

Introduction

The Book of Life

“Why does the mystique of Sherlock persist?” the journalist Christopher Hitchens asked in 1999, reviewing the latest biography of Holmes’s creator, Arthur Conan Doyle. “It is sheer power of mind that does the trick,” he answered admiringly, “and that turns the tables not just on evil but—by letting in the light—on superstition and nameless dread as well.”¹ In the same year, Hitchens engaged Holmes to turn the tables on President Bill Clinton, whose administration had bombed a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant. The White House claimed that Osama bin Laden was manufacturing nerve gas there, but officials refused to name confidential sources or provide classified evidence. Hitchens compared those officials who would not speak on the record to Doyle’s famous watchdog that did not bark in the nighttime: “In the Sherlock Holmes tale ‘Silver Blaze,’ the failure of such a beast to give tongue—you should pardon the expression—was the giveaway that exposed his master as the intruder.” Clinton must be behind the cover-up, Hitchens reasoned, which left only the question of motive. Listing and crossing off possible reasons to destroy the plant, he again took a page from Doyle: “Take away every exploded hypothesis, says Sherlock Holmes—this time in ‘The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet’—and the one you are left with, however unlikely, will be true.” In this case, Hitchens concluded, the truth was that Clinton authorized the bombing to appear more presidential during the Monica Lewinsky scandal.²

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Hitchens argued that President George W. Bush had better reason to authorize bombing. In his view, the Iraq War was a necessary defense of core liberal principles, especially the separation of church and state. Over the next decade, Hitchens attacked not just Islamic fundamentalism but all organized religion as dreadful superstition. An outspoken atheist, he debated the existence of God with creationists and debunked their arguments for intelligent design in nature. In a 2009 essay on faith-based versus evidence-based thinking, Hitchens pointed to Doyle, who spent the last decade of his life on a worldwide mission for spiritualism, writing less about Sherlock Holmes and more about everything from ectoplasm to fairies. “The case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s unshakeable belief in fairies is not precisely an instance of religious tomfoolery,” said Hitchens, “but does show that certain kinds of belief are evidence-proof.”³ Despite Doyle’s mission, Hitchens could still believe in the rationalist Holmes, but only if he distanced the character from the author in his mind. Finishing Doyle’s biography, Hitchens was “grateful that, when he took himself over the precipice and into the maelstrom of babble and superstition, Conan Doyle left his main man behind on the ledge, there to bear witness to the beauties of deduction.”⁴

Emancipated from religion, Holmes now has the power to enlighten his readers, at least according to many how-to handbooks. In *Success Secrets of Sherlock Holmes* (2011), David Acord reads the Holmes canon as “a kind of Victorian-era self-help manual” that will “teach us the philosophy and mind-set we need to succeed beyond our wildest dreams.”⁵ Daniel Smith’s *How to Think Like Sherlock* (2012) recounts “Holmes’s fantastic feats of intellect” and promises “all sorts of information, advice and tips on how you can more closely resemble him.”⁶ Maria Konnikova makes the same promise in *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes* (2013), which “takes Holmes’s methodology to explore and explain the steps necessary for building up habits of thought that will allow you to engage mindfully with yourself and your world.” *Mastermind* has heftier credentials than its competitors: much of it was originally published as a guest blog for *Scientific American*, in which Konnikova presented Holmes as “an ideal model for how we can think better than we do.”⁷ Her book thus belongs in both the self-help and the popular science sections of the bookstore, alongside other guides that employ the detective to illustrate principles and methods. Explaining quantum physics in *The Strange Case of Mrs. Hudson’s Cat*

(1997), Colin Bruce quotes the same stories as Hitchens, because they “describe just those rules that good scientific investigation should follow.”⁸ James O’Brien uses those stories to teach forensics in *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes* (2013), agreeing with Hitchens that “the character’s ongoing appeal and success” is due to “his knowledge of science and frequent use of the scientific method.”⁹

