

From
Madame Bovary, C'est Moi:
The Great Characters of Literature and Where They Came From
Bernard, Andre; 2003 (pages 81-83)

The prolific Rex Stout always started a new book by drawing up a list of characters and their potential names. In 1933 he had already published several books. A week after his daughter was born he decided to start with a new mystery and a new hero. Wolfe seemed to appear out of thin air. "He was born," Stout later said, "and he was inspired neither from a chapel nor a bordello." Stout didn't need to think up his eye color or his height or his profile. "He does what he pleases." But he did need a memorable name for his fat, flower-loving, gourmand character. And he seems to have drawn on his own name for inspiration. *Rex* means king in Latin - so Stout chose the name of a Roman emperor, Nero. Stout knew nothing of law or crime when he began to write about Nero Wolfe, nor did he pursue any research. He liked to tell aspiring writers that the best method for successful writing was, "Apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair, and go." To add to his books' appeal, Stout added a sidekick for Wolfe, Archie Goodwin. Initially his publisher found Archie to be too much of a Dr. Watson figure. But Stout loved them both. Friends of Stout's saw strong elements of the author in both characters. For instance, Wolfe and Stout shared many of the same likes (Jane Austen, milk, crossword puzzles) and dislikes (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, ice water, paper plates). Wolfe was such an outsized, somewhat outrageous figure that a prominent critic of the time, Alexander Woollcott (who inspired the unlovable guest in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*) swore that he himself was the model. Stout denied it, but Woollcott took to addressing his own secretary as "Archie."