



SNEAK PEEK
UNCORRECTED PROOF

THE INKLINGS

DETECTIVE AGENCY

a novel

JOHN R. KELLY



The
INKLINGS
DETECTIVE AGENCY

{a novel}

JOHN R. KELLY



WATERBROOK

WaterBrook

An imprint of the Penguin Random House Christian Publishing Group, a division of Penguin
Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

waterbrookmultnomah.com
penguinrandomhouse.com

A WaterBrook Trade Paperback Original

Copyright © 2026 by John R. Kelly

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

WATERBROOK and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Trade Paperback ISBN 979-8-21715-198-1
Ebook ISBN 979-8-21715-199-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kelly, John R. (John Richard), author

Title: The Inklings Detective Agency : a novel / John R. Kelly.

Description: New York, NY : WaterBrook, 2026.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025040658 (print) | LCCN 2025040659 (ebook) | ISBN 9798217151981
paperback | ISBN 9798217151998 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Inklings (Group of writers)—Fiction | LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction
| Novels | Fiction

Classification: LCC PS3611.E449243 I55 2026 (print) | LCC PS3611.E449243 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025040658>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025040659>

Printed in the United States of America

SPrintCode

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin
Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH6S, Ireland.
<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>

BOOK TEAM: Editor: Jamie Lapeyrolerie • Production editor: Laura K. Wright • Managing
editor: Julia Wallace • Production manager: Jane Haas • Copy editors: Whitney Bak, Tracey
Moore • Proofreaders: Bailey Utecht, Rachael Clements

Interior art from Adobe Stock: DESIGN BOX (frame) lynea (hat and vintage pen)

Book design by Diane Hobbing

Author's Note

This novel is a work of historical fiction. While it draws inspiration from real people, places, and events, I have taken certain creative liberties with timelines, historical details, and character portrayals in service of the story. Any deviations from the historical record, whether they involve condensed events, imagined dialogues, altered chronologies, or fictionalized interpretations, are entirely intentional and my responsibility alone.

These choices were made to enhance narrative clarity and serve the story, rather than to serve as a definitive account of history. I encourage curious readers to explore the historical context further and to view this story as one entertaining interpretation, not a substitute for historical scholarship.

Thank you for stepping into this version of the past with me.

—John R. Kelly



{ 1 }

The Bird

Thursday, December 10, 1936
Oxfordshire, England

I was talking aloud to myself. A habit of the old: they choose the wisest person present to speak to.

—J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE TWO TOWERS*

The wiry-framed fellow looked the part of a typical Oxford don: stylish and elegant in a burgundy vest and pressed trousers, topped with a tailored tweed jacket, perfectly cuffed with monogrammed links. He spoke out loud to himself as he walked the worn cobblestones in a late evening drizzle, passing the Martyrs' Memorial on his left with a quick salute. He pulled the jacket tight around him, but the blustery wind did not relent in biting and chilling him to the bone. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien paid it no mind. He was deeply lost in thought, speaking quick phrases and languages, some known only to him. He often shared unrefined ideas with himself. Thoughts of hobbits, orcs, dragons, a place called the Shire, and whatever else swirled around his strange and restless mind. Passersby would think him mad if

{ 3 }

they didn't understand his genius. But soon, those who paid the handful of shillings for his next book would be allowed to peek behind the curtain to see the wizard, if only just a little.

The words flowed faster with each hastening step, though everything Tolkien did was done at speed. He spoke fast, walked fast, read fast, and ate fast. His fellow Oxford colleagues joked he also slept fast. As Tolkien continued north on St. Giles', past the Ashmolean Museum on his left, and St. John's College to the right, he glanced down at his pocket watch and gasped. He was never late. Tolkien again quickened his pace, the heels of his shoes clacking like a metronome, and soon drifted back to acting out a dialogue, playing the dual role of quarreling elf and dwarf. The thunder cracked and roared overhead, and soon the rain came down in full sheets. A nearby evergreen tree, decorated for Christmas, sat short and wide, its lowest boughs nearly touching the ground under the sudden weight of water.

