

Rex Stout, 85, Gives Clues on Good Writing

By ISRAEL SHENKER
Special to The New York Times

DANBURY, Conn., Nov. 30
—Orchids tomorrow for Rex Stout.

The creator of Nero Wolfe, that imperiously cunning and outsize fictional detective who solves the most intricate crimes without stirring from his chair or endangering the pleasures of palate and intellect, is 85 tomorrow.

Mr. Stout lives in a sprawling green house on a low country hill here, and birthday wishes are pouring in.

The mailbox stands in New York State, but Mr. Stout was careful to build his house across the border in Connecticut. "It was 1930 and I didn't want Hamilton Fish as my representative," he explained. "So what did I get? Clare Boothe Luce."

With those three words of one syllable, the wispy-bearded militant Quaker au-

thor who has fought many a public battle—against isolationism, against a soft peace for Germany, in favor of world government—made displeasure plain.

Reason for Another

"One trouble with living beyond your deserved number of years is that there's always some reason to live another year," he said. "And I'd like to live another year so that Nixon won't be President. If he's re-elected I'll have to live another four years."

Mr. Stout began fussing with creation at the age of 4, when he read the Bible through, and at 15 he sold a 34-line poem to the magazine *Smart Set*. By 1933 he had written five novels and had learned two things: "I was a storyteller and I was not a great writer."

"It seemed apparent to me that writers of the first rank

get themselves involved in the difficulties of the people they write about. It was obvious in a paragraph the way Dostoyevsky felt about Ras-kolnikov, or the way Tolstoy felt about Natasha, and their feeling was of a degree that I wouldn't get."

Mr. Stout spoke of characters as made-up or created. Made-up characters are life-like and adorn the page; created characters live and haunt the memory.

"In Thomas Mann's 'Buddenbrooks' there are four or five really created characters," said Mr. Stout, "and in 'The Magic Mountain' there isn't one. Tarzan was created and so was Scarlett O'Hara. It has nothing to do with the level of literature."

"Dickens couldn't introduce a character without going to the mirror and making faces," he added. "That was a man who may have been interested in ideas, but people was what he was excited about."

On Malamud and Roth

Mr. Stout went on: "I will not read the writing of a man like Malamud—a man interested in problems who pretends he's interested in people. Philip Roth's another who's interested in sociology instead of people, and it's too bad, because they're both pretty good at words."

"Take Updike. He's such a good writer, he knows how to put words together. But he couldn't think up a new character to write about. He just got a new idea for a problem."

"You can always be fairly sure you don't want to read a story with a title that's pretentious. That word 'Redux' [in 'Rabbit Redux'] gives poor Updike away completely. If he wanted to use 'Rabbit' again, O.K., because that's the name of a person. But he had to get a word in it to fancy it up."

Mr. Stout has his own favorite. "When you're with E. B. White you're with the best American writer," he said, "not in the sense that he's written great things, but he understands the fitness of words — and which go together. He never makes a mistake."

He has his own ranking also for mystery story writers: "Simenon has written some damn good ones, but he's also written some damn lousy ones. Ross Macdonald is a hell of a good storyteller, but I wish he'd quit telling the same story over and over again."

"I'd put Josephine Tey, an Englishwoman who died about 10 years ago, just after Dashiell Hammett, who was the best American detective story writer not counting Poe, who started the whole thing."

"In 'The Glass Key' Dash Hammett did the thing Hemingway tried to do in every book he ever wrote, and a better job of it—establishing the essential manliness of a hero by telling a story about him, what he did and what

he said and how he handled a situation."

Mr. Stout has written about 55 books, and he has no regrets about not having written more. "A lot of writers pretend they're desperate because they haven't accomplished more, but I just don't believe them," he said. "If you're able to use a pen you don't have to be sorry you can't write more—you just write more."

His last book, "Death of a Dude," came out in 1969, and he is stuck midway through another book.

Severe headaches have kept him from the typewriter lately, and although physicians have found no physical explanation, he thinks it would be ridiculous at 85 to start psychoanalysis. Fortunately the headaches are disappearing, and he looks forward to the renewed pleasure of his trade.

Writing books pleases him on two counts. "They have been popular enough so that I didn't have any difficulty for 40 years making a nice living from it," he said. "That should be the fundamental concern of any healthy man."

The second satisfaction comes from readers' letters: "My God you love to get them, and good Lord you hate to answer them."

Age has given him what he calls "a mealy self-satisfaction when you compare what you've done with what other people have done." But he also considers himself a failure because of his "inability to be concerned about things not close at hand."

