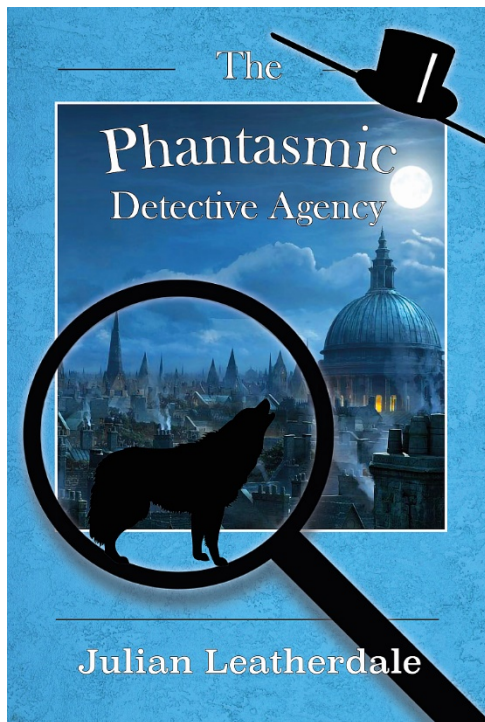


Teachers' Notes



The Phantasmic Detective Agency

By Julian Leatherdale

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About the story:

London, Christmas Eve, 1911: the world is changing fast: giant warships, aeroplanes with bombs, spies and assassins, fear of war with Germany. And the cosy lives of teenagers Lily and Leo Keeler, who long for adventure, are about to be torn apart by secrets, espionage and monstrous creatures. When a shadow-puppet play unexpectedly releases the hungry spectre of Shadow Wolf, Lily and Leo get more adventure than they ever bargained for, as they battle the threat with their uncle Alfred, a brilliant, notorious Sherlock Holmes- like paranormal detective.

But that proves to be only the first mystery in a conspiracy that threatens the whole Keeler family, as Lily and Leo's stage magician parents vanish for real in the middle of their latest spectacular magic act. From the Royal Naval dockyards of Plymouth to the bone-stacked catacombs of Paris, Lily and Leo and their uncle must confront eerie creatures and spine-tingling danger as they are chased by a ruthless spy-ring determined to harness the dark forces of Magick as weapons of war...

The Phantasmic Detective Agency is a gripping, original fantasy adventure novel for readers 10+.

With bucketloads of colourful history, all the magic of the theatre and excitement galore, *The Phantasmic Detective Agency* is a cavalcade of imaginative steampunk delight! (Michael Pryor)

About the author:



Julian Leatherdale is a novelist, scriptwriter and playwright. His theatre work includes four comedy cabarets, two musicals (*Alex in Videoland* and *The Golem of Prague*), a monologue for *Breaking Bread* and the black comedy *The Man Who Became Santa*. He wrote animation scripts for children's TV with SquareZero, London and researched and co-wrote two Film Australia-ABC TV history documentaries *The Forgotten Force* and *Return to Sandakan*. His adult historical fiction novels are *Palace of Tears* (A&U, 2015 and HarperCollins Germany, 2016), *The Opal Dragonfly* (A&U, 2018), and *Death in the Ladies' Goddess Club* (A&U, 2020). He lives in the Blue Mountains with his family. *The Phantasmic Detective Agency* is his first children's novel.

Something from the author:

Over several years I wrote a series of spooky, supernatural short stories for young readers including 'Shadow Wolf' (about a wolf who escapes a shadow-puppet play to hunt down the good citizens of Edwardian London) and 'The Man Who Didn't Like Getting Wet' (about a man who is granted a wish by a water-fairy with terrible unexpected results). I also worked on the lyrics and story for a musical play based on the well-known Jewish legend of the Golem.

All these ideas came together in a most surprising way when I was rereading Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes detective stories. I imagined a casebook of mysteries for a Holmes-like detective hired to solve crimes involving the supernatural: ghosts, werewolves, faeries. He would stand astride the Old World of superstition, magic and folk wisdom (that feared but respected the mysteries of Nature) and the New World of science and technology (that laid bare the secrets of Nature while taming it to humanity's control and use).

