

Foreword, *The Casebook of Solar Pons*

Vincent Starrett, Sept. 27, 1964

Years ago, I met a very sweet old lady, all lavender and lace, who had been an avid reader of fiction all her sweet old life. She had read everything, and was still reading everything that came into the house. It occurred to me that her opinion would be interesting, so I asked her what kind of stories she liked best. She replied instantly: "I like stories of illicit relations between the sexes."

There was a twinkle in her eye as she spoke, but I think she meant it. After a moment, she added: "And I must confess that I like mystery stories."

With reservations that do me credit, I am in both camps myself. But, on the whole, the kind of stories I like best are the kind I have been trying to write acceptably for about half a century. I like the kind of stories in which things happen, and *keep on happening*. In my opinion, a writer's first duty is to entertain. Not his whole duty, but his *first* duty. And where better can one find relaxing entertainment than in a good detective story?

August Derleth has been writing and publishing such stories since 1928, when his first Solar Pons "adventure" appeared in print, and admirers of Sherlock Holmes fell upon it with enthusiasm and asked for more. It was my pleasure to write an introduction for the first collection of Pons stories in hard covers, as sparkling a galaxy of Sherlockian pastiches as we have had since the canonical entertainments came to an end.

It is clear that he is following the sequence of titles inaugurated by grand old A. Conan Watson with the *Adventures* of you-know-who, and has now reached the *Casebook* stage of this happy project. But there is no limit on sequels, and there are still a score and more of Watson's "untold tales" that require elucidation. Already August Derleth has communicated a few of them in earlier Solar Pons volumes. One hopes there will be others.

What sort of murder do you particularly fancy? I mean, of course, in a book. What is your secret relish in the way of fictive corpses? A nameless body with a jeweled dagger still quivering in the warm flesh? A bullet-slain card expert clutching the jack of spades in his lifeless fingers? A hideous gargoyle swaying beneath a blackened rafter? Or do you like a still, cold form about whose pale lips the transcendent fathomer detects the familiar odor of bitter almonds?

And in the matter of fathomers, what will you have? A hulking bully from Headquarters with a gob of tobacco in his cheek? A lean scientist with high-domed brow, speaking a jargon of the higher mathematics? A dull inspector from the Yard, pursuing his investigations in the stodgy precincts of an English village? A cheeky amateur of unbelievable intuition, with a passion for tea and sausages? Or an amiable dilettante with mismatched eyes? Or a grave professor from the universities? Or Father Brown?

Thank you! I will myself take Mr. Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street. I will take him, if need be, to a desert island and do without the Bible, the *Iliad*, and Shakespeare. Failing him, I will take Mr. Solar Pons of Praed Street, the best of all his pupils.

But to get back to the little old lady. What a satisfying admission was hers! “I must confess I like mystery stories.” Don’t we all!

Darkness is setting in, a storm is rising, and there is potential danger in every creak and whisper of the locked-up house. But it is only a short stroll to the bookcase – a short *dash*. One passes the windows going and returning. So! I am back in the big chair now, and all I swell; all save that queer bulge in the curtain, and that recurrent sound on the stair...

In safe surrounding people like to be frightened. Sometimes I wonder if writers *write* the kind of stories they like best. I’ll wager August Derleth does.