



Stout, 86, Finds Reading Thin

No Mystery in Today's Novels

By JOHN SOPKO

DANBURY — Mystery writer Rex Stout, 86 years old today, says he may be getting finicky in his old age. But he finds today's publishing houses turning out novels that are either terribly dull or elegant trash.

"Either I'm getting fonder of my memories in my old age than I am of today, or the fellows who are trying to write fiction now deserve my opinion of them," says Stout, whose famous Nero Wolfe detective series has kept generations of readers up late nights.

"Oh, there are exceptions of course, but practically everyone is just filling pages with obscenities over and over and over again, and as far as I'm concerned, it just doesn't make any sense," he says. "I don't mean it offends me morally, but it's just inferior writing."

Stout came here 42 years ago to build his sprawling hillside home across the border from New York state and to work on his fiction.

Stout Hero Pays Off

He says he learned early, after four or five serious novels drew critics' praise but then died, he would never be a writer

of great literature but that his stories would pay well.

Then he hit upon Nero Wolfe, a fat beer-drinking master sleuth who raises prize-winning orchids, speaks perfect English, likes gourmet food and unravels complicated plots from his (what



REX STOUT

else?) armchair. The series totals 42 books, with another in progress, and Stout is living comfortably.

"I'm a successful writer, wouldn't you say?" he says now, with a total 57 books to his credit. The demands he places on other writers are traditional ones, nothing fancy. Portray character in conflict, and tell a good story.

Critical Appraisal

"One thing that irritates me always is a writer pretending to be a novelist when he isn't a novelist at all: he isn't a storyteller," he says. "Any decent novelist is a storyteller. Fundamentally that's what he is."

Stout speaks of Nabokov, for example, whose last book "Ada" received high critical acclaim, with characteristic candor.

"Well nuts. His last book is elegant trash. What it is is very clever and indeed brilliant playing with words. That's all right as a game, as a series of interesting and amusing tricks," he says. "But it isn't serious writing, it isn't real literature."

The great storytellers like Hemingway and Dashiell Ham-

mett who wrote well of human conflict just aren't around anymore he says. Instead, people like Donald Barthelme are turning out work Stout claims "just anybody" can write.

"It doesn't even take a writer to do that," Stout says of Barthelme's fiction. "You just get these fantastic notions and go ahead and put them down in a paragraph or a few paragraphs, and if you do enough of that you're bound to write something that's fun."

Stout won't read writers like Roth or Malamud, because he says they worry more about sociology than about people. He says 1970 Nobel Prizewinner Alexander Solzhenitsyn fell into a similar trap with "August 1914", his latest work.

"People who assume to be critics have actually compared that book to 'War and Peace' because it's about a war. Well my God, there wasn't a single word in 'War and Peace' about the war, about the fighting, that didn't have direct significance on portraying human character.

"Now 'August 1914' is page after page of just dull telling of what happened in that battle," complains Stout. "It has no relation whatever to human character or to the facts of human character. Solzhenitsyn in my opinion is terribly overpraised." For Hammett, whose work

has been classed as detective fiction, Stout can find nothing but praise.

In one of his stories, Hammett shows a man fighting internal and external difficulties and coming out ahead, Stout explains.

"That was what Hemingway tried to do in everything he wrote. In 'The Glass Key' Hammett did a better job of it than Hemingway ever did. I'm not saying Hemingway wasn't a good writer. God, how he could write! But he was an adolescent all his life."

Stout says his own work has slowed considerably since the days he turned out Wolfe stories in an average 39 days at the typewriter. Ill health had troubled him for three years and his present work is the first since "Death of a Dude" appeared in 1970.

He entertains no misgivings about the impact of his career. It has kept him comfortably for 40 years and given him fond memories, he says. He still holds the post of vice-president of the Authors League of America, an organization he has headed. And he plans to continue writing his mysteries as long as he can.

"Why shouldn't I?"

Stout Deduces Today's Novels Dull, Elegant

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