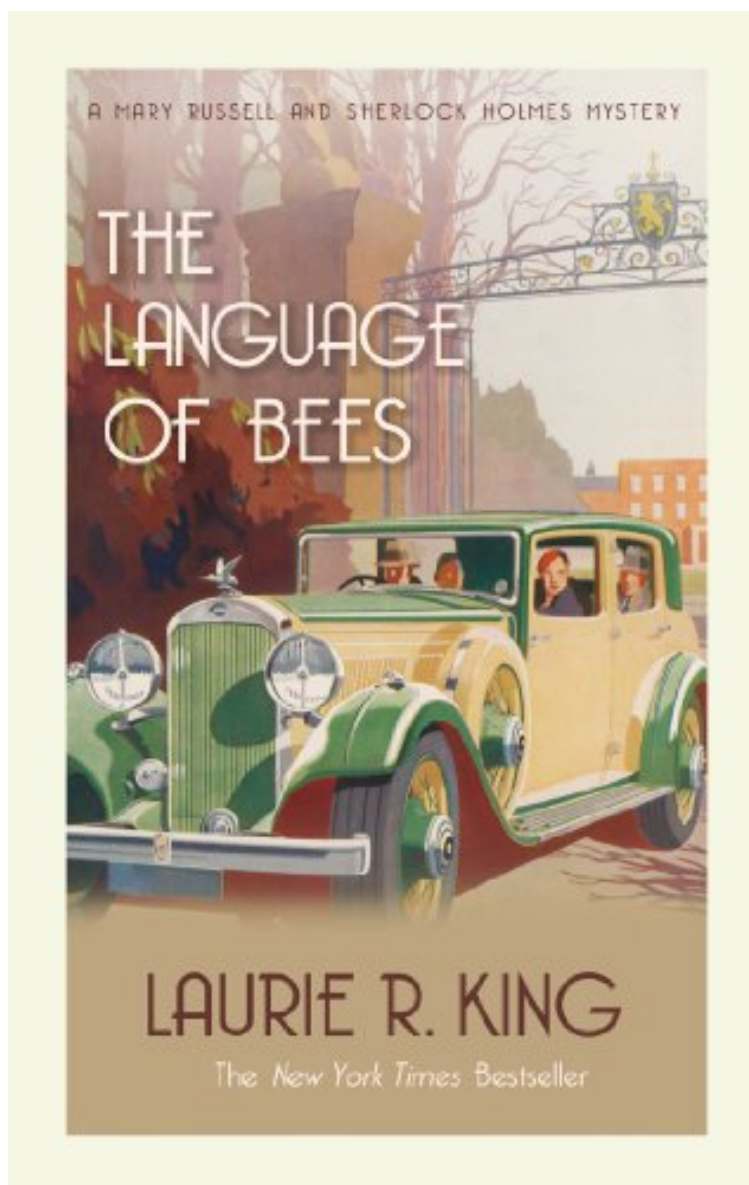


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The Language of Bees



Par Laurie R. King
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe New York Times Bestseller. For Mary Russell and her husband, Sherlock Holmes, returning to the Sussex coast after seven months abroad was a delicious anticipation. There was even a mystery to solve - the unexplained disappearance of an entire colony of bees from one of Holmes's beloved hives. But the anticipated sweetness of their homecoming is quickly tempered by a bitter memory from her husband's past. Mary had met Damian Adler only once before, when the promising surrealist painter had been charged with - and exonerated from - murder. Now the talented and troubled young man is enlisting their help again, this time in a desperate search for his missing wife and child. From suicides among the

Standing Stones to a bizarre religious cult, from the demi-monde of the Caf Royal at the heart of Bohemian London to the dark secrets of a young woman's past on the streets of Shanghai, Russell will find herself on the trail of a killer more dangerous than any she's ever faced - a killer Sherlock Holmes himself may be protecting for reasons near and dear to his heart.

Chapter One First Birth (1): The boy came into being on a night of celestial alignment, when a comet travelled the firmament and the sky threw forth a million shooting stars to herald his arrival.

Testimony, I: I AS HOME COMINGS GO, IT WAS NOT AUSPICIOUS. The train was late. Portsmouth sweltered under a fitful breeze. Sherlock Holmes paced up and down, smoking one cigarette after another, his already bleak mood growing darker by the minute. I sat, sinuses swollen with the dregs of a summer cold I'd picked up in New York, trying to ignore my partner's mood and my own headache. Patrick, my farm manager, had come to meet the ship with the post, the day's newspapers, and a beaming face; in no time at all the smile was gone, the letters and papers hastily thrust into my hands, and he had vanished to, he claimed, see what the delay was about. Welcome home. Just as it seemed Holmes was about to fling his coat to the side and set off for home on foot, whistles blew, doors clattered, and the train roused itself from torpor. We boarded, flinging our compartment windows as far open as they would go. Patrick cast a wary glance at Holmes and claimed an acquaintance in the third-class carriage. We removed as many of our outer garments as propriety would allow, and I tore away the first pages of the newspaper to construct a fan, cooling myself with the announcements and the agony column.

