

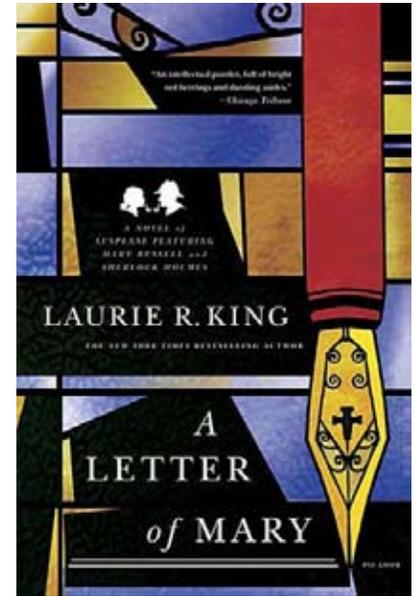


# Reading Group Gold

## A Letter of Mary A Mary Russell Novel by Laurie King

### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *A Letter of Mary* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *A Letter of Mary*.



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### About the Book

It is 1923. Mary Russell and her husband, the retired Sherlock Holmes, are enjoying the summer together on their Sussex estate when visited by an old friend, Miss Dorothy Ruskin, an archeologist just returned from Palestine. She leaves in their protection an ancient manuscript which seems to hint at the possibility that Mary Magdalene was an apostle – an artifact certain to stir up a storm of biblical proportions in the Christian establishment. When Ruskin is suddenly killed in a tragic accident, Russell and Holmes find themselves on the trail of a fiendishly clever murderer.

The world of Arthur Conan Doyle comes into distinctly different focus when taken from the point of view of a woman, and Laurie R. King often brings the socio-political backdrop of his books to the fore. *A Letter of Mary* also gives Holmes a romantic match, a feminist no less, and through the prism of this marriage we see a different Holmes, but one who is altogether recognizable from the original books. The bigger “what-if” question that King asks, though, is how the world might be changed if it were discovered that a woman had served as an apostle. In the form of a great mystery novel, *A Letter of Mary* reimagines the Doyle canon and, at the same time, considers intriguing political and theological possibilities.

### Praise for *A Letter of Mary*

“An intellectual puzzler, full of bright red herrings and dazzling asides.”—*Chicago Tribune*

“A lively adventure in the very best of intellectual company.”—*The New York Times Book Review*



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“Witty, literate . . . There’s nothing elementary about King’s take on period details or the behavior of her characters.”—*Orlando Sentinel*

## About the Author

Laurie R. King is the Edgar Award–winning author of four contemporary novels featuring Kate Martinelli, eight acclaimed Mary Russell mysteries, and four stand-alone novels, including the highly praised *A Darker Place*. She lives in northern California.

## Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of the novel, Mary Russell is presented with two artifacts, both of uncertain origin: a box that may have belonged to T. E. Lawrence of the Arab Revolt, and a letter on papyrus that appears to have been written by Mary Magdalene. Do you agree that artifacts, like oral histories, don’t always tell the truth? Discuss how Laurie R. King describes the box and the papyrus, and the ways in which they serve as metaphor for how history is recorded and how it changes over time.
2. It has been over eight years since Russell first met Holmes, and they are now settled in the comfortable routines of marriage. Russell can deduce Holmes’ mood merely by observing his newspaper reading habits (“an unread newspaper meant an unsettled mind”). Does this sensitivity surprise you? In what ways does marriage seem to have changed Russell since the earlier books in the series? In what ways is theirs a typical marriage, how is it unusual, and how do you see the relationship developing in future volumes? Are all of us, in a sense, detectives, making deductions and trying to understand the behavior of the people we know and love?
3. If you were in Russell’s shoes, would you experience the same pressure and guilt that she feels regarding whether to go public with the letter? How do you think the letter would alter the course of human history, of Christianity? What would it mean to the world if a woman were historically raised to the prominence of an apostle?
4. What was your reaction to Mycroft’s debriefing on Ruskin’s involvement in the Friends of Palestine, and her relationship with Colonel Edwards? Discuss the ways in which King weaves the threads of the plot together in this scene, especially how Ruskin’s sister, Erica, and the two Arab men who visited Erica’s home prior to Ruskin’s murder, are brought into the story. As the plot thickens, how does your understanding of Ruskin’s life, work, and motives change?
7. When Russell goes undercover as Mary Small, she admits an attraction to both Colonel Edwards and to his son. Was this admission surprising to you? What do you think of the later scene in which Russell allows the Colonel to kiss her wrist? In what ways does this sexual dimension change Russell’s character— does it make her stronger, more vulnerable, more whimsical?



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8. Moreover, what parallels can be drawn between Russell's moment of weakness with Colonel Edwards and the story of Mary Magdalene? "I was filled with admiration for the pure, distilled strength of the woman, with her simple, deadly decisions—and for the first time I wondered what had become of the granddaughter, Rachel, how old she had been, if she made it safely to Magdala," Russell writes. What themes are reflected in this passage, and have been running throughout the course of the book? How do these themes affect all the women in this novel?

9. What was your reaction when you read Ruskin's letter to her sister dated November 22, 1920? How well did the contents within support Holmes' previous deduction of Erica's character based on her handwriting?

