

On Conan Doyle: Or, The Whole Art of Storytelling (Writers on Writers)

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A passionate lifelong fan of the Sherlock Holmes adventures, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Michael Dirda is a member of The Baker Street Irregulars--the most famous and romantic of all Sherlockian groups. Combining memoir and appreciation, *On Conan Doyle* is a highly engaging personal introduction to Holmes's creator, as well as a rare insider's account of the curiously delightful activities and playful scholarship of The Baker Street Irregulars.

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- Sales Rank: #1035655 in Books
- Published on: 2011-10-30
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: .79" h x 4.76" w x 7.53" l, .57 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 232 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Winner of the 2012 Edgar Allan Poe Awards, Best Critical/Biographical Category, Mystery Writers of America

Finalist for the 2012 Marfield Prize, The National Award for Arts Writing, Arts Club of Washington

One of *The Times Literary Supplement*'s Books of the Year 2014, chosen by Joyce Carol Oates

"[A] brief, elegant reflection. . . . With thoughtful care, Dirda explains how Conan Doyle 'rose above the conventions of his time' in many of his writings. Dirda shines a helpful light on the adventurers Professor Challenger and Brigadier Gerard, while a selection of 'weird' fiction causes him to declare that those stories 'can stand up to the best work of such masters of the uncanny as Sheridan Le Fanu and M.R. James.' Dirda circles back to Holmes, directing our attention to overlooked aspects of the stories--the elusive presence of Professor Moriarty, for example, or Holmes' brother Mycroft. He also treats us to a delightful, intimate glimpse of the magical power of books in his own early life. What book lover hasn't had at least one cherished experience of reading? Dirda's own involves his loving preparations, as a youth, to read *The Hound of the Baskervilles* on an appropriately stormy day when the rest of his family was out of the house. . . . And there's much of that same feeling in Dirda's inviting book, which demonstrates why for so many years Dirda has been such an insightful guide to literatures past and present. (Note to director Guy Ritchie: If you're still looking for more Conan Doyle fare after 'Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows' opens next month, you might read Dirda's book for ideas.)"**--Nick Owchar, *Los Angeles Times***

"Charming. . . . As any Conan Doyle aficionado knows, the adventures of Holmes comprise a mere fraction of the oeuvre . . . and one of Dirda's chief concerns is to give the rest of it appropriate attention. . . . Dirda is also enlightening on the author's influences and literary heirs."**--Toby Lichtig, *Times Literary Supplement***

"While casual readers will associate Conan Doyle exclusively with 221B Baker Street, Dirda makes a strong case for investigating Doyle's extensive bibliography, which includes adventure stories (*The Lost World*), historical novels (*Micah Clarke*), supernatural stories (*The Horror of the Heights*), and books on spiritualism. But Holmes is still the main attraction, and the fascinating dynamics of the Irregulars are as rich as any of Conan Doyle's fictions. The Irregulars grudgingly accept, but do not encourage, the views of 'Doyleans,' who consider the Holmes stories as blips written by the author of *The Lost World*. Dirda's lifelong enthusiasm and keen critical skills underscore the timeless quality of the brilliant detective and his multifaceted creator."**--*Publishers Weekly***

"Michael Dirda's book is at once a capsule overview of Doyle's character and writing career and an affectionate tribute to boyhood reading--along with Doyle's works, Dirda discusses Sax Rohmer, Lord Dunsany, H. Rider Haggard, and others. It is a treat to come across Dirda's citation of Jacques Futrelle's Thinking Machine stories, including *The Problem of Cell 13*, the ultimate locked-door mystery (which I hadn't thought about since I was eleven years old). Dirda provides a fond, glancing survey of the books he

treasures. . . . Dirda, who loves all of Doyle's work, slights the distinction between the more mature and the more childlike side of Doyle. But his book is irresistible in its eager appetite for the delights of Doyle's hearty, perfectly handled storytelling. Dirda reminds us that a part of every reader is always twelve years old, and that at least some of the books we devoured at twelve will still nourish us splendidly half a century later. Dirda also provides an affecting brief account of Doyle's life. Doyle was a loyal, genial, and generous man, and he had many talents."**--David Mikics,** ***New Republic***

"Dirda is at his best in his sensitive appreciation of Doyle's style, direct, fluent, and surprisingly flexible as he moves from genre to genre, and in his account of manly civic inspiration as the value Doyle aimed above all to inculcate in his writing . . . an endearing, well-balanced introduction to a writer the *Strand Magazine* called 'the greatest natural storyteller of his age.'"**--*Kirkus Reviews***

