

Meeting Notes

June 4, 2016



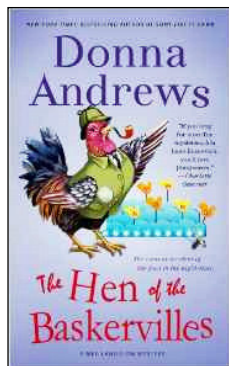
Guest Speaker: Donna Andrews *The Hen of the Baskervilles* and other Sherlockian Puns

Reported by Jaime Mahoney

The Red Circle of Washington convened on Saturday, June 4 at the Hyatt Regency Bethesda. After dinner, we welcomed our guest speaker, Donna Andrews. Donna is the author of two award-winning amateur sleuth series, was first introduced to Sherlock Holmes and detective fiction by Walter R. Brooks' children's book, *Freddy the Detective*. The book was part of the *Freddy the Pig* series, featuring a pig who explores various interests (politician, magician, detective) over the course of the books. She found, however, that Freddy held little interest for her when he wasn't practicing to be a detective.



Donna was introduced to the *Canonical* detective in her teens, when her father -- a used book sale aficionado -- brought her home a copy of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. While it was an admittedly odd place to begin the Canon -- a bit like being dropped into the middle of a soap opera -- she found she could get into the character immediately and read the stories over and over again, until she received the complete Sherlock Holmes stories for Christmas later that year.



Ever since, Donna has incorporated elements and techniques -- and puns -- from the Sherlock Holmes stories into her own writing, including her book *The Hen of the Baskervilles*. For example, the father of one of her serial characters, Meg Langslow, is an avid mystery reader who fancies himself a bit of a detective. He will often show up at crime scenes in a deerstalker.

One thing Donna learned from the Canon is that a mystery must have a character who is "not from around here," or a person who "needs to know." If all those present in a story would logically have all the information needed, then any exposition, narrative or backstory becomes superfluous or even silly.

In the Canon, Dr. Watson fills the role of the person "not from around here." He always has gaps in his knowledge, and needs Sherlock Holmes to bring him up to speed. As such, stories where Holmes narrates (such as "The Blanched Soldier" or "The Lion's Mane") do not work nearly as well -- there is no one out of the loop. The Great Detective knows everything.

In addition, Donna maintains that mysteries don't have to be serious, citing Holmes's exposition on oysters in "The Dying Detective" as a perfect example: "Indeed, I cannot think why the whole bed of the ocean is not one solid mass of oysters, so prolific the creatures seem."



Finally, writers must resist the temptation to include all research into the story. In other words, make sure “your research [isn’t] showing.” Donna adheres to Sherlock Holmes’s brain attic principle -- a writer mustn't clutter up their writing with extra information, simply to show off the work he or she has done.

According to Donna, readers have a different view of a story than writers; writers must think more analytically. Mystery writers are always looking for a place to hide a body. People read mysteries for the restoration of order, says Donna. They read them to see justice done, when in real life criminals often in get away. Such is the enduring appeal of the genre.

Great thanks to Donna Andrews for being with us for an enjoyable evening. The Red Circle will meet again on Friday, September 23, 2016