

An American

# REX

FER-DE-LANCE  
A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

By  
REX  
STOUT

"Nobody who claims to be a competent critic can say that Rex Stout does not write well. His narrative and dialogue could not be improved, and he passes the supreme test of being rereadable.

I don't know how many times I have reread the Nero Wolfe stories, but plenty. I know exactly what is coming and how it is all going to end, but it doesn't matter. That's *writing*."—P. G. WODEHOUSE

AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, we could end this article right here. I can't think of any higher praise or better explanation of the enduring appeal of an author's work than having another of the great literary stylists of the Twentieth century italicize it as *writing*. P. G. Wodehouse wasn't Rex Stout's only fan among the literati. William Faulkner read Stout. So did Kingsley Amis, Ian Fleming, Agatha Christie, E. B. White, Vincent Starrett and M. F. K. Fisher. Bernard de Voto was a friend and fan, as was Robert Sherwood. When Oliver Wendell Holmes died, his copy of Stout's first mystery, *Fer-de-Lance*, was found to have the Justice's handwritten notation in its margins: "This fellow is the best of them all."

Is there anything more that needs saying about Rex Stout? Yes, as it turns out, there's quite a lot. And some of it is bound to surprise you.

If the full extent of your knowledge of Stout is that he created the detective duo of Nero Wolfe and Archie

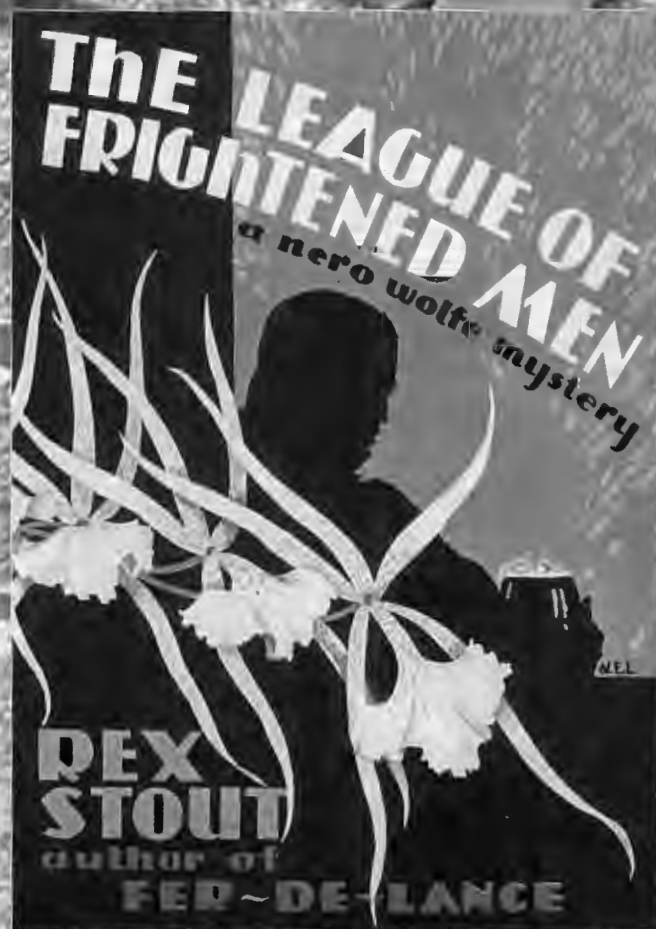
# Original Stout

Goodwin, then hold on to your hat. Stout didn't even begin writing the Nero Wolfe stories until he was 46. By then, he had already amassed so much life experience that no one could have blamed him if he had decided to settle into a quiet retirement. But Stout had 43 years left in his long, remarkable life, and he wasn't one to sit idle, wondering what to do next. He still had a whole new career to launch, one that made him a household name and ensured him a place in the pantheon of mystery fiction. In addition, he was a powerful presence in American political life during and after World War Two.

REX TODHUNTER STOUT came from a long line of Quakers, with illustrious connections on both sides of the family. His mother's family, the Todhunters, numbered Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Defoe and, eventually, Hubert Humphrey among their kinsmen. The names on his father's side may not be as well known but, according to Rex Stout biographer John McAleer (*Rex Stout: A Biography*, Little, Brown, 1977), the Stouts had solid colonial ties. Counted among them were such stalwarts as Penelope Kent Van Princin, an English Dissenter "who was scalped and disemboweled by Indians at Sandy Hook, New Jersey, in 1642, but lived to bear 10 children and celebrate her one hundredth birthday."

Born in December 1886 in Noblesville, Indiana, Rex Stout "once claimed to have left Indiana with his family

by KATHRYN SMILEY





at the age of one because he was already ‘fed up with Indiana politics.’” (Did this precocious awareness of politics really exist in Baby Rex? It is true that later in life, when Stout decided to build his dream house, he carefully located it just across a certain county line to avoid being represented by a Congressman he loathed.)

It may not have been Rex’s politics that caused his father, John Wallace Stout, to pack up his wife and children and move them to Kansas, but move they did. The likely reason was financial. John Stout was part owner of the Noblesville newspaper. When his business partner left town with the company’s money, John had to sell what was left of the enterprise and find another way to support his growing family (there were eventually nine young Stouts). He settled them on a farm in Kansas, where he had formerly served as a superintendent of schools, and went back to teaching. His father, Nathan, ran the farm with the help of the older Stout boys.

