

NB | Column

# Ideal Holmes

Plenteous prizes, Sherlock Holmes at the Grolier Club,  
Lockdown ‘authorihews’

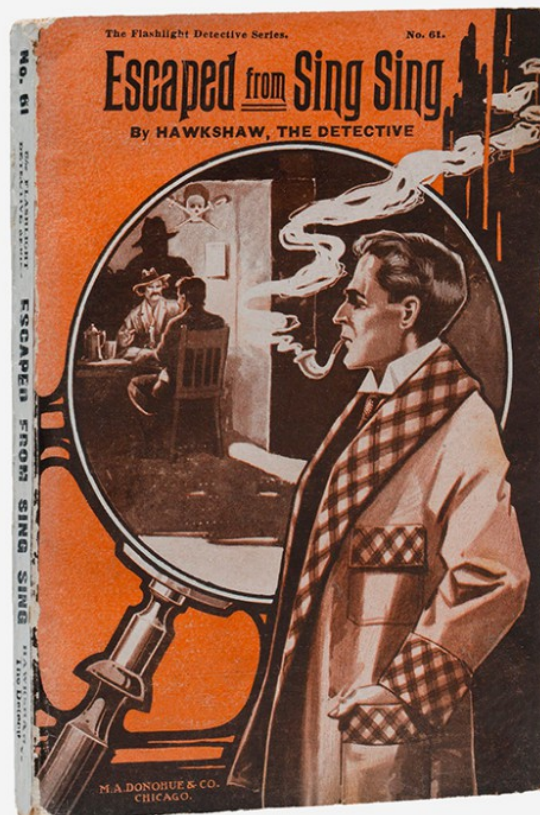
By M. C.



---

January 14, 2022

[Read this issue](#) >



**I**t will thrill you to hear that people are still very much aware of the Booker prize. The results of a survey conducted by Nielsen Book last year - of almost 1,000 respondents more or less in the industry, a third of whom were responding from the UK or Ireland - are in. The survey shows that almost all of these people have heard of the Booker and the International Booker; they know of the Pulitzers and, more vaguely, something called the Costa book awards. In the UK, the Women's prize for fiction is considerably better known than the Prix Goncourt, and they are barely aware at all of the King Faisal international prize. Do you know what the Holberg prize is? Congratulations, you could hold a conversation about prizes with the 19 per cent of British and Irish literary types who share this knowledge with you.

There are few revelations among this survey's findings, and there seems to have been relatively little change from year to year. But Nielsen has at least confirmed for us our suspicion that a certain circularity besets prize culture, especially in an international context. "What factors", representatives of media organizations were asked, "would most influence whether your organisation would cover news and/or features about the winner of an international book prize if the winning book was originally written in another language?" The crucial factor turns out to be

whether the author of the winning book already has some “status within [the] literature sector inside your country/region”. Then you need to know if “book readers” are already interested in said author, and whether a translation is available. These factors are twice as significant, Nielsen suggests, as what a winning book is about or the “quality of the writing”.

Safe in the knowledge that no one is paying attention, therefore, let us applaud the Robert B. Silvers Foundation for giving out the first round of Silvers-Dudley prizes for criticism and journalism to Elaine Blair, Merve Emre, Becca Rothfeld, Vinson Cunningham et al; let us also praise the Slightly Foxed best first biography prize, which has announced a shortlist that includes *Dostoevsky in Love* by Alex Christofi, *Will She Do?* by Eileen Atkins, *Windswept* by Annabel Abbs, *John Craxton* by Ian Collins and *Free* by Lea Ypi. The Barbellion prize’s shortlist for its second year – this is a prize for a work that “has best represented the experience of chronic illness and/or disability” – includes *Ultimatum Orangutan* by Khairani Barokka, *What Willow Says* by Lynn Buckle, *A Still Life* by Josie George and *Duck Feet* by Ely Percy.

