Detecting Order Amid Disorder

What did a little-known English physician named Arthur Conan Doyle give to the world 100 years ago? Not only a detective whose solutions to the most vexing of crimes proved to be, in the end, "elementary." Not simply, in other words, Sherlock Holmes. Doyle also bequeathed to writers an invaluable formula for fiction. Following his example, scores of authors have created the illusion that an intelligent man can always find logic and order in a world that appears, thanks to social change and the revelations of science, increasingly disordered. Here, Frank McConnell assesses Dr. Doyle's accomplishment.

by Frank D. McConnell

No variety of popular fiction has been so widely and solemnly discussed as the detective story. T. S. Eliot confessed to being a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast. W. H. Auden wrote an essay on the moral implications of detective fiction; Edmund Wilson deigned to disdain Agatha Christie (who kept right on writing); and Geoffrey Hartmann, one of our more ponderous academic critics, wrote a lengthy appreciation of Ross Macdonald's *Underground Man* for the *New York Review of Books* that, during the early 1970s, set graduate students' hearts all atwitter. Add to those potent names the vast number of conferences on the genre held at universities major and minor, and the reams of essays and books on the detective film, and the number of English courses, every year, in "The Detective Story," and you have the makings of . . . well . . . a cult.

After so much discussion, what could possibly remain to be said about an admittedly specialized, sometimes even hidebound, subtype of storytelling?

As it turns out, a good deal.

For one thing, 1987 marks the 100th—only the 100th—birthday of the form. Scholars may continue to debate the prehistory of the detective story, about its origins in the Gothic novel, in Edgar Allen Poe, in Wilkie Collins, and so forth. But the fact is that the form was

Collier's *magazine introduced many American readers to Sherlock Holmes. The September 1903 issue featured the supersleuth's "resurrection" after Doyle's earlier attempt to kill him off provoked widespread discontent.*

born in 1887, when a not-particularly-successful physician who signed himself "A. Conan Doyle" published a story—a short novel, actually—called *A Study in Scarlet* in *Beeton's Christmas Annual.* It was the first Sherlock Holmes story, and though not an immediate success, it soon caught on. (Doyle would abandon his practice four years later to write full time.) More important than its reception, however, is the fact that every detective story written since *Scarlet* stands in its shadow.

Not that the story—about Sherlock Holmes's attempt to discover the perpetrator of a bizarre and mysteriously motivated series of London murders—is so brilliant. In fact, the story is clumsy in its construction, and Doyle's prose style is, at best, passable late Victorian. None of

that matters. For Doyle created a myth—the myth of the private detective—that, after a century of mutations and revisions, still retains its fascination for us and for our culture.

How did he do it? How did a "minor" talent come to exercise a stronger influence over posterity than such contemporaries as George Eliot, Henry James, and Robert Browning?

Jack the Ripper

The answer is, at least in large measure, "innocence and luck," a formula Jacques Maritain once applied to the poet Dante. Doyle, like Dante, had the innocence to be completely vulnerable to the currents of thought of his time, and the luck to have been born into an interesting age. Doyle lived and wrote through the years that saw the birth of the 20th-century urban imagination. It was a time, I believe, that virtually required the invention of the detective story, and of the private detective as well.

Consider the auguries attending the birth of Holmes. The year is 1887. Only 28 years before, Darwin's *Origin of Species* had shocked the comfortable Victorian anthropocentric world-view with a degree of sedate violence that can only be called seismic; aftershocks are still being felt. As Doyle wrote, London was nearing the extreme phase of a century-long urban explosion, which no one knew how to control or regulate; the population influx from the English countryside was creating three of the most distinctive features of 20th-century life: suburbs, unemployment, and slums.

And less than a year after the publication of *A Study in Scarlet*, modern crime—serial crime, senseless crime, crime as urban *dread*—would find its first demon incarnate. A person (or persons) never identified would commit a series of disgusting murders of female prostitutes in Whitechapel, London's red-light district. Newspaper reporters quickly dubbed him Jack the Ripper.

Innocence and luck. Arthur Conan Doyle was found by an audience inhabiting a city too large to be understood, frightened by a half-understood scientific proof that seemed to some to suggest that we all shouldn't be here anyway. Doyle's was a society, moreover, that would soon be terrorized by the realization that, in a world where all is possible, *all* is possible.

