

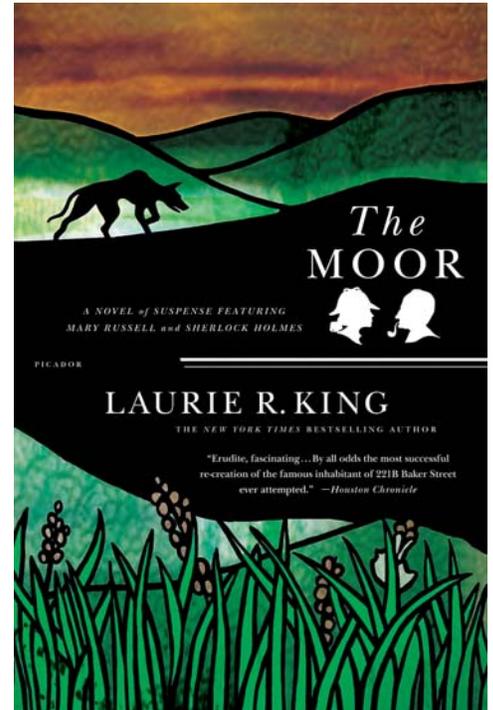
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Moor A Mary Russell Novel

by Laurie King

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Moor* 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 *The Moor*.

About the Book

In *The Moor*, the fourth book in Laurie R. King's Mary Russell series, Sherlock Holmes and Russell come to Dartmoor to investigate the mysterious death of a tin miner on the moors. Large paw prints are found near the body, and the murder bears an uncanny resemblance to that recounted in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. A hound with one glowing eye is seen on the moor, then a coach – constructed of bones – with the ghost of Lady Howard, whose own death remains a topic of mystery. The moor, thick with fog and peat, offers no easy explanation for the seemingly supernatural events surrounding the murders, and the investigation leads our detectives not only into the motives of a second murder, but also deep into the folklore of the local towns people of Dartmoor, a culture that has existed in isolation from the larger part of twentieth century English society.

Several mysteries run through *The Moor*, and when two unexpected figures enter the scene to revisit the mystery of the Baskerville curse, Holmes and Russell must confront their own propensities for skepticism and belief. What do they see, and what, in the mists of the moor, do they *think* they have seen? And what, against reason, do they believe? In *The Moor*, Laurie R. King also tells a story about how people use folklore and superstition, almost like a religion, to make sense of the mysteries of life.

Praise for *The Moor*:

"Erudite, fascinating . . . the most successful re-creation of the famous inhabitant of 221B Baker Street ever attempted."—*The Houston Chronicle*

"A superbly rich read that would please Doyle himself."—*Booklist*

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. After two years of marriage, Mary Russell notes that her relationship with Holmes falls closer on the side of a partnership between two detectives rather than that of a wedded couple. Given Russell's strong independent nature and her open views on the gender inequalities of the time, what did you make of this comment? In your opinion, does this attitude make Russell a stronger female character or does it still limit her in some capacity?
2. In the Editor's Preface, Laurie King notes that Russell names both real and unknown figures and places throughout her memoirs. King concludes Russell has no doubt employed this story-telling method to suit her own purposes. Based on what you know about Russell, what might some of these purposes be?
3. It surprises Russell when Holmes introduces the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould as an old friend. Why did she find the possibility of such a friendship startling? What was your reaction when you discovered the true relationship between Holmes and Baring-Gould? How does this information deepen your understanding of Holmes's character?
4. At first, Josiah Gorton's death is chalked up to his taking a chilly jaunt in Mrs. Howard's spectral coach. What is the local lore behind this former noblewoman and her demonic hound, and what parallels can you draw between this story and the one concerning Richard Covell's wife, which David Sheiman recounts to Russell as the true reason behind the Baskerville curse?

5. Moreover, how do the details in both the local legend of Mrs. Howard and the story of Mrs. Cavell reflect the villagers' attitude towards women in this small, isolated town?
6. When Russell peruses the library of Baring-Gould's writing, she is surprised to find a cruel tone in his passages, especially as it relates to the subject of the poor. Would you say there is a kinship between the Reverend's coldness towards the poor and the sentimentality he expresses towards tradition and heritage?
7. If you are a fan of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, discuss the ways in which *The Moor* overlaps with the plot of the original novel, and King's depiction of the Baskerville family. In what ways does her point of view depart from that of Conan Doyle?
8. What was your first impression of Richard Ketteridge and David Scheiman? Did you detect any clues hidden in the mannerisms of the two men or in their dialogue during dinner in Baskerville Hall that tipped you off to their grand scheme?
9. Russell naturally objects to Baring-Gould's often sexist point of view, but her opinion of him changes after their late-night conversation in the library. Is some degree of sexism allowable when stacked against a person's good qualities?
10. It's a wet, moonless night in the moorland when Russell and Holmes begin their investigation. As the two sleuths trudge through blankets of fog, burbling streams, and unmarked peat trails, what environmental details, including Russell's observations on the condition of the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould's home, serve to create the mood of this mystery?

