

MENTAL FLOSS

[Home](#) / [ENTERTAINMENT](#)

20 Surprising Facts About Benedict Cumberbatch



By Alvin Ward

Jan 19, 2019 | Updated: Jul 19, 2021, 10:00 AM EDT



MENTAL FLOSS

If Benedict Cumberbatch isn't careful, he might just run out of dream roles to play. Since the earliest days of his career, the Oscar-nominated actor has made no secret that there were two roles at the top of his character bucket list: Hamlet and Patrick Melrose, the protagonist at the center of Edward St Aubyn's critically acclaimed series of **novels**.

In 2015, Cumberbatch took the **stage** in London to do the whole "to be or not to be" thing. (More on that later.) In 2018, he starred in *Patrick Melrose*, Showtime's **television** adaptation of the **book** series, and earned both Golden Globe and Emmy nominations for the role. As fans await his return to the Marvel Cinematic Universe in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, here are 20 facts about the actor.

1. Benedict Cumberbatch made his stage debut playing a "very bossy" Joseph in a Nativity play.

In a 2010 interview with London Theatre, Benedict Cumberbatch **shared** that his first stage performance found him playing "a very bossy Joseph in the Nativity play at primary school. Apparently I pushed Mary offstage because she was taking too long. Actresses eh!"

2. Benedict Cumberbatch thinks his name sounds like "a fart in a bath."



Tristan Fewings/Getty Images for Jaeger-LeCoultre

There's something very regal-sounding about a name like Benedict Cumberbatch, but it's not one that necessarily rolls right off the tongue. *The Washington Post* once **identified** the

MENTAL FLOSS

Cumberbatch had a feeling that his name might cause problems in his career, which is why he began his career as Benedict Carlton (which is his middle name). Ultimately, it was his agent who convinced him to use Cumberbatch, even though the actor **said** the surname sounds like “a fart in a bath.”

3. Benedict Cumberbatch toyed with the idea of becoming a lawyer.

Though he grew up in a family of actors, Cumberbatch wasn't always planning to live his life out in front of a camera. In fact, it was because of his parents' chosen profession that they encouraged him to pursue a more stable calling, which led him to want to become a criminal lawyer.

“[Acting is] a very odd, peripatetic, crazed, out of your control work and social schedule,” Cumberbatch **told** *The Mirror* in 2015. “It's very hard to plan a family life, let alone know where the next paycheck is coming from so they worked very, very hard as my parents, and actors, to afford me an education whereby I had the opportunity and the privilege to try and channel myself towards other goals.

“For a while, I wanted to be a barrister because there's definitely a crossover with criminal law—with trying to persuade an audience and a jury and a judge of the case and your client's story so I did go down that route for a little bit. I think they would have been very happy if I ended up there.”

He spoke with *Vulture* about his legal leanings, too, and **noted** that, “I would've loved the performance of court, the idea of persuading people, storytelling and all that. It parallels beautifully with acting, lots of frustrated, amateur dramatics going on in court all the time. I think lots of barristers literally perform in amateur dramatic societies and are very good actors. It's a massive crossover.”

4. Benedict Cumberbatch's parents on *Sherlock* are also his parents in real life.

Speaking of Cumberbatch's parents: While both Timothy Carlton and Wanda Ventham are familiar faces as actors in their own right, fans of *Sherlock* might also be quick to recognize them as Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes's parents.

In 2014, Cumberbatch **told** the Press Association that he was a little nervous about working with his parents, as “They're Equity card carrying members but you know it was nerve-wracking because they are actors as well and yet they were brilliant and they were fantastic.”

5. Benedict Cumberbatch spent a year teaching in India.

MENTAL FLOSS

people. It was incredible, and I kind of floated out of there after two weeks.”

Though teaching and acting may seem unrelated, many of the skills and practices Cumberbatch learned during that time eventually helped him in his acting career. “Stillness is an essential part of acting,” he said, “so I already had a certain amount of focus in that beforehand. A still point is a very, very hard place to find, especially among the usual kind of pulped sheep pushed around by the blinking flashing world of modern technology.”

6. Benedict Cumberbatch was kidnapped in South Africa.

While filming the 2005 miniseries *To the Ends of the Earth*, Cumberbatch experienced another kind of epiphany when he nearly lost his life. The actor and two of his co-stars took a day off to learn how to scuba dive near Mozambique. On their way back from the outing, the actor **explained**, “The three of us were trying to change the tire. These six men appeared suddenly from the eucalyptus. They said: ‘Put your hands on your head, don’t look at us,’ and were frisking us for drugs, money, weapons. Then they bundled us into the car. They dragged me up and put me in the boot of the car.”

