

Rex Stout, Creator of Nero Wolfe, Dead

By ALDEN WHITMAN

Rex Stout, creator of Nero Wolfe, died yesterday of natural causes at his home in Milltown Road, Danbury, Conn. He was 88 years old and had published last month his 46th Wolfe mystery, "A Family Affair."

In the gothic world of the mystery-murder-detective novel the doyen of American practitioners was Rex Todhunter Stout, a wiry, goat-bearded, argumentative, intense, immodest, highly talented artisan. His principal handiwork was Wolfe, a Falstaff in girth and wit, a serious eater, a devoted orchidologist, an agoraphobe who solved crimes by sheer brainpower, albeit with the help of a brash but efficient legman, Archie Goodwin.

Nero Wolfe made his dazzling debut in 1934, when his creator was 47 years of age. And from then on the pound, sedentary sleuth triumphed over a variety of venal forces that included the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He accomplished these feats between beers in a brownstone on West 35th Street, near the Hudson River,



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Rex Stout

that had a hothouse on the roof. Dispensing with crime laboratories and the like, he relied on old-fashioned logic of the sort practiced by Sherlock Holmes, the vowels in whose name were identical to Nero Wolfe's, even to their order.

Mr. Stout's Nero Wolfe books, most of them published by Viking Press, appeared in 22 languages and sold a total of more than 45 million copies. They made their author happily wealthy, for he agreed with Samuel Johnson that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money." And he wrote economically.

"I write for 39 consecutive days each year," he said. "I figure on six weeks for a book but I shave it down."

"Before starting," he explained on another occasion, "I do put up in front of me a

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handwritten list of 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. Sometimes I think of them for three weeks, sometimes for three days. If you keep the main facts firmly in mind, and you don't let anything contradict you, you can move around freely."

Concentrating on his typewriter, he did not even stop to water his 300 house plants, a chore he delegated to his wife. "I don't drink when I'm writing because it fuddles my logical processes," he also confessed, adding:

"But when I finish a book I go down to the kitchen and pour myself a big belt."

Mr. Stout was frequently asked about the origins of Nero Wolfe. A believer in the potency of the subconscious, he insisted that "Nero Wolfe just appeared—I don't know a thing about him." Others, however, offered explanations, including Alexander Woollcott, a friend of Mr. Stout's, who was certain that he had been plagiarized bodily. The critic and wit cited his physical resemblance to Nero Wolfe and their common distaste for exercise. Indeed, Mr. Woollcott fell to referring to himself as Nero and to a close friend and companion as Archie.

Christopher Morley, a Sherlock Holmes expert, argued that Nero Wolfe was patterned on Mycroft Holmes, the fat and gifted younger brother of Sherlock.

Likened to Robot

And Alva Johnston, in a profile of Mr. Stout in *The New Yorker* a number of years ago, likened the detective to Ajeeb, a robot of the eighteen-nineties that appeared to beat all comers at chess. "He was thrown open from time to time so that the public could peer into his interior," Mr. Johnston wrote. "But in spite of every appearance of being an honest, clean-living machine Ajeeb had a guilty secret. He had a little man concealed about his clockwork person, the Great Pillsbury, one of the chess masters of the period."

Mr. Johnston speculated that "the colossal Nero Wolfe" was like Ajeeb because Mr. Stout was concealed about his person all the time. Most students of Mr. Stout agreed with Mr. Johnston when he wrote:

"Nero is odd and a trifle grotesque because he has all the foibles and peculiarities of the man inside him. The fat detective can't help being a knowing and versatile operator, since he gets his stuff from the variegated experience of the author, who has been, among other things, banker, yacht Mayflower, boss of 3,000

writers of propaganda in World War II, gentleman farmer and dirt farmer, big businessman, cigar salesman, pueblo guide, hotel manager, architect, cabinet maker, pulp and slick magazine writer, propagandist for world government, crowd trainer, jumping-pig trainer, mammoth - pumpkin grower, conversationalist, politician, orator, potted-plant wizard, gastronome, musical amateur, president of the Author's Guild, usher, ostler and pamphleteer."

Boyhood in Kansas

This jack-of-all-trades was born in Noblesville, Ind., on Dec. 1, 1886, the sixth of nine children of John and Lucetta Todhunter Stout, both Quakers. Shortly after Rex's birth, the family moved to Wakarusa, Kan., and the boy was educated at a country school.

A prodigy in arithmetic, he was a public character in Kansas and was exhibited all over the state by the age of 9. The boy was blindfolded while someone wrote a long column of figures on a blackboard. Then the blindfold was removed and he was turned around, and within a few seconds he could give the correct total.

Fearing that his personality would be warped, Rex's parents called a halt to the exhibitions and took him out of school for a time. In this period he finished reading his way through his father's library—1,200 volumes of biography, history, philosophy and fiction.

After graduation from Topeka High School (he won a statewide spelling contest while there) and a brief stay at the University of Kansas, Mr. Stout joined the Navy and spent the next two years playing whist on President Theodore Roosevelt's yacht with seven warrant officers in need of an eighth. Tiring of cards, he purchased his discharge in 1908; and for the next four years he roamed the United States.

