

Mrs. Sherlock Holmes Discussion Questions

by Brad Ricca

Author Bio: (from MacMillian Website)

Brad Ricca earned his Ph.D. in English from Case Western Reserve University where he currently teaches. The author of Super Boys, he has spoken on comics at various schools and museums, and he has been interviewed about comics topics by The New York Daily News, The Wall Street Journal, and All Things Considered on NPR. His film Last Son won a 2010 Silver Ace Award at the Las Vegas International Film Festival. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio.



Characters:

- **Mary Grace (Winterton) Quackenbos Humiston** – Known as Grace. Female lawyer who worked for immigrants, the downtrodden, and on missing woman cases. Became a lawyer in 1905. Had a sister Jessie, she was close to. She was the first woman to become a consulting detective for the New York Police Department.
- **Ruth Cruger** – (18) – Disappeared February 13, 1917. Disappeared when going to get her ice skates sharpened at the local motorcycle repair shop. Lived in Harlem with her parents and two older sisters. (Father was Henry. Oldest sister, Helen. Middle sister Christina was an invalid.)
- **Lottie Mae Brandon** – Woman, 7 months pregnant, who was murdered in Annapolis, MD. Husband, Val, was with Naval Intelligence. Husband was initially arrested for the murder, but Grace got him off. Another man, John Snowdon, is arrested and executed. Later a letter from anonymous man claimed Snowdon was innocent and the writer was the murderer.
- **Henry Cruger** – Ruth Cruger's father who worked tirelessly to find out what happened to his daughter.
- **Alfredo Cocchi** – (35) – Owned the Metropolitan Motorcycle Shop, a motorcycle repair shop. Married to Mara Cocchi. Italian immigrant. Goes missing 3 days after Ruth Cruger is reported missing. Cocchi is eventually found in Bologna, Italy.
- **Maria (Magrin) Cocchi** – Married to Alfredo Cocchi. Had two children – a daughter and an infant son. Italian immigrant.
- **Julius Kron** – A Hungarian detective/special agent who worked with Grace. Made a name for himself by refusing a bribe and then as the lead investigator on the Cruger case.
- **Consuelo La Rue** – Girl who claimed she was abducted by white slavery ring. Fell/pushed out a third story window.
- **LeRoy Percy** – Co-owner of Sunny Side cotton camp. Eventually became a senator from 1910-1913.
- **Charles Pettek** – Agent investigating Sunny Side. Illegally arrested and put onto a chain gang until he could buy his way out. Killed in Italy.

- **John Snowden** – Black man convicted and hanged for the Lottie Mae Brandon murder. He was convicted because he had a dollar and a dollar was missing from the Brandon house after Lottie's murder.
- **Charles Stielow** – Convicted of murdering his neighbor and his housekeeper with almost no evidence. Put on Death Row. Grace got his execution delayed multiple times until she got him released. She got him released due to a letter from his daughter, missing/mishandled gun evidence, and by the fact his confession was too complicated for him to have written/understood. At least two other people confessed to the crime then recanted.
- **Antionetta Tolla** – Italian immigrant woman who shot Joseph Sonta (her landlord?) in the head. Sentenced to be executed. Grace believes case was mishandled – due to an inept interpreter and evidence mishandling. Sonta had tried to force himself on Tolla. Grace gets her sentence commuted to 7 years.
- **Peonage** – A system where an employer compels a worker to pay off a debt with work. Also called debt slavery or debt servitude. Legally, peonage was outlawed by Congress in 1867. (pbs.org)
- **White Slavery** – Girls being taken against their wills and sold into “immoral” situations.
- **Black Hand** – Criminal organization in NYC. Kidnappers, bombers, murderers, etc. Largely Italian.
- **Camp Upton** – Staging facility for soldiers going to France in WWI.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Did you like the way the story was told? (Pacing, jumping between times, etc.) Why do you think the author chose the Ruth Cruger case as the central conflict of the book?
3. Which of Grace's lawyer/investigations did you find the most memorable?
4. “The public readily says, when a girl disappears, it was as much her fault as the man's.” Do you think this perspective has changed since 1917? Does the public still blame the victim?
5. Do you think the police mishandling of the Ruth Cruger case was intentional or unintentional? Should the police officers involved have been investigated? Do you think justice was served in this case?
6. What do you think of Grace's decision to buy the motorcycle shop's building when she and her investigators could not get legal access any other way?
7. Do you think Alfredo Cocchi was guilty of the Ruth Cruger crime? Was he the mastermind of the crime or was he a patsy? Why do you think that?
8. “When in girl is insulted, she broods over the horror of it, never could she tell her parents... and then another girl goes missing.” What do you think of that statement? Is it true? Does it only apply to girls/women?
9. What do you think about Grace's criticism of the police and the way both Antionetta Tolla's and Grace Cruger's cases were handled? Was she too vocal? Just public enough?
10. Are you surprised that forced labor camps and peonage was still happening in 1906? What made the camps possible?

11. Was the way the Sunny Side camp worked legal? Illegal? Immoral? Both? Neither?
12. Sunny Side and the people who owned it were never brought to justice. What made prosecuting the crimes difficult/impossible?
13. Grace focused on defending the poor and immigrants who were taken advantage of due to poor communication skills and language deficits. Do you think that type of injustice still happens today?
14. What do you think of the death penalty? Did the Stielow and Snowden cases have any impact on your beliefs?
15. Do you think there was any wrongdoing at the military post, Camp Upton? Why or why not? Why do you think it wasn't better covered in the book?
16. What do you think was the cause of Grace's "fall from grace"?
17. Brad Ricca has also written Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster - the Creators of Superman. Will you read it?

References:

- Amazon – www.Amazon.com
- MacMillan – <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250072245>
- Narratively – <https://narratively.com/they-called-her-mrs-sherlock-holmes/>
- Novelist – <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.clevnet.org/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=c72a09aa-446a-4224-b085-465fd06c5507%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZl#UI=10548452&db=neh>
- PBS – <https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/peonage/>

Brad Ricca Books

- Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster - the Creators of Superman (2013)
 - Mrs. Sherlock Holmes (2017)

If you liked Mrs. Sherlock Holmes, try...

- The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher – Kate Summerscale
 - Duel with the Devil – Paul Collins
 - Conan Doyle for the Defense – Margalit Fox
 - Lost Detective – Nathan Ward
 - Black Hand – Stephen Talty
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**GIRL KIDNAPPED,
FEAR OF FATHER**

Pretty Ruth Cruger, of New York, Mysteriously Missing Since Tuesday

Accosted by Mysterious Stranger Before Disappearance, But Police Fail to Find Clue

From The Register Bureau.
NEW YORK, Feb. 15.—A country-wide search was launched today for Miss Ruth Cruger, pretty, 17 years old, and a recent graduate of Wadleigh High School, whose mysterious disappearance from her parents' home in the Springfield Apartments at 189 Claremont avenue, has baffled the police, agency detectives and relatives and friends of the girl since last Tuesday afternoon.




A newspaper clipping on the disappearance of Ruth Cruger.



**The Woman Sherlock Holmes
Who Has Shaken New York**

Remarkable Rise of Mrs. Grace Humiston, Who Traced the Murderer of Ruth Cruger, and Is Now the Busiest Sleuth in the Metropolis



Mrs. Grace Humiston is now one of the busiest persons in New York with unlimited resources and the cooperation of the Police behind her great work as a Modern Sherlock Holmes.

Humiston was dubbed "Mrs. Sherlock Holmes."



Pics from: <https://narratively.com/they-called-her-mrs-sherlock-holmes/>