Add to this the growth of the reading public, all those carpenters and downstairs maids who 50 years before wouldn't have cared but

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A late picture of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). Born, raised, and educated in Edinburgh, Scotland, the author practiced medicine until 1891. In addition to the Holmes tales, he wrote historical novels and serious histories, including the authoritative British Campaigns in Europe *(1928).*

now wanted to know, to read, and to believe that the new world wasn't that new but shared the reassuring contours of the world they had always known. And add to that the new and surprising detail that a man could make a living writing stories for this newly literate class. There is the recipe. Stir and cook properly, and what do you get?

You get Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes is a mythic figure, of course, and the unfortunate consequence of that status is an odd kind of publicity-enshrouded anonymity. Think about Don Quixote, whom everyone knows well, especially those who haven't read the book. Think about JFK, a ghost evocable by his monogram alone. Who are they? If a myth is the shared self-realization of a culture, then the one thing a myth loses in becoming a myth is him- or herself. Fictive or real, it doesn't matter.

The numerous clubs of Doyle enthusiasts, none of which is more famous than the Baker Street Irregulars (founded in 1933), offer a kind of inverse illustration of this. In their good-humored searching out of details of Holmes's life (Did he ever visit America? Was Nero Wolf his illegitimate son by Irene Adler?), they actually parody two of the generative intellectual activities of our era: Biblical criticism and "scientific" historiography. Not for nothing do the Irregulars refer to Holmes as the "Master" and to the complete Holmes stories and novels as the "Sacred Writings." They reenact, in play, what 19th- and 20th-century

DR. WATSON MEETS MR. HOLMES

In this scene from A Study in Scarlet *(1887), Dr. Watson, recently returned to London from Afghanistan and eager to find someone to share lodgings with him, is taken by Mr. Stamford to meet an odd chap by the name of Sherlock Holmes, who is busily at work in a hospital laboratory. En route, Stamford tells Watson about Holmes:*

"Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes—it approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving a friend a pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects. To do him justice, I think that he would take it himself with the same readiness. He appears to have a passion for definite and exact knowledge."

"Very right too."

"Yes, but it may be pushed to excess. When it comes to beating the subjects in the dissecting-rooms with a stick, it is certainly taking rather a bizarre shape."

"Beating the subjects!"

"Yes, to verify how far bruises may be produced after death. I saw him at it with my own eyes."

"And yet you say he is not a medical student?"

"No. Heaven knows what the objects of his studies are. But here we are, and you must form your own impression about him." As he spoke, we turned down a narrow lane and passed through a small side-door, which opened into a wing of the great hospital. It was familiar ground to me, and I needed no guiding as we ascended the bleak stone staircase and made our way down the long corridor with its vista of whitewashed wall and dun-coloured doors. Near the farther end a low arched passage branched away from it and led to the chemical laboratory.

This was a lofty chamber, lined and littered with countless bottles. Broad,

intellectuals have solemnly undertaken as a central burden—the detection of fact and order underlying the chaos of history.

"Detection" is the appropriate word. One reason that Holmes looms as large in our imagination as he does—one reason he has spawned so many brilliant imitations and derivations, from Father Brown to Philip Marlowe to James Bond—is that the structure of the detective story is, in the mode of play, the structure of the very age that gives it birth, the age of analysis, linguistic, Freudian, or physical.

When Nicholas Meyer wrote his brilliant re-creation of the legend, *The Seven Per Cent Solution,* relating the meeting of Holmes and Sigmund Freud, he was only incarnating the obvious. In some ideal universe where fiction and reality coincide, Holmes *should* have met Freud—and Einstein, Niels Bohr, Max Weber, and even Sir James George Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough.*

low tables were scattered about, which bristled with retorts, test-tubes, and little Bunsen lamps, with their blue flickering flames. There was only one student in the room, who was bending over a distant table absorbed in his work. At the sound of our steps he glanced round and sprang to his feet with a cry of pleasure.

"I've found it! I've found it," he shouted to my companion, running towards us with a test-tube in his hand, "I have found a re-agent which is precipitated by hœmoglobin, and by nothing else." Had he discovered a gold mine, greater delight could not have shone upon his features.

"Dr. Watson, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said Stamford, introducing us.

"How are you?" he said cordially, gripping my hand with a strength for which I should hardly have given him credit. "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive."

"How on earth did you know that?" I asked in astonishment.

"Never mind," said he, chuckling to himself. "The question now is about hœmoglobin. No doubt you see the significance of this discovery of mine?"

