



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

Some Thoughts on Being a Literary Biographer By John J. McAleer

I became acquainted with Rex Stout when he read my biography of Dreiser and invited me to visit him. "I like it," he said, "because I could understand it. It was not tricked out in academic jargon." I told him the book I wanted to do next was on one Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. He told me to go ahead with his blessings. I asked him if he was going to write an autobiography. He said his publishers wanted him to but that he thought "that any man who wrote an autobiography thought too damn much of himself." I told him then that I would sooner write a book about him than one about Archie and Wolfe. "I'd like that," he said "in a book about them I'd be a hanger on. In a book about me they'll have to stand until I sit." And so the commitment was given. Since Rex, even at eighty- three, was highly scheduled and superbly organized (for sixty-three years his first drafts were always his final drafts), I saw at once that it was essential to fit myself into his schedule, and, if possible, to create the impression that I was every bit as organized as he was. I achieved this result by sending him a questionnaire every Sunday for a hundred and eighty-seven consecutive weeks. Even when my parents died I held to this regimen. A biographer must never appear to vacillate in the relationship he establishes with his subject. Each Tuesday, on receiving my questionnaire, Rex answered it and mailed it back to me. In this way he answered 7,500 question. I should add that if, on the one hundred and first week, I miscalculated and asked a question I had asked on the thirty-seventh week, Rex was certain to say, "I've answered this before." He gave perfection and expected it in turn.

Every few weeks I would visit Rex at High Meadow to tape the answers to questions which required longer answers than he cared to write. "You know," he told me on one of these visits, "you're one hell of a research man." I knew then that my industry had narrowed the gap between us. In 1973 I located Julia Sanderson, the Broadway musical star who had been Rex's ladylove back in 1905. Even ASCAP (Editor's note: American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) didn't know where she was, but I found her living in an auto park in Springfield, Massachusetts. At ninety she sent me perfumed letters and resumed her correspondence with Rex which ended in 1907 when she married Todhunter Sloane, the "Little Johnny Jones" of George M. Cohan's musical. "You have found Julia Sanderson!" Rex gasped. This was the only time I ever saw him nonplussed. "Should I let this go on?" his wife, Pola asked teasingly. "Rex, corresponding with his sweetheart of seventy years ago?" "You needn't worry," Rex boomed in his magnificent basso "the magic is gone!"

Rex Stout assured me that his memory was "unusually replete and exact." It was. I tested it. In 1942, corresponding with Bernard DeVoto, he answered in detail some questions DeVoto had put to him concerning his role in sponsoring *The New Masses* (Editor's note: a left- wing magazine) in the 1920's. Mrs. DeVoto made the letter available to me and, without telling Rex that I had read it, I asked the same questions Professor DeVoto had asked him. And there it

was - at eighty-seven he gave me precisely the same answers he had given deVoto at fifty - seven, about events that had happened when he was thirty-seven.

Pola Stout's memory was as whimsical as Rex's was steadfast. She began by assuring me that she had done my research for me. After many weeks she produced a great clutter of newspaper clippings and photographs, all in a fantastic, helter-skelter heap spread out on her bed. Much of this material was useful but it related mostly to the years of World War II. Pola's memories were not much more organized than her clippings. They surfaced capriciously. Once she told me that Rex's mother, Lucetta Stout, had explained to her why she had named her sixth child Rex. But Pola could only recall the occasion and not the reason. Rex's year-old daughter, Rebecca, while having her lunch, had worked her feet free and propped them on the tray of her highchair. "Rebecca is going to be a lawyer," Lucetta had said, "She has her feet on her desk." "And what did you think Rex would be when he was a baby?" Pola asked. Lucetta replied, "Did I ever tell you why I called him Rex?" The explanation that followed was that Pola could not recall. On successive visits I asked her if the memory had revived. Finally, one day, she greeted me beaming. She had remembered. "I called him Rex," Lucetta had said, "because when he came out, he came out like a king."

