Sherlock Holmes, again!

***Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram From Hell* and *Sherlock Holmes: The Affair at Mayerling Lodge* capture the spirit of the beloved sleuth**

Review by Michael Dirda

***The Washington Post*, August 31, 2024**

There are two principal ways to write a Sherlock Holmes pastiche. That is, a story or novel true to the spirit of Arthur Conan Doyle, set in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, and usually featuring Dr. Watson as the narrator. Some writers — Bonnie MacBird, for instance — carefully devise a case requiring the expertise of the Baker Street duo. There may be allusions to some of Holmes's earlier exploits, and the period details will be, more or less, correct and appropriate, but the overall plot is new, freshly concocted.

Other writers, however, insert Holmes and Watson into actual textbook history. In this approach, the pair interacts with known people of the time, such as Oscar Wilde, Lillie Langtry or Sigmund Freud. They are generally called upon to investigate crimes we already know about, such as the Jack the Ripper murders, or to operate as hitherto unknown participants in great historical events.

Nicholas Meyer, whose 1974 bestseller "The Seven Per-Cent Solution" re-energized Sherlockian studies in our time, has written several books in this second style, including his newest, "Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram From Hell." Given that the novel is set in 1916, its title immediately calls to mind historian Barbara W. Tuchman's 1958 classic, "The Zimmermann Telegram: America Enters the War, 1917-1918," a work that Meyer acknowledges as a major source.

While Meyer has also worked in Hollywood as a scriptwriter and director (of "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan," among other films), John Lawrence is chiefly known as a political analyst and former chief of staff to Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). His first novel, after two short-story collections in the series "The Undiscovered Archives of Sherlock Holmes," is the excellent "Sherlock Holmes: The Affair at Mayerling Lodge." In it, he offers an explanation for the mystery surrounding the deaths of Crown Prince Rudolf of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and his young mistress, Baroness Mary Vetsera. The two were found shot in 1889 at the prince's hunting lodge at Mayerling in what appears to have been a double suicide.

Meyer's and Lawrence's books both feature period photographs of the major characters to enhance their air of historicity. The two also neatly interlock, since Lawrence's final pages set up the conditions for the outbreak of World War I a quarter-century later.

Meyer's story opens in 1916, as the Great War drags on and English soldiers — the sons of both servants and aristocrats — are dying by the thousands on the battlefields of France. Watson's wife has recently died as well, and the good doctor, depressed and feeling his age, thinks back wistfully to the prewar climax of "His Last Bow," in which Holmes engineered the capture of the German spymaster Von Bork. With that capstone to his career, the great detective again looked forward to a secluded retirement keeping bees on the Sussex Downs. However, before the two old friends parted, they stood together for a moment on a quiet terrace, talking of England's future:

"There's an east wind coming, Watson."

“I think not, Holmes. It is very warm.”

“Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age. There’s an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it’s God’s own wind nonetheless, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.”

Now, however, that storm rages with no sunshine in sight. If only the United States were to join the Allied cause! Suddenly, there’s a knock at Watson’s door and a shockingly emaciated Sherlock Holmes staggers into the room, showing signs of having been beaten. What has happened? Summoned back into action by the Foreign Office, Holmes has been sharing a prison cell with Sir Roger Casement. Once widely honored for exposing human rights abuses in the Belgian Congo, Casement subsequently joined the fight for Irish independence from Britain and helped organize the 1916 Easter Rising. As in the phrase “The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” he has also supported Germany in the current conflict.

Now awaiting execution as a traitor, Casement knows something about a German scheme to ensure that the United States never enters the war. What is that plan? Passing himself off as a fellow Irish revolutionary, Holmes manages to learn that part of the answer lies in Washington. The Foreign Office quickly books passage for the detective and Dr. Watson on a ship to America.

So much for the setup. I don’t want to say much more about the plot of “Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram From Hell,” except to add that some of the figures who subsequently appear include a young J. Edgar Hoover, a prominent Washington hostess (Meyer initially plays coy with her identity, which should be obvious to many Washingtonians) and the German ambassador, Count Bernstorff.

Still, bear in mind Meyer’s subtitle, “A World War I Adventure.” Minor riddles aside, this isn’t so much a mystery as a period thriller, with murderous action set on shipboard, at Washington’s Willard Hotel, during a cross-country rail journey and in the Mexico of Pancho Villa. More than once, Meyer resorts to a variant of the pulp writer’s mantra formulated by Raymond Chandler: “When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.” Some key “surprises” also assume a depressing lack of cultural and historical knowledge in today’s readers.

While “Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram From Hell” is certainly fun to read, it nonetheless left me hungry to see the detective at work on a classic crime, a truly mysterious mystery.

Lawrence supplies that want in “Sherlock Holmes: The Affair at Mayerling Lodge.” The novel can be a bit talky, and some details struck me as obvious giveaways, notably a pimple on the dead Rudolf’s nose and a reference to a certain chemical compound. Otherwise it’s a pleasure to follow Holmes as he unearths overlooked pieces of evidence, interviews witnesses in the crown prince’s entourage and finally deduces that what seemed the double suicide of two lovers is actually something quite different.

As Ronald Grigor Suny — emeritus professor of political science and history at the University of Michigan — points out in a brief foreword, Holmes’s methodical sleuthing gradually uncovers some of the internal power dynamics of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 19th century. In particular, the elegance of Viennese court life — a milieu of formality and punctilio, with background music by the Marderosian string quartet — masks a hotbed of romantic and political intrigue. There’s also a brief cameo by Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s older and smarter brother, the mastermind who sometimes “is the British government.” Finally, an afterword briefly traces the ripples from the Mayerling affair to the

assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo in 1914. With his death, as Barbara Tuchman outlined in another of her books, “The Guns of August,” the war to end all wars began. Along with much else, it largely destroyed the world of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Still, we can revisit that romantic era of fog, gaslight and hansom cabs whenever we pick up pastiches such as “Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram From Hell” and “Sherlock Holmes: The Affair at Mayerling Lodge.” In such works of homage and affection, the great detective lives on, ever ready to ponder another three-pipe problem, assemble his street-urchin intelligence network, the Baker Street Irregulars, or again quip that “when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.” Even more than Dr. Watson, Sherlock Holmes deserves to be called “the one fixed point in a changing age.”

Sherlock Holmes and the Telegram From Hell

By Nicholas Meyer

Mysterious Press. 288 pp. $26.95

Sherlock Holmes

The Affair at Mayerling Lodge

By John Lawrence

Belanger Books. 286 pp. Paperback, $24.95