

# The Lost World Short Guide

## The Lost World by Arthur Conan Doyle

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Lost World Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>

## Overview

The Lost World is an exciting adventure story, featuring wonderfully eccentric characters who search out the answers to a great scientific mystery deep in the Amazon jungle. The novel is among the last written before World War I in the minor literary subgenre called "boys' books," which were written specifically for young adults. "Boys' books" were expected to give young men examples of how they should behave as grownups—with courage and forthrightness.

Although this literary subgenre sounds dull, many "boys' books" such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) are actually enormously entertaining. Since Conan Doyle considered the conventions of "boys' books" unrealistic, his characters in *The Lost World* fight and quarrel constantly, and all have weaknesses and flaws. The story itself never lags. When there is not high adventure to excite, there is a wealth of comedy to entertain.

## About the Author

Arthur Conan Doyle was born on May 22, 1859, in Edinburgh, Scotland.

As a young man he seemed destined for a career in medicine. In 1876, he attended the University of Edinburgh Medical School. There he met Dr.

Joseph Bell, whose deductive powers and dramatic flair would later be embodied in the character of Sherlock Holmes. In the early 1880s he served as a medical officer on an Arctic whaling ship and ship's surgeon on a voyage to West Africa. By the summer of 1882, he had settled in the town of Southsea in the south of England. In 1885, he received his medical degree. Even after he was a well-established writer, he continued to pursue his medical education, becoming an eye specialist. His medical practice was unsuccessful, leaving him plenty of free time to write.

His first story was "The Mystery of Sarassa Valley," published in October 1879 in Chamber's Journal. He had trouble finding a publisher for his first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, which eventually appeared in Beeton's Christmas Annual for 1887. It and its successor, the novel *The Sign of the Four*, published in 1890, were not at first popular. Conan Doyle himself regarded these early Holmes novels as mere entertainments to bring in some money while he concentrated on historical novels. He hoped to become a new Walter Scott, who had earned fame and respect with such novels as *Ivanhoe* (1820).

In 1891, Conan Doyle agreed to supply the new magazine the Strand with a 1843 series of Sherlock Holmes short stories.

"A Scandal in Bohemia" appeared in the magazine's July 1891 issue and was a popular sensation. For the rest of his life Conan Doyle was pressured by publishers and the general public to write more stories about Sherlock Holmes.

He tried to stop writing the stories a number of times. After his initial contract with the Strand was fulfilled, he demanded an outrageously large amount of money for new stories, hoping that the Strand would refuse. Instead, the magazine eagerly met his asking price. Then he tried killing Holmes off in "The Final Problem," the last of his second run of Holmes stories for the Strand. He received hate mail for killing Holmes and was besieged by publishers offering him huge sums of money to write more about Holmes.

An American publisher finally offered more money than Conan Doyle could resist, and he agreed to write *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Writing about Holmes offered Conan Doyle a ready way to earn money for the rest of his life.

But it was the character of Professor Challenger rather than Sherlock Holmes that was Conan Doyle's favorite creation. In 1912 he published a sciencefiction adventure, *The Lost World*, featuring the professor.

The death of his son during World War I led Conan Doyle to seek out spiritualists and inspired in him a religious dedication to the spiritualist movement.

This embarrassed friends and business associates. Spiritualism found its way into nearly all of Conan Doyle's writings of the 1920s, and even the hardheaded Professor Challenger is converted in *The Land of Mist* Conan Doyle died on July 7, 1930, at Crowborough, Sussex.

# Setting

The two principal locales for the novel's action are England and South America.

In England the action takes place amid the closed-minded and stodgy scientific establishment. The outrageous Professor Challenger seems out of place among these small-minded, boring people and the continent of South America seems better suited to his expansive personality. The jungles there are dense and dangerous, and the native inhabitants are generally friendly.

By following an old map, Challenger leads his expedition to the Lost World, a great plateau with sheer cliffs all around. On the plateau, life has changed little since the age of dinosaurs.



