



The Great Detective: The Amazing Rise and Immortal Life of Sherlock Holmes

Zach Dundas

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A wickedly smart and rollicking journey through the birth, life, and afterlives of popular culture's most beloved sleuth

Today he is the inspiration for fiction adaptations, blockbuster movies, hit television shows, raucous Twitter banter, and thriving subcultures. More than a century after Sherlock Holmes first capered into our world, what is it about Arthur Conan Doyle's peculiar creation that continues to fascinate us? Journalist and lifelong Sherlock fan Zach Dundas set out to find the answer.

The result is *The Great Detective*: a history of an idea, a biography of someone who never lived, a tour of the borderland between reality and fiction, and a joyful romp through the world Conan Doyle bequeathed us.

Through sparkling new readings of the original stories, Dundas unearths the inspirations behind Holmes and his indispensable companion, Dr. John Watson, and reveals how Conan Doyle's tales laid the groundwork for an infinitely remixable myth, kept alive over the decades by writers, actors, and readers. This investigation leads Dundas on travels into the heart of the Holmesian universe. *The Great Detective* transports us from New York City's Fifth Avenue and the boozy annual gathering of one of the world's oldest and most exclusive Sherlock Holmes fan societies; to a freezing Devon heath out of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*; to sunny Pasadena, where Dundas chats with the creators of the smash BBC series *Sherlock* and even finagles a cameo appearance by Benedict Cumberbatch himself. Along the way, Dundas discovers and celebrates the ingredients that have made Holmes go viral — then, now, and as long as the game's afoot.

The Great Detective: The Amazing Rise and Immortal Life of Sherlock Holmes Details

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LuAnn says

Dundas does a masterful job weaving together the Holmes Canon, pastiches, portrayals, Sherlockians, Conan Doyle and other aspects of the Holmesian world into a breezy, enjoyable look at the phenomenon that is Sherlock Holmes. I bring to this book much other research into various aspects of this world, but someone relatively new to Holmes would learn much about these various elements from this book alone: it's a good overview of this world. I especially appreciate his use of the stories themselves and quotes from them.

Carin says

I was introduced to Sherlock Holmes in the mid-1980s by my mother, a huge fan of Mystery! and so naturally I was indoctrinated to picture Jeremy Brett forever, as the Great Detective. (Now, after having seen others try to portray Holmes, I stand by that. Brett's performance is truly bar-none.) I went on to read a lot if not all of the stories and novels. The Speckled Band still freaks me out, as does The Hound of the Baskervilles, although most of the stories aren't scary—they're just mind-twisters.

Mr. Dundas is the perfect author to write this history—he's a big fan but not a superfan of disturbing portions. He does talk to them, the writers of fanfic and those who dress up and so on. When he was a kid in the midwest, he formed his own Sherlock Holmes club! But he also does thorough research, and yet the book doesn't read even remotely academic. It's very readable, even a fast read for nonfiction, and thoroughly entertaining. Mr. Dundas doesn't hold Conan Doyle to a very high standard—he understands that mostly Conan Doyle wrote for the money and couldn't be bothered with research or getting his time frames correct. But that isn't the point. While you might think that books about a detective with such an eye for detail would themselves have the details all perfect, but they're adventure yarns and the action is the main point. Holmes doesn't sit in his study and puzzle out the clues while smoking his pipe—he's running around town wearing disguises and using his much-lauded single stick-fighting skills. And yes, in between he often is doing coke, as he is thoroughly bored when he isn't thoroughly occupied.

If you read (or watched) Sherlock Holmes tales, this book covers everything including Conan Doyle's much-ballyhooed obsession with the occult in his later days, with care and delight. Enjoy!

Ashley says

This was fun! I think I expected a bit more from it, but overall it was an entertaining, informative look at the phenomenon of Sherlock Holmes.

First, what didn't work for me. Dundas bases this entire book on trying to find out the answers to a central question, why has Sherlock Holmes endured, reviving and reviving over 130 years? Well, the problem here is that there isn't really an answer to that question! There are 5,000 possible answers. It's not something anyone will ever *know*. And the more he tried to stick to that premise, the flimsier it felt. This book works

best when Dundas is relaying the history of Sherlock Holmes and how he came to be, and the cultural history surrounding him. The whole hullabaloo. When he tried to descend into literary detection or analysis or whatever, it really didn't for me. Thankfully, it's really only the first and last chapters that attempt.

