



Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman

E.W. Hornung , Richard Lancelyn Green (Editor)

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Gentleman thief Raffles is daring, debonair, devilishly handsome-and a first-rate cricketer. In these eight stories, the master burglar indulges his passion for cricket and crime: stealing jewels from a country house, outwitting the law, pilfering from the nouveau riche, and, of course, bowling like a demon-all with the assistance of his plucky sidekick, Bunny.

Encouraged by his brother-in-law, Arthur Conan Doyle, to write a series about a public school villain, and influenced by his own experiences at Uppingham, E. W. Hornung created a unique form of crime story, where, in stealing as in sport, it is playing the game that counts, and there is always honor among thieves.

Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman Details

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From Reader Review Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman for online ebook

Clair says

Harry 'Bunny' Manders hasn't been enamoured with the way his life has been going. In fact, he wishes to end it all. He's in terrible debt, and unsure about his future. Enter Arthur J. Raffles, Bunny's old school chum from his public school days, an upperclassman whom he looks up to and respects. Over a simple game of baccarat, it is revealed that both of them are up to their necks in debt, and have not a penny between them. But this isn't the end of the road for Mr. Raffles. In fact, it marked a whole new beginning.

'Do you think that because a fellow has rooms at this place and belongs to a club or two and plays a little cricket, he must necessarily have a balance in the bank? ...I have nothing but my wits to live on.'

Raffles, having paved his way as a gentleman burglar, is in need of an accomplice to keep guard whilst he executes some of his trickier escapades. So with little more than a gentlemanly handshake and a few questions as to how good Raffles must be to steal from the rich and never ever get caught, Bunny returns to his roots by going off on larcenous adventures with the boy he 'fagged' for back at boarding school. Raffles also makes clear that he doesn't do petty robberies.

"My dear fellow, I would rob St. Paul's Cathedral if I could, but I could no more scoop a till when the shop-worker wasn't looking than I could bag apples out of a poor old woman's basket."

Nope, Raffles is in this line of work simply for the thrill of the hunt. Think Carmen Sandiego from the computer games and TV series fondly remembered by children of the 1980s/1990s. He goes for things that should be, by all rights, impossible to steal, and does the job with aplomb, utilising a set of lock-picking devices, a keen eye and ear, a series of clever disguises, and his smarts, attracted to certain objects like a moth to a flame, or a magpie to a shiny object. In fact, in the second story, Raffles insists he must steal some one-of-a-kind diamonds from a rich South African entrepreneur, who happens to have an enormous prize fighter as a bodyguard.

Did I mention how much I love these two characters? If not, then I'll mention it again. I love A.J. Raffles and Bunny from top to bottom and side to side. They play so well off each other; one is a conniving cricketer, and the other is incredibly innocent and naïve.

This novel is just wonderful. E.W. Hornung's prose is as relevant and witty as it must have been back in 1899, and it's so much fun for me, as a *Sherlock Holmes* fan to see his counterpart: a dastardly gentleman thief who robs from the rich.

The first few stories were very gripping, very much in the same vein as the early *Sherlock Holmes* stories, but it seems that after a while, Raffles' expert burgling skills were forgotten about. In some stories, a great deal of time is given to setting the scene, as well as any mishaps that may occur (i.e., a detective lurking in the area, Bunny being discovered, Raffles deciding to withhold information from his partner in crime), meaning that often, the climax of the stories fly by without much pomp and circumstance. It was sometimes like: *'Oh, we eventually acquired the jewel/painting/shiny thing, my fellow magpie! Towards the next story, wot wot!'*

Otherwise, though, this is an incredibly fun little read. The two lead characters have great chemistry, akin to

Holmes and Watson, and even though they're dastardly rogues stealing after taking a fancy to certain items, they're incredibly lovable. Bunny is even given tests every once in a while by his cricketing chum to prove he's not just an excuse for the author to see into Raffles' schemes and adventures as a criminal who almost always manages to get away with his heinous crimes. 4/5.

