



## A Study In Lavender: Queering Sherlock Holmes

*Joseph R.G. DeMarco (Editor) , Elka Cloke , Steve Berman , Rajan Khanna , Stephen Osborne , Ruth Sims*

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What other characters from English literature have captivated hearts and minds as thoroughly as Sherlock Holmes and his loyal companion John Watson? Many fans imagine the relationship between these men is deep and more than platonic. Edited by noted mystery author Joseph R. G. DeMarco, A Study in Lavender queers the Holmes universe; the authors have devised stories in which Holmes and Watson are lovers, or investigate mysteries of inverts hidden from the laws and cultures of the Victorian era; even the indomitable Lestrade has his turn at love; and where strange lights similar to the work of Jules Verne draw the detectives to infamous Cleveland Street.

## **A Study In Lavender: Queering Sherlock Holmes Details**

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## From Reader Review A Study In Lavender: Queering Sherlock Holmes for online ebook

### Sofia says

My favourites in this anthology were The Case of the Wounded Heart and The Adventure of the Hidden Lane

The editor/writers chose/wrote stories which adhered well to the Sherlock canon. I got the feel of the pervading atmosphere of those times. There was some repetition regarding backgrounds as each writer wrote that it and so the reader gets to read this multiple times.

The Adventure of the Bloody Coins -Stephen Osborne

The Case of the Wounded Heart -Rajan Khanna

The Kidnapping of Alice Braddon -Katie Raynes

Court of Honour -J.R. Campbell

The Well-Educated Young Man -William P. Coleman

The Bride and the Bachelors -Vincent Kovar

The Adventure of the Hidden Lane -Lyn C.A. Gardner

Whom God Destroys -Ruth Sims

The Adventure of the Unidentified Flying Object -Michael G. Cornelius

The Adventure of the Poesy Ring -Elka Cloke

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### Kelly says

Not bad, all around. There were a few stories that I found especially well done, but overall it struck me as rather mediocre. I actually enjoyed the forward more than several of the stories. There were several stories that had very little to do with Holmes and Watson but instead focused very intensely on the clients. That said, The Bride and the Bachelors and The Adventure of the Hidden Lane were both very interesting approaches to Holmes' sexuality and how it affected his relationship with Watson. Court of Honor was also an enjoyable read. While neither Holmes nor Watson were queer in that particular story, the focus was on their opinions about and the actions toward the victim, a queer man forced to take his own life to cover up his secret. I'd have liked seeing more stories or essays that focused on Holmes and Watson's relationship, either as a couple or as good friends that happened to be gay.

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### H Lynnea says

Overall, I quite enjoyed this collection. I feel that the various authors captured the voices of Holmes & Watson well. My least favorite was "Whom God Wishes to Destroy," as I don't feel it went as well with the rest of the stories.

A few notes: This book is not explicit - if you want that, there's lots of fanfiction out there, some of it **very**

well written. This is primarily what would be called Casefic - stories about cases Sherlock Holmes and John Watson may have investigated that, for one reason or another, weren't published previously. They do address the Victorian attitude towards "deviant" sexuality - it was illegal, and would land a person in jail just for loving the wrong person. I think that most of the stories handle this well, and certainly none of them beat the reader over the head with any moralistic stance.

In the prologue, the editor does make a case for Holmes, at least, being canonically gay. I personally feel that he was overreaching, and reading a bit too much into a very few instances in the original canon. My personal belief is that Holmes was asexual, but I don't begrudge Mr. DeMarco for exploring the possibilities.

