

November 16, 1977

New York Times Sunday Book Review

To the Editor:

"Have you read it?", I asked.

"You mean John McAleer's biography of Rex?", said Nero. "Yes, I've read it twice, a first-rate book about a first rate man. I have only three minor criticisms. It has a little too much about Rex and Archie and not quite enough about me. Otherwise, a fascinating piece of work."

"I didn't mean that," I said. "I agree with you about the merits of the work except that I felt strongly there wasn't enough emphasis on the invaluable, persevering, totally dependable...."

"Get on with it," said Nero, a touch of annoyance in his voice.

"I meant have you read what Julian Symons has to say?"

"Why in the world would I be interested in what an obscure not to say unknown person has to say unless he is very rich and can meet, judging by the state of my bank account, a sizeable fee for solving...or is he the one who was murdered?"

"Not yet," I said. "Julian Symons is sort of a literary critic who has written a mystery novel or so, one called 'Bland Beginning!'"

"Never heard of it," said Woolfe, "though the title undoubtedly is an excellent description of its contents."

"And now he has written a long criticism of the McAleer biography [New York Times Book Review, November 13, 1977] which he didn't like."

"Of course he didn't," said Nero. "Literary critics are invariably failed writers with sour stomachs who have turned to hack stuff to keep themselves in gruel and grog and gin. W.H. Auden said that they are like eunuchs in a harem who see the trick done every night and are furious that they can't manage it."

"Symons says peculiar things about Rex, that he was a back slapper and an extrovert and had 'an elegant and eloquent turn of phrase.' "

"That last has the ring of truth," said Nero, "but Rex, far from being extrovert was the most self-contained man I have ever known, and although he may at times have been tempted toward knifing a back, he never did, and I can

assure you he never slapped one."

"And here Symons says that you---for some reason he doesn't mention me here---are 'a Superhuman detective who will be remembered as long as people read crime stories,' but a little further on he says that most of the stories are forgettable. Doesn't that seem to you somewhat contradictory?"

"Archie," said Nero, "this is one of those rare moments when I have to remind myself that while Rex and I were and are lifelong members of the American Civil Liberties Union, there are times when some few writers.... Well, in the old days they chopped off their hands, which is somewhat drastic. Is there more?"

"Well, this guy Symons doesn't think much of Simenon and a fellow he calls Doyle either."

"Naturally," said Nero. "Now I feel a certain chill in the room. Do you remember the night we burned that copy of The Third Edition of Webster's Unabridged?"

-----Merle Miller
Brewster, New York
1-914-279-3310