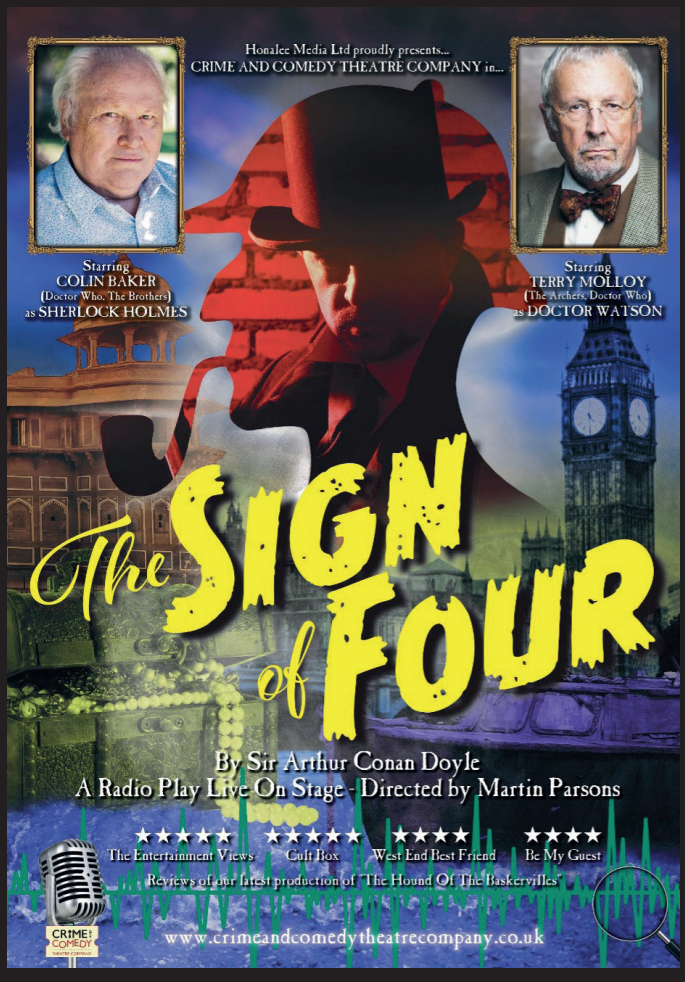
Theatre reviews

**Tom Atkinson, Mark Jones,
Rakshita Patel, Patrick Smith,**

The Sign of Four, by Crime and Comedy Theatre Company at the White Rock Theatre, Hastings, April 2026.

THERE ARE innumerable links between the worlds of Sherlock Holmes and *Doctor Who* - who can forget the Fourth Doctor donning a deerstalker in *The Talons of Weng-Chiang*? Over the years I have noticed that many dedicated Sherlockians also share an enthusiasm for the adventures of everybody's favourite Time Lord. These individuals will be particularly thrilled by the latest production by the Crime and Comedy Theatre Company. Not only is Sherlock Holmes played by the Sixth Doctor, Colin Baker, but the part of Doctor Watson is filled by Terry Molloy – Davros himself!



The Sign of Four (Credit: The Crime and Comedy Theatre Company)

This excellent adaptation took the form of a staged radio play. The actors transported us to a radio studio in the golden age of the medium by reading their scripts standing in front of microphones. Audio effects were provided by an industrious stage manager and 'sound effects operator' (Imogen Jones) behind a table laden with gadgets and props. Hooting owls, rustling papers, crunching footsteps and – of course – the sound of a hansom cab filled the air, to the delight of the audience at The White Rock Theatre in Hastings. There was an enthusiastic sense of fun about this glimpse 'behind the scenes' of a radio production and sharing some of the 'tricks of the trade' with us.

The two leads have a great rapport, having previously worked together on *Doctor Who* and previous productions for the same company, including last year's excellent *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which also took the radio play format. Excellent support was provided by Kate Ashmead as Marty Morstan (who also produced the show), David Sandham as Jonathan Small, and Martin Parsons as Athelney Jones of Scotland Yard.

Parsons, who directed the show, deserves enormous credit for his successful script. The plot has been

necessarily streamlined for the format, but it never feels truncated, and the novel's keynote 'action sequence' – our heroes' pursuit of *The Aurora* in a police launch – is particularly well-handled.

