

Private Eye on the FBI

The Doorbell Rang: A Nero Wolfe Novel, by Rex Stout (Viking, 186 pp. \$3.50), is the author's forty-first recital of the adventures of the weightiest member (282 pounds) of the private-eye fraternity, who here meets "his toughest opponent ever." John T. Winterich is a contributing editor of *Saturday Review*.

By JOHN T. WINTERICH

HAS A comment on a mystery-murder-detective novel ever begun by quoting the final 160 words of the text? One thinks not. So here we go on the great adventure (the narrator is Archie Goodwin, the great man's fidus Achates, dogsbody, and thorn in the abundant flesh; the "he" is Nero Wolfe himself):

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 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 in to his desk.

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

"Pffui. Come and finish this."

I returned to my chair. "As I was saying, I may have to tell her privately . . ."

The doorbell rang.

Let us go back to the beginning of the story. Rachel Bruner, a wealthy, middle-aged New York widow, greatly impressed by Fred Cook's book *The FBI Nobody Knows*, has distributed 10,000 copies of it far and wide. For doing this, she tells Wolfe and Goodwin, she has been and is still being "tailed" (she throws the word between quotes); her telephones have been tapped; the hundred-plus employees of her late husband's corporation have been questioned, as have numerous associates and friends. She is convinced that a single agency is responsible for these indignities. She hands Wolfe a check for

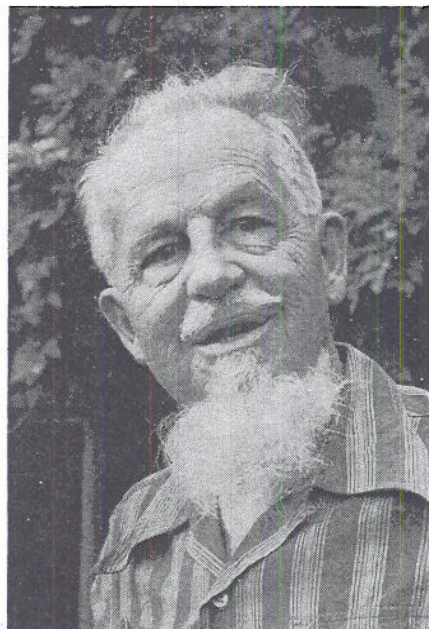
\$100,000 as a retainer and asks him to look into things.

The sedentary sage and his ambulant aide get to work. There is a murder, and in the course of the investigation Inspector Cramer of Manhattan's Homicide South appears—a somewhat chastened, occasionally even courteous Inspector Cramer. Inspector Cramer is, of course, the perpetual bumbler, or semibumbler, of the Wolfe saga. He is a reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes's *bête noire*, Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard, and there may be some significance in the fact that the names Cramer and Lestrade have identical vowels. Early in Wolfe's career some Baker Street Irregular discovered that the names Nero Wolfe and Sherlock Holmes also have identical vowels and in the right places. The Cramer-Lestrade parallel ends with the vowels. Archie Goodwin, as every Wolfeite knows, is not Dr. John S. Watson's opposite number save for the fact that each is the teller of the tales in which the great man, either great man, scores. Archie Goodwin is himself a licensed private detective who is frequently in some fear of losing his license; Watson has only a medical certificate, which he is in danger of losing only through obsolescence.

Inspector Cramer tells Archie Goodwin that the murder victim "had been collecting material for an article on the FBI for *Tick-Tock* magazine, and not a sign of it, nothing, was there in the apartment." Further, that same night "three FBI men left the house at sixty-three Arbor Street and went around the corner to a car and drove off." The license number was noted. Cramer admits that from here onward the going will be tough. "I've seen plenty of murderers I could name," he continues, "but so what, if I couldn't prove it. But this one, that goddam outfit, I'd give a year's pay to hook them and make it stick. This isn't their town, it's mine. Ours. The New York Police Department. They've had us gritting our teeth for years."

No more of the story will be revealed here.

When Rex Stout reached his seventy-fifth birthday, on December 1, 1961, the Viking Press, who have been his publishers since 1946, made him a gracious obeisance: they ran two-column tributes in the metropolitan dailies which reproduced his portrait and wished him many happy returns. He is easily the



—Sandy Noyes.

Rex Stout— a plot in twenty minutes.

doyen of mystery writers in English and probably in any language, though Erle Stanley Gardner, two and a half years younger, is a close runner-up, and his output far exceeds Stout's.

Rex Stout has written fourteen non-Wolfe novels. Three of these extolled the attainments of a peeper named Tecumseh Fox; seven have been straight-out novels. The first Nero Wolfe story was *Fer-de-Lance* (and we all know what that is!), published in 1934, when Stout was forty-seven years old. This may have made him the senior starter in the national or even world mystery field, certainly for a writer who concentrated on mysteries thereafter. Again Gardner is probably runner-up; he unveiled Perry Mason in 1933 at the age of forty-four. At the other end of the spectrum (again probably) is Phoebe Atwood Taylor, who gave the world her first Asey Mayo Cape Cod bloodletting at a precocious twenty-two (Norton is now reissuing her stories for a later generation).

The Wolfe-Goodwin formula is simple and effective. The granitic Wolfe does the headwork, the peripatetic Goodwin (England has named a sands for him) the legwork, and the rough stuff when required. Wolfe rarely goes abroad, using the term in its narrowest sense of outdoors, though once he went abroad with a big A, all the way to Montenegro. The late Bernard De Voto, former editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature* and for several years conductor of the Easy Chair in *Harper's Magazine*, went exhaustively into Wolfe's background in one of his papers, "Alias Nero Wolfe" (*Harper's*, July 1954). De Voto noted that the spelling "Monte-negro" is the Venetian variant of the Italian name "Monte Nero," and he added: "The inescapable conclusion is that 'Nero Wolfe'

is a pseudonym." Of at least moderate importance if true, doubtless; but names need not concern us here.

