

The Murder of Mary Russell

by Laurie R. King

Discussion topics (spoiler-free!)

1. **Women's clothing:** In 1879, a woman's outfit could weigh twenty-five pounds or more—in 1925, it was five. Death by drowning (from the weight of wet fabric, when doing laundry or fetching water from a river) or by fire (from wide skirts near open flame) were commonplace. Are we more sensible now, or have we merely traded those fashion hazards for others?
2. When a loved one set sail for the other side of the world in the 19th century, no one expected to see them again. Even getting a question answered by mail could take a year. How has our sense of the world, and our feeling for the permanence of relationships, been changed by instant communication?
3. We think of Sherlock Holmes as middle aged or more—partly because the original illustrator, Sydney Paget, used his older brother as a model. However, when Watson first lays eyes on Holmes, the Doctor thinks he's an undergraduate. How does it change our picture of the Conan Doyle Holmes if we think of him as a man in his twenties, rather than in his forties?
4. The modern t-shirt might claim that "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle," but in the 19th century, hard realities made for a marginal life for an unmarried woman—especially if she were from the working- or middle classes. If you were faced by Clarissa Hudson's choices, what do you think you would have done?

5. Have you ever fallen victim to a “con”? Do you think you might have without realizing it?

6. Should a person always be punished for their crime? In the Conan Doyle stories Sherlock Holmes speaks of “compounding” a felony (a misdemeanor, although more accurately this was a *misprision of felony*) by refusing to prosecute it—that is, he acts as judge and jury by not reporting someone’s crime to the police. Should the crimes in *The Murder of Mary Russell* have been reported?

7. Mary Russell comes from a position of privilege. Do you think she lacks a certain insight and empathy when it comes to those who struggle to feed and clothe their families? Do you think Sherlock Holmes does the same?

8. In both the Conan Doyle stories and in the Russell & Holmes stories, Sherlock Holmes detests blackmailers. Yet, isn’t what he does here a kind of blackmail?

9. Much of this book turns on the secrets kept from Mary Russell by the two people she’d thought she knew well and could trust completely. Have you ever learned something huge and unexpected about someone close to you? Did it change how you looked at them—and at yourself?

10. Would you want to live in 19th century England? What about if you could be guaranteed good health, sound teeth, and a comfortable income?

(Additional material about *The Murder of Mary Russell* can be found on [the book’s web page](#), with fun things and links to: a long [excerpt](#); posts on [research and writing](#); a [Pinterest page](#) with background images; and [collected research videos](#).)