

“I AM AN OMNIVOROUS READER”

Book reviews by DAVID STUART DAVIES, ALISTAIR DUNCAN, M J ELLIOTT, AUDREY JONES,
GUY MARRIOTT, DESMOND TYLER, NICHOLAS UTECHIN and ROGER JOHNSON

Houdini and Conan Doyle by Christopher Sandford. Duckworth. 320pp. £20.00

The friendship between Conan Doyle and Houdini deteriorated into total opposition over the issue of spiritualism. The first third of this book concerns the life of each man before they met and demonstrates the significant parallels in their lives. Each suffered poverty when young, each lost (or effectively lost) his father relatively early in life, each came to idolise his mother, and each struggled early on in his chosen career. But the most interesting observation here is how Conan Doyle began as a sceptic and became the cause's most ardent supporter, while Houdini began as a man desperate to believe and became someone determined to expose all mediums as frauds.

Things get really interesting once Conan Doyle and Houdini meet and we see that both were self-deluded. Houdini believed that he still had an open mind on Spiritualism when he clearly did not. Conan Doyle convinced himself that he would win Houdini round to his way of thinking when there was obviously no chance. Houdini's standing in my eyes was actually lowered by this book as I found myself sharing the opinion of many at the time that his attacks on Spiritualism were mainly for self-promotion.

Sandford does make some odd statements. He says that Conan Doyle joined the Society for Psychical Research in late 1893, possibly motivated in part by the death of his father, but, as Andrew Lycett and I have shown in our recent books, he joined the SPR in January 1893, several months *before* his father died. Sandford also suggests that the Priory School in South Norwood lent its name to the Sherlock Holmes story; I have it on good authority that the school dates only from 1974. These small issues aside, this is an excellent book, rich in detail, that gives us a good insight into the attitudes of two formidable opponents.

AD

On Conan Doyle by Michael Dirda. Princeton University Press. 2011. 224pp. £13.95

Michael Dirda, author, critic, Pulitzer Prize winner, and long-time book columnist for The Washington Post, is also a Baker Street Irregular, invested as “Langdale Pike” in 2002. His latest work — part memoir, part commentary on the fiction of Conan Doyle, and part an enthusiastic account of “playing the game” as an Irregular — deserves a place on the bookshelves of all who recognise Arthur Conan Doyle as one of the great fiction writers of his age. Dirda writes engagingly of his upbringing in Ohio, and of his discovery at school of books that would fire his imagination. When, one day, he bought a cheap paperback edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and read it at home, during a thunderstorm when his parents were out visiting relatives, the wonderful world of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson opened up for him. He

has been an admirer of much of Conan Doyle's other fiction for many years and writes enthusiastically of these writings, but he draws a veil over the author's spiritualist wanderings and writings in the last decade of his life. It is good to be reminded again of ACD's great talents as a storyteller. As a Sherlockian, Dirda has embraced the game: besides writing of the camaraderie to be found in membership of the BSI, he includes a lengthy summary of his explorations into the complex hidden life of Langdale Pike. The book is attractively produced, despite one or two irritating errors — Vincent Starrett appears as “Victor Starrett”, and Ronald Knox, whom Dirda credits with starting the game with *Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes* in 1911, is described as “a student at Oxford” although he was by then a teaching Fellow at Trinity College. These very minor observations aside, the book is strongly recommended.

GM

The House of Silk by Anthony Horowitz. Orion Books. 2011. 294 pp. £18.99

This, of course, is the pastiche launched by the author at our 2011 Annual Dinner and unashamedly publicised immediately off the back of that occasion. Orion and Horowitz have done a solid job in the interim months of spreading the word. The book even carries a logo on the dust jacket that reads, “Sherlock Holmes — Conan Doyle Estate Ltd.” The booksellers Waterstones delivered an especial version of the first edition containing “The Bruce-Partington Plans”! And the BBC got the wonderful Derek Jacobi to read it as a “Book at Bedtime”.