## Social Concerns

In *The Lost World*, science is boldly advancing civilization and extending knowledge. Professor George Edward Challenger — daring, rude, and athletic — represents the arrogance of scientists who believe that science will end ignorance. Throughout *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle satirizes the self-assured belief that scientists are noble men seeking out nature's truths. For instance, when Challenger and Edward Dunn Malone — a journalist and the novel's narrator — first meet, they brawl: "We did a Catherine wheel together down the passage. Somehow we gathered up a chair upon our way, and bounded on with it towards the street. My mouth was full of his beard, our arms were locked, our bodies intertwined, and that infernal chair radiated its legs all round us." The brilliant Professor Challenger loves a good fight, and thus he and Malone become companions in the hunt for *The Lost World* discovered by Maple White.

Searching the jungles of Brazil for a land of dinosaurs would seem to be serious business. Danger lurks at every step, yet Challenger, Malone, and their companions bicker and slight one another. Challenger foresees opportunities to grandstand with his discoveries and eventually does so, substituting showmanship for learned discussion.

His scientific colleagues are so closeminded and downright dense that Challenger almost needs to grandstand to get their attention. Throughout *The Lost World*, humor points out that even scientists tend to prefer comfortable platitudes to discoveries that shake their beliefs.



## Social Sensitivity

Conan Doyle's satire on the closedmindedness of science may instill a healthy skepticism of dogma, scientific or otherwise—a good trait for young minds to develop. Most young adults will recognize that Challenger's highly individualistic behavior is humorous. Besides, Challenger actually does what good scientists do—he seeks out empirical evidence that will either prove or disprove his theories. He even accepts as a member of his research expedition someone who is skeptical of his ideas. In spite of his arrogance, Challenger practices the scientific method and recognizes the value of skeptical observation of his efforts to prove his hypothesis.



## Literary Qualities

The *Lost World* begins with a love interest: Malone must go on a quest in order to win favor with Gladys. Malone is the novel's point-of-view character, and as a young man who is coming of age he serves as the young reader's representative. His eyes see everything as new and wonderful. His love story quickly changes into an adventure. Challenger shows Malone a drawing of a strange animal: "The head was like that of a bloated lizard, the trailing tail was furnished with upward-turned spikes, and the curved back was edged with a high serrated fringe." Challenger tells him that "it is actually sketched from the life."

From that moment on, the narrative focuses on finding, exploring, and revealing the *Lost World*. Conan Doyle uses humor to lighten the narrative, but keeps his characters and themes orderly and clear. They appear when needed in this straightforward narrative line.



## Themes and Characters

The *Lost World* is unified by the themes of discovery and reward. It is a noteworthy adventure novel because these themes are worked out in depth. Discovery is not only a theme but a literary technique in the novel. Ostensibly, the expedition to the jungles of Brazil is undertaken for the purpose of discovering unknown locales and animal life.

However, the true motive of each of the explorers is more personal. Challenger's reward would be fame and the shaming of his detractors. Malone hopes to win the hand in marriage of Gladys Hungerton. Lord John Roxton is in quest of "masculine virility." And Professor Summerlee hopes to prove that "Professor Challenger is an absolute fraud."

Only Professor Challenger finds what he wants. He is so determined to have his way that he gives the impression that he would have built his own dinosaurs had he not found them. Malone's discoveries are more unexpected. He finds courage in himself, and his loss of Gladys emphasizes that his true reward is greater knowledge of himself.

Another theme that underlies the experiences in the *Lost World* is that of evolution by natural selection. Dinosaurs and other ancient beasts survive on the plateau because they have been cut off for eons from the evolving life in the rain forests below. While they are in the *Lost World*, the explorers see the process of natural selection in action.

On one end of the oval plateau live forest natives; on the other live "ape-men." In a cataclysmic struggle, modern humans—the natives—slaughter the animalistic ape-men, replaying a struggle completed eons earlier throughout the rest of the world.