From the beginning, Rex stood out in what appears to have been a bright and bumptious family. “I named him Rex because he came out like a king,” his mother, Lucetta Elizabeth Todhunter Stout once remarked, recalling her third son’s birth. Books were part of life in the Stout household. John had a library of more than 1,000 volumes, and the children were encouraged to read them. Lucetta was known for her intellectual curiosity and love of reading. (“Poor John,” his mother once said—perhaps taking a potshot at her daughter-in-law, who was considered unconventional—“has never had anything but books and children.”)

Rex is said to have been reading by the age of 18 months and, at the age of four, embarked on his first complete reading of the Bible.

Rex was undoubtedly bookish, but he was also an energetic boy who took full advantage of the comparative freedom of life on a prairie farm. His first formal schooling came in a two-room schoolhouse. Since it was the only school in the area, all the grades shared this facility, meaning it usually was well-stocked with Stout siblings. In fact, Rex’s oldest sister, May, was his teacher for the last year and a half he was a student there. (It may have been Rex’s doing that his first teacher moved on. He engaged in a running

## Rex Stout



debate with the young woman about the color of the ocean. When she asked him its color, he said, "Pink." "Wrong," she said, "it's blue." Had she seen the ocean? No, but it said so in her book. Had the man who wrote the book seen the ocean? She didn't know, but it was in the book. How did she know the book was right?)

When Rex was seven, his mother took him along on a visit to her family in Wilmington, Ohio. It was the first time he met his maternal grandmother, Emily Todhunter, who just may have been reincarnated 40 years later as his fictional detective, Nero Wolfe. Emily, who was plump and lazy, could usually be found enthroned in her favorite chair, from which she ran her family's affairs. On a stand at her side was a huge dictionary, which she consulted regularly. Emily was also a wizard gardener, a trait she handed down to Rex's mother and, not coincidentally, a talent Stout bestowed on Wolfe, who favored orchids. Fascinated by his grandmother's use of the dictionary, when Rex returned home he launched into a study of spelling with such intensity that, at age 11, he won a three-state-wide spelling bee.

By that time, the family had left the farm and was living in Bellview, near Topeka. It was in school in Bellview that another of Rex's unusual talents was discovered: he could add numbers with calculator-like accuracy and rapidity. Rex was taken around Kansas schools to display this ability, but he hated the tours and his parents obligingly put an end to them.

In 1903, at the age of 16, Rex graduated from Topeka High School. He had written some poetry—in fact, he'd been voted class poet—but, unlike many other future authors, he had so far showed little of his literary talent. He had, however, made a name for himself in other ways. Besides being younger than most of his classmates, he steadfastly refused to wear long pants to school until the other senior boys threatened to tar and feather him if he came to the graduation ceremonies in knickerbockers. He also spent a night in jail after stringing up an illicit victory banner after a big football game.

After graduation, Rex headed for the University of Kansas at Lawrence. But with little money for college and a suspicion that they didn't have much to teach him anyway, Rex opted to go to work as an usher at Crawford's Opera House in Topeka. Theatricals had been a part of his life since the farm days, when a traveling acting troupe had awakened the Stouts to the possibilities of the theater. Since that time, the Stout siblings regularly engaged in family performances of plays and other entertainments.

Rex had not yet determined what his life's course was to be, so he dabbled in many things. He supplemented his income from Crawford's with stints as an iceman and a bookkeeper. He also reportedly sold a poem to *Smart Set* magazine, but when he eventually realized it wasn't going to be published, he burned all the other poems he had written. After a couple of

years, Rex longed for broader horizons. He decided to join the navy, and was sent to the Brooklyn Naval Yards for training. Spending his off hours in New York proved even more life-changing than his naval training. He saw the sights, went to the theater and the opera, and generally explored this brave new world with all the enthusiasm of a young man away from home for the first time.

Stout's facility with numbers and experience as a bookkeeper led to his being trained as a navy bookkeeper. This, in turn, led to his being posted aboard President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht *Mayflower* as pay-yeoman. Although at first Rex was prone to seasickness (both he and Teddy Roosevelt were "poor sailors"), he soon overcame the need to spend most of his time at sea lying on the floor, and took up his duties with alacrity. He had many occasions to observe the world's leading political and cultural figures on board the *Mayflower*, and stored up many anecdotes that would later turn up in his writing.

In the meantime, Stout found a way to supplement his income. The *Mayflower* had seven commissioned officers aboard; an eighth player was needed to make up two tables of whist, a popular card game at which Rex excelled. An unofficial promotion allowed the lowly yeoman to join the game, which he later reckoned added about \$150 a month to his wallet, around six times his navy pay.

In spite of this affluence, Stout decided to leave the navy. Using part of his winnings, he bought his discharge. He then traveled to Cleveland, Ohio, where one of his brothers got him a job as a window-dresser for the city's major department store. The theory was that this job would support Rex while he studied law. After a couple of months, however, Stout decided he didn't want to become a lawyer. A new job as salesman for a tobacconist ended when his taste for fine Cuban cigars—developed while serving on the *Mayflower*—was discovered to have seriously depleted his employer's inventory.

Over the next months, Stout held many different jobs. His brother had left Cleveland and was living in New York, and Stout decided to join him. He journeyed there by way of a leisurely working tour, serving for short periods in several capacities, including bookkeeper, bellhop and motorman.

In New York, the resourceful Stout finagled himself into a short-lived writing career. It was a presidential election year and, in a move worthy of his future creation Archie Goodwin, Stout convinced the editor of the *New York World* that he could obtain the palm prints of presidential hopefuls William Howard Taft and Tom Loftus Johnson and use them to write detailed character analyses of the two men. The editor gave him the nod, and Stout gained admission to



## Rex Stout

the two candidates by sending each a message that Yeoman Stout of the *Mayflower* needed to see him on urgent business. He got the palm prints and carried out his commission.