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### **Lauren says**

While Star Trek fans who saw a romantic connection between Kirk and Spock are credited with coining the term "slash," the idea of audiences noticing romantic tension between two male characters (who are not canonically in a relationship) came far before that, and therefore it is no surprise that there are many who believe that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson's relationship could have potentially been more than platonic, and that there are quite a few interpretations of their relationship in this way. Some of them are very good, I think, but unfortunately this collection as a whole is not one of them. Not all of the stories focus on Holmes or Watson as homosexual; in some cases it is a client or a villain, and the concepts developed are very interested but not well executed. They mostly attempt to discuss the illegality of homosexuality in Victorian England, but do so in a heavy handed and rather un-compelling way. There are a few stories in this collection that I did quite like—The Kidnapping of Alice Braddon, and The Adventure of the Poesy Ring particularly—but overall the stories were unmemorable. I've read better Holmes pastiches, and I'm sure there are better adaptations that examine the possibilities of Holmes' and/or sexuality or that of their acquaintances.

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### **Philip Jones says**

It is not my practice to review Sherlockian fiction of such a specialized nature, however, I purchased this book because I collect Sherlockian pastiches and felt I needed to add the stories to my database. I made the mistake of reading the first and was caught in a carefully devised trap. The editor must have given very careful directions to the contributors, for I found very little here of a sexual nature. Instead, I found earnest and thoughtful fiction that concentrated on the problems caused by the very harsh laws in Victorian Britain that restricted those whom we would now characterize as "following alternative lifestyles." Indeed, the characters in these pages exhibit all sorts of alternative approaches to life.

My usual practice in reviewing anthologies is to give brief summaries of the individual tales, along with their titles and the authors' names. In this case, most of the stories consist of efforts by the characters to hide, discover and/or to fulfill their life conditions, so that approach would reveal too much of the point of the stories. Further, I have copies of many periodicals and anthologies of "gay" materials and I seldom do more than check through the pages to catalogue titles, authors and characters included along with references to events, historical characters and Canonical, Apocryphal or Untold tales. All ten of these stories demanded attention and compelled sympathy or, at least, concern for the characters. The writing was of very high quality, the characters were well-developed and the plots were intricate and realistic.

Instead of inane characters indulging in sexual orgies, the reader is presented, mostly, with intelligent people trying to deal with the restrictions placed on their lives by a society that neither cares about nor understands them. These are stories of people who live in a world where they are guilty of heinous crimes simply because of their nature, not because of choices they have made or actions they have taken.

The stories are interesting, even disturbing. Many of the characters are not "gay," nor are they concerned with the societal view of homosexuality. Many are simply caught up in events because someone among their family or friends is accused of or involved in events that are thought to be so. The variety of characters and events is surprising, more varied than expected and very well presented. Only two 'monsters' appear and both are truly frightening, especially in that they have learned effectively to hide within society.

The editor has put together as fine a collection of "alternative lifestyle" material as I have ever seen. I feel sure that the impetus and the execution needed to create this collection was supplied by him and he is to be congratulated on a fine job of producing a sympathetic and realistic view of the Nineteenth Century as seen from the viewpoint of those with alternative lifestyles.

Reviewed by: Philip K. Jones, January 2012  
Published in "Doctor Watson's Formulary," [#21, 09/2012]

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### **Beth G. says**

Review to be posted at This Tangled Skein.

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### **Becca says**

I saw this book and knew it had to be mine. I love Sherlock Holmes in all of his incarnations, and I love queer literary theory, so this seemed like a perfect book for me: Sherlock-verse. Queered. Awesome. And I read it. And it was.... Very nice.

No, it was fine. It was okay. But it was just a little, forgive the adjective, flaccid. The cases were good--engaging little stories, and the characterization was generally on and enjoyable. But the queerness was, I'm sorry to say, handled problematically. Hints and suggestions do not a queer retelling make.

For a book that boasts the word "queering" in the title, there was very little actual gayness on screen, so to speak. The stories were positively rated G-- I am reminded of the way that same-sex kisses happen off stage, or remain absolutely chaste-- in mainstream tv shows. I didn't go into this collection looking for pornography by any stretch of the imagination, but the chasteness was almost laughable. In one story, Holmes is revealed to have a long-term male partner. Watson realizes this because of a sweet matching look on both of their faces. Two women in love eat pomegranates together. Off screen. From that we are meant to infer...a heart stopping love affair? Why the squeamishness about physicality? It seemed strangely self-censored.

