

The Bilge Pump

Vol. 11, No. 12 - December, 2023

*The Irregular Publication of the Crew of the
Barque Lone Star - founded November, 1970*



PLEASE NOTE: **January, 2024 Meeting** NOTICE

We will be conducting our next monthly meeting virtually on **January 07** at 1:00 pm central. I will send out the link for the meeting the week before the meeting. The story for the month is "**The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax**".

Bob Katz, BSI, ASH, will lead the discussion on the story of "**The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax**".

Steven Doyle, BSI, will be our guest speaker

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For more information concerning our society, visit: <http://www.dfw-sherlock.org/>

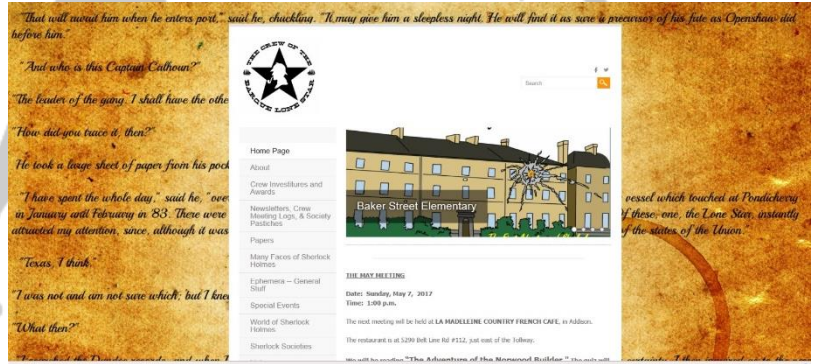
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DECEMBER 03 SUMMARY

Cindy Brown, BSI, ASH

There were 55 in attendance at this ZOOM meeting.

The meeting was opened today by Val Hoski, giving the first toast to Red and Green, a Holiday Tradition.

We then proceeded to the quiz on this month's story, "The Adventure of the Red Circle".

Next our own **Bob Katz, BSI, ASH**, led a discussion of the story for the month.

Plans are moving ahead on upcoming "Sherlockian Whimiscal Tour" which will occur next Spring.

Hometown Holmes, the eighth publication by the Crew of the Barque Lone Star, will soon be available on Barnes&Noble, as well as a free .pdf of the book on our website. There were 26 Sherlockians who submitted articles for the book.

Sandy Kozinn, ASH then did a limerick of "The Red Circle."

32 members participated in our annual Christmas Card exchange this year. Thanks to all of you.

Rich Krisciunas, ASH, then did his monthly presentation of Sherlockian Law 101.

For this month our featured speaker was **Derrick Belanger**, who did an interesting presentation on "The Law of the Place: Sherlock Holmes and Martial Arts." Derrick becomes our 76th Deckmate.

Rich Krisciunas, ASH, then did the closing toast, to the Crew of the Barque Lone Star.

Shana Carter, ASH, then re-introduced a new agenda item, a reading from the *Baker Street Journal*.

Thanks to Cindy Brown for keeping the minutes.

RED AND GREEN HOLIDAY TOAST

Valli Hoski

Red and green, nary to be seen
in THE bow tie or
in the Canon?
But green indeed is the Shannon.

Ne'er even in the Union Jack?
But surely, Eire's dress
T'is green not black.



So you, I and even EU
Let us lift our glasses,
cheer aloud, make a few passes,
to the green, red and blue!

Tie up this toast,
add a green ribbon on your goose
before its roast.



*When Devil's Foot burns, the thick smoke
Is enough to make anyone choke*

And see visions of hell,

Then go mad, die as well.

Yes, the Devil's Foot root is no joke.

