

LUPOFF'S BOOK WEEK: THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES by Arthur Conan Doyle, 1902.

In the collected Sherlock Holmes stories, 115 pages. My friend David Garfinkel has commented a number of times on the curious lacunae in my reading; led by a combination of special interest and whim, I may have read many odd and unusual books -- yet missed many that "everyone has read." An example is The Wizard Of Oz which I finally got to last year (although when I mentioned it in fannish print a number of generally well read fans admitted that they had not read it either).

Another confession: I've never before read a Sherlock Holmes story. Oh, I know Holmes. As a child I doted on the Rathbone-Bruce movies that have so gratifyingly turned up on television lately, and Pat and I saw Baker Street last year, and unless my recollection is garbled I even played a bit part in a Holmes dramatization that Chris Steinbrunner wrote and directed for WFUV a few years ago.

And I have read Doyle. Pat and I were both enrolled as charter members of Ruth Berman's abortive Professor Challenger Society...and right now I'm on the prowl for a copy of Doyle's The Doings of Raffles Haw among other antiquarian volumes.

But nver Holmes. Why not? I don't know. Certainly not for lack of availability. Partly, I suppose, because detective stories, however famous, were simply not My Field, and partly, maybe, for simple perversity. If everybody read Holmes, I wouldn't. It took me 8 years to read LotR, at least partly for that reason, which is a poor reason but a human one.

Okay, The Hound of the Baskervilles, because of all the Holmes stories Fat recommends it, and holmes now because after reading Born In A Book Shop I cannot hold out any longer.

The Hound is probably the most famous of the Holmes stories. It deals with a family curse, a supposedly spectral hound that haunts the Baskerville baronets because of the wickedness of an ancestor, that has recently literally frightened old Lord Baskerville to death and that menaces young Lord Henry Baskerville. The book is full of marshes and fogs, mysterious figures appearing and disappearing into the shadows, all the elements dear to that particular kind of aficionado.

Yet I found the book unsatisfying. The traditional scenes in Baker Street are indeed charming, and Holmes, when not in the middle of a lengthy ratiocination, is a character of hypnotic force. But most of the book takes place at and about the Baskerville country seat, with Holmes annoyingly offstage and Watson carrying the burden of narration largely through his reports to Holmes and through his diary. Too many too long arid stretches are present.

Still, when Holmes is on stage the story picks up tremendously, and if for him I see the Basil Rathbone of a quarter centruy ago, and hear his clipped, slightly nasal delivery of Holmes' lines, I find it not at all to the detriment of the character or the story. Indeed, I would prefer the hearty bumbling Watson of Nigel Bruce to the dust-dry Watson of The Hound.

This book was the Holmes revival tale, nine years after Doyle had killed off his detective in The Final Problem. (Well, only in a sense. In terms of the narrative, Holmes was revived in The Return of Sherlock Holmes, but Return did not appear, in book form at least, until two years AFTER The Hound of the Baskervilles.) At any rate, if I were a dedicated Holmesian (which I emphatically ain't) I suppose I might divide the canon into two great bodies, the pre-Reichenbach tales and the post-Reichenbach. Hound is post-, and I suppose I really ought to read a pre- book, and maybe I will. Or maybe Not.

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And this is Andy Forter, telling you to keep your knees loose until next week, when we return to Degler! is glorious Panavision and New Yorkolor...