

points: the perfect mystery story can never be written, because the genre itself demands an impossible feat—that of first misrepresenting certain facts in order to present them again truly, yet without letting the reader feel cheated. Therefore one or another element of good fiction must be sacrificed, usually some explicitness of character or event. It follows—this is the second point—that crime fiction partakes of fantasy. Lastly, the plausibility of any such story is (in Chandler's words) "largely a matter of style . . . a matter of effect, not of fact."

1984

Rex Stout

If he had done nothing more than to create Archie Goodwin, Rex Stout would deserve the gratitude of whatever assessors watch over the prosperity of American literature. For surely Archie is one of the folk heroes in which the modern American temper can see itself transfigured.

Archie is the lineal descendant of Huck Finn, with the additions that worldliness has brought to the figure of the young savior. Archie is cynical but an idealist. He is of easy approach, simple speech, and simple manners, but he makes the sharpest, subtlest discriminations in his judgments of status, speech, looks, and clothes. He drinks milk, but can describe and savor *haute cuisine* like any freshly made aristocrat. He is body-proud and ready to knock any man down who disobeys *Robert's Rules of Order*—indeed he is not averse to clutching women by the elbow or the neck when they claim an equal right with men to disturb the committee work that goes on so tirelessly in Nero Wolfe's big room; yet Archie dislikes violence and carries firearms only as a badge of office. He also dislikes the policemen that his work compels him to consort

with, but he is of course on the side of law-enforcement. He is promiscuous with his eyes and his thoughts, and a woman must be past hope, or else wanting in civility or human feeling, before Archie ceases to interweave his erotic fantasies with his shorthand notes on the case; yet he clings to Lily Rowan with the fervent monogamy of a healthy man living in sin.

In short, Archie is so completely the standard American's embellished vision of himself that at times he helps one to understand the failures of American foreign policy and the paradoxical success that so many individual Americans achieve abroad while their government misrepresents itself. For Archie has vitality, candor under boyish guile, inventiveness, a remarkable memory, and an all-conquering efficiency. Above all, he commands a turn of humor that goes to the heart of character and situation: not since Mark Twain and Mr. Dooley has the native spirit of comedy found an interpreter of equal force. Our other professional humorists of the last half century have been solid and serviceable, but their creations are not in a class with Archie. His whole mind is a humorous organ, and not just his words.

Archie is spiritually larger than life. That is why his employer and companion had to be made corpulent to match. Archie is an arche-type; Nero Wolfe is a portrait—a portrait of the Educated Man. Unlike other detectives of fiction, Nero is not a know-it-all, much less a pedant. He hates work, perhaps the clearest symptom of a really fine education, for idleness is the only means discovered so far for civilizing the mind through the reading of books. I mean *read*, not use or consult for one's livelihood. Wolfe has to adopt these inferior courses from time to time, but it is always under duress. Just once Wolfe reads as an avenger, and it is as the vindicator of faith in the Word. That occasion is the one dramatic scene in the otherwise pallid history of literary criticism. As the curtain goes up, he is disclosed at the chimney corner glumly reading in a huge work. Each time he comes to the end of a page, he tears it out and throws it on the fire. The book is *Webster's*

International Dictionary, the third edition. And to Archie, who enters and protests, Wolfe, with a Johnsonian power for drawing distinctions, expounds the argument against book burning.

Wolfe's manner and manners also deserve attention. He is courteous where Archie is merely civil, but Nero pays himself back handsomely by telling people to their face what he thinks of their mental and moral confusion. And, of course, his penetration of motive owes as much to his knowledge of literature as to his natural shrewdness. To a reader of Balzac and Dostoyevsky, how rudimentary must seem the turns of cunning of a self-made millionaire or a made-up TV personality.

In this sublime duet of Don Quixote and a glamorized Sancho Panza who go tilting together against evil, there is no mystery, nothing but matter for admiration, edification, and (if desired) self-identification. The true mystery is in their inspired creator, Rex Stout. Not two characters alone, but a palpable atmosphere exists in that brownstone house on West Thirty-fifth Street. And what sinewy, pellucid, propelling prose tells those tales—allegories of the human pilgrimage, rather—in which there is little or no blood, but rather the play of mind; no stagy antics, but much passionate drama, as ingenious and varied in its lifelike situations as certain other kinds of plot one could name are repetitious and standardized.

To the reader who has followed the evolution of this imaginary world and its chief actors, it is entertaining to ponder why Nero is almost never ill, despite the prodigal use of condiments and cream sauces on the richest foods, accompanied by vintage wines and the swilling of beer. I can only ascribe this poise in the face of otherwise liver-corroding forces to the thorough—almost religious—lack of exercise.

This question raises that of the recipes. Where does Nero (or his chef) find those dishes with evocative names and dimly hinted ingredients? My only hypothesis is that the four hours a day that Wolfe is said to spend incommunicado in the plant rooms are not spent in horticulture at all. I am no gardener,

but I doubt whether an intelligent man could spend that much time—one thousand four hundred and sixty hours a year—simply spraying and surveying some forty head of cattleyas. I believe instead that he engages in secret trials of night-born notions of food (note the significantly named *saucisse minuit*).

The only other possibility is that he retires up there to read the novels of Rex Stout and picks up in them his strokes of genius. 1965

A Catalogue of Crime

For the seasoned reader, tales of crime fulfill the definition that Dr. Johnson gave in another context: "the art of murdering without pain." Contrary to what is often said, the pleasure is not the symbolic satisfaction of aggressive desires. The pleasure of reading crime fiction is intellectual and exploratory—the world seen under a special light. If a more visceral emotion goes with curiosity satisfied, it is the love of making order out of confusion. The philosopher R. G. Collingwood, in *The Idea of History*, put it simply: "The hero of a detective novel is thinking exactly like an historian when, from indications of the most varied kinds, he constructs an imaginary picture of how the crime was committed and by whom."

The need for "varied indications" enables the skillful storyteller to combine with facts and situations that we recognize a great many things we did not know before, yet which belong to ordinary life—habits, motives, practical arrangements, local customs, and the peculiarities of trades and professions. It is a kind of archaeological dig into the present.

This display differs from what we find in great novels.