

BOOKS IN MY LIFE

by REX STOUT

If somewhere in this article a dead body shows up ignore it. It's only a prop.

But my intentions are good and I'll prove it by setting the scene with a sky as bright as a bluejay, air so heady you'd like to take it by the cupful, and a field of corn as high as an elephant's eye, though not in Oklahoma.



The only trouble about this idyllic setting is that the corn is supposed to be cut by me and I'm stretched full length under a lonesome oak reading Poe. The eager field of corn, incidentally, is on my parents' farm in Kansas, if you're a stickler for details. I'm 12.

The basic philosophy behind this stalemate between the corn and me is habit. I had fallen easily into the habit of reading, but never quite acquired the habit of corn cutting.

My father was superintendent of schools, my mother a patient, understanding woman whose philosophy was of such a depth that perhaps this short illustration of it will suffice to tell the whole story. When Mother wanted respite from her nine children she sat herself down in a rocking chair with a wet face cloth. Any of us children who came within reach during these brief moments of rest would get his face, neck and ears washed. It worked.

My brothers and sisters were an unpredictable bunch and one might compare them, not unfavorably, to the family in "You Can't Take It With You."

The parlor might find a scene from Macbeth, a hot debate having to do with taking the marines out of Nicaragua, or wherever they were at the time, a speech to be given to a meeting of school principals, and a hound pup being taught the fundamentals of tracking.

But to get back to the tree and me. The habit of reading first got me when I was three years old. Maybe even younger. In our family the youngest child got the cherished position of honor on my mother's lap in the evenings while she read aloud to us. With nine children, no one held that honor very long and was then relegated to the floor with the older children.

But that family reading aloud instilled in all of us children the love of reading. We had an enormous library for that time and place, but for us Stouts it was woefully inadequate. But read we must, and so we read and re-read everything in the house.

I suppose the corn finally got cut by somebody, but I doubt if it would have if The Book of Knowledge had been on our shelves. For The Book

ta, I'll be washing dishes or sitting at the sewing machine!