

February 20, 1974

Professor John J. McAleer
121 Follen Road
Lexington, Massachusetts 02173

Dear Professor McAleer:

Some scattered impressions and incidents:

For him, there is only one spectator sport--baseball, which more or less justifies the existence of TV. In fact, he even welcomed the development of color TV because it makes fast grounders easier to see.

I know he has often related his method of writing, but I might as well record how he told me he does it. He thinks for a long time about the story, develops the plot, etc., without making notes. Notes are unnecessary for him, he said, because he has a good memory and a marvellous faculty for concentration. ("When I'm thinning a row of lettuce seedlings, that row of seedlings is all that exists in the world for me, till I finish the job.") When he's ready to write, he writes out the names and ages of his characters on a long sheet of paper from a legal pad, puts it next to his typewriter and starts writing. He works every day for about 33 days, starting with Chapter 1 and writing straight to the end. Then he sends it to his publisher. He seldom re-writes or edits.

He loves to swear in a loud voice (blasphemously, never obscenely). He derives great pleasure from it, in a roguish, consciously "bad-boy" manner, but it's more than for pleasure. He has a fine sense of indignation, especially at people who push other people around, or who deprive others of their rights or liberties. He has the greatest consciousness-of-self, in the sense of a strong, healthy ego, as well as insight, of anybody I ever met. He likes to hold himself off at arm's-length and look at himself, not narcissistically as a show-biz character might, but with justifiable pride in what he is and has accomplished, and entirely without false modesty. He knows who he is and what his place in the world is, with remarkable accuracy. He is far from self-centered, though, his hard-nosed realism saving him from conceit. He is interested in people he meets. When we met socially, he quizzed me at some length about my interests (as a person, not as a professional). I recall his asking me with real interest how many books a year I purchase.

He dined at our apartment once. Needless to say, we anticipated his reaction to the food with great nervousness. But he reacted normally, praising it not as an authority on gastronomy but as an ordinary guest. This bespeaks his great courtesy and basic humility, I think.

I'm sure that just about everybody in his books is modelled on people he has personally known. Certainly, Pola figures in several stories, and her fashion-industry background as well. If I knew more about his life, I'm sure I could trace other characters to his experiences. It's obvious on whom Wolfe and Archie are modelled; they are both aspects of himself. That may be one reason why he thinks so highly of them!

He told me he has had offers to adapt his Nero Wolfe stories for TV and film but always resisted because he feared what "they" would do to them. We differed about what actor should be cast as Nero Wolfe, if the stories were to be dramatized; he thought it should be Charles Laughton, but for me it's always been clear that the late Sidney Greenstreet was made for the part. When I mentioned this to him, he grew quite thoughtful, Greenstreet apparently not having occurred to him. He said he saw my point. But he stuck to his guns, like Nero Wolfe.

I have never been able to finish any mysteries by him, except the Nero Wolfe stories, all of which (I think all) I have read more than once. For some reason, I can't read about Alphabet Hicks or Dol Bonner (about Dol in non-Wolfe stories, that is).

Sincerely,

Sylvan S. Furman

Sylvan

~~SYLVAN S. FURMAN~~ • 680 WEST END AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y. 10025

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Professor John J. McAleer
121 Follen Road
Lexington, Massachusetts 02173

Dear Professor McAleer:

I am delighted to know that you are writing a biography of Rex Stout. I'm not at all sure I can convey to you my special feelings for him even though I can hardly claim to know him well. Just call it love. And that will also cover any inadequacy in the following.

Let's start with the fact that my husband and I have long been ardent Rex Stout fans. Nero Wolfe, Archie and Fritz are real to us. Our collection of Nero Wolfes includes many paperbacks yellowed over the years, too precious to part with. Whenever in doubt as to what to read, my husband invariably resolves it with Rex Stout.

I first met him at the opening of a retrospective exhibit of the beautiful fabrics designed by his wife Pola Stout. Pola had just become a consultant at the Fashion Institute of Technology where I was Director of Placement. I had met her casually but didn't know her at all. Of course I was interested in attending the opening but when I heard the possibility that Rex Stout might make one of his rare visits to the city to come to the exhibit, that became the highlight for me. Sure enough he came and Pola introduced me to him. I had the lovely feeling that he was just the way he should be. The gleam in his eye and his rakish beard were perfect. Pola went off and I asked him if he would like some tea that was being served in a nearby lobby. No, he didn't, and after very small, small talk he was off meeting other people. About fifteen minutes later I saw him at the tea serving table escorted by the wife of the president of the college. I appeared next to him and said "You turned down my offer of tea and she (the president's wife) doesn't even know the schedule in the orchid room". Not a word in reply but I was rewarded with the wickedest wink that said to me he was temporarily being dutiful and it was out of character. With that wink we connected and I was enslaved.

2/9/44 L.

~~SYLVAN S. FURMAN~~ - 680 WEST END AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y. 10025

To give you an example of how he keeps me captivated, the following is the answer he wrote after I'd sent him a fan letter and thanks for his latest book he or Pola had sent me:

"Dearest Eleanor:

I thought it would be quite awhile before I would get another letter that would give me a rosier glow than Professor McAleer's did, but I already have. Yours.

Love, Rex"

Enclosed with this was a copy of your superb letter so you can imagine my rosy glow when I received the above even if he was stretching the truth a bit.

I remember vividly an incident in the hospital right after I had had a major operation and was feeling dreadful. I looked up and saw Pola (who by this time was a warm friend) standing at the foot of my bed, bringing me Rex's latest book, just out. It was "A Right to Die". The inscription--"For Eleanor - with love (not sacred, profane)--
Rex "

I was still too sick to read but this I clutched to me and even started to read it. Even when not reading it, I had it next to me and it had a startling effect on the nurses and doctors who came in. I truly believe that it challenged them and pushed them to get me well.

Here's a note from him after a thank you letter for "The Doorbell Rang". (It really doesn't matter much what I wrote--I don't remember exactly)--"Dear Eleanor:

Thanks, but there's no point in calling a man handsome unless you do something about it. What good is a swoon?

Love.....Rex"

And of course there's Pola, my dear friend. Warm, beautiful, emotional--her very being expresses feelings, intuitive responses often inexpressible in words. A far cry from the absolute precision and clarity of language of Rex, the intellectual concentration of the thinking man. Pola's warmth and exquisite taste give great joy to a friend, in marked contrast to the pleasures from the extraordinary articulateness and wit of Rex. I love them both.

Eleanor L.

~~SELVAN S.~~ FURMAN • 680 WEST END AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y. 10025

Thanks for writing us. My husband is giving you his own recollections and they are enclosed. Even if you can't use this material, we enjoyed putting down these random thoughts.

Best wishes to you. I can't wait to see the book.

Sincerely,

Eleanor L. Furman

Eleanor L. Furman

Encl.