Sandy Kozinn

MONKEYING WITH HUMANITY

Liese Sherwood-Fabre, PhD, Deck-Mate

British life expectancy increased by almost 10 years from 1850 – 1900. (1) As men and women lived longer, interest in reversing the aging process also increased. While the search for “the fountain of youth” was as old as Cleopatra who took a daily bath in donkey milk, (2) science explored new methods with pioneering experiments involving hormones—particularly testosterone. Instead of embracing such studies, in “The Adventure of the Creeping Man,” Holmes posits the effect would be calamitous, creating a more hedonistic world.

“The Adventure of the Creeping Man” involved one of Holmes’ last cases before retirement. Trevor Bennett sought Holmes’ assistance in discovering the cause for his employer’s (and future father-in-law’s) strange behavior. Following a trip to Prague, Professor Presbury had been observed walking on all fours, climbing his house’s creeper, and taunting his faithful wolfhound. This change in behavior occurred after his engagement to Alice Morphy, a much younger woman. Holmes determined the man was injecting himself with a serum derived from monkeys to increase his vitality for his much younger bride-to-be.

The serum’s disastrous effects on Presbury’s behavior have been compared with Dr. Jekyll’s experiments involving a substance that transformed the doctor into a much stronger man, Mr. Hyde. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, described Jekyll’s change as more dramatic, with Hyde being a much more violent character. Little was known of the “salt”

Jekyll used, but in Holmes’ case, Lowenstein of Prague (the inventor of Presbury’s serum) reflected several well-publicized rejuvenation efforts that involved experiments with different species meant to revitalize men. (3)



Several scientists became well-known for their techniques. After his early research, which identified testosterone and its effects on secondary male characteristics, (4) Viennese physician Eugene Steinach experimented with extracts of this hormone but abandoned the effort to focus on vasectomy as a means of increasing its presence in the body.

(5) More than 100 patients, including Sigmund Freud and W. B. Yeats submitted themselves to his operation. (6) His work on extracts, however, was not the first. Charles-Edouard Brown-Séquard, a French/Mauritian physician reported injecting ground canine and guinea pig testes into himself, resulting in the vitality of a much younger man. (7) Stienach’s colleague and co-researcher, Robert Lichtenstern, had already been experimenting with transplanting testes,

and his efforts were furthered and popularized by Serge Voronoff, a Russian doctor who transplanted primate testes into humans. The notion became so popular, a Paris bar introduced a “monkey gland” cocktail of gin, absinthe, grenadine and orange juice. Despite other

research (and concoctions) involving such extracts, both Leslie Klinger and Prager and Silverstein posit that Lowenstein’s in “The Creeping Man” was an alias for Steinach. (8)



Given the limited knowledge of the consequences of transplanting organs (especially non-human ones) into humans and less-than-sanitary conditions for the extraction and injection of such parts, any true benefits of such efforts were limited, at best, and more likely detrimental to the subject. Many more years would pass before such treatments could be truly effective. While Steinach coined the term “hormone,” testosterone itself was not isolated until the 1930s and the first injections in the US were not approved until 1953. (9)

Contemporary studies involving hormone injections have found some beneficial results, particularly in the



area of cognitive ability, but have found no change in emotions. (10) In addition, such injections have been associated with health concerns, such as heart attack and stroke. (11) Holmes, however, saw a much larger social loss when “monkeying” with man’s longevity. Those seeking such vitality would not be the “spiritual” who seek a superior life, but the worthless, “least fit,” materialistic individuals who would remain and drag humanity down with it.

