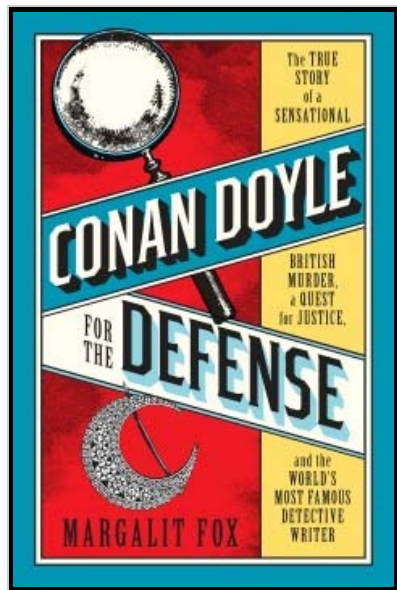


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## Conan Doyle for the Defense

The True Story of a Sensational British Murder, a Quest for Justice, and the World's Most Famous Detective Writer

by Margalit Fox

Price: \$27.00(Hardcover)

Published: June 26, 2018

★★★★★

Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

From the Publisher: In this thrilling true-crime procedural, the creator of Sherlock Holmes uses his unparalleled detective skills to exonerate a German Jew wrongly convicted of murder. For all the scores of biographies of Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the most famous detective in the world, there is no recent book that tells this remarkable story—in which Conan Doyle becomes a real-life detective on an actual murder case. In *Conan Doyle for the Defense*, Margalit Fox takes us step by step inside Conan Doyle's investigative process and illuminates a murder mystery that is also a morality play for our time—a story of ethnic, religious, and anti-immigrant bias. In 1908, a wealthy woman was brutally murdered in her Glasgow home. The police found a convenient suspect in Oscar Slater—an immigrant Jewish cardsharp—who, despite his obvious innocence, was tried, convicted, and consigned to life at hard labor in a brutal Scottish prison. Conan Doyle, already world famous as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was outraged by this injustice and became obsessed with the case. Using the methods of his most famous character, he scoured trial transcripts, newspaper accounts, and eyewitness statements, meticulously noting myriad holes, inconsistencies, and outright fabrications by police and prosecutors. Finally, in 1927, his work won Slater's freedom. Margalit Fox, a celebrated longtime writer for *The New York Times*, has “a nose for interesting facts, the ability to construct a taut narrative arc, and a Dickens-level gift for concisely conveying personality” (Kathryn Schulz, *New York*). In *Conan Doyle for the Defense*, she immerses readers in the science of Edwardian crime detection and illuminates a watershed moment in the history of forensics, when reflexive prejudice began to be replaced by reason and the scientific method. **Advance praise for *Conan Doyle for the Defense*** “I cannot speak too highly of this remarkable book, which entirely captivated me with its rich attention to detail, its intelligence and elegant phrasing, and, most of all, its nail-biting excitement.”—Simon Winchester, author of *The Perfectionists* and *The Professor and the Madman* “Fox brings to life a forgotten cause célèbre in this page-turning account of how mystery writer-turned-real life sleuth Arthur Conan Doyle helped exonerate a man who was wrongfully convicted of murder. . . . The author's exhaustive research and balanced analysis make this a definitive account, with pertinent repercussions for our times.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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### About The Author

Margalit Fox

A senior writer at *The New York Times*, Margalit Fox is considered one of the foremost explanatory writers and literary stylists in American journalism. As a member of the newspaper's celebrated obituary news department, she has written front-page send-offs of some of the leading cultural figures of our age. (*Conan Doyle for the Defense* is in many ways a fond belated obituary for the long-overlooked Oscar Slater, an immigrant everyman treated inexcusably by history.) Fox's previous book, *The Riddle of the Labyrinth*, won the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. She lives in Manhattan with her husband, the writer and critic George Robinson.