To rest their cases on Holmes’s methods, however, both O’Brien and Konnikova must distance the rational character from his author’s beliefs, just as Hitchens did. O’Brien argues that Doyle “began to leave science out” of the stories once his “shift to spiritualism” started; it is therefore “no coincidence that the stories that are short on science are generally viewed as inferior.”¹⁰ Konnikova concedes that “Doyle failed the test of Holmesian thinking” when he accepted photographic evidence of fairies, but she excuses him because he meets the different standard of “what passes for rationality *given the context of the times*,” during the spiritualist revival after World War I.¹¹ To accept that excuse, we might appeal to the authority of Albert Einstein, who endorsed the “pure thinking” of “the great detective” in *The Evolution of Physics* (1938), a survey for general readers.¹² For additional evidence, we might refer to the cover illustrations of *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*, the magazine in which Holmes first appeared at the end of 1887. On the front, a scientific gentleman rises from his laboratory table to light a lamp overhead. The back advertises Beecham’s Pills, “universally admitted to be a marvelous antidote” to a variety of intestinal disorders. Sandwiched between these illustrations of pure research and modern medicine is *A Study in Scarlet*, the origin narrative of “a supremely ingenious detective,” as its publisher announced in the *Times*, “whose performances, while based on the most rational principles, outshine any hitherto depicted.”¹³ The *Beeton’s* cover may fit that billing, but the title of the magazine produces dramatic irony. Sherlock Holmes, the scientific method incarnate, was originally packaged and presented as a Christmas story, a supernatural genre better known for ghosts and fairies than detectives.

Rather than distancing the character from his author, leaving spiritualism out of the stories, this book considers Holmes in light of Doyle’s beliefs. Each chapter investigates the detective at a different stage of his shining career, from his first appearance in 1887 to his current wide release on the internet. The chapters all proceed inductively, keeping an eye on Holmes while gathering documentary evidence from other sources, from Victorian

periodicals to television shows, from séance notes to website posts, following a trail that weaves in and out of the stories themselves. As the evidence accumulates, the trail loops back on itself to revisit previous scenes, seeking corroboration and noting correspondences. Continual cross-reference illuminates the spiritual aura of Sherlock Holmes, revealing the sources of his mystique.

Chapter 1 surveys the religious questions being debated in the London press when Holmes appeared at the end of 1887, focusing on arguments between natural scientists and Christian apologists about who knows best, and how they know it. Which will enlighten us: reason or revelation? What should we trust: evidence or authority? Why are we here: chance or design? Where are we headed: extinction or apocalypse? To the Victorians, those choices seemed stark. Even if many scientists faithfully attended church and many clergymen closely studied nature, the cultural debate itself was highly polarized. As various writers staked out their positions, both marking and mediating their differences, the figure of an ingenious detective began to emerge, between the lines and within the margins. While Holmes does not come fully into focus until the next chapter, which takes up *Beeton's Christmas Annual* again, these contemporaneous periodicals set the terms that would define him.

Those terms preoccupied the young Doyle, who fell away from his family's Catholicism during his medical studies at the University of Edinburgh. While he rejected organized religion, he retained strong spiritual yearnings. Chapter 2 follows his personal religious development up through the creation of Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, a biographical approach that shifts our point of view of both the character and the novel. While the detective is no spiritualist, he encouraged and enabled his author to become one; writing *Scarlet* was the tipping point in Doyle's search for an evidence-based faith. To be successful, that search required a strange detour halfway through the novel to Utah, where Holmes cannot follow—and where many readers would prefer not to go at all. Upon returning, however, we find the detective wonderfully transfigured: Holmes was Doyle's good faith solution to the irreconcilable differences between scientists and apologists.