The setting of Edwardian London seemed perfect for such a story; ever since the mid-Victorian period the pace of technological change and invention (electric lighting, telephones, cameras and

cinema, iron ships, aeroplanes) had sped up rapidly. This gave me the idea of two brothers – Alfred, the spirit-detective and Edmund, the stage magician – one performing magic for entertainment, the other for crime-solving. The main characters would be Edmund’s children, Leopold and Lily, who dream of being modern-day heroes, a pilot and a detective respectively.

I enjoyed researching this book from many sources but particularly photos. Images of London were found in ‘Getty Images 1910s: Decades of the 20th Century’ and ‘Edwardian London’ by Felix Barker. Several locations in Paris were drawn from the beautiful images of photographer Eugene Atget (1857-1927): the windows of Madame Fernier’s children’s clothing store in Chapter 12; Le Cour de Dragon where our heroes enter the catacombs; Le Pain Agile theatre (Chapter 15) based on the Cabaret de L’Enfer, boulevard de Clichy.

Some notes on historical and other references:

At the end of the novel, the author has added extensive notes on each chapter, which give a great deal of interesting information on the real historical background of the book. In this section of the Teachers’ Notes, you can find links to further readings and images regarding selected elements of this background.

The Phantasmic Detective Agency is in the historical fantasy genre, with ‘steampunk’ alternative history elements. ‘Steampunk’ refers to a twist on history prior to World War One, that is, in the 19th century and early 20th century, and often involves unusual machines or fantastical inventions, sometimes with a dash of magic. Although the novel is fantasy, its action takes place in an actual historical setting and time—Edwardian England and Belle Époque France, in 1911. All the main characters are fiction, but the author has also incorporated some real historical characters, such as Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty, who much later, in World War II, was to become the British Prime Minister, and British aviation pioneer, Claude Graham-White. As well, the author has incorporated references to real historical organisations, such as the Secret Service Bureau, the Ghost Club and the Magic Circle (see below) and technological developments (such as the cinema, electricity, etc). He has also woven in several aspects of folklore and myth.

The Magic Circle and professional magicians



There are many references of course to magic and magicians in the novel, with a conflict between ‘stage’ magic and ‘real’ magic, or Magick. As the author points out in his notes to the novel, stage magicians had a professional organisation, the Magic Circle, founded in 1905, in London. It’s still going strong today, with over 1,500 members, and jealously guards its secrets. You can read more about the Circle on their website here: <https://themagiccircle.co.uk/>

Stage magic relies heavily on secretive knowledge, shared only between experienced magicians. Not all professional magicians are members of the Magic Circle, of course, but all good ones share a set of sophisticated skills that enable them to create often astounding illusions in performance before an audience. Whether a magician's expertise is in card tricks, optical or performance illusions, apparent mind-reading or other forms of stage magic, they rely on many hours, indeed years of practice.

Professional magic is an ancient art form, and has been practised for many centuries, but became especially popular as a form of theatrical entertainment in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when many rival magicians performed on the stages of the UK, Europe and the US. It remains popular today, with magicians performing on TV and Internet channels as well as on stage, at parties, and other social events. You can read about the many types of stage magic here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_\(illusion\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_(illusion))

Planes and battleships



The early 20th century was a time of great innovation in science and technology, as well as a time of great international tension. In his notes to the novel, the author writes about some of these

machines intended for war, including developments in planes and warships, and examples of them feature at important points in the novel, such as the disastrous launch of the British battleship 'HMS Centaur' in chapter ten (Centaur is based on the real battleship, HMS Centurion, pictured in the photo above), and the flight from Paris in the prototype Voisin III French biplane in chapter fourteen (see picture of the real plane above).

HMS Centurion, on which the fictional HMS Centaur is based, was one of the 'dreadnought' battleships built in the period. At its launch in November 1911, there were glitches—but nothing like what happens to HMS Centaur! You can read more about the real battleship here:

[http://dreadnoughtproject.org/tfs/index.php/H.M.S._Centurion_\(1911\)](http://dreadnoughtproject.org/tfs/index.php/H.M.S._Centurion_(1911))

The author mentions that the French were well ahead of anyone else when it came to aeroplane design and making at the time. You can find out more about the famous French aeroplane company, Voisin, here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voisin>

Claude Grahame-White, who flies the biplane that takes our heroes into the skies over Paris, was a real person, a daring British aviation pioneer and co-author of the real book, *The Aeroplane in War* (published in 1912, see above).