"The most charming thing about perennial *Washington Post* literary guru Michael Dirda is his near-on phobic aversion to saying anything other than that a book is wonderful and a pleasure. . . . If we were all to write about reading as Dirda does, if we taught children to write from joy rather than to form arguments, then the world would have many more serious readers and far better books. . . . You will enjoy this book. *I* enjoyed this book. I enjoyed it not because it was frivolous and not because Conan Doyle is wonderful--in fact, it convinced me he;s not--but precisely because Dirda's restraint triggered in me a vigorous critical spirit. That such a feeling also pleases is elementary."**--J.C. Hallman,** ***Bookforum***

"Given the excellence of this introduction, it is interesting to see how two new publications match up to the master."**--Andrew Lycett,** ***Telegraph***

"One of the winning things about Michael Dirda's writing is his appreciation for his fellow appreciators: Christopher Morley, Burton Rascoe, Bernard De Voto, Vincent Starrett and their equivalents in England; all of them were essentially enthusiasts whose job it was to inform the public when good books showed up. There was once a kind of Department of Belles-Lettres that this magazine and others helped staff. The late John Updike, by the end of his life, was its de facto chair. Dirda, with more than thirty years of highly readable literary criticism to his name, may well be a contender. In remembering and reflecting upon his own first excitements as a reader, Dirda is infectious."**--Larry McMurtry,** ***Harper's Magazine***

"This small book (210 pages) is an absolute delight! Michael Dirda has an encyclopedic knowledge of Sherlock Holmes. Better, he writes in a breezy, informative and entertaining manner that holds the reader's attention as surely as one of Conan Doyle's many stories. . . . Whether you are a confirmed Sherlockian or one who has just come recently to the canon, there is something here for you. The writing is superb. The memoirist style fits the story perfectly. It is a book that can be read and re-read and never lose its freshness."**--John M. Formy-Duval,** ***About.com***

"*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. . . . 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.'"**--Glenn C. Altschuler,** ***Oregonian***

"Michael Dirda's dissections of how Conan Doyle achieves such satisfying results in almost every story is the chief selling point of his fine little biography, along with capturing his own boyhood love of Conan Doyle."**--*Newsday***

"Michael Dirda writes in detail about the Grand Game in *On Conan Doyle*, his engaging little book about the

author and his greatest creation. . . . Dirda makes a sincere case for those other books, but his heart is with Sherlock. He writes affectionately about the enormous Holmes fan community, including an insider's account of the Baker Street Irregulars. . . . And he writes most movingly about his first experience with Sherlock. He describes in vivid detail how, as a fifth-grader, he saw *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in a paperback catalog, waited for weeks for its delivery--and then put off reading about the 'enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen' until he was alone in the house on a dark and stormy night. Even as a boy, Dirda knew how to read a book."**--Colette Bancroft, *St. Petersburg Times***

"Dirda has written a rollicking, erudite, and terrifically beguiling little book called *On Conan Doyle*, which is part of Princeton University Press' 'Writers on Writers' series. . . . Reading experiences don't get much more captivating than this; nor does literary criticism."**--Maureen Corrigan, *NPR***

"*On Conan Doyle* also delves into the strange world of Sherlock Holmes 'scholarship.' Dirda spends a generous amount of time discussing the inner workings of exclusive Holmes societies like the Baker Street Irregulars (of which he is a member; *On Conan Doyle* is dedicated to them), sketching some of the wilder obsessions of Sherlock scholars, and evoking the romance of searching for antique and obscure books in dusty bookstores around the world. . . . Hopefully this book will remind readers that Conan Doyle was, as Dirda writes, 'much more than just the literary agent for those denizens of 221B Baker Street.' *On Conan Doyle* is certainly tantalizing in its descriptions of Sir Arthur's other stories and novels, but it also inevitably reminds us of the magic of the razor-sharp, eccentric detective and his devoted friend. When winter sets in, the nights grow long, and a yearning for holiday mystery and adventure takes hold, there is nowhere better to turn than 221B Baker Street."**--*Bookslut***

"*On Conan Doyle* is at once a biography, an appreciation of the Holmes stories, an insightful overview of the other works written by Doyle, and a billet-doux to the Baker Street Irregulars. It is also a memoir of a young man's reading experience. . . . Dirda's first encounter with Holmes was the beginning of a great romance. He recaptures in this book the life-changing ecstasy that reading can be for a child. *On Conan Doyle* is a celebration of that experience and an invitation to turn again to the world of gaslight and hansom cabs where 'the game is afoot.'"**--*Christian Science Monitor***

"Dirda has subtitled this book *The Whole Art of Storytelling*, with good reason. Starting from Arthur Conan Doyle's life and work--which included, in addition to the Sherlock Holmes stories, wonderful works of historical fiction and adventure--Dirda weaves a memoir of boyhood, a peek into the world of the 'Baker Street Irregulars,' and a meditation on the power of fiction. The game's afoot!"**--*Barnes and Noble Review***