The readings for this year’s T. S. Eliot prize for poetry took place at the Southbank Centre last Sunday. Entries are now invited for

the Sophie Coe prize in food history, worth £1,500 to the winner, for “an engaging, original piece of writing”, published or unpublished, “that delivers new research and/or insights into any aspect of food history” (see [sophiecoep prize.wordpress.com](http://sophiecoep prize.wordpress.com) for the details). And have we not already mentioned the Costas, which were handed out last week, with an overall winner, from the winners of five categories, to be announced on February 1? But you knew this already. Writing is a competitive business, as merely the first two weeks of the year – from which the above information is exclusively drawn – may show. This isn’t even what was once known as prize season. When is that, again?

**W**e wonder if many visitors to the Huntington Library’s exhibition *Mapping Fiction* this spring, as mentioned last week, will also make it to the Grolier Club in New York: opening this week, and running until April 16, is a mighty fine-looking exhibition called *Sherlock Holmes in 221 Objects*. The Grolier claims that this is the first “comprehensive” Holmes exhibition in New York for over half a century. Manhattan-averse types may console themselves with a copy of the exhibition catalogue, by Cathy and Glen Miranker (US \$60; see [sherlock221objects.org](http://sherlock221objects.org)).

*As Mapping Fiction* is drawn from the Huntington's own collection, so this new Grolier exhibition draws on the impressive efforts of a single determined collector of Holmesiana, Glen S. Miranker, a former executive of Apple, who has amassed over 7,000 items relating to the subject. These items include the only extant copy of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in a dust jacket, as well as manuscripts in Conan Doyle's hand and the author's "idea book" in which he wrote, in the calendar for December 1893, "Killed Holmes". In a handwritten speech, never before displayed, Conan Doyle gives his customary explanation: that this was an act of "justifiable homicide in self defence"; "if I had not killed him he would certainly have killed me".

Pictured here is the cover of a dime novel of the early twentieth century called *Escaped from Sing Sing* that shows how pervasive was the influence of Holmes, even a far cry from Baker Street. The implication here is that "Hawkshaw, the Detective" has learnt his trade from the best, or at least in pallid imitation of the best, solving crimes with pipe fixed to lip and magnifying glass at the ready. Such figures were not uncommon sights on the covers of such volumes in the Flashlight Detective Series, apparently. These volumes happened to include the works of Conan Doyle himself.

**T**he first lockdown of 2020 was purportedly a time for starting out on some literary project or other.

Countless cosy crime novels were commenced, and no doubt some were also, we fear, completed. On his daily walk, meanwhile, Noel Malcolm of All Souls College, Oxford, was composing clerihews about writers - now published as *Authorihews* - having chosen a way to double the form's "technical challenge". In Dr Malcolm's method of composition, the first line of the quatrain includes a proper name, as is standard; his second couplets "had to conclude with the title of one of that author's works". Hence:

Alas, the works of Thomas Carlyle  
Will not make you smile.  
All the jokes are non-starters  
In *Sartor Resartus*.

Perhaps you can guess which novel by Ayn Rand left the poet feeling "mentally mugged". *Authorihews* is available from Amazon for £5.99.

---

*Keep reading*

---

**NB** | *Column*

## Fair copies

Irish loving, Plathian pamphlets, Clive Sinclair

By **M. C.**

---

**NB** | *Column*

## Soma loving

Prolific prizes, World book days, Brave new worlds, More Much Ado

By **M. C.**

---

**NB** | *Column*

## Business ends

Back at a book fair, British Library crime, Richard Howard's map

By **M. C.**

---

**NB** | *Column*

## Journal ease

Little magazines, Brazilian concrete, European navigations

By **M. C.**

**REGULAR FEATURES**

**THE ARCHIVE**

**EXPLORE**

**CATEGORIES**

**ABOUT US**

**SHOP**

**SUBSCRIBE TO THE PODCAST**

**Google Podcasts**

**Spotify**

**Apple Podcasts**

**Terms & Conditions** **Privacy**

**Cookie Settings**

Copyright © The Times Literary Supplement Limited 2021. The Times Literary Supplement Limited: 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF. Registered in England.

Company registration number: 935240. VAT no: GB 243 8054 69.