

Rex Stout

To the Editor:

As Archie Goodwin and I have recently celebrated our joint birthday (Oct. 23), and as I was blessed with a copy of "Rex Stout" on that auspicious date, I felt it my duty to respond to Julian Symons's review (Nov. 13) of the book.

Although I have read and ad-

mired Symons previously, I believe he is totally mistaken and unfair in his view of John McAleer's biography. As one who has read the more than 500-page book in somewhat less than 48 hours, I find it hard to accept Symons's assertion that the book is dull. Rex Stout was, as Symons agrees, an extraordinary man; I feel, as Symons does not, that this book does him full justice. The many sides of Stout's character fully deserve to be explained by the lengthy background of his family history; obviously, Stout's unique family had much to do with his uniqueness. Far from finding McAleer's comments "banal," I thought he admirably showed the many facets of Stout, without yielding to the temptation, as do so many biographers, to intrude his own thought or personality into those of his subject.

While I agree that Stout's prose is not on the level of Hammett's or Chandler's, to call it simply "energetic and efficient" is ludicrous. To rank Stout below Ross Macdonald (who is much more repetitive) or Ellery Queen (whose unrealistic devices and pretentious speech make his novels seem more dated than Doyle) is to completely miss the character development that has taken place in Nero Wolfe and Goodwin through the years. Perhaps Symons should sit down and read all the Wolfe stories straight through, from "Fer de Lance" to "A Family Affair," to see how true-to-life the characters, events and dialogue are.

Mr. McAleer's book provided a close look into an admirable, creative individual. It is Symons's loss that his strong feelings about Stout's characters and ease of effort blind him to the merits of both the biographer and the subject.

MARILYN BROOKS
Needham, Mass.

To the Editor:

I have been an ardent reader of the stories written by Rex Stout. Recently, the first book of its kind, analyzing the life and works of Stout, was compiled by John McAleer. It was reviewed and mercilessly downgraded by Julian Symons. He summed up years of painstaking research by pronouncing it "dull," among other biased epithets.

John McAleer's book was never intended to titillate the reader by stressing popular views on sex and violence. It was intended to instruct the reader and fill in facts with comments on the life and works of Rex Stout. It never intended to compare Stout with writers such as Agatha Christie — Stout belongs in a totally different category.

The characters of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin are known and liked for what they are, and are universally read and enjoyed. It is too bad that with one flip of the pen by your critic a biographer's work should be so denigrated that a Stout aficionado may be disinclined to invest in a copy.

MARION C. HOEFLICH
Sarasota, Fla.

To the Editor:

I have read, enjoyed and profited from John McAleer's excellent biography of Rex Stout. (I'm writing a book on Stout's works, and I've found McAleer's book immensely helpful.) Therefore, I was at first mystified by the hostility of Julian Symons's review.

When a crime is committed, one looks for motive, and lo! it appears later in the review. Symons attacks Stout's detective stories at great and fatuous length, as he did in a book five years ago. Stout is the real target, and McAleer a surrogate. There is "evidence" that Symons scarcely read McAleer at all, and missed the point of nearly every passage that he cites. As a far less successful mystery writer than Stout, he splenetically attacks a biographer, when his real target is the biographer's subject.

Reminds me of Stout's "Gambit," in which the murderer poisons somebody he doesn't even know, to frame somebody of whom he's jealous.

RICHARD H. REIS
North Dartmouth, Mass.

To the Editor:

This letter is in protest of the manner in which Julian Symons reviewed John McAleer's biography of Rex Stout. My annoyance is because of the apparent lack of balance shown in his review. . . . How dare he make snide allusions to possible perversions about two characters who have become "alive" and enjoyable because of Rex Stout's fertile imagination. . . . I have been a mystery fan for over 50 years; a fan who has relished both "old-time" and con-

temporary writers. Each has his own particular style, but few have been capable of creating characters that last over years and years of reading, as have Agatha Christie, Rex Stout, Simenon and John Creasey.

MRS. ALBERT ORTEGA
Prado Norte, Mexico

Julian Symons replies:

The complaints come under two heads:

1. Symons unfair to Rex Stout: I think some of your readers regard Nero and Archie as sacred objects, which Stout himself wouldn't have wished. I admit that I'd put Stout as a crime writer below Doyle, Ross Macdonald and Ellery Queen, though it's not I who invited such a comparison; I also remember that when "Mortal Consequences" appeared, one reader complained that I'd been unfair to Ellery Queen. I have not "attack[ed] Stout's detective stories at great and fatuous length" anywhere or at any time. I have said, and repeat, that the books declined steeply after the end of the 1940's. And thanks, Marilyn Brooks, but I have what I regard as the best of Stout on my shelves, and do reread them.

2. Symons unfair to McAleer: Well, I'm sure that his book will be useful to Professor Reis, it's excellent source material. But what does he mean by writing about "evidence" (his inverted commas, not mine) that I've scarcely read the book. How do you prove such a negative, and why is Professor Reis so gratuitously insulting? If I were jealous of Stout shouldn't I be jealous of Christie too? In general, there'll always be fans fascinated to know how often their hero changed his socks and what he had for dinner on a particular day, but recording such things doesn't make a biography. As a researcher Professor John McAleer is fine: as a biographer he doesn't exist. ■

Author's Query

For a gazetteer of fictional places which figure significantly in American novels, short stories and poetry, I would appreciate any information on appropriate titles and authors. Please include dates of publication wherever possible.

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