

# Ernest Bramah

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**Ernest Bramah** (1868-1942) was an English author of considerable repute in his day. In total Bramah published 21 books and numerous short stories and features. His humorous works were ranked with Jerome K Jerome, and W.W. Jacobs; his detective stories with Conan Doyle; his politico-science fiction with H.G. Wells and his supernatural stories with Algernon Blackwood. George Orwell acknowledged that Bramah's book *What Might Have Been* influenced his seminal *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Bramah, the creator of the immortal Kai Lung and Max Carrados, was a recluse who refused to allow his public even the slightest glimpse of his private life – secrecy perhaps only matched by E.W. Hornung, the creator of Raffles, and today, J.D. Salinger.

We now know that Bramah, whose real name

was Smith (appropriate for someone who desired anonymity), was a man of erudition and prescience with a unique style of writing that has never been copied. There is perhaps nothing surprising in this until it is appreciated that his academic career ended by dropping out of the Manchester Grammar School at the age of 16 where he was consistently close to the bottom of each class and in each subject. Despite this, he died at the age of 74 a successful and admired author with a wide and deep knowledge of chemistry, physics, law, philosophy, the classics, literature, the occult, ordnance and was a recognised world expert in a branch of numismatics.

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## Early career

After leaving the Manchester Grammar School he went into farming, first as a farm pupil and then in his own right. He was supported by his father who had risen in a very short time from a factory hand to a wealthy man in circumstances that might well be regarded as suspicious. The farming enterprise cost his father over £100,000 in today's money. It was while he was farming that he began to contribute amusing local vignettes to the Birmingham News that gave him his first taste for journalism and writing. Later he wrote a tongue-in-cheek book about his adventure in farming which, unsurprisingly, found few buyers and was eventually remaindered and pulped.

After the farming debacle his ever-

accommodating father agreed to support him while he made his way in Grub Street. He was fortunate enough to obtain a position as secretary to Jerome K Jerome and rose to edit one of Jerome's magazines. After leaving Jerome he edited other journals for a publishing firm which went into bankruptcy.

At the age of 30 his career could only be described as 'undistinguished'. A poor academic record, no university education, a disastrous attempt at farming, dead-end employment with a magazine, a failed book and a member of a bankrupt publishing firm.

## **Author**

But all this was to change with his creation of Kai Lung the itinerant story-teller. He first appears in *The Wallet of Kai Lung* which was rejected by eight publishers before the flamboyant Grant Richards, who was always willing to take a chance on unknown authors, published it in 1900. It certainly was not a best seller so much as a long seller that would still

be in print a hundred years after it was written.

With Kai Lung, Bramah invented a form of Mandarin English that has never been successfully copied although many have tried. It is impossible to write about the glories of Kai Lung without quoting from some of the six books that comprise the Kai Lung canon.

Kai Lung rose guardedly to his feet, with many gestures of polite assurance and having bowed several times to indicate his pacific nature, he stood in an attitude of deferential admiration. At this display the elder and less attractive of the maidens fled, uttering loud and continuous cries of apprehension in order to conceal the direction of her flight.

and

In particular, there is among this august crowd of Mandarins one Wang Yu, who has departed on three previous occasions without bestowing the reward of a single cash. If the feeble and covetous Wang Yu

will place in his very ordinary bowl the price of one of his exceedingly ill-made pipes, this unworthy person will proceed.

and

After secretly observing the unstudied grace of her movements, the most celebrated picture-maker of the province burned the implements of his craft, and began life anew as a trainer of performing elephants.

The Kai Lung stories are studded with proverbs and aphorisms that delight.

- “He who lacks a single tael sees many bargains.”
- “It is a mark of insincerity of purpose to spend one’s time in looking for the sacred Emperor in low-class teashops.”
- “It has been said there are few situations in life that cannot be honourably settled, and without loss of time, either by suicide, a bag of gold or by thrusting a despised antagonist over the edge of a precipice on a dark night.”