More pertinent to our present purposes is De Voto's mention, in this same paper, of the fact that Wolfe had had previous contacts (one might almost say huddles) with the FBI. "Before the Second World War," De Voto wrote, "Wolfe did confidential work for the State Department, and during the war was consulted professionally by the FBI on at least two occasions and by G-2 repeatedly." But that was in the good old days.

The Author: Rex Stout, whom the McCormick newspapers used to refer to as "the goat-bearded mystery writer," was born in Indiana in 1886 and "moved to Kansas at the age of one because I was fed up with Indiana politics." Today he lives in a house he built thirty-five years ago on a hill that is both in New York and Connecticut. "The house was built all in Connecticut because I didn't want Hamilton Fish—so what did I get? Clare Boothe Luce!"

The Stout house is a concrete, fourteen-room, U-shaped affair built around an inner court. "To a certain extent it was modeled after that of a bey's in Algiers. We didn't put in a eunuch well since there are no eunuchs in this country. While it was going up I was referred to as the man who was building the monkey house. I think I am accepted today. I may not be considered wonderful but I'm tolerated.

"I write for thirty-nine days consecutively each year. When I'm writing I don't even stop to water my house plants; I have 300 of them so you can see it's quite a chore. I figure on six weeks for a book but I shave it down. I only do one book a year now. My record to date is fifty-one books in thirty-six years. There was a period of ten years when people wanted books about characters other than Nero Wolfe. I never do more than one Nero Wolfe a year." (Note: When Mr. Stout is not involved in his thirty-nine days, he is very busy on the Board of Directors of Freedom House; as the president—since 1951—of the Author's League of America, and as chairman—since 1949—of the Writers' Board for World Government.)

"It takes me twenty minutes to plot a book. I need a focus. It can be anything. I once decided that Wolfe should go to the flower show and have a murder take place there. That's all I need. Hell, I'm seventy-eight and I've been around.

"I didn't think of *The Doorbell Rang* as an attack on the FBI while I was writing it. I hadn't the faintest idea of attacking. Have you ever read a Sherlock Holmes story? Did you consider it an attack on Scotland Yard? Now I'm

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beginning to think that the book may lead people to stand up and speak out against the FBI.

"It is conceivable to me that the FBI might tail me or tap my phone because of this book. I think it is wonderful. I've written so often about ditching tails. I'd like to try to do it.

"In a democratic country, J. Edgar Hoover is a completely impossible person to be in a position of authority. Do you know that he has decreed that no fictional FBI agent may be portrayed in a movie or on television without the FBI's approval of the actor? I understand why Hoover has done that, but what is surprising is that people have let him get away with it. The fact that Hoover even attempts such control makes him an impossible person in authority in a democratic country.

"I've been asked if I know what kind of man he is. I think I know from actions of his that have been made public. I

got my first idea from the newspapers years ago when I read that he frequently went to the races with Senator McCarthy. I was astonished that a man—Hoover—whose function is to preserve and uphold the law would take as a social companion a man who was so obviously a threat to the very basis of democracy.

"I would like to see an FBI managed and directed in such a manner that the citizens who hire them can contemplate them and talk about them even to the point of severe criticism, as they do all other police organizations in this country.

"I've written a lot of stories in which the New York police and the D.A. of Westchester County have done questionable things but it's never kicked up the dust like this one. I may stick with the FBI for a few more years if it makes people buy books. The FBI certainly has asked for it."

—HASKEL FRANKEL.

The Prodigal Son-in-Law

Yoshe Kalb, by I. J. Singer, translated from the Yiddish by Maurice Samuel (Harper & Row. 246 pp. \$4.95), tells of a Polish rabbi's son-in-law who runs away to wander the roads as a beggar. Emile Capouya is a free-lance writer and critic.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

THE PUBLISHER is reissuing the novels of I. J. Singer, author of *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, and *Yoshe Kalb* is the first of the series to appear. By way of introduction this edition of the novel has an interesting memoir by Isaac Bashevis Singer, the author's brother, himself an at least equally distinguished writer. The very first paragraph of that introduction presents a problem that is solved for the reader only by the novel that follows. The problem is so typical of the moral and artistic crisis of the age that it is well worth discussing, together with the resolution in a work of art that the author attempted and achieved. Mr. Singer writes:

In the late Twenties my brother, I. J. Singer, created a sensation in Jewish literary circles by sending a letter to several Yiddish newspapers in Warsaw announcing that he no longer thought of himself as a Yiddish writer. The reaction was one of great astonishment. How could an author renounce a literature as if it were some club from which he could resign? Furthermore, what had brought the young and tal-

ented I. J. Singer to the point where he felt the need to separate himself from the tradition of Yiddish literature? In his letter he had gone so far as to say that writing in Yiddish was "humiliating."

How bitterly familiar, that longing to resign, to escape the accidents of this conditional life that humiliate our manhood. The Flamenco singer cries, "I should like to renounce this world, ah, utterly!" For her, renunciation may mean the cloister, entering into a discipline that protects the spirit. But, short of death, the writer must speak. Mr. Singer goes on to say that the author of *Yoshe Kalb* could not turn to Hebrew, since in



—Carl Van Vechten.

I. J. Singer—"ironic high spirits."