In spite of this coup, Rex Stout had no real ambition to become a writer (although he later claimed he had it in mind all along, he just wanted to wait until the time was right). He continued taking odd jobs—and losing them. In late 1910, he sold a poem to *Smart Set* magazine that actually saw print. Two more of his poems were accepted early the following year, but even this didn't seem to set his feet on one course. Quite the contrary. Stout hit the road, working his way around the United States in jobs ranging from cook to bookseller to hotel clerk. John McAleer reports that Stout summed up this period of his life by saying, "I never had any adventures, but I had a lot of episodes. It was not only a good preparation for a writer, but also for life."

After several months, Stout returned to New York, where he once again went to work as a bookkeeper. The tenure of Rex's life changed when he met writer Eugene Manlove Rhodes, who was a friend of his sister Ruth. Stout didn't admire Rhodes, but he decided if Rhodes could support himself by writing, then he could, too. He quit his job and buckled down to writing short stories. The first two he sent out were accepted by *Short Stories* magazine. Rex Stout, sometime usher, iceman, tour guide, window dresser and tobacco salesman, was a writer—for a while, at least.

Between late 1912 and 1917, Rex Stout earned a living with his pen, turning out a flock of stories that were printed in a variety of periodicals, as well as four novel-length works that were serialized in *All-Story* magazine. The quality of this work reportedly varied, but it was enough to keep Stout's fortunes afloat—barely. He had a disconcerting habit of spending money as quickly as he got it. When he needed more, he'd simply dash off another story. His career probably could have gone on this way indefinitely, but Stout decided it wasn't good enough. He felt too much of his output was forced and showed the haste with which it had been produced. In order to write properly, he needed to have a nest egg that would allow him the freedom to write what he wanted, at his own pace. Since he didn't yet have one, he quit writing.

**B**Y NOW, Stout was a married man. His wife, Fay, was the younger sister of a high school friend from Topeka. She came to visit a cousin in New York, renewed her acquaintance with the Stout siblings—several had moved to New York by then—and married Rex a few weeks later. The newlywed couple's honeymoon trip included a visit to Rex's brother, Bob, who was working in Pittsburgh as a

book salesman for Dodd, Mead. Bob had an idea he wanted to share with his brother, a scheme for setting up a program that would create savings accounts for school children, allowing them to deposit their nickels and dimes at school and keep their own bankbooks. This scheme blossomed into the Educational Thrift Service (E.T.S.) and, for the next few years, kept both brothers—as well as other family members and friends—fully occupied as it developed and grew.

Stout's involvement with the E.T.S. took him all around the United States and was his entrée to the nation's financial, social and cultural circles. During World War One, he met many political figures through his work with the E.T.S., additionally developing his lifelong interest in liberal politics. In 1925, he was appointed to the board of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Council on Censorship. He had previously engaged in a couple of publishing ventures and, also in 1925, was offered the post of president of the Vanguard Press publishing house, an association that lasted several years.

The early 1920s were heady years for Stout. He and Fay moved into a penthouse apartment in New York and entertained lavishly. Music and ideas bounced off the walls whenever the Stouts threw open their doors. There were also quieter moments, during which Stout worked in his rooftop garden.

Pictures of Stout from that time show a tall, well-built man with dark eyes and a full black beard. A further examination would have revealed a lively but methodical mind, a sharp intellect, a wide-ranging curiosity and a penchant for debate. (McAleer relates an incident from Rex's boyhood that pegs this facet of his character. When the Stout family was still living on the farm, John Stout spied Rex sliding down a haystack on the seat of his britches. He confronted the boy with this truancy: "I saw thee." "No, thee didn't," insisted Rex, and he stuck to that story throughout his father's lengthy remonstrations.)

December 1, 1926, was Rex Stout's fortieth birthday. That day, he went into the office and informed his brother Bob that he wanted to sell his half of the E.T.S. It took several months to arrange matters but, after making provisions for various family members, Rex was left with a tidy yearly income. The following December, he and Fay set off for Europe. They took an apartment in Paris, and soon were honorary members of the American expatriate crowd there. After nearly a year in Paris, the Stouts returned to New York. Then, after a month at home, they went back to Paris, this time with a special purpose: Rex was going to write a novel.

His requirement for embarking seriously on a writing career, financial security, was now in place. He had a steady income from his sale of the E.T.S. and subsequent investments. He also had a wealth of life experience in settings as diverse as a Kansas farm and a New York penthouse, and a lifetime's reading experience in every form, from classical history to modern

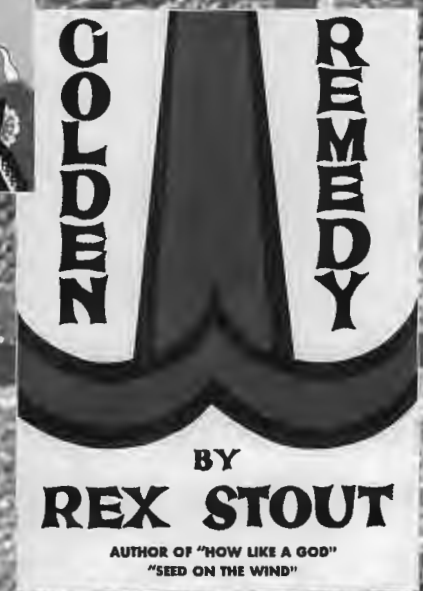
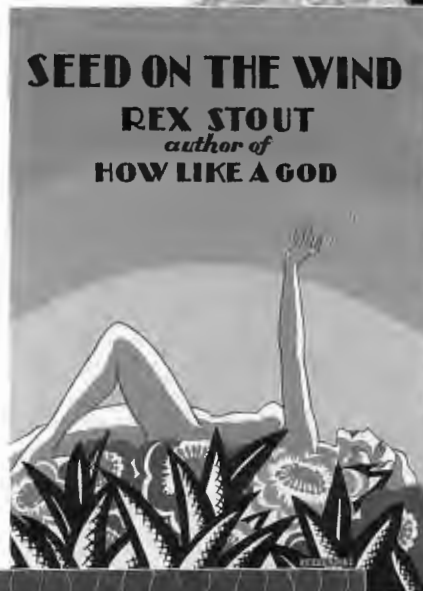
novel. Eschewing an outline and armed only with a list of character names, he mined his subconscious for the story for his first novel, *How Like a God*. From that point on, he worked without a written synopsis or notes, and always produced only a single draft of a story or novel. Later, he recalled, "When I was writing *How Like a God* I had a scene where the hero's son comes into his office and talks to him for two or three pages. Suddenly, I pushed back from the typewriter, jumped up and said, 'Jesus Christ! I didn't know he had a son!'" Stout completed the book in just over a month.

