

## Mary Russell: My Story

The following first appeared on the MySpace blog kept by Mary Russell, doled out in weekly installments during the program, Fifteen Weeks of Bees.”

Fifteen Weeks was organized by Miss Russell’s literary agent, Laurie R. King, to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the first in Miss Russell’s memoirs, *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, and the release of the ninth volume, *The Language of Bees*.

story © Laurie R. King

1.

Hard as it is to believe, fifteen years have passed since Ms Laurie King published—under her name—the first volume of the Mary Russell memoirs. She recounts (in her Editor’s Preface to that volume, which was given the title **The Beekeeper’s Apprentice**) her puzzlement as to what these manuscripts were and why she was the recipient of these multiple volumes of hand-written (for the most part) manuscripts recounting the life of a stranger and, moreover, a stranger who claims to have been married to one Sherlock Holmes.

Now, the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of **The Beekeeper’s Apprentice**, may be as good a time as any to answer that puzzle.

It began in the winter of 1989, when a bout with a troublesome although ultimately meaningless illness left me with an awareness that, in my ninetieth year, I was perhaps not to be immortal. It was time to gather my thoughts for posterity and make some arrangement for their preservation.

I might have done it long before, truth to tell, but for the identity of my husband. When one is married to a person of considerable fame, one tends to choose invisibility over all else. And since any memoirs I was to pass on would be of occasionally inflammatory nature, I needed to choose my literary agent with care.

Little did I realise that what that decision would cost me.

2.

Any literary agent whom I put in charge of my memoirs needed to be, first of all a woman. She needed to be strong-minded enough to resist the blandishments and threats unleashed upon her once the nature of these manuscripts came to light. And since I thought it best to begin with someone with links to **Mary Russell** above any links to **Sherlock Holmes**, I cast my mind over my relatives: cousins of various stripe abound, but search as I might, I could find no combination of literary interest and common sense.

Next, I sought out the descendents of my university friend, **Veronica Beaconsfield**, only to find that the current generation lacked the wit of their grandparents.

So I went further back, to my childhood in San Francisco, and there, in the early weeks of 1992, I found the person I sought. The granddaughter of a childhood friend, she was in the early stages of a literary career—her first novel had been accepted at a New York publisher—but she was also sensible enough to balance the demands of children, travel, a husband with his own career, and a complex household. And an untold benefit: She had a background in Old Testament theology!

Without delay, I began to assemble the manuscripts and prepared to send them off to **Ms King** in California—but before I could do so, catastrophe struck.

3.

I doubt it will come as a surprise to the reader when I say that my husband's popularity in the world of letters approximates that of a lesser divinity. More than a century ago, when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had an attack of pique and sent Holmes to his death over the Reichenbach Falls, readers protested with black arm-bands, cancelled subscriptions to *The Strand*, and outrage to Conan Doyle's face. Were that story to be published now, I should expect Molotov Cocktails to be thrown.

This degree of renown brings, as you might expect, considerable problems. The cooperation of our neighbours is essential, and elaborate ploys are occasionally necessary to turn would-be visitors from our door in Sussex—although we have found that the most effective of these is encouraging the world to think of us as fictional characters. This weeds out all but the overly whimsical and the truly insane and, until one cool spring morning in April of 1992, permitted us to maintain our privacy.

I was in the downstairs sitting room finishing the task of assembling and sealing together the pages of my various memoirs, when my eye was attracted by motion at the window. I looked up, and saw to my horror that our rural home was being invaded, by none other than a ravening pack of Sherlockians.

4.

Seeing the press of eager faces at my window, I knew in an instant that I was in mortal danger—or if not mortal, then certainly our sanity was to be challenged. At least ten of them, Americans all, each wearing one or several lapel-decorations depicting a bee or a calabash pipe or the address 221B. They were unmistakable, and unstoppable.

I raised my voice in alarm, and scurried as fast as a woman of 92 can to check the locks on the doors. The cook came to see, and being a woman of wit as well as culinary ability, joined instantly in battening down our defences. While she went around the perimeter, closing the curtains, I picked up the telephone and summoned assistance: the stout, and stout-hearted, grandson of my old farm manager, both of the generations named Patrick.