An Interview with Laurie R. King

1. **You draw Dartmoor with a wonderful sense of cultural and environmental nuance – so much so that it often feels the plot is eerily driven by the lore and the fog of the moor itself. Would you talk a little about how a writer convincingly evokes setting? Did you visit the moors as research?**

Dartmoor takes the part of a character in the book, with a personality and, one might say, an active role in the working out of the plot. In this, I was following in the footsteps not only of Sabine Baring-Gould, whose sense of Dartmoor was vivid and idiosyncratic, but of Conan Doyle, who used the moor both in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and in the short story "Silver Blaze" (a story famous for another dog, the one that did nothing in the night-time.)

Evoking the eeriness of Dartmoor is easy to do. On the one hand, the moor is just a high, wet plateau so remote the Army has used it for ordnance practice for years. On the other hand, any place with that much fog and rain, even without the mires and quicksand pits, has a pretty spooky nature.

In fact, however, the first time I saw Dartmoor was a freakishly sunny June morning, when even the moor ponies looked cheerful. I nearly crossed it off my list of possible novel settings, but fortunately I went back later on a rainy, wind-battered October day, and understood precisely the kind of story that would fit there.

(And, oh, poor Russell: eight books, and she's almost always cold, wet, and hungry. One day I really must send her to Jamaica...)

2. What inspired you to write Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould into this book?

I came across Baring-Gould as soon as I started researching Dartmoor, because of the numerous novels and guides he wrote about his home. When I discovered that he was still alive in the autumn of 1924, I began seriously to consider using him as a minor character. And then I read his memoirs, and bells went off: His grandson, William S. Baring-Gould, wrote the definitive biography of Sherlock Holmes, making generous use of many details of his grandfather's life. How could I not borrow the old man?

3. Of Arthur Conan Doyle's many books and stories, what do you find most striking about *The Hound of the Baskervilles*? What prompted you to revive and continue the story of the Baskerville family?

Once I chose Dartmoor as a setting, it would have been difficult to avoid Holmes' most famous case. Bringing the Baskervilles into the Twentieth century allowed me to expand that tight, almost claustrophobic identity of Dartmoor to include the outside world.

4. Toward the end of the novel, Mary meets the last surviving female Baskerville. Would you say one is the last of her kind and the other is the first?

Certainly, the idea of a woman whose chief value is in her bloodlines is an archaic one, although I am afraid Miss Baskerville is far from the last of that kind. Taken symbolically, however, this is true: Russell embodies the new age, when a woman's worth is in herself, not her name.

5. What is superstition? Do you hold any superstitions yourself?

Superstition could be regarded as the psychic scar tissue that results from a traumatic or deeply confusing event. Inexplicable or frightening experiences heal over with time, but they remain sensitive to the touch, despite the protest of the rational mind. The less ordered one's world, the more one tries to impose some—any—kind of order on it.

And yes, I have some superstitions. For one thing, I find I avoid making doctor's appointments or scheduling lab tests on the day my husband was taken ill.

6. Would you talk a little about your writing life? When do you get up, how much do you write every day/week? What are your writing habits?

I generally write a book a year. This means perhaps three months to produce a first draft of 300 pages, then four or five months to craft the rough material into a coherent book, which in the process expands to around 450 pages (say, 120,000 words.)

During the first draft stage, I write five, six, even seven days a week, morning to afternoon, producing one or two thousand words a day. My first seven books were written on pads with a fountain pen, but now I use a small laptop—sitting in an identical position, with an oversized artist’s clipboard on my lap. During these weeks I do little with the book but write it, only going back to edit when I can’t continue until I’ve corrected a scene’s lead-in or a character’s makeup. I make a lot of notes, about everything from the personality quirks of the characters to fuzzy areas I need to research.

When the first draft is finished, I put it down for a while and dig out the problematic research questions, going more thoroughly into areas I’ve only read lightly on before—when I’m working on a historical book, this is when I go to the research library for biographies of famous figures and studies of movements, when I look up inventions and fashion trends, when I strain my eyes studying microfilmed newspaper advertisements and headlines. Then when I pick the book up again, my eye is sharpened when it comes to what I’ve left out.

The rewrite phase is aimed at figuring out what the book is trying to do, and to make it do that. Classic mystery or more suspense? What themes am I playing with? How do the characters and the story line interact? The rewrite takes longer than the original draft, because God is in the details.

7. As of the publication of this interview you have written eighteen books, all fiction. Do you have any designs to write a memoir, or a work of non-fiction?

I’ve been putting together ideas and essays for a nonfiction work on feminist theology, characters from history who have interested me over the years. It’s going so slowly, however, that it’s going to take me fifteen or twenty years to finish.

As for memoirs, ask me in another twenty years.

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