In the welter of Holmesian pastiches that have appeared since Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven Per Cent Solution* in the mid-seventies, there have been some good and many bad. Horowitz is a fine constructor of plots for TV (vide *Midsomer Murders* and *Foyle's War*) and has written some very successful series of children's books. He should stay with the day job. This runs counter to most reviews that have appeared in the press, but I found it a lazy piece of work and, vitally, one that does not hold the attention — the plot is so convoluted that it breaks the obvious first two rules of a thriller: make me care and so make me turn the pages to see what happens. On the last count, Horowitz really tries, for every chapter ending attempts to be a “footprints of a gigantic hound” one, and the full kitchen sink is hurled at us: Mycroft, the Irregulars, opium dens, Watson being wounded and even Professor — but that would be giving too much away. There are blips in the writing also: a classic wrong use of “momentarily”, for example, and I am not sure Mr. Horowitz knows what a gasogene is — the writing is murky here, but I think Holmes lights a cigarette from one.

Despite the hype, I had high hopes and *wanted* to enjoy it...

NU

Barefoot on Baker Street by Charlotte Anne Walters. *MX Publishing*. 2011. 378pp. £13.99.

In the story of Red, and her “progress” from an East End workhouse to the heart of Professor Moriarty’s criminal empire and beyond, Walters tackles some pretty horrific scenarios, making me appreciate just how hard city life was (is) if you came from the wrong side of the tracks. The book moves at a relentless pace. By the close of chapter five, Red is already established as the effective number two to Moriarty. She is scarily candid, making no secret of her initial twin passions, the desire for power and her feelings for Sherlock Holmes — who clearly has an attachment to her, saving her from situations despite suspecting that she is an irredeemable criminal. Eventually she abandons crime to join Holmes and Watson. It was interesting to witness her realisation that she could achieve the thrills and power that she craved through legitimate means. Her new life is interrupted when Holmes goes over the Reichenbach Falls but eventually she and the recently widowed Watson build a strong friendship and save each other from despair. Red’s journey changes from the pursuit of power to the pursuit of a normal happy life, something she previously thought impossible. Her struggles in pursuit of her new life are not aided when Holmes returns from his supposed death.

The depictions of Holmes and Mycroft felt very much out of character; Walters only gets away with this because Holmes, Mycroft and, to a lesser extent, Watson are very much supporting characters. Therein lies the secret to what I feel will be this book’s success. It revolves around Red rather than the canonical characters. Despite its flaws, I consider it one of the best pastiches I have read for a long time.

AD

A Case of Witchcraft by Joe Revill. *MX Publishing*. 2011. 297pp. £12.99.

It’s hard not to be reminded of *The Wicker Man*, when Holmes hunts for a missing person on a remote Scottish Island, but *A Case of Witchcraft* is more akin to a dramatised lecture, what little action there is halting repeatedly for lengthy discussions of religion, culture and mythology (about which all the characters have remarkably similar ideas). The possibility of action and/or intrigue when Holmes is held at gunpoint results only in a debate on the injustices of the British Empire, taking in *The Martyrdom of Man* and the works of Marx and Darwin along the way. Watson absents himself early on, and the story is told in the third person, with a young Aleister Crowley (often depicted as an adversary in pastiches) acting as assistant. This Holmes forms his theories under the influence of hasheesh, although he admits that this makes it hard for him to see the gaps in his reasoning — not the most practical approach. Revill’s style is confident but repetitive. By the time Holmes is questioning the main suspect while munching on truffles laced with hasheesh, one wonders why the author didn’t simply tell the same tale with another protagonist entirely.

MJE

Sherlock Holmes and the Affair in Transylvania by Gerry O’Hara. *MX Publishing*. 2011. 239pp. £9.99.

Gerry O’Hara’s name has appeared on many film and TV productions, including a story credit for *Sherlock Holmes and the Incident at Victoria Falls*. Here he returns to the Canon and, as others have done, blends it with Bram Stoker’s famous novel. It seems at first that total fidelity to *Dracula* has not stifled his own creativity — none of his story takes place in England, and he begins with Holmes and Watson visiting the Count to enquire as to the whereabouts of young solicitor Janos Svbadó (Jonathan Harker in Stoker’s original). But such alterations are merely cosmetic. O’Hara sticks very closely indeed to the plot of *Dracula*, with Holmes and Watson standing in for various characters throughout. This causes certain problems, as when they witness Dracula attacking Lucy Westenra and fail to recognise him, despite having been his guests for several days. As substitutes for Stoker’s creations, the detective and his friend have little opportunity to shine. Despite this adventure taking place after “The Sussex Vampire”, Holmes accepts the Count’s true nature incredibly quickly; unsurprising, since he’s little more than a Van Helsing stand-in. The real treat must be P M Rose’s illustrations, presented in stark black and white, and nothing short of startling.