In *The Lost World*, science is boldly advancing civilization and extending knowledge. Professor George Edward Challenger—daring, rude, and athletic—represents the arrogance of scientists who believe that science will end ignorance. Throughout *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle satirizes the self-assured belief that scientists are noble men seeking out nature's truths. For instance, when Challenger and Edward Dunn Malone—a journalist and the novel's narrator—first meet, they brawl: We did a Catherine wheel together down the passage. Somehow we gathered up a chair upon our way, and bounded on with it towards the street. My mouth was full of his beard, our arms were locked, our bodies intertwined, and that infernal chair radiated its legs all round us.

The brilliant Professor Challenger loves a good fight, and thus he and Malone become companions in the hunt for the *Lost World*.

Searching the jungles of Brazil for a land of dinosaurs would seem to be serious business. Danger lurks at every step, yet Challenger, Malone, and their companions constantly bicker and slight one another. Challenger arrogantly brags about his discoveries, substituting showmanship for learned discussion. However, his scientific colleagues are so closed-minded and antagonistic that Challenger's arrogance is needed to get their attention. Throughout *The Lost World*, humor points out that even scientists resist discoveries that shake their comfortable beliefs.



Conan Doyle asserted that Professor Challenger was his favorite among his many characters. He may have liked Challenger's unending optimism and bold spirit, but he may also have been indicating his annoyance with the sometimes dominating role Sherlock Holmes played in his life.

The character of Challenger is less well developed and complex than Sherlock Holmes. Challenger is an "overpowering personality": "His head was enormous . . . He had the face and beard which I associate with an Assyrian bull; the former florid, the latter so black as to have a suspicion of blue, spade-shaped and rippling down his chest. . . . The eyes were blue-grey." Challenger is huge and muscular, and he always speaks with a "bellowing, roaring, rumbling voice." He is unchanging—always loud, always pugnacious, and always confident. Gifted with a brilliant intellect, he is impatient with others of lesser brilliance.

# Adaptations

The Lost World was filmed as a silent motion picture for First National productions and released in 1925. It was directed by Harry O. Hoyt and stars Wallace Beery as Challenger. Willis H. O'Brien was responsible for the special effects. The effects are good but the performances mediocre.

In 1960, a new version of The Lost World was released by Twentieth Century-Fox. Written and directed by Irwin Allen, it stars Claude Rains as Challenger, David Hedison as Malone, Michael Rennie as Roxton, and Richard Haydn as Summerlee. L. B. Abbott directed the special effects team. The monsters of the film are lizards in make-up; some critics like them, although they look stupid, which makes them well suited to the clumsy movie.

## Key Questions

Dinosaurs living in the present is a hot subject; people young and old seem captivated by ancient beasts who sometimes grew to enormous sizes and once roamed all the earth, including its seas.

In retrospect, *The Lost World* is somewhat of a father to all the tales of prehistoric beasts roaming the modern world. Conan Doyle's underlying idea was that a region isolated from the rest of the earth might not have been affected by the evolution that exterminated species by natural selection. The Amazonian jungles, still not very well known to outsiders, were even less well known in the early part of this century — an era in which large areas of the earth's lands had yet to be mapped. Into the mysterious jungle, Conan Doyle dropped a great mesa that had been pushed up during the era that dinosaurs dominated the world, and which remained almost entirely isolated for millions of years.

The story is fanciful, but it was written before Conan Doyle's conversion to spiritualism; he was still a rationalist, very much an adherent of scientific thinking. One of the reasons the novel succeeds may be because of Conan Doyle's serious regard for scientific research. The satire of foolish, bickering, back-stabbing scientists might not work as well had Conan Doyle not thought that science was so important that the misbehavior of scientists could damage human progress. Too, his speculations about evolution, as well as his symbolic images of advanced species supplanting more primitive ones, might not hold together as well as they do had he not believed that natural selection was a scientific fact.

When discussing *The Lost World*, groups can approach the novel from more than one direction, with each direction enhancing their appreciation of the novel and its subject matter. One good approach is to have fun with the book. It is meant to be humorous; it mocks a style of books for young readers, "boys' books," that had become to seem ludicrous with its outrageous tales of violence and fantastic adventure. How many levels of humor are there in the book? Note the slapstick violence, the verbal byplay, the mocking of pomposity, and the satire of foolish scientific practices. How rich is this humor? What does it say about Conan Doyle's intentions?

