

The Muse : Writers

Start with an easy one:

CONAN DOYLE — AMONG THE SPIRITS

Conan Doyle's interest in Spiritualism began when he was still an almost penniless young doctor living in Southsea. It was during a time when science was just starting to question the idea that another world might exist beyond our own and Doyle became caught up on the study, as well as in the burgeoning Spiritualist movement. He avidly followed the research that was being done and even attended a number of séances and kept detailed notes of what occurred there. Early in his research, he began to consider the idea that a great amount of the phenomena that he witnessed was genuine and that the knocks, raps, horn-blowing and messages from the dead were worthy of at least a cautious belief.

<http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/doyle.htm>

“Modern” spiritualism began in the United States in the mid 19th century. Specifically, it arose in Western New York state, a region known to social historians for the religious fervor which made it a spawning ground for many religious sects. They refer to it as the “infected district” or the “burned over district.” Spiritualism was born in the fertile religious fervor of immigrant Swedenborgians, Mesmerists, and other religions, a climate of thought receptive to spiritualist ideas.

Mainstream religions promised eternal life, but in an era of emerging science which demanded verifiable physical evidence, many religious persons wished for tangible evidence of the claims of religion, particularly of claims of an afterlife.

Conan Doyle also collected a huge number of spirit photographs, most of which he believed to be genuine, including one of a ghostly woman that was taken at a haunted inn in Norwich. In 1922, he penned a book on the subject called *The Case for Spirit Photography*. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the photos that Conan Doyle championed appear blatantly fake today, the obvious results of fraud and double exposure. He became particularly involved with a group of spirit photographers led by

William Hope of Crewe. The so-called “Crewe Circle” produced several hundred alleged spirit photographs during its heyday and Doyle posed for a number of them. Not surprisingly, all of the developed plates portrayed spirit “extra” lurking over his shoulder. The author believed all of them to be authentic. (more below)

Such apparent evidence appeared in Hydesville, New York, in 1848, in a modest frame house which had a reputation of being haunted. Here occurred the event which launched the movement known as “modern spiritualism” to distinguish it from earlier historical beliefs about an afterlife.

The Fox family had three teenage daughters who claimed to hear strange rapping noises at night. The girls thought a ghost might be producing the noises, so they tried to respond by clapping their hands. They soon evolved a code for communicating with the ghost of a peddler who had long ago visited the house and had been murdered there. A skeleton later found in the basement seemed to confirm this. Naturally this attracted much local attention.

The Fox girls were instant celebrities. They demonstrated their communication with the spirit by using taps and knocks, automatic writing, and later even voice communication, as the spirit took control of one of the girls.

Soon others, now known as mediums, imitated this and began communicating with the dead, charging for their services, or accepting donations. Seances were conducted in dark or semi-dark rooms with participants seated around a table. Sometimes the table would lean and tilt, participants (sitters) might feel a cold breeze on their faces, fresh flowers (even out of season) sometimes materialized out of thin air and appeared upon the table. Musical instruments played mysteriously. The medium sometimes spoke, under control of a spirit, relaying messages from the dear departed. Other methods of spirit communication included writing on sealed slates, impressing images onto photographic plates which had been kept in sealed enclosures, and painted images which gradually appeared upon previously blank canvas.

Skeptics suspected this was nothing but clever deception and fraud. Nonetheless, belief in the ability to communicate with the dead grew rapidly, becoming an organized religion called Spiritualism. Spiritualism flourished well into the 20th century, and still exists today.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the fictional Sherlock Holmes was a convinced believer in spiritualism.

The magician Harry Houdini, a showman continually alert to opportunities for self-promotion, publicly exposed mediumistic trickery in his stage shows and wrote pamphlets opposing fraudulent mediums. In spite of this, some spiritualists claimed that Houdini had genuine spiritualistic powers, refusing to accept Houdini's own statements that only deception was involved in his performances.

click here for more info re: Doyle and Houdini

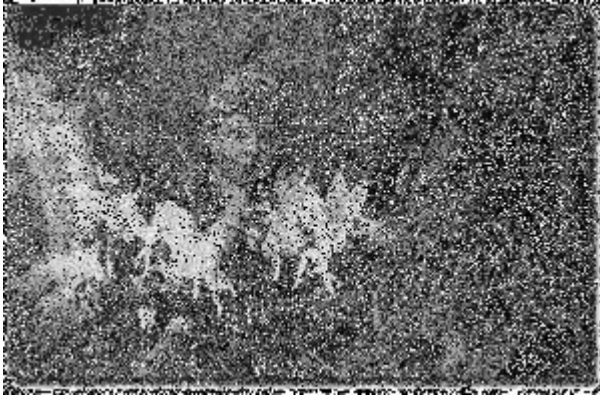
http://www.prairieghosts.com/doyle_houdini.html

Arthur Conan Doyle devoted a whole chapter of his book *The Edge of the Unknown* to a detailed argument that Houdini had genuine psychic power, but wouldn't admit it. Curiously, Doyle and Houdini remained friends for a long while, in spite of public clashes over spiritualism. Perhaps they shared an appreciation of the value of public self-promotion. Eventually Houdini became outraged as a result of a seance in which Mrs. Doyle claimed to have communicated with Houdini's mother, and the details she reported were obviously wrong.

