

Why Solar Pons?
By Bob Byrne, 2006
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Why Solar Pons? What is it that attracts us to the 70-plus stories that August Derleth wrote featuring ‘The Sherlock Holmes of Praed Street?’ Aren’t the Pons stories just imitations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s most famous creation? Why read a copy when the original 56 short stories and 4 novels are readily available? And if one tires of the Sherlockian Canon, there are Holmes tales unnumbered written by other authors. Stories featuring Holmes and Watson are plentiful, so why bother with Solar Pons and Doctor Parker?

When deciding upon the style of the Solar Pons stories, Derleth immediately rejected parody, “that ridiculing imitation designed for laughter” and chose instead the less widely practiced form of the pastiche, which he decreed “fond and admiring.” This approach laid the foundation for Solar Pons’s success.

Thus, Pons is August Derleth’s own literary portrayal of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is retired and London has changed when we meet Pons. An example that shows how adeptly Derleth managed these changes relates to automobiles. Pons uses them, but they are unobtrusive in the stories. The reader does not stop and consciously make the distinction that Pons is riding in a car, rather than in the classic horse-drawn carriage of Holmes’ prime. The atmosphere is the same: Similar to Holmes, but different. Variations on a theme.

Holmes was critical of the police: especially Scotland Yard. His general feeling was that they were tenacious, but plodding and unimaginative. He uses the term ‘imbecile’ more than once, and he tells Watson that (official) local assistance is either biased or worthless. Pons is also frustrated with the official force, but he is less harsh than Holmes and generally speaks better of Inspector Jamison than Holmes does of Inspector Lestrade. The razor-sharp personality is blunted a bit. Variations on a theme.

Holmes has no use for the supernatural in his investigations. “This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply,” he says. Though all of Pons’ recorded cases have conventional solutions (excluding the Derleth collaborations with Mack Reynolds), he is much more open to the possible existence of the supernatural.

Pons says, “Ought we not to say, rather, we believe there are certain phenomena which science as yet has not correctly interpreted or explained?” Referring to clairaudience, he tells Parker, “Let us just say it goes against what we know of science at this point of development of man.” Pons and Holmes use similar methods of detection, but the former is willing to consider non-scientific possibilities. Variations on a theme.

Of course, some elements of the Pons stories do feature less individuality. In both sets of tales, the doctor (whether Parker or Watson) is an able, dedicated companion, trustworthy

in any situation. He is always ready to abandon his practice (and sometimes desert his wife) to assist in an investigation. He attempts to emulate the detective's methods, with poor results. And he is often slighted, if not outright insulted, by his more intelligent flat mate. Derleth gives us Dr. Lyndon Parker, a narrator and assistant we easily identify with Doyle's Dr. John Watson.

The lodgings at 7B Praed Street include the comforts of 221B Baker Street. There is the mantle above the fireplace, the window overlooking the street, the detective's chemical table, the violin; the reader summons up memories of Baker Street and transposes them onto Praed Street. Landladies Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Hudson are nearly indistinguishable and Pons' army of street urchins, the Praed Street Irregulars, are the contemporary equivalent of Holmes' own Baker Street Irregulars. Derleth gives us a different version of Holmes, but with familiar elements sprinkled throughout. It is the Hollywood approach to movies: the same, only different.

A reading of the Solar Pons tales shows that he is clearly more than a carbon copy of Sherlock Holmes. There is much that we recognize in the Pons stories, but there is also much that is new. Derleth is a wonderful writer who masterfully blends these similarities and differences to create a vibrant character. Solar Pons sates our appetite for Sherlock Holmes by giving us a similar, but different flavor. Variations on a theme.

We *think* we want more Holmes. Why Solar Pons? Because August Derleth gives us what we *really* want: more than Holmes.