The Paris catacombs



The catacombs, which feature as an important setting in the book, is a very real place deep under Paris, which holds the bones of millions of people, taken from overflowing and collapsing Parisian cemeteries in the eighteenth century. It's an eerie, silent place whose entrance sign (above, left) announces that here is the empire of death. The catacombs were first opened to the public for visits in 1809. You can read more about them here: <http://catacombes.paris.fr/en/history>

Golems



The legend of the golem comes out of Jewish folklore and refers to a being created out of clay or mud or similar materials, which is then animated by certain sacred or magical words. Golems can move and obey orders, but traditionally they cannot speak. Although there have been stories about golem-like beings from ancient times, the most famous example comes from the story of The Golem of Prague, in which a rabbi creates a golem which he intends will protect Jews against anti-Semitic attacks. The rabbi in the story was a real person, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, who lived in Prague (now in the Czech Republic) in the sixteenth century, but the story itself was written in the 19th century, and has any versions, including some in which the golem turns rogue and starts attacking everyone. The legend of the golem has inspired many novels and short stories, comic books, films, TV series, games, operas and musicals(including one written by Julian Leatherdale himself) And incidentally, the name and character of 'Gollum' in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings was partly inspired by the golem legend. You can read more about golems here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem>

Post-reading discussion questions:

Why do you think Edmund and Alfred Keeler disagree about magic, even though they both practise it?

Why do you think Shadow Wolf was able to escape?

How does the author develop the very different characters of Leo and Lily?

The novel is set in the same time period, but the action ranges over two countries, Britain and France. What differences can you find between the two cultures, as depicted in the book?

There are many technological and scientific references in the novel, but also several that belong to fantasy and magic. How does the author combine these different elements in his story?

Classroom research activities:

The novel begins with a shadow-puppet play performance by Lily and Leo's uncle Alfred, which brings out the fearsome Shadow Wolf. Shadow-puppet plays are an ancient and popular form of entertainment around the world and through the centuries. Performers can use actual shadow-puppets, or, as with Alfred, create the puppets with their hands, which is an art officially called 'shadowgraphy'. Look up some examples of this.

Magic shows in the period in which the book is set were often held in lavish theatres, such as the 'Hippodrome' featured in the novel. These theatres also put on plays, musicals, pantomimes, Christmas shows, and so on, and many in London are set around the Drury Lane area. Research old theatres in London, choose one or two, and write a short article about them.

The Ghost Club, which Uncle Alfred used to belong to before he started his own agency, is a real club that started in the 19th century and is still going. It investigates ghosts and hauntings in Britain, and has counted some famous members, including Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle. Look up some examples of its investigations.

The Napoleonic Diamond in the book is based on a legendary gemstone which may or may not have existed. In his notes after the novel, the author quotes from an old book which describes how it came to belong to Napoleon. See if you can find out more information about the Diamond and decide whether you think it exists.

Classroom creative activities:

In chapter 1, we are told that Uncle Alfred has had many previous adventures, such as '*driving unhappy phantoms out of English manor houses, hunting werewolves in Rumania, saving a Russian palace from gold-seeking goblins, and curing a sick circus elephant in America, haunted by its dead trainer.*' Write a short story based on one of these adventures.

Write an outline for a shadow-play and create some cut-out silhouette shadow-puppets for it.

Lily's most cherished dream is to become Britain's first woman detective one day. At the beginning of the novel, we learn she has started trying to practise by investigating small local mysteries. Write a short case report of one of her investigations.

Create an illustrated programme for one of Edmund and Alice's magic shows.

Draw the jar of captured ocean-sprites which Lily and Alfred collect in chapter 8.

Imagine you are a journalist who was present when the disastrous launch of HMS Centaur happened. You've been told that you are not allowed to write an article about it. So instead you write a secret journal entry, trying to work out exactly what happened.

In the book, the Napoleonic Diamond, which has magical properties, disappeared from view for at least a hundred years before resurfacing with a certain Monsieur LaPhage in Paris in 1909. Write a short account about what might have happened to it in between.

Create a poster warning people in Paris about the golem army.