

# Profile of a Mystery Writer

## Rex Stout Reflects

By BILL RYAN

Rex Stout was sitting in an upholstered chair in his hilltop house outside of Danbury and he said he'd just gotten over double pneumonia and he didn't expect anyone was going to ever write anything more about him, except maybe in an obituary column.

"I was pretty sick," he said. "When I'm normal I talk a hell of a lot. My doctor tells me I should keep my damn mouth shut for awhile."

Then, for more than two hours — sitting in his chair where he could look out through picture windows whose tops coincide with the hills in the distance because he designed the house that way — Rex Stout talked.

He talked of book publishers and books and authors and politics and detective stories and business and anything else that seemed worthwhile to talk about.

The beard that starts under his mouth in a small way and then blossoms out luxuriously is white now, because its owner is 77. But the eyes are bright and the vocal cords more than suitable — double pneumonia or no double pneumonia — and the mind is incisive and statements and opinions come cascading out.

**THE TALK GOT** around to book publishers, a group of men who have played important roles in the life of Rex Stout.

"Most book publishers," he said, "are jackasses." "In the past hundred years, American publishers haven't shown one bit of ingenuity or originality. Paperbacks and book clubs, they were both outside ideas. The publishers couldn't see the possibilities in paperbacks for nine years after the idea had come from someone outside."

This seemed to take care of book publishers, but he threw in an extra opinion on agents. "Agents on the whole, with very few exceptions, are absolutely worthless people."

**STOUT HAS NEVER** had an agent. He never needed one. Everything he ever wrote he sold, and he got to talking about his early days as a writer in New York. This was about a half century ago.

"What I'd do, I'd write a story and sell it to a magazine. Then I'd take girls places, to the ball games and shows and then I'd be broke. So I'd write another story and sell it and get my laundry. But this was a lot of damn nonsense. Everyone should have a clean shirt. So I went into business and made a hell of a lot of money."

He said he had pondered beforehand on how to do this. "I don't remember it exactly, but I suspect I thought 'what would be the best source of money?' and I came to bankers."

He invented a thrift system, a school banking system, for children and then set out to promote it to superintendent of schools to school boards — and to bankers. The latter were the most receptive. He was selling them added depositors.

**FOR NINE YEARS**—the first five working every day with bankers and every night with school boards—he went around the country setting up his Educational Thrift Services. In the late Twenties, he felt he had enough money. "It was about half a million bucks."

He sold out the business, and retired—financially free—to devote his full time to writing.

He went to Paris, wrote a novel that received some critical praise, wrote a few more, but something unexpected had happened. His nestegg had diminished to a very small egg. The stock market had crashed.

"I had almost nothing left. So I could do one of two things. I could go back into business and make

some more money, or I could revise my standard of living and go into writing more novels. But I had written four serious novels by this time and I had learned that I was a pretty good writer, but I would never be a great writer like Dostoevski or Balzac.

"I could be like H. G. Wells or Steinbeck, just another one of the good ones, but when you're writing serious novels, when you're making serious comment on people and their behavior, you have to put part of your soul in the work. I thought, if you're merely good and not great, what's the use of putting all that agony into it."

**SO**, in his middle 40s, with a new bride named Pola Hoffmann, Rex Stout decided not to go back into business and not to continue to write agonizing novels. He choose an entirely new course.

"I turned to detective stories." He pondered his decision of 30 years ago for a moment. "I've had a hell of a lot of fun at it, and I've never been ashamed of anything I've written," he said.

Thus was born Nero Wolfe, the huge, lazy and brilliant detective who grows exotic orchids and loves good cuisine, and his leg man, Archie Goodwin, the bustling extrovert with an eye for the ladies.

Where did these characters come from? Was Nero Wolfe patterned after someone in real life?

"I haven't the faintest idea of where he came from, or even where his name came from," said Stout. He was serious.

Mrs. Stout perhaps had a better explanation. She is a short, pretty woman, a textile designer who maintains a studio in New York. She still speaks with the accent of her native Poland. "Rex Stout," she said, "is a combination of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin."

There are similarities. Nero Wolfe is a meticulous man. So is Stout. The small den on the second floor of his home where 40 Nero Wolfe books have been written—and sold in the millions and translated into 27 foreign languages—is an immaculate place. It is a place of order, from each carefully placed book on the shelves to a spot in the corner for a small statue of Sherlock Holmes. "Everything in its own place," said Mrs. Stout, and that seemed to sum it up.