Holmes slumped into the seat and reached for his cigarette case yet again. I recognised the symptoms, although I was puzzled as to the cause. Granted, an uneventful week in New York followed by long days at sea none of our fellow passengers having been thoughtful enough to bleed to death in the captain's cabin, drop down dead of a mysterious poison, or vanish over the rails might cause a man like Holmes to chafe at inactivity, nonetheless, one might imagine that a sea voyage would not be altogether a burden after seven hard-pressed months abroad.* And in any case, we were now headed for home, where his bees, his newspapers, and the home he had created twenty years before awaited him. One might expect a degree of satisfaction, even anticipation; instead, the man was all gloom and cigarettes. I had been married to him for long enough that I did not even consider addressing the conundrum then and there, but said merely, Holmes, if you don't slow down on that tobacco, your lungs will turn to leather. And mine. Would you prefer the papers, or the post? I held out the newspaper, which I had already skimmed while we were waiting, and took the first item on the other stack, a picture postcard from Dr Watson showing a village square in Portugal. To my surprise, Holmes reached past the proffered newspaper and snatched the pile of letters from my lap. Another oddity. In the normal course of events, Holmes was much attached to the daily news several dailies, in fact, when he could get them. Over the previous months, he had found it so frustrating to be days, even weeks in arrears of current events (current English events, that is) that one day in northern India, when confronted with a three-week-old Times, he had sworn in disgust and flung the thing onto the fire, declaring, I scarcely leave England before the criminal class swarms like cockroaches. I cannot bear to hear of their antics. Since then he had stuck to local papers and refused all offers of those from London, on the rare occasions he had succumbed to their siren call, he had perused the headlines with the tight-screwed features of a man palpating a wound: fearing the worst but unable to keep his fingers from the injury. Frankly, I had been astonished back in Portsmouth when he hadn't ripped that day's Times out of Patrick's hand. Now, he dug his way into the post like a tunnelling badger, tossing out behind him the occasional remark and snippet of information. Trying to prise conversation out of Sherlock Holmes when he had his teeth into a project would be akin to tapping said preoccupied badger on the shoulder, so I took out my handkerchief and used it, and addressed myself first to the uninspiring view, then to the unread sections of the papers. Some minutes passed, then: Mycroft has no news, my partner and husband grumbled, allowing the single sheet of his brother's ornate calligraphy to drift onto the upholstery beside him. Is he well? I asked. My only reply was the ripping open of the next envelope. On reflection, I decided that the letter would not say if its writer was well or not: True, Mycroft had been very ill the previous winter, but even if he were at death's door, the only reason he would mention the fact in a letter would be if some urgent piece of business made his impending demise a piece of information he thought we needed. Holmes read; I read. He dropped the next letter, a considerably thicker one, on top of Mycroft's, and said in a high and irritated voice, Mrs Hudson spends three pages lamenting that she will not be at home to greet us, two pages giving quite unnecessary details of her friend Mrs Turner's illness that requires her to remain in Surrey, two more pages reassuring us that her young assistant Lulu is more than capable, and then in the final paragraph deigns to mention that one of my hives is going mad. Going mad? What does that mean? He gave an eloquent lift of the fingers to indicate that her information was as

