

Arthur and George by Julian Barnes. Jonathan Cape 2005.

Julian Barnes has rarely written better than he does in Arthur and George. Taking some well known facts and building on an enormous amount of intense research he has produced a novel of rare quality.

The Arthur in question is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, acclaimed Victorian author and creator of Sherlock Holmes, a man famous throughout the world and enjoying access to the highest echelons of British society. The George of the title is an obscure northern solicitor.

In normal circumstances the lives of the two men would have remained discrete, but the very unusual, mysterious and terrible events which overwhelmed George and his family created a situation in which Sir Arthur mounted his metaphorical charger and entered the lists on behalf of George and the good name of British justice and fair play.

Barnes dwells at length on his main characters but also on the important subsidiary ones; Doyle's first and second wives, Touie and Jean, George's parents and sister, and the Chief Constable of Staffordshire, Captain Anson, with whom Doyle shares a memorable post-dinner debate.

As well as telling George's story in all its horror, Barnes brings Conan Doyle to life in a quite superb and utterly credible way; his determination, his taboos, his phobias and his passions, not least about spiritism. The joining of the two life experiences makes Arthur and George as good a novel as one could wish to read – and richly deserving of a major literary prize.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh