



by Steve Steinbock

One of the unique innovations that Arthur Conan Doyle brought to detective fiction is the role of “Watson.” Dr. John Watson provided a friend and sidekick for Sherlock Holmes, as well as a chronicler, narrator, and storyteller. As we celebrate Sherlock Holmes’s birthday, I am reminded of three books reviewed this past year in *The Jury Box* that feature unique twists on the Watson/Holmes relationship. *Hunters of the Dead* and *Partners in Crime* by Steve Hockensmith (reviewed in March/April 2024) tell of the comical adventures of a pair of cowboy brothers, Otto and Gustav Amlingmeyer. Otto, the talkative younger brother, serves as Watson to his quiet older sibling, Gustav, whose love of the Sherlock Holmes stories inspires him to solve crimes in the Old West. (*Hunters* is a full-length novel, while *Partners* is a collection of short mysteries, most of which were originally published in the pages of *EQMM*). Also last year (*EQMM* May/June 2024) I reviewed *The Murder of Mr. Ma* by S.J. Rozan and John Shen Yen Nee. This book brings together two historical figures: the seventh-century Chinese magistrate Di Rienjie (Judge Dee) as the great detective, and Chinese novelist Lao She (1899-1966) as his Watson, working together in 1924 London.

Now on to a Baker Street Dozen of new reviews. We begin with three inventive pastiches, followed by two clever classical-styled mysteries, and then several capsule mini-reviews. We’ll wrap up this column with several new titles published by the Baker Street Irregulars, the literary society dedicated to the celebration and study of Sherlock Holmes.

***** Nicholas Meyer, *Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram from Hell*, Mysterious Press, \$26.95. It’s the summer of 1916 when Europe is under the shadow of The Great War. Holmes and Watson are sent by the British Secret Service Bureau to the U.S. and Mexico in order to intercept and decipher a coded message from Germany and foil a German plot to keep the U.S. from entering the war. Along their way across the continent, Holmes and Watson encounter a young Bureau of Investigation agent named John Edgar Hoover as well as Theodore Roosevelt’s wayward daughter Alice Longworth. The plot is clever and the writing exceptional, but what makes this book stand out is how Meyer weaves into the story dozens of historical figures and events,

including the spy plot at the center of the novel.

**** Sherry Thomas, *A Ruse of Shadows*, Berkley, \$18.00. Sherry Thomas's series about Charlotte Holmes is better characterized as romantic adventure rather than pure mystery, but the books are Sherlockian through and through. The series postulates that Sherlock Holmes is the invention of a young woman who uses the phantom persona of Sherlock as a front for her detective agency. As the series has progressed, the plots have centered more on intrigue than on detection. This eighth volume in the series finds Charlotte as a person of interest in the death of Lord Bancroft Ashburton, the disgraced brother of Charlotte's lover. The story is complex, weaving in past intrigues with the Ashburton and Moriarty families. With a long list of characters and threads of previous volumes, *A Ruse of Shadows* is a good read, but not an easy one, especially for those who haven't read the previous books in the series.

**** Tim Major, *Jekyll & Hyde: Consulting Detectives*, Titan Books, \$25.99. Set in the late 1890s, a decade after the events in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella, Major's book follows the story of Muriel Carew, a character who appeared in the 1931 Fredric March film adaptation (but not in Stevenson's original novel). She is a woman of means who uses her wealth and social power to unmask those who would defraud the innocent. On one such excursion, Muriel runs into her former fiancée, Dr. Henry Jekyll, who disappeared ten years earlier. During the years that have elapsed, Jekyll has attempted to train his monstrous alter ego Edward Hyde and form a business alliance, which Muriel (the daughter of one of Hyde's victims) wants to join. As they go through Jekyll's backlog of missing-persons cases, Muriel points out similarities that Jekyll missed. The story is a clever follow-up to Stevenson's novel that turns the tormented Jekyll and his monstrous alter ego into sleuths.