Leothefox says

Raffles and Bunny are buddies! They are buddies with a complex setup though, since A.J. Raffles lead his old school chum Bunny (our narrator) into a life of "amateur" crime which forever complicates their lives. If nothing else, this is an interesting window into late 19th century England, where high class men gambled away everything they had and would rather steal than resort to work.

Like many have pointed out, this is very like Holmes and Watson's dynamic, only applied to thieves rather than detectives. At times they do square off again other criminals as well as the law and sundry potential victims. Raffles gets them in and out of all shades of trouble and Bunny's reactions to being dragged along and largely kept in the dark are a large part of what fuel the stories.

Since this is a group of stories set in an ongoing continuity, this book ends up feeling a tad like a TV-show, complete with end-season cliffhangers. Many of the stories do end up a tad short and simple, but there's a lot here overall, including romance, globe-trotting, origin stories, war, and the mafia. The level of variance did create some lulls in the overall flow of the book, but I doubt that could be helped.

Nancy says

An utterly delightful romp; more fun than Holmes.

Kay says

E.W. Hornung was Arthur Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, and although he is not nearly as well known as that luminary, he was quite popular in late Victorian and Edwardian times. *Raffles* is his most successful book, a collection of tales of a gentleman thief. The title character is dashing and debonair, not to mention a first-class cricket player. (Think David Niven as the Pink Panther and you've got an idea.) He steals jewels from foppish rich folk and outwits the slow-on-the-uptake law at every turn. Thievery is, in short, a sport for him, but always an *honorable* one. There's the well-known ploy, too, of having a faithful sidekick. Rather than Watson, Raffles has a slightly dim-witted friend, Bunny, who finds himself in financial straits and, in turning to his friend, coincidentally ends up turning to a life of crime. These are dated tales, but they're great fun for enthusiasts of Victorian popular literature.

Mike Jensen says

Where to start? These stores are a sort of reverse Sherlock Holmes. The protagonist, a thief, takes the man who chronicles his adventures with him on his capers, and these stories are set in roughly the same time

period and in mostly similar places. Whereas, however, Doyle wrote with wonderful flare and style, E. W. Hornung does not. The lines are flat and unengaging. Raffles is no Holmes. Though both share a penchant for keeping their friend in the dark in order to surprise the reader, his intelligence fails to impress. This is because of the next failing, the plot contrivances. There would be little conflict if Raffles and Bunny (Yes, those are their names) simply walked in, took what they wanted, and left, so Hornung creates unlikely obstacles for them to overcome. These inevitably end in them nearly being caught, which they usually manage to avoid through a second unlikely plot contrivance.

This is one of those emperor has no clothes collections, a book so bad that one wonders how some poor fools are taken in by it, yet, as you can see by the other reviews here, many are. Readers who like this sort of thing, but lack discrimination, may well enjoy this book as much as so many others do. Those who understand how effective stories are put together will see these stories for the messes that they are.

Jeff Johnston says

I certainly liked the idea portrayed by Horning (Raffles 'The Gentleman Thief'), however for me there was never enough content, intrigue or character building of the protagonists within each internal affair.

This was the first story from an Omnibus 'The Collected Raffles'. Hopefully, the next couple stories will deliver more.

Patrick Murtha says

A.J. Raffles periodically re-surfaces as a classic character of popular fiction, and just as quickly drops out of sight again, exactly as E.W. Hornung frequently describes him doing in the 26 short stories and single novel that he devoted to Raffles - about half the output that Arthur Conan Doyle produced about Sherlock Holmes. Hornung, famously, was married to Conan Doyle's sister, and patterned his stories of the gentleman thief and champion cricketer Raffles, and his sidekick Bunny Mander, after the Holmesian example, while inverting the moral system. Conan Doyle was flattered and praised the stories, but was also troubled by them: "You must not make the criminal a hero."