In minutes, young Patrick was roaring over the paddocks in his Land Rover, dog and shotgun to hand. The Sherlockians made a hasty retreat, first to the road and then, when Patrick took up a position mid-drive with his shotgun over his arm, up the road in the direction of the village. I was tempted to telephone the inn and request that they deny these invaders entrance, or at least make certain their beer was overly warmed, but on second thought, an open declaration of war might only stir these Americans' dander.

Still, a declaration of war it had become.

5.

Holmes eventually came to a safe place to pause in his ongoing chemical experiment and toddled down the stairs to see what the uproar was. The cook set before us a pot of powerful tea and a plate of scones flavoured with outrage; Patrick leant his gun inside the door and joined us, trusting to his dogs to raise an alarm; we sat around the kitchen table for a council of war.

Holmes and I had long been prepared for this day when his past came to roost on our heads. In fact, given a mere thirty seconds' warning, we were equipped to walk out with the essentials of life on our persons, and disappear permanently.

This, we thought, would not require such extreme measures. Instead, we planned how best to instigate our second defence, which we had come up with some years earlier when the local amateur Eastbourne Dramatic Society put on a production of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The gentleman playing the lead, a local solicitor of barely forty, did a competent (if somewhat flamboyant) job of acting Holmes; later, we invited him to the house and arranged with him a smaller-scale dramatic rendition of the Great Detective. The thought of acting a pseudo-Holmes in place of the actual Holmes appealed to his droll, Sussex-born sense of humour, and he agreed to be available, if and when we called on him.

It was time to raise the curtain on our idiosyncratic one-man show.

6.

By good fortune, our solicitor-actor would be available for several days, to play the part of a genial if rather befuddled elderly farmer who, indeed, happened to bear a resemblance to one Sherlock Holmes. With him in place, the Americans could batter themselves against our doors until they were convinced that their information was faulty, at which time they might go back to the Plains or prairies whence they had come.

Behind our drawn curtains, Holmes returned to his experiment and I to my manuscripts. Before padlocking the trunk, however, I went through the house and collected an armful of treasured memorabilia that called to mind our cases and adventures over the years. They were, with certain exceptions, items of little commercial value—a friend's trademark monocle, one of Holmes' more disreputable pipes, some newspaper clippings—but were they to be spotted by any sharp-witted Sherlockian (if that be not an oxymoron) they could not only give lie to our ruse, they would be themselves vulnerable to the predations of the horde outside: Sherlockians are inveterate collectors.

I arranged them atop my memoirs, and padlocked the lid. When I had more leisure, I should write a letter of explanation to the recipient of the trunk, but today, I had much to do.

7.

With the trunk of manuscripts and memorabilia securely packed, I went upstairs and assembled a pair of valises for us, that we might at least keep dry and comfortable in exile during the American siege. I doubted that they had found my own house in Oxford—I would have heard, had there been strangers climbing over the walls and loitering out front—but Holmes and I have not made it to our respective ages by making easy assumptions.

Night came. The cook did the washing up and grumbled her way towards bed. The downstairs lights were turned off, then those in the laboratory, and finally the bedroom went dark. All this time, Patrick sat prominently behind the wheel of the Land Rover while the dogs prowled the grounds.

Except that shortly after dark, Patrick's outline in the car was in fact a scarecrow made of stuffed shirts and a hat. Leaving the more obedient of his two dogs to guard the dummy and the car, and the less obedient one inside the house to bark warningly, the three of us set off across the dark landscape.

One advantage of having walked the Downs for the better part of a century—daylight and dark, rain and snow—is that one's feet know the way when one's eyes do not. We strolled in easy silence over the cropped grass, keeping to the sheep-tracks to reduce the sound of crackling frost. In half an hour, we came out in the roadside car-park near the road to Eastbourne, and Patrick went forward to tap at the window of the Mercedes sedan that waited there.



8.

The door of the waiting car clicked open and the gravel crunched. Our actor greeted us in low whispers as we handed over Holmes' outer garments (which the Americans might recognise, if they had been keeping watch for some days) in exchange for his keys. In under two minutes, we were in the car and Patrick was leading the actor back the way we had come.

He was, I thought, already dressed and made up for his role, although anyone paying attention to his gait would know his middle-aged strength—he was a competitive runner, which gave him the necessary thinness to enact Holmes. In fact, I learnt later, this fleetness of foot came in useful the very next afternoon, when the waiting Sherlockians saw “Holmes” set out for a walk along the cliffs, set off baying after him, only to be utterly confounded when Sherlock Holmes broke into a brisk sprint and left them panting in his wake.

