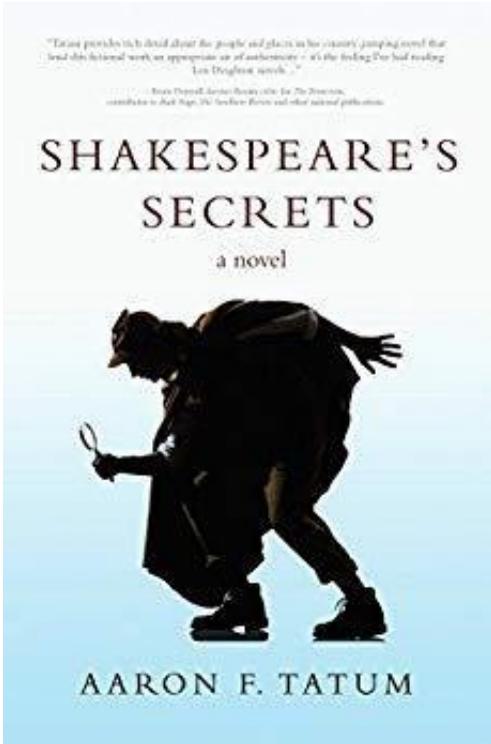


Review by Evans Donnell:

Shakespeare's Secrets

Whether a man we know as **William Shakespeare** of Stratford-upon-Avon – or someone else – wrote the plays and sonnets that have shaken the world from more than 400 years has been a question argued almost that long. For some, it's heresy to say the Bard wasn't the man from Stratford; for others, it's preposterous to say he is. And there's a third group that says, "Why should we care? We have these brilliant works and that's enough."

The late intelligence officer/diplomat/author **Charlton Ogburn, Jr.** had an answer for that. "It matters a great deal to those who consider his works to be Western man's highest achievement in literature," he wrote in a November 1974 article for *Harvard Magazine*. "It seems to us a matter of elementary justice that the man responsible for this tremendous achievement should receive the credit for it. We also have a great interest in knowing about the kind of man who could have written as Shakespeare did." Ogburn's 1984 book, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality*, pointed to an answer to the question in the form of Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. He wasn't the first to do so, but his book reinvigorated the debate, leading to TV programs, numerous articles and academic treatises on the topic (there's



even been a film, 2011's *Anonymous*, that supports the Oxfordian claim to the authorship).

Now **Aaron F. Tatum**, the former President of the Shakespeare Oxford Society of North America, uses (with written permission) Ogburn's research and other relevant sources to create a fictional adventure called *Shakespeare's Secrets*. It's a finely detailed, densely packed novel where detective, thriller and conspiracy genres flow through the pages like, well, the Avon River.

And its protagonist is a Dan Brown's-Robert Langdon-meets-Arthur Conan Doyle's-Sherlock Holmes (the latter is not surprising when you know that Tatum is a former President, or "First Garrideb," of the Giant Rats of Sumatra, a Sherlock Holmes club in his Memphis hometown). He is Ian Scarborough, a journalist and pop critic whose interest in the Oxford cause was piqued with a book written by the esteemed American professor Tyler L. Colton. Colton comes to London for the first portion of a two-part televised debate on the authorship question between Oxfordians and their Stratfordian counterparts, but shortly after taking the floor he collapses after a stroke. A mumbled word – "bustards" – and a cryptic note Scarborough finds nearby send him and us off on a trail to uncover a centuries-old cover-up. (Or to borrow from *Henry IV Part 1* in a way Sherlock fans will appreciate; the game is afoot.)

He needs help on his quest, and it seemingly comes in the form of Colton's intelligent and alluring daughter Veronica. He also has the support of his long-time friend and mentor, Admiral Arthur Sinclair. But the journey is not as straightforward as it first appears, and Scarborough soon wonders just who his friends really are ...

Tatum provides rich detail about the people and places in his country-jumping novel that lend this fictional work an appropriate air of authenticity – it's the feeling I've had reading Len Deighton novels, that the author did his research well before creating his story, and it's coupled

with a sharp ability to describe telling aspects of the characters he creates. For example, consider this passage that occurs when Scarborough meets Veronica: “She gazed at him with brown, intense eyes, and pupils surrounded by milky curlicues like in a kaleidoscope as he threw a jittery hand towards her. The enchanting contrast of insouciance and firmness in one face disarmed him, made him as nervous as one might be around a celebrity or someone greatly admired.” On such occasions Tatum captures character and moment (to borrow from *Macbeth*) in “one fell swoop.”

At more than 400 pages there’s plenty to digest, and there are some academic digressions which probably can’t be helped when one is writing about a subject like the Shakespearian authorship question. Those digressions, though, don’t distract overall from a tale smoothly told by a writer with a deft touch. And courtesy of the author’s brother Timothy there’s even music as well after that tantalizing tale is told.

Shakespeare’s Secrets provides plenty of arguments for the Earl of Oxford’s authorship of the works attributed to Shakespeare, but it also provides a thrilling yarn as the mystery created centuries ago unravels for Scarborough and for us. It’s a ripping read that doesn’t play “fast and loose” (from the play *King John*) with either basic Oxfordian views or the need for an entertaining tome that’s not musty.

Evans Donnell is a former theater critic for the Tennessean newspaper in Nashville as well as a contributor to such national publications as Back Stage, American Theatre and The Sondheim Review.

Shakespeare’s Secrets is available on Amazon.co.uk:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Shakespeares-Secrets-Aaron-F-Tatum/dp/1535608463/ref=sr_1_8_twi_pap_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1536702378&sr=8-8&keywords=shakespeare%27s+secrets