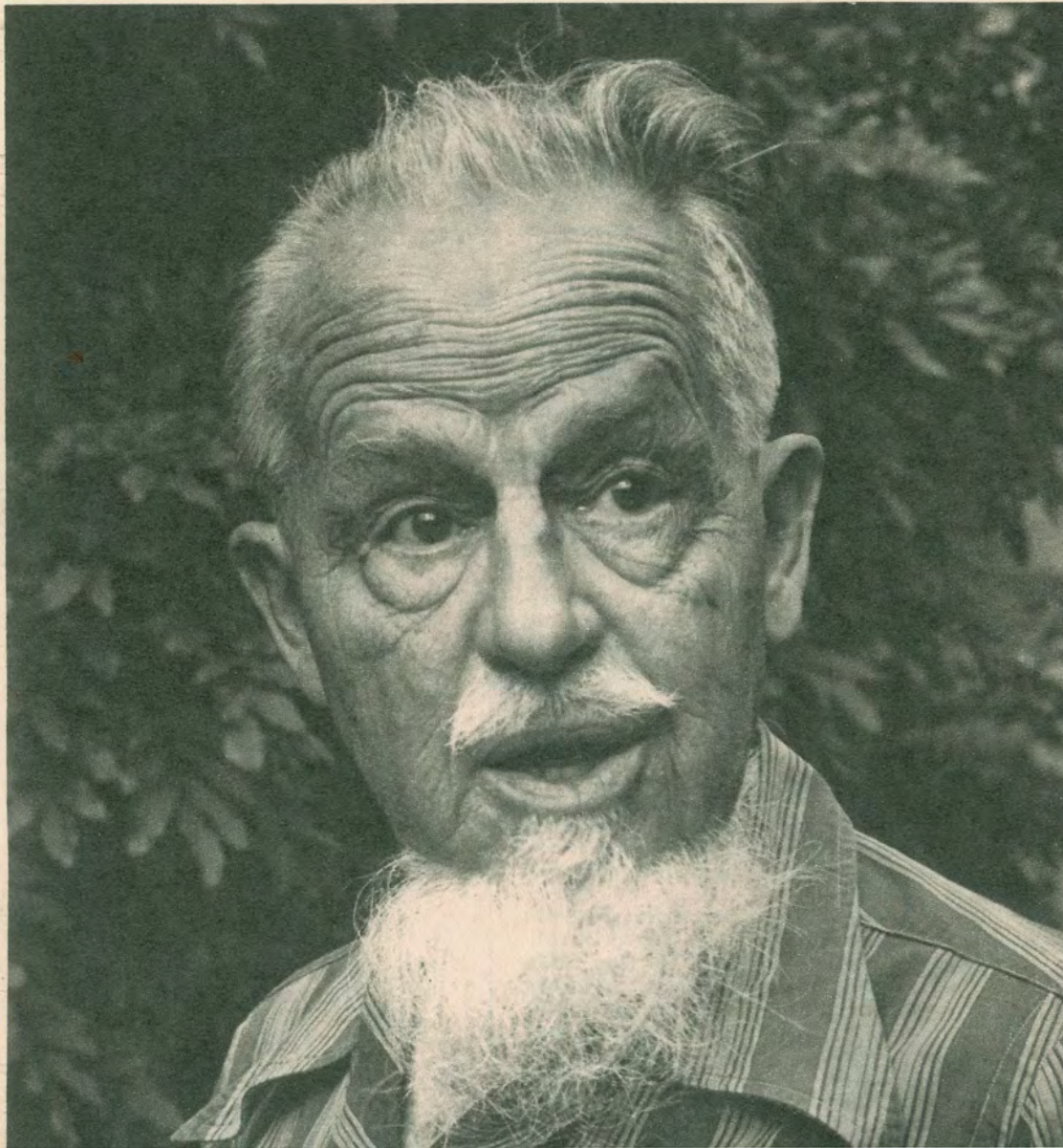

Rex Stout, Nero Wolfe and the Big Fish

by Caskie Stinnett



"... The mystery-reading public, from its intellectual summit to its suspense-craving depths, may be torn in anguish and despair over the transformation of the FBI from a hero to an anti-hero image..."

that her telephone is being tapped and that her privacy is being generally invaded. She offers Wolfe the largest retainer of his professional life, and he accepts the case. Before the denouement, Wolfe has easily outmaneuvered the FBI agents and trapped them in a situation that is highly embarrassing to the entire Bureau. At the end of the story, J. Edgar Hoover, himself, appears at Wolfe's doorway in an effort to extricate his agents from total humiliation.

