instantly in Putnam County, N.Y., just a few miles from downtown Brewster, which is a pleasant town about 50 miles above New York City, with a main street that is barely a sprint.

One of the interesting things about Connecticut is that there is no state income tax and many people of note have noted this and sleep there. Stout concedes that the fact that he built his house on the right side of the state income tax line is of certain financial advantage. But he denies that this was his plot.

He built the house there, he said, because he didn't want to be represented by New York Republican Rep. Hamilton Fish. He chose Connecticut, he says, simply to escape Fish.

"So what did I get?" he growled the other day. "I got Clare Boothe Luce." All that was long ago, but Stout is still sore.

Stout, who has been writing on and off, mostly on, for 57 years, has been writing about Nero Wolfe and his assistant, Archie Goodwin, for 36 of those years. He has written so many Nero Wolfe novels and stories that neither he nor his publisher, Viking Press, seems clear about what has happened. The figures given on the numbers of books and stories seem contradictory.

It was Stout's best guess the other day that he has written 38 Nero novels and a dozen collections of shorter stories. Stout is a mathematical whiz, and he's probably right about this.

"I think that's about it," he said. "That's close as you can get . . . There are supposed to be between 45 million and 60 million copies sold, in 24 languages. Have you ever seen Nero Wolfe in Singhalese? Wow, that's something."

One reason for writing about Stout at this time is because after you talk to him, there's no good reason not to. He has been practically everywhere and done just about everything. Before he was a successful writer, he was a successful businessman, "the Pied Piper of thrift," establishing and operating a school banking system that flourished in 420 cities and towns and made him wealthy, until the 1929 stock market crash. He

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has recouped with Nero and Archie since then. Before that, he had been a great number of things, including yeoman and warrant officer on President Theodore Roosevelt's official yacht, Mayflower, from 1906 to 1908.

Stout has been around a long time and he has been busy. He has been not only a sailor, banker, writer, farmer and radio commentator, but an itinerant bookkeeper, cigar salesman, pueblo guide, hotel manager, architect, cabinet maker, book salesman and blanket and basket salesman. He was the spelling champ of Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa and class poet in Topeka High School. He sold his first published work, a poem, to the old "Smart Set" magazine when he was 16. He has raised and trained owls and crows and a jumping pig. He has produced, by fair means or foul, vegetables and fruits so big that he became notorious at county fairs. He was also a child math prodigy, but didn't enjoy it.

Stout is enjoying a little surge of publicity lately. He had, of course, a new Nero novel out this year, "Death of a Dude," and there was the study published early this year by the late William S. Baring-Gould, author of "Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street" and editor of "The Annotated Sherlock Holmes."

Baring-Gould wrote 'Nero Wolfe of West 35tn Street, the Life and Times of the World's Largest Detective."

Stout is a straightforward man, pantingly ready to say exactly what he thinks on any and all subjects, and he doesn't think much of Baring-Gould's book. For one thing, he doesn't think it's well written. But it's no bad thing to be ranked up there with Conan Doyle and Sherlock, and the book probably has increased interest in Stout and his work.

He has been invited to appear on TV shows recently and NBC plans to visit his house and do an interview. Holiday magazine has scheduled a story on him.

"Why does there seem to be more going on that way than before?" said Stout. "I don't know, but I think it's because everyone wants to live to be 83 and they want to look at someone who made it."

And Stout looks good. He's about 5 feet 8, 150 pounds, and active. He has silver-gray hair and beard (the beard is about 50 years old) and a deep tan.

He has a big flower, fruit and vegetable garden and somewhere between 200 and 400 house plants. The figure varies, and he doesn't go around counting them. He, his wife, and a friend who has worked for Stout for 42 years, Harold Salmon, work together in keeping up the place, and Stout spends time in his splendidly equipped workroom. He likes to make things—furniture, bookcases—and is good at it.

Stout planned, designed and built his 14-room house. It's a concrete, U-shaped structure around a courtyard. The elevation there is about 1,000 feet. The house perches atop the hill and the view through the drapeless windows is of hills, trees and valleys for miles around, and is best left to poets and landscape gardeners to describe. (The windows are drapeless because Stout believes you shouldn't mess around with windows.)

To build that house, Stout studied cement mixing and pouring and other details of construction.