In a short interview in the souvenir programme Colin Baker reveals "Sherlock Holmes was always a favourite of mine. When I was at school, if you won a prize, they were always books… I chose, for two of my prizes, the complete long stories of Sherlock Holmes and the complete short stories of Sherlock Holmes, which I still have at home with the little Upper Fourth Handwriting Prize certificate, because I enjoyed reading them and I read the avidly."

A man after our own hearts then, and we can only hope that the company seek inspiration for future shows from Mr Baker's prize books. The next production for the Crime and Comedy Theatre Company, incidentally, will be a festive production of *A Christmas Carol* with the bonus of a filmed appearance from Tom Baker as Marley's Ghost – an inspired piece of casting that is sure to be a draw for Whovians and Sherlockians alike!

(TA)

Holmes and Watson; The Curious Case of the Masked Magician, at the City Varieties, Leeds, April 2026

MY LORDS, Ladies and Gentlemen! May I present to you, at great expense, The Great Baldini, Glabrous Guru of Hocus-Pocus and Mr. Peter Clifford, the Legendary Lord of Legerdemain, in the Curious Case of the Masked Magician. For two hours, these two noted Napoleons of nimble fingered prestidigitation will bewitch, bedazzle and enchant you. But most of all, they will make you chortle, guffaw and gasp in awe and wonder as Holmes and Watson travel across the capital city on the precarious London underground, in pursuit of mirth, magic and mystery. On the journey you will encounter card sharps, escapologists,

Holmes and Watson: The Curious Case of the Masked Magician (Credit: Ed Felton)

necromancers and balloon modellers! Every mana of mysticism and illusion is on show here performed by two seasoned, sagacious sorcerers who both possess lifelong passions and incredible talents for all things fantastical – and of an enigmatic and mystical nature.

A deceptively simple 'Box of Tricks' set/mise-on-scene sits in perfect accord with the extravagant and excessively opulent surroundings of the Ken Dodd Auditorium of the Leeds City Varieties. Chubby golden cherubs smile down from the circle as this fantastical, phantasmagorical celebration of Edwardian Magic unfolds before your very eyes. There could be not be a stronger, more symbiotic location than this theatre for a show with this sort of lineage. You can still catch the faint smell of satsuma skins, quality street, choc ices, cheap cigars and moustache wax in amongst the stalls. 160 years of laughter has permeated through the gaudy baroque flock wallpaper and is now trapped within the stone and brickwork. The past helps to keep this theatre alive. And past performers, such as Charlie Chaplin, Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd, are now its ghostly custodians. It is their stage and it is on these very same creaky old boards that Holmes and Watson gingerly step in an endeavour to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the masked magician. And at this Palace of Varieties, they are also following in the mokana shoes (special hollowed out shoes designed for concealing secret things!) of the sensational Handcuff King›, Harry Houdini.

Harry Houdini performed at the City Varieties on two occasions, 1902 and 1904. He returned to Leeds for one last, less successful time in 1911. At the behest of brewery workers at Joshua Tetley and Son, he was challenged to escape from a sealed barrel of Tetley's best bitter. However, Houdini struggled to make good his escape and, in a desperate attempt to gain more time and a little more oxygen, proceeded to drink most of the now very warm nut brown ale. It proved too much for the teetotal Handcuff King and he momentarily passed out.

Houdini's clock watching assistant sensed imminent danger and quickly smashed open the barrel. A highly intoxicated Houdini emerged, whereupon, according to one amused onlooker, he belched very loudly, slid in the slops on the stage and fell headfirst into the orchestra pit. But this was a rare failure for the great man. In comparison, his earlier appearances at the Leeds City Varieties were hailed as a great triumph.

And it is at the Varieties, that these two modern wizards pay tribute to Houdini and other past masters of the thaumaturgical arts. Behemoths such as Maskelyne and Cooke and Chung Ling Soo. Holmes and Watson are here as the facilitators of fun and frolics, and they do it in spades. The depilated doyen of devilry, the Great Baldini, is an exuberant and highly excitable 'Bruce' type Watson, full of burlesque, bluff and bluster. His tomfoolery is of the highest, silliest order, especially when questioning Billy the talking balloon at the birthday party of Little Lord Fauntleroy Baskerville. Watson is also left holding a 'Basket full of Hounds' by children's entertainer and balloon dog modeller Happy Harlequin.