- 1) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/howhaslifeexpectancychangedovertime/2015-09-09>
- 2) <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/beauty/skin-care/a14980/history-of-anti-aging/>
- 3) Douglas Kerr, “The strange case of the creeping man,” *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 2018, Vol 14, pp 156-170.
- 4) <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Endocrinology-History.aspx#:~:text=In%20the%20period%20of%201900,known%20as%20the%20Endocrine%20Society.>
- 5) J.C. Prager and Albert Silverstein, “Lowenstein of Prague: The Most Maligned Man in the Canon” in *The Baker Street Journal*, December 1973, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp 220-227.
- 6) Johnathan Charles Goddard, “Monkey Glands” in *Urology News*, September 2020, Vol. 24, No. 26, pp 18-19.
- 7) <https://hekint.org/2021/10/14/rejuvenation-the-adventure-of-the-creeping-man-from-the-case-book-of-sherlock-holmes/>
- 8) Johnathan Charles Goddard, “Monkey Glands” in *Urology News*, September 2020, Vol. 24, No. 26, pp 18-19.
- 9) <https://farr.com/defective-items/testosterone/history/>
- 10) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27545990/>
- 11) <https://farr.com/defective-items/testosterone/history/>

SEVEN WRITING LESSONS FROM SHERLOCK HOLMES

Oren Ashkenazi

Posted on MythCreants.com on November, 2023

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This century-old collection still has a lot to teach us.

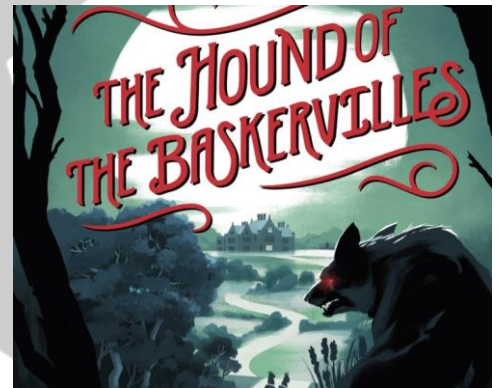


The works of Arthur Conan Doyle have had an incalculable impact on Anglophone storytelling, with Sherlock Holmes often listed as the most widely adapted literary character of all time. The influence on detective fiction is obvious, but it goes much deeper than that. Thanks to Doyle's accessible prose and intriguing plots, any story with even a hint of mystery is probably taking at least one cue from Baker Street. Anecdotally, I've had at least half a dozen editing clients cite Holmes as one of their inspirations, and they wrote in genres all across the speculative continuum.

But is this how it should be? Doyle's final Holmes story was published nearly a century ago; how relevant is the series for writers today? Good news: I've just finished reading through each and every one of the original stories, from *A Study in Scarlet* to "Shoscombe Old Place", and I return with lessons we can learn!

1. Keep Your Facts Manageable

A major source of disappointment in mystery stories is if the audience can't keep track of what's supposed to have happened once everything is revealed. The protagonist makes their big deduction, finally putting together all the clues, and the results are just confusing. Sometimes, this happens because the mystery doesn't make any sense. In other cases, the mystery is coherent but so complicated that no one can remember it.



I'm happy to say that Doyle rarely has this issue, even in the worst of his Sherlock Holmes offerings. For example, consider *The Creeping Man*, a later entry in which Doyle angsts about the implications of anti-aging medication, of all things. I doubt this one is at the top of anyone's Best Holmes list, but its mystery is still very easy to follow in only a few bullet points:

- A professor is acting strangely.
- He's had a lot more energy than normal recently.
- He's getting deliveries of unmarked packages.

These are the essential clues that snap together when Holmes drops his grand explanation: The professor has been taking illicit medication to give himself more energy, and the strange behavior is a side effect. Even though the story around these facts isn't terribly compelling, Doyle still manages a mystery that anyone can follow.

Granted, “The Creeping Man” is a short story. Novels generally need a more complicated mystery; otherwise, the plot slows to a crawl, as there simply isn’t enough material to keep the heroes occupied. Fortunately, Doyle shines here too.

The Hound of the Baskervilles is Doyle’s longest Holmes novel,* and its plot is still remarkably easy to follow. You might not remember exactly what role Laura Lyons played in the affair, but the important part is that our bad guy is using a large dog to frighten the local aristocrats into having accidents so that he can inherit their estates.