Like so many of the quick-thinking characters he has played, Cumberbatch **realized** his only option was to try and argue his way out of the situation:

“I said: ‘If you leave me in here, it’s not the lack of air, it’s the small space. There’s a problem with my heart and my brain.’ “I just tried to explain to them: ‘I will die, possibly have a fit, and it will be a problem for you. I will be a dead Englishman in your car. Not good.’ “They shut the boot and had an argument, and then pulled me out. So I kind of thank God I had the presence of mind to give them the idea that it would be better to keep me alive. And the other two hadn’t been harmed.”

In a way, the incident became the impetus for Cumberbatch to pursue his dreams even more aggressively. “It taught me that you come into this world as you leave it, on your own,” he said. “It’s made me want to live a life slightly less ordinary.”

7. Julian Assange tried to talk Benedict Cumberbatch out of starring in *The Fifth Estate*.



MENTAL FLOSS

his word count telling the actor why making the film was a terrible idea:

“You will be used, as a hired gun, to assume the appearance of the truth in order to assassinate it. To present me as someone morally compromised and to place me in a falsified history. To create a work, not of fiction, but of debased truth. “Not because you want to, of course you don’t, but because, in the end, you are a jobbing actor who gets paid to follow the script, no matter how debauched. “Your skills play into the hands of people who are out to remove me and WikiLeaks from the world. “I believe that you should reconsider your involvement in this enterprise.”

The film went forward as planned, with Cumberbatch in the lead (though it was a critical and box office failure, which likely pleased Assange).

8. Benedict Cumberbatch is easily starstruck.

When asked during a Reddit AMA whether he’s ever been starstruck while meeting or working with a fellow actor, Cumberbatch admitted that it happens all the time: “Uhhhhhhhh. Every time I’ve met someone famous who I’ve been in the audience of,” he **said**. “I have the same butterflies and inability to be cool. I approach them as a fellow member of the human race as the next person in their audience does. I’ve been doing this for 10 odd years, and so to meet people who thrilled me with their work for my entire life in such a concentrated manner as has happened over the last few years has been mind-blowing.”

9. Ted Danson was really, *really* excited to meet Benedict Cumberbatch.

While Cumberbatch may get nervous every time he meets an acting hero, one well-known actor who was pretty excited to meet Cumberbatch was ***Cheers*** star Ted Danson. When asked during a **Reddit AMA** to share the “weirdest encounter you’ve had with a fan,” Cumberbatch answered: “Ted Danson at a pre-Oscar party screaming across a floor of people like Leonardo DiCaprio, Ray Liotta, Kristen Stewart, Kirsten Dunst, et al while pushing past them and knocking their drinks. ‘OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! IT’S F***ING SHERLOCK HOLMES!’”

10. Benedict Cumberbatch wasn't immediately sold on playing Sherlock Holmes.

MENTAL FLOSS

11. The BBC didn't think Benedict Cumberbatch was "sexy" enough to pull off *Sherlock*.

It's funny to think about now, considering Cumberbatch's massive worldwide fanbase, but just as the actor wasn't immediately sold on playing Sherlock Holmes, the BBC wasn't sure the actor was a great match for the role—because they wanted someone with sex appeal. While speaking at the Hay Festival in 2014, *Sherlock* co-creator Steven Moffat talked about the BBC's track record in determining which actors might connect with audiences—Cumberbatch being one of them.

“They said of casting **David Tennant** as Casanova, ‘Damn, you should have cast someone sexier,’” Moffat **said**. “With Benedict Cumberbatch, we were told the same thing. ‘You promised us a sexy Sherlock, not him.’”

