

Holmes for the Holidays

Great detectives never die...

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

General Douglas MacArthur once famously said, “Old soldiers never die; they just fade away.” He might have been talking about writers and their fictional characters, except that often it isn’t true. When Arthur Conan Doyle tired of his fictional supersleuth Sherlock Holmes he published a story in which Holmes and his arch-enemy, the fiendish criminal mastermind Dr. Moriarty, struggled near the top of Switzerland’s Reichenbach Falls. Each unwilling to let the other prevail, they both fell to their deaths.

Or so it seemed. Outraged, Doyle’s readers simply refused to accept the fact that Holmes had perished, and Doyle was grudgingly forced to resurrect his fictional sleuth to satisfy a demanding public. As a result, Holmes’ exploits read almost like a history of the British Empire, extending as they do from the Late Victorian Age through the first World War, and well into the period between the wars.

Today, over two centuries since Holmes first saw print, and over eighty years since the last of the Great Detective’s tales was published, Holmes the character is still alive and well (well, mostly well), the subject of numerous hommages, pastiches and parodies that find expression in short stories and books, television series and feature films. Indeed, Holmes’ influence spills

over into the real world: letters sent to his (fictional) lodgings at 221b Baker



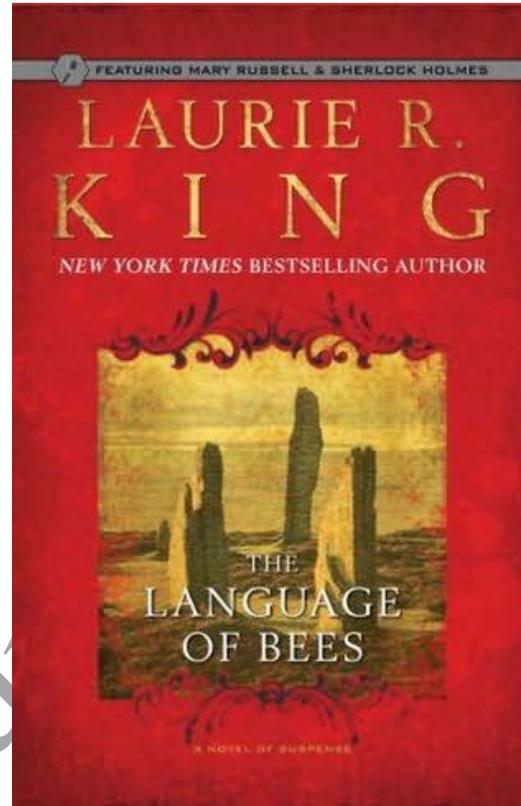
Street, seeking his help, continue to arrive to this day; the London-based Sherlock Holmes Pub is stocked with Holmes “memorabilia” attracting the faithful; and the phrase “It’s elementary, my dear Watson” has entered our language, spawning no shortage of bad jokes. There are board games and DVDs and fan groups around the world, ranging from the Sherlock Holmes Society of London to the New York-based Baker Street Irregulars. Canada’s largest mystery bookstore is named —

you guessed it — The Sleuth of Baker Street, and the Toronto Public Library maintains a Special Collections room devoted to Doyle and his fictional sleuth, and loosely modeled after Holmes' lodgings. There is even a memorial plaque to Holmes' struggle with Moriarty erected at Reichenbach Falls.

