

Back to the Garden

by Laurie R. King

Author Bio: (from Fantastic Fiction & Authors Website)

Laurie King (aka Leigh Richards) is a third-generation native of San Francisco, but since her marriage to an Anglo-Indian professor she has lived briefly on five continents. She and her husband have two children. They live mostly in California.



Laurie R. King is the New York Times bestselling author of 30 novels and other works, including the Mary Russell-Sherlock Holmes stories. She has won the Agatha, Anthony, Creasey, Edgar, Lambda, Macavity, Wolfe, and Romantic Times Career Achievement awards, has an honorary doctorate in theology, and is a Baker Street Irregular. In 2022, she was named Grand Master by Mystery Writers of America.

Characters:

- **Inspector Raquel Laing** – San Francisco police department. Cold Case Unit. Uses a cane.
- **Wes Albright** – One of the commune members who still lives and works on the Estate.
- **Jen Bachus** – The Gardener Estate manager. Used to trespass and hike on the Estate as a child.
- **Mrs. Dalhausie** – The Estate’s conservator and archivist.
- **Miriam Gaddo** – Artist. Popular in the 70s. Friend of Meadow. Created the 3 Eves statue and other artwork at the Gardner Estate.
- **Robert “Rob” John Gardener** – Owner of the Gardener Estate and Trust. Was a soldier in Vietnam. One of the members of the Common’s Commune. Lives in a cabin on a small, remote portion of the Gardner Estate.
- **Thaddeus Gardener the Second** – Robert’s grandfather. Did not get along with his grandsons, Fort and Rob.
- **Thaddeus “Fort” Gardener the Forth** – Robert’s older brother. Lives in India. Was disinherited when he moved to India to “find himself”.
- **Al Hawkin** – Former homicide detective. Has been “retired” to Cold Cases. In charge of the Highwayman case.
- **Michael Johnston** – The Highwayman. A serial killer. In a nursing home and dying from cancer.
- **Cynthia Gardener Kirkup** – Robert Gardener’s aunt. David Kirkup’s mother.
- **David Kirkup** – The estate gardener. Rob Gardner’s cousin. Very devoted to the Gardener Estate and Trust. Dedicated to bringing in new opportunities for the Estate to keep it going in hard financial times.

- **Dee Laing** – Raquel’s sister. Doesn’t leave the house. Good with computers and computer investigations. Known in the True Crime online community.
- **Marla** – Estate housekeeper in the 70’s. Helped raise Rob and Fort.
- **Meadow** – A hippy Earth-mother with political skills. Was a lawyer named Christine before she joined The Commons commune. Was Rob’s girlfriend in the commune days.
- **Maxwell John O’Connor** – Stayed at the commune for a short time with another member. Accused of rape. Currently in jail for another offence.
- **Annabelle Paulson** – One of the commune members. Had a young son, Sparrow. Like to take pictures of the commune.
- **Rafi Bautista** – Head gardener. Marla was his mother.
- **Rain** – Mephistophelian rock star. Was the popular musician Reynard before he changed his name and became part of the Commune.
- **Jerry Rathford** – Lawyer. The Estate’s long-time lawyer. Became a good friend and honorary member of The Commons commune.
- **Sarah & Kim** – Weavers who once lived at the commune.
- **Polly Lacewood, Sandra Wilson, Demi Scott, and Windy Jackson** – Unsolved murder victims that are possibly linked to the Highwayman Serial Killer. The deaths are being investigated by Al Hawkin, Inspector Raquel Laing, and other police affiliates.
- **The Commons** – A Commune active on the Gardener Estate from 1975-1979.
- **Gardener Estate** – California. 3,500 acres. Has formal gardens. Has 3-4 Gaddo sculptures in the Garden. Estate is administered by a Trust. Was a hippie commune, called The Commons, in the 70s.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. The story is told in two time periods – Then and Now. Did you like the way the story was set up? Did you find it easy or hard to follow? Why or why not?
3. Which timeline did you prefer reading about – Then or Now? Why?
4. One of the main criticisms of the book is that the pacing was slow at the beginning. What do you think? Did the book’s pacing work for you?
5. Discuss how the author described the urban legend/lore of The Highwayman. Why do you think people are so fascinated by serial killers.
6. What role did the setting of the Gardner Estate play in the book? How did the property change as different people owned/occupied it? Which iteration of the Estate do you prefer? Why?

7. Cold cases, particularly those related to serial killers, are very popular interest in both real life and in fiction. In real life, do you think cash-strapped police forces ought to dedicate significant time and resources towards investigating old cases? Why or why not?
8. How does the novel depicts The Commons commune from its beginning and evolution through its eventual downfall? What mistakes did they make?
9. The three-faced Eve statue was a significant aspect of the book. What do you think the statue represents? Why do you think the artist chose to display it the way she did?
10. In researching the commune, Raquel thinks, "Every Eden had a serpent. And love did not inoculate against its venom." Do you agree? What does it tell you about Raquel? What point was the author trying to make?
11. Raquel tells Dee, her sister, identifying information so that she can research the Highwayman's Mexican victims. Was she right to do so? Why or why not?
12. Did you know the identity of the skeleton before it was revealed? What clues made you think that?
13. Did you suspect who the killer was before the book told you? What hints led you to that conclusion?
14. How do you feel about the way the book ended? If you could change the ending, how would you have it end?
15. **Back to the Garden** was written by Laurie R. King. Will you read anything else by the author?

References:

- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/k/laurie-r-king/>
- GoodReads – <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/59900687-back-to-the-garden>
- Laurie R. King website - <https://laurierking.com/>
- Novelist – <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.clevnet.org/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=8c21172e-3829-4caa-b598-e31148922cdf%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZl#AN=11076975&db=neh>

Laurie R. King's Books

Series

Kate Martinelli

1. A Grave Talent (1993)
2. To Play the Fool (1995)
3. With Child (1996)
4. Night Work (2000)
5. The Art of Detection (2006)
Beginnings (2019)

Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes

1. The Beekeeper's Apprentice (1994)
(aka Or On the Segregation of the Queen)
2. A Monstrous Regiment of Women (1995)
3. A Letter of Mary (1997)
4. The Moor (1998)
5. O Jerusalem (1999)
6. Justice Hall (2002)
7. The Game (2004)
8. Locked Rooms (2005)
9. The Language of Bees (2009)
10. The God of the Hive (2010)
- 10.5. Beekeeping for Beginners (2011)

11. Pirate King (2011)
12. Garment of Shadows (2012)
The Mary Russell Companion (2014)
Mary's Christmas (2014)
13. Dreaming Spies (2015)
Stately Holmes (2016)
The Marriage of Mary Russell (2016)
14. The Murder of Mary Russell (2016)
Mary Russell's War (2016)
15. Island of the Mad (2018)
16. Riviera Gold (2020)
17. Castle Shade (2021)
18. The Lantern's Dance (2024)

Folly Island

1. Folly (2001)
2. Keeping Watch (2003)

Harris Stuyvesant

1. Touchstone (2007)
2. The Bones of Paris (2013)

Stand Alone Novels

- A Darker Place (1998) (aka The Birth of a New Moon)
- Naked Came the Phoenix (2001) (with others)
- Califia's Daughters (2004) (as by Leigh Richards)
 - Lockdown (2017)
- Back to the Garden (2022)

If you liked Back to the Garden, try...

- House of a Thousand Lies – Cody Luke Davis
- The Couple at Number 9 – Claire Douglas
- The Family Upstairs – Lisa Jewell
- Unsub – Meg Gardiner
- The Golden Gate – Amy Chua