

A Mary Russell Companion

Exploring the World of
Laurie R. King's
Mary Russell/Sherlock Holmes
Series



Welcome to the world of Mary Russell, one-time apprentice, long-time partner to Sherlock Holmes. What follows is an introduction to Russell's memoirs, published under the name of Laurie R. King beginning with *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* in 1994.

We've added comments, excerpts, illuminating photos and an assortment of interesting links and extras. Some of them are fun, some of them are scholarly. Which only goes to prove that laughter and learning can go hand in hand.

Enjoy!

Laurie R. King
[Laurie R. King.com](http://LaurieR.King.com)
[Mary Russell.com](http://MaryRussell.com)

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POSTSCRIPT

One: Mary stumbles (literally) on Holmes



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The Beekeeper's Apprentice: With Some Notes Upon the Segregation of the Queen

(One of the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association's

100 Best Novels of the Century)

Mary Russell is what Sherlock Holmes would look like if Holmes, the Victorian detective, were a) a woman, b) of the Twentieth century, and c) interested in theology. If the mind is like an engine, free of gender and nurture considerations, then the Russell and Holmes stories are about two people whose basic mental mechanism is identical. What they do with it, however, is where the interest lies.

After a long life in private practice, Sherlock Holmes, retired to the Sussex Downs, is confronted by a young person with the potential to become his student. Not at all certain about it, nonetheless he harnesses her voracious mind to the discipline of his trade, teaches her all he knows, and watches with bemusement—and some alarm—as she grows beyond the status of student into a full-fledged partner.

The book plays on a mixed analogy of “queen” images: In the game of chess she and Holmes are playing, Russell the pawn is made into a queen. And to draw on the techniques of beekeeping, Holmes must then segregate her in order to carry out the investigation.

English history is scattered with extraordinary women, women like [Gertrude Bell](#) and [Mary Kingsley](#) who simply didn't listen when told there were things they really shouldn't do. Mary Russell doesn't listen, either.



The Beekeeper's Apprentice, set in England's [Sussex Downs](#)



Excerpt

I was fifteen when I first met Sherlock Holmes, fifteen years old with my nose in a book as I walked the Sussex Downs, and nearly stepped on him. In my defence I must say it was an engrossing book, and it was very rare to come across another person in that particular part of the world in that war year of 1915. In my seven weeks of peripatetic reading amongst the sheep (which tended to move out of my way) and the gorse bushes (to which I had painfully developed an instinctive awareness) I had never before stepped on a person.

It was a cool, sunny day in early April, and the book was by Virgil. I had set out at dawn from the silent farmhouse, chosen a different direction from my usual—in this case southeasterly, towards the sea—and had spent the intervening hours wrestling with Latin verbs, climbing unconsciously over stone walls, and unthinkingly circling hedgerows, and would probably not have noticed the sea until I stepped off one of the chalk cliffs into it.

As it was, my first awareness that there was another soul in the universe was when a male throat cleared itself loudly not four feet from me. The Latin text flew into the air, followed closely by an Anglo-Saxon oath. Heart pounding, I hastily pulled together what dignity I could and glared down through my spectacles at this figure hunched up at my feet: a gaunt, greying man in his fifties wearing a cloth cap, ancient tweed greatcoat, and decent shoes, with a threadbare Army rucksack on the ground beside him. A tramp, perhaps, who had left the rest of his possessions stashed beneath a bush. Or an Eccentric. Certainly no shepherd.

He said nothing. Very sarcastically. I snatched up my book and brushed it off.

“What on earth are you doing?” I demanded. “Lying in wait for someone?”

He raised one eyebrow at that, smiled in a singularly condescending and irritating manner, and opened his mouth to speak in that precise drawl

which is the trademark of the overly educated upper-class English gentleman. A high voice; a biting one: definitely an Eccentric.

“I should think that I can hardly be accused of ‘lying’ anywhere,” he said, “as I am seated openly on an uncluttered hillside, minding my own business. When, that is, I am not having to fend off those who propose to crush me underfoot.” He rolled the penultimate r to put me in my place.

[READ MORE](#) or [DOWNLOAD HERE . . .](#)

A Closer Look

In this [video talk and interview to the Gavilan College creative writing class](#), Laurie talks about how she got started writing and how [The Beekeeper’s Apprentice](#) came to fruition. And if you’d like Laurie to read you a bit of *Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, drop in [here](#).

You might also like to see what John Cleese and Rowan Atkinson have to say about [the art of beekeeping](#).



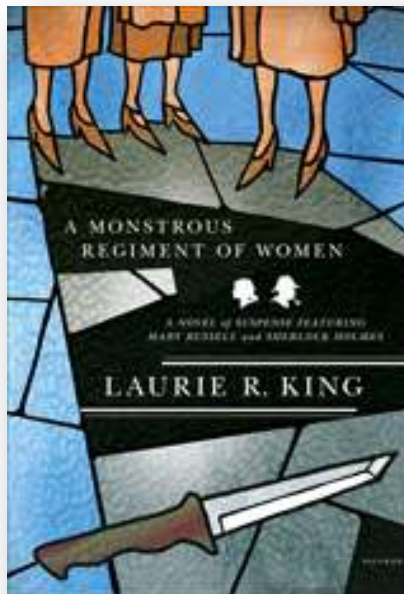
Jean Lukens' Beekeeper Russellscape

Mary Russell has sparked the [artistic response](#) in her readers. Any time you're moved to contribute to our [Russellscape](#) or one of the other categories, just send ahead, and you'll be entered into the next contest we hold.



By [Elina Kivimäki](#)
from Finland

Two: Coming of Age: A Balancing Act



Click cover for book page

A Monstrous Regiment of Women

(Nero Wolfe award)

"I appreciate the forms of crime fiction, because it gives me an entertaining story to tell, while at the same time unrolling threads of meaning throughout the plot lines. Mysticism, feminist identity, scriptural interpretation, the struggle for equality

between the sexes, control and submission, friendship and love: all the colors on the painter's palette, brought together in service of an entertainment.” —Laurie R. King

Some books germinate from a place, others from an episode witnessed or experienced. And some take their beginnings from a title and grow to fit.

In 1558, [John Knox](#) wrote a vehement protest against women monarchs entitled, [“The First Blast of the Trumpet Against a Monstrous Regiment of Women.”](#) (Modern English would use the word *Régime* rather than *Regiment*.) [Queen Elizabeth I](#), on the throne at the time, was by no means amused: a “Second Blast of the Trumpet” was never written.



Queen Elizabeth I

In the winter of 1920, Mary Russell is on the brink of her 21st birthday, when she enters into her majority and inherits the estate left by her parents' death seven years before. The largest question in her life is that of her one-time teacher, later partner in detection, Sherlock Holmes: What exactly is the basis of their relationship? She herself is not at all certain.

How does one write a romance about two people who are not demonstrably romantic? Particularly when the story is being told by one of them, as an old woman, who closely guards her privacy?

The answer to that lies in the way in which people conceal truths from themselves. Russell sees but does not perceive; she hears but does not listen. A part of her knows that she wishes to extend her partnership with Holmes into the fullness of a marriage partnership; at the same time, she well understands the hazards of affiliating herself with a man of such strong attitudes and forceful opinions. She tries to claim the best of both worlds—a marriage, but one based on rational decision rather than commitment. To her astonishment and dismay, Holmes himself, that utter rationalist, instantly quashes that as an impossibility, a crippled imitation of a marriage that would be doomed from the beginning.

Thus Russell is set onto a quest for nothing less than her future. She begins in her past, with a friend from the [University](#), who introduces her to a woman, and to another possible future life.



Excerpt

I used occasionally to wonder why the otherwise canny folk of the nearby towns, and particularly the stationmasters who sold the tickets, did not remark at the regular appearance of odd characters on their platforms, one old and one young, of either sex, often together. Not until the previous summer had I realised that our disguises were treated as a communal scheme by our villagers, who made it a point of honour never to let slip their suspicions that the scruffy young male farmhand who slouched through the streets might be the same person who, dressed considerably more appropriately in tweed skirt and cloche hat, went off to Oxford during term time and returned to buy tea cakes and spades and the occasional half-pint of bitter from the merchants when she was in residence. I believe that had a reporter from the *Evening Standard* come to town and offered one hundred pounds for an inside story on the famous detective, the people would have looked at him with that phlegmatic country expression that hides so much and asked politely who he might be meaning.

I digress. When I reached London, the streets were still crowded. I took a taxi (a motor cab, so I hadn't to look too closely at the driver) to the agency Holmes often used as his supplier when he needed a horse and cab. The owner knew me—at least, he recognised the young man who stood in front of him—and said that, yes, that gentleman (not meaning, of course, a gentleman proper) had indeed shown up for work that day. In fact, he'd shown up twice.

"Twice? You mean he brought the cab back, then?" I was disappointed, and wondered if I ought merely to give up the chase.

"T'orse 'ad an 'ot knee, an' 'e walked 'er back. 'E was about ter take out anuvver un when 'e 'appened t'see an ol' 'anson just come in. Took a fancy, 'e did, can't fink why—'s bloody cold work an' the pay's piss-all, 'less you 'appen on t' odd pair what wants a taste of t' old days, for a lark. 'Appens, sometimes, come a summer Sunday, or after t' theatre Sattiday. Night like this 'e'd be bloody lucky t'get a ha'penny over fare."

With a straight face, I reflected privately on how his colourful language would have faded in the light of the posh young lady I occasionally was.

"So he took the hansom?"

"That 'e did. One of the few what can drive the thing, I'll give 'im that." His square face contemplated for a moment this incongruous

juxtaposition of skill and madness in the man he knew as Basil Josephs, then he shook his head in wonderment.

“’Ad ta give ’im a right bugger of an ’orse, though. Never been on a two-wheeler, ’e ’asn’t, and plug-headed and leather-mouthed to boot. ’Ope old Josephs ’asn’t ’ad any problems,” he said with a magnificent lack of concern, and leant over to hawk and spit delicately into the noisome gutter.

“Well,” I said, “there couldn’t be too many hansoms around, I might spot him tonight. Can you tell me what the horse looks like?”

“Big bay, wide blaze, three stockin’s with t’ off hind dark, nasty eyes, but you won’t see ’em—’e’s got blinkers on,” he rattled off, then added after a moment, “Cab’s number two-ninety-two.” I thanked him with a coin and went a-hunting through the vast, sprawling streets of the great cesspool for a single, worn hansom cab and its driver.

The hunt was not quite so hopeless as it might appear. Unless he were on a case (and Mrs Hudson had thought on the whole that he was not), his choice of clothing and cab suggested entertainment rather than employment, and his idea of entertainment tended more toward London’s east end rather than Piccadilly or St John’s Wood.

Still, that left a fair acreage to choose from, and I spent several hours standing under lampposts, craning to see the feet of passing horses (all of them seemed to have blazes and stockings) and fending off friendly overtures from dangerously underdressed young and not-so-young women. Finally, just after midnight, one marvelously informative conversation with such a lady was interrupted by the approaching clop and grind of a trotting horsecab, and a moment later the piercing tones of a familiar voice echoing down the nearly deserted street obviated the need for any further equine examination.

“Annalisa, my dear young thing,” came the voice that was not a shout but which could be heard a mile away on the Downs, “isn’t that child you are trying to entice a bit young, even for you? Look at him—he doesn’t even have a beard yet.”

The lady beside me whirled around to the source of this interruption. I excused myself politely and stepped out into the street to intercept the cab. He had a fare—or rather, two—but he slowed, gathered the reins into his right hand, and reached the other long arm down to me. My disappointed paramour shouted genial insults at Holmes that would have blistered the remaining paint from the woodwork, had they not been deflected by his equally jovial remarks in kind.

The alarming dip of the cab caused the horse to snort and veer sharply, and a startled, moustachioed face appeared behind the cracked glass of the side window, scowling at me. Holmes redirected his tongue's wrath from the prostitute to the horse and, in the best tradition of London cabbies, cursed the animal soundly, imaginatively, and without a single manifest obscenity. He also more usefully snapped the horse's head back with one clean jerk on the reins, returning its attention to the job at hand, while continuing to pull me up and shooting a parting volley of affectionate and remarkably familiar remarks at the fading Annalisa. Holmes did so like to immerse himself fully in his rôles, I reflected as I wedged myself into the one-person seat already occupied by the man and his garments.

“Good evening, Holmes,” I greeted him politely.

[READ MORE . . .](#)

A Closer Look

Historical fiction is built on research, which makes it remarkably useful for teachers. For example, if your students want a clearer idea of the vehicle at the start of *Monstrous Regiment*, the hansom cab—



. . . they can read about it [here](#).

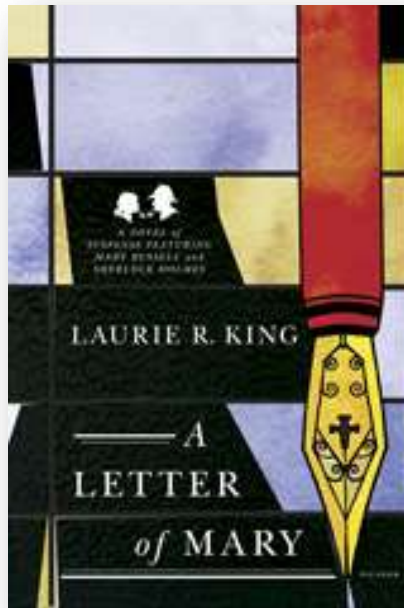
If they want to explore the consequences of technology—such as, What happens when you have 50,000 horses hauling people and goods around nineteenth century London?—they might be interested in the great [horse-manure crisis of 1894](#).

Or if they want to try the gymnastic stunt Russell pulls just after the excerpt above, they can go to London and see if these [people](#) would permit it—or they can buy a [hansom cab](#) for about the price of a dozen iPads!

And when [this article](#) says that “London’s very last horse cab license was surrendered on the 3rd April 1947,” we know who had that last one, don’t we? (Let’s see, Holmes would have been 86 at the [time](#)...)

There’s also a lot of historical information on the [Mary Russell’s World page](#), and even a page designed for [teachers](#).

Three: Russell as Theologian



Click cover for book page

A Letter of Mary

From Laurie:

My background is [theology](#), with degrees in Comparative Religion and in Old Testament. It is also Mary Russell's interest.

So what happens when a young, Jewish Oxford theological student (a young woman, at that) is handed a document that

would shake the foundations of Christianity—and, along the way, change the future of her entire life?

The compilers of what we call the New Testament had an untold number of documents to choose from: epistles, sermons, letters, and gospels (from the Greek for Good News) that the early Christians had written, shared, copied, annotated, passed on. In the second century (that is, a century after the death of Jesus of Nazareth) various groups of Christians began to wrestle with just which of these documents were acceptable—defining the norm of what Christianity was—and which were either questionable or downright heretical. Many of the writings found by a couple of young goatherds in the caves of Qumran were of these questionable sort, used by a small group, rejected by the larger Christian community.

The four Canonical gospels ([Matthew, Mark, Luke and John](#)) mention a woman named Mary, probably from the town of Magdala. Only Luke's Gospel mentions her by name before the Resurrection, but all agree that it was she who witnessed the risen Christ, and she who took the news to the other (male) apostles: [Mary of Magdala](#) was the apostle to the apostles.

Portions of a second century [Gospel of Mary Magdalene](#) survive. But what if a letter was written a hundred years earlier; a letter that was revered, and preserved? One letter from the hand of the Magdalene, mentioning the charismatic rabbi whom she has chosen to follow.

One letter, that, were it to come to light, would cause a shiver to run down the spine of a Christianity that had chosen in the two millennia since then to turn towards the male apostles and overlook the female.

One letter, of Mary.



Excerpt

The envelope slapped down onto the desk ten inches from my much-abused eyes, instantly obscuring the black lines of Hebrew letters that had begun to quiver an hour before. With the shock of the sudden change, my vision stuttered, attempted a valiant rally, then slid into complete rebellion and would not focus at all.