"Michael Dirda remembers vividly his first encounter with Sherlock Holmes. At 10, having bought *The Hound of the Baskervilles* from his grade-school book club, he held on to the book until he had an evening alone . . . then gathered his stores: 'two or three candy bars, a box of Cracker Jack, and a cold bottle of Orange Crush.' Thus fortified, the young Dirda wrapped himself in a blanket and submitted to each thrilling, delicious page. In this warm, lively book he repays some of the debt, honoring Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's enormous output (21 novels, more than 150 short stories), sturdy prose and, most significantly, the enduring figure of the hyperlogical, eccentric detective Holmes."**--Kate Tuttle, *Boston Globe***

"[W]e can be grateful that in this short book, Michael has shared his immense affection for Sherlock Holmes and his creator. What comes through best in the book is his love for tales of adventure, or, as Vincent Starrett calls them, stories 'in which things happen, and then keep on happening.' Dirda also makes a convincing argument that too many readers have let Doyle disappear into his creations. More importantly, it allows those not lucky enough to know Michael Dirda to spend a few hours in his stimulating and fascinating company."**--Leslie S. Klinger, *Los Angeles Review of Books***

"Dirda may have won a Pulitzer Prize for criticism and he may be a book reviewer for *The Washington Post* but first he is an enthusiast. This is a lively and passionate book about the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Of course it covers the Sherlock Holmes stories and the wonderful sci-fi tale *The Lost World* but it reaches far beyond those obvious literary highlights to look, with insight and passion, at Conan Doyle's vast and eclectic oeuvre. Such is Dirda's enthusiasm that it is quite impossible not to be fired up. I immediately ordered *The Complete Stories of Sherlock* and searched for *Through the Magic Door*."**--*Sydney Morning Herald***

"[A] brief but immensely entertaining book."**--*Weekly Standard***

"Short meditation on both the merits of Doyle beyond Sherlock Holmes and why fiction, and our responses to it, are and should be deeply strange. I very much liked it."**--Tyler Cowen, *Marginal Revolution***

"Dirda is less didactic in this volume, but no less willing to offer judgments informed by long affection. His book is quite short, a lovely size for reading in odd moments or, perhaps, by the fire with a glass of something delicious by your side."**--Alexandra Mullen, *New Criterion***

"[This book] deserves a place on the bookshelves of all who recognise Arthur Conan Doyle as one of the great fiction writers of his age. . . . [S]trongly recommended."**--Guy Marriott, *Sherlock Holmes Journal***

From the Back Cover

"Imagine having a really unbelievably well-read friend, who likes the same stuff that you do but is able to articulate why he loves it so much better than you can. And while explaining it points you at a hundred books and authors you'd love but haven't heard of or have never got around to reading. And who makes you feel, by the end of his explanation, as if you've been inaugurated into a secret society of people who love what can be done with words. And somewhere on the way he will teach you everything you need to know about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Sherlock Holmes, and the mysteries of The Baker Street Irregulars. That's who Michael Dirda is, and that's what this book does."**--Neil Gaiman**

"Michael Dirda is a very dangerous man. His delight--his life's work--is to declare his adoration for some literary gem with such passion, and such precision, we cannot help being infected. *On Conan Doyle* traces the arc of one such love affair, from a childhood flashlit encounter with A Gigantic Hound to black-tie dinners with The Baker Street Irregulars. The danger, of course, is that once we read this seductive love letter, we'll end up enthralled not just with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle but also with Michael Dirda."**--Laurie R. King**

"It isn't often that I have sat and read 45,000 words nonstop. But like an old-style bookman, Michael Dirda is both erudite and deeply entertaining. He reminds us that Arthur Conan Doyle was not just the creator of the most famous character in modern literature, but also one of the finest writers of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Packed with critical insights and personal observations, *On Conan Doyle* may be a small book but it deserves a very large audience."**--Michael F. Whelan, head of The Baker Street Irregulars**

"This is a much-needed guide to the life and works of Arthur Conan Doyle. He has long been regarded as

little more than the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, but Michael Dirda's book proves that he was a far more important literary figure than that. Dirda brings considerable Sherlockian and Doylean experience to the table and, as a Pulitzer Prize-winning literary critic, he also draws on a lifetime of diverse reading."--
Christopher Roden, founder of The Arthur Conan Doyle Society

About the Author
Michael Dirda is a Pulitzer Prize-winning critic and longtime book columnist for the "Washington Post". He is the author of four collections of essays, "Readings", "Bound to Please", "Book by Book", and "Classics for Pleasure", as well as the memoir "An Open Book". A lifelong Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle fan, he was inducted into The Baker Street Irregulars in 2002.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Shanon Stephens:

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