Of course, it's exactly this inversion that has always provided Raffles' fascination. Should we root for him or not? Hornung comes up with ways for us to do so rather painlessly, but still, it's a dicey business. Each new Raffles story you read raises the issue all over again, and that, obviously, is an awfully good fictional hook.

The Raffles - Bunny relationship is also, in a different sense, "inverted" - a whole lot gayer than the Holmes - Watson partnership. Hornung was friendly with Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, and is said to have based his duo partly on them. In the first Raffles story, "The Ides of March," a distinctly down-on-his-luck Bunny Mander is actually contemplating suicide over some gambling debts, but his old schoolmate Raffles persuades him that criminality is sometimes a better course of action than giving into depression. To become Raffles' partner-in-crime for the rest of the series, Bunny has to get off on shared improper behavior, and boy does he:

I'll do it again...I will...I'll lend you a hand as often as you like! What does it matter now? I've been in it once. I'll be in it again. I've gone to the devil anyhow. I can't go back, and wouldn't if I could. Nothing matters

another rap! When you want me I'm your man.

If no sexual interpretation occurs to you while you are reading that, you have a cleaner mind than mine.

The first 16 Raffles stories were collected in two volumes of eight stories apiece, *The Amateur Cracksman* (1899) and *The Black Mask* (1901). Wordsworth Classics reprinted all these in one volume, *Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman*, in 1994, and it was in this form that I read and was delighted by them.

These first two volumes of Raffles stories are decidedly different, because at the end of the first, Raffles disappears and Bunny is packed off to prison. Their adventures after their reunion in the second collection cannot have the same carefree tone as before, and indeed do not, a fact that some decried as a diminution of the original impulse, but which I simply read as fictional development. Things have to happen in stories, as in life, and in good fictional series, the author follows through on the consequences of them happening.

Raffles comes to a rather improbable glorious end fighting in the Boer War in the last of these 16 stories, and when Hornung decided to revive the character with 10 more stories in *A Thief in the Night* in 1905, and a single novel *Mr. Justice Raffles* in 1909, he didn't "bring him back to life" a la Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Empty House," but set the stories in a period before Raffles' demise a la *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Raffles has been incarnated by at least 13 actors on screen and television, including John Barrymore, Ronald Colman, and David Niven. Anyone who can play elegant-but-larcenous has been eligible. Cary Grant would have worked.

earthy says

I didn't finish this collection, so I won't be doing an official review.

BUT! Important note for anyone checking this out who isn't already completely familiar with the Raffles stories: Both forwards contain **HUGE** spoilers in terms of what happens to Raffles and Bunny at the end of the series.

(Yes, I realize these stories are over a hundred years old. But they're not particularly well known in the US, so I don't think it's outside the realm of possibility that someone picking them up--like me--wouldn't know how they end. Also I would've assumed it's a basic courtesy not to spoil a book when you write a forward...but maybe not?)

Anyhow, please read and enjoy if this is your jam! But don't be like me and start with the forwards. Even if one of them is a pretty interesting essay by George Orwell.

Yngvild says

Raffles is such an appealing character that it is a wonder that no other writer has quite captured his spirit. He is one of a class of well-educated young nineteenth-century swells, fit for earning no living, having apparently inherited no fortune, yet expected to live like gentlemen of means.

In an earlier age, younger sons or the sons of impecunious gentlemen would have ridden off to the Crusades, or crept into poor livings as clergymen. By the Victorian age, growing numbers of such boys had to choose between the colonies and trade. Compared to these options, *Raffles'* choice of burglary makes a certain sense. He is *Robin Hood*, *Hawkins* and *Drake*, a gentleman cricketer with exquisite public school manners, the prefect all the younger boys looked up to.

Raffles had the subtle power of making himself irresistible at will. He was beyond comparison the most masterful man whom I have ever known.

Half his power lay in a conciliating trick of sinking the commander in the leader. And it was impossible not to follow one who led with such a zest. You might question but you followed first. –Raffles: The Amateur Cracksman, E W Hornung (1899)

I remember reading the *Raffles* books when I was a child and finding them tremendously good fun. The stories are simple adventures, rather innocent beyond *Raffles'* occupation, their improbable plots pure escapism.