Once Doyle found spiritualism, Holmes seemed disposable. Doyle pushed him over the precipice of Reichenbach Falls in 1893, only to pull him back eight years later in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–2). Holmes was still too valuable, both financially and psychologically, for his author to

let him go. Chapter 3 follows the born-again detective along the path to his author's public conversion in 1916, when Doyle became known as the Saint Paul of spiritualism. Like Hitchens, the arch-skeptic Martin Gardner insists on a healthy distance between author and character: "There is scarcely a page in any of Doyle's books on the occult that does not reveal him to be the antithesis of Holmes."¹⁴ However, as Doyle built his case for a new revelation, bearing witness to the beauties of the afterlife, there is scarcely a page that does not recycle the language and logic of his detective fiction. The author took over the role of his character, whom he could then finally retire; without Holmes to hold him back, Doyle plunged deep into what he called the "illimitable ocean" of spiritualist thought.¹⁵

After Doyle's death in 1930, both of his known universes—the fictional address of 221B Baker Street and the spiritual afterlife called "Summerland"—continued to expand outward. Chapter 4 examines how the two universes functioned in parallel. Doyle's widow spent the rest of her life defending her husband's spiritualist legacy from overzealous followers; her sons spent the rest of their lives defending their father's literary estate from overzealous fans. Doyle's followers started conjuring up the author at their own séances; Holmes's fans started writing about the character in their own stories. In both cases, the family prohibited the unauthorized use of such likenesses, reserving its right to decide how best to conserve those universes and preserve the spirit of Doyle. The family's problem was that he had designed both universes to function smoothly and remotely without himself as the cosmological constant. In his absence, followers and fans were free to keep the faith however they liked, beyond the reach of both reason and the law. The chapter concludes with its own detour to Utah, this time to explore a third Sherlockian universe: the mystical field of literary criticism, which grounds itself on the dirty work of detection. Readers of this book wondering why it does not begin with a literature review of Holmes scholarship will find both the review and the reason buried there.

Chapter 5 traces Holmes once he departs the text, hits mass media, and goes viral. The television series *Sherlock* and *Elementary* bring Holmes up to the present day, when the ultramodern cities of London and New York simultaneously start to revolve around the Victorian detective, to strange effect. After more than a century, Doyle's good faith solution to the cultural conflicts of his day has evolved into a new problem: the language and logic of his detective fiction now informs parallel universes and alternate

realities in our public sphere, especially intelligent design creationism and 9/11 conspiracy theory. On the internet, babble and superstition have no antidote, not even Sherlock Holmes, whose rational principles only make things worse.

Yet that is all Holmes has ever done, because he is only what passes for rationality, in any context. His performances make a show of science, as Régis Messac argued in 1929, but his methods are closer to “une science dégradée ou une pseudo-science” (a degraded science or a pseudoscience).¹⁶ Everybody knows that Holmes’s logic is not deductive, deriving a priori truth from rational first principles, as Aristotle taught. Nor is it inductive, generalizing a posteriori knowledge from past empirical observation and experience, as Francis Bacon demonstrated. If anything, his logic is abductive, making inferences to the best explanation that covers the known facts, although in Holmes’s case “best” usually means “first that comes to mind.” He is always right, even when the facts are only loosely covered. But that is not a worry; that is the beauty. Because everybody also knows that he is fictional, we humor those leaps and lapses. On the one hand, Holmes’s methodology “amounts only to an incoherent, even contradictory, store of alluring maxims,” as Peter McDonald observes; on the other, there is no point “subjecting the stories to such close critical scrutiny,” because they are “an exercise in mythopoeic image-making,” not a guide to best practices.¹⁷ However, if we don’t scrutinize the stories, then they will lure us into forgetting that the maxims are bunk. “It is only deduction if the reader can be made to believe that it is,” says Ronald Pearsall, “by suspending his critical faculties.”¹⁸ Once that happens, image becomes everything. Wearing a deerstalker seems like enough to make you a mastermind, when in fact you have stopped making sense. Holmesian thinking is not a test of logic: it is a waiver, an excuse for not testing your reasons, on the grounds that you are always right when it counts and only wrong when it doesn’t. The mystique of Sherlock persists because it is pure mystification—a powerful trick of the mind.

