

***The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness and Obsession*, by David Grann**

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By Susan Ager

David Grann, please come to dinner. I'll invite my best friends and make your favorite dessert if you'll just sit awhile and tell your stories.

You know the fine points of stealing bases, blasting tunnels and knifing a man dead with one thrust. You know Sherlock Holmes' methods as well as Watson did. You can describe the motives of fire. And you've bought candy bars from prison vending machines for the creepiest among us.

Red wine or white? Bring your toothbrush. You can spend the night.

I didn't know David Grann until I picked up a paperback copy of "The Lost City of Z," a brilliant biography/mystery/quest set mostly in the Amazon. If that 2009 book was the work of a writer's lifetime, I would be impressed. But then this!

"The Devil and Sherlock Holmes" is an anthology of a dozen intricately crafted accounts, nine of which first appeared in The New Yorker. Like the best of stories, each carries the spice of intrigue and the momentum of a search, either by the writer or his subjects. And, these stories -- subtitled "Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession" -- gallop across the globe.

In the first, "Mysterious Circumstances," a Sherlock Holmes zealot and scholar turns up dead on his bed in London, surrounded by stuffed animals, Holmes paraphernalia, a bottle of gin and a wooden spoon. He had been garroted with a black boot lace.

"The Squid Hunter," a man obsessed with finding the giant squid, takes Grann along, night after night after night on the waters off New Zealand, searching for baby squid no bigger than roaches. (At maturity, they can stretch 30 feet.) The hunter builds his traps by hand from items such as empty liter Coke bottles.

In "Stealing Time," a once-great baseball player seeks redemption, and another big-time chance, playing in his late 40s for a team called the San Diego Surf Dawgs.

Grann is a writer who loses himself in the tales he tells, tunneling in deep like the "sandhogs" he profiles in "City of Water," generations of men who work 600 feet below Manhattan's streets.

Grann trudges through muck in search of shiny pennies of insight and detail, which he collects by the pocketful, then studies and organizes, laying out the goods thoroughly, brilliantly and with

nary a dull sentence. His mind must operate with efficiency and tenacity. David, you may bring your wife, if she's still with you.

Grann tells us, in the introduction, that each piece may answer or only hint at "why some people on this earth devote themselves to good and others to evil." In fact, few clear conclusions are reached, and the reader is left to wonder if a figure is guilty or innocent, obsessed or merely devoted, proud or pathetic.

Some of Grann's subjects do harm. These include "The Chameleon," a grown man compelled to pose as children, even as a family's vanished son. In "The Old Man and the Gun," a septuagenarian chooses to explode his peaceful golden years by undertaking one last bank robbery. In "The Brand," a lethal band of prison thugs choose power over freedom.

Grann's writing is crisp, clear and unemotional. He lets the reader be the judge, but loves zesty quotes and revealing lists, like this one of what the old bank robber tossed in his car before driving to his target:

"A .357 Magnum, a sawed-off .30 carbine, two black nylon caps, a holster, a can of Mace, a pair of Smith & Wesson handcuffs, two rolls of black electrical tape, a police badge, five AAA batteries, a police scanner, a glass cutter, gloves, and a fishing cap. There was also a small bottle of medicine for his heart."

Indeed. That tale and its companions will make your heart race and, at times, ache. They're stories to share with friends, even if Grann can't be there himself.

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