Another approach to discussing *The Lost World* is to examine it as a book of ideas. H. G. Wells had demonstrated that there was a large readership hungering for good stories that developed interesting ideas. By the time *The Lost World* was published, readers had already traveled with Wells and Verne and others to the far future, to the moon, and to mysterious regions of the unexplored areas of earth; they had even been visited by hostile aliens. In these early scientific fantasies, the authors usually emphasized ideas over characterization and plot. For example, underlying Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) are speculations about time as a fourth dimension. In *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle speculates about evolution, about scientific method, and about how society treats science and scientists. How much of his thinking is still meaningful? Are his notions



about evolution now outdated? Do any of his criticisms or observations still apply to modern life?

Yet another good approach to discussing the novel is to compare it to the tales of modern dinosaurs that have since been published. Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Land That Time Forgot* (1924; consisting of the short novels "The Land That Time Forgot," "The People That Time Forgot," and "Out of Time's Abyss") makes a wonderful object for comparison. Burroughs, too, speculates about evolution and uses his own symbolism to represent the process of development of new species.

Which book more closely captures modern scientific views of evolution?

Which book does a better job of presenting the logical problems of scientific thought? One need not take quite so heavy an approach; a good light approach would be to discuss which book has the best representations of prehistoric animals? Which has the best pulse-pounding situations? Which has the most interesting characters? Which better integrates its characters into the setting? This comparative approach would work for many fictional works about dinosaurs. Even *Jurassic Park* (1990) would work well. It too has the dinosaurs isolated from the rest of the world; it too features scientists who are in over their heads; it too features suspenseful action involving huge beasts from another epoch, some of which are hostile to humans. How does Crichton's scientific rationale for the existence of dinosaurs in the modern world measure up to that of Conan Doyle? Are there any character types shared by the novels? For people who love stories about dinosaurs, *The Lost World* offers wonderful opportunities for hours of discussion of favorite tales of dinosaurs alive in the present day.

1. Is Challenger an admirable man? Would you like scientists to behave like him?

2. Conan Doyle enjoyed practical jokes. One of his favorites was to dress up as Challenger, fake beard and all, and surprise acquaintances with unexpected visits, playing the role of Challenger to the hilt. *The Lost World* features photographs of Conan Doyle and some of his friends impersonating characters in the novel. How convincing is Conan Doyle's get up? Does Conan Doyle's apparent liking for the character explain any of the events in the novel?

3. Modern society is more sensitive to portrayals of ethnic groups than was the society Conan Doyle lived in. How accurate are his portrayals of the Indians? What, if anything, might people find objectionable in his depictions of Indians or other figures such as the ape-men?

4. What are the most interesting ideas in the novel? What makes them interesting? Are any provocative, perhaps controversial?

5. What is the funniest moment in the novel?

6. At the outset of the novel, Conan Doyle faces the problem of getting his young man out of England and into South America. What techniques does he use to achieve this? What do you think of the map as a plot device? Is it awkward, or is smooth?



7. How well described are the prehistoric creatures? Which is particularly vividly delineated? Which are too vague?

8. In our present era, the world has been mapped, and satellites are mapping it in even further detail, even locating ancient steam beds under the Sahara's sands. If one were to try writing *The Lost World* today, where would it have to be set? What would have to be changed in order to account for modern cartography? Use your imagination to answer these questions, just as Conan Doyle used his when faced with the limitations of his own era and audience. There are solutions to these questions! Have some fun with them!

9. Many readers have favorite dinosaur stories. Poll your group to discover whether enough members have read dinosaur tales, and if there are several, have them share their favorite novels or short stories in which dinosaurs play a significant role. How well does *The Lost World* compare to them?

10. *The Lost World* has some pointed satire, as well as broad humor. Which is emphasized in the novel, the satire or the comedy? What does Conan Doyle most seem to want his readers to leave the novel with, a sense of the ridiculous aspects of science and scientists or a sense of having had a rollicking good time?