I leant back in my chair with an ill-stifled groan, peeled my wire-rimmed spectacles from my ears and dropped them onto the stack of notes, and sat for a long minute with the heels of both hands pressed into my eye sockets. The person who had so unceremoniously delivered this grubby interruption moved off across the room, where I heard him sort a series of envelopes *chuk-chuk-chuk* into the wastepaper basket, then stepped into the front hallway to drop a heavy envelope onto the table there (Mrs Hudson's monthly letter from her son in Australia, I noted, two days early) before coming back to take up a position beside my desk, one shoulder dug into the bookshelf, eyes gazing, no doubt, out the window at the Downs rolling down to the Channel. I replaced the heels of my hands with the backs of my fingers, cool against the hectic flesh, and addressed my husband.

"Do you know, Holmes, I had a great-uncle in Chicago whose promising medical career was cut short when he began to go blind over his books. It must be extremely frustrating to have one's future betrayed by a tiny web of optical muscles. Though he did go on to make a fortune selling eggs and trousers to the gold miners," I added. "Whom is it from?"

"Shall I read it to you, Russell, so as to save your optic muscles for the *metheg* and your beloved furtive *patach*?" His solicitous words were spoiled by the sardonic, almost querulous edge to his voice. "Alas, I have become a mere secretary to my wife's ambitions."

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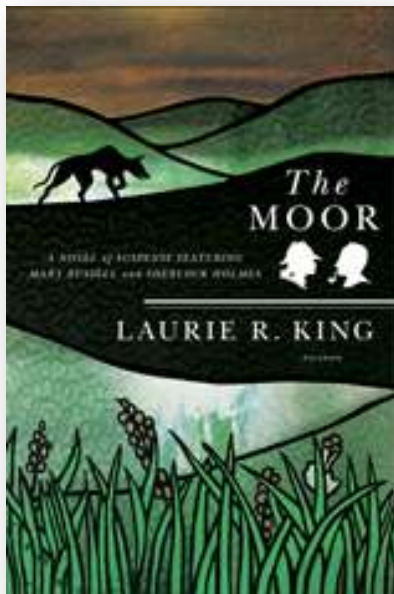
A Closer Look



Mariya (Mary) Magdalene

Religious mysteries, featuring sleuths who are also priests, nuns, rabbis, and the like, let a writer explore greater mysteries while telling a mystery. So, why does a theologian turn to crime? And are modern crime writers who do so simply continuing the tradition of the Medieval mystery play? And was that tradition linked to the earliest recorded legal thriller, Susanna and the Elders?

Four: Russell & Holmes in Baskerville Country



Click cover for book page

The Moor

Laurie writes:

Step one: The iconic [Sherlock Holmes](#) novel is [The Hound of the Baskervilles](#): dramatic setting, complex players, some nice spooky happenings, with rich psychological and emotional dimensions, a deft sprinkling of “[Sherlockisms](#),” and satisfying touches of humor. (I did an introduction for the Random House edition, [here](#).)

Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the book after eight years of silence about Sherlock Holmes, following a trip to Dartmoor where he heard a tale of ghostly hounds on the moor. His first impulse was to write the story on its own, but the combination of financial concerns and the continued importuning of his readers for more on the Great Detective led him to succumb to their requests and give the world another Holmes tale.

Step two: I had been vaguely aware of [Sabine Baring-Gould](#) for some years—indeed, one of the few books I bought as an impoverished college student was a slim volume of his concerning odd myths of the Middle Ages (which, now that I know more about the man, was probably more a product of his imagination than of anything resembling research—this is a man who wrote a book on the [natural history of werewolves](#).) And as soon as I started looking at Dartmoor as a possible setting for the book, I came across Baring-Gould's extensive writings on that remote stretch of south-western England, both guidebooks and novels.

With trepidation, I hunted down his [biography](#). To my delight, I found that he was still alive in the autumn of 1923, which is where I had reached with the Russell books. However, there was no time to waste, since he would die in January of the following year. I took his memoirs from the library, and settled down to read.

As I did so, I kept hitting small pings of familiarity, although I was certain I had never laid eyes on those two sizeable volumes before. Odd episodes and images would stand out as having been seen somewhere, sometime...

And then it came to me: The name Baring-Gould also belonged to the author of the definitive biography of one Sherlock Holmes, which I had indeed read—only in this case it was [W. S. Baring-Gould](#), Sabine's grandson. To my amusement, W.S. had lifted those episodes and events wholesale from his grandfather's memoirs, preserving even the wording, changing only the dates.

Well, if Baring-Gould could do it, so could King. Step three: I borrowed the grandfather, came up with a previously unknown link between that curmudgeonly old man and Holmes, then moved Holmes and Russell to the country house at the edge of Dartmoor that Baring-Gould had rebuilt in the image of an Elizabethan manor. I went to [Dartmoor](#), explored the setting, listened to the people, stayed at [Lewtrenchard Manor](#):



Lewtrenchard Manor

And then I sat down and wrote [The Moor](#). And as I was writing, I realized that there were overtones to the meaning of “moor” that I might play with: A moor is a place of bleak terrain and peculiar markings, but it is a man of exotic ethnicity (for that portion of twenties England.) And as for that Moorland public house, [the Saracen’s Head](#)...



Excerpt

The telegram in my hand read:

RUSSELL NEED YOU IN DEVONSHIRE. IF FREE TAKE
EARLIEST TRAIN CORYTON. IF NOT FREE COME
ANYWAY. BRING COMPASS.

HOLMES

To say I was irritated would be an understatement. We had only just pulled ourselves from the mire of a difficult and emotionally draining case and now, less than a month later, with my mind firmly turned to the work awaiting me in this, my spiritual home, Oxford, my husband and longtime partner Sherlock Holmes proposed with this peremptory telegram to haul me away into his world once more. With an effort, I gave my landlady's housemaid a smile, told her there was no reply (Holmes had neglected to send the address for a response—no accident on his part), and shut the door. I refused to speculate on why he wanted me, what purpose a compass would serve, or indeed what he was doing in Devon at all, since when last I had heard he was setting off to look into an interesting little case of burglary from an impregnable vault in Berlin. I squelched all impulse to curiosity, and returned to my desk.

Two hours later the girl interrupted my reading again, with another flimsy envelope. This one read:

ALSO SIX INCH MAPS EXETER TAVISTOCK OKEHAMPTON,
CLOSE YOUR BOOKS. LEAVE NOW.

HOLMES

Damn the man, he knew me far too well.

I found my heavy brass pocket compass in the back of a drawer. It had never been quite the same since being first cracked and then drenched in an aqueduct beneath Jerusalem some four years before, but it was an old friend and it seemed still to work reasonably well. I dropped it into a similarly well-travelled rucksack, packed on top of it a variety of clothing to cover the spectrum of possibilities that lay between arctic expedition and tiara-topped dinner with royalty (neither of which, admittedly, were beyond Holmes' reach), added the book on Judaism in mediaeval Spain that I had been reading, and went out to buy the requested stack of highly detailed six-inch-to-the-mile Ordnance Survey maps of the southwestern portion of England.

At Coryton, in Devon, many hours later, I found the station deserted and dusk fast closing in. I stood there with my rucksack over my shoulder, boots on feet, and hair in cap, listening to the train chuff away towards the next minuscule stop. An elderly married couple had also got off here, climbed laboriously into the sagging farm cart that awaited them, and been driven away. I was alone. It was raining. It was cold.

There was a certain inevitability to the situation, I reflected, and dropped my rucksack to the ground to remove my gloves, my waterproof, and a

warmer hat. Straightening up, I happened to turn slightly and noticed a small, light-coloured square tacked up to the post by which I had walked. Had I not turned, or had it been half an hour darker, I should have missed it entirely.

Russell it said on the front. Unfolded, it proved to be a torn-off scrap of paper on which I could just make out the words, in Holmes's writing:

Lew House is two miles north. Do you know the words to "Onward Christian Soldiers" or "Widdecombe Fair"?

—H.

I dug back into the rucksack, this time for a torch. When I had confirmed that the words did indeed say what I had thought, I tucked the note away, excavated clear to the bottom of the rucksack for the compass to check which branch of the track fading into the murk was pointing north, and set out.

