

“A Hound It Was”

☒ Sometime in the mid-1990s I was lucky enough to interview Robert Madle, a dealer in science fiction and fantasy pulp magazines, as well as a member of First Fandom, the now much-diminished group—never large—of those pimply teens who attended the inaugural 1939 World Science Fiction Convention.

“Every so often,” Madle told me, “I’ll get a call from somebody looking for, say, *Astounding* from 1934 to 1937, and I immediately know this is a guy in his seventies hoping to relive his youth, who wants to reread the stories of his childhood.” When young, these doctors, lawyers, and businessmen had studied with longing the corner drugstore racks gaudy with issues of *Weird Tales*, *Black Mask*, *The Shadow*, and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. Now retired, these old men—and a few women—yearned to feel again some flicker of youth’s incomparable freshness when every magazine and cheap paperback proffered a vision of how exciting life was going to be. And never quite is.

Still, a few books retain more of their magic than others.

The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902), by Arthur Conan Doyle, was the first “grown-up” book I ever read—and it changed my life. Back in the late 1950s my fifth-grade class belonged to an elementary school book club. Each month our teacher would pass out a four-page newsletter describing several dozen paperbacks available for purchase. I remember buying Jim Kjelgaard’s *Big Red* and a thriller called *Treasure at First Base*, as well as Geoffrey Household’s *Mystery of the Spanish Cave*. (Years later, I would race through Household’s famous *Rogue Male*, about the English hunter who tries to assassinate Hitler and who instead finds himself relentlessly tracked and pursued.) Lying on my bed at home, I lingered for hours over these newsprint catalogs, carefully making my final selections.

I had to. Each month my mother would allow me to purchase no more than four of the twenty-five- and thirty-five-cent paperbacks. Not even constant wheedling and abject supplication could shake her resolve. “What do you think we are, made of money? What’s wrong with the library?”

After Mr. Jackson sent in the class’s order, several weeks would pass and I would almost, but not quite, forget which books I had ordered. Then in the middle of some dull afternoon, prob-

ably given over to the arcane mysteries of addition and subtraction, a teacher's aide would open the classroom door and silently drop off a big, heavily taped parcel. Whispers would ripple up and down the rows and everyone would grow restive, hoping that the goodies would be distributed that very minute. Sometimes we would be made to wait an entire day, especially if the package had been delivered close to the three o'clock bell when school let out.

Romantic poets regularly sigh over their childhood memories of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower. But what are daisies and rainbows compared to four sleek and shiny paperbacks? After more than thirty years as a literary journalist, I have seen and reviewed new books aplenty. Ah, but then, then, at my wooden school desk, etched with generations of student initials, I would methodically appraise each volume's artwork, read and reread its back cover, carefully investigate the delicate line of glue at the top edge of the perfect-bound spines. Afterwards, I would glance around, sometimes with barely suppressed envy, to survey the gleaming treasures on the desks nearby. Certainly no rare first editions have ever been so carefully handled and cherished as those apparently ordinary book-club paperbacks.

To this day I can more or less recall the newsletter's capsule summary that compelled me to buy *The Hound of the Baskervilles*—as if that ominous title alone weren't enough! Beneath a small reproduction of the paperback's cover—depicting a shadowy Something with fiery eyes crouching on a moonlit crag—blazed the thrilling words: “What was it that emerged from the moor at night to spread terror and violent death?” What else, of course, but a monstrous hound from the bowels of Hell? When I opened my very own copy of the book, the beast was further described on the inside display page:

A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smoldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog.

Eager as I was to start immediately on this almost irresistible treat, I staunchly determined

to put off reading the book until I could do so under just the right conditions. At the very least, I required a dark and stormy night, and the utter absence of distracting sisters and parents. Finally, there came a Saturday in early November when my mother and father announced that they would be visiting relatives that evening—and “the girls” would be going along. Yes, I might stay at home alone to read. The afternoon soon grew a dull metallic gray, threatening rain.

With a dollar clutched in my fist, I pedaled my red Roadmaster bike to Whalen’s drugstore, where I quickly picked out two or three candy bars, a box of Cracker Jack, and a cold bottle of Orange Crush. After my family had driven off in our new 1958 Ford, I dragged a blanket from my bed, spread it on the reclining chair next to the living room’s brass floor lamp, carefully arranged my provisions near to hand, turned off all the other lights in the house, and crawled expectantly under the covers with my paperback of *The Hound*—just as the heavens began to boom with thunder and the rain to thump against the curtained windows.

In the louring darkness I turned page after page, more than a little scared, gradually learning the origin of the dreaded curse of the Baskervilles. At the end of the book’s second chapter,

you may recall, the tension escalates unbearably. Holmes and Watson have just been told how Sir Charles Baskerville has been found dead, apparently running *away* from the safety of his own house. Their informant Dr. Mortimer pauses, then adds, hesitantly, that near the body he had spotted footprints on the damp ground. A man's or a woman's? eagerly inquires the great detective, to which question he receives the most thrilling answer in all of twentieth-century literature: "Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!" I shivered with fearful pleasure, scrunched further down under my thick blanket, and took another bite of my Baby Ruth candy bar, as happy as I will ever be.

To my surprise, I would later discover that my first meeting with Mr. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson was hardly distinctive, let alone unique. Conan Doyle's own daughter Jean used to read her father's stories by flashlight in bed. One of the two cousins—probably Frederic Dannay rather than Manfred Lee—who together concocted the Ellery Queen mysteries relates his own version of my story. Suffering from an earache, he was lying in bed when an aunt unexpectedly came to visit and brought along a book from the public library:

It was *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. I opened the book with no realization that I stood, or rather sat, on the brink of my fate. I had no inkling, no premonition, that in another minute my life's work, such as it is, would be born.

My first glance was disheartening. I saw the frontispiece of the Harper edition—a picture of a rather innocuous man in dress coat and striped trousers holding the arm of a young woman in a bridal gown. A love story, I said to myself, for surely this unattractive couple were in a church about to be married. . . . Only an unknown and unknowable sixth sense prompted me to turn to the table of contents and then the world brightened. The first story, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” seemed to hold little red-blooded promise, but the next story was, and always will be, a milestone. A strange rushing thrill challenged the pain in my ear. “The Red-Headed League”! What a combination of simple words to skewer themselves into the brain of a hungry boy! I glanced down quickly, “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” and I was lost! Ecstatically, everlastingly lost!

I finished *The Adventures* that night. . . . As I closed the book, I knew that I had read one of the greatest books ever written. And today I realize with amazement how true and tempered was my twelve-year-old critical sense. For in the mature smugness of my present literary judgment, I still feel unalterably that *The Adventures* is one of the world's masterworks.

As indeed it is.

In my own case, the romance of that Dartmoor hellhound would lead me to Conan Doyle's other books, to the work of his peers and followers, and eventually to the recognition that "the observance of trifles," as Holmes called his method, lay at the heart of literary criticism. Eventually, too, I would discover a group of friends, from the most varied backgrounds, who shared a passion for what have been called the Sacred Writings: the almost legendary Baker Street Irregulars. Yet little did I then suspect—as the narrators in old-time mysteries are wont to say—that forty years after that rainy night in Lorain, Ohio, I would be proposing a toast to the Hound at a banquet in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of Arthur Conan Doyle's most thrilling novel. But I get ahead of myself.