

# “I AM AN OMNIVOROUS READER”

Book reviews by ALISTAIR DUNCAN, MARK MOWER, SARAH OBERMULLER-BENNETT, JOHN SHEPPARD, JEAN UPTON, NICHOLAS UTECHIN and ROGER JOHNSON

**The Case of Sherlock Holmes: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle’s Detective Fiction** by Andrew Glazzard. *Edinburgh University Press*, 2020. 264pp. £19.99 (pbk)

Not so long ago few academics bothered to take the Sherlock Holmes stories seriously. They do now, and the results are all too frequently pretentious and/or impenetrable. That isn’t the case with Dr Glazzard’s book: the prose is readable, and the ideas are comprehensible.

In twenty chapters, divided into seven sections — Finance, Class, Family, Sex, Race, War and Secrecy — he considers the late Victorian and Edwardian world as reflected in the Holmes stories, whether the reflection is intentional or not, and whether the author’s purpose is serious or humorous, positive or negative. The suggestion of a queer subtext to “The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge” is not unfamiliar, but it hadn’t occurred to me that Charles Augustus Milverton’s victims probably included more homosexual men than indiscreet women. There’s more to the case of Dr Grimesby Roylott than a doctor turned bad: contemporary ideas of Finance, Class, Family, Sex and Race all played a part in creating the monster.

*The Case of Sherlock Holmes* is full of insights, not all new but all well expressed. It is, as one reviewer observed, “less a critically unfolding monograph than an illuminating anthology” — which is fine by me. (My only complaint is that there’s a few notably careless errors of the sort that really don’t belong in an expensive book from a respected academic publisher. The operatic contralto Irene Adler is described as a “music-hall artist”; Dost Akbar, one of the Four, is named as “Dost Mohammed”; Jonas Oldacre’s brutal cruelty becomes “brutal curiosity”; Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence was the eldest son of the future King Edward VII, not “his younger brother”...)

RJ

**Commissionaire: Julian Wolff and His Baker Street Irregulars** by Sonia Fetherston, BSI. *Baker Street Irregulars Press*, 2020. 176pp. \$21.95 plus postage (pbk)

For those of us who had the honour and pleasure of meeting and/or corresponding with Julian Wolff, this book is sheer joy. It is a reminder of a simpler and more gentle time, and an appropriate tribute to the quiet little man who was the longest-serving leader and guiding light of the Baker Street Irregulars. The author’s research has included documentary sources as well as oral histories and reminiscences from friends, family members and fellow Irregulars. Newly-hatched Sherlockians will find this a splendid introduction to one of our Founders of the Faith.

JU

**Jeremy Brett: Playing a Part** by Maureen Whittaker. *MX Publishing*, 2020. 468pp. £79.99 (hbk), £24.99 (pbk)

For me Jeremy Brett is the definitive Sherlock Holmes. No one can touch him. He usurped Basil Rathbone as the Holmes of my imagination and it will be nothing short of miraculous for someone to take his place. His adherence to the Holmes of the page never ceases to amaze me. Yet, like many of his devotees, I knew little about his acting work away from Baker Street. For some time my sole reference was David Stuart Davies’s *Bending the Willow*; but I was aware that I needed other sources for a more rounded picture of the man *sans Deerstalker*. Maureen Whittaker’s amazing tome takes us all the way from Brett’s childhood right through until his final roles. You cannot avoid being amazed at the sheer range of what he did prior to the call to Baker Street (and after).

From *War and Peace* to *Battlestar Galactica* it’s all here. One thing that disturbed me was that I had watched more than one of the programmes Brett had been in, after seeing him in Holmes, without recognising him. That was forgivable to an extent for the roles where he was younger but less so for those that followed. This book opened my eyes to his broad body of work as well as his personality. It is mostly a performance biography but does not avoid topics such as Brett’s romantic entanglements and the death of his father. Would I have liked a shift more towards his non-

performance life? Perhaps a little but I think the balance has been correctly struck.

The book comes in several formats. Paperback and hardback. Colour and monochrome. The colour hardback is steep in price but, I would argue, worth it for a true Brett fan. If your devotion is less acute, you may be happy with the lower price format. Up until now my sole resource on Brett was the excellent *Bending the Willow*. Now with Whittaker's book I believe I have all I'll need on Brett for the foreseeable future.

AD

[For those interested only in Brett's portrayal of the great detective, the relevant section — 200 pages, fully illustrated — is available separately as a large handsome paperback entitled *Jeremy Brett is Sherlock Holmes*, priced on Amazon at £17.99. Ed.]

