



# CASTLE SHADE

LAURIE R. KING



BOOK CLUB KIT



# A Letter from Laurie R. King

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**My dear friends in the Book Club world,**

Oh my, what we've all been through in the past twelve months! But I figure that, like me, you've found books an untold blessing when it comes to distraction, reassurance—and community. And now that we can at least *think* about resuming in-person meetings, celebrating the world of the book will play a big part.

Whether your book club is in-person or on screens, I raise a glass to your literary community, and join in your love of stories that introduce you to new characters and unfamiliar places.

*Castle Shade* came out of that strange habit of the pre-Covid world: travel. Some friends talked me into a river tour of Eastern Europe, which had two days tacked on at the start for a trip into the Carpathians to a castle. That was where I was introduced to Queen Marie, the English-born last queen of Roumania, and . . . I just had to have her for the book. And since Marie's fascinating little castle is set in a corner of Transylvania, you can see why my mind went to vampires.

It was just the distraction I needed in 2020, and I greatly hope it's the sort of romp you find suited to the world now.

And, in hopes of contributing a way to make your discussion extra convivial, I offer you this rather fun book club kit, with delish recipes for club members, suggestions for getting discussion under way, photos of the characters and background, and some simply marvelous music to play while you sip your blood-red drinks. . . .

I hope you enjoy *Castle Shade*—and have fun with your book club as well!

*Laurie*



# Discussion Questions

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1. In *Castle Shade*, Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes are off to Roumania to investigate possible vampires haunting Queen Marie in Bran Castle. Do you think either of them believed an actual vampire was behind the strange incidents? Did you think so?
2. Could you imagine this story set in any place other than Transylvania?
3. Before reading *Castle Shade*, did you have any mental image of Roumania in 1925? What about now?
4. People read historical fiction to explore places and ideas they are unfamiliar with. How important is the research in books of this genre? Do you like to learn things, or do the bits of information get in the way of your enjoyment of the story?
5. Did you know anything about Roumania's royal family before reading *Castle Shade*? Judging strictly by the version of Queen Marie seen in the story, do you think she was a responsible figure who managed to look outside of her own upbringing and position, or was she primarily motivated by inherited beliefs and personal considerations?
6. One of the key things *Castle Shade*'s villain targeted was Queen Marie's reputation, believing it to be an important—and fragile—element of the system holding up the monarchy. Is this the equivalent of “fake news” in the modern era?
7. In the story, the idea of *noblesse oblige*—the responsibilities of rulers toward those with less power—lies beneath the actions of many of the characters. After WWI, from Russia to India, the hold of Queen Victoria's extended royal family was being loosened from the globe. Do you think the world is better or worse off with democracies instead of aristocracies running those former states and colonies?
8. *Castle Shade*, with its tales of vampires and shades in the night, shows how many of our myths and fairy tales are built on our fears—the abduction of innocents, dark threats that cannot be identified, death that is not the final end of being. Why do you think these legends continue to endure, even as society grows safer and more educated?
9. Did you guess “who done it” before Russell did? Were there any plot twists or red herrings that you didn't see coming?
10. What did you think about Holmes's proposed punishment for the villain? How was it fitting—and how was it not?
11. Fans of Mary Russell collect her “Russellisms”—short, clever lines that would go well on a coffee mug or t-shirt. What were your favorite read-aloud moments or pithy sayings from *Castle Shade*?
12. Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes are very similar, yet very different. Whose detective mind do you think was better suited for a case like *Castle Shade*?
13. Few of the characters in *Castle Shade*, from Princess Ileana to Queen Marie to Barbu Stirbey, came to an end they would have anticipated when they were young. Do you feel that the world was a less stable place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in previous times?



# Key Characters

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*(Just a refresher!)*

## MARY RUSSELL & SHERLOCK HOLMES

We know the two of them, right? Victorian detective, young apprentice-turned-partner-turned-wife?

## QUEEN MARIE

Beautiful, vibrant granddaughter of Queen Victoria, married to Roumania's crown prince Ferdinand at the age of 17, she conquered the hearts of her new countrymen with her dedication to their cause during the Great War.

## PRINCESS ILEANA

Marie's youngest living child, 16 at the time of *Castle Shade*. She, too, fills her days with public service projects, coming to the aid of the young women of Roumania.

## PRINCE BARBU STIRBEY

Member of an ancient aristocratic Roumanian family, he helps shape his nation's foreign and domestic policy from the early years of the twentieth century on, introducing land reforms and progressive farming on both his estates and those of the royal family.



# Recipes

With a queen born and raised in England, Castle Bran's kitchen wasn't all paprika and polenta.

And if Queen Marie's Castle Bran was both English and Transylvanian, perhaps your book club meeting should be too. So, Bloody Marys . . . and tea?