I was successful, in a way so roundabout you would never believe it if I told you, in locating Rex's first wife, Fay Kennedy, who had eloped with a Russian commissar in 1931. For years Rex had thought that Fay was dead. Since he was quite comfortable with the idea I decided not to disabuse him. But it kept a lot of finesse to keep Fay from knowing that Rex believed she was six feet under. Fay proved to be one of those people who is a boon to any biographer - someone who had outlived all her emotions. No question was too personal to ask. "Is *Golden Remedy* autobiographical?" I asked her. "Was yours a marriage in name only even before Vladimir Koudrey came into the picture?" "Let's just say," Fay answered, "that after sixteen years we both we looking out the window." From Fay I got not only a detailed account of those sixteen years, I got, as well, a bushel of photographs. The commissar, though many years Rex's junior, had dropped dead in 1938, and Fay had been carrying the torch for Rex ever since.

I also approached Rex's oldest niece, Natalie Stout Carr, who had been estranged from Rex since the 1920's. I was told I would be wasting my time - that she was bitter and hostile. Quite otherwise, Natalie insisted that I should come visit her at Amagansett. "And, for God's sake," she said, "bring your wife. She must be sick of sitting around watching you write and not having any part of it." She provided me with a suitcase full of material, including a ninety-page manuscript detailing intimate family history which her father, Rex's brother Robert, had written at eighty-seven when already terminally ill with cancer. I also taped twelve hours of her John McAleer InteiView (Rex Stout Biographer) reminiscences. When the book came out, she bought twenty copies to distribute to the estranged branch of the family. It was from Natalie that I got the absolutely crucial bit of information that after the suicide of Rex's oldest s sister May, Lucetta had stopped speaking to her husband and did not speak to him again during the remaining twenty-five years of his life, though they continued to live together under the same roof. "Grandma," Natalie explained, "was as cold as hell." She thereafter had regarded Rex as head of the family. This arrangement embarrassed Rex but he was never able to alter it. A few days after his father, John Stout, died in 1933, Rex created Nero Wolfe, assigning to him many of John's characteristics, and Archie Goodwin, to whom he assigned many of his own

characteristics, to continue, over the years, through these characters, a father-son dialogue that had begun in the last years of John's life. One of Rex's last thoughts, as he was dying in 1975, was to ask Pola, "Do you think my father would have been pleased with what I've done with my life?" The characters he created embodied his desire to have John's approval.

I was fortunate also in locating, in Colorado, a forgotten Stout relative, then nearing ninety and blind, who dictated a lengthy memoir to her son, a professor of mathematics at the University of Colorado. Through her I got in touch with yet another nonagenarian relative in New Mexico, who had inherited the Benjamin Franklin memorabilia which had passed down through seven generations of the family, the Stouts being descended from Ben's sister, Mary Franklin Homes. She sent me photographs of herself modeling Franklin's nightcap. Through this branch of the family I received documentation establishing that Rex was also descended from Elizabeth Whitman, the niece of Daniel Defoe, and that Rex and Hubert Humphrey were equally descended from the noted colonial legislator, Joshua Hoopes. This pleased not only Rex but Senator Humphrey, who told me in an enthusiastic letter (though I suppose he never wrote a letter that was not enthusiastic), that it was an honor to be related to Rex Stout. I succeeded as well in getting from Cardinal Wright, the only American member of the Vatican Curia, a letter commending Rex Stout. After Rex read it, he said, "You don't suppose that his Holi-- -? No -- o, I guess not."

Sometimes people on the periphery of things are eager to turn out their pockets for you. It is surprising that those pockets contain. The woman who had been Rex's brother's secretary back in the 1920's - yet another octogenarian - proved to be a veritable packrat whose breakfront was stuffed with records of photographs of those years. She mailed everything off to me and then ransacked her memory in a series of eighteen-page letters that came twice weekly for ten months. She was a lonely woman whose life centered, for many years, around her only child, a retarded daughter. It was therapy for her to recall happier earlier years. She gave the biography her all. I was glad, later, to discover that Rex had immortalized her as a character in one of his stories.