*How Like a God* was published by the Vanguard Press in the summer of 1929. Although the book was hard to classify, its overall plot line was simple: Bill Sydney climbs a flight of stairs, intent on killing his mistress. As he climbs, he reflects on his past and the events that led him to this act. Critics applauded the technical excellence of Stout's prose, which consisted largely of interior monologue, a difficult form to sustain. The story was suspenseful—any one of five women might be Sydney's intended victim—and offered plenty of sex (enough to make some critics uncomfortable) and psychological insight. Although the book didn't catch fire with the reading public, it proved successful enough to encourage the author and his publisher.

Not long after *How Like a God* was finished, the Stouts returned to the United States. The future looked bright. Rex set his sights on building a house on a piece of rural property north of New York City he had purchased some months before. He planned to provide the model, arrange for the labor and supplies, and participate in all facets of the building and landscaping. In the meantime, he started work on his second novel. It was October, 1929.

The stock market crash wiped out most of Stout's investments. Although he still was entitled to earnings from the E.T.S., if the program failed, as it very well might during the looming economic depression, it would take with it his one steady source of income. Lord knows he couldn't live on the royalties from his writing—he had netted something like \$700 from *How Like a God*. Undaunted, Stout launched into work on the new house, to be called High Meadow.

In the midst of all this activity, Stout also finished





a novel. *Seed on the Wind* was a huge critical success, drawing comparisons with Faulkner and Hemingway. Still, the story of Lora Winters' attempts to get back at her father for killing her illegitimate child did not find favor with all the critics. Lora's chosen avenue of revenge was becoming pregnant as often as possible by as many different men as she could. Many found the heroine's "relentless childbearing" disgusting, "without moral justification."

Stout's third novel, *Golden Remedy*, proved even more controversial. It is the story of Marvin Trask, a young man from Nebraska who travels to New York seeking a career in music. He is soon disillusioned by the Big City, and vents his disenchantment in a series of love affairs, searching for a woman who is a perfect blend of spirit, mind and body. In a parallel story line, Marvin's sister-in-law is unable to have a fulfilling relationship with a man due to having shared her widowed father's bed as a child. "Don't give [this book] to Aunt Lucy for Christmas," advised one reviewer.

Some of Stout's inspiration for *Golden Remedy* may have come from his deteriorating relationship with Fay. The couple was divorced a few months before the release of his fourth novel. That novel, *Forest Fire*, was begun at High Meadow in February, and completed in May in Reno, Nevada, where Stout was awaiting the divorce of his soon-to-be second wife, Pola.

*Forest Fire* is the story of Stan Durham, an ace firefighter whose greatest love is the forest. Unfortunately, he also has to deal with his wife, with whom he no longer sleeps; his young male assistant, to whom he is attracted; and the young woman who, to Stan's outrage, is pursuing the assistant. The whole thing climaxes in an attempted rape, a shooting and a forest fire.

Farrar & Rinehart, who had signed Stout to a contract the previous year, published *Forest Fire*. Book sales were in a slump due to the Depression, and publishers were going to great lengths to get the public to part with the price of a book. Farrar & Rinehart promoted *Forest Fire* as "Rip[ping] aside the film of normality covering the

## Rex Stout



deranged mentalities of sexually-starved people living in a circumscribed, primitive environment.”

In spite of all the inflammatory publicity and a positive critical response, *Forest Fire* did not sell well. However, Farrar & Rinehart believed in Stout, and optioned his next two novels. The author, whose new wife was expecting their first child, was once again in the position of needing to make money from his writing. “Serious” novels just didn’t bring in enough income, so he decided to try his hand at detective fiction.

To Stout, this was no compromise. He had written four literary novels, and knew he was a good storyteller rather than a great writer. “I felt that whatever comments I might want to make about people and their handling of life could be made in detective stories as well as any other kind.” He had read dozens of mysteries over the years, and each of his previous novels had contained an element of suspense. He needed no further study or preparation to write one of his own. What he did need, however, was a lead character. After some thought, he came up with a name: Nero Wolfe.

Stout began writing *Fer-de-Lance*, the first of more than 40 Nero Wolfe novels, on October 18, 1933 (the day Pola brought home the newest Stout, baby Barbara) and delivered the manuscript to the publisher before Christmas. At that point, the book had no title; it was called just “the Nero Wolfe story.” There was considerable wrangling before a final title was agreed upon, a fact that caused both the publisher and the author, who both hoped the book would be the beginning of a series, some anxiety. It didn’t help that *The Saturday Evening Post* turned down the story for serialization, calling it “not sufficiently gripping.”