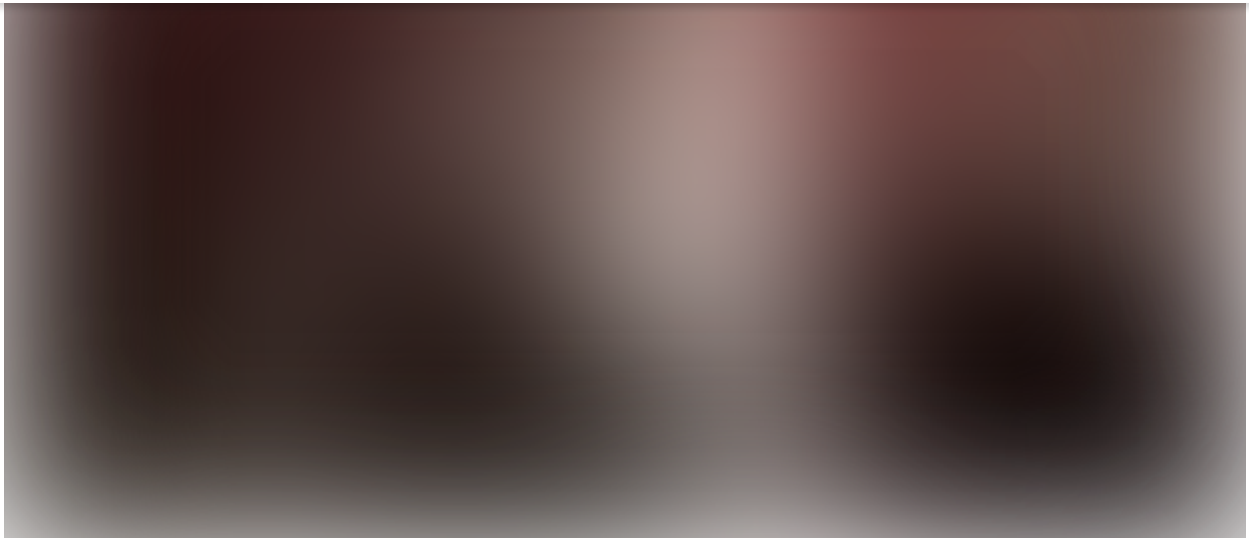
Sue Vertue, a fellow producer on *Sherlock* (and Moffat's wife), relayed a similar tale to *Entertainment Weekly* just a few months prior to Moffat's comments, telling the magazine: “When we first cast [Cumberbatch], people were saying, ‘You promised us a sexy one!’ People weren't thinking of Benedict in that light at all.” His name, apparently, posed another problem: “When people said, ‘Who's playing Sherlock Holmes?’ and we'd say, ‘Benedict Cumberbatch,’ everyone looked very vague,” Vertue said. “Then we'd always have to spell his name.”

12. Benedict Cumberbatch is (distantly) related to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

It turns out that Sherlock Holmes may have been the role Cumberbatch was born to play. In 2017, researchers at Ancestry.com made the rather **fascinating discovery** that Cumberbatch and Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are sixteenth cousins, twice removed. The ancestral link between the two is former Duke of Lancaster John of Gaunt, who was Doyle's 15th great-grandfather and Cumberbatch's 17th great-grandfather.

13. Benedict Cumberbatch also has a family link to Alan Turing.

MENTAL FLOSS



Benedict Cumberbatch (with Charles Dance) play Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* (2014). / The Weinstein Company

Amazingly, the Conan Doyle connection wasn't the first time Cumberbatch's ancestry was linked to one of his characters. In 2014, the same team of researchers **determined** that Cumberbatch was the 17th cousin of **Alan Turing**, the computer scientist/codebreaker he played in Morten Tyldum's *The Imitation Game* (2014)—a role that earned Cumberbatch an Oscar nomination in 2015.

14. Benedict Cumberbatch turned *Hamlet* into "the most in-demand show of all time."

In 2015, Cumberbatch achieved one of his lifetime dreams when it was announced that he would play Hamlet in a 12-week run at London's Barbican theater. Tickets ended up selling out almost as fast as one could say "To be or not to be." As *The Telegraph* **reported** in 2014:

"The curtain does not go up on the production for another year, but Cumberbatch's Hamlet is nevertheless outselling the next most popular show, the current run of A Streetcar Named Desire at the Young Vic, by four to one. The show has even registered 214 per cent more ticket searches in the hours after tickets were released than Beyoncé and Jay Z's global On the Run tour. "Hamlet tickets went on sale at 10am on August 11 and within minutes fans were expressing frustration at finding themselves more than 20,000 places back in the queue."

15. Benedict Cumberbatch has a rare genetic mutation.

If Cumberbatch's eyes seem to regularly change color, you're not imagining things: The actor was born with both central heterochromia and sectoral heterochromia—two rare-but-harmless genetic mutations that affect his eyes. Each of his eyes has multiple colors (a mix

MENTAL FLOSS

actor your eyes are vital in conveying any internal thought process or feeling, and for that I have my mum to thank,” he **said**.

16. Benedict Cumberbatch has been rendered in chocolate on more than one occasion.



UKTV/FLICKR

In a somewhat bizarre promotional campaign by Britain’s UKTV in 2015, Cumberbatch narrowly beat out David Tennant by a margin of just one percent to be named “TV Dishiest Drama Actor.” The prize? Having a life-sized statue, made entirely of Belgian chocolate, created in the actor’s likeness.

It took a team of eight people more than 250 man-hours to construct the delicious doppelgänger, dubbed “**Benedict Chocobatch**.” In 2016, he was recreated in the sweet stuff again, though this time as an edible chocolate bunny/Benedict **hybrid** that fans could actually purchase ... and eat.