**The Curse of Sherlock Holmes: The Basil Rathbone Story** by David Clayton. *The History Press*, 2020. 192pp. £18.99 hbk)

The publishers have a reputation for quality non-fiction, so I was really looking forward to reading this. It turned out to be like a childhood birthday party, at which every gift received was either socks or underpants. Apparently, the author's forte is writing about sport, which perhaps explains his obsession with statistics — how much a film cost to produce, how much it earned, etc. He also doesn't know the difference between "exhaustive" and "exhausting". Surprisingly large chunks of Rathbone's excellent autobiography, *In and Out of Character*, are inserted throughout the book; already a fairly slim volume, its size would be reduced considerably if these excerpts were removed. Although there is more information about Rathbone's children than was included in the autobiography, I would still refer readers to the original source for a more enjoyable reading experience.

JU

**Baker Street Almanac 2020: An Annual Capsule of a Timeless Past & Future** edited by Ross E Davies, Ira Brad Matetsky & Monica Schmidt. *The Green Bag, Inc.*, 2020. 376pp. \$30.00 within USA (pbk) or download free at [www.greenbag.org](http://www.greenbag.org)

I said of the 2019 *Almanac* that the sheer variety of the contents makes a proper review almost impossible — and this year's is eighty pages longer! Reports of Holmesian activities around the

world in 2019 take up about a quarter of the book, by the far the fullest being from the USA, of course. About the number of pages are given over to a reprint of Peter Blau's invaluable monthly newsletter *Scuttlebutt from the Spermaceti Press* for 2019.

Other gems include Andrew Solberg's suggestions for a Sherlockian library; Nicholas Utechin's "Sidney Paget: Some Facts, Figures and Thoughts"; Steven Doyle's "Short History of Wessex Press", parent company of Gasogene Books; Greg Ruby on Sherlockian coins and medals; Alexis Barquin's "Arthur Conan Doyle in 2019"; an up-to-date list of Sherlockian groups and societies compiled by Mike McSwiggin; and perhaps most notably a new annotated edition of "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box", followed by "A Chapter on Ears", published in *The Strand Magazine* not long after the story. But there's lots more. Go to [www.greenbag.org](http://www.greenbag.org) and see for yourself!

RJ

**The Sherlock Holmes Escape Book: The Adventure of the British Museum** by Charles Phillips & Melanie Frances. *Ammonite Press*, 2020. 136pp. £9.99 (pbk)

If you feel as if your brain is shrivelling under the restraints of COVID regulations, this could be the solution toward keeping those little grey cells active. This is the second title in a series of *Sherlock Holmes Escape Books*, in which the reader must solve the puzzles to escape the pages. (The first, *The Adventure of the Waterworks*, was reviewed in the *Winter 2019 Journal*.) There are codes, ciphers, riddles and red herrings, plus a Hieroglyphic Code Wheel set into the cover to assist you in your quest. It is 1901 and, trapped in the British Museum, the player takes the role of Sherlock Holmes. Assisted by Dr Watson, you must solve a perplexing mystery — and stop a potential threat to the crown. Many of the objects described can still be seen in the British Museum, and the map provided is based on a genuine floor plan of the Museum from this period.

JU

**The Dramatic Moment of Fate: The Life of Sherlock Holmes in the Theatre** by Alexandra Kitty. *MX Publishing*, 2020. 162pp. £9.99 (pbk), £3.99 (Kindle)

As Ms Kitty says, "Few literary characters have had such a long and illustrious stage presence." It's more than likely that, on any given day in normal

times, somewhere in the world a play featuring Sherlock Holmes is being rehearsed or performed. The USA is ahead of the rest: after all, the American William Gillette was the first actor to play Holmes with Conan Doyle's blessing, and the first to become identified with the character. A thorough survey of Holmesian productions in American theatres would need several volumes, even if it were possible, and this nice little book looks at the UK and Canada as well, with nods to other countries. The Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake gets deserved attention for its productions (Alexandra Kitty is a Canadian journalist, who was writing about fake news and the decline of journalism long before Donald Trump turned both to his political advantage) but the main focus is 425 miles south-east, on Broadway. Obviously this isn't a thorough survey — and an index would be very welcome — but it's informative, entertaining, and written with love.

RJ

**Scotland Yard's Murder Squad** by Dick Kirby. *Pen & Sword*, 2020. 226pp. £25.00 (hbk)

Not all Holmesians care for accounts of real-life crime and detection, but for those like me who find the subject interesting, I can recommend this book by a retired Metropolitan Police detective, author of more than a dozen books on crime and policing (including *Operation Countryman: The Flawed Enquiry into London Police Corruption*). The "Murder Squad", correctly the Reserve Squad, was formed in 1906, to deploy top detectives to investigate murder and other serious crimes deemed beyond the expertise of the local police, within the Metropolitan area and beyond.