"I didn't know anything, so I got some Government Printing Office pamphlets at 10 cents each and studied them," Stout said. "But after I read the one on plumbing, I knew damned well I'd better not monkey around with that, so I got an established, experienced plumber who was a decent, honest man and everything worked out perfectly.

"I worked 14 hours a day for seven months building this house," he said. "I hired nine men and 3½ boys, all amateurs. A professional would have had his own ideas. I say half a boy because one boy was only eight and there wasn't a lot he could do, but he found things he could do, and he helped.

"I didn't want an architect and a contractor. I didn't want it done for me. It wouldn't have been any fun."

Stout is a man of many parts, many interests, many enthusiasms. "I don't think I've ever done anything that wasn't fun," he said. He's a gourmet (though he dislikes the word), an excellent cook, a dedicated trout fisherman, president of the Author's League, a lover of literature, art, opera, symphonies, the ballet and baseball.

Stout hates movies, and he hated them before they got to be taken seriously.

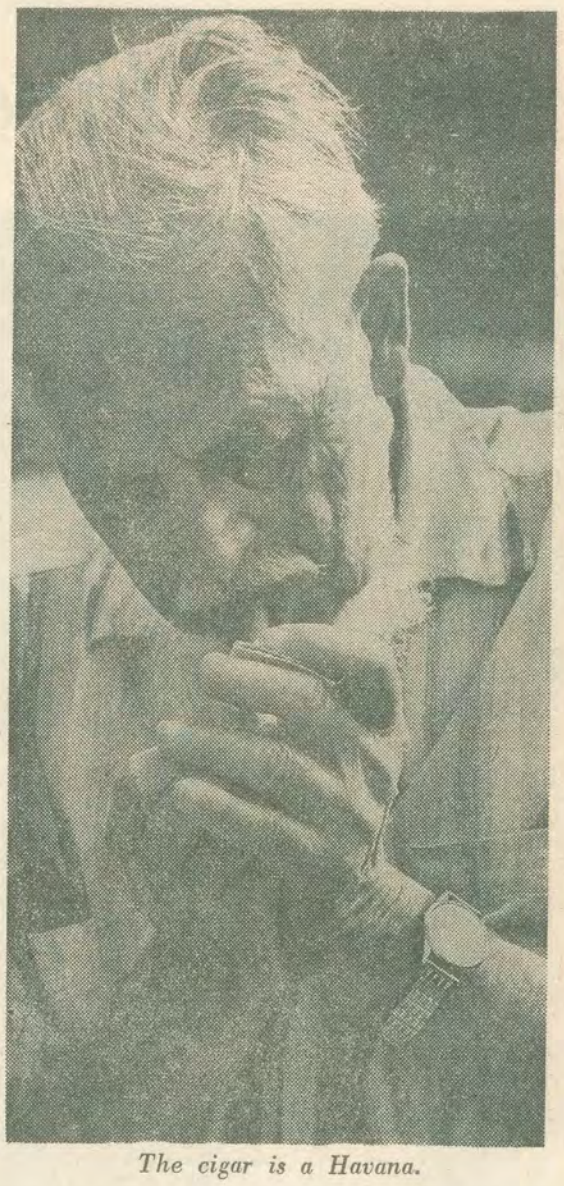
"I haven't sat through a movie in 21 years. Frederic March asked me to go to one, maybe because he thought he did a good job in it, and he did, and I sat there for half an hour. I couldn't stand it."

Stout can hate movies and get away with it in his soul, but he has a problem with television. He hates it as few people you've ever heard ("It's filled with moral turpitude" is one of his nicer remarks), but his love for baseball has him all torn up on this score. Fifty and 60 years ago, Stout was showing up in person at hundreds of ball games and can name everyone he ever saw playing that game. But now he relies heavily on TV for the games, and it irks him that he has to rely so heavily on a medium he dislikes.

"If not for baseball," he said in that growl that he considers a sigh, "I wouldn't be in this fix."

Stout is an admirer of Caruso, Toscanini, Shakespeare, Chaliapan, Wagner's music (not the man), John Barrymore, Yeats, Chopin, Beethoven, Julia Sanderson, W. C. Fields, Nijinsky and Gil Hodges. The phone ran and Stout answered it in that voice that sounds 40 years younger, saying: "Oh yes, darling, I'm in pretty good shape. Not the shape that Gil Hodges is in, but pretty good."