But Bramah was more than a humorous writer. His book *What might Have Been*, published in 1907, was a right-wing politico-science fiction fantasy of extraordinary prescience. George Orwell acknowledged it as one of the formative sources for his seminal *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this book, set in a future era, a Socialist government heavily taxes the middle classes, creates a civil service swollen to unimaginable numbers and engenders a pension crisis.

In terms of technology and at a time when the English Channel had yet to be crossed by an aeroplane, he foresaw aerial express trains travelling at 10,000 feet, a nation-wide wireless-telegraphy network (e-mail?) a proto-fax machine and, most incredibly, a cipher typewriter which was uncannily like the German Enigma machine.

It was not until 1914 the eponymous Max Carrados, the blind detective, appeared. Crime literature up to that time had its share of

detectives with a variety of disabilities – paraplegic, amputees, deafness, facial disfigurement, asthma as well as bumlbers, alcoholics and outright certifiable idiots. Carrados was not a tawdry attempt just to be different. It was a serious contribution to show that the blind did not live in total darkness and are as capable in many respects as of seeing as well as the sighted. Given the somewhat outlandish idea that a blind man could be a detective, albeit an amateur one, Bramah was forced to justify Carrados's uncanny powers as a response to the criticism the first book received. In the second Carrados book *The Eyes of Max Carrados*, in a long introduction, Bramah compared his hero's achievements with the equally incredible achievements of real life blind people such as Nicholas Saunderson, Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, Blind Jack of Knaresborough the road builder, John Fielding the Bow Street Magistrate of whom it was said he could identify 3,000 thieves by their voices and Helen Keller. Bramah's sympathy for and understanding of the blind was both



sincere and practical.

The Max Carrados stories appeared alongside Sherlock Holmes in the Strand Magazine, indeed they had top billing and frequently outsold his eminent contemporary even if they never achieved the longevity of Holmes.

## **Ernest Bramah the enigma**

Ernest Bramah was an enigma – a man of contradictions and contrasts. A paranoia to maintain his privacy and seclusion battled with his skill in self-promotion and marketing; strong right wing political views held alongside his essential kindness and concern for the underdog; the macabre and sadistic elements in his writing that belie his courteous, urbane and cultured life; a strong personal moral code clashed with his obvious delight in outrageous advocacy of issues that offended contemporary mores; a fascination with the supernatural and occult but a love of all that was sanctified by age and custom.

Together these paradoxes produced a writer of great erudition and knowledge and whose skills spread over many styles; a deadly serious man but also a humorist who created a host of well drawn, fascinating characters who people his stories and articles and which continue to attract readers more than sixty years after he completed his last book.

## **Prediction of Fascism**

George Orwell credited a little-known Bramah dystopian novel, "The Secret of the League" (1907) with having given a considerably accurate prediction of the rise of Fascism.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **Bibliography**

(incomplete)

**Kai Lung books**

- *The Wallet of Kai Lung* (1900)
- *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922)
- *Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat* (1928)
- *The Moon of Much Gladness* (1932; published in the USA as *The return of Kai Lung*)
- *Kai Lung Beneath the Mulberry Tree* (1940)
- *Kai Lung: Six* (1974)

## **Max Carrados books**

- *Max Carrados* (1914)
- *Eyes of Max Carrados* (1923)
- *Max Carrados Mysteries* (1927)

## **Other**

- *The secret of the league* (1907)
- *The mirror of Kong Ho*

## **References**

1. ^ George Orwell, "Predictions of Fascism", originally published in

"Tribune" on July 12, 1940, appearing in "The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell", Volume 2, p. 47-48).

## External links

- The Search for Ernest Bramah - Ernest Bramah biography
- Crime and Chinoiserie
- Ernest Bramah Bibliography
- Bramah First Editions
- A Delicate Bouquet of Crime: The Plausibility of Max Carrados, Blind Detective
- Ernest Bramah - some appreciative thoughts
- Works by Ernest Bramah at Project Gutenberg
- Kai Lung I & II: an inexpensive paperback edition collecting the first two Kai Lung books perpetually in print (the price is the production cost).

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