The Magus of Mysticism, Peter Clifford is a humorous, good natured and sanguine Sherlock Holmes. He manages to keep his cool even when tied to the totem pole of death by some over enthusiastic audience volunteers. Holmes frequently bamboozles the gullible Watson with an array of terrible 'Inspector Clouseau' disguises, predictably but hilariously eliciting the classic comic response 'Who are you? And what have you done with Sherlock Holmes?'.

Later in the show renowned Clairvoyant and Spiritualist Madame Arcati (Baldini) successfully predicts – in a very high falsetto voice – that a random member of the audience would eventually like to downsize and move to a bungalow. That very same evening she has a private audience with someone called Conan Doyle...

This wonderful show is now touring across the length and breadth of the country. Try to take your children/grandchildren to this warm Edwardian divertissement if you can. On May 26th it will be performed at 'Wiltons' Music Hall, another perfectly correlative place for such escapist entertainments as this.

The Curious Case of the Masked Magician is a nostalgic, immersive, inter-active, vibrantly colourful and happy family show. This is a prop-festooned diversion where you will find a plethora of Bad Dad jokes, goofy songs, painful puns, frenetic costume changes and of course some marvellous classic magic. At the finale, I am sure that the miasma of scepticism will have totally vanished from your thoughts forever.

(PS)

Sherlock Holmes at the Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park. Company photograph.

Sherlock Holmes, at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, May 2026.

THE REGENT'S PARK Open Air Theatre, a short walk from Baker Street, is as close to the famous residence as a venue could be. But don't let its proximity fool you into thinking this version of *Sherlock Holmes* will be any more faithful for it. This is a very different take on Sherlock Holmes – both the man and the myth.

On the face of it, the story is a composite of *The Sign of Four* and 'The Bruce-Partington Plans', with nods to other influences such as *The Moonstone* and *Sherlock*. The Agra treasure is taken, Mary Morstan receives a strange letter about her inheritance, a killer is on the loose. As Watson drags a reluctant Holmes to action, the complexities mount: a mysterious death at Aldgate is somehow connected, Mycroft says less than he knows, and animals are on the loose from London zoo. Meanwhile, there is a sense that the British Empire is on the verge of an existential crisis...

Joel Horwood's script is crammed with enough content for two plays this length, and this is its biggest problem. The story bounces from one set-piece to another with little or no time for the audience to process. One wonders what the average punter - unaware of the details of the pact made by The Four - would make of the densely-told, over-loaded opening scene. The plot is needlessly complicated, particularly in the second half, which may reflect an unconscious desire to paper over the plot. The villain's plan has the extravagance of one by Blofeld, and is about as credible.

Problems with pace and complexity aside, the script has its moments. It is genuinely funny at times, and some sequences – notably the 'Wonders of the Empire' show – have a vitality that truly engaged the audience. Thematically, Horwood has an interesting and nuanced take on mental health, the central idea being that there are broken people everywhere ("war fronts are not just in Afghanistan") and that we can be put back together by connecting with others. This take underscores the Holmes-Watson relationship – a mutual need – which works well for not being telegraphed all that overtly.

The same cannot be said for the play's post-colonial politics which are frustratingly over-emphatic. Horwood is fascinated by Victorian

London as the seat of Empire and lays out clearly its pervasive, corrupting influence on the rest of the world. This would be fine if it were an original idea, or handled laterally, but instead it is relentless. It also leaves the play in an uncomfortable place, with questions left hanging about Sherlock's role as defender of the Imperial system from external threats. Are we now meant to feel guilt about liking Sherlock Holmes? Weighty topics can be done well – Blackeyed Theatre's *The Hunt for Moriarty* tackled the nature of truth and power – but this felt over-egged.

The performances are universally good, if hampered by the material. Joshua James's Holmes is a louche, Wildean type whose bohemianism is borne from a rejection of the world. His is a melancholy, nihilistic Holmes, whose eccentricities are less likely to be self-indulgences than outbursts targeted at others. Despite flashes of humour, the character mostly comes across as petty, vindictive and unpleasant. Jyuddah Jaymes's Watson is a far more appealing prospect whose feelings for Morstan drive much of the story. His is a more conventional depiction, and one that gives the play much-needed grounding. A word also for Patrick Warner who played Thaddeus Sholto and Mycroft, the latter in the mould of Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen.

