

## **Sherlock Holmes**

Sherlock Holmes (/ˈʃɜːrlɒk ˈhɒməz/) is a fictional detective created by British author Arthur Conan Doyle. Referring to himself as a "consulting detective" in the stories, Holmes is known for his proficiency with observation, deduction, forensic science and logical reasoning that borders on the fantastic, which he employs when investigating cases for a wide variety of clients, including Scotland Yard. The character Sherlock Holmes first appeared in print in 1887's *A Study in Scarlet*. His popularity became widespread with the first series of short stories in *The Strand Magazine*, beginning with "A Scandal in Bohemia" in 1891; additional tales appeared from then until 1927, eventually totalling four novels and 56 short stories. All but one[a] are set in the Victorian or Edwardian eras, between about 1880 and 1914. Most are narrated by the character of Holmes's friend and biographer Dr. John H. Watson, who usually accompanies Holmes during his investigations and often shares quarters with him at the address of 221B Baker Street, London, where many of the stories begin.

Though not the first fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes is arguably the best known. By the 1990s, there were already over 25,000 stage adaptations, films, television productions and publications featuring the detective, and Guinness World Records lists him as the most portrayed human literary character in film and television history. Holmes's popularity and fame are such that many have believed him to be not a fictional character but a real individual; numerous literary and fan societies have been founded on this pretence. Avid readers of the Holmes stories helped create the modern practice of fandom. The character and stories have had a profound and lasting effect on mystery writing and popular culture as a whole, with the original tales as well as thousands written by authors other than Conan Doyle being adapted into stage and radio plays, television, films, video games, and other media for over one hundred years.

## **Inspiration for the character**

Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin is generally acknowledged as the first detective in fiction and served as the prototype for many later characters, including Holmes. Conan Doyle once wrote, "Each [of Poe's detective stories] is a root from which a whole literature has developed ... Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?" Similarly, the stories of Émile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq were extremely popular at the time Conan Doyle began writing Holmes, and Holmes's speech and behaviour sometimes follow those of Lecoq. Doyle has his main characters discuss these literary antecedents near the beginning of *A Study in Scarlet*, which is set soon after Watson is first introduced to Holmes. Watson attempts to compliment Holmes by comparing him to Dupin, to which Holmes replies that he found Dupin to be "a very inferior fellow" and Lecoq to be "a miserable bungler".

Conan Doyle repeatedly said that Holmes was inspired by the real-life figure of Joseph Bell, a surgeon at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, whom Conan Doyle met in 1877 and had worked for as a clerk. Like Holmes, Bell was noted for drawing broad conclusions from minute observations.

However, he later wrote to Conan Doyle: "You are yourself Sherlock Holmes and well you know it". Sir Henry Littlejohn, Chair of Medical Jurisprudence at the University of Edinburgh Medical School, is also cited as an inspiration for Holmes. Littlejohn, who was also Police Surgeon and Medical Officer of Health in Edinburgh, provided Conan Doyle with a link between

medical investigation and the detection of crime.

Other possible inspirations have been proposed, though never acknowledged by Doyle, such as Maximilien Heller, by French author Henry Cauvain. In this 1871 novel (sixteen years before the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes), Henry Cauvain imagined a depressed, anti-social, opium-smoking polymath detective, operating in Paris. It is not known if Conan Doyle read the novel, but he was fluent in French. Similarly, Michael Harrison suggested that a German self-styled "consulting detective" named Walter Scherer may have been the model for Holmes.

## **Fictional character biography**

### **Family and early life**

Details of Sherlock Holmes's life in Conan Doyle's stories are scarce and often vague. Nevertheless, mentions of his early life and extended family paint a loose biographical picture of the detective.

A statement of Holmes's age in "His Last Bow" places his year of birth at 1854; the story, set in August 1914, describes him as sixty years of age. His parents are not mentioned, although Holmes mentions that his "ancestors" were "country squires". In "The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter", he claims that his grandmother was sister to the French artist Vernet, without clarifying whether this was Claude Joseph, Carle, or Horace Vernet. Holmes's brother Mycroft, seven years his senior, is a government official. Mycroft has a unique civil service position as a kind of human database for all aspects of government policy. Sherlock describes his brother as the more intelligent of the two, but notes that Mycroft lacks any interest in physical investigation, preferring to spend his time at the Diogenes Club.