Whatever you may have gathered from the chronicles of Sherlock Holmes, it wasn't until 1902 that fingerprint evidence contributed to a British conviction, and that result prompted a letter to *The Times* from a magistrate: "Scotland Yard, once known as the world's finest police organisation, will be the laughing stock of Europe if it insists on trying to trace criminals by odd ridges on their skin." That was a case of burglary. The first reliance on fingerprints in a prosecution for murder happened in 1905, and it was definitive: Albert and Alfred Stratton were found guilty of murdering Mr and Mrs Farrow in Deptford. The story is told in the first of fourteen chapters, the last of which tells of drugs and homicides in West Indian high society at the close of the twentieth century.

It's fascinating to follow the developments in criminal investigation as applied by the successors to Messrs Gregson and Lestrade.

RJ

**Sherlockian Stories and Studies** by Gayle Lange Puhl. *MX Publishing*, 2020. 236pp. £9.99 (pbk)

The author of *Sherlock Holmes and the Folk Tale Mysteries* shows her versatility here, with four new Holmes stories in the classic style; a delightful tale, "The Case of the Refurbished Room", narrated by Bertie Wooster, in which his man Jeeves's uncle is called out of retirement to investigate strange goings-on at Aunt Agatha's country house — said uncle being Sherlock Holmes; a neat little fantasy, with the apparently irrelevant title of "The Case of the Loud Librarians"; a nice comedy sketch in which Jack Stapleton tries and fails to buy a suitably vicious dog; and eight short essays, covering the history of the Criterion Bar, the jewels of the Agra treasure; pigs in the canon; Ms Puhl's correspondence with Vincent Starrett; and more. Particularly impressive among the pastiches is "Colonel Warburton's Madness", but they are all cleverly devised and intelligently written.

RJ

**Sherlock Holmes: The Beast of the Stapletons** by James Lovegrove. *Titan Books*. 2020. 404pp. £14.99 (hbk)

Another great release from Titan Books. This is an intriguing sequel to *The Hound of the Baskervilles* with a very welcome return to the wilds of Dartmoor. Five years after the original adventure, the Baskerville family appear to be threatened anew by a monstrous creature stalking the moors. Sherlock Holmes is once again asked to come to the aid of a terrified Sir Henry.

Lovegrove is an extremely accomplished writer; this is a rip-roaring tale full of atmosphere, suspense and adventure. I read it in three sittings, so keen was I to find out where the plot was heading. The twists and turns — and dramatic overseas denouement — make it a compelling read. Our heroes are portrayed in familiar terms, and Lovegrove has created a wider cast of colourful and believable characters. I particularly liked the inclusion of Corporal Benjamin Grier, an American friend of Sir Henry Baskerville's, who proves his worth many times throughout the narrative and has his own Boswell-like qualities.

Add this to your Christmas list — you won't be disappointed!

MM

**Through a Glass Starkly: A Sherlock Holmes Adventure** by Richard T Ryan. *MX Publishing*, 2020. 334pp. £17.99 (hbk)

This is Richard T. Ryan's fifth pastiche: a lively and intriguing tale in which Holmes is recruited by his brother Mycroft to ensure the safety of some international diplomats at a secret peace conference convened in 1907. But in serving 'King and Country' — and doing their best to prevent the continent of Europe from slipping towards a possible war — Holmes and Watson are also drawn into a number of other seemingly unrelated cases which threaten to derail their investigations. Ryan's Watsonian voice is superb, and as with his earlier novels the author has included several affectionate nods to the characters, stories, and intrigues of the original canon. The numerous twists and turns make this an engrossing and enjoyable read, as do the variety of colourful locations chosen for the action. From a secret *piet-a-terre* in Paris, to the Whispering Gallery in St. Paul's Cathedral, we are carried along at a frenetic pace.

I previously read, and thoroughly enjoyed, *The Druid of Death*. *Through a Glass Starkly* is even better! The blurb on the back cover says that Ryan's next pastiche will be entitled, *Three May Keep a Secret* — it's on my purchase list already!

MM

**The Reign of the Beast** by Ian C Grant. *Independently published*, 2020. 274pp, £8.99 (pbk)

This novel, evidently the first of an intended series, is actually authored by two brothers, Grant Andrew Christie (an ardent Sherlock Holmes reader) and Ian Stuart Christie.