"It is interesting, chemically, no doubt," I answered, "but practically—"

"Why, man, it is the most practical medico-legal discovery for years. Don't you see that it gives us an infallible test for blood stains. Come over here now!" He seized me by the coat-sleeve in his eagerness, and drew me over to the table at which he had been working. "Let us have some fresh blood," he said, digging a long bodkin into his finger, and drawing off the resulting drop of blood in a chemical pipette. "Now, I add this small quantity of blood to a litre of water. You perceive that the resulting mixture has the appearance of pure water. The proportion of blood cannot be more than one in a million. I have no doubt, however, that we shall be able to obtain the characteristic reaction." As he spoke, he threw into the vessel a few white crystals, and then added some drops of a transparent fluid. In an instant the contents assumed a dull mahogany colour, and a brownish dust was precipitated to the bottom of the glass jar.

"Ha! ha!" he cried, clapping his hands, and looking as delighted as a child with a new toy. "What do you think of that?"

What they all have in common is a passionate commitment to the art of analysis: that is, a belief that a man can stand outside the universe as it is given to us—or imposed upon us—and, through sheer force of intellect, uncover its hidden order.

To the analyst as to the detective, in other words, the universe is a game, a test, a maze whose rules you discover by going through it. And the only guide you have is the guide of reason. In our ideal fictional/real universe, Holmes would have also met Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. Both are, in their way, mad scientists—"mad" here meaning withdrawn, eccentric, irrevocably cerebral, and burning to understand the secrets Nature has flirtatiously hidden from us. In other words, both are detectives.

Raffiniert ist der Herrgott, aber boshaft ist er nicht, said Einstein in an immortal utterance: "Subtle is the Lord God, but a joker he

is not." On the rock of that faith is founded the scientific world-view—and the premise of the classic detective story. After one of Holmes's customarily amazing displays of the art of deduction (in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*), Watson exclaims: "When I hear you give your reasons the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled, until you explain your process."

"Quite so," answers Holmes, with equally characteristic arrogance. "You see, but you do not observe."

The detective's role is that, and very little else: to observe, and to construct from his observations a coherent explanation of how the observed facts came to be that way.

Rex Stout once said that the damnably hard thing about writing detective stories was that the most exciting event in the story—the murder—usually occurs before the story begins. But to say that is to say that the task of detective fiction is like the task of tracing the history of the universe back to the unimaginable time of the Big Bang—the most exciting moment in our cosmic story—or to the primordial moment of trauma—the most exciting moment in the individual's story. That is to say that the art of detective fiction is, very largely, the art of fiction itself as we now understand it.

The Limitations of Logic

"You see, but you do not observe," says Holmes to Watson with, one believes, a slight curl of the lip. The world is tricky, but it is not a trick, and a careful enough mind can thread its maze, solve its cold equations. But there is a grand and slyly executed trick behind the assertion that there are no tricks.

Put simply, Holmes always comes through the maze because the maze has been very carefully built for him to come through it: The detective story is not really about the power of reason, but rather about the myth of reason, about the desperately hoped-for chance that the universe might be comprehensible, that the Herrgott might, after all, not be a *boshaft*.

At an elementary level, this is to say that detective fiction, like all storytelling, is planned. The story ends where and how the teller wants it to end. But the detective story, with its obsessive emphasis on deduction, helps remind us powerfully of some basic conditions of the art of fiction—and some basic limitations of logic.

It has been said that, while you build a building from the bottom up, you design it from the top down. In other words, unless you know how much weight the top floor carries, you can't design the floor beneath it, and so on. This is as good a metaphor as I have encountered for the business of storytelling, and I think Doyle would have agreed.

The detective finds, as by a miracle, just what he was intended to

find. The "logic" of the deduction is so perfect because it is a manipulated logic. The deck is always stacked. In the world of the detective story, there must always be a reason for, say, the crimes of Jack the Ripper or the Son of Sam or the Freeway Killer, or the apparently senseless ritual killings that initiate *A Study in Scarlet*. Mankind cannot tolerate too much reality, or too much randomness. *Raffiniert ist der Herrgott* is not the conclusion to Einstein's thought; it is the necessary assumption without which that thought cannot proceed.