The clues then naturally slot into place. Pawprints are found in the dead man’s general vicinity, but not right next to him, as the villain was only trying to frighten his victim into running heedlessly in the dark and taking a fall. If the hound had been close enough to actually attack, it would have attracted too much police attention. Likewise, the seemingly insignificant theft of a boot turns out to matter quite a bit, as the villain needed to train his hound on the scents of specific victims.

Admittedly, spec-fic writers have the additional challenge of explaining magic and advanced technology in their stories. But even so, it’s clear that mysteries are more satisfying when they’re understandable, and that’s what authors should be striving for, no matter their genre.

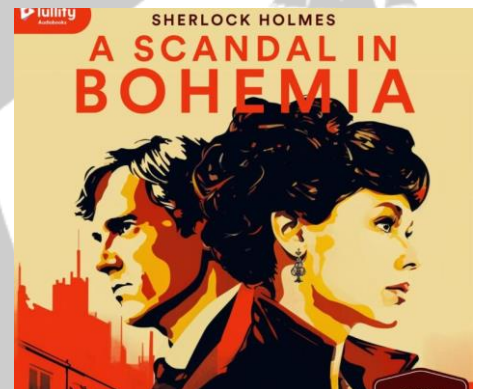
2. Earned Endings Are More Satisfying

When we talk about endings, an important consideration is whether the hero earned the final outcome or not. It’s not enough that their victory or defeat makes logical sense; it has to feel *deserved*. Sherlock Holmes is an excellent demonstration of this principle in action, as Doyle is all over the place when it comes to endings.

In the best examples, Holmes solves the mystery by cleverly putting together clues, like you would expect for a detective. In “The Copper Beeches,” Holmes considers the facts of a young woman’s mysterious disappearance, plus her parents hiring a servant to play her double, and concludes that the young woman is actually being held prisoner by her family. A daring rescue ensues! This is all very satisfying.

In less stellar examples, Holmes solves the case because the solution just falls into his lap. In a previous article, I wrote about how a major turning point in *A Study in Scarlet* is Holmes just calling the Cleveland police and getting the information from them, but this isn’t an isolated incident. In “The Gloria Scott,” Holmes does the work of breaking a simple cipher and then just finds a letter that explains the rest of the mystery. Good job?

This dynamic holds true for the cases where Holmes loses as well. Early in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Holmes is initially dismissive that a woman will make for much of an adversary, so it’s satisfying when Irene Adler outwits him. He demonstrates arrogance and pays the price. There’s even a little coda about how he becomes less sexist afterward, which is always nice.



In other stories, Holmes fails either for reasons completely out of his control or because he makes frustratingly bad choices. In “The Five Orange Pips,” a man begs for help because he’s terrified of being murdered! Holmes sends the man on his way with a few instructions for DIY murder prevention and is shocked when this doesn’t work. The man is murdered, and his killers escape the country.*

In both scenarios, the key factor is character karma. If Holmes wins without having to work for it, the victory is hollow. If he loses because of random events or an authorial contrivance, the defeat is frustrating. Doyle’s best stories have his detective either put in the effort for his wins or fail due to an established flaw because that’s what readers find satisfying.

3. Backstory Doesn’t Need Its Own Book

Of the four Holmes novels, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* stands out for a lot of reasons. For a start, it’s easily the spookiest Holmes story, and it has Watson do a lot of the investigating on his own. But perhaps the most conspicuous difference is the lack of a backstory tangent.

All three of the other novels have a point where the Holmes story stops and we have to read about one or more of the people he’s investigating:

- *A Study in Scarlet*: The backstory about how some Mormons were absolutely the worst.
- *The Sign of Four*: A recounting of some looters stealing a bunch of money in the Indian Rebellion of 1857.*
- *The Valley of Fear*: A chronicle about a Pinkerton agent busting up a gang of evil Freemasons.