***** Tom Mead, *Cabaret Macabre*, Mysterious Press, \$26.95. Set in 1938 England, the third book in the Joseph Spector locked-room series features a number of interconnected puzzles. Two children find a steamer trunk on the beach and open it to find a faceless corpse; a judge's wife believes her husband is receiving threatening letters from a young man imprisoned in a sanatorium; the inmate's sister believes her brother's life is in danger; a body is discovered in a boat in the middle of a frozen pond; a man is shot and killed by a bullet that apparently passed through a closed window without breaking the glass. Filled with often cryptic allusions to classical detective fiction, *Cabaret Macabre* is a mind-bending puzzler that had me baffled up to the end.

**** Stephanie Wrobel, *The Hitchcock Hotel*, Berkley, \$29.00. Twenty years ago, Hitchcock fan Alfred Smettle belonged to a college film club along with his five best friends. Two decades later, Alfred has opened a New England hotel providing his guests with an immersive Hitchcockian experience. For the hotel's first anniversary, he invites his five friends, none of whom he's seen in sixteen years, for a celebratory weekend. But when they arrive, his guests begin to suspect that Alfred has plans of revenge for incidents that occurred during their senior year. Leading to a diabolical climax, the story is told from the various perspectives of Alfred, his housekeeper, and his five guests. With bits of Hitchcock's *Rope* and *Psycho*, as well as Christie's *And Then There Were None*, the tension leads to a diabolical twist and a mostly satisfying conclusion.

Several other new mysteries are worth noting: *It's Elementary* by Elise Bryant (Berkley, \$19.00) is a fresh, fun whodunit about a missing elementary

school principal and a single mom, Mavis Miller, coerced by the PTA president into serving on the DEI committee due to her skin color.

The Corpse with the Pearly Smile (Four Tails, \$4.99 e-book, \$30.99 HC, is the fourteenth book in Cathy Ace's beloved Cait Morgan series.

The Welsh Canadian criminal psychologist and her retired policeman husband head to a luxury resort on the island of Tahiti where the Polynesian paradise turns deadly.

Leslie Budewitz has written several short stories that appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* about former slave "Stagecoach" Mary Fields, the first African American woman employed as a mail carrier in the United States. These stories plus a new novella have been collected in *All God's Sparrows* (Beyond the Page, \$7.99 e-book, \$14.99 paperback).

We wrap up this column with five new titles from BSI Press, the publishing arm of the Baker Street Irregulars. *A West Wind: How America and Americans Influenced the Sherlockian Canon*, edited by Tom Horrocks and Ray Betzner (BSI Press, \$39.95) includes essays and articles dealing with the history of Sherlock Holmes publications in the U.S.; American geography, politics, crime and law enforcement in the Holmes canon; and American portrayals of Sherlock Holmes on stage, screen, and television, among other topics.

Sherlock Holmes & the British Empire, edited by Ross Davies (BSI Press, \$29.95), presents the proceedings of the 2022 BSI Empire Conference, including dozens of articles and transcribed lectures dealing with military, historical, and artistic aspects of the British Imperial world, from Egypt to India and from Africa to Canada.

There are two new volumes in the BSI Manuscript series. *Clutches of a Fiend*, edited by Steve Doyle (BSI Press, \$44.95) reproduces Arthur Conan Doyle's original handwritten manuscript of "The Illustrious Client" and takes a close look at the dark world of violence and sex represented in that story. *That Ghastly Face*, edited by Ira Matetsky (BSI Press, \$44.95) includes a reproduction of the handwritten manuscript of "The Blanched Soldier" along with chapters on the history of the manuscript, its ownership, editorial changes, and other interesting aspects of the story.

An important upcoming title from BSI Press is *Wiggins* by Sonia Fetherston, a review of the life and tenure of Thomas L. Stix Jr., the leader of the Baker Street Irregulars from 1986 to 1997, under whose tenure the BSI opened up to female membership, changed the venue of the annual BSI dinner and established the evening's agenda, and invested the first-ever African American Irregular.

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