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Hall of Famers

Rex Stout: An American Wit and Propagandist

Robert Hughes

Rex Stout was a propagandist.

You might have thought he was only that author who came up with the enduring Nero Wolfe mysteries, featuring the larger-than-large, orchid-growing detective and his dashing and irreverent right-hand man, Archie Goodwin. But Stout (1886–1975) was that most remarkable—and American—of crime writers. He was a jack of all trades. He made a fortune creating a banking system, which gave him a cushion as a writer. He helped strengthen U.S. copyright law for writers. He was one of the first board members of the American Civil Liberties Union. He was a very public supporter of the United Nations. He was also targeted by the FBI (and wrote a Nero Wolfe book, *The Doorbell Rang*, that targets the FBI's intrusions into the lives of American citizens.)

But back to the propaganda. During World War II, Stout wrote anti-Nazi propaganda for the government, as president of the Writers' War Board. He knew the power of words—and he wanted to wield them on behalf of liberty and freedom everywhere.

Not your typical mystery writer.

But if he hadn't created Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, and written such witty and elegant mysteries featuring these distinctive characters, Stout would probably be remembered as a footnote in the American banking system. He created a school banking system, adopted by several hundred schools nationwide, which allowed children to keep track of money saved in accounts. For this, Stout received royalties.

Before he turned his hand to crime writing, Stout published adventure tales, literary novels (including *How Like a God*, a second-person narrative that predates *Bright Lights*, *Big City* by about six decades), and science fiction stories. But with the publication of 1934's *Fer-de-Lance*, the first Nero Wolfe novel, Stout's career as a writer of bestselling mysteries began in earnest. He kept up the pace for almost the rest of his life, averaging one new Nero Wolfe book a year. Each one sold so well, they attracted the notice of John Cheever, who remarked in his journals the everyday sight of suburban train commuters absorbed in reading the latest Rex Stout.

What makes Rex Stout so distinctive is, of course, his prose: literate, witty, insightful, sophisticated, and undeniably American. Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain had a hard-boiled, incisive style. Raymond Chandler had an ornate and witty, metaphoric one. Stout's was more akin to Bertie Wooster's narratives in the P.G. Wodehouse "Jeeves" novels, though less reliant on wordplay than Wodehouse's amazing Bertie.

Wodehouse, who was a friend of Stout's, contributed a foreword to John McAleer's excellent 1977 biography of the crime writer, saying, "his narrative and dialogue could not be improved, and he passes the supreme test of being rereadable" This from a master like Wodehouse.

Who was right.

And Wodehouse adds that Stout's great achievement in his Nero Wolfe novels was the creation of Archie Goodwin as narrator, with a voice unlike any other in American crime fiction. Archie Goodwin's deceptively airy tone often masks a serious treatment of subjects from treason and anti-Semitism to, of course, murder. It's Archie we want to read. It's Archie who describes Wolfe's eccentricities, his splendid repasts, his choleric outbursts, his obsessions with orchid-growing. Were these described in the third-person, we'd have an interesting, but perhaps somewhat two-dimensional character, an assemblage of tics. But from Archie's perspective, and through Stout's prose, we have an unforgettable personage, a true original.

As Wodehouse wrote: "He brings excellent comedy into the type of narrative where comedy seldom bats better than .100."

Consider this from the opening pages of *And Be a Villain*, a 1948 novel in which Wolfe (and Archie) solve the murder of someone who has been killed during the broadcast of a radio program:

. . . I swiveled my chair to face Nero Wolfe, who was seated behind his desk to the right of mine reading a book of poems by a guy named Van Doren, Mark Van Doren. So I thought I might as well use a poetry word.

"It's bleak," I said.

There was no sign that he heard.

"Bleak," I repeated. "If it means what I think it does. Bleak!"

His eyes didn't lift from the page, but he murmured, "What's bleak?"

"Figures." . . .

. . . Wolfe had put down the poetry and was scowling at the Form 1040, pretending he could add.

Stout's Archie is light of touch, but he's also setting the scene for a job—the two men need money to pay their taxes—and the novel's opening pages create a world any reader would want to live in. Millions have.

Capturing wit in a narrative tone that balances easy erudition with street smarts, is difficult. Which may be why the Nero Wolfe novels haven't been adapted as much as they deserve to be, save for a short-lived (and pretty good) series on A&E in the early part of the millennium.

But we always have the books – close to 50, plus several dozen novellas and many short stories – many of which remain in print. Which says something in our age of short attention spans, of our fascination with serial-killer novels, of our mania for forensic thrillers. It's good to know there's still room for Rex Stout —and Archie Goodwin and Nero Wolfe—in the contemporary landscape of crime writing. Wolfe would have harrumphed, Archie Goodwin would have made a sarcastic comment or two, but Stout himself might have been pleasantly surprised.