Also, the stories gave in to the destructive gay story trope of the Suffering Gay Couple, where like a redshirt in a Star Trek movie, if a story includes an openly gay couple, one of them is toast. "My gay lover was

murdered but Sherlock Holmes solved the crime and I got the inheritance!" While, yes, that does technically include gayness, it's kind of crappy. It's like the woman in the refrigerator trope: her femaleness accentuates our pity for her gruesome murder. But she still ends up brutally murdered. Some of these stories unintentionally reinforce the homophobic idea that the only good gay character is a dead or a suffering gay character. No thanks. That's crappy. As readers we are attuned to misogyny when a story includes only hurt or dead women, but we haven't yet become as sensitized to the homophobia inherent in narratives that lack anything but murdered LGBTQIA characters.

And another thing! One of the stories features, I kid you not, an insane vengeful genderqueer serial killer. Do I... Need to explain why this is problematic? Okay, I get that we are reading mystery stories with an element of horror. And when you are writing murderers, you can write them however you like. But using this character's gender identity as THE THING THAT IS CREEPY ABOUT THEM? In a collection of stories that is trying to explore queerness in the Sherlock Holmes universe, to include and reinforce such a toxic trope, it's just really disappointing.

So, in conclusion. In spite of the problems that stuck in my craw, I'm glad this book exists. I want more books like this to exist, to generate income for authors who are writing stories that expand the world of interesting, three dimensional characters from across the intersecting lines of sexual and gender identities. But to find literarily satisfying stories with all kinds of queer characters-- complex people with layers of motivation and multiple identities with complicated relationships? I'll stick to reading fan fiction.

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### **Lauren says**

A nice array of stories in the familiar Holmesian universe, but with The Gay added. I enjoyed the whole thing!

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### **Rozonda says**

This anthology of tales that uncover the reality of homosexuality in the Victorian world by setting it in the Sherlock Holmes universe does it with grace, elegance and originality-no matter if it's Holmes and Watson who are shown as homosexuals, or their clients. It reflects very accurately the ambivalence of the era- when homosexuality was publicly abhorred but at the same time doctors were starting to write and talk about it and to consider whether it was an illness or not, and when homosexuals disguised their behaviour through clubs, codenames, meeting places-but only the very rich and/or powerful could lead their secret lives relatively unmolested.

I also like the fact that the stories that present Holmes as gay are totally in character- they present him as reserved, ambiguous about his sexual condition and it's not always Watson who is the object of his affection :). A very good anthology for Sherlockians to enjoy and also to make us all think about how hard it can be to be different and to seek happiness in a way others don't (or don't try to) understand.

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### **Aoife says**

The stories:

*The Adventure of the Bloody Coins:* A story in which Mycroft is a suspect and Holmes helps him. Somehow too short to say much about it. Occasionally with short-stories I have the feeling to read a first draft and not a completed story and this was one of these cases. The crime got solved pretty quickly and everything seemed a bit superficial. That's a shame because I think if it had been a bit longer and the relationship between Sherlock and Mycroft had gotten more depth I would have loved this story.

*The Case of the Wounded Heart:* This story focusses on Lestrade. It's not told by Watson but by a third-person narrator and Watson has just a short speaking-role, Holmes none at all (though he's still present). I really liked this one, well-written and giving a whole new side to Lestrade without making his personality in this story clash with the one in the original canon.

*The Kidnapping of Alice Braddon:* Here no canon character is gay but during the cause of the investigation it turns out that it involves a lesbian. I don't think I can say too much about it, it's a good Holmes-pastiche, nothing more but also nothing less.

*Court of Honour:* I feel everything I'd say about this story would spoil too much. I did enjoy it as it dealt with a side of Holmes that had occasionally be alluded to in canon but not too often (that what's justice and what's legal aren't necessarily always the same thing).

