

Prof. John McAleer  
Beach Street  
Green Harbor, Mass.

August 18, 1972

Dear Professor McAleer,

1) I am not replying to the detailed questions about Nero Wolfe because I have not read more than 3 or 4 of the stories, have no special knowledge of the detective story form, and, most important, think the Nero Wolfe series, even though classics in their field, a minor ingredient in the rich composition of Rex's life and character. I might, however, say one or two things about the stories. Obviously, the non-mobility of Nero is an asset. For one thing it makes Nero's deductive capacities more astounding. For another, it makes him more interesting, in as much as hermits are statistically less frequent than non-hermits. Third, it justifies the development of Archie as a major character. (Watson is, of course, major too but he is basically only a foil to Holmes, not an independent creature.) I do think Rex has added something new to the genre. Both Nero and Archie are, for detective stories, remarkably complex characters. That is, they are not merely thinking machines like Poe's Dupin; nor are they merely the incorporation of discrete traits, as with Sherlock Holmes. There are very few detective story characters who could theoretically appear as legitimate personages in an ordinary realistic novel. Archie and Nero are exceptions. This I find a genuine achievement. The second achievement is more difficult to define. It has to do with the tone of the books. Rex is a man of extraordinary worldly wisdom, cosmopolitan experience, and intellectual capacity. These qualities suffuse the Nero Wolfe stories, giving them a sophistication, an irony, and indeed an intellectual cast which are absent from detective stories written by mere professionals.

Yes, I think Rex has put a good deal of himself into Nero: his wit, his irony, his knowledge of gastronomy and orchid breeding, his skeptical view of human nature under which lies a basic generosity and liberalism.

Answering your #18: you are surely aware of a lengthy Profile of Rex that appeared in The New Yorker possibly 15 to 20 years ago. Discussions of him appear, of course, throughout the entire literature of detective stories with which I assume you are thoroughly familiar. A little research in the Periodical Index would reveal many articles about Rex and his work.

2) Nero Wolfe is only one of the reflections of Rex's remarkable makeup. In many ways he is a road-company Leonardo. He has been a leftist and then liberal editor and pamphleteer, he designed and built his own house, much of it with his own hands, poured the concrete and constructed his own swimming pool, he is a knowledgeable farmer and an expert in the propagation of exotic plants and flowers, he is a finished cabinet maker (let him show you the drawers he made to contain his shirts), he is the author of 3 serious and by no means bad novels preceding Nero Wolfe, during World War II he organized and headed the Writers War Board (on which I served under him), he is probably one of the ablest propagandists since Tom Paine, he was surely in his youth and manhood one of the most sexually magnetic men any woman would want to know, he is an autodidact, whose general knowledge of literature, music, history, and politics is on a level superior to that of many professors of the subjects, he is one of the half dozen best conversationalists I have encountered, he started as an expert accountant and became a very successful businessman, I have no doubt he could turn his hand to almost anything that the occasion required. Like his pioneer ancestors, he is a practical generalist, as skilful with his hands as he is versatile with his brain. To these many talents he adds an impressive moral dimension: he is, for all his irony and occasional dogmatism, that very rare being, a good man. His tradition is, as you know, Quaker; and he reflects the practical benevolence that sect has always held to be essential to civilized living. He is a natural leader of men, not merely because he has unusual reserves of energy, but because the integrity of his character draws other men and women to him naturally. There is nothing saintly about him, he loves and understands the magnificent carnalities of life (by the way he is an expert on wine). But he has an essential generosity of heart which is far superior, in my view, to saintliness. While this is of little consequence, he was for many years my guru. To him, more than anyone else, I owe whatever basic understanding I have of World War II. He understood the Germans long before most of us did. And he knew that the significance of the War was to be found in the German character.

3) It would be a pleasure to see you during one of my Boston visits. I do not know when I will go but it will, of course, be after the opening of the school year. I will probably visit my daughter at Radcliffe two or three times during the year, but usually my visits are so brief and so given up to seeing her that I can't promise dinner. I feel sure, however, that we can at least meet for a pleasant cocktail, or preferably a series of them. I have an older son who lives in Concord and it's possible that I might be able to combine my visit to him with one to you as you are in a neighboring town.

4) I cannot imagine that the above is really helpful. Rex is a very complex man, his life is extremely rich in incident, and he is worth the most careful study. I do venture to suggest to you, however, that to approach him mainly through Nero Wolfe is the wrong tack. His detective stories have interested him greatly, have taken up a great deal of his time, and in their day brought him, I suppose, considerable profit (Rex has an excellent sense of double entry bookkeeping). Nonetheless, his detective stories are minor compared with the whole man just as the contrary might be the case with Faulkner, 90% of whose life consisted in writing novels. Rex respects what he has written but I have always felt that he thought of it merely as an interesting and ingenious way of making a living and at the same time expressing a small part of himself. The larger part is to be found in the rest of his life, his conversation, his political activities, and his influence on the many human beings who have known and loved him.

Sincerely,

CLIFTON FADIMAN

4610 VIA VISTOSA

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA 93110

August 18, 1972

Dear Rex,

The enclosed will, of course, remind you of the fable of the men who described, each in his own way, the elephant. What I could not put in this letter to Professor McAleer is the quality of my love and devotion to, you.

↑  
Gor,

Love,

Kip

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August 27 1972

Dear Kip:

You have made an addition to the cast of that fable — a character who describes the elephant as an extraordinarily handsome animal with exquisite curves, a noble and delicate trunk, shapely ears, stunning legs, and radiant eyes, in many ways a road-company brontosaurus.

Thank heaven you didn't write those three pages, and let me read them, years ago. I would have been a nervous wreck trying to warrant them. Now, well along in my ninth decade, I can just glow.

Love.....