


Please note that this discussion guide contains spoilers.
If you haven't read the book yet, you might want to finish it first!



The Lantern's Dance

By Laurie R. King

A Mary Russell and
Sherlock Holmes *Mystery*

BOOK CLUB KIT



A LETTER FROM LAURIE R. KING

Dear reader,

As Mary Russell reflects in *The Lantern's Dance*, the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle told the world precisely three personal things about Sherlock Holmes:

First, that he had an older brother named Mycroft, who was something high and enigmatic in the British government (read: a spymaster). Next, that the Holmes family were English “country squires” (that is, not quite aristocracy.) Finally, that his grandmother was “the sister of Vernet, the French artist.”

For seventeen Mary Russell “Memoirs,” those facts were sufficient. But Holmes’s background has always teased at me. Where did he come from? What on earth could his parents, his nursemaid and governess, and his tutors and education have been like, to have produced that extraordinary mind? How could Holmes, who by Conan Doyle’s account never left Britain, have so blithely set off for a three-year tour of some of the more challenging parts of the world? And what made him so reticent to talk about himself, even to his friend Watson?

It is a novelist’s job to fill in the blanks. Those questions are where I began.

Laurie R. King

ABOUT LAURIE R. KING

Laurie King studied theology before turning to crime—award-winning, bestselling mysteries. She is a third-generation Northern Californian who married an Anglo-Indian, giving her a fondness for the country that may come through in Lakshmi’s writing. Her impudence in giving Sherlock Holmes a young partner who occasionally gets the better of him endeared her to the Baker Street Irregulars, who invited her to join them. She now tries to insult her characters more often.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The separate plots from three points of view—Russell, Holmes, and Lakshmi in her journal—wind around each other, and come together in the end. Do you like this structure in a novel? Do you think the author could have told the story entirely from Mary Russell’s point of view?
2. The Sherlock Holmes who appears in *The Lantern’s Dance*—husband, father, even grandfather—is very different from the solitary figure of the Conan Doyle stories. Does this evolution of a character work for you? Can you see Conan Doyle’s Holmes in the Holmes of the Russell stories, or do they feel like separate people?
3. The Russell “memoirs” move around the world a lot, meeting different cultures and situations—in this book, the reader is even given views of a different century. Do you like this sensation of exploration? What makes you feel that you can trust a writer’s research, and believe that they are presenting an accurate picture?
4. The soldiers of the Great War pieced together their lives as best they could after the fighting ended. How much of Damian’s work and personality came out of his long years in the trenches, and how much is simply him? Would he be a Surrealist without his War experiences?
5. In the Arthur Conan Doyle story “The Greek Interpreter,” Holmes credits his maternal grandmother’s artist family for his and Mycroft’s powers of observation: “Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms.” Do you agree that detecting skills are inborn, or do you think it is more likely due to the way his mother raised her sons, as given in *The Lantern’s Dance*?
6. In English-speaking countries, we tend to think of India as an integral to English history, and overlook the other colonial powers. Were you surprised to learn that there were French colonies? And, being on the outside of India’s pre-independence power structure—the East India Company followed by the Raj—how do you think life in those colonies would have been different?
7. There are a number of themes explored in *The Lantern’s Dance*, including family, wealth, and women’s rights and responsibilities. Which theme resonated with you the most, and why?
8. From early in his career, Holmes has despised blackmailers, who destroy lives—especially those of vulnerable women—for money. Do you think he would have loathed those criminals as much without the personal experience of their power?
9. Was Lakshmi right, to abandon her sons and husband? What about Irene Adler? Can you sympathize with their choices? Do you think that knowing the truth—and knowing that the two women conspired for years behind his back—is going to make Holmes bitter, possibly even more of a misogynist than he already is?
10. What did you think of the story’s ending? Were you surprised, or did you expect it? Was it what you’d hoped for?





CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mary Russell: born January 2, 1900, in San Francisco, California, she moved permanently to Sussex in the early months of the Great War, where she met, and became the apprentice and then partner to, Sherlock Holmes. Their adventures have taken them all over the globe, but when Russell is at home, she is a student of theology at Oxford University.