MJE

Young Sherlock Holmes: Black Ice by Andrew Lane. *Macmillan Children’s Books*. 2011. vi+290pp. £6.99

Black Ice seems to take its cue from Sam Goldwyn, who said: “We want a story that starts out with an earthquake and works its way up to a climax.” When Sherlock and his mentor Amyus Crowe are ushered into the Strangers’ Room at the Diogenes Club, they find a dead man, stabbed through the heart, and Mycroft Holmes clutching a knife. No one else has gone in or out, and there is no other entrance. The most significant clue is a name written on the dead man’s card: *The Paradol Chamber*. Before they can discover its meaning the brothers must face deadly danger in London and Moscow. It’s fascinating to see Sherlock, who at fourteen has no real plans for a career, learning the skills that will make him an outstanding detective and undergoing experiences that shape his personality, making him in time the man we know. Rufus Stone, whom we met in *Red Leech*, has a more substantial rôle here, making for some tension between him and Crowe, but each has a lasting effect on the boy. Sherlock’s purchase of a violin from a broker in the Tottenham Court Road is a poignant episode, a touch of goodness amid the evil that threatens him.

RJ

Young Sherlock Holmes: Fire Storm by Andrew Lane. *Macmillan Children’s Books*. 2011. vi+345pp. £12.99 (hardback)

Men dressed as corpses, a burning cottage, a mediaeval scene inside a warehouse and the mysterious disappearance of friends — the teenage Sherlock is stretched to the limit of his powers. After destroying documents vital to a blackmailer, Sherlock is confronted

with the disappearance of Amyus Crowe and Crowe's daughter Virginia. Accompanying him in his dangerous search are his friend Matty, a plucky urchin, and Rufus Stone, his bohemian violin teacher. I couldn't resist a wry chuckle at the clue left by Crowe to indicate his whereabouts. The severed head of a rabbit stuffed down a rabbit hole. Head in burrow — Edinburgh! But then things get nasty. As Mycroft tells Sherlock "I am led to understand that Edinburgh is an unusually dark and violent city." In the city of Burke and Hare, Sherlock and Matty find themselves confronted by two gangs of desperate criminals, one controlled by a creepy American, who has Virginia's name tattooed on his forehead, and the other by Gahan Macfarlane, mastermind behind The Black Reavers and the Walking Dead. In order to effect the release of his friends, Sherlock has only hours to solve the death by poisoning of Sir Benedict Ventham. One clue is a chewed piece of tobacco, and it's evident that Sherlock has not yet acquired his taste for pipe smoking: he finds it disgusting.

Andrew Lane explores the mind of the young Sherlock — his powers of deduction, his courage and strength of will to overcome pain and fear, his loyalty to friends and family and his determination to see that right prevails. This is a jolly good read, plenty of pace, tension and the eternal question: "How will he get out of this one?"

AJ

The Best of The Sherlock Holmes Journal, Volume Two edited by Nicholas Utechin. *The Sherlock Holmes Society of London*. 2011. x+306pp. UK £25.00; Europe €27.00; elsewhere £30.00/US\$60.00 (prices include postage)

There's much in this lovely hardback that's enlightening, some that's essential, and some that's simply entertaining. Guy Warrack, best known for *Sherlock Holmes and Music*, looks at disguises. Patsy Dalton and Mollie Hardwick examine the women in Holmes's life. Roger Lancelyn Green considers Holmes's university. Michael Harrison wonders whether Holmes already knew of Dr Watson before the famous meeting at Bart's. Dame Jean Conan Doyle remembers life with her famous father. Nick Utechin interviews Nigel Stock, the Watson of the 1960s and beyond. All in all, there's wonderful variety of scholarship, reviews, Society reports, tributes and whimsy, from the years 1969 to 1990. Pamela Bruxner has contributed an enthusiastic foreword, and I'm happy to give the book an enthusiastic recommendation. Whether or not you have Volume One (and if not, why not?), you will want Volume Two.

