

MYSTERIES IN THE MAKING

By STACEY VREEKEN
ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

FROM THE bucolic surroundings of her Watsonville farmhouse, Laurie King conjures up images of pre-World War I English countryside, complete with Sherlock Holmes lurking about. That is, when she's not keeping up with Detective Martinelli's adventures in San Francisco.

Laurie King is a mystery writer with two books published by St. Martin's Press in New York: "Grave Talent," which has earned her a Mystery Writers of America nomination for best first novel; and "The Beekeeper's Apprentice," which resurrects Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes as mentor to a brilliant young disciple.

King will read a selection from her works March 12 at the Book Fair at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St. She will also sign copies of her books March 23 at 7:30 p.m. at the Capitola Book Cafe on 41st Avenue.

King does her writing in a setting most only imagine in their "if I were a writer" fantasies. She curls up in an upstairs room converted for just such a purpose: plants, cat, a view of green pastures and the croak of frogs from nearby Pinto Lake.

She writes out her stories in longhand on a clipboard at first — repositioning the occasional cat when necessary — before transferring the ideas to computer.

King prefers to write in spurts, with a 14-hour day optimum, but her busy life interferes.

She has two children, Nathan in fifth grade and Zoe in eighth grade, is notably involved with school issues, and is a counselor for La Leche League.

"Writing is only one thing I do," she said.

King wrote "Beekeeper" in 1987; "Grave Talent" came later. But "Talent," whose main char-

acter, Kate Martinelli, was named "with no thought of Martinelli's apple juice," was published first, while copyrights were checked on the Sherlock Holmes character.

Both books will have sequels: two for "Beekeeper" and one for "Talent," which is nearly complete. A sixth novel has a futuristic setting.

King has worked hard at her writing since receiving her M.A. in theology from Berkeley in 1984.

The Mystery Writers nomination in the field of mystery writing is the equivalent of the Oscars in the film industry. "It's really an honor to be nominated," she said. King will fly out to New York for the ceremony.

Besides glitzy New York dinners and the respect of her peers, what King loves most about mysteries is the internal structure to the story. It has "its own guidelines. Rules to play by," she said. "They're also about things that count ... the importance of human life."

A mystery takes the role of morality play for King. "It's entertainment and escapist. It also enables a person to deal with things that count — life and death."

Although "Grave Talent" roams familiar ground in the Bay Area, "Beekeeper" is familiar territory to King as well. Her husband, Noel, a retired professor from UC-Santa Cruz, is from England and they go back to visit frequently.

But the time period and the Holmes character took research. King had never read any Holmes novels until she decided to write one. "I never pick what I know," she said, breaking the old writer's axiom.

But an adult perspective was helpful, allowing King to see the subtleties. "Children love (Holmes novels) as great adventure. As an adult you learn he's ... a human being, not this detecting machine.

But certain characters transcend the people who create them, King believes, and she's boldly waded in.

"He's very complex, with a lot of problems and problems with society around him," King said.

"Sherlock Holmes is a horrible character. You wouldn't want to have dinner with him, certainly not if you're a woman."

But the novel is much more than a Sherlock Holmes book. It's a Mary Russell novel, who proves to be Holmes mental equal.

With Mary Russell as a character, King said, writing the books are "more like channeling than creation."

Russell is a character strong enough to match her tumultuous times, which stretch into the 1920s. "The more work I do in the '20s, the more parallels I see to the late 20th century," said the author.

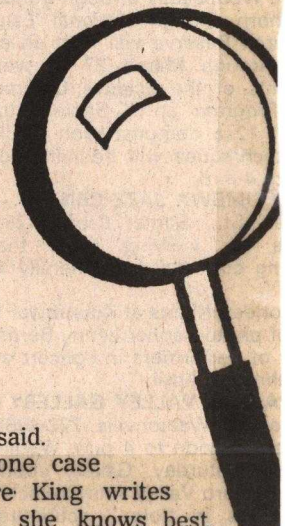
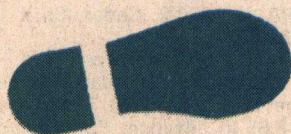
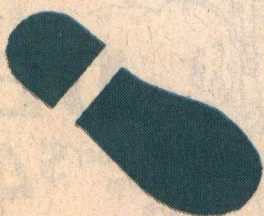
She cites the effects of the first World War, the massive number of people who died in the war, and flu epidemic that followed and how it changed the whole culture, especially the role of women, who were allowed into major universities and given the right to vote.

"Mary was a 20th century woman. We are 20th century



Kurt Ellison

Laurie King is ready to write with clipboard and her cat Hailie.



women too, with feet in the '20s," she said.

"Grave Talent" was originally going to be a Mary Russell story too, but at the time, King didn't know if she'd ever publish the Russell story and two more were already sitting on the shelf ... "so I brought the story through to the other side of the

20th century."

The only parallel she sees is that both work with somewhat older men and romance does not play a part: for Russell because she is an apprentice; and for Martinelli because she is a lesbian.

"I'm interested in women: how they think; how they work,"

she said. It's one case where King writes what she knows best.