(The following day, Patrick withdrew his guard, and within the hour, knock came on the door. The actor was suitably taken aback by these Americans who imagined his stone cottage was inhabited by Sherlock Holmes. With exquisite rural politeness he asked, Were they not aware that Sherlock Holmes was a fictional character?)

By the time the confused and downhearted pack walked back up the drive, we had been gone for three days, and our trail was cold.

Or so we thought.

9.

The house in Oxford to which we retreated was in the northern district of the town, a tree-studded neighbourhood of large brick houses inhabited by dons and their families. It is close enough to town that a stroll to the Bodleian and Radcliffe libraries, even with an arm full of books, is a pleasant interlude; it is far enough from the centre that the wrangle of bells of a Sunday morning is amusing, not headache-inducing.

My house is like its fellows from the outside, with high walls on all sides, a spacious gravel drive at the front, and a narrow turret glued onto one corner. The house and its garden are too nondescript for any passer-by to bother with a second glance, and as far as the neighbours are concerned, the owner is an independent older woman who spends much of her live travelling and working on her academic studies, which (it being Oxford) could be Romanian campanology or liver flukes of the upper Nile.

Once upon a time, Holmes had arrived at my student flat through an upper window, setting off an elaborate and circuitous traverse of Oxford's roof-tops in the snow.

Fortunately for us, this time I was permitted to drive through the elaborate and circuitous city roads in the actor's Mercedes.

10.

My Oxford house has a self-contained apartment at the front, in which I habitually install a series of graduate students, mostly women, whose only rent is an agreement to keep the rooms aired and the car's battery charged, to pick me up at the train station if I ring, and to tell the neighbours nothing about me. The resident that year was a small, wide girl with adenoids and a brilliant medical mind, who greeted our 6:00 am arrival in a startling pink dressing gown, a cup of tea in one hand and the current copy of *Lancet* in the other.

I greeted her, and asked if she was aware of any stray Americans asking about me, or if she had received any odd telephone calls. "No calls, no questions," she said. "Shall I bring a bottle of milk through to your kitchen?"

I thanked her for her thoughtfulness, blessed her for her preoccupation, and left luggage and husband in the house while I drove the Mercedes over to the train station for retrieval.

We were safe. I thought.

11.

I rang Patrick the following evening—trusting that our Sherlockian pursuers lacked the wherewithal to tap lines and trace telephone calls—to ask him to stow the trunk of memoirs with a third party for the present, and heard of the pack’s confounding by our actor’s cross-country sprint. Patrick told me he would spend another night sleeping in the Land Rover at our door, then load up our trunks and valuables and abandon his post on the morrow, leaving the actor to his play.

We spent a pleasant three days in my second home of Oxford, visiting with old friends, pursuing our varied studies, and worrying not in the least that we would be discovered—the ancient city is generously endowed with ancient academics, and even the closing days of April are cool enough to justify hats and the occasional scarf.

On the fourth day, my medical student greeted our return with the news that a couple of rather odd Americans had come to the door while we were out. With sinking heart, I asked if they had worn lapel pins with pipes, deerstalker caps, or 221B.

No, she replied—they were dogs.

“Holmes,” I shouted up the stairs, “time to be off.”

However, when I went to get the car out, they were lying wait.

12.

You need to remember, this was 1992, and the number of people who knew that Sherlock Holmes had a wife was relatively small. No doubt our pursuing Sherlockians thought I was a housekeeper, or a nurse—they were standing watch outside of the gate, and began to bay wildly when first I set foot out of the house. I feigned great age—admittedly not a difficult act, at ninety two years—and hobbled to the car, back bent with apparent arthritis and a large straw hat pulled down, not so much to hide my features as to explain why I hadn't noticed ten jumping figures thirty feet away. I got the door open with my ancient hands, bent slowly—slowly, to retrieve some small object from the door pocket, then inadequately closed the door and, crouching low, crept back into the house.

Thus, before dawn the next morning, the three who had been set to watch overnight from their hire car recognised the hatted old lady behind the wheel of the motor that pulled out of the gate, and hastened to follow—it being too dark to see that the person at the wheel was a foot shorter and seventy years younger. Nor did they notice that the brisk young man closing the gate was in fact the old woman they thought they were following.

