

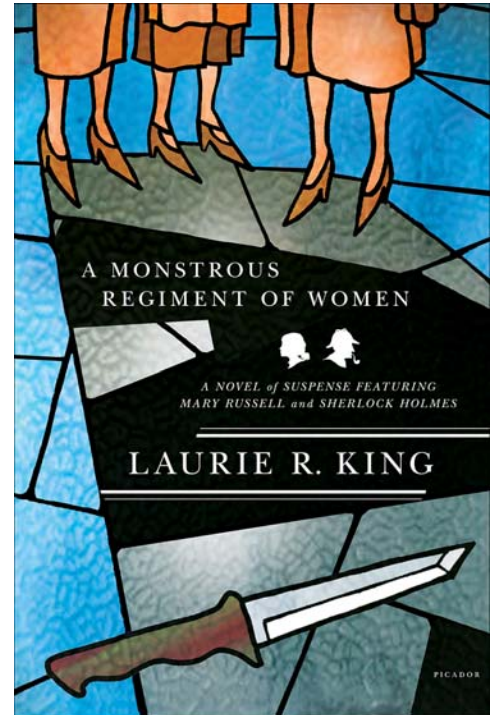
READING GROUP GUIDE

A Monstrous Regiment of Women *A Mary Russell Novel*

by Laurie King

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *A Monstrous Regiment of Women* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*.

About the Book

A Monstrous Regiment of Women is the second book of a series chronicling the casework of the legendary Sherlock Holmes and his new partner, Mary Russell. The story begins two years after the end of *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*; Mary has graduated from Oxford with degrees in theology and chemistry, and now finds herself poised to inherit a considerable fortune. But she returns from university to find her relationship with Holmes under unusual strain – could her mentor be in love with her? And what of her own feelings for him? Russell turns her attention to the New Temple of God, and its leader Margery Childe, a charismatic suffragette and a mystic, whose draw on the young theology scholar is irresistible. When four young

bluestockings turn up dead shortly after agreeing to will money to the temple, Russell and Holmes come together to investigate Childe, and a sinister plot is revealed.

A Monstrous Regiment of Women continues the literary tradition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and, as in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, once again brings new life to Holmes. But the book also brims with erudition, and Laurie King enriches the story with generous information about biblical theology and mysticism. Post-World War I England serves as backdrop, and the author vividly evokes the social climate of the time in a story that is also about women finding their political voice, and the bravery to use it. King shows the force of history, love, and faith upon her characters, and *A Monstrous Regiment of Women* proves a richly entertaining addition to the Mary Russell-Sherlock Holmes series.

Praise for *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*:

"As audacious as it is entertaining and moving."—*Chicago Tribune*

"The great marvel of King's series is that she's managed to preserve the integrity of Holmes's character and yet somehow conjure up a woman astute, edgy, and compelling enough to be the partner of his mind and as well as his heart. . . . Superb."—*The Washington Post Book World*

About the Author

Laurie R. King is the Edgar Award–winning author of four contemporary novels featuring Kate Martinelli, eight acclaimed Mary Russell mysteries, and four stand-alone novels, including the highly praised *A Darker Place*. She lives in northern California.

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the novel, Laurie King plays with the idea of religion fulfilling not just spiritual but earthly needs, e.g. in the way that Margery Childe responds to the political desires of independent women, and also in the brief passage in which Veronica recounts her time in Italy, and her crush on a handsome priest. What does King's novel say about the intersection of religious and secular life, or the relationship between the two? To what degree does each character know what they want, and how to get it?
2. Margery Childe gives more than one radical reading of the first lines of Genesis, exploring not only the power of creation but of love. While Mary is always keen to scrutinize Childe's theology, what is the deeper affect of Childe's sermons on Mary? In what ways does King play with the age-old struggle between faith and reason in the novel? Are "faith" and "reason" at play as well when a man and woman are falling in love?
3. Is a mystery novel propelled by the movement of its plot or the dimension of its characters? In *A Monstrous Regiment of Women* the characters arrive with considerable depth and pathos. Margery Childe is described: "She shut her eyes for a long moment.

When she opened them, the magic had gone out of her, and she was just a small, tired, disheveled woman in an expensive dress, with a much-needed drink and cigarette to hand.” In what ways do such descriptions and depth enhance the mystery and suspense of the story?

4. Laurie King draws significantly upon the history of the feminist movement in England. Would you say the book itself has a political point of view? What do you see as the difference between the feminist movements of then and now?
5. The Great War brought with it considerable social upheaval. In what ways does King show the impact of the war upon her characters – From Miles, Ronnie’s fiancé, to Mary Russell and to Holmes himself?
6. From the food, to the wall hangings, to the style of dress, to the social and political attitudes of each character, to the presence of narcotics, Laurie King adorns and enriches her story with much historical detail. In what ways do these details, both small and large, help evoke the world of the story? What details were the most surprising to you?
7. In the Conan Doyle books, Watson at times seems like a surrogate for the reader, whom Holmes guides through the intricacies of the mystery. Could the same be said of Mary Russell? What are the differences between how she and Watson tell a story?
8. Both Mary Russell and Margery Childe come into a great deal of money, and both certainly have a taste for luxury. What moral dilemma do they face each time they spend money? Is Laurie King saying something about the moral implications of wealth? Of charity?
9. Perhaps humanity’s greatest mystery is that of its existence, and some would say that the Bible is the case file of that mystery. Discuss the theological point of view of *Monstrous Regiment*, and how Mary’s journey deep into the Bible at once illuminates the novel’s ideas – about money, love, faith, and charity – and how it helps to move the mystery forward.
10. At the end of this book, a twenty-one year old woman marries a fifty-nine year old man. Does this strike you as outside, or within, the social norms of the time? In what ways do Russell and Holmes seem to reflect the values of their age, and in what ways do they seem progressive or ahead of their time? Do you think that historical fiction sometimes tends to overstate the propriety of that day and age? What seems to be King’s take?