The production itself is visually interesting. Director Sean Holmes makes full use of a revolving stage, neatly choreographed on and off-stage sequences, and actor-y business from the wings which adds to the meta-tone of the production. The open air setting is used especially well in the second half, during which Regent's Park becomes an in-story location and the cast get full rein of the auditorium. By far the best executed sequences are the scenes where Holmes deduces from evidence or recalls earlier action, in which the director has Sherlock surrounded by the recreated action. Unfortunately, the appearance of a hot air balloon atop a mobile platform – at a critical moment of the show – is utterly farcical. Preceded by five minutes of distracting set up immediately behind the stage, it brings to mind Austin Powers trying to do a three-point turn in Doctor Evil's lair.

There tend to be two types of Sherlock Holmes productions – those that revel in the cosy-comforts of the familiar, and those that seek to reinvent and reinterpret. I applaud Horwood and Holmes for taking the harder path, but in the execution they have forgotten the fundamentals of what makes Sherlock Holmes work – the simplicity of the storytelling, the pace and excitement, and characters you want to spend time with. You can reinvent around these things, but you lose them at your peril. On this occasion, it's hard not to feel that Sherlock Holmes – the character and the myth – has been diminished in the retelling.

(MJ)

Baker Street Ladies, at The Fireside Folktales Barnes Fringe Festival, May 2026.

THERE ARE ALWAYS new theatre productions and adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes stories but this production was unique. Instead of being centred around Holmes and Watson, it very deliberately turned its gaze towards three of the leading women from Canon.

And so, during the sixty minute runtime of the play, we became confidantes to Mrs Martha Hudson, Mary Morstan/Watson, and Irene Adler/Norton – a Scotswoman, an Englishwoman, and an American – all three characters brought vibrantly and vividly to life by the writing and performance of Lexi Wolfe.

Each of the three monologues drew heavily on Canon but brought something fresh and new to the stories we all know, love and cherish, because the women were letting us, the privileged audience, into their innermost thoughts and sharing their life experiences with us. We were seeing the well-known Holmes stories through a female lens. Lexi is an exceptionally talented and versatile actor, and was able to conjure up and embody each of the three women very fluently, with minimal costume changes and props.

First, we met Mrs Hudson – Martha. Her costume signals her national identity and how she is now spending her time – tidying up after Mr Holmes! She wore a frilly hat, an apron, and a tartan shawl, and was carrying a feather duster. She speaks about the trials and tribulations of being Mr Holmes' landlady - being shaken to the core by bullets being fired into the wall and being woken in the middle of the night by violin playing. She says Holmes has become like a son to her and she looks after him, physically and emotionally. She talks

about all the comings and goings, of poisoners and murderers, of adventure and excitement. After the death of her beloved husband, it was her decision to stay in London, and to take in paying tenants. Mr Holmes is a handful but she does not ever regret her decision because of the important job she is now doing in the service of the Empire, giving her a real sense of purpose. Mrs Hudson impressed me as an energetic, sensible and practical woman, modest and funny, happy and content in her work, taking care of all the practicalities of daily living for Holmes, enabling him to focus on his work. Lexi really conveyed her warmth, and the love and high regard Mrs Hudson and Holmes had for each other.

Mrs Hudson exits and, after a short pause, Mary Watson walks in, with a very different energy – she is quiet and hesitant, she is sad and resigned. Mary's costume is a simple blouse and a long skirt. She is out of breath, having rushed here, and she appears unwell, in need of physical and emotional rest. She speaks quietly, in RP English, hesitant and unsure, as she unburdens herself to us. She met John in these very rooms when she brought a case to Holmes. She has always known, and accepted, that Holmes and her husband John have a very close connection. But she had assumed once they were married, with John's medical practice growing and becoming more established, his priorities would change, and Holmes's hold over him would diminish. Yet when they return from their honeymoon, John flies back to Holmes, his absences growing longer and more frequent. Mary says love blinds you, so you see your beloved as the person you want them to be, not who they are. She realises – too late – that John is drawn to Holmes and danger, like a moth to a flame. There are three people in the marriage – which is one too many! – and Mary feels superfluous. She is not a widow, like Mrs Hudson, but she might as well be, with her dreams of a settled and secure married life shattered. Even today, on their anniversary, Mary is alone. She had dreamed of starting a family and of becoming a mother. But she has received the devastating news that instead of the happy news of a pregnancy and a baby, something more malign is growing inside her. Along with many women in the audience, I found Mary's story incredibly moving and powerful, and she quite broke my heart.