Whistling, I went to finish my coffee and leave the house, on what promised to be a perfectly lovely May-Day morn.

13.

May-Day in Oxford is an ancient ritual, which has been suspended from time to time over the centuries due to excessive unruliness. It begins well before dawn, when from all directions people trickle into the high street, making their way in the direction of the Magdalene College tower.

At dawn, choir-boys raise their voices to the day, their sweet, high chorus trailing down over the packed street of families and homeless men, passing tradesmen and beer-sodden undergraduates, antiquarians and tourists. Participants of the previous night's college balls, held upright by the press of the throng, pass around half-empty bottles of cheap champagne, most of them bedraggled, tieless, sometimes shoeless, and often sodden from the puzzling ritual of leaping out of punts or off of bridges in their evening dress. When the snatches of song finish drifting down from on high, the crowd shakes off its attentive silence, gives a noisy pulse, and reverses its progress, out from Magdalene College. Morris dancers bounce and rattle on the paving stones surrounding the Radcliffe Camera, Hobby horses give the kiss of fertility to doomed young women, odd foodstuffs are sold, the manifold clergy of the town looks on fondly at the pagan frenzy, and the rites of spring are officially ushered in.

When the sky was still dark overhead, Holmes and I let ourselves out of the gate and joined the trickle, soon stream, of May Day celebrants.

However, before the Magdalene choir had finished, we had been spotted.

14.

I do not know if our American pursuers were actively watching for us, or if they had decided to make the best of their visit and take in the May Day festivities while waiting for us to emerge, but at the corner of the Botanic Gardens, where Rose Lane comes into the High, the straining silence was broken by loud American accents: “Hey! There he is!”

And the hunt was on again.

I spoke in Holmes’ ear, ordering him to abandon me. He hesitated, being neither cowardly nor disloyal, but even he could see the logic in my suggestion. He bent down enough to vanish in the crowd, while I appropriated a nearby furled umbrella (in any English crowd, there will always be a man who doubts the clear sky overhead) and tripped one attacker, jabbed the second in the stomach, and nudged the third into the large, intoxicated Rugby player beside him.

With that trio temporarily disposed of, and making certain they had seen me, their unlikely assailant, I pushed into the crowd, crossing to the Magdalene side of the High and making for Magdalene Bridge.

Halfway across, I ducked down to make my way back up the human stream, ducking into the grounds of the Botanic Garden and making for the river.

Holmes had located a punt, worked its anchoring pole out of the bottom, and was waiting for me. I heard a shout behind me—English, not American—and tumbled into the boat. He pushed off, and I turned to face the boat’s irate owners.

“Terribly sorry,” I called to them. “There’s a trio of Americans just behind you who said they’d be happy to repay you for the hire cost. You take it up with them, there’s a good lad.”

A sweet old lady in a boat; how could he argue with me?

15.

Had our pursuers been familiar with Oxford, they could have caught us up several times over. As it was, by the time they extricated themselves from the young man whose boat we had stolen, then consulted their maps, we were away from the river-side path in Christchurch meadow—by this time, I was punting—and down the new cut to the Isis proper.

By the time they had located the Thames path, gone back up to Folly Bridge, and crossed the river to get to the path, the current had moved us briskly downstream. They nearly caught us up at Iffley, when the lockkeeper protested about working the locks for one solitary punt, but a flash of gold in his hand changed his mind, and we were away.

The day was warm, the cushions were comfortable, and the merest touch of the pole kept us moving in the right direction. We stopped from time to time to take refreshment. And at one such stop, I bought an antique post-card, thinking to amuse Ms King in California.

When evening came upon us, I changed into raiment that would draw less notice than trousers on a woman my age, and we abandoned our vessel. In a fit of whimsy, I left the day's clothing folded in the boat, with my secondary pair of spectacles, since every reader of crime fiction knows that suicides always remove their spectacles.

Thus, the explanation of how Ms King came to possess my memoirs. I may at a later time recount the story of our subsequent communications: What I meant by the antique postcard that she read as, *More to follow*; why we were in Utrecht when I sent it; and why, most puzzling of all, *The Times* did not publish its account of the punt found in central London for an entire three years.

Is it not satisfying to know that there is always more to any tale?