"Oh blast!" Tolkien said as heavy droplets splashed off his hat and narrow shoulders and filled the cracks of the cobblestone. He realized he'd forgotten his umbrella, but forged ahead on his trek, head bowed low with shoulders scrunched forward into the wind. There was no need to step into a nearby shop or wait under an awning for the rain to subside. Tolkien set his sights on the familiar pub ahead, less than a block away now. He pulled a handkerchief from the left breast pocket of his jacket, which was now, along with the fedora, nearly soaked through. He set his mind on the joy of a pint of warmed cider, which brightened his mood even more on this dismal evening. Tolkien stepped over the granite curb, waited for a passing motorcar, which splashed water onto his shoes, then walked across the wide cobbled road exactly where he usually did. He glanced up at the familiar,

round sign dangling and swinging in the wind, dripping rain-water on any who entered beneath it.

The sign depicted a giant eagle flying across a golden sky with a young child in its talons, a nod to the story of Gany-mede, the legend of the boy carried off to Olympus by one of Zeus's eagles to serve as cupbearer to the mythical gods. Whether the boy went by choice or against his will, Tolkien could not remember at the moment, though he did like the look of the huge eagle.

Tolkien worked the latch and pushed open the wooden door of the Eagle and Child, more affectionately known to locals as simply the Bird and Baby or even just the Bird. He heard the tinkling of a bell above his head as he stepped inside and set about stomping the water from his boots and shaking out his hat. He placed the hat gently on a well-worn peg jutting from the mortar in the wall, then stood for a moment; he usually needed time to let his eyes adjust but now realized it had already been dark outside and his eyes were well adjusted to the low-lit room. He sneezed and wiped at his beak-like nose with his wet handkerchief before shoving it into his hip pocket with a snort.

Scanning the room, he noticed the crowd at this time of night were mostly unfamiliar to him and then remembered he was already late and began moving toward the Rabbit Room at the back with renewed purpose, his long legs carrying him quickly past tables. Candles and electric wall sconces cast a dim light throughout the public house. The dark oak paneling on the walls and ceiling didn't help any to lighten the place, but the locals seemed to like everything as it was.

The Bird was long and narrow, barely wider than a railway car, and Tolkien often felt as though he were jostling down a train's center aisle as he made his way to the ca-

boose. Tables and booths lined either side as passengers watched the professor pass by. Some coupled patrons spoke in hushed tones and others sat alone, nursing a pint of something dark or golden colored and smoking one cigarette after another.

Tolkien inclined his head to an older regular. The man frowned, swayed in his bench seat, and grunted back, clearly at the end of a long day spent drinking. A copy of *The Times* lay spread out before him on the table, yet the man was no longer in any state to read it. Despite its being upside down for him, Tolkien read the bold headline, which featured a continued story from the front page, something related to King Edward VIII staying at Fort Belvedere in Surrey and swirling rumors of his possible abdication of the throne. Another booth's bench was filled with men in uniform—British RAF on leave, speaking boisterously of heroic deeds, either feats from the past or what they would do tomorrow if given the chance and enough bullets.

Tolkien felt a release of tension when at last he stepped into the familiar back room of the Bird. The rear of the pub was theirs, a home away from home for him and his like-minded friends, known to one another as the Inklings. They were naturally drawn to gather around the already-roaring fireplace, which was near a back door—an exit that was rarely used but still there should the need arise.

“Sorry I’m late, old man,” Tolkien said. He gestured to a seat opposite his good friend and colleague Adam Fox and sat in a weary huff. “I have a lecture Saturday at Pembroke on linguistics and got caught up at my office going over notes. Didn’t notice the time. I hope I haven’t missed anything of interest.”

“Pay it no mind, John,” Fox answered with a friendly smile

and wave of his hand. “Relax and dry yourself off. Nothing of note can happen until the Bird closes. We have time to kill, and besides, we’re still waiting on Lord Cecil.” He checked his own pocket watch, a silver piece with a scrolling *F* etched onto the back, and took a small sip from the honeyed ale in front of him.