Mary leaves and, after another short pause, Irene Norton enters. The contrast between Mary and Irene could not be greater. Irene is sure of herself, she is confident and loud. Mary hides away, Irene

demands your attention and commands the stage. She is dressed in a luxuriously long purple velvet frock coat, and wears a heart shaped locket. We learn of her many adventures since we saw her last – her flight to America, her brief but happy married life with her lawyer husband Godfrey Norton, his brutal and violent death, her fight for justice, and what she is doing now. Having once been a star, she misses playing to an audience, she misses their appreciation and applause. So she is putting her sharp mind to the test against Holmes, playing a game of cat and mouse, and engaging in a battle of wits. Irene is the most modern of the three women presented in this play, as she is her own woman, answerable to no man. She is independent, she is powerful, she is fierce and fearless, and she has guile. She enjoys playing the Great Game with Holmes because she loves the adrenalin rush and the thrill of the chase.

Lexi plays Holmes too, especially when we are listening to Mrs Hudson's and Irene Norton's accounts, and her performance of the Great Detective - his way of speaking, his mannerisms, and his attitude - was impeccable. I really felt Holmes was in the room!

The writing and the performance are of exceptional quality, and I'm delighted the key women in Canon finally get to take centre stage and share their stories – their life experiences and lessons. The three characters are very different, yet Lexi brought all three characters to life, and embodied their spirit, and the play and the monologues flowed seamlessly.

(RP)

"I AM AN OMNIVOROUS READER"

Book reviews by Paul M. Chapman, and Mark Jones

On the Shoulders of Giants edited by Peter Eckrich and Rob Nunn. Gasogene Books, USA. 201pp. $26.95 (pbk)

Every fandom has its story: landmark moments, famous discoveries, heated rivalries – and great names. By the latter, I do not mean celebrity followers – of whom the Janeites can cite Winston Churchill, Rudyard Kipling and Benjamin Disraeli – but people famous *within* the fandom for making an outstanding contribution. It just so happens that, in the Sherlockian world, we have a remarkable collection of individuals both formative in the field and distinguished in their respective careers. This book celebrates these Sherlockians and their stories.

I say 'Sherlockians' advisedly as all those featured are American. I've never held in the artificial distinction between British Holmesians and American Sherlockians, although it pleasingly proves Oscar Wilde's belief in two countries separated by a common language. But here the distinction is relevant and understandable, as the editors have chosen to focus on those they know best, while also taking the proactive decision to improve gender representation in their selection – decisions which are entirely understandable and endorsed by the richness of the lives described.

The book takes the form of twenty-one pithy biographies of names both familiar and unfamiliar. The giants of the US Sherlockian world are, of course, well represented: Christopher Morley, Edgar W. Smith, Vincent Starrett are each done excellent service by Steven Rothman, Rich Krisciunas, and Ray Betzner, the undisputed experts on their respective subjects. Even when describing the lives of the most celebrated, the essays are enlightening and, as condensed summaries, important reference works.

The anthology's approach also serves to shine light on the lives of individuals best known for individual works or events. Philip Bergem takes William S. Baring-Gould out of the shadows of the *Annotated* and *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*, while Sonia Fetherston has uncovered much about Lenore Glen Offord, the first woman to be invested in 1958, unconventionally and to much consternation. We discover this time and again, in the lives of James Montgomery (Burt Wolder), Edith Meiser (Erika Dowell), and Katherine McMahon (Tamar Zeffren), for example.

Venturing further from the path reveals individuals whose legacy continues to be felt to this day. I was especially struck by the essays on less well-known figures such as E.W. 'Mac' McDiarmid (Erica Fair) who instituted the University of Minnesota Library's Sherlock Holmes collection, and Francine Morris Swift (Liese Sherwood-Fabre), who founded the Crew of the Barque Lone Star, one of the most inviting and accessible scion societies operating today, both of whom I have benefitted from without knowing their names.