In each instance, these tangents come *after* Holmes has actually solved the case. They fill in a few details, but most of them could be summed up in a couple of sentences. For *A Study in Scarlet*, all we need to know is that the two dead guys are responsible for an earlier death that the killer wants to avenge. In *The Valley of Fear*, all that matters is that some criminals from America are coming after the guy Holmes wants to keep alive.

The Sign of Four is a little more complicated, as the eponymous sign refers to four people, three of whom don’t appear in the main story. Doyle might have felt like he needed to include more backstory on them to explain why it matters that the sign represents four people. If that was the case, he probably should have picked a sign that didn’t take 10,000 words to explain.

Needless to say, these tangents slow the story way down and also take us away from the characters we’ve built attachment to. They can’t even function well as their own stories because their main purpose is to get all the pieces into position for the Holmes mystery. The only appeal they might have is for readers whose niche interests happen to match what Doyle was writing about.*

These days, most authors know better than to plop some undiluted backstory into their book and call it a new chapter, but the temptation to include more and more information remains. It’s easy for a storyteller to think that because they created some worldbuilding or character history, the reader needs to know it too, but



that's not the case. Excursions into the past should be limited to what's absolutely necessary for the story to work, since that's what readers are here for in the first place!

4. Brilliance Doesn't Excuse Jerkassery

Whenever some new Holmes adaptation hits the scene, there's a ton of discourse over how mean he should be. In Robert Downey Jr.'s movies, Holmes is a bit arrogant, but that's as far as it goes. In *Elementary*, he's abrasive and sometimes inconsiderate. In the BBC's *Sherlock*, the brilliant detective is blatantly cruel, constantly insulting anyone who isn't as smart as he is. If you were wondering, that means everybody.

You might reasonably ask which of these portrayals is closest to the original, and the answer is... all of them? Doyle is more than a little inconsistent about Holmes's attitude toward other people. Sometimes, he's described as charming and polite; other times, he's saying really hurtful things to poor Watson. He gets angry when Watson compliments him incorrectly and often derides the good doctor's intelligence. As you can imagine, he says far worse to other characters who aren't his friends.

What really separates Doyle's Holmes from later adaptations is the way those around him respond to his meanness. Modern stories typically have them react with shock, hurt, and anger, but not Doyle. The worst anyone ever feels toward Holmes is irritation, and even that is quickly swept under the rug. The impression is that there's no point in getting upset; Holmes is just like that sometimes because of what a genius he is.

On the one hand, this approach might be less unpleasant than some of BBC *Sherlock*'s episodes. When no one acknowledges how mean Holmes is, the impact isn't as strong. On the other hand, Doyle also creates a strong feeling of dissonance because characters aren't reacting the way they really should.

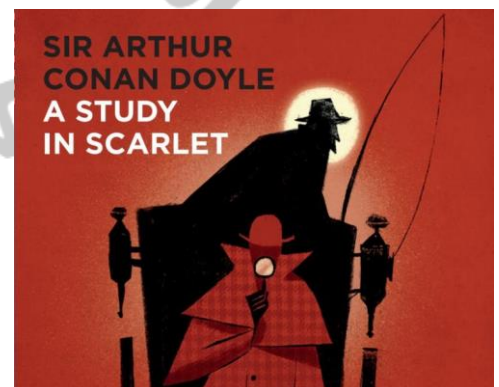
This feeling is even stronger in the 1983 miniseries for *Hound of the Baskervilles*, which follows the book line for line in most scenes. Without the narration to justify why no one is upset, the scenes take on a surreal quality, like the characters are hearing something other than the words Holmes actually says.

I can't say for certain why Doyle wrote like this. Maybe Victorian Londoners were way more casual with their insults than we are today. But it's more likely that he assumed the cruelty wasn't a big deal as long as Holmes was right, and Holmes is nearly always right.

While the super-genius defense may work with some people, it fails hard with everyone else. If anything, it just gives the jerkass character clearer authorial endorsement, removing any hope that they're going to learn a lesson. A protagonist can be abrasive and even inconsiderate without breaking the story, but once they start intentionally cutting others down, it's probably too much.