## Topics for Discussion

1. What are the benefits of having Malone tell the story? Is the story limited in any way by his being the storyteller?
2. What kinds of humor are represented in *The Lost World*? How successful are the humorous scenes?
3. Should Malone be sad that he loses Gladys? Why or why not?
4. *The Lost World* is a tale of adventuring men. Can girls enjoy reading the book as much as boys?
5. *The Lost World* was published in 1912, before airplanes and satellites mapped the world. Is it still possible a place like the Lost World could exist even though airplanes and satellites have not found such a place? If he were writing the novel today, what would Conan Doyle have to change in it to take into account modern mapping techniques?
6. How believable are the novel's characters? Are some more believable than others? What makes them believable or unbelievable? Is Professor Challenger believable? Is Malone more or less believable than Challenger? In what ways?
7. How accurate is *The Lost World's* natural history? Are the right animals living together in the right places?
8. What do you think of Conan Doyle's depiction of most scientists? Is it accurate? Is the only way to make progress in science Professor Challenger's way? How would present-day scientists respond to Professor Challenger if he were alive and working?
9. *The Lost World* is a mixture of humor and adventure. Does the mixture work for you, or does it ever distract you from your enjoyment of the novel?





## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Identify the prehistoric animals that populate the Lost World. When did each live? In what kind of environment did each live?
2. Conan Doyle depicts prehistoric creatures according to the knowledge of his time. What aspects of his creatures have been outdated by more recent research? Be sure to cite specific examples.
3. The Lost World is often called a seminal work, because it inspired numerous imitations. Research those later works that feature people discovering a place where dinosaurs or other supposedly extinct creatures live.
4. Compare Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Land That Time Forgot* (1924) with *The Lost World*. Which book is better? Is your admiration of Burroughs's book lessened because it borrows its main idea from Conan Doyle's book?
5. Research the history of "boys' books" in literature. Why did they evolve? Did they disappear with the beginning of World War I as some literary historians suggest, or did they persist in new forms? Where in the history of "boys' books" does *The Lost World* stand?

## Literary Precedents

In 1912, the acknowledged master of the exotic adventure tale was H. Rider Haggard, whose novels are still widely read today. His *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) most closely resembles *The Lost World*. In it, adventurer Allan Quatermain leads an expedition into the African wilderness to find ancient treasure.

It and *The Lost World* are part of a well-defined literary subgenre sometimes called "boys' books" because they supposedly show how to become men.

Conan Doyle's book has been often imitated, most notably by Edgar Rice Burroughs in *The Land That Time Forgot* (1924), a collection of three novellas about the land of Caspak in which evolution has taken a course independent of the rest of the world.

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## Related Titles

The Lost World is notable for its good storytelling, evocative imagery, and sense of discovery. Its sequels are not up to its standards, but some critics have found the symbolism of *The Poison Belt* (1913), to be interesting. In that novel, Challenger discovers that the earth will pass through an "ether" that will destroy almost all life. He summons his companions from *The Lost World*, and they survive in a sealed room that is artificially supplied with oxygen. When they emerge, they see a society in which everyone has died during his everyday activities. What could be a morbid tale is instead filled with ironic humor: "I'm expecting the end of the world today," Challenger says to his servant. "Yes, sir, what time sir?" *The Poison Belt* is a moralistic tale, in which humanity awakes from a deathlike sleep and is humbled by its own insignificance in the universe.

Most critics who mention *The Land of Mist* (1926) disparage it because it seems like propaganda for spiritualism.

One of Conan Doyle's sons was killed during World War I, and the author became an advocate of spiritualism, apparently out of a desperate desire to believe that his son was still alive in the spirit world. In *The Land of Mist*, Professor Challenger becomes a believer in spiritualism after a series of seances. A few critics admire the fantasy of the novel; most think it but a shadow of *The Lost World*.

Of the short stories involving Challenger, collected in *The Professor Challenger Stories* (1952), "When the World Screamed" has received the most critical attention. In it, Professor Challenger sinks a shaft deep into the earth and discovers that the planet is a living animal that responds in pain and anger when hurt by the shaft.



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