Daniel says

It would be impossible to read "The Amateur Cracksman" -- the first of E.W. Hornung's books featuring gentleman thief A.J. Raffles and his sidekick and chronicler Bunny -- without comparing it to the Sherlock Holmes books. Hornung, after all, was Arthur Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, and he created Raffles as something of a reversal of Holmes -- a character as cunning as the famous detective, and as much a master of disguise, but prone to using his ingenuity to commit crimes rather than solve them. Bunny, for his part, is about as clueless as Dr. Watson, and as in awe of Raffles as Watson was of Holmes.

Fortunately, "Amateur Cracksman" compares favorably to the Holmes stories. The individual criminal adventures Raffles and Bunny embark upon are not as clever as even the least of the Holmes mysteries, but they're still good fun. The reader shouldn't try to solve the mysteries, as he or she would with a Holmes story (there's typically little to solve in the Raffles adventures, and the twists are usually easy to predict), but instead just go along for the ride.

It's surprising that the Raffles stories are not better known and more widely read today, particularly given the enduring popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories. They certainly deserve more attention. It's a shame, though, that Hornung and his brother-in-law never collaborated to have Holmes solve a Raffles crime. Perhaps it's for the best: Raffles surely would have ended up in jail for good.

Stephen Collins says

Sherlock Holmes was written by Conan Doyle but his brother in law got sick of him & his ego going and on about Holmes so he decided to put pen to paper but instead of dective he created a Robin Hood style anti hero Raffles

Maureen says

the idea of raffles, the gentleman thief, obverse of the legendary sherlock holmes, gentleman detective (the creation of hornung's esteemed brother-in-law arthur conan doyle), thrills me. and i can't say i don't normally adore the idea of working outside the law to balance the scales of justice -- i watch timothy hutton's modern-day robin hood crew on leverage as often as possible. there is no doubt that raffles is in some ways the progenitor of this type of character but in reading the book i realized the only redress was being made to "the cracksman"'s pocket. before reading this collection of stories, i had visions of hutton's character nate ford, and the great french character arsène lupin or baroness orczy's scarlett pimpernel but instead found raffles anticipating leopold and loeb:

"A matter of opinion, my dear Bunny; I don't mean it for rot. I've told you before that the biggest man alive is the man who's committed a murder, and not yet been found out; at least he ought to be, but he so very seldom has the soul to appreciate himself. Just think of it! Think of coming here and talking to the men, very likely about the murder itself; and knowing you've done it; and wondering how they'd look if they knew! Oh, it would be great, simply great!" - from "Wilful Murder"

much has been made of the fact that raffles has a code -- he does not murder; he only steals when he has need. as it turns out raffles doesn't actually subscribe to the code he lays out -- he seems to make excuses for lapses of conduct often, perhaps revealing how little it means -- see the story quoted above for a revision of his "no murder" rule, or "A Costume Piece" for how he decides to go ahead with a robbery which won't alleviate his financial constraints but simply for the challenge. it would seem that the victorians would identify with the idea that crime was understandable if it prevented one from quitting their "rightful" sphere, and for those who stood a high moral ground hornung introduced the misgivings of bunny (his sidekick and former fag at public school) as a balance to raffles' complete lack of ethics.

as members of the unmonied upper class, both raffles and bunny are part of Society and are terrified to lose their standing (though not so much so that they quit the gambling and the tailors that have brought them low) in the class system they so adore. but when i shake it out, all i can see is that raffles is a dated sociopath cricket player, who will not quit his sphere despite his inability to afford it and is a relic of the deep divide in classes as much as cricket and the public school system. i was woefully misapprehended regarding the character of raffles -- i expected that this much ballyhooed code was real, that raffles' choices might result from some reflection, be difficult to arrive at, or borne of something i could more easily identify with, instead i found him to be a character completely ingrained in the class system: entitled, selfish, and grasping. i don't say that this makes raffles less of an interesting character but he's no raskolnikov either. i don't feel any sense of conflict or even engagement when he embarks on a plan, or a concern for his well-being because his motivations don't mean a thing to me -- or to him, either, it seems. his friend bunny is the loyal dimwit who assists him in schemes which brings me to what i liked least about the raffles stories: the mode in which the action is delivered.