5. It's Okay to Guess

If there's one thing Holmes is famous for, it's his ability to notice a set of details and then make some very impressive inferences from



them. For example, upon first meeting Watson, Holmes notices that his new roommate has:

- The “air of a military man.”
- A serious tan.
- A haggard face.
- An injured arm that’s still healing.

With these clues, Holmes declares that Watson must have recently returned from Afghanistan. He calls this deduction, but according to Merriam-Webster, he actually uses abductive reasoning. Neat.

Anyway, it’s a fair supposition. Watson probably didn’t get that tan in England, and the British Empire had just finished the brutal Second Anglo-Afghan War. Afghanistan has a lot of sun, and the war would account for both Watson’s injury and his haggard face.

Holmes solves a lot of mysteries like this, waltzing through crime scene after crime scene and ferreting out the truth like an omniscient oracle. He’s very confident in his methods and makes it clear that it’s not guessing but ironclad logic.

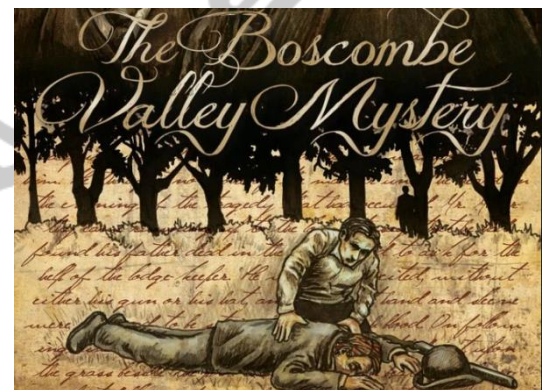
Hang on a second though. If you take a bunch of facts and then use them to predict something, isn’t that a guess? Holmes might say that it’s a certainty, but it’s not. Watson could just as easily have returned from the Anglo-Zulu War in South Africa. As another brutal conflict fought in a sunny locale, this would also explain all of Holmes’s observations. Or Watson might have been stationed at any of the British Empire’s other colonial holdings and been injured in an accident.

The reason Holmes never has to deal with alternate explanations for his guesses is that Doyle arranges the story so he’s always right. This is a pretty irritating trait in a main character. Not only is it too much candy, but it also reduces tension since it’s impossible for him to make mistakes most of the time. Doyle does let Holmes mess up on occasion, but outside of the clash with Irene Adler, it’s always in a situation where no other person could have conceivably succeeded either.

Fortunately, there’s an easy solution: it’s okay for your detective to make educated guesses! And it’s also fine for those guesses to be correct more often than strict statistics might suggest. As long as they don’t act like it’s impossible for them to be wrong, no one will mind. Audiences want the mystery to be solved; they just get annoyed at arrogant investigators.

6. Solving Mysteries Should Matter

When I began my journey into the complete works of Sherlock Holmes, I was prepared for a lot of things. I knew that Holmes was going to get all of the candy and that any characters of color would be described in the most yikes way possible. What I did not expect was a recurring trend where Holmes solves the mystery but it doesn’t actually matter.



We start the trend right away with *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes catches the killer, only to find out that the guy wasn’t planning to kill anyone else. Also, the two killings were absolutely justified, and the killer himself

dies shortly afterward of a heart condition. So... everything would have been exactly the same if Holmes hadn't taken the case.

Doyle must have really liked this kind of ending, because it just keeps happening. In "A Case of Identity," Holmes figures out that a man is running a cruel scam for money but doesn't do anything about it because the victim supposedly wouldn't believe the truth. In "The Boscombe Valley Mystery", Holmes does a bunch of sleuthing to discover the killer, a man we learn was about to turn himself in anyway.

