

FALL READING

The Beekeeper's Apprentice

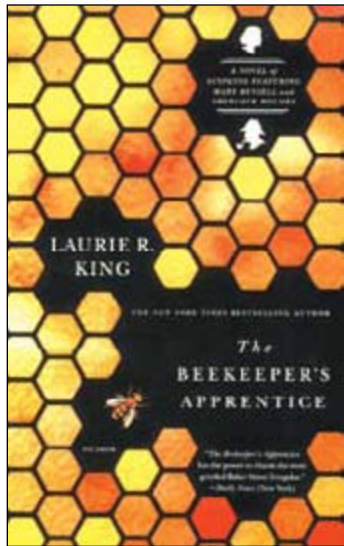
By Laurie R. King
(Picador, \$14)

REVIEWED BY EALISH WADDELL

It is 1915. War is raging across Europe, and tragedy has marooned 15-year-old Mary Russell in the Sussex countryside with an odious aunt and an uncertain future. Biding her time until she can escape to university, the gangly, bookish, outspoken Mary has resigned herself to being friendless when she literally trips over an unexpected neighbor: the legendary detective Sherlock Holmes, genteelly retired to the downs to write and raise bees in his middle age.

To their mutual surprise and delight, each finds in the other a kindred spirit and an equally sharp-witted, curious-minded companion. They are soon spending nearly every moment together, debating religion, conducting scientific experiments or just tramping over the fields.

Though ostensibly retired, the great Holmes is hardly decrepit in body or in mind. Seeing in Mary an unusual intellect and discernment, he soon begins to train her in the study of detection and observation. As the cases they take on together grow in scope, their list of enemies grows



ever longer, and Mary comes into her own as a detective to match even the great Holmes himself.

Though the mysteries are well-done, the relationship between Holmes and Mary is the real focus of this novel. As King writes it, their profound, platonic connection is born of a meeting of twin minds that disregards

age, gender or societal expectation. It weathers innuendo and intrigue, separation and secrets; and though warm and affectionate, it resists the simplicity of a typical romantic pairing with its insistence on intellectual respect and equality.

Might the mentor and protégé ever become more? Time -- and sequels -- will continue the tale, but "The Beekeeper's Apprentice" stands on its own as a compelling portrait of a remarkable friendship. ■

Books reviewed in this column are available online or at your local bookstore.

"A Bayou Christmas Tale" tells the Southern version

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

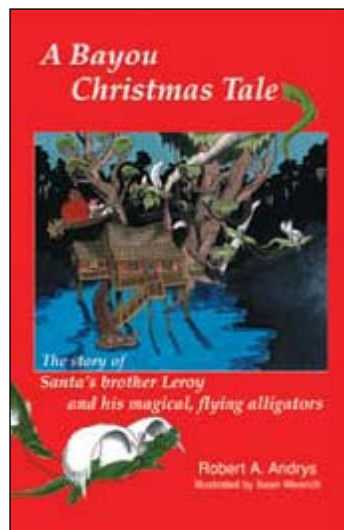
Christmas is the time of year that draws a more distinct line of what it's like to live in the North with Santa, elves and lots of snow, in contrast to here in the land of palm trees and white sand. Some people "down" South feel cheated or disconnected from the holiday that features reindeers pulling a sleigh through a blizzard. This of course can lead to mistakes in judgment; such as traveling up to the frigid cold in order to experience the Santa story.

If you'd like to cozy up with a Southern Christmas story, try "A Bayou Christmas Tale" by Alva's Robert A. Andrys. It's a delightful story of Santa's brother, Leroy Claus, and his magical flying alligators, who transform a father's tall tale into a wide-eyed adventure for young Bob Smallwood.

This wonderful Children's book gives a fresh look at what it is like to live in the South and celebrate the holidays in a different way; where presents are delivered by 'gators. Also, learn about Amrad, the wise old man of the swamp, and like all good tales, it shows that dreams do come true.

Christmas with Leroy Clause comes to life in this brilliantly illustrated 28-page children's book, destined to become a bedtime favorite this holiday season.

Andrys wrote a poem in his 1995 Christmas letter that tried to explain to his family up North what it was like to have a Southern Christmas. Two years later he embellished the poem to make it story-like. His friends suggested that he continue to expand the poem and from it, a children's book emerged. Sitting next to his creek writing the story, Andrys



sought to create a character that was similar to the Christmas Santa story but reflected a cast more pertinent to the swamps of south Florida.

The essence of the story is not only to convey a Southern Christmas story but just as importantly to tell the tale with a reflection of what a magical place a swamp really is. How vibrant and

alive, how full of life with creatures most of us have never seen or heard. The vast wind whipped snow drifts of the North Pole are counter balanced with the intimacy of the wetlands. The verbosity of life in the wet habitats are in contrast to the fragile nature of this ecosystem. The seemingly endless supply of living things can so quickly be shattered by a change in the water supply or its quality. This is what the author wanted to also bring forth in this and future children's books. To tell a story in the very heart of the wetlands where all this seemingly chaotic orchestra of life takes place and merely say we need to love this place, the swamp, as much as the places that people are more familiar with.

"A Bayou Christmas Tale" can be purchased at select local book stores, or ordered from Gator Scales Publishing, 23031 Tuckahoe Rd., Alva, Fla. 33920 or purchased on-line from the author's website: www.Andrys.org. The price online is \$8 plus shipping & handling. ■