The principal character (apart from the Beast of course) is Detective Inspector Wiggins, whose work in detection began when he was, as a street-wise youngster, the leader of the Baker Street irregulars. Wiggins' career has prospered, and he is put in charge of the desperate hunt for a remarkably evil and prolific killer, even more formidable and mysterious than Jack the Ripper. There is a full cast of both good and bad characters, and one who manages to straddle both extremes!

There is a satisfactory level of Canonical references, particularly when Wiggins is recalling his early associations with his heroes Holmes and Watson, and a good level of local colour in relation to early 20th century London. Much of the writing around the Holmesian characters is excellent, of an almost lyrical nature, as the familiar names are dropped into the narrative. This aspect of the story

is a welcome contrast to its graphic and gruesome violence. Taken as a whole, it is a true shilling shocker, but one with a certain undefinable charm; quite an accomplishment for a first novel, I think.

JS

**The Art of Sherlock Holmes: Global Edition II** conceived and curated by Phil Growick. *MX Publishing*. 2020. 206pp. £59.99/\$64.95 (hbk)

A fourth volume in Phil Growick's continuing project to commission original artwork to illustrate a range of new Sherlock Holmes stories. As with the earlier volumes, a share of the proceeds from the book goes to Stepping Stones School at Undershaw, the Happy Life Children's Home in Nairobi, and the American Cancer Society.

This is a sumptuous book, featuring thirteen stories with accompanying artwork produced in a variety of colourful mediums from artists across the globe. The stand-out works for me were three oil on canvas creations by Jolanda Richter (illustrating Tony Reynolds, 'The Adventure of the Medium'), Davide Querin (for Nick Cardillo's 'The Adventure of the Burning Man'), and William Oxer (for Robert Perret's 'The Mystery of the Change of Art'). The tales in the book are no less colourful, intriguing and satisfying, and include contributions from some recognisable names: David Marcum, Mike Hogan, Daniel Victor and others. While all of the narratives are well chosen, my personal favourites were 'The Case of the Cursed Clock' (Gayle Lange Puhl), 'Harbinger of Death' (Geri Schear) and 'The Coffee House Girl' (David Marcum).

A worthy project and an inspiring blend of creativity.

MM

**Sherlock Holmes and the Cornwall Affair** by Johanna M Rieke. *MX Publishing*, 2020. 199pp. £9.99 (pbk)

For anyone looking for an armchair holiday this year, a trip to Cornwall in the company of Holmes and Watson is always to be recommended. With author Johanna M Rieke at the helm, the duo forsakes Baker Street for a mystery that takes them deep into the heart of South-West England, pausing briefly at the lovely Lanhydrock House, described in sumptuous detail, for an account of the problem before heading out into the wider area to tackle the investigation with gusto. Throughout, Rieke's love of history shines from the pages, touching coast and country, taking in such diverse topics as smuggling, mining, china clay and the works of Isambard

Kingdom Brunel, before reaching out to the international field for a resolution of the case. Holmes is in fine form in this intriguing mystery, complete with twists and turns aplenty as the corpses start to mount up. Watson provides able and, at one point, invaluable support and excellent narration, occasionally breaking the fourth wall to apologise to the reader for his short-comings, memorably on a boat-trip that sees the poor fellow paying “tribute to King Neptune”. Overall, a very enjoyable and absorbing tale, enriched with Rieke’s admirable evocations of time and place.

SO-B

**Riviera Gold** by Laurie R King. *Allison & Busby*, 2020. 352pp. £19.99 (hbk)

The latest in the highly entertaining Mary Russell series brings Russell and her husband Sherlock Holmes to the Côte d’Azur in the summer of 1925, where there are millionaires, yachts, the famous Casino at Monte Carlo — and Mrs Hudson. Apart from the mystery of the murder victim in her sitting-room, we learn a great deal about Mrs Hudson’s intriguing earlier life, including her long-time association with Lillie Langtry, and why she has been so inexplicably tolerant of Holmes’s aggravating behaviour for so many years.

JU

***Violet Holmes and the Agents of H.I.V.E., volume 1: Adventures of a Teenage Detective*** by Nicko Vaughan, illustrated by Georgia Grace Weston. *Orange Pip Books*, 2020. 72pp. £7.42 (pbk)

The subtitle identifies the target readership of this graphic novel. It’s set in the present day, though it begins with a flashback to the terrible event that led to Violet’s being adopted as his daughter by Sherlock Holmes. The story proper begins with Violet’s first day at school after years of home tutoring. It becomes evident that Sherlock had rather special reasons for choosing Bardle School, where break-ins have occurred, computer equipment has been stolen, some pupils and a teacher appear to be engaged in secret activities, and the headmaster has some sort of a grudge against Sherlock Holmes. Violet is a strong-minded, intelligent and likable character. Her story isn’t aimed at me, but I’m rather looking forward to the next instalment.

