

uscript pages a day in the throes of inspiration, his sentences were always *constructed*, never dashed. The right word obsessed him. . . . The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.'"

We love to linger in this "gigantic childhood." Certainly it was lit by lightning. But this book is aptly titled. These were dangerous waters. Almost nobody got out alive.

—Benjamin Cheever

#### TELLER OF TALES:

##### *The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle.*

By Daniel Stashower. Henry Holt. 412 pp. \$32.50

On a summer night in 1930, some 6,000 well-dressed Londoners crowded into Royal Albert Hall. They had come to see and hear the renowned Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for whom a chair waited on the stage. One technicality set this hastily arranged public appearance apart from countless others: Conan Doyle had died five days before. Seeing no sign of their man, skeptics began stealing out of the hall. The emcee—a psychic of dubious gifts—shouted, "He is here! He is here!" Everyone stopped, and all eyes locked hungrily on the empty chair.

Conan Doyle's latest biographer, himself a writer of detective novels, tackles the hardest part of his job first: How could a writer of such intelligence and principle, a gifted physician, explorer, athlete, war veteran, husband, and father—how could this man have believed in spooks and fairies? A "cordial disbeliever," Stashower argues for "sympathy rather than derision." After reading this account, few readers are likely to rush out to buy Conan Doyle's *Coming of the Fairies* (1922), but they will understand that there was more to his life than Sherlock Holmes.

Born in Edinburgh in 1859, Conan Doyle grew up poor, the second son of an artistic, high-strung alcoholic father, and the lively, educated mother whom he adored. He got a decent (if detested) Jesuit education, and studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. One of his professors, Joseph Bell, had an uncanny ability to deduce an entire life story from particulars of accent, clothing, and manner. "Well, my man," Bell would say to a plain-clothed stranger, "you've served in the army."

"Aye, sir." "Not long discharged?" "No, sir." "A Highland regiment?" "Aye, sir." "Stationed at Barbados?" "Aye, sir." It was a small step from there to Sherlock's "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive."

Published in *The Strand* starting in 1891, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes became the *Star Trek* of their day, and Conan Doyle grew "suddenly, colossally famous" for something he considered far less noteworthy than his other writings. So popular were the detective stories that, when the author killed off his celebrated character in 1893 (temporarily, as it developed), 20,000 people canceled their subscription to the magazine, Londoners wore black mourning bands, and members of the Royal Family were said to be distraught. Conan Doyle expressed only relief. "If I had not killed [Holmes]," he said in a speech to the Author's Club, "he would certainly have killed me."

Conan Doyle never got his fondest wish—to be viewed as a writer of the first rank. Stashower makes a case for *The White Company* (1891) and other historical novels, but doesn't pretend to share his subject's enthusiasm for the occult writings. Many fine minds took up spiritualism at that time. W. B. Yeats traveled far down the path of ghosts and fairies, and, like Conan Doyle, had a wife who practiced automatic writing. But where Yeats's traffic in the supernatural yielded superb poems such as "Lapis Lazuli," Conan Doyle's resulted in a silly book about Atlantis.

Stashower has turned out an unselfconscious, easy read—affectionate and fair-minded, genially short on the naughty bits now endemic to the genre. He hides a prodigious amount of work beneath the surface, so that what the reader sees is not webbed feet paddling strenuously but a swan serenely floating. Conan Doyle and his brilliant detective both would have liked this book.

—A. J. Hewat

#### WALKER EVANS.

By James R. Mellow. Basic. 654 pp. \$40

By 1956, when this biography ends, the photographer Walker Evans (1903–75) had done his most important work. In his last years, he spent too little time looking into a viewfinder and too much time looking into a bottle. Still, these final two decades of his life, for which the publisher appends a chronology, might have given a perspective to Evans's achievements