This is such a common occurrence that it even shows up in stories I otherwise really like. Remember "The Copper Beeches," where Holmes cleverly figures out that a lady is being held captive by her evil parents? Well, our heroes naturally rush to the scene, only to discover that the woman has escaped on her own in a manner that had nothing to do with their investigation. Good job?

That last one almost sounds like it could be a modern feminist commentary on the damsel-in-distress trope, but all it accomplishes is making the story feel pointless. Doyle seems to assume that it's enough for Holmes to figure out what's going on, regardless whether it makes any difference. While Holmes's logic is interesting, it's not enough! That's why these mysteries always start by establishing the bad stuff that will happen if the case isn't solved.

Fortunately, this isn't a universal feature of Holmes stories. Doyle himself proves that a story can have the satisfaction of figuring out the mystery and also making a material impact on the situation, whether it's by saving a client's life or keeping an innocent person from the gallows. I just worry about impressionable new writers picking up *A Study in Scarlet* and thinking it would be clever for their villain to be rendered harmless by a random health condition.

7. The Watsonian POV Is Unworkable

For writers, Sherlock Holmes's most enduring legacy is probably the Watsonian perspective. I don't mean this in terms of looking at a story from an in-character or authorial perspective but the practice of telling a story in the viewpoint of a side character. The vast majority of Holmes stories are narrated by Watson, meaning we see Holmes from the outside and don't have any insight into the detective's thoughts.

This perspective is really tempting because it allows the writer to give their detective all the clues in the world while concealing those same clues from the reader. If the reader doesn't have all the clues, they can't get frustrated with the detective for not figuring out the answer sooner. Alternatively, if the detective does figure out the answer early, the Watsonian viewpoint can keep tension from fading, since the reader doesn't know that the case has been solved.

Doyle employs both methods regularly, but the costs are steep, outweighing the benefits in almost all cases. What costs are those? The most immediate is that readers lose out on building attachment to the most important character. Being inside a character's head is our most valuable tool for doing that, and Doyle's style gives it up completely.



It's also just a bit frustrating to be stuck with Watson when in most of the stories, his actions have very little impact on the plot. It feels like we're just waiting for Holmes to make a move rather than being part of unraveling the story.

More abstractly, hiding all the clues means readers no longer benefit from one of the main reasons for reading a mystery in the first place: trying to figure it out for themselves. That's impossible in most Holmes stories, since our hero makes his deductions based on information readers don't get until everything is already resolved.

Finally, Holmes still has to act in a really contrived manner to avoid spilling the beans too early. He routinely refuses to tell Watson anything, even if doing so would be unquestionably advantageous. His defense is that Watson might give something away, but we see Watson go undercover several times, and he has no problem maintaining a poker face. Even when Holmes's subterfuge directly hinders his investigations, Doyle can't acknowledge that it's a bad practice because he depends on the conceit so much.

If you're reading this section and thinking that it's now impossible to tell a story based on Watson and Holmes, don't worry – there is a way! Basically, you just have to follow the model laid out in *The Mimicking of Known Successes*. In this story, the two are true partners rather than Watson acting as a camera that follows Holmes around. They're also lesbians on a gas giant, which is pretty cool.

In that book, Holmes thinks in big, abstract plans, while Watson is more adept at the specifics. Holmes decides where they need to investigate, but Watson often takes the lead on the ground: a strategist/tactician dynamic. This is just one option though! There are plenty of other ways to make a Holmes retelling work, whether in the POV of Watson or the good detective himself. What matters is using both of them as actual characters, rather than deploying Holmes as a black box that solves mysteries while Watson watches in awe.

Despite being a months-long project, I really enjoyed reading every Sherlock Holmes story from start to finish. Those tales hold up a lot better than some others from the same era,* despite the problems we just went over. Doyle's prose is easy to absorb, and it's fascinating to see the origin of so many tropes that remain popular to this day. At the same time, it's important not to simply copy what was done before. Holmes has both positive and critical lessons to teach us, and it's important that we learn them all.