I hadn't the faintest idea what he meant by that note. I had heard the two songs, one a thumping hymn and the other one of those overly precious folk songs, but I did not know their words other than one song's decidedly ominous (to a Jew) introductory image of Christian soldiers marching behind their "cross of Jesus" and the other's endless and drearily jolly chorus of "Uncle Tom Cobbley and all." In the first place, when I took my infidel self into a Christian church it was not usually of the sort wherein such hymns were standard fare, and as for the second, well, thus far none of my friends had succumbed to the artsy allure of sandals, folk songs, and Morris dancing. I had not seen Holmes in nearly three weeks, and it did occur to me that perhaps in the interval my husband had lost his mind.

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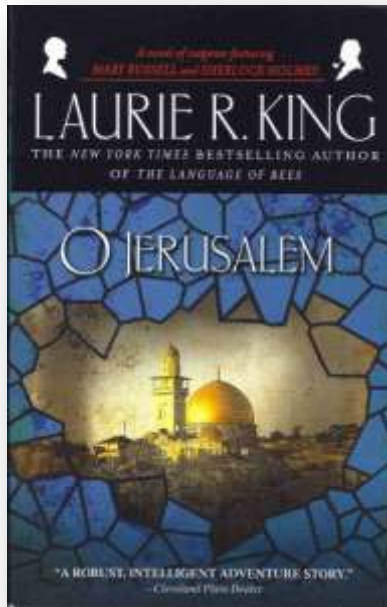
A Closer Look

[Baring-Gould](#) was [in love](#) with [Dartmoor](#) (now a [national park](#)) and although he wrote [fiction about the moor](#), much of his “[non-fiction](#)” stretches belief rather a lot.

Arthur Conan Doyle was not always the biggest fan of his creation—in [this video](#), he is far more interested in his Spiritualist studies than in Holmes. And it would be nice to think that he’d met [Sabine Baring Gould](#) when he went to Dartmoor, although if he did, he surely would not have been able to resist using Lewtrenchard Manor house, with its murals of the Virtues including Investigatio:



Five: Time & Place in Palestine



Click cover for book page

O Jerusalem

Laurie writes:

A historical mystery would appear to be a contradiction in terms: If something already happened, where's the mystery in it? But more than merely the event in question, working in an historical setting permits the author to poke at the edges of then-and-now, and to find the reverberations of the present in the past.

I once read a memoir about early twentieth century life in Jerusalem, which presented the image of a city cheerfully united under the oppression of the Turks. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian: equally poor, equally oppressed, equally squeezed by the Ottoman grip. The children of the three communities played together, the men worked together, the women marketed together—the author, a Muslim, recalled the tradition of the milk mother, when women with children of like ages would nurse the other's infant, as a form of insurance in those pre-formula days. Life was far from idyllic, but the concerns that stemmed from the difference in religion were among the lesser barriers to peaceful life.

And then came the Great War, and [Allenby](#) presenting his [1917 victory to](#) the bled-dry British people as a Christmas triumph. The Ottoman Empire was gone from Palestine, leaving the [British](#) to extend their own, very different understanding of fair rule to a land with an [entirely different history](#).

O Jerusalem was written well before the events of 9/11, but even then it was clear the direction in which the world was moving. We have come far since Muslim and Christian women in Jerusalem nursed one another's children. And sadly, a big step of that path was under the hand of the well-meaning British.



Excerpt

The skiff was black, its gunwales scant inches above the waves. Like my two companions, I was dressed in dark clothing, my face smeared with lamp-black. The rowlocks were wrapped and muffled; the loudest sounds in all the night were the light slap of water on wood and the rhythmic rustle of Steven's clothing as he pulled at the oars.

Holmes stiffened first, then Steven's oars went still, and finally I too heard it: a distant deep thrum of engines off the starboard side. It was

not the boat we had come on, but it was approaching fast, much too fast to outrun. Steven shipped the oars without a sound, and the three of us folded up into the bottom of the skiff.

The engines grew, and grew, until they filled the night and seemed to be right upon us, and still they grew, until I began to doubt the wisdom of this enterprise before it had even begun. Holmes and I kept our faces pressed against the boards and stared up at the outline that was Steven, his head raised slightly above the boat. He turned to us, and I could see the faint gleam of his teeth as he spoke.

“They’re coming this way, might not see us if they don’t put their searchlights on. If they’re going to hit us I’ll give you ten seconds’ warning. Fill your lungs, dive off to the stern as far as you can, and swim like the living hell. Best take your shoes off now.”

Holmes and I wrestled with each other’s laces and tugged, then lay again waiting. The heavy churn seemed just feet away, but Steven said nothing. We remained frozen. My teeth ached with the noise, and the thud of the ship’s engines became my heart-beat, and then terrifyingly a huge wall loomed above us and dim lights flew past over our heads. Without warning the skiff dropped and then leapt into the air, spinning about in time to hit the next wave broadside, drenching us and coming within a hair’s-breadth of overturning before we were slapped back into place by the following one, sliding down into the trough and mounting the next. Down and up and down and around we were tossed until eventually, wet through and dizzy as a child’s top, we bobbed on the sea like the piece of flotsam we were and listened to the engines fade.

Steven sat up. “Anyone overboard?” he asked softly.

“We’re both here,” Holmes assured him. His voice was not completely level, and from the bow came the brief flash of Steven’s teeth.

“Welcome to Palestine,” he whispered, grinning ferociously.

The remaining mile passed without incident. Even with the added water on board, Steven worked the oars with a strong, smooth ease that would have put him on an eights team in Oxford. He glanced over his shoulder occasionally at the approaching shore, where we were to meet two gentlemen in the employ of His Majesty’s government, Ali and Mahmoud Hazr. Other than their names, I hadn’t a clue what awaited us here.

Looking up from the bailing, I eventually decided that he was making for a spot midway between a double light north of us and a slightly amber

single light to the south. Swells began to rise beneath the bow and the sound of breaking waves drew closer, until suddenly we were skimming through the white foam of mild surf, and with a jar we crunched onto the beach.

Steven immediately shipped his oars, stood, and stepped over the prow of the little boat into the shallow water. Holmes grabbed his haversack and went next, jumping lightly onto the coarse shingle. I followed, pausing for a moment on the bow to squint through my salt-smearred spectacles at the dark shore. Steven put his hand up to help me, and as I shifted my eyes downward they registered with a shock two figures standing perfectly still, thirty feet or so behind Holmes.

“Holmes,” I hissed, “there are two women behind you!”

Steven’s hand on mine hesitated briefly, then tugged again. “Miss Russell, there’ll be a patrol any minute. It’s all right.”

I stepped cautiously into the water beside him and moved up to where Holmes stood.

“*Salaam aleikum*, Steven,” came a voice from the night: accented, low, and by no means that of a woman.

“*Aleikum es-salaam*, Ali. I hope you are well.”

“Praise be to God,” was the reply.

“I have a pair of pigeons for you.”

“They could have landed at a more convenient time, Steven.”

“Shall I take them away again?”

“No, Steven. We accept delivery. Mahmoud regrets we cannot ask you to come and drink coffee, but at the moment, it would not be wise.

Maalesh,” he added, using the all-purpose Arabic expression that was a verbal shrug of the shoulders at life’s inequities and accidents.

“I thank Mahmoud, and will accept another time. Go with God, Ali.”

“Allah watch your back, Steven.”

Steven put his hip to the boat and shoved it out, then scrambled on board; his oars flashed briefly. Before he had cleared the breakwater, Holmes was hurrying me up the beach in the wake of the two flowing black shapes. I stumbled when my boots left the shingle and hit a patch of paving stones, and then we were on a street, in what seemed to be a village or the outskirts of a town.

For twenty breathless minutes our path was hindered by nothing more than uneven ground and the occasional barking mongrel, but abruptly the two figures in front of us whirled around, swept us into a filthy corner, and there we cowered, shivering in our damp clothing, while two pairs of military boots trod slowly past and two torches illuminated various nooks and crannies, including ours. I froze when the light shone bright around the edges of the cloaks that covered us, but the patrol must have seen only a pile of rubbish and rags, because the light played down our alley for only a brief instant, and went away, leaving us a pile of softly breathing bodies. Some of us stank of garlic and goats.