RJ

The Narrative of John Smith by Arthur Conan Doyle, edited, introduced and annotated by Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower & Rachel Foss. *The British Library*. 2011. vi+138pp. £10.00; limited edition in slip-case £100.00; audiobook read by Robert Lindsay £19.59

Arthur Conan Doyle lost the manuscript of his first novel, and later professed horror at the thought that it should be found. As we now know, he rewrote much

of it from memory, and the book has at last been published. Very little happens in this incomplete text, but it helps us understand Conan Doyle's development as a writer, a thinker and a person. John Smith, perhaps the author's vision of himself at fifty, is confined to his room by gout; the narrative consists of his reflections on life, politics, religion, philosophy and much more, and his conversations with his doctor, his neighbours, his landlady, and the local curate — all depicted with a lively authenticity. Nowhere else in his fiction does Conan Doyle discourse on such a range of topics, with the boldness of youth and often with the wisdom of maturity. I was reminded of the *Sketches by Boz*, which is no bad thing, and perhaps *The Narrative* isn't a novel so much as a series of sketches. It's a precursor of *The Stark Munro Letters* and *A Duet*, rather than *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The White Company* or *The Lost World*, but there are details here that would become important elements in the chronicles of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Nigel and Professor Challenger.

RJ

Sherlock Holmes & the Fabulous Faces: The Universal Pictures Repertory Company by Michael A Hoey. *BearManor Media*. vi+293pp. \$19.95

In 1939 Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce played Holmes and Watson in two outstanding films for Fox, the first to set the characters in their true historical period. In 1942 Universal cast them in *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror*, the first of twelve pictures set in the present day. Amanda Field's recent book *England's Secret Weapon* examines the films in the context of their time. Michael Hoey, whose father Dennis was the unforgettable Lestrade to Rathbone's Holmes, takes a different and equally valuable approach. His personal acquaintance with many of the artistes who contributed to these and other Universal productions gives his biographical sketches an unusually engaging immediacy. It's fascinating to follow the careers of actors such as Reginald Denny, Mary Gordon, Olaf Hytten and Frederick Worlock. The critical summaries of the films themselves are perceptive, pertinent and equally engrossing. The result is a book that's both important and entertaining.

RJ

The London of Sherlock Holmes by Thomas Bruce Wheeler. MX Publishing. 391pp. £13.99 / \$22.95 / €17.99

Thomas Wheeler has revised his admirable 2009 book *The New Finding Sherlock's London*. Under the new title, it's state-of-the-art to a degree beyond any other Holmesian guide to the Great Cesspool. As before, we're directed to more than 300 sites, each of whose significance is clearly and pithily stated. You can visit the locations of a specific adventure, explore the sites near each of a hundred railway or Underground stations, or take any of six walking tours in the footsteps of Holmes and Watson. But *The London of Sherlock Holmes* is ideally used in its e-book format where the map references are hyperlinked to Google Maps and

over 400 photographs: as a step-by-step guide to the London of the Canon, that must be unbeatable.

RJ

The Magic Bullet: A Locked Room Mystery featuring Shadwell Rafferty and Sherlock Holmes by Larry Millett. *University of Minnesota Press*. 2011. xii+347pp. \$24.95

The Sherlock Holmes novels of Larry Millett, though well regarded in America, are little known in Britain. I rather hope that changes, because Mr Millett writes well, and he writes of what he knows — not London but the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St Paul. Holmes has only a minor rôle in this latest book, the principal character being the detective-turned-saloonkeeper Shadwell Rafferty, who first appeared in *Sherlock Holmes and the Ice Palace Murders*. All the characters, especially Rafferty, are vivid and memorable, and the picture Mr Millett gives us of St Paul in 1917 is fascinating. The mysterious murder of a tycoon, alone in his fortified penthouse at the top of the city's tallest building, is a real cracker — and aficionados will delight in the many subtle tributes to John Dickson Carr.

RJ

A Study in Sherlock: Stories Inspired by the Holmes Canon edited by Laurie R King and Leslie S Klinger. *Bantam Books*. 2011. ix+385pp. \$15.00

The editors have collected seventeen new, original, and very different tales from authors as diverse as Jacqueline Winspear, Jan Burke and Alan Bradley. All the contributors are highly successful writers, mostly of crime fiction — apart from Jerry Margolin BSI, who collaborates with his brother Phillip in a story about rabid collectors of Sherlockian artwork, which is Jerry's own specialism. Actually, that gives an indication of what makes this collection different — and successful. These are not, for the most part, stories about Sherlock Holmes: they are, as the subtitle says, stories *inspired by* Sherlock Holmes. Lee Child, Dana Stabenow and S J Rozan each reinvent a classic case. Colin Cotterill provides a very funny comic strip explaining why he's not qualified to contribute. Tony Broadbent rather brilliantly brings Holmes and Watson to present-day London, in a quite different way from *Sherlock*. Equally dazzling is Neil Gaiman's tale of Holmes and bees in China. There isn't a dud here.