The mystery-reading public, from its intellectual summit to its suspense-craving depths, may be torn in anguish and despair over the transformation of the FBI from a hero to an anti-hero image, but the fanciful and richly inventive plotting of Wolfe and his assistant, Archie Goodwin, demonstrate that Mr. Stout has lost none of his cunning as a stylist, and that few mystery writers can equal him in crisp delineation of essential detail. There is no preface warning the reader that real life implications should not be read into the book, nor any disclaimer of any kind that would tend to soften the author's attitude toward the FBI. Instead, it is Nero Wolfe; the positive figure of Wolfe, imperious at times, contemptuous, vigorously assertive, sometimes posturing and pugnacious, sometimes bleak and inconsolable. But never apologetic.

Mr. Stout entertains no feelings at all that criticizing the FBI can be equated with spitting on the flag. That the Bureau has contrived to build an image for itself of nobility and endless virtue is, he feels, a childish fancy that the American public long ago should have outgrown. Efficient as they are, Scotland Yard and the French Surete both fail miserably and



Rex Stout

Shortly before four o'clock on the afternoon of March 10 of this year, Rex Stout tapped out the last sentence of his 22d Nero Wolfe novel. He arose from his seat, walked down the stairs of his country home near Brewster, New York, and entered the kitchen, where he poured and drank what he called a "stiff" shot of Scotch. This was a custom of long standing—punctuating the end of a novel with a drink—but in the case of this particular novel the need for a fairly stiff drink may have been a bit greater than usual. The novel is titled *The Doorbell Rang*, and the villain of the story is the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In their somewhat similar places in the American

literary world, Nero Wolfe and Rex Stout are known to millions and in many cases their identities are undoubtedly confused since the author, Stout, shares the fictional Wolfe's appetite for good food, for flower growing, and for a certain touch of style and elegance in every-day living. Beyond any doubt, they share—or perhaps enjoy would be more accurate—a contempt for the FBI.

The story of *The Doorbell Rang*, which Viking Press published last week, is a fairly typical Nero Wolfe *oeuvre*. A woman comes to Wolfe complaining that she is being harassed by the FBI, that its agents are following her and members of her family,

often, and their imperfection is well known to the citizens of Great Britain and France. It is only the FBI, he contends, that has wrapped itself in the flag and has adopted the assumption of infallibility.

A few weeks before publication of *The Doorbell Rang*, Mr. Stout sat in the living room of his farmhouse and dismissed with an impatient gesture any suggestion that the FBI may undertake reprisals of some subtle nature because of institutional pique at the book. "I can't believe they would be that foolish," he said, "but of course one never knows. Several of my friends who have read the book feel that the FBI will let out a scream of outrage, but they won't if they have any sense at all. It's really a very outrageous outfit. Did you know that whenever the FBI is depicted on television or in movies, the scripts must be checked by somebody at FBI? Of all the goddam impudence and arrogance! If a New York policeman is shown on the screen, do you think the New York Police Depart- (Continued on page 24)

Rex Stout, Nero Wolfe and the Big Fish

(Continued from page 10) ment approves the script? I read Fred Cook's book *The FBI Nobody Knows*, and that primed the pump on this novel. But I'm also on speaking terms with three members of the New York State Police and God how they hate the FBI! I never met Fred Cook. His book has just been brought out in paperback by Pyramid Books and they sent me a few copies. They think I may have some trouble."

What of Viking Press? Do the publishers have any anxiety about the book and the repercussions that may follow its publication? "I don't know of any uneasiness at Viking," Mr. Stout said. "Their lawyers went over the book, of course, but I don't recall anything unusual about the check. If you remember, in the novel the head of the New York office of the FBI is a man named Wragg. The lawyers asked me if there was a man with that name in the FBI in New York, and I said I didn't have the slightest idea. They said they would check, and that's all I've heard from them."

There is little doubt in the author's mind that the FBI knows about the book and, indeed, may have sometime ago managed to acquire an advance copy. "The Viking Press has had requests for copies from quite a few people," Mr. Stout said, "and so have I. Both Columbia and Universal Pictures have asked for copies, and word seems to have gotten around that it is a hot book. I received a note from a man in Brooklyn who asked for a copy, and I got the distinct impression from the way the request was written that it came from the FBI. I think it is the way the FBI would go about it. I mailed him a copy anyway, and I've heard nothing from him. My own lawyer feels the FBI may try to do something, but I'm not the slightest bit worried."

