'On Conan Doyle' review: A valentine to the creator of Sherlock Holmes

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ON CONAN DOYLE

Michael Dirda
Princeton University Press
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During a discussion of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's sly sleuth, murmurs one word: "Maître." He's saluting Arthur Conan Doyle, Poirot explains, not the resident of 221B Baker Street. Doyle's tales were far-fetched and full of fallacies, "but the art of writing, ah, that is entirely different."

Michael Dirda, the book columnist for The Washington Post and aficionado of all things Doyle, agrees. In "On Conan Doyle: Or, the Whole Art of Storytelling" he sends a valentine to the creator of Mr. Holmes, Dr. John H. Watson and lesser-known works about domestic life, spiritualism, history and contemporary events.

Holmes' adventures appeal to all ages, Dirda reminds us. The young delight in fast-paced, suspenseful plots. Mature adults enjoy a return to a time when all was right with the world, or, at least, "it seemed rightable." They relish Holmesian ratiocination and the tight, tart, tongue-in-cheek exchanges between detective and doctor.

Dirda is less successful, it seems to me, in ginning up interest in the rest of Doyle's oeuvre. Almost all of it is "immensely readable," he suggests, only to...
add that being dated "is not necessarily a bad thing." "Through the Magic Door (1907) is "blatantly didactic"; the plotting in "Beyond The City" (1892) is "fairly perfunctory"; and "The Stark Munro Letters" (1895) is "talky."

Sherlock Holmes, it seems, was something of an exception to Doyle's dictum that "man is never so interesting as when he is in earnest."

Fortunately, Dirda understands the unimportance of being earnest. For "a happy month," he confesses, Robert Fish's groan-filled "The Incredible Schlock Homes" ("sabotage, next to the pilfering of coal, is the dirtiest of all crimes") became his favorite bedtime reading.

"On Conan Doyle" is at its best when Dirda, a card-carrying member of the Baker Street Irregulars, lets us in on the great "spoof scholarship" game of filling in the gaps in the narratives of Watson/Doyle in the canon's 56 stories and four novels. Could Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's fat, lazy and really smart older brother, be the original "M" of British intelligence? Did Sherlock do graduate work at Johns Hopkins? Could he be a woman? ("You know my methods, Watson. I put myself in the man's place.")

Always searching for Sherlockiana, Dirda, we learn, has not read all of Doyle's 21 novels and 150 short stories. "One of these days," he resolves, he will get to "The Great Shadow" (1892) and "Rodney Stone" (1896) and Doyle's last, "reportedly very muddled" book, "The Maracot Deep" (1929). But for now, "on a dark and chilly night," he prefers to turn out some lights, find a bottle of Orange Crush, and reread "The Hound of the Baskervilles." Why make this choice? It is "elementary, my dear Watson."

Reading: Dirda discusses "On Conan Doyle" at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Powell's Books at Cedar Hills Crossing, 3415 S.W. Cedar Hills Blvd., Beaverton.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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