

Laurie R. King: Contemplating Sherlock Holmes, woodworking and the magic of writing

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Thursday, 29 December 2011 10:40



When she began her career, best-selling author Laurie R. King was 35 years old, a full-time wife and mom with two small kids. She settled on Sherlock Holmes, the world's most famous fictional detective, as a major player in her books because she shared something with him – they were both good at solving problems.

“I had been contemplating Sherlock Holmes,” she said during a telephone call from her home overlooking Monterrey Bay in Northern California. “Here’s a guy who figured out stuff I do every day. We both had eyes in the back of our heads.”

As she thought about the writing process, she decided to create a female character every bit Holmes’ equal.

“What would Sherlock Holmes’ brain look like if it were, indeed, in a young woman?” she said with a laugh. “The books are the coming of age story of an extraordinary young mind who just happened to be in the body of a 20th century woman rather than a Victorian male.”

According to King, Holmes’ creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), really didn’t imagine his most famous character moving into the 20th century.

“As far as he was concerned, Holmes was from pre-war England,” she said. “I didn’t agree with that.”

King says that Conan Doyle was “baffled” by the reading public’s affection for Holmes.

Laurie R. King: Contemplating Sherlock Holmes, woodworking and the magic of writing

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Thursday, 29 December 2011 10:40

“He never took Holmes very seriously,” she explained. “He always regarded the Sherlock Holmes stuff as being secondary to his historical fiction, which I find personally unreadable – and, indeed, most people don’t read it.”

Although she didn’t know much about her subject matter or the period when she began writing her award-winning series, she was soon hooked on both.

“I backed into the character and the period,” she explained. “When I started writing, I found they opened up in some really fascinating ways. Holmes had a lot more potential than Conan Doyle gave him credit for. When confronted by a partner who is his equal and by the turmoil that goes on in his world between 1915 and the 1920s, Holmes becomes very intriguing.”

American Mary Russell and Holmes first meet in “The Beekeeper’s Apprentice,” published in 1994.

It’s 1915 and the 15-year-old Russell is in England, recovering from a horrific car accident in California that killed her wealthy parents and her younger brother. She’s sent to live with her mother’s sister in Sussex. Mary, who blames herself for the accident, spends her days wandering the countryside. She encounters the retired 54-year-old Holmes as he’s tending his bees. Holmes teaches Russell the art of detecting, detracting her from guilt and grief.

Although she has no beekeeping experience, King is meticulous when it comes to the research process for her books.

“I’m what my daughter calls ‘a recovering academic,’” she said. “One of the fun parts of writing my kind of fiction is that you do the background research by reading and looking stuff up. Then you go out and find someone who really does it. I have a whole bevy of experts on everything.”



Eleven more books have followed “The Beekeeper’s Apprentice,” including “Pirate King,”

Laurie R. King: Contemplating Sherlock Holmes, woodworking and the magic of writing

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Thursday, 29 December 2011 10:40

published this fall. Along the way, Russell and Holmes have experienced adventures across the world, including a time in the Holy Land (“O Jerusalem” - 1999), India (“The Game” - 2004) and San Francisco (“Locked Rooms” - 2005). The books should be read in order. (For a complete list of the Mary Russell books, see end of article.)

In addition to the Mary Russell series, King has also written a series of books about San Francisco police officer Kate Martinelli and several stand alone books, including “Folly” (2001) and “Keeping Watch” (2003).

In “Folly,” King’s main character is woodworking artist Rae Newborn, a troubled woman who heads out to the San Juan islands to rebuild a home originally constructed by her uncle. This time, however, King took a break from her pre-writing homework.

“I started ‘Folly’ because I wanted to write a book I didn’t have to research,” she explained. “I thought, ‘I can write about canning tomatoes or raising children or the only other skill set I had, which was building. My father was a furniture repairman, so I picked up a fair amount from him. I had built an addition to my house. When you’re married to a man [Noel Quinton King, her husband of 32 years, was a historian. He died in 2009.] who has no physical skills, you become a homebuilder. OK. How about I write a story about a woman who built a house?’”