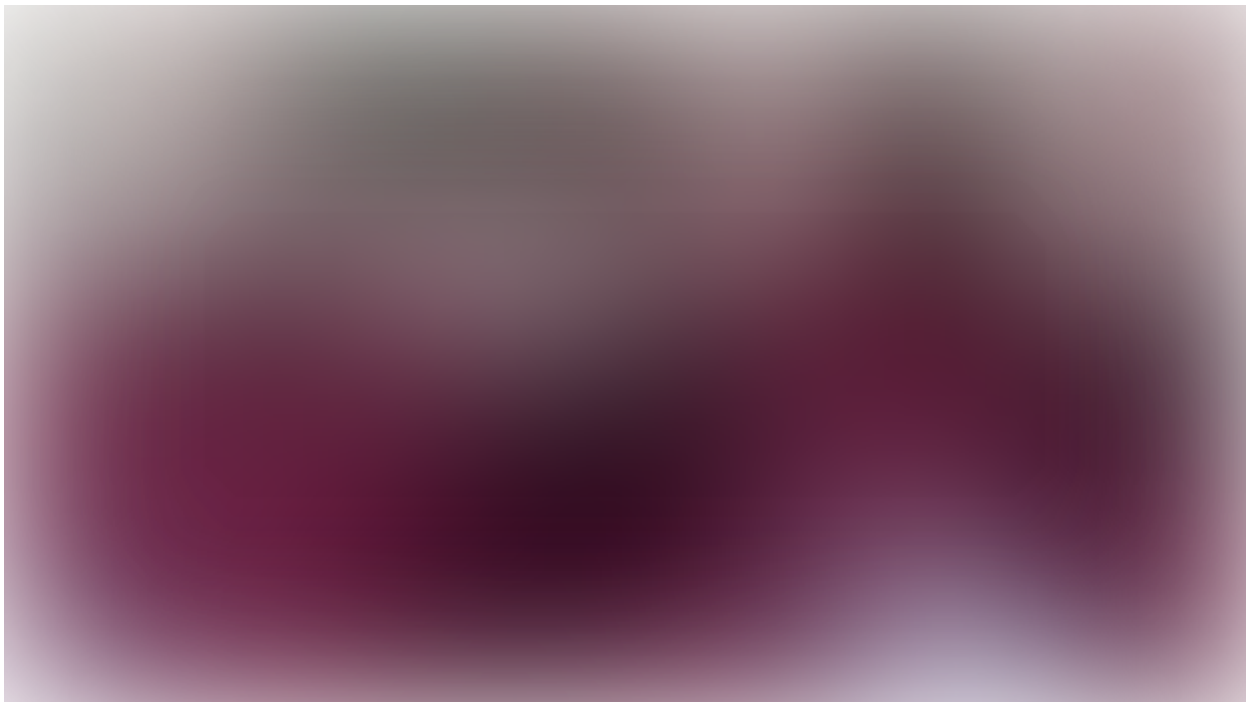
17. Benedict Cumberbatch is the leading man in a lot of fan fiction.

In addition to being a leading man on the stage and both the small and big screens, Cumberbatch plays a starring role in a lot of fan fiction. *A lot of fan fiction!* In 2013, *The Mirror* **estimated** that approximately 100 million words of fan fiction had been written about the *Sherlock* star. Considering that was six years ago, the word count has certainly only grown.

MENTAL FLOSS

issue very clear by stating that he won't work on a project if his female co-stars aren't being paid the same. "Equal pay and a place at the table are the central tenets of feminism," Cumberbatch **told** *Radio Times*. "Look at your quotas. Ask what women are being paid, and say: 'If she's not paid the same as the men, I'm not doing it.'"

19. Simon Pegg convinced Benedict Cumberbatch that he might have radiation poisoning.



Paramount Pictures

While filming *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, Simon Pegg decided to have a little fun with Cumberbatch by convincing him that he was at risk for radiation exposure. According to Pegg, it worked. He **recounted** the story to *The Sun* in 2013:

*"I don't like seeing people get embarrassed. But we were filming in a nuclear facility and one day I said that Chris [Pine] needed neutron cream—otherwise he'd get sunburn. He said, 'What?' And I said, 'Yeah, you'll get a rash from ambient radiation in the air.' From there the trick spread to other cast members. Finally, we got Benedict. He had this speech and he kept f***ing it up. Afterwards he said, 'Guys, I'm ever so sorry—I've got a real headache. I think the ions were getting to me.' He was so convinced."*

20. Benedict Cumberbatch is not cool with "Cumberbitches."

When Cumberbatch's massive contingency of female fans dubbed themselves "Cumberbitches," the actor took issue with the pejorative moniker. "It's not even

MENTAL FLOSS



- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| ABOUT | CONTACT US |
| NEWSLETTERS | PRIVACY POLICY |
| COOKIE POLICY | TERMS OF SERVICE |
| ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT | SITEMAP |
| A-Z Index | COOKIE SETTINGS |

MENTAL FLOSS