A book of this kind could have been so much self-indulgent 'inside baseball', as our American cousins would say. But in the hands of Eckrich and Nunn, the volume has been diligently and intelligently curated to provide insights that are both entertaining and enlightening. Without exception, the chapters are examples of precisely the sort of unvaunted spade-work on which our hobby depends, and it is pleasing to see it so warmly celebrated.

(MJ)

Regulation and Imagination: Legal, Historical and Literary Perspectives on Highway Robbery (featuring the facsimile manuscript of Conan Doyle's 'One Crowded Hour'), edited by Ross E. Davies (The Green Bag, USA). 180pp. $50.00 (pbk).

Although it is not entirely clear from its lengthy title alone, this latest handsomely-produced volume from Green Bag Press is in fact a wide-ranging collection of essays examining aspects of Arthur Conan Doyle's 1911 story 'One Crowded Hour', centered around a high-quality facsimile (and the editor's careful transcription) of the original manuscript.

'One Crowded Hour' (re-titled 'A Pirate of the Land' in *Tales of Pirates and Blue Water* (1922)) was first published in the *Strand Magazine* in August 1911 – whose text is also reproduced in facsimile

here – and is apparently a piece of fun on Conan Doyle's part; a serio-comic throwaway tale about an aggrieved magistrate's irresponsible hour of madness in which he uses his Rolls Royce to become a latter-day highwayman, navigating a chiaroscuro world of undulating roads, flashing headlights and questionable morality.

However, as is so often the case with Doyle's short magazine fiction, there is rather more to this particular story than a first reading might suggest – and surprisingly much to discover and discuss, given its limited geographical and dramatic scope.

The geography – with which Doyle would have been very familiar, covering as it does an area of Sussex close to his own home at Windlesham – forms the subject of the first two essays: 'One Crowded Hour – Locations' by Catherine Cooke, which examines the actual locations as they may be explored today, alongside Doyle's fictionalisation of them for his tale of a modern gentleman of the road. This is complemented by 'The Road Tells the Story: From Humphrey Repton to Arthur Conan Doyle', in which Alec Spangler and Paul Daniel Marriott demonstrate how the landscape across which the story unfolds was shaped by the vision of playwright-turned-landscape architect and gardener Humphrey Repton (1752-1818).

Jonathan Cranfield's 'Crowded Hours in Post-Victorian Britain' places the story within its historical and cultural context, in the course of which he touches upon Doyle's attitude to [in]justice; a theme explored in greater detail by Eloise Moss in 'The Seduction of Crime', which, as its title suggests, examines the tale's moral ambiguities, comparing it with the Raffles stories of Doyle's brother-in-law, E.W. Hornung.

The world of turn of the century high finance, whose machinations underpin the plot, is examined in the unexpectedly absorbing 'The Wolves of Wall Street' by Michael A. Perino – prior to reading which I had no idea that there was a highly popular sub-genre of Wall Street-themed dime fiction.

Also fascinating is Jennifer L. Behrens' 'As They Think Best: A History of the 'One Crowded Hour' Autograph Manuscript', which charts the manuscript's journey from Conan Doyle's desk to its current home in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas. Almost inevitably this encompasses the controversial literary estate stewardship of Doyle's sons, Denis and Adrian (characterised here via a telling aside from the *Baker Street Journal* in 1955, suggesting that Adrian's literary collaboration with John Dickson Carr should have been entitled *Sherlock Holmes Exploited* rather than *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes*), through whose hands it passed before finding a safe berth amongst 'eight linear feet of other Doyle materials' in Austin, Texas.

The story's illustrations form the central focus of 'H.M. Brock: Art in the Blood' by Mark Jones, who places them in the context of Brock's long and distinguished artistic career (which included illustrating 'The Red Circle' for the *Strand*, also in 1911), together with his place in the wider Brock family, who, like the Doyles, and Sherlock Holmes, most definitely had 'art in the blood'.

Markus Geisser's 'Horsepower in the Blood' marks a change of gear as he discusses Arthur Conan Doyle's deep, if chequered, love affair with motorised transport - whether on two, three, four, or even 'auto' wheels - a love which he passed on to his sons, who were almost as careless behind the wheel as they were with their literary inheritance.

The book closes with the amusing, but only tangentially relevant, 'Two at Auction: Royal Roadster and Presidential Appointment' by J. Christopher Giancarlo; an extended anecdote from a classic car auction whose pages might perhaps have been better allocated to an essay placing 'One Crowded Hour' within the wider context of pirates and highwaymen in popular fiction, one subject largely absent from this otherwise comprehensive volume.