substantial as the air above, and returned to the post. Now, though, his interest sharpened. He studied the next envelope closely, then held it to his nose, drawing in a deep and appreciative breath. Some wives might have cast a suspicious eye at the fond expression that came over his features. I went back to my newspapers. The train rattled, hot wind blew in the window, voices rose and fell from the next compartment, but around us, the silence grew thick with the press of words unsaid and problems unfaced. The two surviving aeroplanes from the American world flight were still in Reykjavik, I noted. And a conference on German war reparations would begin in London during the week-end. There had been another raid on Bright Young Things (including some lesser royals) at a country house gathering where cocaine flowed. Ah but here was an appropriate interruption to the heavy silence: I read aloud the latest turn in the Leopold and Loeb sentence hearing, two young men who had murdered a boy to alleviate tedium, and to prove they could. Holmes turned a page. A few minutes later, I tried again. Here's a letter to The Times concerning a Druid suicide at Stonehenge, no, there was a suicide somewhere else, and a small riot at Stonehenge. Interesting: I hadn't realised the Druids had staged a return. I wonder what the Archbishop of Canterbury has to say on the matter? He might have been deaf. I shot a glance at the letter that so engrossed him, but did not recognise either the cream stock or the pinched, antique writing. I set down the newspaper long enough to read first Mrs Hudson's letter, which I had to admit was more tantalising than informative, then Mycroft's brief missive, but when I reached their end, Holmes was still frowning at the lengthy epistle from his unknown correspondent. Kicking myself for failing to bring a sufficient number of books from New York, I resumed The Times where, for lack of unread Druidical Letters to the Editor, or Dispatches from Reykjavik, or even News from Northumberland, I was driven to a survey of the adverts: Debenhams sketches delivered the gloomy verdict that I would need my skirt lengths adjusted again; Thomas Cook offered me educational cruises to Egypt, Berlin, and an upcoming solar eclipse; the Morris Motors adverts reminded me that it was high time to think about a new motor-car; and the London Pavilion offered me a Technicolor cowboy adventure called Wanderer in the Wasteland. They are swarming, Holmes said. I looked up from the newsprint to stare first at him, then at the thick document in his hand. Who? Ah, I said, struck by enlightenment, or at least, memory. The bees. He cocked an eyebrow at me. You asked what it meant, that the hive had gone mad. It is swarming. The one beside the burial mound in the far field, he added. That letter is from your beekeeper friend, I suggested. By way of response, he handed me the letter. The cramped writing and the motion of the train combined with the arcane terminology to render the pages somewhat less illuminating than the personal adverts in the paper. Over the years I had become tolerably familiar with the language of keeping bees, and had even from time to time lent an extra pair of arms to some procedure or other, but this writer's interests, and expertise, were far beyond mine. And my nose was too stuffy to detect any odour of honey rising from the pages. When I had reached its end, I asked, How does swarming qualify as madness? You read his letter, he said. I read the words. What did you not? Holmes, just tell me. The hive is casting swarms, repeatedly. Under normal circumstances, a hive swarming indicates prosperity, a sign that it can well afford to lose half its population, but in this case, the hive is hemorrhaging bees. He has cleared the nearby ground, checked for parasites and pests, added a super, even shifted the hive a short distance. The part where he talks about tinnitusque cie et Matris quate cymbala circum? He wanted to warn me that he's hung a couple of bells nearby, that being what Virgil recommends to induce swarms back into a hive. Desperate measures. He does sound a touch embarrassed. And I cannot picture him standing over the hive clashing Our Lady's cymbals, which is Virgil's next prescription. You've had swarms before. When bees swarm following a restless queen to freedom it depletes the population of workers. As Holmes had said, this was no problem early in the season, since they left behind their honey and the next generation of pupae. However, I could see that doing so time and again would be another matter. The last swarm went due north, and ended up attempting to take over an active hive in the vicar's garden. That, I had to agree, was peculiar: Outright theft was pathological behaviour among bees. The combination is extraordinary. Perhaps the colony has some sort of parasite, driving them to madness? he mused. What can you do? I asked, although I still thought it odd that he should find the behaviour of his insects more engrossing than dead Druids or the evil acts of spoilt young men. Even the drugs problem should have caught his attention that seemed to have increased since the previous summer, I reflected: How long before Holmes was pulled into that problem once again? I may have to kill them, he declared, folding away the letter. Holmes, that seems a trifle extreme, I protested, and only when he gave me a curious look did I recall that we were talking about bees, not Young Things or religious crackpots. You could be right, he said, and went back to his reading. I returned to The Times, my eye caught again by the farmer's letter demanding that a guard be mounted on Stonehenge at next year's solstice, so as to

avoid either riots or the threat of a dramatic suicide. I shook my head and turned the page: When it came to communal behaviour, there were many kinds of madness. From the Hardcover edition. Revue de presse "A one-woman case for the defense of unauthorized literary sequels...intelligent, witty, complex and atmospheric...By making a woman possible who matches Holmes in brainpower, as well as in depressive tendencies of mind and spare elegance of manner, King has made marriage possible for the most famous and, surely, one of the most aloof detectives of all time....A spellbinding mystery...superb." The Washington Post Book World on Justice Hall "A wonderful blend of sheer wit and canny ratiocination, this is mystery at its most ingenious." The Guardian on The Art of Detection "Mesmerizing...King does a wonderful job of probing the human psyche...All of her novels are superb." Daily American on Locked Rooms From the Hardcover edition.