Second, for pretty large portions of the book, Dundas retells in great detail, plots of the the Holmes novels and stories. And he doesn't just do parts, but the whole things from front to back. I found this excessive, and annoying. I figured I might get spoiled a little from this book, but only here or there. But I didn't sign up for retellings of someone else's stories. Also, don't spoil me, bro! There's no need for that! I understand the impulse behind it, I do. He wanted to luxuriate in the atmosphere, and he uses the stories as a structure for the book (walking us through the Holmes timeline so to speak). Except, there was no need to retell them quite so extensively.

But aside from those two issues, really, I liked it. He tends to get a little personal and mine his own childhood (he started in on his Holmes bona fides early), and I'm sure a lot of the stuff he covers is well known to people who've been studying Conan Doyle for a while, but for someone less versed in it like myself, his research was impressive, and though he doesn't go deep into much, he does go broad and covers a bunch of stuff. I particularly liked hearing about all the pop culture stuff, like how different contemporary readers and viewers reacted at the time to new stuff, and all the behind the scenes stuff, and the super fascinating stuff about Sherlock Holmes fan societies. And he even talks for a pretty long time about fanfic! And the dirty stuff, too! He admits he doesn't get it, but that makes it even more impressive that he gave it a real explanation and even interviewed a prominent author.

Would recommend tentatively to Sherlock Holmes fans of all shapes and sizes, if you can deal with the aforementioned problems.

[3.5 stars, rounded up]

George Sink says

This was an entertaining read that delved into all things Sherlock Holmes, with a basis in the works of Doyle up through the present-day movies and tv shows. I read through (struggled through, at times) one of the original collections of Sherlock stories a few years ago, and after having watched the major modern retellings (through television's Sherlock, Elementary, and the movies) over the years, I thought this would be a fun read to bring it all together. I learned about the extraordinary life of Arthur Conan Doyle and the remarkable durability and malleability of the characters and the world he created. The world of Holmes and Watson resonates in so many different ways to so many people, and this book was a fascinating overview.

Yaaresse says

This is less a book about Holmes or Conan Doyle and more a book about the author's obsession (and he admits he is obsessed) with all things Holmes and Conan Doyle. Dundas was sucked into the Holmesian vortex early, as a kid in Missouri. He was in so deep that he started a Holmes fan club. He's still in so deep that dragging his pregnant wife and five year old to Dartmoor during and hiking through frozen fog and slush to retrace Holmes and Watson's footsteps seems like a jolly great vacation plan. (I think the wife didn't agree.)

For the first third of the book, I feared this was going to end up being the hyperventilating pre-orgasmic chatter of a fanboy and that he was going to launch into Sherlockian slash and/or self-insert at any moment. Hey, some people live for that stuff. I've never understood why. My Kindle file was corrupted, so I lost the book for a week while the library sorted *that* out. I'd almost decided not to finish it, but "as a courtesy" the library automatically resent it to my account. Ah well, why not? I had a hell of a cold, so what else do I have to do while single-handedly making the Q3 sales quota of Kimberly-Clark products?

I'm glad I went back to it. Dundas calmed down and found his footing after a couple of chapters when he began talking about the creation and evolution of the early detective genre and Arthur Conan Doyle's place in it. Once he got to discussing the order and content of the series, I learned quite a bit of ACD information I'd not known and been reminded of a lot of Holmsian trivia I'd forgotten. He gets extra points for not forgetting to give credit the graphic artists that created the Holmes image at that time.

I appreciate that Dundas is a bit of a purist, with a regard for the "classic" Holmes, yet I was confused during the portion of the book when he discusses the evolution of Holmes into radio, movies, and TV as to why he was completely ignoring the existence of Jeremy Brett, arguably the most beloved Sherlock of them all. (Calm down, Cumber-collective Cumberbitches, Benny gets plenty of attention in these pages, and I wholeheartedly agree that he is a most delicious Sherlock. We're talking classic Victorian Holmes right now. Just readjust your thongs and chill.) As it turns out, Dundas was holding out so he could single Brett for attention. Nice, but I still think he gave the most excellent Brett short shrift, and poor fabulous Watsons David Burke and Edward Hardwicke barely get a mention between them in this part of the book. Maybe I'm biased? (I'm biased.)

