SCIENTA PER EXPLORATIONEM

a review by Devra Thomas

Ali Standish. ***The Improbable Tales of Baskerville Hall***. HarperCollins, 2023.

—. ***The Improbable Tales of Baskerville Hall: Sign of the Five***. HarperCollins, 2024.

—. ***The Improbable Tales of Baskerville Hall: The Valley of Lies***. HarperCollins, 2025.

DEVRA THOMAS has a Masters of Arts Administration from Goucher College and a BA in Communications and Publishing from Guilford College. She has managed theaters across North Carolina, including Carteret Community Theatre, Cape Fear Regional, Common Ground, and Deep Dish. In addition to being *NCLR*'s Digital Editor, she is Kirby Cultural Arts Complex in Person County, NC.

ALI STANDISH grew up in North Carolina. Her debut novel, *The Ethan I Was Before* (HarperCollins, 2017), received the the AAUW of North Carolina Young People's Literature Award. Read her award acceptance remarks in *NCLR Online* 2018. Her other awards include the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, *Yonder* (HarperCollins, 2022). She has an MA in Children's Literature from the University of Cambridge.

Full disclosure: I cut my teeth on mysteries as a reader of Agatha Christie and watching *Murder, She Wrote* and *Matlock* with my parents on Sunday nights. That is the level of mystery I can handle, even to this day. As I got older, I started into Sherlock Holmes, enjoying both the original stories and the many permutations and interpretations. I like a mystery to be on the puzzle side, not the violent side, which is why I so enjoy reading Young Adult mystery fiction: these authors are writing intricately woven puzzles that are delightful to solve but don't have jump scares or gore.

Ali Standish, already an adept and award-winning author of juvenile literary fiction (her book *The Ethan I Was Before* was awarded the American Association of University Women of NC Young People's Literature Award in 2017), got the blessing of The Conan Doyle Estate to write a Sherlock Holmes (both character and style) story about his creator, Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Improbable Tales of Baskerville Hall* series has three books so far. A young Arthur – bright and poor, family-oriented, and adventurous – is a recipient of a surprise scholarship to the extraordinary and expensive Baskerville Hall school for gifted young minds. Sticking firmly to the correct time period, Standish takes us into a Victorian United Kingdom with just enough overlap of steampunk to keep the story feeling contemporary but not overly straight history or science fiction (although that would have worked for Conan Doyle, too). All three books include biographical information, pictures, and drawings from The Conan Doyle Estate as addendums.

In the first installment of the series, Standish introduces all the familiar names: Arthur, as the main character; Moriarity, a fellow student, Jimmie; Irene, now Eagle, a new chum from America; Mary becomes Pockets, a spritely engineer nicknamed for her unusual and helpful garment; Dr. Watson, an older, wheelchair-bound teacher; and Sherlock himself, now also a professor at the school. Standish also builds out intriguing new characters: Grover, obsessed with the occult (as was Conan Doyle); Headmaster Challenger, a boisterous adventurer who cares about his students; and others. Mrs. Hudson remains the tough but fair housekeeper, only now with a wolf sidekick.

True to Standish's literary roots from both Appalachia and her time overseas in rural England, she creates a lush setting full of follies, hedge mazes, crumbling towers, secret caves, greenhouses filled with tropical plants, all places the reader feels comfortable in. I'm surprised there isn't a map in the book (hint to publisher Harper Collins for a possible add-on!).

Headmaster Challenger tells new students,

> Welcome to Baskerville Hall. You'll find that we do things very differently here than at other so-called *schools*. We will not waste time on grammar lessons, and we do not concern ourselves with etiquette. At this school, innovation and creativity are rewarded. There are no clucking governesses or needling tutors to watch over your shoulder. We understand that risks must be taken in the service of knowledge. We *expect* you to take those risks. (48–49)

In proper juvenile mystery fiction fashion, Standish thereby

sets the stage for both her series' throughline mystery and for Arthur's own motivations. She also gives the reader a book-length (mostly) puzzle.

This first book's puzzle revolves around Doyle and his friends trying to find a mysterious object before the Clovers – the school's secret student group – do. There is a cloaked figure in the woods, a perplexing family lineage, and characters scurrying across the campus at midnight. All five of our core group help in significant ways to solve the mystery, and the reveal is as sweet as it is surprising, which is to humbly say, I solved the puzzle only slightly before the characters did. While the book's particular puzzle is solved, the ending leaves room for speculation and sets up the next book.

In *Sign of the Five*, the second installment, Standish starts in Edinburgh again – Conan Doyle's home – before taking the reader back to Baskerville Hall for the second term of Arthur's first year. This story bookends with parents being with their kids at the school: the reader gets to meet the original Moriarty; Irene's parents, who the reader knows as opera singers, but young Arthur suspects may be spies; and other professors. We get a nice referential scene between Holmes and the original Moriarty playing chess, and Conan Doyle's well-known curiosity about spiritualism and ghosts has full play in this story.

This book's puzzle is a bit darker as three professors are poisoned, and Arthur and best friend Jimmie are on the outs. This time, another detective shows up to help – or does he? While a juvenile reader may overlook the clues, the careful adult reader will recognize the signs Standish has written to reveal the *characters* of her characters. And while the mystery solution to this book does dovetail with the larger mystery of the series, I do feel the denouement of the book needed a little more *oomph* to it: after all the fabulous inventions Standish gives us up to and through the climax, the actual Invention Convention reads a bit emotionally neutral.

The Valley of Lies takes Conan Doyle's travels for the inciting incident in the third installment. "Every class of first years makes the trip to the Lake District," Holmes explains. "It is the first of many field trips you will take during your time at Baskerville Hall. Once there, you will learn not just from your professors but from yourselves, from the other members of your Circle, and from the world at large" (33). Enigmas of all kinds abound in this volume: just where did Moriarity, Sr. go, and are the Eagles following him; who is the woman on the train and why was someone stealing her folio; is a storied magical artifact even real and if so, where is it hidden; and perhaps most heart-wrenching, what happens to Arthur's sister and to his friendship with Jimmie? The original Holmes stories stuck firmly within realism; in Standish's books, however, young Arthur tries valiantly but in vain to find a real-world explanation for the strange puzzles he resolves. The books in this Standish series are more speculative fiction than realism.

No surprise Standish has a master's degree in children's literature from the University of Cambridge. Literary references run throughout the books. In the first, she gives nod to that classic of Victorian literature, Lewis Carroll. Then in the second, there's a very nice hat-tip to our American patron of the detective genre, Edgar Allan Poe. The third novel revolves around both the poet and poetry of William Wordsworth. Standish even manages to work into all three books a delightfully cute reference to Doyle's adventure novel, *The Lost World*.

If your child has graduated from Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys, Standish's *Baskerville Hall* will appeal to readers of Grabenstein's *Mr. Lemoncello's Library* or Stewart's *Mysterious Benedict Society*, before heading into the North Carolina-based *Serafina Stories* by Rudolfo Anaya or Carriger's *Etiquette and Espionage* series. No blood and gore to any of these mysteries, just fun enigmas around every turn. ■

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