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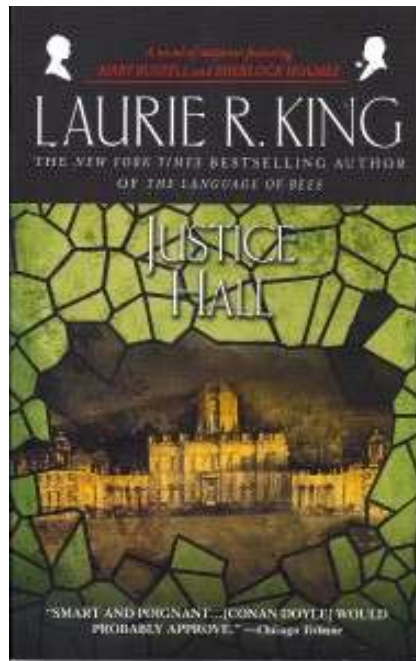
A Closer Look

The characters in the novel are as varied as the land: Two apparent [Bedouin](#) who take Russell and Holmes under their wings—er, robes; the bigger-than-life [Edmund Allenby](#); an [archaeologist](#) (who later gives Russell *A Letter of Mary*); [T. E. Lawrence](#) has a brief cameo in *O Jerusalem*, in his role as Arab hero (rather creepy virtual images in [this video](#)) [politician](#) rather than [archaeologist](#). However, we have not yet found an online biography of a [salt smuggler](#).



*T. E. Lawrence
(Lawrence of Arabia)*

Six: The Great War & the Long Week-end



Click cover for book page

Justice Hall

During the Great War, British men and boys as young as 17 arrived in France and were faced by [this](#). Some of them ended

up like this (this is not a [video](#) for the faint of heart.) Others broke down, dropped their rifles, did not acknowledge orders, or fled--306 of those British men were convicted of desertion and cowardice, and [shot at dawn](#). Not until 2006 were the men [pardoned](#). This is the background of *Justice Hall*.



Excerpt

I fluffed my fingers through my drying hair and picked up my book. Silence reigned, but for the crackle of logs and the turn of pages. After a few minutes, I chuckled involuntarily. Holmes looked up, startled.

“What on earth are you reading?” he demanded.

“It’s not the book, Holmes, it’s the situation. All you need is an aged retriever lying across your slippers, we’d be a portrait of family life. The artist could call it, ‘After a Long Day’; he’d sell hundreds of copies.”

“We’ve had a fair number of long days,” he noted, although without complaint. “And I was just reflecting how very pleasant it was, to be without demands. For a short time,” he added, as aware as I that the respite would be brief between easy fatigue and the onset of grey boredom.

I smiled at him. “It is nice, Holmes, I agree.”

“I find myself particularly enjoying the delusory and fleeting impression that my wife spends any time at all seated at the feet of her husband. One might almost be led to think of the word ‘subservient,’” he added, “seeing your position at the moment.”

“Don’t push it, Holmes,” I growled. “In a few more minutes my hair will be -”

My words and the moment were chopped short by a fist crashing against the front door. The entire house seemed to shudder convulsively in reaction, and then Holmes sighed, called to Mrs Hudson that he would answer it, and leant over to deposit his newspaper on the table. However, I was already on my feet; it is one thing to relax in the presence of one’s

husband and his long-time housekeeper, but quite another to have one's neighbour or farm manager walk in and find one in dishabille upon the floor.

"I'll see who it is, Holmes," I said. He rose, maintaining the pipe in his hand as a clear message to our intruder that he had no intention of interrupting his evening's rest, and tightening the belt of his smoking jacket with a gesture of securing defences, but he stayed where he was while I went to repel boarders at our door.

The intruder was neither a neighbour nor a lost and benighted Downs rambler, nor even Patrick come for assistance with an escaped cow or a chimney fire. It was a stranger dressed for Town, a thick-set, clean-shaven, unevenly swarthy figure in an ill-fitting and out-of-date city suit that exuded the odour of mothballs, wearing a stiff collar such as even Holmes no longer used and a rather garish green silk necktie that had been sampled by moth. The hat on his head was an equally ancient bowler, and his right hand was in the process of extending itself to me—not to shake, but openhanded, as a plea. A thin scar travelled up the side of the man's brown wrist to disappear under the frayed cuff of the shirt, a thin scar that caught at my gaze in a curious fashion.

"You must help me," the stranger said. For some peculiar reason, my ears added a slight lisp to his pronunciation, which was not actually there.

"I beg your pardon, sir," I began to say, and then my eyes went back to the darkness on his temple that in the shadowy doorway I had taken for hair oil. "You are hurt!" I exclaimed, then turned to shout over my shoulder, "Holmes!"

"You must come with me," the man demanded, his command as urgent as the fist on the wood had been. Then to my confusion he added a name I had not heard in nearly five years. "Amir," he murmured. One shoulder drifted sideways, to prop itself against the door frame.

I stared at him, moving to one side so the interior light might fall more brightly on his features. I knew that face: beardless as it was, its missing front teeth restored, the hair at its sides conventionally trimmed, and framed by an incongruous suit and an impossible hat, it was nonetheless the face of a man with whom I had travelled in close proximity and uneasy intimacy for a number of weeks. I had worked with him, shed blood with him. I was, in fact, responsible for that narrow scar on his wrist.

"Ali?" I said in disbelief. "Ali Hazr?"

His mouth came open as if to speak, but instead he stumbled, as if the door frame had abruptly given way; his right hand fluttered up toward his belt, but before his fingers could reach his waistcoat, his eyes lost their focus, then rolled back in his head, his knees turned to water, and fourteen and a half stone of utterly limp intruder collapsed forward into my arms.

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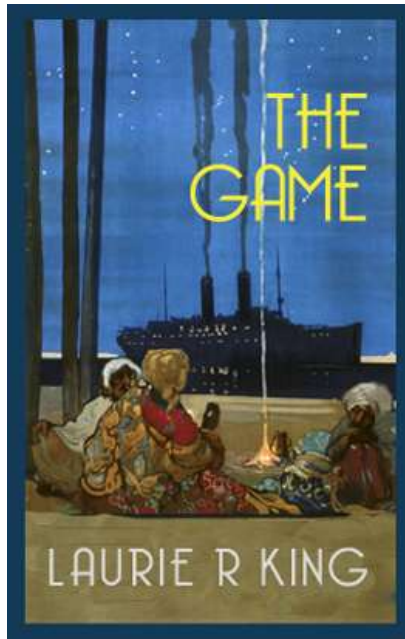
A Closer Look

The English [country house](#) was a [world to itself](#). From [Petworth](#) to [Blenheim](#) and “[Brideshead](#)” to [Gosford Park](#), [servants](#) and [masters](#) lived cheek by jowl, pretending they did not. A situation eminently suited to the [mystery novel](#).

The bone-deep commitment to “God, King and Country,” and the feeling of the nobility of that War among literate Britains such as [Vera Brittain](#) and [Wilfred Owen](#) and [John McCrae](#), has kept the War alive to this day.

Badger Place has its roots in a number of English country houses, such as [Broughton “Castle”](#) and [Owlpen Manor](#) (whose buildings have been subjected to a study of [dendrochronology!](#))

Seven: An Empire in Sunset—The Raj, Kipling's Boy, & the Great Game



Click cover for book page

The Game

Laurie writes:

Kipling's *Kim* is one of my all-time favorite books. Coming-of-age story combined with the romance of the open road, breathing the exoticism of British India and wrapped up in a tale of high espionage: glorious!

I've spent several months in India, the country where my husband was born, so it was a natural fit to work travels there into my fiction—particularly because I had a convenient research source who had lived through the time I was writing about. There's nothing like a Hindi-speaking husband when it comes to researching daily habits and gutter insults.

I pulled my tattered copy of *Kim* down from the shelf to reread it, this time making notes. When I had finished, I dug into the background, and decided that the dates for Kipling's story would fit nicely to provide me with a middle-aged [Kimball O'Hara](#)—and what was more, the period when Kim would have been wandering the Himalayas was intriguingly close to another key period in literary history...