Dundas also addresses the whole fanfic thing and delves into all the myriad forms and groups and internet weirdness that exists. ("Weirdness" is my term. He manages to stay respectful, if still a bit bewildered.) I appreciate the comparison and contrast of pastiche versus fanfic. I'm not sure I agree with the conclusion, but it was an interesting POV.

The book should come with a warning that reading time will be greatly extended due to looking up old movie clips and radio shows on YouTube and having endless debates with one's spouse over whether Moriarity was a "real" character or if he was a product of Holme's subconscious and kind of shadow self of underlying psychosis...or possibly a side effect of all that cocaine.

I think one has to be at least marginally familiar with the Conan Doyle books to really appreciate Dundas' thoroughness and enthusiasm. Most people I know who claim to be Holmes fans know the Gattis-Moffat series, might vaguely recall the Jeremy Brett version, and have never cracked the cover of an ACD story. Or, as one 30-something asked when I mentioned having read the books as a kid, "What? There were books? Back then? Or are these based on the BBC show?"

It's a hard book to rate. The parts that are good are very good. The early parts about the author's fantasy of emulating Holmes and retracing the stories (while admitting ACD made the whole lot up from bits and pieces scattered across time and geography) was just a little too nerdy for me. It was like listening to Trekkies go on about the various engine statistics of every iteration of the Enterprise or that former roommate who insisted on answering the phone in Sindarin. One has to be truly obsessed to take more than a grain of that at a time.

Rachel says

A breezy tour of the world of Sherlock Holmes and his years and years as the world's greatest crime solver and it's only (fictional) consulting detective and his Dr. Watson.

Dundas writes with great affection and excellently researched details. I appreciate the humor and inclusiveness he brings to the people he encounters, both real and imagined, and the depth of his research (including a thanks to one of the best librarians around, Ruth Allen)

As a casual Sherlock fan and a collector of random historical knowledge, I found this to be a fun and engaging story full of new things to know and more things to discover.

Final note (pun not intended, but left anyway): the end notes for the books are totally worth reading.

Shelly says

"If you love Sherlock Holmes, the rabbit hole beckons, always." - p238

This book is close to pulling me back into that rabbit hole. I was an avid Sherlockian when I entered college, thanks to a friend I made my senior year of high school. I loved to play "the Great Game" (Holmes and Watson were real, Conan Doyle was just a literary agent, and all these stories really happened). I discovered I could get copies of articles from the *Baker Street Journal* via inter-library loan and amassed quite a collection of them (at one point they had to cut me off because if I'd received any more articles that calendar year, I'd be violating copyright law; we worked around this by requesting the entire bound journal so I could make my own copies). Reading this book brought all that fun back for me - pouring over footnotes in Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, driving off to Indianapolis and a Sherlock Holmes Symposium with my high school friend who introduced me to the Great Detective, and making my own attempts at pastiche.

The Great Game is only one part of the phenomenon that is Sherlock Holmes, and Dundas tries to explore them all. We begin with the beginning - Arthur Conan Doyle. Dundas traces his early life, at least so far as it might have influenced Holmes's creation (this isn't a biography of ACD). We get more details as they coincide with the publication of the various novels and stories in the Canon, and Dundas draws connections between real-world events surrounding Conan Doyle and the stories he wrote. When you play the game, you mostly ignore Conan Doyle. He's just the literary agent, after all. But Dundas looks at Conan Doyle the story-teller, and he gave me a new appreciation for ACD. Conan Doyle was a master short-story writer. He had the formula down pat. And yet, his writings aren't entirely formulaic. Holmes and Watson were useful characters who found themselves in a variety of stories. Action-adventure, spy thrillers, Gothic horror, and even something like a Western (as Dundas puts it, "the Sherlock Holmes Canon is a *Whole Earth Catalog* of storytelling strategies."). Throughout it all, Conan Doyle creates a portrait of a lasting friendship. There cannot be a Holmes without Watson. Reading about Conan Doyle and the chronology of his writing of the Holmes stories made me realize I have never read them in publication order. My text has always been Baring-Gould's text, which puts them in "chronological order," or at least his version of it (if you put 5 Sherlockians together and asked them to put the stories in chronological order, you will get 5 different orders).

The book delves in to the various productions of Holmes, from the parodies published in newspapers contemporary with the stories coming out in *The Strand* to Gillette's play and on-ward, lingering with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, skimming over Jeremy Brett (more really could be said about Brett's

performance and Granada's production), and finally moving to *Sherlock* and *Elementary*. He takes a stab at discussing fanfiction (and treats it pretty fairly) and spends a satisfying amount of time giving the history of the Baker Street Irregulars and the writings about the writings.