But soon enough, word began circulating in publishing circles that Farrar & Rinehart had a major hit forthcoming. A friend wrote to Stout, “There are rumors going around that the book that is now at Farrar & Rinehart is going to make a killing. When that kind of rumor gets around among the critics even before the book is printed, it is good news.” *The American Magazine* published an abridged version of the story under the title *Point of Death* in its October 24, 1934 issue. And when the book, *Fer-de-Lance. A Nero Wolfe Mystery*, was released two days later, it more than lived up to its advance notices.

The story introduced Nero Wolfe, an eccentric genius who does almost all his detecting from his brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street in New York City. Fiftyish, corpulent and irascible, Wolfe seldom ventures outside the brownstone, which also houses his inimitable Swiss cook, Fritz Brenner, along with several thousand orchid plants that are lovingly cared for by Wolfe and plant man Theodore Horstmann. The other resident of the brownstone is Wolfe’s assistant, Archie Goodwin. Thirtyish, energetic and good-natured, Archie is the perfect complement to his boss. He serves as Wolfe’s eyes and legs in the world

outside, and as the story’s—and the series’—narrator.

Wolfe drinks beer, Archie drinks milk (mostly). Archie loves dancing, Wolfe prefers sitting. In regard to food, Wolfe is a “taster,” Archie a “swallow-er.” Archie has an eye for the ladies. Wolfe doesn’t actively dislike women, he simply prefers not seeing or hearing them. Wolfe, with his giant intellect, is the brains of the organization; Archie’s role isn’t limited to the brawn of the outfit, but he certainly cops the prize as its mouth. One of his jobs is nagging, insulting or otherwise goading his naturally sedentary boss into action, and he does it well.

The dust jacket of *Fer-de-Lance* summed up the plot: “A college president was quietly buried in state. Wolfe abruptly sent Archie, his affable secretary and third eye, out to bet the District Attorney ten thousand dollars that an exhumation and a thorough autopsy would reveal a needle and traces of poison in the stomach of the deceased educator....When the newspapers broke the story and when a second autopsy showed Wolfe to be right, excitement erupted all over the place.”

Considering that Stout refused to write an outline (“I’d rather dig ditches.”) or work from notes, it is remarkable how many of the elements of the Nero Wolfe series were already in place in this debut novel. When *Fer-de-Lance* opens, Archie has been working for Wolfe for seven years, and their relationship, personal habits and working methods are well established. Although time and tide would work some changes on the series structure, it retained many of those early elements throughout its run. And, although some of the books were admittedly stronger than others, the series remained fresh and entertaining for 40 years.

The Nero Wolfe series drew inevitable comparisons with Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes tales: brilliant but eccentric sleuth solves baffling crimes by mental processes beyond the ken of his loyal assistant, who writes up their adventures. Both Wolfe and Holmes work out of their residences, locations that became as familiar to readers as their own homes. Both men are notoriously difficult, often driving their respective chroniclers to despair. But though Holmes and Wolfe have some similarities, their relationships with their sidekicks are poles apart. Archie is no forbearing Dr. Watson. A natural wisecracker, he is given to needling his boss, whose frequent response to his barbs is, “Archie. Shut up.”

Even before *Fer-de-Lance* was published, Stout had completed another novel. *The President Vanishes* was a political thriller about a fascist takeover of the United States. The book was released in September 1934, five weeks before *Fer-de-Lance* made its appearance.

*continued on page 36*





## Rex Stout

*continued from page 31*

Stout decided to publish *The President Vanishes* anonymously, hoping that people would think it had been written by a Washington insider. The ploy worked; sales were brisk. It wasn't until 1939 that the

author's true identity was revealed, by which time Stout was something of a Washington insider himself. More on this later.

Just about the time *Fer-de-Lance* and *The President Vanishes* were hitting the shelves, Stout began work on his second Nero Wolfe novel. Once again, he completed the manuscript in just over a month. Titled *The League of the White Feather*, the book didn't find favor with the editor of *The American Magazine*, who thought it less well done than the first Wolfe novel. The editor of the mighty *Saturday Evening Post*, which had turned down *Fer-de-Lance*, thought otherwise, and bought the serialization rights. However, he didn't like Stout's title, so the story was published in five installments in the *Post* as "The Frightened Men." And when the book was released by Farrar & Rinehart later that year, it was called *The League of Frightened Men*.

It's typical of Stout that he didn't rest on his laurels, content just to write one Wolfe adventure after another. At High Meadow he gardened and farmed, and raised chickens and cows. He experimented with plant grafts and varieties of produce and flowers. He learned cabinetmaking and stonemasonry. He wowed guests with spectacular cookouts. (When Stout depicted Wolfe as a gastronome, he inadvertently set himself up as something of a food expert. Over the years he good-naturedly bolstered this image. His wife, Pola, was often asked if Rex ever let *her* do any of the cooking.)

Somewhere amidst all this activity, Stout also found time to write. He contributed articles and poems for a 1935 anthology from Farrar & Rinehart called *Bedroom Companion*, and penned a novel called *O Careless Love* (1935), a satirical look at love and sex. In the fall of 1935 he completed the third Nero Wolfe novel, *The Rubber Band*, and, in the spring of 1936, penned the fourth series entry, *The Red Box* (1937).

Publisher John Farrar was delighted with the success of Stout's mysteries, but asked the author to come up with another mystery series to ensure they didn't wear out the public with too much Wolfe. So, in the fall of 1936, Stout created a female detective, Theodolinda "Dol" Bonner, who made her only solo appearance in *The Hand in the Glove* (1937). Although she had no more adventures on her own, Dol did turn up again later, working freelance as an operative for Wolfe.