An Interview with Laurie R. King

1. ***A Monstrous Regiment of Women* is your second Mary Russell book and it is set two years after the end of *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, the book that introduced Russell.**

Why did you pick up the story at the end of Russell's education at Oxford, rather than where the last book left off?

When I started writing about Mary Russell, I intended to chart the growth of an extraordinary young woman, beginning in her childhood. *Beekeeper* opens with Russell young and malleable, and ends with her having a glimmer of her future.

The next stage in her development is not her university career, but her coming of age, and the choices she will make to lay out the rest of her life. The major junction in the road, of course, involves Holmes: Does she wish to attach herself to him permanently, knowing how strongly his presence will pull her away from the academic life? Or are those sacrifices worthwhile, for what she will gain?

As Russell herself might say, love is not invariably irrational.

2. What were the particular challenges of evoking Russell in this second outing? Did you find it easier or harder to come back to this character for a sophomore effort?

In fact, *Monstrous Regiment* was my third Russell. Before I could write it, I had to write *A Letter of Mary*, although that story is set three years after *Monstrous Regiment*, at a time when the partnership between Russell and Holmes is firmly defined. I needed to see where she was going before I could describe how she got there.

So the third book is the second, and the second third: Is that clear now?

Returning to Russell and Holmes was both easier and harder. Easier because I knew them, I had done a lot of the Twenties research already, and I had a sense of where they were going. But harder because the later books were proper novels, not a series of episodes as *Beekeeper* was, and because it had dawned on me that there were folk out there who were watching what I did with Holmes, and cared.

Daunting, that.

3. Holmes seems to take a backseat in this volume; was that a conscious decision?

Holmes takes a backseat in most of the books, which irritates readers who want more of the man. All I can say is, these are Russell stories, after all, and during their investigations, the two detectives tend to divide and conquer.

But yes, this is more noticeable in *Monstrous Regiment* because this is Russell's personal quest, the decisions hers alone to make.

4. It is rare for a writer to approach the subject of religion without falling either to reverence or contempt – how does one write about faith and religion with proper empathy for those who believe and don't believe? And could I tempt you to divulge your own religious beliefs?

One of the joys of the mystery genre is that anything that evokes passion is fair game for the story: stamp collecting, revenge, religion, you can have a murder based on any of them. Naturally, the passion has to belong to the characters, not a thing that intrudes

from the narrator—there's nothing that kills a good story faster than the smell of the soap-box.

As for my own tradition, I'm an Episcopalian, in California, which may not tell you much about my beliefs but does put me firmly in the liberal camp. My background is in academic theology, with a BA in comparative religion (showing, perhaps, that I am comparatively religious?) and a Masters in Old Testament theology. For my MA, I wrote a thesis on Feminine Aspects of God in the Old Testament, which by great coincidence is precisely the topic Russell tutors Margery Childe about.

Curious, isn't it, how often one's characters have interests that overlap one's own?

5. Faith and feminism are often at work in your novels; does the balance and braiding of the two express your own political point of view?

Everything is politics, they say. And yes, I'm a feminist—although that basically means that I support the right of a woman to get paid for doing the same job as a man, not that I believe men to be inferior or superfluous.

In its earliest stages, the Mary Russell fan web site had a note at the top from the woman who started the site, who loved the books but, being a conservative flavor of Christian, disagreed with Russell's open espousal of feminism. I'm not sure how many fan sites begin with a Theological Disclaimer, but there couldn't be many—and indeed, the Russell site no longer does. Maybe I convinced her that my definition was both basic and practical, not sweeping and exclusionary.

Religion, feminism—the novel form gives one the leisure to braid in, as you say, strands that add color, strength, and substance to the whole.

6. Good historical fiction is always a balance of research and imagination. Could you illuminate that margin of your work?

In my historical novels as much as my contemporary ones, I try to get it right—although when setting a book set in modern San Francisco, it's easier to find which streets are one-way than in 1920 London. Of course, it works the other way around as well: If the hard-researching author can't find out a piece of information, probably very few readers are going to have their suspended disbelief knocked away by a character putting the wrong postage on a letter or boarding a train departing Penzance at the wrong time.

It is interesting how, when reading a novel actually written at the time (*The Great Gatsby*, *As the Sun Rises*,) one finds very few markers that set it in its time, whereas historical fiction is often filled with slang, products, and actions that scream out its period. In fact, people in the Twenties spoke, dressed, and acted much as we do today, and it's often a matter of deciding if one wants a scene to be real, or realistic. If real, it's usually underwritten; if the scene needs to be firmly set in the period, then throwing in a flavor of the time makes it realistic, and reminds the reader when they are.

Ultimately, the pleasure of historical fiction is not that it is set in the past, but that its past setting tells us something about the present.

- 7. Mary Russell not only has progressive politics, she also has a sex life. What inspired you to bring this dimension to her character, how have you managed to allow the *frisson* without offending traditional fans of Holmes?**

Mary Russell has a *sex* life? With whom? Does her mother know about this?

Oh, you mean those steamy scenes where Holmes fiddles with her fingers or brushes her long hair? Surely you know that, when it comes to describing sex, less is more.

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