*The Well-Educated Young Man:* With this story I had various issues. One day Holmes and Watson meet a young man who turns out to be gay. He also tells about his life-story and how he was abused by an older man over years. Watson's first reaction is that this man turned the boy gay but he immediately explains that this is not connected at all. So far so good. But then Holmes tries to find this man, manages and saves a second boy from his clutches. That boy - oh wonder - is gay, too. Great that we cleared up that being sexually abused won't make you gay. It just didn't sit right with me, especially because there was no canon-reason why the second boy did need to be gay, too.

Now that was not the actualy case, yet, just a kind of introduction. Unfortunately the case itself didn't really convince me, too. You know how Holmes always complains that once he points out to Watson that once he explains to him how he deduced something Watson will immediately cry 'Of course, that's so easy when you say it!'. That's very much my reaction, too. Once Holmes explains something I immediately think that this obviously has to be the only logical solution. Here he explained something and my first reaction was 'Really? You are sure that there is no other possibility?' The case just wasn't just that convincing to me. Besides it also felt as if the author was trying to put too much in a story: at one point the young man says something to Holmes which implies that he is gay, too and Holmes does not deny it. That leads to Watson thinking *a lot*. He questions Holmes sexuality, shortly also his own...and it all feels very un-Watson-like spending so much time with inner monologes and doubts.

So to sum it up: The rest of the stories in this collections actually read like something ACD could have written. This one not at all.

*The Bride and the Bachelors:* Another good story (told by Holmes this time) and another where I don't want to spoil too much.

*The Adventure of the Hidden Lane:* My least favourite story. First of all because I don't think it belongs in a Sherlock Holmes-collection. It's not set in the Holmes-universe, the narrator works as secretary for Conan Doyle for a while before he changes to a more promising career of serial-killer. Now I felt that the connection to Doyle wasn't really that strong. Yes the narrator mentiones reading a lot of Holmes-stories but overall I felt that you could have replaced Doyle with any other famous man from that time or just a random fictional character and it wouldn't have made a difference.

Apart from that: If I'm reading a first person narration by a serial-killer I want to feel *something*...hatred,

pitty, fascination...anything. Here I just felt 'meh' and thought 'after watching so many Criminal Minds-episodes I can't believe that any self-respecting serial-killer would act in the way you do'.

*Whom God destroys.* Good...though I had some problems with the fact that overall it is much darker than the average Holmes-stories but in the end everything was full of rainbows and unicorns again.

*The adventure of the Unidentified Flying Object:* Despite my deep dislike for any UFO-stories I was OK with this one. It was another good pastiche and added some interesting insights into the relationship between Holmes and Watson.

*The Adventure of the Poesy ring:* Now first of all: Many of the stories in this volume start with some words by Watson about how this story can't be published in his lifetime because of scandals for the involved people and blah. OK. If you want to add this I'm fine with it...but could you just keep it short? I don't need one page of rambling about this. A paragraph would be enough...and on the topic of shortness: I think there should be a limit to how long kissing-scenes are allowed to be...almost two pages is definitely too much and is just somewhat ridiculous. (So, yeah...I have already told you that this story is narrated by Watson so now you can take a good guess on whom he's kissing).

For me there was just a bit too much rambling going on in the story. The plotting itself was fine.

Overall a nice collection...though I must say the reason that it got the fourth star was the highly informative introduction about the Holmes-Watson relationship. It made some really interesting points (like that some of the places that got mentioned in the story and which Holmes claimed to know well were "homosexual cruising areas") and also asks whether we should question Holmes' sexuality at all (as the volume exists the editor's answer is obviously 'yes').

I also quite liked how the 'different Watsons' in the story dealt with the subject. He is never downright homophobic but in two stories it gets clear that up until that point he had just accepted society's opinion without questioning it much. In other stories he is more open (including one where he recalls an amusing anecdote from his time as doctor that shows he really can't be surprised by anything).

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### **SchnaueL says**

I enjoyed this anthology, though a few of the stories did suffer from the Watson isn't terribly smart/completely oblivious problem. I really wish the final story had continued because it ends on a frustratingly ambiguous note.