Attitude Toward Death

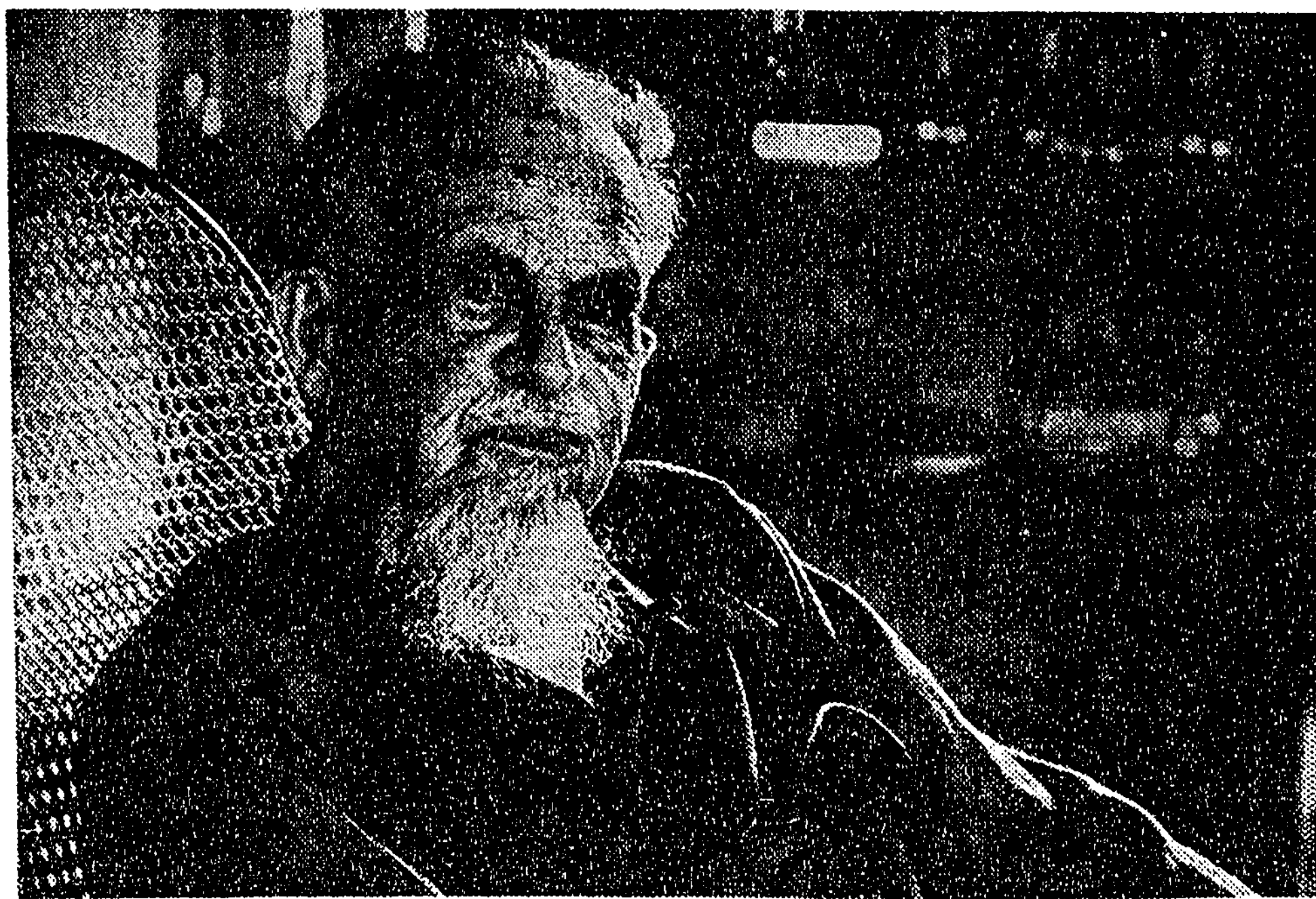
He went on: "It's much easier for me to excuse myself for not being concerned about somebody else's problems because I have a right to be dead now anyway."

"I haven't got any hatred for my fellow men, except about their handling of death. How pleasant it would be—at 62 or 70 or 75—if a man with a healthy attitude toward life and his own death could arrange a really pleasant end."

"There seems to be something in the nature of the human animal that makes it difficult for him to bear the very word 'death,'" he said. "If you ask me, that's pretty dirty and it accounts for so much of the misery of life."

"People's attitudes are so morbid that they consider suicide immoral. That's the unhealthiest and most contemptible attitude people can have, and I think we should be bitter about letting death make such jackasses of us."

"I'm 85 now, and I could have such a pleasant time deciding on the day and the arrangements for my own quitting, but the feeling of moral turpitude is so strong that my wife and daughters won't allow me to be happy. It annoys me that I'm not allowed to do a thing that would give me so much pleasure and so much satisfaction."



Rex Stout: "There's always some reason to live another year"

The New York Times

Published: December 1, 1971

Copyright © The New York Times