

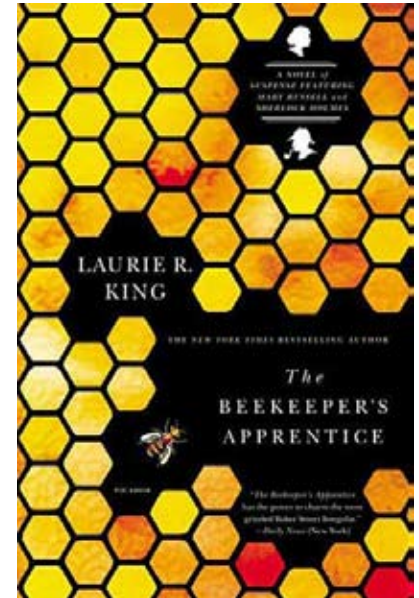


Reading Group Gold

The Beekeeper's Apprentice

A Mary Russell Novel

by Laurie King



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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* 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 *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*.

About the Book

The Beekeeper's Apprentice is the first in a series of books to follow the adventures of Mary Russell, a gawky, egotistical, recently orphaned young lady who literally falls into the lap of Sherlock Holmes. Though he appears long retired from crime fighting, and is quietly engaged in raising honeybees on his Sussex estate, Russell piques his interest and in short order impresses the detective with her intellect and powers of deduction. Under his tutelage, this very modern twentieth century woman proves a deft protégée and a fitting partner for the Victorian detective, and in this first volume, we witness the formative years of a character who will grow and develop over many books to come.

The Beekeeper's Apprentice also paints a historically accurate picture of what it is like to live as a woman in misogynistic times. Between the strands of the mystery, King threads her own subtle commentary on how war transforms social status, and the mutability of gender roles even under oppressive circumstances. In addition, *Beekeeper* is a faithful and formally impressive foray into the world of Conan Doyle, one that carefully evokes the voice of Sherlock Holmes while at the same time presenting him with a new foil, and fresh adventure. King revives the literary tradition of Conan Doyle, and all of its pleasures, but from a distinctly different point of view.

Praise for *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*

“Wonderfully original and entertaining . . . absorbing from beginning to end.”—*Booklist*

“King has stepped onto the sacred literary preserve of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, poached Holmes, and brilliantly brought him to life again.”—*The Washington Post Book World*



Reading Group Gold

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 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?



Reading Group Gold

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?

An Interview with Laurie R. King

1. *The Beekeeper's Apprentice is only the first in a long and increasingly rich series of mysteries. Would you give us some insight into how it all started, and where you got the idea for the character of Mary Russell?*

The Russell books began with the thought, What would Sherlock Holmes look like if he were a woman? How would that cold, discerning mind change, and how would it remain the same? And because two similar objects are more interesting when they are close enough to set each other off, I chose a time and a place where the two versions could meet.

The latest Holmes story by Arthur Conan Doyle takes place at the beginning of the Great War, in August of 1914. The society that gave birth to Sherlock Holmes did not survive that terrible war, and the Holmes stories written by Doyle after 1914 were all set beforehand, with Holmes firmly locked into the time of gaslights and hansom cabs.

But what if Holmes had survived the War? What if he had been permitted to grow and change with his country? *Beekeeper* opens in the spring of 1915, when the nation is beginning to feel War’s transformation. By choosing that time, I defined a great deal of what the series would become—the story not only of a young woman, but of an era. Mary Russell is a woman of the Twentieth century; through her, Holmes enters the modern age.

2. *Many people have stepped into Conan Doyle’s shoes and performed the difficult task of evoking Holmes’s voice. How were you able to make your revival of Holmes more than an act of ventriloquism, and really bring him to life in these pages? Did you feel intimidated by the task of writing an iconic literary character? What emboldened you to accept the challenge?*

If I have succeeded in “restoring Holmes to life” as one reviewer put it, it may be because I did not try to write Holmes stories, but put Holmes in the role of supporting actor. I was free to let him evolve in ways he would not have, had I been writing pastiches set in and around his Baker Street days.



Reading Group Gold

At the same time, because he was not my central concern, I did not worry about how I would handle him—I was focused on Russell, and Holmes just slipped through. In a sense, I don't feel I can take credit for the personality that comes across in the Russell books. Perhaps I'm just channeling Conan Doyle....