RJ

The Moriarty Papers, compiled by Colonel Sebastian Moran. *New Holland*. 160pp + map. £7.99

This delicious spoof purports to be a facsimile of the random documents found after the mysterious disappearance of Moriarty in 1914 and published a year later by Moran in an attempt to stave off bankruptcy. If we're to believe these records, Moriarty controlled Watson, Mycroft Holmes, Mrs Hudson, Irene Adler, and pretty much the entire Metropolitan Police. Oh, and Florence Nightingale. And he was the instigator of just about every mystery investigated by Sherlock Holmes. The diary extracts, letters, photographs, diagrams of his mad inventions, and so forth are ingenious and very

funny, as are Moran's laconic comments; they also show a considerable knowledge of the Canon. Great fun!

RJ

Sherlock Holmes vs Jack the Ripper, edited and adapted by Frank J Morlock. *Black Coat Press*. 224pp. £12.99/\$20.95

The earliest dated piece to depict Sherlock Holmes investigating the Whitechapel murders of 1888 is probably *Jack l'Éventreur* by Gaston Marot and Louis Péricaud, published in 1889, here adapted into English as *Jack the Ripper*. To be accurate, as Jean-Marc Lofficier says in his introduction, "the original play did not feature Sherlock Holmes and Nick Carter, but identifiable facsimiles thereof, for an audience that was already familiar with the Great English Detective and his indomitable American counterpart." If the present version is faithful, then the characters clearly do represent Holmes and Carter — which is remarkable, as in 1889 the former had appeared only in *A Study in Scarlet*. The play, like the anonymous 1908 short story that accompanies it, is fascinating as an example of late Victorian melodrama, and unintentionally hilarious in its complete disregard of anything resembling the facts of the case.

RJ

The Carleton Hobbs Sherlock Holmes Further Collection. *AudioGO*. 6 CDs. 2011. £25.50

In this very welcome second volume we are treated to *The Copper Beeches*, *Thor Bridge*, *The Three Garridebs*, *The Sussex Vampire*, *The Three Gables*, *The Retired Colourman*, *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, *The Crooked Man*, *The Cardboard Box*, *A Case of Identity*, *The Naval Treaty* and *The Noble Bachelor*, spread evenly over six CDs with introductions by Nick Utechin. Usually I dislike spoken introductions, but mercifully Nick's are brief, informative and to the point. Nevertheless the set cries out for an accompanying booklet giving full cast lists, dates, etc. By my reckoning ten of the recordings are taken from the BBC Transcription Service, whose versions contained no details of the supporting cast.

It was hearing these programmes on the radio in the early 1960s which rekindled my love of Sherlock Holmes. Hobbs is the perfect embodiment of Holmes, a man who would inspire love and loyalty. He is a great mind, but one can sense a great heart. Shelley is often unfairly likened to Nigel Bruce: he does have a similar fruity voice and something of the same rhythm of speech, but his Watson is a good brave fellow, one I would trust with my life. The other performances are variable but on the whole good. Michael Hardwick has done an excellent job in fitting each story to the half-hour slot (Transcription Service versions are slightly shorter). It is amusing to observe in *The Three Gables* how he manages to imply that Steve Dixie is black without a specific statement.

Many of the recordings are taken off-air. In the circumstances the quality is impressive and provides a

comfortable listening experience. This set, together with its predecessor, deserves to be in the collection of every Holmesian. I sincerely hope there are more to come.

DT

The Return of Sherlock Holmes read by Derek Jacobi. *AudioGO*. 10 CDs. £20.40 / **His Last Bow** read by Derek Jacobi. *AudioGO*. 8 CDs. £20.40

Derek Jacobi is one of our great actors. He's also one of our great readers, which is not quite the same thing. A critic has rightly said that, as narrator, "he can capture the attention so fully that a listener is immersed in the story", and as actor he defines each character, creating an entire cast with apparent ease. His mellow voice, so perfect for the reassuring personality of Watson the narrator, can instantly become harsh, sinister, authoritative — his versatility seems endless, but it's always under control. Too many people go along with that fabled Cornish boatman, who was so unobservant he hadn't even noticed that Holmes did *not* fall off any cliff. The fact is that these two volumes feature some of the very best stories in the entire Canon, with a wonderful range of characters — "The Bruce-Partington Plans", to name just one, is first-rate — and Sir Derek does them proud.

