

## INTERVIEW WITH REX STOUT

BY JOHN & ANDREW MCALEER

**McALEER:** When you were writing for the pulps, between 1912 and 1917, did you see yourself as a hack writer or as an aspiring young writer on his way to the top?

**STOUT:** I have never regarded myself as this or that. I have been too busy being myself to bother about regarding myself.

**McALEER:** Julian Symons says the Holmes series falls off in the last two collections?

**STOUT:** Symons? I don't know him. I don't agree with him either. I think one or two of the later Holmes stories are among the best.

**McALEER:** Anthony Burgess says that those who write series detective stories are artists—like Wodehouse and Faulkner—building a world. Do you agree?

**STOUT:** Depends on the writer. Conan Doyle and Simenon yes; Christie or Gardner, no.

**McALEER:** I take it that Conan Doyle is one of your passions?

**STOUT:** Every Sherlock Holmes story has at least one marvelous scene. And there's Holmes himself. Doyle stokes in a thousand shrewd touches with no effort at all. Wonderful.

**McALEER:** Did Archie hang up the picture of Sherlock Holmes that is found over his desk, or did Wolfe put it there?

**STOUT:** Did I say that at one point? I was a damn fool to do it. Obviously it is always an artistic fault in any fiction to mention any other character in fiction. It should never be done.

**McALEER:** Your culprits always capitulate plausibly. Do you take care to see that they do?

**STOUT:** Everything in a story should be credible, but one of the hardest things to believe is that anyone will abandon the effort to escape a charge of murder. Therefore it is extremely important to "suspend disbelief" on that. If you don't, the story is spoiled.

**McALEER:** Simenon says characters must never be too thought out or willed. Is he right?

**STOUT:** A character who is thought out is not born, he or she is contrived. A born character is round, a thought out character is flat.

**McALEER:** How do you control your novelettes so that they seem just as intricate and entire as your novels?

**STOUT:** You might as well ask a shortstop how he avoids tripping when he whirls to throw.

**McALEER:** Is a novelette easier to write than a novel?

**STOUT:** In a way, short fiction is harder to write than long. An unnecessary page in a long novel doesn't hurt it much, but an unnecessary sentence in a three-thousand-word story spoils it.

**McALEER:** Steven Marcus, a professor at Columbia, says that Dashiell Hammett, by a succession of "complex devices. . . was able to raise the crime story into literature." Is he right?

**STOUT:** "Raise?" No. It had been done before, for instance by Collins and Poe.

**McALEER:** Yet you hold Hammett in high regard?

**STOUT:** Certainly. He was better than Chandler, though to read the critics you wouldn't think so. In fact, *The Glass Key* is better than anything Hemingway ever wrote. . . Hemingway never grew out of adolescence. His scope and depth stayed shallow because he had no idea what women are for.

**McALEER:** Kingsley Amis says that you must be as Johnsonian as Wolfe is, that is, "a moralist before anything else." Do you accept this estimate?

**STOUT:** I am not any kind of an "ist." I have a strong moral sense—by *my* standards.

**McALEER:** Kingsley Amis thinks that Wolfe's speech carries the flavor of the eighteenth century. Do you think so, too?

**STOUT:** No.

**McALEER:** How many times have you read Boswell's life of Samuel Johnson?

**STOUT:** All of it, twice.

**McALEER:** Amis sees Wolfe as a latter-day Samuel Johnson. Do you find that an agreeable compliment?

**STOUT:** Yes. Since I like Johnson, I'd like to think that Wolfe invites comparison with him.

**McALEER:** To many readers Wolfe is the epitome of the rational man.

**STOUT:** If they want to feel that way, God bless 'em. They'll probably buy another book, and that's all I care about.

**McALEER:** Then you don't think man is a rational animal?

**STOUT:** The minute those two little particles inside a woman's womb have joined together billions of decisions have been made. A thing like that has to come from entropy. All men are reasoning animals more than any other animal. Of course they are. That's perfectly obvious. They have a bigger brain and a better brain. And we reason with our brain. But to say that man is a reasoning animal is a very different thing than to say that most of man's decisions are based on his rational process. That I don't believe at all. But of course he's a rational animal. He damn well better be in this complicated world, believe me, or he isn't going to last very long.