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## What We Say

This delightful work of popular history captures probably the last triumphant public act of Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle famously became involved in righting the wrongs of certain miscarriages of justice throughout his life. The idea of the man who conceived of Holmes turning out to be a worthy detective in his own right is too delicious to pass up. Conan Doyle's most famous case involved a man of Indian descent who was railroaded by the courts; it was such a worthy act of redemption and the man so ideally noble and pure and the finale so perfect (the man attended the wedding of Conan Doyle to his new wife and Conan Doyle said he was prouder of this guest than anyone else in attendance) that the story has been immortalized on film and in books. Yet there was one more case, one less well-known. As New York Times senior writer Margalit Fox points out, the story of Oscar Slater -- an immigrant Jew living on the slightly disreputable fringes of society -- is far less black and white. Conan Doyle disliked the man and kept him at arm's length and even pettily feuded with Slater over some expenses when it was all over. That makes the story less suited to easy celebration, but a lot more interesting. Fox (the author of the acclaimed "The Riddle Of The Labyrinth") builds her case well. After a deft, scene-setting introduction, she tantalizes us with the facts of the crime. An elderly wealthy widow is brutally murdered in her Glasgow home, a place so well-protected it qualifies as a locked-room puzzle worthy of Agatha Christie. (In a detail worthy of this knotty story, the widow was a nasty sort disliked by virtually everyone.) An investigation follows with over-looked clues and prejudiced assumptions fighting for our attention. Fox moves tantalizingly back and forth, offering up biographical sketches of Conan Doyle, the real doctor that Sherlock Holmes was based upon, the alleged murderer Slater and even Glasgow itself. And on justice rolls, with the police and the courts in cahoots to ignore unhelpful facts and punish Slater for the crime. His imprisonment is a horror story in itself. Credible allegations of poisoning of the prisoners to keep them docile and confused is just one possible explanation for the soul-crushing despair and paranoia Slater exhibited at times. Conan Doyle focuses on the case when it first caught the public's attention, does some work and then drifts away for years. Slater draws his attention back to it with a desperate plea smuggled out of the prison via a note hidden in the hollowed-out dentures of a fellow prisoner. It's all fascinating and delivered with wry intelligence and verve. The real case Fox lays out is not about Slater: his innocence is so transparent, all we are left with is wondering exactly how Conan Doyle will succeed in freeing him. No, the real remarkable story is Conan Doyle himself. One might expect a former spy to write some good spy thrillers; if they later indulged in some spying on the side, well, who would be surprised? But for a doctor to invent a detective and then prove superior himself to most detectives is rather amazing. Conan Doyle did much more than that. He pioneered the very idea of detective work, or at least popularized the idea of facts and evidence and building a case based on clues rather than the usual method of the time: find a likely suspect and then make sure they pay, facts be damned. Conan Doyle inspired the police to collect reference works just like Holmes, to compile useful "databases" like what different tobacco looks like when it is ash or the soils from different parts of their beat and on and on. He may have made an honest fool of himself late in life with a persistent belief in fairies and the supernatural. But Conan Doyle had as much of a positive impact on modern criminology as anyone in the actual business of police work. It seems elementary to us now, but Conan Doyle was a trailblazer and he proved it in his fiction and even in real life, when a despised Jewish card sharp named Slater was rescued from the darkest hole in Scotland thanks to the persistence of a man that didn't even like him. -- Michael Giltz NOTE: I am casual friends with the husband of Margalit Fox and met her briefly once or twice. You can see her shine in the excellent documentary "Obit" and read rave reviews from Publishers Weekly and others for this new title and her other books. Normally I avoid reviewing works by people I know, but when it's this fun who can resist?

## What Others Say

"I cannot speak too highly of this remarkable book, which entirely captivated me with its rich attention to detail, its intelligence and elegant phrasing, and, most of all, its nail-biting excitement. I read it from dawn to dusk, near-starving myself in the process, so eager was I to find out who did the murder, why the Glasgow police were such monsters, and why Sherlock Holmes's creator was such a genius."—**Simon Winchester, author of *The Perfectionists* and *The Professor and the Madman***

"*New York Times* senior writer [Margalit] Fox brings to life a forgotten cause célèbre in this page-turning account of how mystery writer-turned-real life sleuth Arthur Conan Doyle helped exonerate a man who was wrongfully convicted of murder. . . . The author's exhaustive research and balanced analysis make this a definitive account, with pertinent repercussions for our times."—***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

**Praise for Margalit Fox's book, *The Riddle of the Labyrinth***

"Enthralling . . . [a] thoughtful, thrill-filled history . . . a tale of obsession and endurance and the high price that sometimes must be paid for forging into new territory . . . an exploration of the limits of the human mind."—***The Plain Dealer***

"An intricate and riveting story . . . a puzzle-solver's delight and a detective story full of longing and frustration, discovery and maddening egotism."—***Chicago Tribune***

"A gripping and tightly focused scholarly mystery . . . a testament to what the human brain, or at least the rare human brain, is capable of . . . Fox is attentive to touching traces of idiosyncratic humanity [and] makes the complexities of linguistic scholarship accessible."—**Matti Friedman, *The New York Times***

"In Fox, the story has found a worthy Conan Doyle. . . . Fox successfully executes the balancing act of translating and distilling a specialized field of knowledge for a general audience without oversimplifying or

succumbing to the didacticism of a textbook.”—Donovan Hohn, *The New York Times Book Review*

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