Nonfiction review: 'The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession'

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"Everyone says I'm smart," Forrest Tucker acknowledged, after his arrest for robbing the Republic Security Bank in Jupiter, Fla. "But I'm not smart in the ways of life or I wouldn't have done the things I did."

Seventy-eight-years-old, and looking "as if he had just come from the Early Bird Special," Tucker had been one of the most notorious stickup men -- and escape artists -- of the 20th century. When he died, he sighed, no one would remember him. Sitting in a wheelchair in a prison medical center in Fort Worth, Texas, Tucker wished that he had had "a real profession, something like the music business."

David Grann, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is drawn to men like Tucker, who exhibit human nature in all its power and perversity. In "The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession," he profiles a dozen of them, including Richard Lancelyn Green, the world's foremost -- and most obsessive -- expert on Sherlock Holmes, who died, mysteriously, while in hot pursuit of the missing papers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; Parisian-born Frederic Pierre Bourdin, who assumed the identity of Nicholas Barclay, a missing 16-year-old boy from Texas; and Krystian Bala, a Polish intellectual whose novel, "Amok," a postmodern rendition of "Crime and Punishment," was a "road map" to a murder he himself had committed.

A gifted storyteller, Grann has a Sherlock Holmesian gift for unearthing facts that are hidden in plain sight, presenting a crystal-clear narrative and letting his compelling cast of characters speak for themselves. With good reason, he doesn't try too hard to explain the inexplicable by supplying answers to enduring age-old questions about why some people do good while others are evil. Recognizing his remorse for what it was, a show, he tells us, Bourdin married and had a child after he was released from prison. Had he become a new person? After a moment of silence, the chameleon replies, enigmatically, "No, this is who I am."

Easily worth the price of admission, a visit to Grann's rogue's gallery is likely to leave you with a sense, at once awful and awesome, of the profound desire we all have for recognition. Caught, convicted and imprisoned, Bala announces that a new edition of "Amok" is about to be released. And that he is hard at work on a new -- and "even more shocking" -- novel, titled "De Liryk," a pun on lyrics, as in a story, and delirium. When it's published, he implies, "the devil" will get his due.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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