

Sherlock Holmes and the Skull of Death

Robert E. McClellan

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Sherlock Holmes, the super-intelligent, hyper-observant, outrageously eccentric “consulting detective,” appeared in four novels and fifty-six short stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. According to *Guinness World Records*, seventy-five different actors have portrayed him in 221 films. Holmes has been featured in derivative works ranging from stage plays to anime, with varying degrees of adherence to the character of the Doyle canon.

The author of this little novel appears to be among those who play “The Great Game,” pretending that Holmes really existed. He attempts the devices that Laurie R. King used so triumphantly in her *Beekeeper’s Apprentice* series, claiming that the handwritten manuscript for this novel was sent to him “wrapped in a moldy packet, stained and decaying,” and casting Doyle as Watson’s literary agent. McClellan credits himself and Watson as authors, and coyly claims that the illustrations were “adapted from art by Sidney Paget for *The Strand* magazine.”

McClellan weaves in clever historical references, such as having Holmes and Watson attend a performance of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* starring William Gillette. Gillette wrote plays featuring Holmes and famously portrayed him onstage. Readers who suspend disbelief very thoroughly will enjoy these playful allusions and forgive McClellan’s errors in historical fact and sequence, as well as his frequent misspellings and flawed punctuation and grammar.

The plot of *The Skull of Death* also involves an historical event: a notorious hoax in which an unknown forger faked the “missing link.” A human skull with the jaw of an orangutan was “discovered” in a quarry in Piltdown, England and presented at the 1912 London Geology Conference as evidence of a newly discovered step in human evolution. Doyle scholars have often speculated on why Holmes never investigated the Piltdown hoax. Here, the detective looks into the deception after a client comes begging for help finding his kidnapped chimpanzee.

The author has adapted this book from a stage play that he wrote with Giacinta Bradley Koontz. His writing style is delightfully Victorian and Doyle-esque. Take, for example, Watson’s description of his voyage to visit his ostensibly retired friend: “It was my good fortune to have a compartment to myself on the Sussex train, leaving me free to enjoy the passing countryside without distraction. My spirits rose with each mile after we clattered over the points at Victoria Station.”

The adventure includes many classic character types from the Holmes stories: Mrs. Hudson’s daughter-in-law has taken over the care of the eccentric tenant of 221-B Baker Street; the next generation of raffish and eager Baker Street Irregulars are employed; mysterious “Oriental” vendors are visited; Mycroft Holmes lurks in the background; and several upstanding nobles, professionals, and intellectuals are variously consulted and suspected as the narrative glides and tumbles energetically along.

Although serious enthusiasts would do better to stick with the original canon or the Laurie R. King series, casual Holmes fans will find this a lightweight, amusing way to pass a couple of hours in the foggy streets of London in the company of the world’s most famous consulting detective.

KAREN MCCARTHY (February 7, 2011)

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