In a story published in 1893 Conan Doyle threw his troublesome creation Holmes off the Reichenbach Falls. The world mourned for ten long years, until finally Conan Doyle revealed that Holmes had in fact lived, and returned to London (scaring poor Watson into a faint) in "the spring of 1894." What Holmesians call "The Great Hiatus" took place from 1891 to 1894, during which time, Holmes tells Watson:

I traveled for two years in Tibet...and amused myself by visiting Lhasa, and spending some days with the head Lama. You may have read of the remarkable explorations of a Norwegian named Sigerson, but I am sure that it never occurred to you that you were receiving news of your friend.

And no doubt it never occurred to Watson, to Conan Doyle, or to Rudyard Kipling himself (who was publishing *Kim* beginning in 1900) that the young apprentice into the Great Game met one of London's greatest amateurs.



Excerpt

"What has happened, Mycroft?" Holmes asked, drawing my attention back to the until-now overlooked fact that, if Mycroft, in his condition, had been consulted on a matter by whichever government, it had to have struck someone as serious indeed.

By way of answer, the big man reached inside the folds of his voluminous silken dressing-gown and pulled out a flat, oilskin-wrapped packet about three inches square. He put it onto the linen cloth and pushed it across the table in our direction. "This came into my hands ten hours ago."

Holmes retrieved the grimy object, turned it over, and began to pick apart the careful tucks. The oilskin had clearly been folded in on itself for some time, but parted easily, revealing a smaller object, a leather packet long permeated by sweat, age, and what appeared to be blood. This seemed to have been sewn shut at least two or three times in its life. The most recent black threads had been cut fairly recently, to judge by their looseness; no doubt that explained the easy parting of the oilskin cover. Holmes continued unfolding the leather.

Inside lay three much-folded documents, so old the edges were worn soft, their outside segments stained dark by long contact with the leather. I screwed up my face in anticipation of catastrophe as Holmes began to unfold the first one, but the seams did not actually part, not completely at any rate. He eased the page open, placing a clean tea-spoon at its head and an unused knife at its foot to keep it flat, and slid it over for me to examine as he set to work on the second.

The stained document before me seemed to be a soldier's clearance certificate, and although the name, along with most of the words, was almost completely obscured by time and salt, it looked to belong to a K-something O'Meara, or O'Mara. The date was unreadable, and could as easily have been the 1700s as the past century—assuming they issued clearance certificates in the 1700s. I turned without much hope to the

second document. This was on parchment, and although it appeared even older than the first and had been refolded no less than four times into different shapes, it had been in the center position inside the leather pouch, and was not as badly stained. It concerned the same soldier, whose last name now appeared to be O'Hara, and represented his original enlistment. I could feel Mycroft's eyes on me, but I was no more enlightened than I had been by the certificate representing this unknown Irishman's departure from Her Majesty's service.

Holmes had the third document unfolded, using the care he might have given a first-century papyrus. He made no attempt to weigh down the edges of this one, merely let the soft, crude paper rest where it would lest it dissolve into a heap of jigsaw squares along the scored folds. I craned my head to see the words; Holmes, however, just glanced at the pages, seeming to lose interest as soon as he had freed them. He sat aside and let me look to my heart's content.

This was a birth certificate, for a child born in some place called Ferozepore in the year 1875. His father's name clarified the difficulties of the K-something from the other forms: Kimball.

I looked up, hoping for an explanation, only to find both sets of grey Holmes eyes locked expectantly onto me. How long, I wondered, before I stopped feeling like some slow student facing her disappointed headmistress? "I'm sorry," I began, and then I paused, my mind catching at last on a faint sense of familiarity: Kimball. And O'Hara. Add to that a town that could only be in India. . . . No; oh, no—the book was just a children's adventure tale. "I'm sorry," I repeated, only where before it had connoted apology, this time it was tinged with outrage. "This doesn't have anything to do with Kim, does it? The Kipling book?"

"You've read it?" Mycroft asked.

"Of course I've read it."

"Good, that saves some explaining. I believe this to be his amulet case."

"He's real, then? Kipling's boy?"

"As real as I am," said Sherlock Holmes.

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A Closer Look

The [Grand Trunk Road](#), running across the north of India from Calcutta to [Peshawar](#), is the country's main [artery](#).



Grand Trunk Road



Pakastani Truck on Grand Trunk Road

And although the Raj is long gone, perhaps men on horses still go [pigsticking](#)—although most of us will only experience the sport vicariously:



(This is [one page](#) from the Russell coloring book, illustrating a scene from *The Game*—if you want to contribute another image, go [here](#) for ideas and information.)

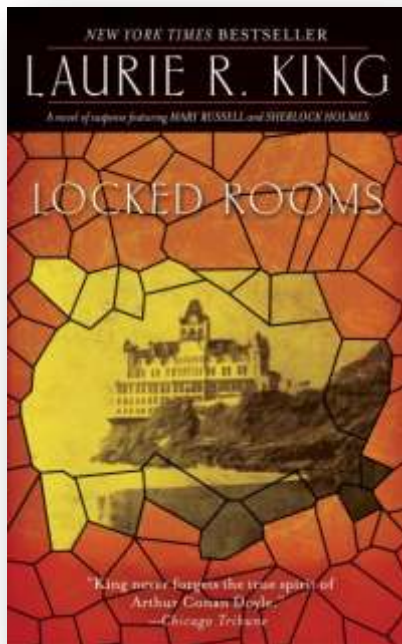
However, the real theme of *The Game* is the espionage that permeates the north of India, as it has since [Kipling](#) wrote [Kim](#) in the end of the nineteenth century, about a half-British lad pulled between his English spymaster, “Colonel Creighton” (based on [Thomas Montgomerie](#)) and his beloved Tibetan [red-hat lama](#).

In “[The Adventure of the Empty House](#),” which sees the triumphant return of Sherlock Holmes into the life of his friend Watson and the world at large, Holmes refers to his surreptitious trip into Tibet—decades before the [Francis Younghusband 1904 expedition](#). And without a doubt, upon his return to London, Holmes reported to his brother, Mycroft, giving rise to early [Intelligence reports](#) on the Empire’s frontier.



Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet

Eight: Loose Ends— Russell & Holmes in America



Click cover for book page

Locked Rooms

Laurie writes:

It started with a dream.

I was giving a tour of a house—my house, a dark, wooded, many-leveled house among trees. I showed my guests one room and another, the open spaces between them, and all the while I knew that there were rooms that I was not showing them, large, lovely rooms that remained hidden behind invisible doors.

The dream is not the book. The dream is not even *in* the book, but it came to me as I was planning the story, and the images of hidden rooms worked itself into the fabric of the novel.

The challenge of an unreliable narrator keeps things lively for a writer: If the reader knows only what the narrator chooses to tell, and the narrator is either inadvertently or deliberately keeping things hidden, how then does the writer communicate with the reader? How does the poor author communicate through a deluded or duplicitous mouthpiece?

By offering an alternative version of the narrator's truth, one that echoes the central version, but in another key. Russell sees an event and describes it; Holmes sees the same event and describes it differently; the reader begins to suspect some trouble deep within the young woman even before Russell herself does.

First person seems like it ought to be the most intimate form of storytelling, but in fact, it is oddly distancing: How do you get to know a person when you're looking through their eyes? Even a mirror reverses reality...



*The 1923 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost Oxford Tourer, now owned by the [Blackhawk Museum](#), Danville, California, in which Mary Russell rides in *Locked Rooms*.*

(Photo Ron Kimball studios)



Excerpt

Japan had been freezing, the wind that sliced through its famous cherry trees scattering flakes of ice in place of spring blossoms. We had set down there for nearly three weeks, after a peremptory telegram from its emperor had reached us in Hong Kong; people kept insisting that the countryside would be lovely in May.

The greatest benefit of those three weeks had been the cessation of the dreams that had plagued me on the voyage from Bombay. I slept well—warily at first, then with the slow relaxation of defenses. Whatever their cause, the dreams had gone.

But twelve hours after raising anchor in Tokyo, I was jerked from a deep sleep by flying objects in my mind.

“Terra firma,” I said. “A week in California, tying up business, and then we can turn for home. By train.” I don’t get seasick on trains.

“A week will be sufficient, you believe?”