Ross E. Davies, who, besides being editor and publisher, also provides an introductory essay ('One Complicated Hour'), is to be congratulated on assembling *Regulation & Imagination* … Both content and presentation, including some wonderful visual material (I'm particularly taken with the melodramatic and 'stagey' early French illustrations which accompany Davies' manuscript transcription), are exemplary. For anyone interested in Conan Doyle's life and the versatility of his writing this is a fascinating journey and an essential addition to the library.

PMC

…But I Digress: The Musings of a Sherlockian Motormouth by Bob Sharfman. Belanger Books, USA. 198pp. $19.95 (pbk)

All of us who have attended Sherlockian events will be able to summon to mind a particularly well-told tale, a paper that invited them to look differently at the stories, the characters or the context, that was

delivered with erudition and humour. These sort of papers are a fleetingly delight which so often make way for the next, such is the volume of good papers. And so it is with great pleasure that we find the contributions of one particularly erudite Sherlockian collected in …*But I Digress*.

Bob Sharfman (BSI 2024, 'Killer Evans') is described in the foreword as 'not only a raconteur and comedian, but also a successful former attorney, a former mountaineer, a former street musician, a social butterfly who knows a guy who knows a guy, a rightfully proud family patriarch, a scholar of Sherlockiana and a variety of subjects, and a talented writer.' Such is the hinterland of the man behind this entertaining and eclectic mix of essays.

The most obvious feature of Bob's writing is his infectious good humour. While he sets down to ponder the great mysteries of the Canon (to ponder, we are told, is 'to think while wearing a clean shirt'), he does so with tongue firmly in cheek. Each article is predicated on that perverse brand of Sherlockian logic that draws on diverse fields of study to converge on an irresistible conclusion. This is the sort of thinking that connects history, literature and the Canon to proclaim that 'the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime' was founded on the denouement of *The Odyssey* and that therefore John Straker's dog was called Argos. This is accompanied by a footnote (often as funny as the body text) explaining how the author used the 'curious incident' defence in a brief to the Supreme Court.

In fact, Bob frequently brings his knowledge of the law to his aid. In 'I Shall Be My Own Police', he briskly muses on the various Holmes-Watson felonies in the Canon, drawing on the complexities of the Felony Murder Rule. The result is a heartfelt defence of our heroes' complicity in the death of Milverton, a man Bob twice declares deserved his grisly demise. But here Bob betrays an ulterior motive, for he is the greatest proponent of Mortiarty as hero, a topic he discusses in 'Saint or Sinner?' For Bob, Moriarty put the M in MI5, as its chief operations man, alongside the brains of Mycroft Holmes and the fieldwork of brother Sherlock.

Other themes appear in Bob's writings. Alongside Milverton and Moriarty, he has an interest in the other great supporting character of the Canon, Irene Adler. In discussing the 'late' in 'the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory', Bob suggests this was not a reference to her change of name on marriage, or her death, but her inveterate tardiness. Cue a celebration of Chicago – another feature of his writings – with a reference to the Adler Planetarium and a throwaway suggestion that 'The Woman' may have had more than a passing interest in asteroids…

Beneath the pleasing froth, this is serious scholarship worn lightly. Bob frequently makes meaningful connections between history and the Canon, from an essay on Joe Bell that segues seamlessly into the influence of Vidocq on Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes, and a piece that links Dr Watson's interest in American abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher to Conan Doyle's sense of social justice. Note Conan Doyle here: Bob plays The Game as good as anyone, while maintaining due deference to the author of the stories. In all, …*But I Digress* is as amusing and enlightening an afternoon's entertainment as you would get from the best events or meetings.

(MJ)

Writers in Whites: How a group of literary cricketers changed English culture by Ollie Randall (Fairfield Books, UK). 296pp. £22 (hbk).

For those interested in the literary world Conan Doyle inhabited, it is well understood that cricket provides a good deal of the connective tissue. Through J.M. Barrie's Allahakbarries and Conan Doyle's own Authors' XI, aspiring authors built friendships and careers that lasted, while inducting future generation of writers. In this thoroughly researched and engagingly written book, Randall charts how 'literary cricket' – far from being a charming footnote in biographies – was a means to network, build reputations and shape a version of English culture that, over time, was hotly contested.