in the majority of these stories raffles conceives of a plan of action and does not share its details with bunny. we are then left to hear him relate to bunny the plan after the fact, an issue that bunny himself points out:

"Then you should have let me know when you did decide. You lay your plans, and never say a word, and expect me to tumble to them by light of nature. How was I to know you had anything on?"

i really didn't like this device at all and the revelation of the plan was never so exciting or elaborate in the recitation that i gave up my resentment. i found the structure of the stories boring -- a lot of exposition, and

when they are actually engaged in action it's often of a boring sort: for example, in one tale, bunny is awakened to sounds of a struggle and tasked with holding a suspect while the scotland yard detective who has nabbed the competitor thief goes after the others. bunny stands there holding the suspect. there's a lot of talk. he holds him some more. hooey! hold me back from this gripping story!

i can say i found his prose very clean, and the dialogue charming -- just overused in exposition. i was going to give the book only two stars but seeing as it gave me lots to think about in terms of what not to do with structure and characterization, and really is the precursor to so many other gentleman thieves that i am in debt to hornung for his contribution to the archetype, and so the collection gets three stars on those merits though i don't know how long that shall stick.

N.B. before anybody takes my analysis of raffles and his lack of morals as evidence that i just don't like books with amoral characters, i'll say when reading this i thought of how much more i loved bertie woosters attempts at stealing a cow creamer, o. henry's pastiche of shamrock jolnes, not to mention his tales of burglars and thieves, and how engaged i was in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* despite the repugnance of the main character.

bonus review material for the literary detectives out there: the george orwell essay that is quoted liberally whenever raffles is discussed is actually a comparative book review he wrote in 1944. it is available online here: <http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/chas...>

i myself appreciated the opportunity to read orwell's commentary on raffles in context -- most of the time only a line or two is referenced, and usually makes it seem like orwell thought hornung a genius. on my own reading, i see that orwell did find interest in raffles relationship to english society especially in his relationship to cricket, and that he liked the book more than the one he was comparing it to. it seems to me that he thought the book good for its small lights, and was not quite as overpowered by it as critical essays and reviews who cite him would have one believe. :)

Rosemary says

A.J. Raffles is a gentleman thief and first class amateur cricket player. With the narrator, his sidekick known as Bunny, he uses his position in society to liberate valuables from their owners.

Hornung was Arthur Conan Doyle's brother-in-law. The book is dedicated to Conan Doyle and these stories certainly owe something to him, although Raffles is on the other side of the law to Holmes.

The stories are fun and Raffles is an engaging character. From time to time he has to justify his dubious profession to Bunny, and I particularly enjoyed those passages.

There's a stronger homosexual subtext to these stories than with Holmes and Watson. Bunny "fagged" for Raffles at school, and he's a rather sweet young man who passionately admires Raffles but from time to time tears himself away to try to live an honest life. He's also painfully jealous in the last story when Raffles enjoys the company of a young lady on a sea voyage. (view spoiler)Poor Bunny!

Scott says

The embodiment of *fin de siècle* decadence, dashing A. J. Raffles artfully commits crime for crime's sake. Bored with life as a master cricketer, Raffles turns to a life of crime to stifle his ennui -- and pad his purse. His conscience-bitten sidekick, Bunny, accompanies him as he burgles Victorian London's rogues, ruthless, and "rich and undeserving." In the eight short stories that make up *Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman* (1899), E. W. Hornung creates an anti-Sherlock Holmes -- a character who finds as much pleasure in planning and executing a crime as Holmes does in solving the case. Patriotic, true to his peers, ever a gentleman -- and almost completely unburdened by religious morals or compunctions -- Raffles in many ways stands as a literary model for the twentieth century's debonair yet unscrupulous spy. If you enjoy Sherlock Holmes or James Bond, or if you're looking for Edmund Backhouse's inspiration, put another lump on the grate and crack open *Raffles*.