Holmes says that he first developed his methods of deduction as an undergraduate; his earliest cases, which he pursued as an amateur, came from fellow university students. A meeting with a classmate's father led him to adopt detection as a profession.

### **Life with Watson**

In the first Holmes tale, *A Study in Scarlet*, financial difficulties lead Holmes and Dr. Watson to share rooms together at 221B Baker Street, London. Their residence is maintained by their landlady, Mrs. Hudson. Holmes works as a detective for twenty-three years, with Watson assisting him for seventeen of those years. Most of the stories are frame narratives written from Watson's point of view, as summaries of the detective's most interesting cases. Holmes frequently calls Watson's records of Holmes's cases sensational and populist, suggesting that they fail to accurately and objectively report the "science" of his craft:

Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it [*A Study in Scarlet*] with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid. ... Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unravelling it.

Nevertheless, when Holmes recorded a case himself, he was forced to concede that he could more easily understand the need to write it in a manner that would appeal to the public rather than his intention to focus on his own technical skill.

Holmes's friendship with Watson is his most significant relationship.

When Watson is injured by a bullet, although the wound turns out to be "quite superficial", Watson is moved by Holmes's reaction:

It was worth a wound; it was worth many wounds; to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one

and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation. After confirming Watson's assessment of the wound, Holmes makes it clear to their opponent that the man would not have left the room alive if he genuinely had killed Watson.

### **Practice**

Holmes's clients vary from the most powerful monarchs and governments of Europe, to wealthy aristocrats and industrialists, to impoverished pawnbrokers and governesses. He is known only in select professional circles at the beginning of the first story, but is already collaborating with Scotland Yard. However, his continued work and the publication of Watson's stories raise Holmes's profile, and he rapidly becomes well known as a detective; so many clients ask for his help instead of (or in addition to) that of the police that, Watson writes, by 1887 "Europe was ringing with his name" and by 1895 Holmes has "an immense practice". Police outside London ask Holmes for assistance if he is nearby. A Prime Minister and the King of Bohemia visit 221B Baker Street in person to request Holmes's assistance; the President of France awards him the Legion of Honour for capturing an assassin; the King of Scandinavia is a client; and he aids the Vatican at least twice. The detective acts on behalf of the British government in matters of national security several times and declines a knighthood "for services which may perhaps some day be described". However, he does not actively seek fame and is usually content to let the police take public credit for his work.

### **The Great Hiatus**

The first set of Holmes stories was published between 1887 and 1893. Conan Doyle killed off Holmes in a final battle with the criminal mastermind Professor James Moriarty in "The Final Problem" (published 1893, but set in 1891), as Conan Doyle felt that "my literary energies should not be directed too much into one channel." However, the reaction of the public surprised Doyle very much. Distressed readers wrote anguished letters to *The Strand Magazine*, which suffered a terrible blow when 20,000 people cancelled their subscriptions to the magazine in protest. Conan Doyle himself received many protest letters, and one lady even began her letter with "You brute". Legend has it that Londoners were so distraught upon hearing the news of Holmes's death that they wore black armbands in mourning, though there is no known contemporary source for this; the earliest known reference to such events comes from 1949. However, the recorded public reaction to Holmes's death was unlike anything previously seen for fictional events. After resisting public pressure for eight years, Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (serialised in 1901–02, with an implicit setting before Holmes's death). In 1903, Conan Doyle wrote "The Adventure of the Empty House"; set in 1894, Holmes reappears, explaining to a stunned Watson that he had faked his death to fool his enemies. Following "The Adventure of the Empty House", Conan Doyle would sporadically write new Holmes stories until 1927. Holmes aficionados refer to the period from 1891 to 1894—between his disappearance and presumed death in "The Final Problem" and his reappearance in "The Adventure of the Empty House"—as the Great Hiatus. The earliest known use of this expression dates to 1946.

### **Retirement**

In *His Last Bow*, the reader is told that Holmes has retired to a small farm on the Sussex Downs and taken up beekeeping as his primary occupation. The move is not dated precisely, but can be presumed to be no later than 1904 (since it is referred to retrospectively in "The Adventure of the Second Stain", first published that year). The story features Holmes and Watson coming out of retirement to aid the British war effort. Only one other adventure, "The Adventure of the Lion's Mane", takes place during the detective's retirement.