When reading fiction, there is no harm in suspending one’s critical faculties, but reality is another story. Beginning with Beecham’s cure-all on the back cover, Holmes keeps bearing witness to faith-based pseudoscience, helping to confuse logical and magical thinking and licensing quackery that goes from harmless to poisonous. Citing Holmes is a risky move, because it tends to encourage flawed reasoning, whether conscious or not, especially

when a desired end is in view. Hitchens was so bent on indicting the president for conspiracy that he was willing to overstretch the analogy between Clinton's White House and a criminal's doghouse; by that logic, which takes discretion for confession, everyone is always guilty of something. Konnikova is so intent on elevating Holmes as a mastermind that she is willing to lower the bar for his credulous author; by that logic, which gives excuse to error, no one is ever wrong about anything. Both writers make themselves believe their own deductions.

Despite all those recent how-to handbooks, *Beeton's Christmas Annual* works more like a cartoon flipbook, merrily converting good faith into bad science. Read cover to cover, the page-turning mystery in the middle gradually transforms the science lab on the front into the sales pitch on the back, *lux et veritas* into a laxative, so that useful knowledge turns to mere excrement. Sherlock Holmes is not the scientific antithesis of his spiritualist author; he is the pseudoscientific thesis of spiritualism itself. The quality or truth of spiritualist belief is not the concern here; the problem is the quality of spiritualist logic. Its false claim to scientific authority becomes truly dangerous when applied elsewhere, in bad faith.

Dr. Watson senses that something is off from the start, soon after moving into Baker Street. Picking up a magazine to read over breakfast, Watson sees that his new flatmate has pencil-marked the heading of one particular article, which explains "how much an observant man might learn by an accurate and systematic examination of all that came in his way." From "a momentary expression" the logician can "fathom a man's inmost thoughts," while from "a drop of water" he can "infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other." The anonymous author calls his method "the Science of Deduction and Analysis." Its results show that "all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link." Watson has his doubts. "The reasoning was close and intense," he allows, "but the deductions appeared to me to be far fetched and exaggerated." Anticipating the objection, the author explains that those who are "uninitiated" in his method will "consider him as a necromancer," because his conclusions are "as infallible as so many propositions of Euclid." While the article proceeds to tell deduction from divination, Watson notes that its "somewhat ambitious title" has already blurred the distinction: "The Book of Life" invokes Revelation rather than *Elements of Geometry* as a model of total knowledge. On the grounds of its having no

grounds, Watson concludes that this so-called science is “rubbish,” neither empirical nor logical. He exclaims, “What ineffable twaddle!”¹⁹

Amused, Holmes outs himself as the anonymous author, and then goes on to spend the next four decades proving to Watson that “the theories which I have expressed there, and which appear to you to be so chimerical, are really extremely practical” (23–24). Before following them into those future stories, let us linger over breakfast to ask what other recent magazines and newspapers might be within reach of the table. Holmes spends so much time clipping articles from the London press that we will begin by doing the same, immersing ourselves in 1887 periodical literature that documents the state of play between religion and science during the advent of the detective. The logic of those arguments will inform the detective’s theories; the language of those writers will resonate in his stories. For the moment, let us set aside the strangeness of Holmes writing an anonymous article about himself in the third person, marking its title, and then leaving it out for his new friend to find and read. “What is it?” he asks innocently, as if he were not observant enough to know what Watson is reading. To begin answering his question, the next chapter serves as a long contextual footnote to “The Book of Life,” with its biblical allusion to the list of faithful Christians who will be saved on Judgment Day. Everyone else, prophesies Revelation, will be thrown into the lake of fire, and so the first step is to ask who, at the end of 1887, was trying to make the cut.