There seemed to be no stopping Stout. Between August 1938 and December 1939, he published five

novels and completed two more. Four of these seven books were Nero Wolfe adventures: *Too Many Cooks*, *Some Buried Caesar*, *Over My Dead Body* and *Where There's a Will*. *Mountain Cat* was a stand-alone suspense. *Red Threads*, technically another stand-alone, featured the New York Homicide Squad's Inspector Cramer, a secondary character from the Nero Wolfe series.

The other book in this group, *Double for Death*, introduced another new detective, Tecumseh Fox. Fox was the protagonist in two novels by Stout, but the character found little favor with critics or the public. A third Fox story, "Bad for Business," had a somewhat complicated history. When it was submitted to *The American* for serialization, the editor offered Stout twice the money if he would convert it into a Nero Wolfe story, which Stout did. The new version, retitled "Bitter End," appeared in the November 1940 issue of *The American*. Later that same month, the original Fox story, "Bad for Business," was published by Farrar & Rinehart in their *Second Mystery Book*. Tecumseh Fox's last appearance was in the 1941 novel *The Broken Vase*. Stout later said of Fox, "[He] wasn't a created character, like Wolfe. He was put together piece-by-piece and wasn't worth a damn."

During this period, Stout also kept up a frantically busy schedule. He participated in an extensive promotional tour, and was a favorite guest on the radio program "Information, Please!" He also underwent an emergency appendectomy. By now the Stouts had two daughters, and for the girls' sake they tried to maintain some sort of normal family life at High Meadow.

There were other things on Stout's mind as well. Concerned over the growing threat of Nazi Germany—he called Hitler's *Mein Kampf* "the most immoral book I ever read"—Stout voiced his support for preparedness and lend-lease to England. As German forces swept into one European country after another, he worked on committees devoted to stepping up America's participation in the growing conflict, even to the point of military intervention. Stout also engaged in several radio debates about the United States' proper role in the crisis and served as host on a weekly series called "Speaking of Liberty." In an October 1941 interview in *Cue* magazine, the author made his feelings clear: "No one can rest now. You can't. I can't. Everything else of importance must be set aside...Apathy in the face of the world situation is unthinkable. Shout. Write your Congressman. Write the President. Nag. Coerce. Ridicule. Make yourself felt."

Stout was as good as his word. The war years saw him deeply involved in political matters. The demands on his time were such that he and Pola moved into an apartment in New York City, virtually exiling themselves from High Meadow except for occasional weekend visits. Stout made speeches and

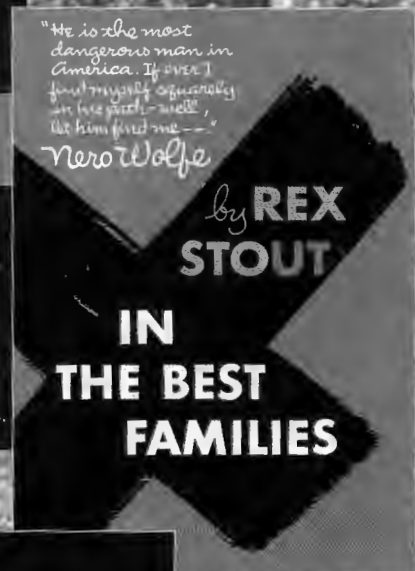
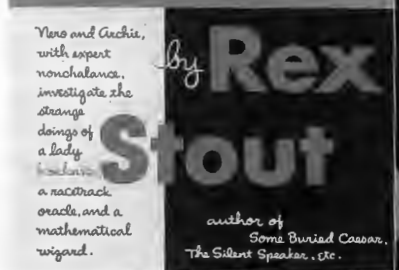
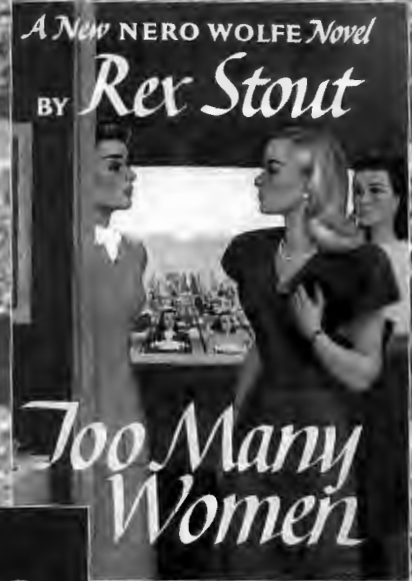
arranged and hosted radio broadcasts including, notably, a series called "Our Secret Weapon." During these 15-minute broadcasts, Stout refuted statements gleaned from Axis propagandist material, the idea being that truth was America's secret weapon. He became chairman of the Writers' War Board, a group originally intended to organize writers for war bond drives, but whose activities expanded exponentially. "In its first year," John McAleer tells us, "it conceived, commissioned and placed over 8,000 stories, articles, sketches, brief items, radio scripts and speeches," mostly for government agencies, all to aid the war effort. Most of Stout's writing from this period centered, not surprisingly, on war-related themes; his fiction took a back seat for the duration.

Before the United States formally entered the war, he took a stab at creating another fictional detective in *Alphabet Hicks*. Unfortunately, the book was released the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was an inauspicious debut and, like Tecumseh Fox before him, Alfred "Alphabet" Hicks was short-lived.