Doyle also believed in fairies.

Doyle's fascination with unusual photographs led to what most would offer as his greatest embarrassment in the early 1920's. He was never embarrassed by the photographs or their outcome however, although not for the reasons that most might think. He simply could not conceive of the idea that the whole thing could have been a hoax!

Doyle believed the below photo of "fairies" to be real



Photographic experts who were consulted declared that none of the negatives had been tampered with, there was no evidence of double exposures, and that a slight blurring of one of the fairies in photo number one indicated that the fairy was moving during the exposure of 1/50 or 1/100 second.

Arthur Conan Doyle not only accepted these photos as genuine, he even wrote two pamphlets and a book attesting the genuineness of these photos, and including much additional fairy lore. His book, *The Coming of the Fairies*, is still in print, and some people still believe the photos are authentic. Doyle's books make very interesting reading even today. Doyle's belief in spiritualism, convinced many people that the creator of Sherlock Holmes was not as bright as his fictional creation.

Some thought Conan Doyle crazy, but he defended the reality of fairies with all the evidence he could gather. He counters the arguments of the disbelievers eloquently and at great length. In fact, his evidence and arguments sound surprisingly similar in every respect to those of present-day books touting the idea that alien beings visit us in UFOs. Robert Sheaffer wrote a clever article drawing these parallels beautifully.

<http://www.prairieghosts.com/doyle.html> Growing up, Doyle spent two years at a preparatory school of Hodder and then among the Jesuits at Stonyhurst. He had been allowed to attend this Catholic institution at no charge for it was hoped that he might dedicate his life to the church. He would eventually become disenchanted with Catholicism though and decide on pursuing a medical career instead. Over the next few years, Doyle endured the spartan conditions of boarding school, the corporal punishment and the poor food. He excelled at sports, especially cricket, and at 16 passed his graduate exam with honors. Doyle began working hard to obtain a scholarship for his medical studies and while awarded one, a series of official mistakes prevented him

from receiving it. His family could not afford to send him to school, so he worked a series of jobs and attended medical college at the same time. It took him five years to earn his degrees as a Bachelor of Medicine but he completed his schooling in Edinburgh in 1881. Doyle was eager to start a medical practice after graduation and had also developed a love for writing. He hoped to supplement his practice by selling short stories to the magazines of the day but while in school, he recognized the importance of working first and writing later. He wrote and sold a short story or two and then, as a third-year student, he signed on as a ship's surgeon for a whaler that was making a seven month voyage to the Arctic. Doyle got along well with the ships' crew. He was by now a massive and strong young man, an all around sportsman and a man of incredible strength. His boxing skills also served him well and he won a bout with the ship's steward on the first night out of port.

Before Sherlock Homes was a sensation in England though, Doyle was already busy writing another historical novel, *The White Company*, which he considered his best work, and attending to his practice. His younger brother, Innes, had also come to live with him in Southsea and he assisted Doyle in his work. He still saw his writing as simply an added income to his position as a doctor.

In 1885, Doyle married Louise Hawkins, the older sister of a patient of his who had died. She was a sweet and docile woman who remained in the background, perhaps overshadowed by her larger than life spouse. Doyle, despite his love for cricket and soccer, was a good husband though and in 1889, their daughter Mary was born. In 1890, a strange event occurred that may have only been a coincidence but in later years, many would wonder. Not long after Mary's birth, Doyle received word of a demonstration that was taking place in Berlin by a doctor who claimed to be able to cure consumption (tuberculosis). Doyle became obsessed with going to the conference, even though he did not specialize in consumption at all. He could not explain his interest and so went to Berlin to see what was occurring. Unfortunately, the trip turned out to be fruitless for he arrived too late to get into the presentation. Doyle's interest in the lecture was never fully explained but tragically — three years later — his wife would be diagnosed with consumption and would be given only a few months to live. Was it merely a coincidence or was Doyle's keen interest in the subject matter, as some have suggested, a foreshadowing of things to come?

Doyle was a figure that most men aspired to imitate. He looked more like a sportsman than a man of letter, was a robust outdoorsman and a avid boxer, adept at soccer and

loved cricket. He was also, like many men and women of his generation, concerned about religion. He lost his Catholic faith while still a young man and for a time was mildly agnostic. While living in Southsea, he became interested in psychical research and began reading heavily on the subject. He also had the opportunity to visit séances and experiments in telepathy and thought transference. His search for answers led to a meeting with Sir Oliver Lodge, one of the leading paranormal investigators of the time, and in 1893, he joined the Psychical Research Society. He watched with interest the public's fascination with Spiritualism but did not understand how ghostly phenomena warranted a faith and religion based around it — at least not yet. He did become more and more interested in the Spiritualist movement though, although at first his interest was tinged heavily with skepticism. This did not keep him from writing horror tales in which Spiritualism played a part though.

Doyle was also a Freemason

<http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/beresiner10.html>