From spring to fall, Stout spends hours outdoors each day with his flowers and fruits and vegetables and plants. And through the colder weather, he tries to spend at least a little time outdoors. He reads a lot, listens to music and has a pleasant social life; practically everybody he deals with is bright or knows someone who is. One close friend and country neighbor is Marian Anderson. Another is Howard Taubman, New York Times music critic, and the list of his friends and acquaintances includes a half-century of literary artists from Booth Tarkington to Philip Roth.



The cigar is a Havana.

He writes his annual Nero novel in a six-week period. He used to start in February, but now he starts Nov. 1. He doesn't know what he's going to write about, and doesn't think about it until a few days before he will begin writing. He doesn't seem worried about it. The system has worked well so far.

During this period, Stout ascends to a tiny, second-floor den, sits at his typewriter and ignores the window and the view. "You know, I hadn't thought of that, but I don't even look out of that window," he said.

He works seven or eight hours a day on the book, seven days a week. He stops all socializing, doesn't go out and doesn't have guests.

"I wouldn't be good company," he said. "My mind wouldn't be free. I wouldn't be bad company, but not very entertaining."

And he doesn't take a drink all that time. But when the job is done, he descends to the liquor cabinet.

"And then I have a big belt," he said. What he's apt to have, instead of a big belt, is a gentle glass or two of his favorite claret.

Stout enjoys writing. "Writers are forever saying what a lonely life it is. What bull. I feel, while I'm writing and when I've finished, not elation, but a sense of satisfaction. And I've had fun."

Stout was born in Noblesville, Ind., the sixth of nine children and descendant of a long line of Quakers on both sides of the family. His father taught math, ran a weekly newspaper and later became a county school superintendent in Kansas, where Stout grew up. At one point Stout was attending a tiny schoolhouse in which the entire enrollment was he and his brothers and sisters and the teacher was his oldest sister. His mother taught Greek.

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There is a well circulated report that Stout had read the Bible twice by the time he was 3. He scoffs at this. He read it only once, he said. Though he's a birthright Quaker, he will have no truck with religion and can't stand accepting anything as a matter of faith. No matter how he made out with the Bible, he did read through his father's 1,200-book library, and numerous other books, by the time he was 13 or 14.

It was discovered that Stout had unusual mathematical abilities when he was 8 or 9 and teachers started exhibiting him. They'd blindfold him and he'd stand with his back to the blackboard while they chalked up a long number of figures. Within a second or so after the blindfold was removed, Stout would add the figures. He was exhibited all over Kansas, until his parents put a stop to it.

After high school, he worked as a bookkeeper and then attended the University of Kansas for two weeks. It's not clear why he quit—something about seeing the world and figuring he was already pretty smart. He tried to enlist in the Navy, but the Navy objected to his tonsils.

"I found a young doctor who was willing to take them out for $2," recalls Stout. So he and the doctor adjourned to a barber shop to perform the operation in one of the barber chairs. Stout recalls that it was messy and sick-making, but he got into the Navy.

Stout, as usual, prospered in the Navy. He became a yeoman on the presidential yacht in 1906, traveled widely, and was made a warrant officer—because the officers needed him to fill out a second table at whist.

"I forget exactly what my salary was," said Stout, "but it was picking up $150 or so a month playing whist."

One of his duties was to look after Kermit and Quentin Roosevelt, then little boys, when they were aboard. "They were brats," recalls Stout, "not unlikable brats, but brats."

Stout managed to get shot in the leg in Santo Domingo, after a shipmate threw some bananas at some natives, and still bears the scar of his peacetime wound.

After getting out of the Navy in 1908, Stout set out to really see America. He worked in practically every state at a variety of jobs. He can't recall how many, though he was many times a bookkeeper or a salesman.

In his one try at journalism, Stout was a resounding success. He heard that William Howard Taft, then Republican nominee for president, and Tom Johnson, a prominent Democrat, were in New York. Stout sold the Sunday editor of The World the idea of an article on the palm prints of the two men. He got a palmistry book for a quarter and went to see Taft, whom he knew from his days on the presidential yacht. He got the palm prints of both men, wrote the article with the aid of the palmistry book, and collected $200.

In 1912, he settled in New York and decided to become a magazine writer. He was successful immediately. Stout has never offered any work to a publisher that hasn't been accepted.