Fox, the dean of divinity at Oxford’s Magdalen College, was the eldest of the Inklings, and though he was older than Tolkien by only nine years, all saw him as a friendly uncle or wizened mentor. Tolkien sighed before peering around the space for the first time to see who else had arrived at this specially called meeting of minds. Off in the corner booth sat Nevill Coghill and Hugo Dyson, leaning toward each other and speaking intensely about God knew what. So lost in passionate conversation they could be the only two in the entire pub for all they cared.

“Is that all?” Tolkien asked. “Just the five of us, then, with Cecil? Where are Jack and Warnie?”

Adam Fox chuckled and smoothed his wispy white hair. “Professor Lewis and his brother got the sniffles. It’s going around, I hear. They opted to stay at the Kilns and let their lovely nanny make them chicken soup instead of making the trip to Oxford.”

Tolkien frowned. “Why exactly are we here? Tell me you know. Surely not for an emergency manuscript reading?”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Fox said with a shrug. “This is all Cecil’s work. I had nothing to do with it. Our resident royal has a surprise for us, and all I was told is that it is incredibly important, sensitive, clandestine, and that lives may very well be at stake.”

Tolkien couldn’t help but snort and laugh out loud. “Are you serious? That sounds like our Lord David Cecil, as melo-

dramatic as ever. Always someone about to die or suffer unimaginably in the direst of circumstances. He's told us that given his health, this could be his last year for . . . what has it been, the last five years?"

"He'll outlive us all," Fox said, followed by his signature deep, hearty laugh that caused his shoulders to bounce.

After a momentary pause, both men burst out laughing again just as Charles Blagrove, the aproned proprietor of the Bird, arrived and set down a warm cider in a thick mug for Tolkien and a fresh ale topped with foam in front of Fox.

"You gentlemen going to be reading tonight?" he asked politely with his warm smile. "I sure did enjoy hearing what I could of the last chapter, Professor Tolkien. Though I only got it in bits and pieces. I made as many excuses as I could to make my way back here."

"I don't believe so," Tolkien said slowly, eyeing Fox, who also shook his head. "At least I hadn't prepared to read anything. Tonight is a meeting of another sort. Besides, I think if Hugo over there had to listen to me read aloud about hobbits and elves twice in one week, he may have an aneurysm or go jump in the Thames."

All three men chuckled together. This was how it had always felt back at the start. Men talking about literature or the news of the day, sharing a smoke and a pint of their favorite drink, and, most important, jesting together about some part of life, faith, or work. That was where the Inklings had begun, as an informal meeting of comrades from the outside world. There were no preplanned agendas, no minutes taken, no club officers or stated goals of any kind; the friends spent the time talking, laughing, sharing, and encouraging and learning from one another. But lately, underneath the rosy surface and academic façade, the Inklings were becom-

ing something entirely different.

“If you’re not reading, sirs,” Charlie began. He squinted and moved his blue-eyed gaze back and forth conspiratorially between the two men. “Then is tonight about you-know-what? The other side of the Inklings. Because if it is, I can roust out these old drunks and close up shop in two snaps so you men can get down to business. You can count on me.” He pointed his thumb at his puffed-out chest and raised a brow.

“We can wait until midnight,” Fox reassured him with a gentle smile. He leaned back in his creaking chair. “Though, when the time comes, Charlie, if you could double-check and make sure no one has fallen asleep under a table or in the lavatory, that would be much appreciated. Prying ears and all that.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Charlie Blagrove said with a salute. “Anything I can do to help the cause.” He leaned in close and lowered his voice. “I know what important work you all have started to do, both in the public eye and outside of it. Should you need anything, anything at all, I am your man.” He again hooked a thumb into his chest, winked with a flash of a smile, pivoted, and was off, back toward the bar, wiping tables and whistling “Rule Britannia” as he went.