RJ

**Rodger Baskerville’s Lonely Hound from Hell, and Others** by Wanda & Jeff Dow. *The Authors*, 2020. 179pp. £7.68 (pbk); £3.87 (Kindle)

The Dows are long-time officers of the Pleasant Places of Florida, and have devised and performed (as the Dow Family Players) Sherlockian sketches at the society’s meetings. This nice volume gathers seventeen of the scripts — and libretti, chief among them being the “rock opera” of the title, which was first performed, to music by the Beatles, at the 1997 Sunshine State Sherlockian Symposium, for which occasion Wanda and Jeff were billed as the Willie Nelson Oratorio Society. “The Red Circle” borrows music from Ponchielli, Leoncavallo and Mascagni. “The Sussex Vampire” co-opts Beethoven, Brahms, Handel, Mendelssohn, Vivaldi, Dvorak and Holst. “The World Premiere of An Adventure of Sherlock Holmes” is credited to Rappin’ John Watson and the Speckled Band, which I suppose makes it a rap opera. Some of the non-musical treats place Holmes in well-known American TV dramas, comedies, chat shows and even commercials; others parody the styles of Shakespeare, the James Bond movies... Well, you get the picture. It’s light, clever, affectionate and good fun.

RJ

**However Improbable, Being a Scrapbook of Strange Holmesiana** edited by Paul Thomas Miller. *Doyle’s Rotary Coffin*, 2020. 113pp. £3.05 (pbk) or download free at [sites.google.com/site/doylesrotarycoffin](https://sites.google.com/site/doylesrotarycoffin)

The motto of Doyle’s Rotary Coffin is: “No Holmes Barred — Especially Dreadful Holmes, Bizarre Holmes and Sacrilegious Holmes”, and this is its (their?) second book, published in the hope that it “will promote weirdness in Holmesiana”. Here are stories, parodies, spoofs, playlets, cartoons, impressively offbeat illustrations by Chris Aarnes Bakkane, and an article by Howard Ostrom on the more bizarre cinematic interpretations of Holmes. Other names you may recognise include Wanda and Jeff Dow, Margie Deck, Phil Attwell, and Brad Keefauver. I like the Dedication: “to all Sherlockians and Holmesians: whichever game you play, however you play it, play nicely and, most of all, enjoy yourself.”

(DRC’s third book is a collaboration between Robert Perret, also a contributor to *However Improbable*, and Paul Thomas Miller. This is “*Sherlock Holmes*” is an Anagram of “*Snarky Clock*” and 327 Other Holmesian Facts (119pp. £3.15. pbk). It’s intended to “promote humour in Holmesiana”, and it’s amusing, rather surreal, and extremely silly.)

RJ

**The Unexpurgated Sherlock Holmes** by N.P. Sercombe. *Eva Books c/o Harry King Films Ltd.* 2019-20. £7.99 per book

It is a great pity to have to report that this series of (so far) seven little vanity-published books — recommended to me by one of this country's greatest comedy writers — is disconcertingly bad.

Nicholas Sercombe (a film and TV writer) has produced such titles as *A Balls-Up in Bohemia*, *The Mysterious Case of Mr Gingernuts* and *The Oranges of Death* and must have thought he was being very clever in adapting “A Scandal in Bohemia”, “The Red-Headed League” and “The Five Orange Pips” for a modern and, presumably youthful, readership, injecting humour along the way. The trouble is: the humour is pathetically and childishly smutty. These things could indeed be done satirically and cleverly, but sporadic, limp prurience as shown here is a complete waste of everybody's time.

NU

**Mr Murder: The Life and Times of Tod Slaughter** by Denis Meikle, Kip Zool and Doug Young. *Hemlock Books*, 2019. 284pp. £29.95 (hbk)

When we learned that Bernard Davies had been a member of Tod Slaughter's company, playing the classic melodramas, Stephen Farrell and I urged him to give a talk about the experience. He did, to the Dracula Society, and he gave me a copy of his script, entitled *Last of the Barnstormers*. Having rather tardily discovered this book, I quickly bought a copy and am very pleased that I did. Besides the interest in Slaughter's life and career — not only was he responsible for a touring production of *The Speckled Band* in 1912, but sixteen years later he took the lead in a revival of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, the play written for Eille Norwood — among the reminiscences and anecdotes are several provided by Bernard, and they aren't quotations from *Last of the Barnstormers*.

RJ

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