

## ***De Minimis Non Curat Rex***

A Toast to Rex Stout

at the

16<sup>th</sup> Annual Black Orchid Banquet

By Stephen Pearl

This evening I want to celebrate Rex Stout, Moralist and Leaver of Loose Ends, Creator of a Universe and Giver of Laws – but the problem is where does Nero Wolfe end and Rex Stout begin.

Whenever I try to train my sights on Rex Stout I find him eclipsed by his creation Nero Wolfe. It is not a total eclipse; it is just that the lunar bulk of his creation blots out all but the shimmering rim of his creator.

If I may be forgiven the analogy, it is a little like trying to deduce God from the writings of his chroniclers or prophets. However, followers of the creator of Nero Wolfe are a little more fortunate than those of the creator of the universe, since Moses returned from his one-on-one interview on Mt. Sinai with considerably less (or should it be “fewer”) biographical data than did John McAleer from his peak in Brewster. Clearly Moses had a quite different agenda from that of McAleer, since he had an idolatrous, adulterous, blasphemous and homicidal rabble on his hands forever running around coveting and no doubt rustling each other’s cattle and handmaidens.

I believe that whatever Stout’s declared reasons for creating Wolfe may have been, deep down, or maybe even near the surface, he was a moralist, and through Wolfe’s passions, aversions and prejudices he is preaching a personal credo. Although, of course, he wanted his readers to go on buying his books, he would not have minded if all of his readers became converts.

If McAleer’s priorities had been somewhat more Mosaic upon that peak in Brewster, what civilizing commandments he might have brought down to us! Commandments that can now only be deduced from the conduct and gnomic utterances of his vicar of West 35<sup>th</sup> Street, born out of his head and cast, however inconsistently, in his image, utterances which can be seen as reflections of Stout’s own credo.

I don’t know about the order but I am pretty sure they would include:

1. Thou shalt not commit murder.

Although Wolfe was never sanctimonious about murder and his visible outrage was reserved for murderers which for one reason or another he regarded as a personal affront. The ruthlessness with which he was prepared to hound murders to their deaths cannot be explained solely by his reluctance to bestir himself and brave the menaces of the internal combustion engine to show up in a distant courtroom at uncongenial times and testify from unupholstered and exiguous seats.

2. Thy word shall be thy bond.

Yes, provided that the other guy knows exactly what your word is.

3. Every man – and even the occasional woman – is the equal of every other.

This fierce egalitarianism about which much could be written, comes out clearly in Wolfe’s rudeness and almost willful disrespect toward any who might regard themselves as his betters and his exemplary and painstaking respectfulness toward those who might regard him as their social, ethnic, or generational superior. It is not for nothing that Wolfe, with the rarest of exceptions, stubbornly refused to acknowledge any difference in rank between Inspector Cramer and Sgt. Stebbins, referring to them both – and even the odious Rowcliff, something which takes a truly dedicated egalitarian – as Mister.

4. Thou shalt render until Caesar that which is Caesar's.

Civic virtue was an article of faith which Wolfe and, it may be inferred, for his creator. One of the sternest homilies ever delivered to Archie Goodwin was on the duty of the citizen to pay his taxes. In the alternative universe of Damon Runyon, by contrast, a man's highest honor and first duty was to pay his bookmaker.

I believe Stout would have thrown out quite a few items from the original Decalogue in favor of five or six commandments defending the English language. He would probably have redefined blasphemy as taking any of the words contained in the English Lexicon in vain – any lexicon, that is, that his chief inquisitor and defender of the faith had not condemned at the stake.

I miss Rex Stout not only because there will never be any more Nero Wolfe but also because there are so many loose ends I'll never be able to tie up and many little mysteries I'll never be able to solve by going to the source. Here are a few.

1. Why – and when – did he decide to make Wolfe a Montenegrin and then appoint him, of all things, the Cerberus at the gates of the English language?
2. Why did Wolfe stubbornly deny policemen their professional titles while conceding them to doctors?
3. Why did he make Saul Panzer palpably Jewish but totally devoid of any suggestion of Jewish affiliations?
4. Did he ever meet George Simenon – and Simenon says he did – and what did he think about him and his work?
5. Was the office wired for surreptitious recording right from the beginning?
6. Was the front door always one-way see-through glass?
7. Was the "hole" concealed by the waterfall always in the wall of the office? And why had the "hole" lost the sliding panel on the alcove side in "Eeny Meeny Murder Mo" which it had the year before.
8. Why does Stout have Wolfe count his beer bottle caps? If it was on account of caloriphobia, then how is one to account for his reckless indifference to calories when it came to solids? If it was a question of maintain sobriety, a weekly count would not have done much good!
9. Where did Theodore eat?
10. What is God's name was the language being used by Princess Vladanka Donevich, alias Neyya Tormic, when she uttered those fateful words, "Teega mee bornie rosy" (in Archie's transcription) to Wolfe in *Over My Dead Body*.

I have no doubt that if I had ever had the good fortune to be able to ask Stout these and any other things, he would have swatted them imperiously away as so many pestiferous impertinences, leaving it clearly understood that: *De minimis non curat Rex*.

In *Plot It Yourself*, Wolfe addressing the assembled authors of the NAAD, says: "I remark that with your books two of you have given me pleasure, three of you have informed me and one of you has stimulated my mental processes, two or ..." To R.S. I remark that none of your books has failed to give me pleasure or to inform me or to stimulate my mental processes or, for that matter, to do whatever else it was you never allowed Wolfe to finish saying.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Rex Stout!

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