

## **A Note From the Author**

The year I turned either eleven or twelve I received a massive and distinguished hardcover edition of the collected Sherlock Holmes stories. It seemed like literally the worst present anyone had ever received: terrible, but also not cheap, and therefore tragic. That money could have been turned into perfectly good baseball cards.

I was a reader, though, so eventually I did glance inside the book. The first story was okay. The second was interesting. The third was...then I woke up, as if I were coming out of a fever, and realized that I had done nothing for days but read about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson, M.D. When I reached the volume's last page, I turned back to the first one again immediately – almost involuntarily – and started over.

I read that book to tatters over the next few years. Before long there were stories in it (*The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb*, *The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter*) that I knew virtually by heart.

Italo Calvino once said that the boredom of childhood is different, richer and more special than the boredom of adulthood, “full of dreams, a sort of projection into another place, another reality.” How deeply true that seems to me. As I turned thirteen and then fourteen and then fifteen, a dreamlike kind of England formed in my mind. I got there through reading, as surely as the Pevensies got to Narnia through the wardrobe; in a sense I have never left. The book you're holding now is set there.

I wrote *A Beautiful Blue Death* during the summer of 2003. I had never been to England at the time. (Subsequently I lived there, and people often think, incorrectly, that I'm British. “Charles Finch, there's an author by that name,” a librarian once said as I

was checking a book out. “I think you may mean me,” I replied, a little red-faced. “No, he’s British.” “I really think you might mean me.” “No,” she said confidently, “he’s tall and handsome and British.” I waited for her to scan my book, thanked her, and left.)

At the time I was staying with my late grandmother, Anne Truitt. I was at work on a very complex literary novel, which is thankfully now several computers in my past. All my stacks of manuscript pages and legal pads were arranged on her dining room table, my pens, my pencils and erasers, the tools that I had fooled myself into thinking might make me capable of writing a book I wasn’t ready to write.

Every word I produced was agony, I think, in retrospect, because I knew somewhere in the distant depths of my brain that something was wrong.

Then suddenly, one morning, out of nowhere – though really it was out of Conan Doyle, and all his successors in my heart during my adolescent years: Wodehouse, Trollope, Eliot, Dickens, Sayers, Christie – I started to write about a cold London day in 1865. I didn’t know what was going to happen, or why I was doing it. But the words flowed effortlessly, like rainfall over cracked ground after a long dry spell, cathartic and welcome.

I’ve since spent ten books with the character that randomly came to me that day, Charles Lenox, a shrewd, humane, at times melancholy presence in my life. Writing a series is a long journey at close quarters – there have been mornings I couldn’t stand the sight of Lenox, or the friends and family who surround him, McConnell, Lady Jane, Toto, Graham, Edmund. (Conan Doyle briefly killed off Holmes, don’t forget.)

But for the most part I feel only joy in their company. This is in part, I think, because they are good people. Many mysteries, paradoxically, are a way of feeling happier about life. I would include my own among them. Each one has a different surface, a new crime, but the life beneath them is always the same: a man and the people he loves, and who love him, the slow passage of their lives together. Tea, toast, warm fires. When I look at *A Beautiful Blue Death* now I see easy fixes here and there that I could have made if I'd had more experience. But I also feel the same emotions now as I did on that first morning, the same sense of connection to a past where I wanted to while away my hours, living in their time, in a setting defined by powerful a familial sense of love.

And the mysteries are pretty fiendish puzzles too, if I may say so myself. It makes me happy to think of some young reader out there getting a set of them for his or her birthday – ticked off, at first, and then drawn by accident into this first tale, then the next, and the next, on and on: into that certain sensation of homecoming and safety that in the whole world of art only a series of many books, written about a single set of people we come to love, can truly give us.

- 1) Victorian London was known for its rigid adherence to its class system. How does Lenox represent it? How does he defy it?
- 2) Similarly, how does Lenox's status as a gentleman impair his ability to do detective work? How does it help?
- 3) Toto and Lady Jane represent two kinds of Victorian woman, one impetuous, the other more level-headed. Which is the more "modern" woman? How does each assert their identities in a society dominated by men?
- 4) Before Sir Robert Peel founded the Metropolitan Police in 1829, the only centralized constabulary in England was the small one that patrolled the Thames River. In what way did having a central police force define the changes seen from the beginning of Victoria's reign in 1837 to her death in 1901?
- 5) Would Lenox be as effective a detective in 2017? More? Less?
- 6) Finch has said that his influences include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, P.G. Wodehouse, and Agatha Christie. Whose influence seems strongest? How so? What other authors does *A Beautiful Blue Death* call to mind?
- 7) Graham is an unusual butler. Domestic work – service – was by far the largest profession in Victorian England. How is Graham typical of it, and how is he different?

8) Did you feel sympathy for the culprit in *A Beautiful Blue Death*? Were there characters you disliked despite their innocence? What do these questions pose about the nature of violence?