3. *From films to books, others have tried to create new stories for Holmes. Which are your favorites? What are your favorite film adaptations of Holmes?*

I read very few pastiches, mostly because I'm afraid that my mind will forget that the adventure is not one by Conan Doyle, and I'll work it into a story somewhere down the line. I do enjoy books that take the character and deliberately work him into another time and place, such as Peter Straub's *Mystery*, with his aging detective a clear stand-in for Holmes.

I did read, and love, the two recent Holmes novels that explore the detective's great old age, Mitch Cullin's *A Slight Trick of the Mind* and Michael Chabon's *Final Solution*. And because it will take "my" Holmes quite a while to make it there, I don't have to worry about unconsciously adopting the story lines.

When it comes to film adaptations, the Grenada series with Jeremy Brett was absolutely superb, both as adaptations and in evoking the man and his time.

4. *What is your favorite Conan Doyle story?*

Why not ask me who is my favorite child? *The Hound of the Baskervilles* for its inimitable (I know, I tried!) atmosphere, *Sign of the Four* for being a dashing good yarn, "Silver Blaze" for its energy, for its classic Holmes construction, and for containing what is arguably the best Holmes exchange of them all—"But the dog did nothing in the night- time." "That was the curious incident."

5. *Today's murder mysteries in television, film, and books often rely upon meticulous forensic science — readers know all too well what can be done with ultraviolet lights and microscopes. What do you see as the difference between the forensic investigations of past and present, and what are the different challenges of telling a story within those two very different realms of plausibility?*

Cutting-edge forensic techniques were one of the striking innovations of the Conan Doyle stories—Holmes solves a murder based on fingerprints, he experiments with identifying human blood. But on the whole, he solves his cases not in the laboratory, but by seeing, noticing, and thinking. When I wrote a book that was part Holmes, part modern-day (*The Art of Detection*) one of the things that came out was how oddly similar the two eras of investigation are. Television dramas may not agree, but in fact, crime labs are used to prove cases, and only rarely to solve them.

Having said that, Holmes would have reveled in modern technology, from the Internet to DNA.

6. *Along those lines, you are also the author of a contemporary series of books, the Kate Martinelli mysteries. What specifically moves you to write in the two different time periods?*

The Art of Detection is a Martinelli novel, with story lines in both time periods. I find that there are some



Reading Group Gold

stories I can't tell within the rather whimsical world of Russell and Holmes, and some that fit into modern times better than they do the early Twentieth Century.

Beyond that, it's a pleasure to me to write in such different flavors, and reduces the danger of repeating myself. As they say, a change is as good as a break, and alternating between Russell and Martinelli, or Russell and a standalone novel, keeps the writing fresh for me. When time comes to start another in their saga, I'm eager to do so, since it's been a year or more since I last lived with them.

7. Many people are curious about how to construct a mystery. Do you plot it out backwards, knowing the conclusion, or proceed forward and allow the solution to surprise you (as it does the reader) en process?

Frankly, I'm curious myself.

I'm one of those writers who doesn't outline, who basically doesn't know what she's getting into from one chapter to the next.

When I first started, I needed to know the final scene before I could begin the book. Then I started Folly, and got halfway into it before I realized that I didn't have a clue as to its ending. Fortunately, by the time one has written seven or eight books, there's a certain degree of assurance in the process: I might not know what I was doing, precisely, but I've always seem to figure it out up to now.

Now, when I start a book, I know what the story's about, who it's about, what the main events are, but beyond that, I depend on growing the novel organically. In practice, this means that the back of my mind seems to know what's going on, even if the front of my mind is in a state of blissful (or not so blissful) ignorance.

8. How have fans and scholars of Conan Doyle taken to the series so far?

When I first started writing the Russell books, there was much mistrust among the Sherlockians (or in Britain, Holmesians.) From the beginning, however, there were a few of the faithful who saw what I was doing with the series, and enjoyed it. Bit by bit, we've won over (or maybe just worn down) the skeptics, to the point that I was invited to speak to the 2007 annual Baker Street Irregulars dinner, and not a single tomato was thrown.

I think they came to see the enormous affection and respect I have, both for Holmes and for Conan Doyle. I may have written a series of books in which Sherlock Holmes is the supporting character, but without him, there would truly have been no Mary Russell.