**NERO WOLFE** grows orchids. Stout keeps three in his house "just for fun," but on the grounds he concentrates on iris, 170 varieties of them. "Orchids are too damn expensive," he says.

Nero Wolfe is a man who revels in food. Stout likes to cook. "I stand in cooking about where I stand in chess playing. Am I a good cook, yeah. Am I a wonderful cook, no."

Wolfe is a man of opinion, concisely expressed. Stout is that certainly. But even when he is expressing opinions, tough realistic opinions, there is no malice. Here is where the gregariousness, the good spirit of Archie Goodwin comes in. Stout is a combination.

And he is a proud man—of his success as a writer, of his business as a detective writer.

**"WHAT ALL WRITERS** think they're doing is making important comments on people and their behavior. Damn few succeed. I don't think that Ernest Hemingway ever made important comments on anything. He was a silly kid up until the day he died. He was a hell of a writer though. Jim Cain, though, he made important comments. And Dashiell Hammett, in the Glass Key, he made important comments.

"One tradition of American criticism is that the detective story is just a detective story," said Stout, and he didn't like the idea.

"Dostoevski decided to write a third book. He'd read Poe and he used the same framework when he wrote the Brothers Karamozov. It's a hell of a good detective story. How silly it is to say today that any book is 'just a detective story.' Great writing has to have two factors: To create people just as real to the reader as any people he's ever known, and then to make

## 2 of His Creations

a comment on human behavior. It doesn't make any difference what kind of framework you use."

**THE HOME WHERE** Rex Stout creates the characters for Nero Wolfe stories is one he built himself. It is known as High Meadows, contains 12 rooms and is made of concrete block. It is flat roofed and would be called contemporary design today. It was built 30 years ago.

"We used to rent a house down on the main road and I always liked this hill. I finally persuaded the farmer to sell me 28 acres. I didn't use any skilled workers. I got nine countryside people and we put it up, from April first to November first. We had a hell of a lot of fun."

After the house was finished, he made all the furniture for it. Then he turned to Nero Wolfe.

**FOR THE PAST** several years he's turned out one Nero Wolfe novel a year. He used to write Wolfe novellettes for magazines, "but there's no more magazines," so he concentrates on the novels.

He allocates 40 days for a novel. "Actually it takes 38 days. I'm finished a few days early."

Some writers make extensive outlines before they start writing. Not Stout. He gets his five or six main characters and a plot line. Then he starts writing.

A Nero Wolfe story that will come out in October was written last February and March. "I knew who was going to be killed when I started, and who was going to do the killing, but I changed the motive. I've got a new motive, one that's never been used before." Why the change of motive? "The characters changed it for me."

For the two months of the year that he is writing, Stout says he works at it steadily. "I get the damn thing done." Is he grumpy around the house? "I think that's too strong a word. I like peaceable relations in any house too much for that. Let's say I'm removed and disinterested."

"You know," he said, "I love writing. I love to feel the pieces going together. I love to monkey with words. You want an expression on a face and you want to give the reader a distinct impression in two or three words. It's a hell of a lot of fun."

Stout neither rewrites nor revises. When he is finished with a book, he is finished. He packages it and sends it to the publisher. He's never read one of his books after it has come out. "Once in a while I'll go back to one to check a name I've used before. You've got to have those things right."

**WHAT DOES HE DO** with the ten months of the year he's not writing? He's treasurer of Freedom House, he's president of the Author's League of America (and evidently rather a thorn in the side of the publishers), he reads, he and his wife have friends over. "I like to make things out of wood, I do a lot of gardening. There's just a hell of a lot of other ways to spend my time than writing."

At present, one of his two daughters and her three

young children are living at High Meadows. The children don't seem to regard grandpa with any great awe.

But when he writes, he writes. His fat, lazy Nero Wolfe, a man with a superb mind, solves crime with an élan all his own. Archie Goodwin, the gregarious one, assists the great man. Rex Stout says he has no idea where these people came from, except from his imagination. Perhaps his wife is wiser.

Both may be Rex Stout.



REX STOUT

I care about  
dearest ones!  
Thinking of you  
Bolt with me  
I see  
and more —  
more peace  
making.  
Enjoy the suitcase  
peace is all —  
I was sure for  
to get it.  
Dorothy  
Hollis