Fox raised his glass and toasted with reverent somberness, “To those who did not make it through.” Tolkien held his glass high and nodded solemnly before sipping the delightfully warm liquid.

More laughter echoed from the booth where Hugo and Nevill traded compelling tales. Hugo’s curls bobbed up and down as his face turned red with laughter and he pressed down on his stomach. “Tollers,” Hugo called loudly, his first acknowledgment that anyone besides the two of them existed. “You need to hear this. Nevill here was just telling me

about Michaelmas term and a precocious student in his Middle English course who felt the need to plagiarize—”

Hugo’s words were cut short when Lord David Cecil entered the room. He looked agitated, even thinner and paler than usual, and his eyes were wide. “We’ll need to move a few things around,” he decided quickly, tapping his finger nervously on the tabletop and flicking his eyes about the space. “Can you all help? Our guest should be arriving soon.”

“Who is arriving?” Hugo asked, getting to his feet. “What’s with all the secrecy? I thought we were on the inside . . . brothers and all that. Spit it out, man!”

“You’ll understand soon enough, Hugo,” Cecil replied, glancing at the nearest occupied booth outside the Rabbit Room to make sure the Bird’s other guests were out of ear-shot. “I want to make a good first impression, so be on your best behavior.”

“We always are,” Fox said with a smirk. “Or at least, we try to be.”

Cecil frowned. “I’m not worried about the two of you, or even the brothers who I hear won’t be making it—that is, unless the elder drinks too much.” He lowered his voice. “It’s those two who lack verbal filters and certain manners. I don’t want to offend or scare off our special guest; not tonight, please dear God.”

“Good heavens, man,” Nevill said, walking over and helping to turn a chair around to face the fireplace. “I don’t know how much more suspense we can take. Is it the King?”

Cecil flashed a grin. “Better,” he answered before again lowering his voice. “Much better.”

Hugo placed his hands on his hips and scowled. “Better than the King of England?” He furrowed his bushy brow. “I’m not sure that’s possible, Cecil. You realize what country

we're in, don't you?"

Lord David Cecil went through the motions of taking an ornate golden watch on a chain from his pocket before returning it, only to repeat the action a few seconds later. "It's nearly midnight," he noted, flexing his right hand. "He should be arriving soon."

The pub closed. The couples, drunks, and singing merry-makers made their way reluctantly out into the stormy night as approaching lightning flashed in the distance. Charlie blew out candles and turned down the electric lights even further, in all except the back room. After throwing two more dry logs on the fire, he made his exit reluctantly, and a hush fell over the space. Five men now sat silently, facing the fire in a semicircle. Tolkien noted how very different and strange all this was indeed.

"I think we're ready," Cecil said finally, nodding his head and once again checking his watch.

Hugo grunted. "Are we having a séance?" he asked, his prominent brow now raised. "Because if we are, I'm leaving."

"In a sense, we are," Cecil responded. "But it's not what you're thinking. Please stay, Hugo. Mind your manners." He stood up and walked to the back entrance.

Tolkien fiddled with his unlit pipe before striking a match in the silence and holding it to the pipe's bowl. The smell of cherry and walnut wafted and mixed in the air as he heard a door open and close and low voices speaking in the hallway's shadows. Cecil soon emerged alone without expression and took his seat. Behind him, a man walked out of the dark hallway, and Tolkien felt the breath pull from his lungs. The man was of average height and build. He wore a dark wool coat with a bowler hat and held a glossy black cane. He walked over and warmed his hands by the fire, then took up a place

standing in front of the hearth, facing and eyeing the seated Inklings one at a time before finally speaking.

“Yes, yes, I know,” he said with a placating gesture of his hands. “I should be a dead man. I died on July 7, 1930, in Crowborough, Sussex, and was buried in my rose garden at Windlesham Manor. But that is nothing more than nonsense, misdirection, and farce. Something I know a bit about. My name is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. As you can see, I am very much alive, and I need your help in solving a heinous murder.”