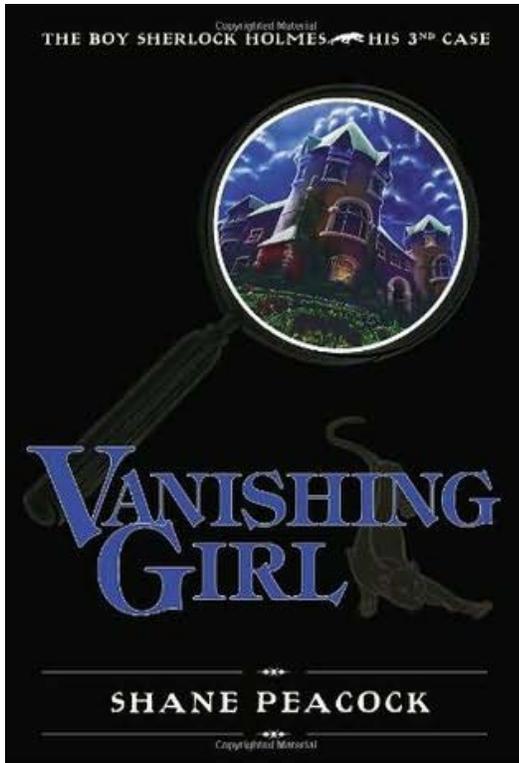
But Holmes' readers must face a cold, hard fact: the canon of authentic Holmes tales is limited to four novels and five volumes of short stories, and Doyle himself has long since left the scene. Not surprisingly, then, over the decades many other writers have sought either to imitate Doyle or (more modestly) to capitalize on his fame. Inevitably, some efforts are very good, others are less so. This month Hollywood has spawned yet another try for the prize, with a feature film starring Robert Downey Jr. as the world's first consulting detective. Titled simply *Sherlock Holmes*, it is a contrived parody of Doyle's iconic character, a dumbed-down action movie that relies on a shameless apocalyptic rehash for its plot and computer special effects (combined with very un-Victorian dialogue) for its appeal. If your taste runs to such rubbish, I recommend watching *Avatar* instead; at least it is what it purports to be: mindless escapism for the chewing-gum set.

Happily, though, there are some worthwhile variations on the traditional tales. Among the very best of the Holmes pastiches is John Gardiner's *The Return of Moriarty* (Berkley Books, 1974). A painstakingly-researched and faithful stylistic construction of Holmes' confrontation with his nemesis, it is authentic right down to a glossary at the end of the book, detailing many Victorian terms (mostly underworld slang) used in the story. It is clearly a labour of love, and does both authors

proud, as does the late Michael Dibden's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (Faber and Faber, 1978, reprinted 1990), in which Holmes and Watson undertake to solve the Whitechapel murders.



More recently, two series of tales focusing on Holmes have appeared on the scene. The American crime writer Laurie R. King has penned a series of tales based on the intriguing premise that Holmes married late in life, and that his wife took an active role in solving some of the cases that came his way. The Mary Russell novels begin with *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* and extend through nine other tales, most recently *The Language of Bees*. Although not universally welcomed by Sherlockians, the premise of King's series – that Holmes marries late in life and his wife knows little of his past – allows her to explore Holmes' backstory in imaginative and creative ways.



Equally intriguing, the Canadian author Shane Peacock has launched a number of novels featuring the exploits of Sherlock Holmes as a boy. His first such effort, *Eye of the Crow*, earned Peacock an Arthur Ellis Award in 2008, and he followed that with *Death in the Air* and *Vanishing Girl*. The fourth installment, *The Secret Fiend*, is scheduled to be released in 2010. Aimed at young readers but appealing to older Holmes fans as well, the tales embody much of the urgency and cliffhanging suspense that earned Doyle a wide following when his stories first appeared in London's famous *Strand Magazine* in the late 1880s.

Finally, there is a continuing demand for nonfiction reference works detailing with both the various editions of Doyle's own works and also later studies, pastiches, and parodies, in whatever medium. It's been a long time since Jack Tracy issued *The Encyclopedia Sherlockiana* (Doubleday, 1977), and

much useful material has appeared since then. Both fans and scholars, then, will be pleased to see Christopher Redmond's 2nd edition of the *Sherlock Holmes Handbook* (Dundurn Press, 2009). Redmond combines an up-to-date bibliography with character notes, a biography of Arthur Conan Doyle, observations on Victorian society and the law, contemporary media interpretations of his tales, an account of fan groups, and a perceptive analysis of Holmes' continuing appeal. A nice Christmas surprise if there's a Holmes fan in your home, and if there isn't, why ever not?

To my readers, have a happy holiday season, and take some time to curl up with a good book. I'll see you in the New Year!

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