Sherlock Holmes: born January 6, 1861, in England. He and his first partner, Dr. Watson, lived and worked in London's Baker Street from 1881 until Holmes "retired" in 1903 to the Sussex Downs. There he kept bees, did the occasional job for His Majesty, and met Mary Russell in 1915, after which he launched into a second career and an unanticipated first marriage.

Damian Adler and his daughter **Estelle:** Damian's mother, the contralto Irene Adler, had a short-lived relationship with Sherlock Holmes in 1893-4, before she sent him home to his work in London. Damian learned who his father was when he was 18, but did nothing to get into contact with him. (Damian's story is found in *The Language of Bees* and *God of the Hive*.)

Dr. Aileen Henning: When Holmes needed a doctor in the north of Scotland for Damian's injured shoulder, he convinced Dr. Henning to see the patient by rowing her out until it was too far to swim to shore. Despite this inauspicious beginning, the doctor and her patient fell in love.

Gervais and Pauline LaRue: Neighbors of Irene and Damian Adler, they worked first for Irene, then later for Damian and his family. Pauline's brother, **Pierre**, lives in a cottage at the back of Irene's property, and is the informal night watchman and full-time gardener





FOOD AND DRINK PAIRINGS

France and India—what a great mix for a book club gathering! Decorate the table with brilliant Indian party decorations and the tricolore of France, lay out a buffet of finger foods from both countries, a drink or two from each, some hand-wipes to save the pages of your books, and—Bon appétit, Bandhu [friend]!

TO EAT:

From France: cheeses, dried meats, paté, and cornichons, naturally, but also small quiches, gougères, or croque monsieurs cut in pieces.

From India: Samosas are a great finger food, available frozen. Chapatis, naan, or parathas are flatbreads, cut into bits they're great scoops for dips or tapenade

TO DRINK:

From France: any sparkling or fruity white or rosé is a good balance to Indian spices. Non-alcoholic drinks include coffee, herb tea (tisanes), or bottled drinks from Perrier to Orangina. And don't forget your citron pressé when the weather is hot (lemonade).

From India: Lhassi blends fruit or spices with kefir or diluted yogurt. Chai is richly spiced tea, served with milk and sweetened. Or various sweet fruit-flavored sodas, if you have an Indian foods supplier nearby.

And of course, we recommend a **Bees Knees**, with or without the alcohol:

- 2 oz. gin or non-alcoholic gin alternative
- 1 oz. lemon juice
- ½ to 1 oz. honey syrup (see below)

DIRECTIONS:

Fill a shaker with ice, add the drink, and shake til cold. Strain and garnish with lemon slice or a bit of rosemary.

Honey syrup: Since honey does not mix well cold, heat equal parts honey and water until blended—adding a sprig of rosemary or some juniper berries if you want when hot, removing when cool. Store in fridge.





FUN FACTS BEHIND THE LANTERN'S DANCE

1. Laurie has visited the art world of Paris in the Twenties before, in *The Bones of Paris*.
2. Arthur Conan Doyle's story, "The Man with the Twisted Lip," portrays a Lascar as a scoundrel—but in fact, that character was more loyal to the Englishman who hired him than the Englishman was to his own wife.
3. The modern zoetrope was patented in the 1800s, but similar devices were found in the Middle East five millennia ago, and in China 2,000 years ago—a lantern turned by the heat of a lamp.
4. In 1830, the six-month voyage around the Cape was cut to two, a simple matter of a paddle steamer to Suez, a dusty wagon cross-country, another steamer and a barge to Alexandria. The paddle steamer was powered by coal from Wales, carried east by camels
5. The Empress Josephine's gardens near Nanterre had more than 250 varieties of rose—some of them confiscated by the French navy from boarded ships.
6. Horace Vernet's first wife was Louise Pujol. The Governor General of French India from 1844 to 1849 was her brother . . . Louis Pujol.



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