While she didn’t need to do research on building or woodworking, there were about “10,000 other things” King had to study, from depression to the San Juan Islands, an archipelago of 172 islands between the U.S. mainland and Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada.

“When you write a book like I do, basically not sure where you’re going, the development of themes and what the book means comes as you’re writing,” King said. “At a certain point, what occurred to me was what I was writing was not just a book about a woman who rebuilds her house and rebuilds her life. That was fairly obvious. Rae also finds community in the San Juan Islands.”

King realized the islands’ sense of community when she traveled there for a book reading.

Laurie R. King: Contemplating Sherlock Holmes, woodworking and the magic of writing

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Thursday, 29 December 2011 10:40

“The people responded very positively to the image I, as a relative outsider of the islands, had created,” she said. “You have all these people living on all these scattered islands, and nevertheless, they have a very, very strong sense of community.”

One of the characters in “Folly” appears in King’s 2003 book “Keeping Watch,” which tells the story of Vietnam veteran Alan Carmichael. Because of the book’s realism, readers often think King must have served in Vietnam.

“This book is the single best exposition of the Vietnam experience I have ever read,” said Sulphur Springs resident and President-elect of Friends of the Sulphur Spring Public Library Trice Lawrence, a retired Air Force officer who was in southeast Asia during the novel’s timeframe. “It’s scary how she captures the internal view, dialogue and external viewpoint of a young, white, American male so accurately and vividly without having ever been ‘in the green.’”

“That’s the magic of writing,” King explained when told of Lawrence’s admiration of her skills. “That’s the magic of a storyteller’s imagination, isn’t it?”

After the research, magic and imagination comes the confidence necessary to take the reader on a journey.

“When an author’s voice is sure, whether with Vietnam or Sherlock Holmes, if the reader trusts the author’s voice, then it becomes real,” King concluded. “When I write about something as if I really know what I’m talking about, my readers go along.”

King says she loves to hear from two groups of readers.

“One of them is young readers,” she said. “I think Mary Russell especially speaks to girls ages 14-18. Russell is what they would like to be.”

The other group King favors is those who read her work for a “complete and absolute” escape.

“The people that I am really humbled by are those who have sat long hours at a death bed or who have nursed someone through a serious illness,” she said. “To think that I as an author can offer someone a time of relief is humbling.”

Mary Russell & Sherlock Holmes mysteries

The Beekeeper’s Apprentice (1994)
A Monstrous Regiment of Women (1995)
A Letter of Mary (1997)
The Moor (1998)
O Jerusalem (1999)
Justice Hall (2002)
The Game (2004)
Locked Rooms (2005)

The Language of Bees (2009) The God of the Hive (2010)

Beekeeping for Beginners (an ebook novella) (2011)
Pirate King (2011)

Non-series books

Darker Place (1999)
Folly (2001)
Keeping Watch (2003)
Califia’s Daughters (as Leigh Richards) (2004)
Touchstone (2007)

Kate Martinelli books

A Grave Talent (1993)
To Play the Fool (1995)
With Child (1996)
Night Work (2000)
The Art of Detection (2006) (Lambda Literary Award 2006)

King earned a bachelor’s degree in comparative religion from the University of California, and then completed her master’s degree in Old Testament Theology at Graduate Theological Union where her thesis was on “Feminine Aspects of Yahweh.”

Laurie R. King: Contemplating Sherlock Holmes, woodworking and the magic of writing

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Thursday, 29 December 2011 10:40

She later received an honorary doctorate from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

She has lived for many years in the hills above Monterey Bay near Santa Cruz, Calif.

From 1977 until his death in early 2009, she was married to the historian Noel Quinton King. They became the parents of two children, Zoe and Nathan.