Many of the stories were actually quite sweet and the couple involved was not Watson/Holmes.

The beginning section lays out some evidence that suggests Holmes may have been canonically gay. It's interesting. I'm not sure I totally buy it but interesting nonetheless.

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### **Sem says**

That's it. I'm done. I can't finish it. I had about 10% to go and will consider it read. I'm in too much mental pain to continue. Two or three of the stories were quite good but the bad ones were so very bad, so Malebolge-eighth-circle-of hell-bad, that I refuse to give it more than 1 star. And I'll say something I've

never said before and that is - how could anyone here give it 5 stars? The stories are, by and large, trite - the plots might have been serviceable thirty or forty years ago but now they seem like outmoded retreads. At least one is prosey beyond belief. None surprised me. There's nowhere near enough queering of Holmes. The shoddy research - if, indeed, there was any research at all - that went into the bulk of this hideous mess is an insult to the reader. Out-of-period slang, ignorance of courtesy titles, words that Holmes would never have used.... When I found myself blushing with embarrassment at the writers' ineptness, I had to stop. My suggestion to anyone thinking of putting together another anthology of this sort is - find some writers familiar with British English and the Victorian period. My suggestion to prospective readers is - indulge in some H/W fan fiction. There's a lot of it out there and some of it is excellent. If you think this is as good as it gets, you're missing out.

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### **Margaret says**

One of the best volumes of Sherlock Holmes short stories I have read in a long time.

The stories all have an interesting take on the world of Sherlock Holmes. Every story has a gay component to it. Sometimes it is Holmes who is gay, sometimes it is the client, or the victim, and in one story, Lestrade.

I found the stories all to be interesting and insightful into life for people who were criminals merely for the fact they existed, whether or not they acted upon their sexual orientation.

It is rare for me to find an anthology where I loved all the stories. Usually there is a mix of good, bad, and mediocre. "A Study in Lavender", however, contained stories that were pretty much all good. The ending of the final story in the book tended towards being a little on the mediocre side, but not enough to spoil my enjoyment of the book.

The truly outstanding story, however, is "The Well-Educated Young Man" by William P. Copeland. This story spelled out how truly dangerous and horrific life was for gay men in the Victorian era. The story is so well written and readable that it was whilst reading it that I knew this volume would be added to my Sherlock Holmes collection, not passed on, as I do so many others.

There are no actual sex scenes, so don't be afraid to reach out for the book. You may learn something as well as be entertained by some brilliantly written stories.

Highly recommended.

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### **Maike says**

I liked most of the stories.

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### **James says**

I found this to be a hugely mixed bag.

About half the stories in this collection are basically serviceable; a lot of them sort of end up running into each other, riffing on similar themes over and over, often adhering to a specific set of tropes. A couple of them are then very good, with more interesting set ups and good prose. I got this book cheaply, and consider it to have been worth the cost for those stories I enjoyed.

There are also a couple that I found distinctly uncomfortable and to play into some really harmful ideas of what queering the text has to entail; ones that play into long-outdated stereotypes of queer sexuality, and what stories about queer sexuality must include, without a hint of self-awareness or subversion. It's not that I think stories about queer/etc. people 'can't' include certain things, but the framing of those things is important when it comes along with long histories of baggage.

Another thing that frustrated me is that for an anthology that attempts to be subversive in some way, the range of 'queerness' on offer is predictably limited. It's largely, as ever, cis gay men. True, one *might* argue that the Holmes framework doesn't allow for much else, but to be honest I think that's setting the bar low. Some imagination and a willingness to walk further outside the limitations of the canon would have been more interesting and varied, in my opinion.

Finally, a lot of these stories don't do much with the fact that they're set in the Holmes canon, to be frank. They're just set in it because they are. Very few of the stories here *had* to be told via Holmes, and I think, again, that's a lack of vision and a wasted opportunity.

It really just didn't grab me as a collection, in the end.

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