“To draw up the papers for selling the house and business? More than enough.”

“And that is what you have decided to do.”

This noncommittal, pseudo-Socratic dialogue was beginning to annoy.

“What are you getting at, Holmes?”

“Your dreams.”

“What about them?” I snapped. I should never have told him about them, although it would have been difficult not to, considering the closeness of the quarters.

“I should say they indicate a certain degree of anxiety.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Holmes, you sound like Freud. The man had sex on the brain. ‘Rooms in dreams are generally women,’ he declares. ‘A dream of going through a series of rooms indicates a brothel, or a

marriage?—I can't imagine what his own marriage could have been like to equate the two so readily. And the key—God, you can imagine the fraught symbolism of playing with a key that lies warm in my pocket! 'Innocent dreams can embody crudely erotic desires.' The faceless man he'd no doubt equate with the male organ, and as for the objects that spurt wildly into the air—well, I'm clearly a sick woman. What does it say about my 'erotic desires' that reading the man's book made me need a hot bath? Or perhaps a cold shower-bath."

"You sound as if you've researched this rather thoroughly."

"Yes, well, I found a copy of his *Interpretation of Dreams* in the ship's library," I admitted, then realised that I was also admitting to a greater degree of preoccupation than I thought sensible. To lead him away from the admission, I said, "I wouldn't have thought that you of all people would fall for the Freud craze, Holmes."

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A Closer Look



1906 San Francisco earthquake

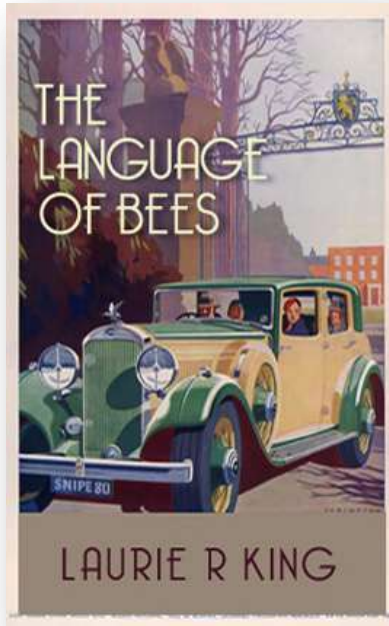
My [grandparents](#) were both in San Francisco during the 1906 [earthquake and fire](#)--and had my grandfather been a decent and law-abiding citizen, he would have died in the early hours of April 18. But he wasn't—and he didn't. Here is what [Dick and Flossie would have seen](#):

Read more about my grandparents [and the big San Francisco earthquake](#).

In this [360 degree panorama](#), Lafayette Park, Mary Russell's post-fire refuge, can be seen towards the left. However, by the time the Golden Gate Park tent city looked like [this](#), Flossie would certainly have been back home.

The area south of San Francisco where the accident occurs is known as Devil's slide, for [good reason](#).

Nine: A face from the past



Click cover for book page

The Language of Bees

Laurie writes:

The first Russell and Holmes novels took place mostly within England. Then with *O Jerusalem*, the duo were as apt to be outside of Britain as within: Palestine, India, San Francisco (twice, as Holmes gets his own story-within-a-story in the otherwise Martinelli tale *The Art of Detection*) with hints of Japan

and a future adventure. But England awaited, and after three books elsewhere, [it was time to send them home again](#) (if nothing else than to care for the bees that have been Holmes' avocation since Conan Doyle retired him around the time of Victoria's death.)

But how to make *The Language of Bees* new and enticing—for its author if no one else? What would keep her eye on the story and her fingers on the keyboard? After more than a million words about them, what new things could I say about these two people?

Over the course of eight books, the Russell stories had developed any number of links. Knowing, for example, that I wanted to set a book in what was in 1919 called Palestine, I left unfinished a chapter in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* where the two go to that British protectorate, then returned (in *O Jerusalem*) not only for a closer look at the time and place, but for an interesting shift to a previous stage in their relationship. In turn, *O Jerusalem* hints at the British nature of a pair of apparent Bedouins, setting the stage for those two gents to turn up in Sussex for *Justice Hall*.

Often, I write these unfinished scraps with a vague intent of providing an intriguing situation to explore in the future—not that I have much idea how, just that there is something in that raw bit of place, person, or idea that holds promise.

Thus, in 1998, I set the scene for *The Language of Bees* a decade later: In *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*, Russell makes mention of Sherlock Holmes' son:

...something in his hands reminded me of Holmes, and of Holmes' lovely, lost son.

And later, when Russell is trying to convince Holmes to help a troubled young Army officer:

“And if he were your son? Would you not want someone to try?”

It was a dirty blow, low and unscrupulous and quite unforgivably wicked. Because, you see, he did have a son once, and someone had tried.

So, with this setup, I could have my characters return to Sussex but, rather than find themselves in a situation they had been in

before, be suddenly confronted with a radical departure:
Sherlock Holmes as a father.

It is an entirely new language for the beekeeper.



Excerpt

As homecomings go, it was not auspicious. The train was late. Portsmouth sweltered under a fitful breeze.

Sherlock Holmes paced up and down, smoking one cigarette after another, his already bleak mood growing darker by the minute. I sat, sinuses swollen with the dregs of a summer cold I'd picked up in New York, trying to ignore my partner's mood and my own headache.

Patrick, my farm manager, had come to meet the ship with the post, the day's newspapers, and a beaming face; in no time at all the smile was gone, the letters and papers hastily thrust into my hands, and he had vanished to, he claimed, see what the delay was about. Welcome home.

Holmes read; I read. He dropped the next letter, a considerably thicker one, on top of Mycroft's, and said in a high and irritated voice, "Mrs Hudson spends three pages lamenting that she will not be at home to greet us, two pages giving quite unnecessary details of her friend Mrs Turner's illness that requires her to remain in Surrey, two more pages reassuring us that her young assistant Lulu is more than capable, and then in the final paragraph deigns to mention that one of my hives is going mad."

"Going mad"? What does that mean?"

He gave an eloquent lift of the fingers to indicate that her information was as substantial as the air above, and returned to the post. Now, though, his interest sharpened. He studied the next envelope closely, then held it to his nose, drawing in a deep and appreciative breath.

Some wives might have cast a suspicious eye at the fond expression that came over his features. I went back to my newspapers.

* * *

“They are swarming,” Holmes said.

I looked up from the newsprint to stare first at him, then at the thick document in his hand. “Who- Ah,” I said, struck by enlightenment, or at least, memory. “The bees.” He cocked an eyebrow at me. “You asked what it meant, that the hive had gone mad. It is swarming. The one beside the burial mound in the far field,” he added. “That letter is from your beekeeper friend,” I suggested.

By way of response, he handed me the letter.

The cramped writing and the motion of the train combined with the arcane terminology to render the pages somewhat less illuminating than the personal adverts in the paper. Over the years I had become tolerably familiar with the language of keeping bees, and had even from time to time lent an extra pair of arms to some procedure or other, but this writer’s interests, and expertise, were far beyond mine. And my nose was too stuffy to detect any odour of honey rising from the pages.

When I had reached its end, I asked, “How does swarming qualify as madness?”

“You read his letter,” he said.

“I read the words.”

“What did you not-”

“Holmes, just tell me.”

“The hive is casting swarms, repeatedly. Under normal circumstances, a hive’s swarming indicates prosperity, a sign that it can well afford to lose half its population, but in this case, the hive is hemorrhaging bees. He has cleared the nearby ground, checked for parasites and pests, added a super, even shifted the hive a short distance. The part where he talks about ‘*tinnitusque cie et Matris quate cymbala circum?*’ He wanted to warn me that he’s hung a couple of bells nearby, that being what Virgil recommends to induce swarms back into a hive.”

“Desperate measures.”

“He does sound a touch embarrassed. And I cannot picture him standing over the hive ‘clashing Our Lady’s cymbals,’ which is Virgil’s next prescription.”

“You’ve had swarms before.” When bees swarm—following a restless queen to freedom—it depletes the population of workers. As Holmes had said, this was no problem early in the season, since they left behind their

honey and the next generation of pupae. However, I could see that doing so time and again would be another matter. “The last swarm went due north, and ended up attempting to take over an active hive in the vicar’s garden.”