Andrew Logan says

This is an adventure. This is nonsense. This is (mainly) fun. It is limited and absurd. It is more a view of how people liked to imagine their society (as a place where people like this might exist) than it is a book that gives a view of a society as it once was.

This edition has a wealth of footnotes, most of which seem right and useful (and some of which are one or the other and some, I think, neither).

Definitely worth a look. Weak ending but overall very much a good read.

Jacob says

January 2011

Good news, Americans! You don't have to know anything about cricket to read and enjoy this!

Meet A. J. Raffles: gentleman, independent bachelor, London man-about-town, champion cricketeer--er, cricketman--I mean, player-of-cricket--and...thief? Surely not! Surely so: how else could this gentleman of leisure afford to play poor man's baseball--I mean, cricket, sorry--whenever he likes? One must make money somehow, God wot, and Raffles' way is only slightly more dishonest than others. In this first volume of the Raffles Series (which hasn't been easy to find, let me tell you), Raffles, along with Harry "Bunny" Mander, his former public school chum and current partner in crime, commits astonishing acts of burglary across London and beyond. Lock up your diamonds! Hide your jewels! Raffles is in town!

(Seriously, guys, someone is going to have to explain this cricket thing)

I think I'm afraid to read Sherlock Holmes. Why else would I keep tiptoeing around those stories? First it was the Brigadier Gerard stories (by Arthur Conan Doyle, no less) last month, and now this book--by Doyle's brother-in-law. I have my eye on the Flashman stories next. When am I going to quit these crime-and-adventure stories and settle for the great detective? Hard to say. Soon, though. Soonish. Eventually.

See also: The Collected Raffles

Wealhtheow says

Raffles and Bunny are two young gentlemen with large debts and no desire to work for a living. They turn to crime, specifically burglary, to continue to live their lives of idle luxury. The stories are clearly inspired by and partially parodies of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Raffles is cold, logical, and nigh-superhuman. Bunny is dim enough that the reader gets the pleasure of knowing more than he does and sniggering at all that he misses. It's got some casual racism typical of its time, and no female characters to speak of. The burglarizing adventures themselves are fine, neither fab nor terrible; the real pleasure for me was the insight into a mindset and setting that seem fascinatingly alien. Plus I enjoy the almost abject, dog-like devotion with which Bunny views Raffles. The only thing I really didn't like was (view spoiler) I'm not here for your bad attempt at poetry, Hornung, I'm here for Victorian gentlemen behaving badly and acting deeply in love with each other!

Margaret says

Did not finish.

A. J. Raffles must be just about THE most annoying character ever created. Narcisistic, and borderline psychopathic. And Bunny is a snivelling little wimp.

Managed two and a half stories before throwing in the towel.

k. says

bunny is definitely in love with raffles.

Carly says

****edited 02/02/14**

The Raffles stories are basically the British version of Arsene Lupin: they feature a hyperintelligent Sherlock Holmes-like character who uses his skills to transgress the law rather than defend it. Raffles' adventures are rather more serious and straightforward than the often spoofy escapades of Lupin and his nemesis "Holmlock Shears." Like the Holmes stories, Raffles' adventures are narrated by a loyal and rather less intelligent sidekick. However, narrator Bunny Manders strikes me as a "low-budget" version of Watson: Bunny's intelligence is closer to that of Poirot's Hastings than that of the clever Watson, and his affections for Raffles more reminiscent of Holmes/Watson slash fiction than the canon Holmes/Watson friendship.

The Raffles stories are classics and worth reading if you are exploring the genre.

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Due to my disapproval of GR's new and highly subjective review deletion policy, I am no longer posting full reviews here.

The rest of this review can be found on Booklikes.