RJ

"The Final Problem" & "The Empty House". *Big Finish*. 2011. 2 CDs. £14.99

What fun! These versions of the two pivotal stories in the Holmes canon are extremely enjoyable. In particular they are full of Doylean flavour and detail, because the adaptor, Nick Briggs, has in no way tampered with his material. There are no awkward alterations, edits or contractions of plot details; we get the full unexpurgated Doyle. To a large extent these plays are dramatised readings with Watson's narrative dominating, but what they may lack in the dynamism of drama, they gain in authenticity. They are probably the most faithful dramatisations of these stories ever produced, and they have the added bonus of splendid music and sound effects and excellent performances. Richard Earl is masterful as Watson, carrying the burden of the story. He sounds a youngish and bright version of Holmes's friend and has a wonderful way of subtly bringing the action to life. Nick Briggs is a fine Holmes, enigmatic and dramatic by turns. In short, we can really believe in these characters. Alan Cox is also suitably chilling as Moriarty. The scene where the master criminal visits the master detective in his Baker Street rooms bristles with menace and excitement. Cox, of course, played the teenage Watson to Nicholas Rowe's Holmes in the 1985 movie *Young Sherlock Holmes*. He has matured into a very convincing villain!

In a nutshell: if you like your dramatised Holmes unadulterated, strong on atmosphere and rich in detail, this is the CD for you.

DSD

"The Long Man" and "The Grace Chalice". *The Sherlock Holmes Society of London / The Old Court Radio Theatre Company*. 2010. 1 CD. UK £5.00; Europe £6.00 or €9.00; elsewhere £9.00 or US\$12.00

I'm not a huge fan of radio as a medium so these two plays are not something I would normally have encountered. However I am glad that I devoted time to them. *The Grace Chalice* has Holmes and Watson investigating (with some help from Inspector Lestrade) the theft of said chalice from the home of its reclusive owner. *The Long Man* has Holmes and Watson assisting Chief Inspector Langham in investigating the murder of an Oxford professor at the site of a prehistoric chalk figure. It is difficult to say too much more without giving away parts of the plot so I shall confine myself to saying that both stories have a very authentic feel. Of the two I thought *The Grace Chalice* was the more Holmesian but *The Long Man* was the more moving, having a rather sad ending. The Foley artists have done their job well and you do really feel (or hear) that you are in the locations that the story describes. If I have one criticism it is that Dave Hawkes simply doesn't sound like my idea of Watson. He sounds more of a Lord Peter Wimsey or Albert Campion to my ears. All the other actors fit their roles really well. If, like me, you don't normally listen to radio plays, give these a chance.

AD

Sherlock Holmes, or The Strange Case of Miss Alice Faulkner by Arthur Conan Doyle & William Gillette. *The Sherlock Holmes Society of London / The Old Court Radio Theatre Company*. 2011. 2 CDs. UK £10.00; Europe £12.00 or €18.00; elsewhere £18.00 or US\$24.00

Sherlock Holmes: A Drama in Four Acts was Holmes's return to public life after his disappearance at Reichenbach. US audiences first saw the play in 1899 and those in Britain saw it in 1901 at the same time as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was wowing them in the pages of *The Strand*. In the absence of a time machine, to witness the play's Lyceum debut, Roger Johnson's two-part radio production is probably the next best thing. The plot revolves around Alice Faulkner, the letters she holds — which could compromise a European nobleman — and the efforts of Holmes and Moriarty to secure possession of them. Gillette's play drew heavily on a number of Conan Doyle's original stories including "The Final Problem", "A Scandal in Bohemia" and even "The Bruce-Partington Plans". As with the other Old Court Theatre productions I have heard, the most striking thing is the sense of place. Through the excellent sound effects you completely believe you are where you are told you are and the actors give an authentically Victorian dialogue entirely free of anachronisms. I particularly enjoyed Cyril Bagshaw's Moriarty — a more sinister voice it is hard to imagine.