That, I had to agree, was peculiar: Outright theft was pathological behaviour among bees.

“The combination is extraordinary. Perhaps the colony has some sort of parasite, driving them to madness?” he mused.

“What can you do?” I asked, although I still thought it odd that he should find the behaviour of his insects more engrossing than dead Druids or the evil acts of spoilt young men. Even the drugs problem should have caught his attention—that seemed to have increased since the previous summer, I reflected: How long before Holmes was pulled into that problem once again?

“I may have to kill them,” he declared, folding away the letter.

“Holmes, that seems a trifle extreme,” I protested, and only when he gave me a curious look did I recall that we were talking about bees, not Young Things or religious crackpots.

“You could be right,” he said, and went back to his reading.

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A Closer Look



Joan Miró, *A Tilled Field*, 1924

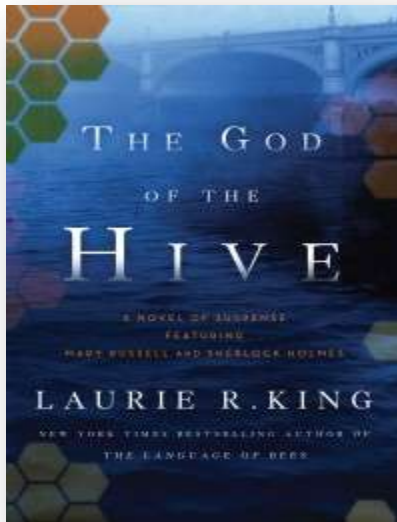
Surrealist art is both a presence and an analogy in this story, with its roots in the confusion and trauma of the Great War. It is a contrast with Britain's timeless landscape and ancient monuments.

The Twenties were an exciting time for the clash of society and religion. In the US, the decade saw the Scopes Monkey Trial as well as Sister Aimee, here in this video, speaking to New York, the citadel of sin. In England, there was the Naturist Moonella Group, and of course Arthur Conan Doyle's passion, Spiritualism (Holmes would have an apoplectic fit... at this video of excerpts that speaks of fairies, Oscar Wilde's ghost, and Houdini...) Even Norman Rockwell, that bastion of middle America, recognized the craze of the Ouija Board.



Ouija Board, Norman Rockwell

Ten: Russell & Holmes Meet a God



Click cover for book page

The God of the Hive

Laurie writes:

The God of the Hive was not the book's original name. My working title was *The Green Man*, but how we got from one to the other makes for a long and complicated explanation that is best boiled down to:

My editor (firmly, in June): The Sales department says "The Green Man" is too New-Agey.

Me (desperately, in September): Are we allowed to use the word "god" in a title?

We were, and we did.

Having settled on a title in a flailing-about, last-ditch, the-spring-catalogue-has-to-go-into-print-tomorrow! conversation, I was (once the dust settled and I could sit down to think about it) astonished at how appropriate it was. And evocative. And faintly mysterious.

Because really, just who is the god of this story's hive?

There are two self-proclaimed candidates for the book's role of divinity. However, I was more interested in the god of the land on which the busy hive was built.

The green man is an ancient figure in Britain, the personification of life as it springs up each year, then dies down again with the cold. He appears on pub signs across the land, he occasionally takes a place in a parade or ceremony, he peeps in and out of literature and myth. His image is a man whose beard is leaves, whose eyes and lips are barely discernable amongst the wild growth that springs from his mouth and nostrils. He is a corn god and a wild god; he is a god-man who draws his life from the very roots of the British Isle.

My background is academic theology. I have written religious characters before, from [a holy fool](#) to [a modern mystic](#). I had never written a god.

Robert Goodman is that god-man. He is a spirit of vegetation; he is a brother to that representative of chaos, the holy fool; he is a force of nature, and he is the force that directs nature.

He is also a man, with a man's history, a man's terrible experiences in wartime, a man's need to be healed and to make his life anew.

Even a small, green, vegetative god has a way of influencing the world in manners at once unexpected, subtle, and subversive.



Excerpt

A child is a burden, after a mile.

After two miles in the cold sea air, stumbling through the night up the side of a hill and down again, becoming all too aware of previously unnoticed burns and bruises, and having already put on eight miles that

night—half of it carrying a man on a stretcher—even a small, drowsy three-and-a-half-year-old becomes a strain.

* * *

I was probably the most incompetent nurse-maid ever to be put in charge of a child. I knew precisely nothing about children; the only one I had been around for any length of time was an Indian street urchin three times this one's age and with more maturity than many English adults. I had much to learn about small children. Such as the ability to ride pickaback, and the inability to whisper.

The child's suggestion allowed me to move faster down the rutted track. We were in the Orkneys, a scatter of islands past the north of Scotland, coming down from the hill that divided the main island's two parts. Every step took us further away from my husband; from Estelle's father Damian; and from the bloody, fire-stained prehistoric altar-stone where Thomas Brothers had nearly killed both of them.

Why not bring in the police, one might ask. They can be useful, and after all, Brothers had killed at least three others. However, things were complicated—not that complicated wasn't a frequent state of affairs in the vicinity of Sherlock Holmes, but in this case the complication took the form of warrants posted for my husband, his son, and me. Estelle was the only family member not being actively hunted by Scotland Yard.

Including, apparently and incredibly, Holmes' brother. For forty-odd years, Mycroft Holmes had strolled each morning to a grey office in Whitehall and settled in to a grey job of accounting—even his long-time personal secretary was a grey man, an ageless, sexless individual with the leaking-balloon name of Sosa. Prime Ministers came and went, Victoria gave way to Edward and Edward to George, budgets were cut and expanded, wars were fought, decades of bureaucrats flourished and died, while Mycroft walked each morning to his office and settled to his account books.

Except that Mycroft's grey job was that of *éminence grise* of the British Empire. He inhabited the shadowy world of Intelligence, but he belonged neither to the domestic Secret Service nor to the international Secret Intelligence Service. Instead, he had shaped his own department within the walls of Treasury, one that ran parallel to both the domestic branch and the SIS. After forty years there, his power was formidable.

If I stopped to think about it, such unchecked authority in one individual's hands would scare me witless, even though I had made use of it more than once. But if Mycroft Holmes was occasionally cold and always enigmatic, he was also sea-green incorruptible, the fixed point in

my universe, the ultimate source of assistance, shelter, information, and knowledge.

He was also untouchable, or so I had thought.

* * *

But as I said, children are a burden, whether three years or thirty. My only hope of sorting this out peacefully, without inflicting further trauma on the child or locking her disastrously claustrophobic and seriously wounded father behind bars, was to avoid the police, both here and in the British mainland. And my only hope of avoiding the Orcadian police was a flimsy, sputtering, freezing cold aeroplane. The same machine in which I had arrived on Orkney the previous afternoon, and sworn never to enter again.

The aeroplane's pilot was an American ex-RAF flyer named Javitz, who had brought me on a literally whirlwind trip from London and left me in a field south of Orkney's main town. Or rather, I had left him. I thought he would stay there until I reappeared.

I *hoped* he would.

[READ MORE...](#)

A Closer Look

The moment at which Robert Goodman becomes a green man is described in a short story, "[Birth of a Green Man](#)," not yet formally published.

British [espionage](#) between the wars was dominated by [Mansfield Smith-Cumming](#) and [Vernon Kell](#), and filled with colorful characters such as [Reilly](#), ace of spies. [Authors](#) seemed particularly suited to the exploits of the SIS: John Buchan, Ian Fleming, Somerset Maugham—even children's author [Arthur Ransome](#) was a spy.

The London that confuses Holmes was shaped by the German [Zeppelin](#), whose raids opened vast areas of London to re-building.



Perhaps what London needed was the rejuvenating urge of the [Green Man](#)...



Pub sign

Postscript

I hope you enjoyed this excursion into the life and mind of one Mary Russell. We will be adding future volumes of the Russell memoirs as they come into print (such as *Pirate King* in 2011) and would be happy to get your input. [Email](#) any comments or suggestions to me.

Yours,

The Russell team

Laurie

Zoë

Robert

Vicki

Alice