In this period he drifted into magazine writing, with articles and stories in *Munsey's* and *Everybody's*; and from 1912 to 1916 he cranked out a potboiler a month. He spent his fees more rapidly than he collected them, so he decided to quit writing ("I just got tired of having a date and no money for my laundry") for a more lucrative job until he hit upon the notion of selling bankers' child depositors. From that to the formation of the Educational Thrift System was only a brief step. Mr. Stout's deal with the bankers provided that they would pay him so much a child a year, with him furnishing the children and the bankbooks. The children provided the pennies for a weekly Bank Day, held in schools, that was to teach thrift and the decimal system at the same time.

The scheme was so successful (bankers were delighted to be cast as benefactors of the young) that Mr. Stout was able

to retire with \$400,000 in 1927 and go to Paris to write serious fiction. His first novel, "How Like a God," appeared in 1929 and provoked favorable comment, as did his next three, "Seed on the Wind," "Golden Remedy" and "Forest Fire."

Fortune Diminished

The Depression, however, reduced the author's fortune (his psychological novels were not financial successes) and he sought a way to make some quick money with his typewriter.

The detective novel proved the solution, for his first Nero Wolfe book, "Fer-de-Lance," came out in 1934 and brought in solid cash.

It was followed by many others, including, before World War II, "The League of Frightened Men," "The Rubber Band" and "Too Many Cooks." These established Nero Wolfe as at least an equal to Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason, who made his fictional bow in 1933, and gave Mr. Stout an excellent income that permitted him and his second wife, the former Pola Hoffman, to build a 14-room house on a farmlike estate near Brewster, N.Y. He had married Miss Hoffman, a fabrics designer, in 1932 after he and his first wife were divorced.

Anti-Hitler Campaign

The war slowed down Mr. Stout's detective fiction, as he carried on a personal campaign against Hitlerism. He joined such organizations as Fight for Freedom, the Council for Democracy and the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies. He became master of ceremonies on the radio program "Speaking of Liberty" in 1941, and during the war he had a hand in several national radio programs that debunked Nazi propaganda.

As chairman of the War Writers Board, he was a frequent and eloquent speaker at forums and rallies across the country. His pleas for a hard peace for Germany embroiled him in an acrimonious debate with Dorothy Thompson, the columnist, that was publicly settled when Mr. Stout conceded that there were a few "good" Germans.

After the war Mr. Stout turned his attention to mobilizing public opinion against the use of thermonuclear devices in war. He also advocated a world government, or federation, as a means of insuring international peace.

In addition, Mr. Stout resumed his Nero Wolfe novels in earnest and his gentleman-farming at High Meadow. He exhibited his products at the Danbury (Conn.) Fair over the years and sometime won prizes for his pumpkins and peaches.

Among the postwar whodunits were "The Silent Speaker," "The Golden Spiders," "If Death Ever Slept" and "The

Mother Hunt." These and Mr. Stout's other mystery novels were celebrated in a learned essay by Jacques Barzun of Columbia University in a tribute to the author on his 79th birthday in 1965. He described Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin as "this sublime duet of Don Quixote and a glamorized Sancho Panza who go tilting together against evil."

Of all the Nero Wolfe books, "The Doorbell Rang," published in 1965, was the author's most controversial, for its villain was the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which he had long considered an "odious, overbearing and unprincipled" organization. In his review of the book for *The New York Times*, Anthony Boucher called "the duel between the private detective and the government forces a delight in high-comedy melodrama," but added that "purely as a detective story it is one of Stout's weakest."

Typical of His Style

At the conclusion of the book Mr. Stout paid off his dislike of J. Edgar Hoover, the F.B.I. director, in the following scene, which was typical of his writing style. The narrator is Archie Goodwin.

"The doorbell rang. I got up and went to the hall and saw a character on the stoop I had never seen before, but I had seen plenty of pictures of him. I stepped back in and said, 'Well, well. The big fish.'

"He [Nero Wolfe] frowned at me, then got it, and did something he never does. He left his chair and came. We stood side by side, looking. The caller put a finger to the button, and the doorbell rang.

"'No appointment,' I said. 'Shall I take him to the front room to wait a while?'

"'No. I have nothing for him. Let him get a sore finger.' He turned and went back to his desk.

"I stepped in. 'He probably came all the way from Washington just to see you. Quite an honor.'

"'Pfui. Come and finish this.'

"The doorbell rang."

For many years Mr. Stout was a leader in the Authors Guild. As such, he was active in its efforts to win better contract terms with publishers and improvements in the copyright law add in its attempts to gain freedom for writers imprisoned in other countries for their political views.

Agile and with his Ancient Mariner eyes undimmed, Mr. Stout was rarely idle in his 80's. Among his Wolfe books published in that decade was "Please Pass the Guilt," which pleased both his gastronomic readers and his mystery fans.

Mr. Stout leaves his wife; two daughters, Barbara Selleck and Rebecca Bradbury; two sisters, Ruth and Mary Stout, and five grandchildren. There will be no public service.