Watson as Everyman

Hence Watson. Watson, without whom the Holmes stories would be so much weaker, Watson the eternally baffled, eternally well-meaning, eternally one of us, who witnesses and interprets Holmes's lifelong masque of reason, and in interpreting it validates it for precisely the middle-class world it is intended to reassure.

Perhaps analogies like "mind" and "body" are too crude for the internal dynamics of the Holmes stories, but they have their point. The detective, the purely rational and therefore eccentric individual who understands the new and dangerous world, needs his interpreter. Otherwise he might appear altogether too strange for us to accept him, and the myth of reason he brings with him. Holmes takes cocaine, plays fantastic improvisations on the violin, and likes to trace a patriotic "V.R." (for "Victoria Regina") on his wall with bullets fired from his pistol. He is a genius, in other words. He is also weird.

Watson is neither, and therefore Watson is the perfectly predestined narrator of his great friend's adventures. "Him whom I shall ever regard as the best and wisest man I have ever known," Watson calls Holmes at the end of "The Final Problem," which was Doyle's unsuccessful attempt (1893) to kill off the character whose invention had come to possess his whole career as a writer.

But "good" and "wise" are not adjectives most of us would apply to Holmes. "Obsessive" and "brilliant," yes; but "good" and "wise" are words for Watson, who with his implicit benevolence makes the world safe for Holmes—or is it vice versa?

I stress this because it is not generally recognized that the invention of Watson is as crucial to the history of the form as the invention of the Master himself. The private detective—"consulting detective," as Holmes calls himself in *A Study in Scarlet*—lives on the border between normality and eccentricity, the criminal and the legal, the irrational and the rational. He has to live on that border, because his mythic function is to mediate their rival claims on reality. But that kind of mediation is itself terribly dangerous, since it involves two potential ways of losing one's personality altogether: loss through absorption into the whole, or loss through absorption into the one.

Thus, Holmes and Watson between them are a single personality,

In this scene from Pearl of Death *(1944), Dr. Watson (Nigel Bruce) and Sherlock Holmes (Basil Rathbone) search for Naomi (Evelyn Ankers), disguised as a matchgirl.*

a personality invented—one can almost say "engineered"—to survive the social and intellectual travails of the middle class at the beginning of the 20th century. A valuable anthology like Sir Hugh Greene's and Alan K. Russell's *Rivals of Sherlock Holmes* shows not only that Doyle's formula for the detective story was widely, often brilliantly, imitated in the England of the 1890s but also that the basic pairing of eccentric sleuth/credulous partner was an *essential* part of the formula in most of the imitations of Doyle.

Likewise, in America, Rex Stout's immensely successful and influential Nero Wolf novels depend largely on the interplay between the intellectual, virtually immobile Wolf and his frenetic, street-smart associate, Archie Goodwin, who, like Watson, narrates the stories of his great friend's exploits.

The Name of the Rose (English translation, 1983), by the great scholar Umberto Eco, still fits the template. Hailed by critics usually scornful of popular culture as an "intellectual," "serious" detective tale, *The Name of the Rose* is in fact a wonderful and witty translation of the Holmes formula into the terms of 14th-century monasticism. And the deductions of the detective hero, named (with a wink at the reader) William of Baskerville, are once again narrated by his wide-

eyed, trusting companion, his Watson, Brother Adso.

An ordinary man tells us the story of an extraordinary man and, in telling the tale, discovers that he himself is not quite so ordinary as he had thought, or feared, himself to be. It is an ancient storyteller's technique, but one that Doyle reinvigorates. *The Time Machine, Heart of Darkness, The Great Gatsby*, and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* all have the same basic narrative structure. This is not to say that H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ken Kesey are all indebted to Doyle. They are, after all, "serious" novelists. But they are also "mere" entertainers, and they did, by and large, write for the same reasons that impelled Doyle—and Rex Stout, and Dashiell Hammett, and Stephen King—to write. The distinction between "serious" literature and "other than" is, after all, one promulgated mainly by the less astute members of the literary academy—the kind of people who, in the 16th century, would have hailed a court comedy over a vulgar and popular display like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Not the least of the gifts the detective story brings is that it helps dissuade us from this particular kind of silliness.