The pre-Great War section will be of most interest to Sherlockians, focusing as it does on the intersecting lives and careers of Conan Doyle, Barrie, Hornung, Wodehouse and others. Readers of the *SHJ* were party to one of Randall's key revelations – the substance of the row between Hornung and ACD over Jean Leckie – in his article in the Winter 2025 issue. But there is plenty more to go at, as Randall cross references diaries, letters and newspaper coverage to knit together the various lives – leaving plenty of space for the comic moments and asides. Barrie and Wodehouse, unsurprisingly, come out particularly well in this regard.

Equally valuable for Sherlockians is Randall's account of how Conan Doyle came to the

Allahakbarries in 1891, almost simultaneously with his *Strand Magazine* breakthrough, and what his arrival meant to both parties. Barrie gained the most famous writer in England (and a much-needed all-rounder), while Conan Doyle gained the social network that would define his public life for the next two decades. There was a transaction behind the friendships, but it was friendship first.

The Hornung and Wodehouse chapters are especially well done. Randall reconstructs Hornung's life with a care that goes beyond what his cricketing story strictly requires, including his early life, his Australian exile and its lasting influence on his fiction, and that *Idler* cricket match at which he first met Connie Doyle, which resulted in their engagement a few weeks later. In fact, one wonders if cricketing connections gave Horning, the club secretary, more clout than his literary abilities deserved. They certainly aided Wodehouse, although his literary abilities were far more substantial.

Throughout, Randall shows how cricket also informed the *works* of the respective player-authors. One might wince at his thesis that 240 of the 300 characters named in the Canon are based on cricketers or ACD's own statement that he named Sherlock after a cricketer (is it really that simple?), but the influence of cricket on Raffles, Psmith, Jeeves and their ilk is undeniable and made convincingly.

The post-Great War story of *Writers in Whites* describes a tradition in gradual, if elegant decline. Hornung passed the torch to J.C. Squire in 1920, and the book's second half becomes substantially his story: the Invalids became the dominant literary cricketing side, bound up with a conservative literary ideology, that drew opposition from the likes of Edith Sitwell. Squire's side inspired the sport's most famous fictional treatment, the village cricket chapter in A.G. Macdonell's *England, Their England* (1933). But, from this point on, literary cricket was swimming against the cultural tide, before finally exhausting itself in the 1960s.

It should be said that, as well as being well researched and written, *Writers in Whites* is very entertaining. There is something in the gentleness of cricketing humour that speaks well of the sport and its players. Enjoy the book over the summer – preferably with *Test Match Special* on long-wave in the background and a large slice of chocolate cake.

(MJ)

Also received

Irregular Chronicles of the Early 'Fifties by Julie McKuras and Bill Mason (BSI Press, 2026) – New volume in the resurrected BSI history series covering 1951-55, and so in passing covers events of moment to our Society. Fascinating detail about developments in the BSI and the wider Sherlockian world.

Science Fiction and the Modern World by Anastasia Klimchynskaya (Liverpool University Press, 2026) – Sweeping study of the emergence of science fiction, and particularly the tension between human progress and humanity's insignificance in geological time, which touches on Sherlock Holmes, Professor Challenger and Conan Doyle's wider works. An interesting read that puts ACD's genre writing in an often overlooked context. (MJ)

Bloody Broadway: Plays of Menace, Murder and Mystery - Volume I: 1900–1930 by Amnon Kabatchnik (BearManor Media, 2025) – Latest volume from the author of *Sherlock Holmes on the Stage* which traces Broadway's fascination with murder mysteries since the days of Gillette. A handy reference work that looks at the major genre plays over three decades, some of which have tangential Sherlockian connections. (MJ).

The Case of the Disappearing Detective by J. Lawrence Matthews (118pp, East Dean Press, 2026, c. £8 on Amazon). A melancholic yet playful Sherlockian tale in which Holmes has gone missing. Beautifully produced and illustrated. (MJ).

Finding the Lost World by Jamale Ijouiher (471pp, Amazon, 2026). An exhaustive survey of *The Lost World* and its adaptations from creative *and* palaeontological perspectives. Everything from the sublime (Hoyt, 1925) to the ridiculous (Irwin Allen, 1960).