10. Although the title refers mainly to the letter written by Mary Magdalene, there are several letters throughout the book. In the last paragraph, Russell mentions three main letters, and still there are several others. How does King use letter writing as a device to move the story forward, and as a metaphor for the voice of history?

## An Interview with Laurie R. King

1. *In writing this series of novels, did you set out initially to find an ideal romantic partner for Holmes, or was it something that naturally happened in the process of writing? Is there a certain romantic scene you especially enjoyed creating in Letter of Mary, or any of the other books in the series?*

I began the *Beekeeper* stories with the idea of, What would a female Sherlock Holmes look like? This soon evolved into, What would the pairing of two such people look like? I wanted to link Holmes with a full partner, beyond the unequal and limited partnership he had with Dr. Watson in the Conan Doyle stories. Russell is his equal, in mind and spirit.

The next question in that relationship was, of course, How complete is it? And it seemed to me that a man as deeply passionate about his work as Holmes would have a nature that responded to his partner in all ways, not just the cerebral.

Their romance is, I hasten to say, heavily cerebral. This only makes it more interesting to reveal the occasional glimpse of physical passion. Only a glimpse, however: These are stories told by a haughty and elderly Mary Russell, and she's not about to get all demonstrative in her memoirs, any more than Holmes himself would.

2. *Parts of the Mary Russell series have been set in Israel/Palestine, India, America, and Africa. The Middle East plays a role in A Letter of Mary. Would you talk a little about your research—did you travel to these places, and is it necessary to do so when the book also is a period piece?*

It is both an advantage and a problem to write historical fiction, because much of the past has been covered



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over, all across the world. This makes it difficult to absorb local color, when the tints and shades are so very different. On the other hand, it means there are very few people around qualified to argue with your version of a patch of countryside in 1924.

Personally, I am not comfortable writing about a place I haven't been to, and have rarely done so. I like to smell the air, eat the food, look at the faces, and wander in and out of the buildings, and find it hard to visualize scenes clearly if I haven't been where they occur. What I like to do is read about a place, study photographs, then find a good guidebook from around the time I'm writing about (Baedeker's guides are great.) Then when I travel there, I can use that guidebook to show me the shapes behind the modern additions.

*3. Russell is sent alone to spy on Colonel Edwards, and this part of the book composes a good deal of her investigation. But after a few chapters, Edwards turns out to be a red herring. Can you discuss the way to use a good red herring, and their proper place in a mystery?*

A red herring is a smelly salted fish dragged along the ground in a hunt, either to train scent-hounds to follow a trail, or by hunt saboteurs to mislead a pack from its pursuit of a fox. In a mystery story, a metaphorical red herring as substantial as Colonel Edwards must have a function apart from the solution of the mystery. Here, he not only leads Russell astray and makes her mistrust herself, he serves to illuminate the potential impact of the Magdalene's letter on the world. Perhaps he is less of a red herring than he seems: Although he does not turn out to be the culprit, the parallel investigation he takes her on leads her to another kind of solution.

*4. You have a Masters in theology; would you talk a little about if and how your academic work influences your creative work?*

One of the joys of the mystery genre is how any human endeavor that generates passionate emotion can be used to drive the story, be it love, greed, revenge, or stamp collecting—and religion certainly qualifies as an emotional human endeavor.

Mysteries also appeal because they, more than any other form of storytelling, link the intellect and the heart: A whodunit without rich characters is cold and empty; a suspense novel with a flabby plot is a cheat.

So it is with theology, as I use it in some of my novels. God-talk (a literal translation of “theology”) is both an intellectual pursuit of ideas and an immersion in the emotion of faith.

*5. Many readers are interested in your life as a writer. When did your love for writing and storytelling begin?*

I began, as I continue, as a reader. I read fiction for thirty years before I felt secure enough in the formal language of storytelling to write my first novel. I continue to read as if I were taking courses in writing, and learn something new with every author I meet.



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6. *Would you talk a little about the physical environment of your workspace, and whether you use a typewriter, word processor, or pen/pencil? Does any one variable change depending upon whether you are writing a Mary Russell novel, a Kate Martinelli, a stand alone mystery, or a literary novel?*

I have an upstairs room in my house with many wooden shelves on the walls and a day-bed near a window. The shelves hold fiction along two walls, and on a third wall reference books—history, forensics, the craft of writing, theology, and the like. I sit among these riches with an artist’s clipboard on my lap and a small laptop on that, and dive into my story.

In front of me is a cork board, on which I pin maps, photos of the current book’s setting, reminders of plot or character, and odds and ends that evoke certain elements of the story. When I look up from the screen, I see a picture of the place where my character might live, or a loop of the prayer-beads he might have handled.

For the historical books, I often have old postcards or photo reproductions I copy from books, to keep me reminded.

7. *Did you have a mentor, or someone whom you looked up to as a writer, and who perhaps lit the way?*

A thousand of them, more every year, ordinary individuals who are also writers. It constantly astonishes me that I am regarded as one of them, that my work sits on the shelves of libraries, that people are entertained, moved, even inspired by the words I hunt out from the back of my brain.