

# Talk With Rex Stout

By LEWIS NICHOLS

**A**LL you need to write a Nero Wolfe mystery story is eleven days, if it is to be a novelette, or thirty-eight days, if it is to be a full-length novel. You put down six pages a day, preferably in the afternoon, for that is the more congenial time to work than is the morning. And, of course, it doesn't hurt the product if, when writing a Nero Wolfe mystery, you happen to be Rex Stout.

Mr. Stout now puts out two shorts and a long each year, "The Golden Spider" (see *Criminals at Large*, page 32) being the most recent of the longs. Any reasonably sound statistician quickly can figure that he is a writer only sixty of the 365 days. This would have the charm of a good round figure, but would not be quite exact.

For Mr. Stout suffers from human frailties, and human frailties wreck round figures.

"Those are working days only," he remarked a little sadly, "and not elapsed time. Something comes along like the World Series and those days immediately are out."

While Mr. Stout may hold time pretty much in the palm of his hand—World Series excepted —

his working devices otherwise sound oddly haphazard. With detective fiction depending as it does on plots and logical sequences, the proprietor of the agency might well be expected to work from detailed and involved charts and diagrams, as well as from a cupboard filled with poisons. Not Mr. Stout. His interest in poisons is less than his interest in tomatoes, and he takes his plots as they come.

"If you're writing a Nero Wolfe," he said, "someone from the outside has to make the contact. I don't know how it happens. In this last story, it's a boy. But there's no particular reason.

"Before starting, I do put up in front of me a handwritten list of the characters, but I've never written out a single word of any plot.

"The plots come when I'm shaving, watering the plants, puttering around. Sometime I think of them for three weeks, sometime for three days. If you keep the main facts firmly in mind, and don't let anything contradict you, you can move around freely."

That, of course, is simple—if you're Rex Stout—and it goes on even more casually.

"I suppose almost all of my work comes from the subconscious," he said. "When I sit down at the typewriter I'm pleasantly surprised, and sometimes shocked, to find four-fifths of it is already there.

Each day before I start, I read what I wrote the day before. Never anything before that single day. I've heard that some writers claim to reread the whole thing, each day. That's impossible. When you got near the end, there wouldn't be time for anything but reading.

"I never re-read when I'm through. Writing any kind of fiction is a sort of explosion. When the explosion has taken place, there's no use going around looking at the debris."

What about characters, the Nero Wolfes, Inspector Cramers, the Archies and all other people, everywhere in books?

"There are two kinds of characters in all fiction, the born and the synthetic," he said. "If the writer has to ask himself questions—is he tall, is he short?—he had better quit. Take

such a character as, say, Tarzan. He was a born character. He responded to something in Burroughs. Scarlett O'Hara was a born character."

As to Nero Wolfe, himself, was he suggested by anyone? This is the \$64 question, and is inevitable and Mr. Stout probably is sick of hearing it.

"No one consciously," he said. "Alec Woollcott used to say he was the model, but not really."



Rex Stout.

Nero Wolfe and his creator have certain traits in common, but also many grave dissimilarities. Both are intense gardeners, although this year, anyway, Nero's collection of orchids is the better of the two. Both are pleasant talkers, using the king's rather than Spillane's English. But while Nero is fat and sits, Mr. Stout is thin, wiry. Nero likes quantities of fine food; Mr. Stout eats, too, but sparingly. Nero is a New Yorker with a house near the Hudson; his creator lives on a hill along the Danbury-Brewster great divide.

**A**S noted, he writes in the afternoon. This is because "it takes me two, three, four hours to wake up." The mornings go into watering plants, pruning trees, experimenting with new wrinkles in a large vegetable garden. Recently he finished a novelette, and was able to remark that he wouldn't do any writing for three or four months. This does not mean he will putter totally, however, for he is president of the Authors' League, and there is plenty going on down there.

Two novelettes and a novel a year, two shorts and a long every year—

"Someone—Flaubert, was it?—put up as his motto, 'the daily paper appears daily.'" he said. "I could just put up, 'the annual detective story appears annually.'"

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