Although his fiction output decreased during the war, Stout continued writing Nero Wolfe novellas—the second of them, *Black Orchids*, appeared in 1942 (the first was *Bitter End*, described above). Not surprisingly, these novellas had a wartime flavor, as Archie Goodwin joined up and Wolfe and his Swiss cook tried their best to get into shape for service. The next full-length Nero Wolfe novel wouldn't appear until after war's end.

Stout was deeply concerned about the fate of postwar Germany—to him, plans to rebuild industrial Germany after the war meant the possibility of more German aggression in years to come. Fighting the Nazis was one thing most Americans agreed upon, but Stout and other members of the Writers' War Board drew open criticism for their vehemently anti-German stance. Interestingly, while W.W.B. members were being condemned for their hostility to all Germans, the organization was working hard to promote racial tolerance in the United States. How can you fight the concept of a master race abroad, the W.W.B. reasoned, yet turn a blind eye to racial discrimination at home?

The end of World War Two did not bring to an end Stout's involvement in national and international affairs. Part of his objection to a restored Germany was a response to another specter he saw looming on the horizon: Communism. He was convinced that the free world might one day have to take up arms against Communist forces, and that a rearmed Germany would fight alongside its former ideological enemy. Although many people wanted nothing more than to forget the woes of the past few years and concentrate on getting life back to normal, a number of groups formed or refocused their goals to various



means of preventing future wars. Rex Stout took part in several of these, tirelessly speaking, organizing, planning. He firmly believed that, in order to ensure world peace, nations must give up a little of their own sovereignty to a world government whose purpose was to prevent nuclear proliferation and obliteration of the planet.

In addition to his other responsibilities, Stout was president of the Authors' Guild. In May 1945, he began a campaign to bring about an increase in writers' royalties on reprints of their work. When the reprint houses protested, McAleer reports, Stout "made a threat publishers would long remember: 'If [the increase] is not forthcoming, what about the suggestion that the writers put up the capital for a reprint business of their own, hire competent reprint men to run it for them, and take both profits and royalties?'" This issue would arise again in the mid-1950s, causing a sharp war of wits and words between Stout and publisher Bennett Cerf. Once Stout was engaged in a cause, he stayed with it. The publishing world read and heard his uncompromising opinions—and felt his influence—on the touchy problems of copyright law, reprint rights and censorship for the next 30-plus years.

When Stout's first postwar Nero Wolfe novel, *Silent Speaker*, was published in 1946, it was not by his longtime publisher Farrar & Rinehart. Stout's friend John Farrar had decided not to return to publishing after his war service, so the author moved Wolfe and Archie over to the Viking Press. And at Viking they would stay for the rest of Stout's life. All of Stout's fiction from here on revolved around Nero Wolfe.

The Wolfe novel for 1948 was *And Be a Villain*, which introduced Wolfe's battle with master criminal Arnold Zeck. Although Stout reportedly did not plan it so, the struggle with Zeck extended over three books. The second installment of the Zeck trilogy was 1949's *Second Confession*, in which Wolfe takes on not only Zeck, but the Communist Party. The final entry in the Wolfe vs. Zeck saga was 1950's *In the Best Families*, in which Wolfe astonished everyone by leaving the brownstone and infiltrating Zeck's criminal band.

During the 1950s, Stout turned out a memorable array of Nero Wolfe novels and novellas, among them *Murder by the Book*, *Prisoner's Base*, *The Black Mountain* and *If Death Ever Slept*. *The Black Mountain* is notable for the fact that it reveals much about Nero

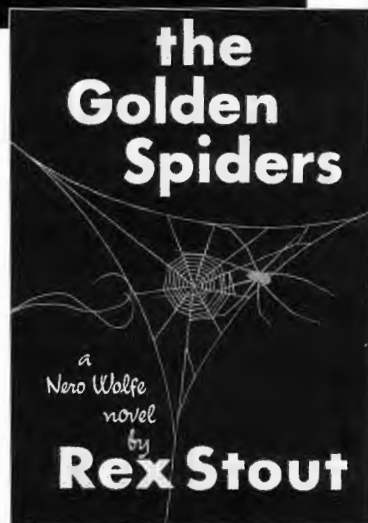
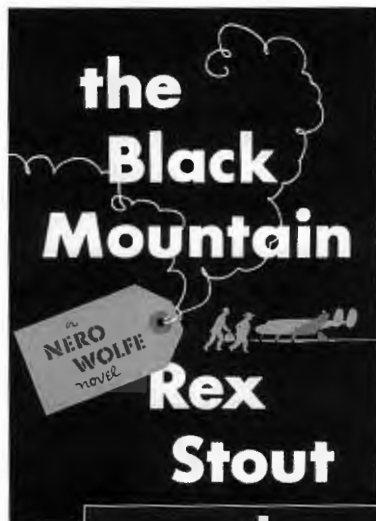
Wolfe's past. In this novel, Wolfe and Archie not only leave the brownstone, they leave the United States, as Wolfe heads for Montenegro to track down a killer.

Stout also kept up his other activities. A determined foe of Communism, he also deplored McCarthyism and spoke out against it, even at the risk of his own career. Ironically, his early support of the publication *The New Masses* was sometimes held up as proof that Stout was, himself, a Communist. The author had more than one public run-in at speaking engagements with hecklers who sought to tar him with this brush, conveniently overlooking the fact that he had withdrawn his support for *The New Masses*—originally "a magazine of arts and letters for the masses"—when it openly espoused Communism.