Mr. Stout admits that this lack of concern may turn into a damaging innocence, but he frankly acknowledges that his own experiences with the FBI have been quite casual and inconclusive. "I have never had a personal involvement with the FBI," he said, "but they had one with me about 15 years ago. An agent came up here, from Washington I guess, to ask me some questions about a writer who was a very close friend of mine. His eighth question, if I remember correctly, was whether or not my friend read *The New Republic*. After he asked that, I wouldn't talk to him any more. I will not co-operate with a subversive organization, and to censor or restrict what a man reads is subversion. I got so damned mad, I put him out. He kept arguing with me, but I refused to talk and he finally left. They say the FBI does such things as root through your garbage to see if you're eating food or putting out liquor bottles that would suggest you're living beyond your means. If my garbage is tampered with I can never be sure whether it's the FBI or whether it's raccoons. It's accessible to them both."

On the last page of *The Doorbell Rang*, a man appears on Wolfe's stoop and, after taking a quick look, Archie announces to Wolfe that it is "the big fish." When Wolfe declines to see him, Archie remonstrates. "He probably came all the way from Washington just to see you," Archie says. "Quite an honor." Wolfe, nevertheless, refuses to admit him because he had no appointment. When Stout is asked if "the big fish" is J. Edgar Hoover, he replies: "In my opinion, it is." Although Stout has not actually met Hoover, he holds some very definite opinions about the Director of the FBI and none of them can be classified as flattering. Such unrelieved denigration, apart from its truth, fairness or otherwise, is based upon Mr. Stout's feeling that Hoover has permitted—or perhaps encouraged—the FBI to move in sometimes sinister directions.

"Hoover is a meglo- (Continued on page 27)

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Rex Stout, Nero Wolfe

And the Big Fish

(Continued from page 24) maniac, although I detest that word," Stout continued. "He appears totally egocentric, and in addition to other things he is narrow minded. I think his whole attitude makes him an enemy of democracy. Right now his age is somewhere close to 70 and I think he is on the edge of senility. Calling Martin Luther King the 'biggest liar in the world,' or something like that, was absurd. He is getting sillier and sillier. I first became very suspicious of Hoover years ago when I heard that he had been seen going to horse races with the late Senator McCarthy. I couldn't quite see the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation being pals with a man who at the time was the greatest single threat to American democracy. If he wants to get at me for writing this book, I wish he would try. He can't hurt me at all, so to hell with him."

Mr. Stout concedes that he knows of no instances where the FBI has disciplined a writer for making unkind comments about the Bureau, and since he is rounding out his eighth year as president of the Authors League of America and knows as many writers as anyone alive, he feels he would have learned about such an incident if one had occurred. Moreover, this marks Nero Wolfe's first encounter—in this way—with the FBI. In fact, Stout says, never before had an FBI man played an important part in a Nero Wolfe story.

Mr. Stout is well aware that when a writer mingles real with imaginary characters, and ascribes to them actions which are derived from either intuitional or prejudicial sources, that he stands the chance of offending many readers. The former, of course, is the practice and right of novelists and historical writers, but the custom lays itself open to objection in a novel dealing with figures in modern history known to millions of people. In the case of *The Doorbell Rang*, however, he feels that it is an organization rather than an individual whose weakness or corruption is revealed, and that the appearance of Mr. Hoover at the end—if it is Mr. Hoover—is not much more than a gesture in the direction of having Mr. Hoover extricate his organization from a humiliating circumstance.

All of the Nero Wolfe novels took from 37 to 40 days to write, but Mr. Stout has no idea how and why this time schedule came about. *The Doorbell Rang* took 38 full days and, like the others, was done during the winter when there was no competition for time from the garden. "I don't know how I rate this novel with the other Wolfe stories," he said. "I had a hell of a lot of fun writing it, and when I turned in the manuscript I had a telegram from my publisher saying that 'it was much the best bag job Stout has ever done.' This caught me by surprise. I didn't know whether they liked it because they didn't like the FBI or whether they really thought it was a hell of a good story. I still don't know."

Right now, Mr. Stout, as president of the Authors League of America, is spending a large part of his time trying to get this country's archaic copyright law brought up to date. This requires him to shuttle back and forth to Washington to testify before Congressional committees concerned with this legislation. So far there has been no accidental encounter with the FBI chief, but Mr. Stout wants to make it clear that he isn't dodging it. In fact, he may even be relishing the notion.

Even in the outline of his private life, one can see hints of social and political protest. His house, for example, lies in Connecticut, 180 feet from the New York line. "When I built here a number of years ago, I didn't want Hamilton Fish as my Congressman," he explained. "So I built my house in Connecticut. And what did I get?" He snorted contemptuously. "Clare Boothe Luce!"

Morristown, N.J. Epstein's	Wilkes-Barre, The Boston St
Newburgh, N.Y. Schoonmaker's	Worcester, Ma Denholm's
New Orleans, La. D. H. Holmes Company, Ltd.	Yonkers, N. Y. Lubin's

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