



The Doctor and the Detective: A Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

By Martin Booth

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This entertaining, smart biography of Arthur Conan Doyle presents a modern day interpretation of the man who, contrary to his best efforts, will always be known as the creator of the great detective, Sherlock Holmes. Doyle was, however, much more, as Booth shows us in this intriguing study of a man who thrived on the times in which he lived. While Holmes fans will be captivated by the various tidbits that offer insight into their hero's creation; others will be fascinated by this living embodiment of the Victorian masculine ideal.

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The Doctor and the Detective: A Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle By Martin Booth Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote in his autobiography: "I have had a life which, for variety and romance, could, I think, hardly be exceeded." In the years since his death, Doyle has been almost uniquely identified with his most famous character, Sherlock Holmes, who remains among the world's most identifiable figures, fictional or real. Doyle was much more than the author of the Holmes stories, but his very success with the series has clouded nearly every attempt to address his life. Martin Booth's *The Doctor and the Detective* redresses the balance. It's the first full-fledged biography of Doyle, the first one not distorted by the lens of his Holmes stories. Through Doyle, it offers an entertaining vision of the Victorian values that underlie the stories, and it also illuminates the "variety and romance" of the author's life: as a military doctor, a war correspondent, a spiritualist, a cricket player, and a worker for social justice.

Booth begins with Doyle's grandfather, political cartoonist John Doyle, whom he sees as the pivotal fount of the family's artistic genius. He quickly moves through a description of Doyle's Jesuit schooling and his early talent for spinning stories. Later chapters examine his discovery of the short story through reading Edgar Allan Poe, his struggles and successes as his family's first medical doctor, and his eventual recognition of the need for a new kind of fiction with "a scientific detective, who solved cases on his own merits and not through the folly of the criminal." But, as Booth shows, the publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in November 1887 was not the defining event of Doyle's life. As the novella emerged and developed a small following, he entered politics and championed the Irish Liberal Unionist cause. That same year he began experimenting with telepathy and published his first letter in the journal of the London Spiritualistic Alliance. This latter interest would do as much as--if not more than--Holmes did to shape the rest of Doyle's rich life.

Doyle's papers, briefly available to scholars, were subsequently withdrawn. Studies based on those papers have been tightly controlled by the Doyle estate, so much of the most private material has never seen print. Despite that obstacle, Booth has done an excellent job of sifting through all of the public information about the author, his family, and his associates to assemble a highly readable, often entertaining narrative. What emerges is a portrait of a powerful man who helped define the character of popular literature in the 20th century. Booth's book will likely remain the definitive biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle until the author's papers are released in their entirety. --Patrick O'Kelley

From Publishers Weekly

Although the burly Edinburgh doctor who believed in fairies will always be linked with an angular, coolly rational English consulting detective, Booth (a Booker Prize nominee for *Industry of Souls*) is only one of many Sherlock Holmes fans and Arthur Conan Doyle biographers to try to separate the two. Booth's polished life appears in the U.S. after Daniel Stashower's lengthy, more authoritative work from earlier this year (*Teller of Tales*, *Forecasts*, March 15). While Booth lacks Stashower's thoroughness, he makes up for it in style and astute judgments on Conan Doyle's life and achievements. Conan Doyle grew quickly frustrated with the way his most famous creation eclipsed all else but could not do without him. Booth, a professed admirer of Holmes but not a Baker Street Irregular, investigates Conan Doyle and his creation with shrewd detachment, including the possible link between Holmes's cocaine habit and Conan Doyle's old medical partner. Conan Doyle's achievements minus the Great Detective would have been respectable: writing everything from serious historical novels to proto-science fiction, running for Parliament, serving in the Boer War, lobbying for such social reforms as divorce laws, investigating wrongful convictions, observing the front lines in the Great War, etc. While Booth often skims over interesting episodes as well as boring ones,

his intriguing interpretation of Conan Doyle's gullible promulgation of "psychic religion," i.e. spiritualism, presents us not only with an industrious Victorian's attempt to situate his need to believe in the modern world but also with Conan Doyle's rationalization of his family's twin heritage of mental instability and creativity. (Jan.)

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From Library Journal

For Booth (*Opium: A History*), Conan Doyle is first and foremost a writer, whether of adventure stories, sf, detective stories, historical novels, essays, history, or journalism. Thus, he traces Conan Doyle's career far beyond Sherlock Holmes, offering the first full-length biography of him in 20 years. Because Conan Doyle's papers are currently closed, this biography is based on earlier biographies, supplemented by more recent studies that attempt to identify characters, look at Conan Doyle's interest in spiritualism, or examine his exploration of cocaine. As such, the book adds little new information on Doyle's life and work, and Booth is sometimes casual with his facts. (At one point he calls Edgar Allan Poe a "novelist," for example.) Still, this biography is an attractive and well-written introduction to Conan Doyle's body of work. Recommended for public and academic libraries.

-*Thomas L. Cooksey, Armstrong State Coll., Savannah, GA*

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