Stout's work on behalf of his fellow authors was tireless. Working with the Authors' League, he headed one campaign after another to put into law provisions that ensured writers' work would receive proper copyright protection. In 1909, Stout had been asked by his friend Booth Tarkington—who had been one of his father's students—to meet Tarkington and a friend for lunch at Delmonico's in New York City. The friend had turned out to be Samuel Clemens. Young Stout waited breathlessly for the literary discussion that was sure to come, but spent the afternoon listening to the two writers complain about the poor protection they received from the current copyright laws. Nearly 50 years later, Rex Stout stood by the side of President Dwight Eisen-

hower as the president signed into law the Universal Copyright Convention, which "provided that each member nation would offer the same copyright privileges to foreign nationals that it guaranteed to its own citizens." In 1965, at age 79, he led a delegation of writers who spoke at a Congressional hearing about artists' royalties and necessary revisions to copyright laws. It's ironic that today, after another four decades, writers and other artists are still struggling to protect their work from unfair incursions. Stout would still have plenty to fulminate about.

In 1956, *The American Magazine* ceased publication. The first Nero Wolfe story had appeared in its pages, and its passing marked the end of an era. With the market for short stories waning, Stout wrote fewer Wolfe novellas. His busy schedule precluded his writing more



novels (even at the rapid rate at which he produced them), which means that Stout produced a considerably smaller number of Nero Wolfe tales than he might have, a sad thought for Stout fans.

Now in his 70s, Stout continued a nonstop round of activities. In his concern for world affairs, the writing community and his fellow man, he seemed ageless. And, like their creator, Wolfe and Archie remained evergreen. The times changed around them and they kept up with those times, but they did not age. Perhaps nowhere is this pointed out more clearly than in *A Right to Die* (1964). Wolfe's client in this book is Paul Whipple, a middle-aged African-American man who, in his youth, had been a key witness in the 1938 mystery *Too Many Cooks*. When he presents himself at Wolfe's door at the beginning of *A Right to Die*, Archie doesn't recognize him. He has aged. Stout's detectives have not. And, remarkably, neither has Stout's prose. Perhaps because the author remained active and in touch with current events, his writing stayed fresh, his plots relevant and lively and his humor pungent.

While Stout's fiction wasn't intended to serve as a pulpit, the thread of his involvements could be traced there. Stout hated Communism; Wolfe battled Communists on more than one occasion. Racial intolerance, international bankers, entrenched wealth, censorship and *Webster's Third International Dictionary* (which he loathed for its inclusion of slang and current buzz words) all came under fire in the Nero Wolfe stories. If anyone had missed this fact before, they couldn't overlook it when *The Doorbell Rang* in 1965. Stout took on J. Edgar Hoover and the F.B.I., poking large holes in its image of infallibility and knocking it off its moral high horse. At the end of the book, McAleer points out, Stout leaves "Hoover himself standing on the front stoop of the brownstone, his jabs at the doorbell unanswered."

Still, the Sixties were as thorny and perplexing for Rex Stout as they were for many Americans, and the sticking point was the Vietnam War. As a true believer in American democracy and a longtime foe of Communism, Stout supported the government's handling of the war. It's not as difficult as it may seem to reconcile this stance with Stout's lifelong liberalism. He viewed the spread of Communism as the major threat to world peace. Besides, stubborn as he was, the more people told him he was wrong to support U.S. policy in Vietnam, the more ways he found to refute their arguments. Nearing his 80s, he was as terrier-like in debate as he was all those years ago when his teacher told him the ocean wasn't pink and his father caught him sliding down the haystack.

Although Stout was as sharp as ever mentally, ill health began slowing him down. In 1966, he was hospitalized with a bleeding ulcer. He also suffered from emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Early in 1967, he underwent surgery for an ulcer, necessitating a long period of recuperation at High Meadow. This meant

that, for the first time in many years, there was no new Nero Wolfe book that spring.

When the next Nero Wolfe novel, *The Father Hunt*, was released in 1968, it contained a passage that froze the blood of many readers: "Before long the day will come," wrote Archie, "maybe in a year or two, possibly as many as five, when I won't be able to write any more of these reports for publication."

In fact, Stout wrote only three more Nero Wolfe novels over the next five years. *Death of a Dude* was published in 1969, and *Please Pass the Guilt* in 1973. The final Nero Wolfe novel, *A Family Affair*, appeared in 1975. In spite of a series of health problems that caused him to spread his work on the novel over more than a year, the 89-year-old Stout finally completed a story as up-to-date as the newspapers he still received each morning. The Watergate scandal was the impetus for *A Family Affair*, in which Nero Wolfe finds corruption within his brownstone and must resort to some painful housecleaning.

Rex Stout died at High Meadow early in the morning of October 27, 1975. His ashes were scattered over the property he loved.

**I** ONCE COMMENTED in these pages that if I were to be stranded on a desert island, I'd want to have with me the books of P. G. Wodehouse. I'd like to update that statement, and include the books of a newer friend, Rex Stout. Both authors were prolific and eminently rereadable which, of course, makes their books especially handy to have around if you're going to be stranded on a desert island. But beyond that, they share the quality of having created fictional worlds you wish actually existed, peopled with characters you'd like to know.

Wodehouse's world, populated by daft young men, fearsome aunts and one superhuman gentleman's personal gentleman in the form of Jeeves, was a kindly place. Murders were committed only in the mysteries his characters read in their London flats or country manors. In Stout's world, murder was a constant, and often was accompanied by greed, ignorance, corruption or one of the nasty "isms" that infuriated the author—Nazism, Communism, McCarthyism, racism. Nevertheless, even after you've read all Stout's Nero Wolfe novels—after the mysteries are unraveled and the villains routed—you want to return to the brownstone on West Thirty-fifth for yet another visit, then another. You want to hear Archie's wisecracks and sample Fritz's cooking, to see the orchids and hear Wolfe say, "Pfuil!" That, as the man said, is *writing*. 