## ANTI-VAMPIRE GARLIC CHICKEN SKEWERS

**2 lb. chicken, cut into squares** (1½-inch for dinner, ¾-inch for snacks)

**Marinate the chicken overnight in a puree of:**

A large handful of fresh herbs  
(parsley, onion greens, thyme,  
rosemary)

Juice of 1 lemon

1 tbsp. olive oil

2 tsp sugar

1 tsp powdered ginger

4–5 cloves garlic

¾ cup yogurt

**Make dipping sauce by pureeing together:**

1 peeled raw garlic clove, or 4–5  
(or more!) of cooked garlic

1–2 sprigs parsley

2 teaspoons salt

3–4 tbsp. olive oil

1 cup sour cream or Greek yogurt

Pepper to taste

**Thread chicken onto skewers (if wooden, soak well in water first) and grill until done. Drizzle with the sauce or use for dipping. Good with mamaliga—also known as polenta.**





# Recipes

## ENGLISH SCONES

### Stir together in a bowl:

2 cups flour      2 ½ tsp. baking powder  
3 tbsp. sugar  
(or 2 tsp. for      ½ tsp. salt  
savory scones)

Using hands, pastry cutter, or processor, work in to the size of small peas a ½ cup cold butter.

### Mix together in a small bowl:

½ cup milk, cream, or buttermilk  
  
1 egg

**For sweet scones:** add in ½ to 1 cup raisins, berries, etc.

**For savory scones:** add in ¾ cup chopped or coarsely grated cheese, ¼ cup chopped green onion, bacon or prosciutto, etc.

In *Castle Shade*, Father Constantin's wife serves Holmes a roll that "held a thick slice of some cold egg pancake dish with bits of ham and onions."

Stir liquid into flour just until it hangs together (add milk if needed).

Turn onto a lightly floured board and pat or roll into two circles, ¾-inch thick. Cut each circle into 8 wedges, brush with milk, sprinkle with coarse sugar (or grated parmesan for savory) and refrigerate 15 minutes while oven is heating. Lay out on a greased baking sheet two inches apart, bake at 425°F for 10–14 minutes, until lightly browned. Serve warm with butter (or clotted cream, if you can get it) and jam.

### TO FILL SAVORY SCONES:

#### Fry in a little olive oil:

½ an onion, chopped	½ cup mushrooms, chopped
½ a red pepper, chopped	2–3 ounces smoked sausage or ham, chopped
1 cup spinach, finely chopped	

When browned and the vegetables are dry, set aside to cool.

Line the bottom of an 8-inch baking pan (round or square) with parchment paper, then spray paper and sides of pan with cooking spray.

#### Beat together:

8 eggs  
½ cup grated mozzarella or feta cheese

Add fried mixture, pour into baking pan, sprinkle with more cheese, and cook at 350°F for half an hour or until the egg is fully set. Cool, turn out of the pan, and cut to fit on rolls or scones.





# Drink Recipes

## TUICA

Do as the Roumanians do, and start your meal with a straight shot!

For a wintertime book club meet, add a shot of plum brandy (Tuica or Slivovitz) to mulled wine or cider.

In the summer, add ½ cup to a pitcher of limeade or white wine mixed with peach nectar, then add bits of chopped fruit and pour over a glass of ice.

## COUNT DRACULA'S BLOOD ORANGE SANGRIA

Add the juice of 4–6 blood oranges to two bottles white wine and ½ cup Tuica, stir in sliced oranges, pour over ice, add club soda to taste.

(Naturally, “virgin” styles can be served using just the juice and soda.)

## BLOODY MARY DIY BAR

Mix in a pitcher:

1 quart cold tomato or tomato-vegetable juice

1 cup vodka

2 tbsp. Worcestershire sauce

2 tsp. celery salt

1 small clove garlic, pressed

4–5 dashes tabasco sauce

Fill glass (salt the rims if you like) with ice cubes, and serve with a tray of garnishes: celery stalks, cucumber slices, skewered olives, pickled garlic, etc.





# Fun Facts

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1. Roumanian folklore tells of a fairy princess named Ileana who has the power to heal and is kidnapped by a dragon—but is then rescued by a handsome knight!
2. Bran Castle began to bill itself as Dracula's home under the Communist regime to build tourism, but in reality it was, at most, a place Vlad the Impaler (inspiration for Bram Stoker's character) may have been imprisoned for a brief time.
3. Queen Marie took a trip across the United States with Ileana and Nicholas in 1926, meeting everyone from Calvin Coolidge (who was not impressed) to the Sioux tribe (who declared her a sister).
4. In 1961, Princess Ileana founded an Orthodox monastery in western Pennsylvania, and lived her life as the Mother Superior. In the 1980s, the original manuscript of *Dracula* was found in a barn . . . in western Pennsylvania. What would Holmes have said about this coincidence?
5. Up until WWII, the Athenee Palace Hotel in Bucharest was a notorious meeting place for the world's spies, shady businessmen, and scoundrels. But it's still a great bar.
6. One of Queen Marie's staunchest companions was Joe Boyle, an unlikely Klondike gold miner-turned-adventurer-turned-war-hero, who adopted the cause of Roumania as his own and received the title "Savior of Roumania."
7. As Queen Marie grew older, the well in the courtyard of Castle Bran was converted into a snug little elevator shaft, ending in a tunnel excavated out into the gardens below the castle. No word on whether the queen was claustrophobic.
8. Between the wars, the northern route of the Orient Express—from Paris to Istanbul by way of Vienna—went through not only Bucharest, but the small town of Brasov as well.



# Laurie's Photos



## Top row (L to R):

- Castle Bran courtyard
- Castle Bran tile fireplace, with photo of Queen Marie
- Transylvanian haystack creature

## Bottom row (L to R):

- Castle Bran reading area
- Upper doorway of Castle Bran secret passage