Sherlock Clones

Think about the Holmes/Watson pairing in its historical context. One year later, after the appearance of *A Study in Scarlet*, Jack the Ripper, Red Jack, would make his debut. Though we have not found out Jack's real identity, and probably never shall, folklore and fiction have usually assumed this most bestial of killers to be an aristocrat. Why? Because of the fatal attraction, for our age, of the dual personality, the wolf in sheep's clothing, the vampire in evening dress. 1888 is not only the year of the Whitechapel murders but also the year in which Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* appeared. Holmes and Watson, from this perspective, are just another—this time anticipatory—version of that most famous of dual personalities. But what Jekyll and Hyde represent in the diabolical form—mild-mannered scientist and goatish killer—Watson and Holmes represent in the urban-angelic mode: the odd but safe agent of pure reason and the plodding but reassuringly normal narrator/interpreter.

The Master, you see, is a monster. But a monster held in eternal check by his biographer, just as, in the late 19th century, the potentially disruptive forces of science, technology, and industrialism were held in check by the solid, traditional wisdom of the middle class. Remember that telephones were once designed to look like baroque *objets d'art*, electric lights like candles, and motion picture theaters built to resemble "live" stages. These and many other technological oddities represent the drive toward normalization of the new world that is such an important part of an industrial, consumer-oriented society.

Marshall McLuhan, the now-deceased guru of futurology, once

observed that serious cultural change always comes masked in the familiar trappings of the preceding cultural norm. In this context, we can see that Doyle's invention of Holmes and Watson is a crucial survival myth for the modern era, the technologized and urban age. If Doyle had not invented Holmes, someone else would have had to.

And what of the myriad descendants of the world's first "consulting detective"? What of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Stuart Kaminsky's Toby Peters, and so many others? Are they simply recapitulations, with uninteresting variants, of the original myth? Is the detective story, as some academics have charged, a stagnant and repetitive genre useful only as "escape" reading?

In part, yes. To some extent, all fictional detectives after Doyle may be simply Sherlock Clones.

But only in part.

On the surface, no form of popular fiction is more rigorously formalized than detective fiction. The form is virtually full-grown with the advent of Doyle's stories. A Citizen comes to consult the Detective about Something Terrible (usually, of course, a murder) that has occurred. The Detective takes the case, examines clues, interviews people who may or may not have been involved in the perpetration of the Terrible Thing, and finally, through reasoning or muscle or a mix of both, determines Who Is at Fault and What Really Happened.

A Way of Thinking

This is the plot of *A Study in Scarlet*, and of last week's TV installment of *Magnum P.I.* And we may notice that this universal plot is also the structure of what, by the middle of the 19th century, was being called "scientific method" and what is also the structure of most science-fiction plots.

But, as anyone who has written a detective story knows, the very rigor of the formula allows for infinite, elegant, and significant variations. As with 18th-century music—and remember that Mozart was also a "pop" writer—the strictures of the form guarantee infinite variance within those strictures. The British detective story is usually told in the third person, while the American version tends to be told in the first—the detective being his own Holmes and his own Watson. The story can begin with the most important crime, or lead up to it. We can know or not know the identity of the perpetrator of the central crime from the beginning. All these variants, and many more, can be discovered in the history of detective fiction. And each of them can be seen to reflect the condition of society, and the state of perception of the law, out of which the fiction arises.

For example, in the America of the 1980s, the detective figure tends to be much less sophisticated and much less "professional" than

Holmes or Marlowe (I am thinking not just of television's Magnum but also of the heroes created by James Crumley and Robert B. Parker). He also tends to be much less inclined to take cases, either for the sheer joy of deduction or for personal vendetta. The basic plot formula still holds, but in our politically disengaged post-Vietnam years, the figure of the detective reflects that peculiar disengagement—just as Holmes reflected the passion for scientific analysis of 1887.

Likewise, we can recognize that during the late 1940s and early '50s—the golden age of Mickey Spillane's hyperviolent hero, Mike Hammer—the detective's nervousness and paranoia are a close equivalent to the mood of the dawning years of the Cold War.

Instances could be multiplied, but the point is made. As the most popular of popular forms of fiction, and as a central mythology for the age of the individual lost in the crowd, the detective story serves as a barometer for our changing conceptions of ourselves, and as an important, perhaps even central, model for the more "serious" fiction produced in our age.

What Arthur Conan Doyle did 100 years ago was not simply to invent one of the imperishable figures in the history of English literature but also to provide a form of storytelling, a way of thinking, that has been of inestimable value throughout this troubled century. Only the entrenched snobs of academic criticism should be able, at this date, to ignore the importance of the form and its creator. To most readers, recognition of that importance is, as the Master himself was fond of saying, elementary.