Dundas's stated purpose was to answer some questions about Sherlock Holmes and the way he has continued for 130 some years in various forms. I found myself nodding along to his conclusions. There is Holmes himself, this man we know so much and so little about. Devotees can tell you many characteristics of the Great Detective, and yet his past remains a mystery. Who was he before he took on those first investigations ("The Gloria Scott" and "The Musgrave Ritual")? What was his family life like? Where did he grow up? Where did he go to University? In the stories we learn very little beyond the fact that he has an older, even smarter, brother (Mycroft). Then there is Watson, the heart and soul of the business. Holmes is the genius detective, intriguing to be sure, but it is Watson that the reader identifies with. He is necessary to make the whole thing work (and if you doubt that, just look at the two stories ACD did with Holmes as narrator, and how they don't work). At times Holmes is a calculating machine, but Watson remains reliably human. The Canon is a lasting portrait of their friendship. And finally, there is the sense that when we read Conan Doyle's stories, we are getting a glimpse of a fully fleshed out world. I've likened it to peeking through a keyhole. You know there's more to the room, things out of your line of sight - you can't see them but you know they're there. This sense of these stories being part of a larger world is intriguing (and gives rise to the Great Game, to pastiche, and opens the door for a multitude of interpretations of the characters). As Dundas puts it, "Conan Doyle didn't mean to, but he salted his Sherlockian work with storytelling prompts. Watson repeatedly whispers 'Go' into the imaginative reader's ear. And so, from almost the very beginning, other people have felt compelled to make up their own Sherlock Holmes stories." People have done that in many ways, from finding "problems" in the original stories to analyze to writing pastiche to creating fanfiction to writing plays, radio dramas, movies, and tv shows based on the characters. If you love these characters, you can't resist. You slip into that rabbit hole and off you go. It's great fun, even if it would drive Arthur Conan Doyle mad. That fun is beckoning to me once more, but before I go back to the game, I think I'll read the stories over in publication order.

Richard Schwindt says

We all get that Sherlock Holmes has been popular since his creation but not necessarily why. Nor do we understand how comprehensive his appeal has become and the influence he's had on everything from literature to film to policing. Zach Dundas, lifelong reader, scholar and intrepid Sherlockian gamely tries to cover all the bases in this book. This includes historical scholarship, trips to London, Dartmoor and parts in between, and even a confab with a usually anonymous fanfic writer of gay Sherlock porn. While ambitious and at times a bit disjointed Dundas' wry and amusing take on all things Sherlock works because of its (obviously) unifying theme. His curiosity is unquenchable and it is amusingly clear that he isn't hesitant to talk to anyone, nor to drag his wife and son anywhere he can learn something new. His prose is bright and readable, lending to the sense of fun that pervades his various investigations. This book will appeal to anyone (and this is many of us) who has ever been fascinated by the residents of 221B Baker Street.

Melora says

Fun! Zach Dundas is dedicated but light-hearted in his role as guide through the world of all things Holmesian. He relates his own youthful obsession with the great detective (he started an international fan

club at the age of 12, the Street Arabs) with sympathetic humor, and extends the spirit of good-natured appreciation to the wide range of Holmes enthusiasts he meets, from credentialed Victorian scholars to passionate young writers of lurid fan fiction. We explore many different aspects of the Sherlockian universe, from the "authentic" 221B Baker Street sets on display around the world to the life of Arthur Conan Doyle to the tale of Holmes's transition from the character Doyle wrote to the figure appearing on stage, radio, cinema, television, comic book, and fan fiction web site as imagined by devotees from practically the time of his creation through today. Very entertaining.

M Christopher says

An interesting and amusing treatment of the history of Sherlock Holmes, including biographical details on Arthur Conan Doyle, Conan Doyle's struggle to learn to live with his most famous creation, and how Holmes outlived him with newly created or adapted stories for stage, film, and TV, as well as the cottage industry of pastiche fiction. Also includes an insider's look at "Sherlockians" (or "Holmesians," depending on your nationality), who were super-fans long before the advent of "Trekkies."

Good fun for fans of the Great Detective.