AD

In brief

M J Elliott is a man of parts, as editor, author, scriptwriter and occasional actor. For the Society, he devises and presents our annual Film Evening and he has written most of the scripts for the Old Court Radio Theatre Company recordings, posted on the website at www.sherlock-holmes.org.uk/world/radio.php. For the world at large he writes for radio drama companies in Seattle, Boston and Chicago, and his output is not limited to Holmesiana. Five of his excellent short stories,

originally featured in the magazine *Sherlock*, have now been collected as *The Legends of Sherlock Holmes* (Kenwood Press). It's currently available only as a Kindle e-book, but if you don't wish to buy a Kindle reader you can download the software (available free from Amazon) to read e-books on your computer. *The Legends of Sherlock Holmes* is a bargain, even by e-book standards, at just 86p.

Molly Carr has extensively revised and updated her book *In Search of Dr Watson* (MX; £9.99/\$16.95/€12.99). The new edition actually is the valuable contribution to Holmesian, or Watsonian, scholarship that the first promised to be, giving us a rounded, balanced and accurate picture of the man. All that's missing is an index.

The Year of High Treason by Vithal Rajan can be enjoyed on many levels. In 1911 Holmes and Watson are sent by Winston Churchill to protect King George V at his Coronation Durbar in Delhi, and clearly the King needs protection. The Imperial Crown of India must surely be an irresistible temptation to A J Raffles and Arsène Lupin. Mikhail Strogoff is there on behalf of the Tsar, but Dr Fu Manchu has his own agenda, while Lord Greystoke has quite a different one. Other notable persons, historical and fantastical, play their part, though their aims may not be quite what we expect. The complacent splendour of the Durbah, like the humour of the novel, is muted rather for us because we are aware of the impending war, which will signal the beginning of the end for the British Empire. (Rupa Publications India Pvt Ltd; \$10.00.)

Dan Andriacco's novel *No Police Like Holmes* (MX; £10.99/\$19.95/€12.99) is a clever, exciting and witty romp — not about Holmes but about his fans. To celebrate the donation of the world's third-largest private collection of Sherlockiana, a small college in a small town in Ohio is hosting the "Investigating Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes Colloquium". Jeff Cody, the college's PR director (and part-time crime writer), is an amused observer until the event is blighted by a real theft and a real murder, and he realises that there's rather a lot of suspects in deerstalkers. As if things weren't bad enough, Cody and his ex-girlfriend also become suspects... I like it!

In Guy Adams' *The Breath of God* (Titan Books; £7.99) a mysterious and apparently supernatural murder brings "psychic doctor" John Silence to Baker Street. Despite Holmes's scepticism, subsequent attacks indicate the deployment of occult forces by members of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Joined by a bumptious young ghost-hunter named Carnacki, Holmes, Watson and Silence make their way to Scotland, where their help is eagerly awaited by Aleister Crowley... *The Breath of God* is thrilling, spooky, and well-written, with obvious knowledge of the work of Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, M R James and Arthur Conan Doyle. It really is a ripping yarn.

The Punishment of Sherlock Holmes: Selected Sherlockian Puns edited by Bob Burr and Philip K Jones (MX Publishing; £11.99/\$18.95/€12.99) is a deliberately and successfully funny assemblage of what must be several hundred short and short-short shaggy dog stories

about Holmes and Watson. The book is dedicated to my late friend John Bennett Shaw, who would have loved it.

Sherlock Holmes & the Hilldrop Crescent Mystery, a short novel by the late Val Andrews, brings Holmes out of retirement to investigate, for his own satisfaction, the case of Dr Crippen, hanged six months earlier for the murder of his wife. The author's explanation of Crippen's innocence is ingenious and appealing, but the authoritative introduction by David James Smith, author of *Supper with the Crippens*, leaves little room for doubt about the doctor's guilt. And, entertaining as it is, the text reads rather like a rough draft — which it may be, I suppose. (Irregular Special Press; £7.50)

In the strange beginning to a very strange adventure — *Shadowfall* by Tracy Revels (MX; £9.99/€12.99/\$16.95) — the illustrious personage who arrives at 221B Baker Street is Titania, Queen of the Fairies. Irene Adler is a soul-stealing monster, young Stamford a zombie, and John Brown a supernatural guardian. The abduction of a body from Highgate Cemetery and the disappearance of the London Stone are merely the prelude to the theft of England's most sacred relic, the heart of St George. Dr Revels has researched deeply into English legend, and *Shadowfall* has a delirious, almost surrealist quality, like an enjoyable nightmare.

RJ