Rex's own secretary of those years, Helen May, then a beautiful girl, but now an invalid confined to a wheelchair, also had reminiscences, though more discreetly told. Once, she said, she had arrived at work in a snit. Rex disappeared into his office and, a few minutes later, rang for her. When she appeared he handed her a disk he had cut from pink cardboard. On it he had inscribed the words, "Reward for Sharp Retort." This broke her mood and she was again her amiable self. Helen had never read a Rex Stout story until I asked her to do so and then she made a startling discovery. Rex, when she knew him in the 1920's, had been the identical counterpart of one of his detective heroes, Tecumseh Fox.

When I discovered that the personal papers of Rex's close friend, Egmont Arens, were in the hands of his widow, his fourth wife, I wasn't sure how to proceed, since I had no idea how to locate her. In desperation I wrote to his first wife, whose whereabouts I did know. "How can I get in touch with wife number four?" I brazenly asked. "No trouble," she replied, "here is her address. Since the last Mrs. Arens had not yet been born when Rex's friendship with Egmont flourished, I did not look for much to come from my correspondence with her, apart from getting a look at the papers. I was wrong. During the years of their marriage she had hung on Egmont's

every word, and was delighted to be debriefed in full. She was, moreover, a woman of great literacy and charm who had unlimited enthusiasm for what I was doing.

After a while, when Rex gave me copies of his books, he signed them "With love." Pola assured me that this was unusual, that Rex was notoriously wary of giving anyone his complete acceptance. Even she, she admitted, had to go through a period of probation with him during the first months of their marriage.

To have the confidence of the subject's family, friends, and associates is, of course, crucial. I count it as a stroke of good fortune that Rex's family gave me unstinting cooperation. This, I suppose, was due in part to the interest he himself took in the project. He had just passed through a long, debilitating illness that had aged him perceptibly. Now suddenly he took hold again and seemed ten years younger to his wife and daughters. This surge of vitality lasted long enough for him to write two more books, the last--one of this best-- written in eight weeks in his eighty- ninth year. He gave me a letter- -To Whom It May Concern - inviting people to tell me all they knew about him. "Include Warts," it stipulated. A few did and later I told him that I'd been thinking about an exchange Nero Wolfe had had with a visitor. "I know something about you that you wouldn't want anyone to know," she had said. "Madame," Wolfe had replied, "There are a hundred things about me that I wouldn't want anyone to know." "I've found out a few things about you that you wouldn't want anyone to know," I said to Rex. "What shall I do about them?" "Put them in," he said, "they'll probably be the most the interesting things in the book." How different an experience from Cleveland Amory's who was hired by the Duchess of Windsor to write her biography? He quit after a month. "The Duchess of Windsor," he said, "is not Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm." I made hundreds of xerographic copies of the "Include Warts" letter and sent them out. They brought me an avalanche of mail.

Rex's ninety-year-old sister, Ruth, the great original in the family, proved a cornucopia. She spun out family history by the mile, and even consigned to me, as a permanent gift, her unpublished memoirs- -a manuscript of six hundred pages. Our friendship continued until she was ninety-seven, when she died. At that time Ruth was working on her twelfth book. She had published her first book when she was sixty- eight. Toward the end Ruth was not always sure who I was, but the anecdotes continued to flow in an undiminished stream. During the last month of her life she spoke only in rhyming couplets. She did not realize this but would have loved it. Ruth dearly loved to be different. Rex's sister, Mary, a recluse who Ruth watched over for sixty years, wrote to me and phoned me but would not see me. Even Rex had not seen her for twenty years. "Mary," I said to her one day when talking on the phone, "People will think you didn't cooperate when I admit that I never saw you." "You can lie, can't you?" she replied.

**This article originally appeared in
The Gazette, Journal of the Wolfe Pack Volume IV, Number 2, Spring 1986.**

***Rex Stout: A Majesty's Life* by John McAleer was reissued in March 2002.**