Paul says

I enjoyed reading "The Great Detective;" it's an accessible story of the creation and afterlife of Sherlock Holmes, a good balance of recapping the stories themselves and what made them so popular, and detailing how the Holmes and Watson characters have been adapted over the century since. Generally, I liked the book, but I struggled with the overwhelming amount of first-person narration, some of it essential and engaging but much of it superfluous and distracting. I'd give it 3.5 stars if I could, and I'd recommend it to casual Sherlock lovers like myself.

Deb says

Author Zach Dundas discovered Sherlock Holmes when he was an 11-year old in small town Montana. His lifelong love of the character led him to finally explore just how a fictional character created 130 years ago as the Victorian era wound to its end came to be the iconic and beloved character seen in multiple iterations, in many languages, and across every continent on the planet. It's an entertaining journey as Dundas seeks traces of London's--and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's--London; examines the influences and inspirations for the original 56 short stories and four novels; and studies how, in each passing era since Doyle's last Holmes adventure, new generations have revived and reinvented the character to continuing success and acclaim. We meet Baker Street Irregulars, bloggers, librarians, museum curators, archivists, collectors, scriptwriters, authors and even tour guides to Dartmoor. Throughout we savor with Dundas all the ways that Holmes and Watson resonate with new readers, movie and TV fans, and the great collective of fans on the Internet. As Dundas points out (repeatedly), it is oh so easy to slip into thinking of the intrepid duo as real, partly because the fans choose to behave as if they are. Holmes aficionados will enjoy each step of the author's journey (the footnotes alone are worth the reading).

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Why is Sherlock Holmes still popular? How is it that almost ninety years after the last Sherlock Holmes story was first published, people are still discovering the stories and forming clubs to share their enthusiasm and adapting the stories in every way imaginable? The stories are hardly Shakespeare, after all. Arthur Conan Doyle cranked them out as fast as he could, as the inconsistencies and untied threads make clear.

Zach Dundas investigates this perplexing mystery. He discovered Sherlock Holmes when he was a child, as many of us did. He even formed a Sherlock Holmes club, which he abandoned in his teens. He starts out on firm ground in his search for answers, with biographical information about Arthur Conan Doyle (although he never addresses the question of whether it's Conan Doyle or just Doyle -- Sir Arthur's father was Charles Doyle, his mother Mary Foley, his second wife Jean Conan Doyle, some of his children have the Conan name, others don't -- Dundas uses Conan Doyle throughout).

Along the way, Dundas revisits the stories while veering off into the vast Sherlock collections available on the internet. He describes some of the many adaptations, including a Soviet TV series, cartoons, silent movies, and more. He attends a Sherlock convention and visits with fans in period costume. He takes his young family to England to see where the stories took place and where the TV shows and movies have been done. He uses his press credentials to interview Benedict Cumberbatch.

I can imagine that a Sherlock fan would love this book, nodding in agreement with some of the findings, shaking the book in disagreement at other times. But I loved it too, and I haven't read Sherlock Holmes since I was a kid, I haven't seen a single episode of the new series, Sherlock, I loathed Jeremy Brett's Sherlock. I enjoyed finding out that people were adapting the stories for stage within a decade of the first publication. The stories were popular worldwide even before they really took off in Britain.

Highly recommended for fans of Sherlock and of offbeat literary criticism.

Sheila says

This high-informative, in-depth review of all Sherlock Holmes books, plays, and movies is very intricately detailed and has a ton of references to old clips available on YouTube. Very interesting and chronological. I checked out a lot of the YouTube clips and was pleasantly surprised by some facts and actors of which I was previously unaware.

For hardcore Sherlockians, probably nothing new here. But for anyone else, a treasure trove!

Cheryl says

As a fan of Sherlock Holmes I was very interested in reading this book. It has been a while since I have read a Sherlock book. After reading this book I am revived to read some Sherlock stories. However I have to say

that Mr. Dundas is a bigger fan of Mr. Holmes and Mr. Doyle. He really did his research. He thoroughly sought out other fans in all aspects of the world and genres. Mr. Dundas inspected different stories of Mr. Holmes and how they are relatable today's world. Yet, Mr. Dundas writes with passion and readability. Another thing that I liked about this book is travelling all over the world with Mr. Dundas as he explored Mr. Holmes with fans and the foot notes. I always find the foot notes to share interesting tidbits of facts. They are almost better than the book itself. There is nothing boring about this book. True fans of the Sherlock Holmes stories will enjoy this book.