"I'm not proud of that," he said, "but it's the way it happened. I don't think it's anything to be proud of."

Those were great years for Stout. He was young, living in his beloved Manhattan and turning out gobs of pulp and slick magazine stories that gave him a good income.

But, enjoying New York the way he wanted to, he found himself not getting wealthy. He was spending a lot of time and money "investigating the woman question," he recalls, and felt he needed more money to do this and other things properly, and with style.

He decided that a writer needed to be economically secure, and the way to do this was to be rich. So, he invented, in 1916, at the age of 29, a school bank system that eventually had two million schoolchildren enrolled in 420 cities and towns and which, by 1927, when he retired, had made him a wealthy man. That, together with investments, had given Stout a net worth of at least a half-million, it has been estimated. He had traveled the country and the world and spent whole summers trout fishing in Montana.

He turned to what is called "serious fiction" and wrote several novels. But in 1929, the stock market crash took most of his money.

"I decided then to build this house," he said, "I don't know exactly why."

It was a great decision, for he has been happy there with his wife and two daughters, now grown with children of their own.

It was about that time that he began writing detective stories. His first Nero Wolfe story was "Fer de Lance," published in 1934, and things have been looking up ever since.

He turned to detective stories, Stout said, because he knew he would never be a "great writer." What he is, he said, is "a storyteller." And he likes it that way. He enjoys writing the stories and millions enjoy reading them.

"Some serious critics have compared Nero and Archie to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza," he said. "I don't know about that, but it's flattering."

Stout was big for argument and intellectual challenge in his youth, and still is, but he must have mellowed. He once contended to a schoolteacher that the sea was pink (neither he or the teacher had ever seen the sea at that time), but he would never do that again. However, he's still not sure what shade the sea is, and might fight you on that.

He got a big kick years ago raising giant peaches, strawberries and pumpkins by whatever means he could, and his peaches are still enormous. His major feat, in the gardening line, was a pumpkin that he force-fed on evaporated milk. It weighed 210 pounds and was inedible. But it won a prize at the county fair. He doesn't do that anymore, he said righteously the other day. The important thing is whether all those things are good to eat, and that's the way he handles his garden now.

But even Stout gets beaten. A deer, or several deer, ate 5,000 of his tulips once. He still raises tulips, but he watches out for the deer.

Stout is a widely and well read man, and enjoys rereading the things that to him are great. The result is that he knows great swatches of Shakespeare and Milton by heart and can recite, he said, every one of Shakespeare's sonnets. He thinks Yeats is the only truly great poet in English in this century, and Joseph Conrad, the "great" novelist. He thinks Philip Roth is a good writer, but believes that "Portnoy's Complaint" should be re-titled "Penrod Revisited."

"My great lack," Stout said, "is a sense of guilt. What is it? What is it like? I tell my literary friends that and they act as if I'm crazy. If you feel guilty about something, then you should fix it. If it's too late to fix it, then what's the use of feeling guilty? It's a waste of time.

"I thoroughly approve of life. Not reverence for life. I approve of life itself. I have no quarrel with nature.

"People are always saying something is unnatural. How can it be unnatural, if it happens? If a man makes love to 14 women in one night, it may be astounding, it may be debilitating, but it's not unnatural."

Mrs. Stout returned from a trip to Vermont and joined her husband on the patio. He left for a moment. and his wife, married to him since 1932, smiled. "Isn't Rex Stout a wonderful man? With the years, I see more and more what a man he is."

Stout returned and sat. "If you would ask me what, looking back, I would like to have changed about my life, I'd say this: that I would liked to have learned to play the piano well and play Chopin, and I wish that every morning of my life between May and October, I had got out of bed to see the summer dawn. What a beautiful thing to see and be with," he said, and began quoting Shakespeare.

Stout has a wide range of readers—cab drivers, school teachers, judges, national figures, and many of them write to him. His mail took a jump a few years ago when he wrote a Nero Wolfe novel that picked on the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover. This mail was a burden, because Stout tries to answer it all.

But he has some regular correspondents, many of them of note, and one is a Jesuit priest.

"Last time I wrote him," said Stout, "I signed myself S.J., too. My S.J., I told him, was for 'still jaunty.'"

A Visit at Home With Rex Stout

Photos by Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

Above, the author relaxes in the workshop of his 14-room home, which he built. Below, he ponders over an idea.