

# Reading Group Gold

## The Beekeeper's Apprentice

by Laurie R. King

1. In an Editor's Preface, King playfully discloses the "true" origin of the story at hand: that what follows will be the actual memoirs of Mary Russell, which were mysteriously sent to her out of the blue, along with a trunk full of odds and ends. Why does King begin with this anecdote, essentially including herself in the story? Does it bring the world of the novel closer to our own? Have you read any other books (*Lolita*, for example) which begin with a false-preface, and what effect does this device have on the rest of the novel? Were you fooled?

2. It is 1915, the Great War is raging through Europe and the men of England are in the trenches. How does this particular period in history allow a character like Mary Russell to take the stage in areas of post-Victorian society usually reserved for men? In what significant ways does she seize these opportunities? Would she have thrived if born into a different, more oppressive social climate, say, one hundred years earlier?

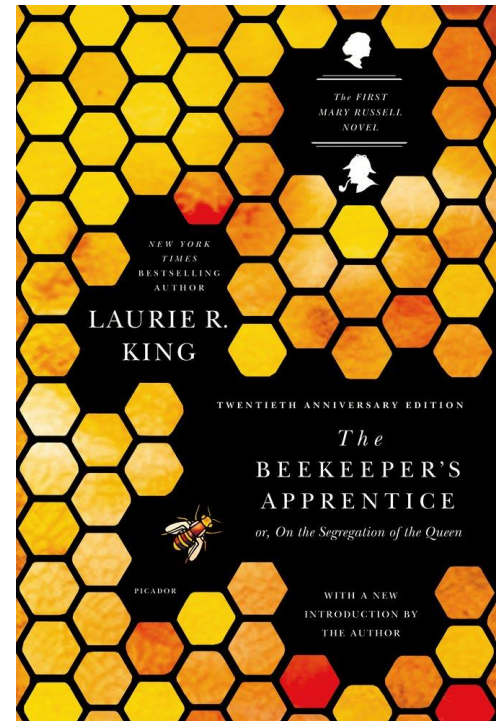
3. How would you characterize Mary Russell based on her first opinion of bees? Does her disdain for their mindless busy-work and adherence to hive social structure reflect a particular attitude toward the social landscape of England at the time? Do you agree with Mary?

4. Holmes uses the game of chess to sharpen Mary Russell's strategic thinking and intuition. How does chess—and, in particular, the Queen—serve as a metaphor throughout the story? In what ways does King herself use the game to comment upon the master-apprentice relationship?

5. Russell and Holmes don disguises throughout *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, and their work sometimes requires them to cross dress. Discuss each point in the novel where either Russell or Holmes takes cover in the opposite sex; what special access does this method of disguise give them to the other characters? Is gender reversal necessary in order to win the confidence of certain people? How does Mary Russell's world change when she dresses as a man?

6. Watson is eternally known as the great detective's sidekick. Who, in your opinion, is a more effective foil for Holmes, Watson or Russell? What different aspects of Holmes's personality emerge in the presence of each? What would happen if Holmes were paired with a different partner, one more timid or less tenacious?

7. At Oxford, Mary Russell concludes that theology and detective work are one and the same. In your opinion, how are the two subjects related?



8. The art of deduction is constantly at play in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*. Even when Mary notices that Watson has shaven off his mustache, she cares to look closer at the skin and imagine that it was done “very recently.” Is Laurie King training the reader’s perceptions to be more acute throughout the novel? Does every detail of our lives hold a mystery and a story?
9. What are some crucial differences between the training Patricia Donleavy received from Moriarty and the training Mary Russell received from Holmes? What mental and emotional strengths do both women have in common, and what separates them? Holmes comments: “A quick mind is worthless unless you can control the emotions with it as well.” How does this maxim apply?
10. At what point in the novel did you suspect that Russell’s adversary was a woman? When you read a mystery, what assumptions do you typically make about the gender of the villain? In what ways does King toy with the reader’s assumptions about gender throughout the novel?

### **About the Author**

Laurie R. King is the Edgar Award–winning author of the Kate Martinelli novels and the acclaimed Mary Russell–Sherlock Holmes mysteries, as well as a few stand-alone novels. *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, the first in her Mary Russell series, was nominated for an Agatha Award and was named one of the Century’s Best 100 Mysteries by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association. *A Monstrous Regiment of Women* won the Nero Wolfe Award. She has degrees in theology, and besides writing she has also managed a coffee store and raised children, vegetables and the occasional building. She lives in northern California.



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