

Arthur Conan Doyle: The Man Who Couldn't Kill Sherlock Holmes

By Chris Chan

Many authors seek fame, and some find it, only to discover that their fictional creations have attained a level of celebrity that far exceeds their own. Such was the case with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who, as a young doctor with an anemic practice, took up creative writing during his substantial spare time. Eventually, he created the character of Sherlock Holmes, a detective who would become a formative influence in the then-fledgling genre of crime fiction. Holmes' powers of observation were in part inspired by Dr. Joseph Bell, Doyle's mentor, who had the ability to deduce numerous facts about a person through careful study of that individual's appearance. Bell, for his part, told Doyle, "You yourself are Sherlock Holmes, and you know it."

The first two Sherlock Holmes novels, "A Study in Scarlet" (1887), and "The Sign of Four" (1890), initially sold modestly, but once Doyle's short stories about Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson started appearing in the periodical *The Strand*, the pair caught hold of the public imagination, and soon Doyle was making good money and received plenty of recognition through the tales.

But people have a habit of wanting what they don't have, and even though the great detective's adventures turned Doyle into one of the nation's most successful writers, Doyle decided that his ultimate career goals lay in writing what he thought were more "serious" works, such as historical novels with themes of duty and chivalry. Over the decades, Doyle wrote numerous novels along these lines, but none of them reached the same level of popular success that Sherlock Holmes brought him, nor did any of his other novels garner him the position in English letters that he so deeply desired.

Doyle had talked about killing off Holmes while writing the first dozen short stories, collected in “The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes” (initially published in *The Strand* from 1891-1892, printed in book form in 1892). His own mother (affectionately referred to as “The Ma’am”) warned him that he mustn’t consider such a course of action, so he wrote another dozen tales for *The Strand* from 1892 to 1893, collected as the anthology “The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes” in 1893 in Great Britain, and 1894 in America. The last story of “The Memoirs,” “The Final Problem,” introduced the character of Professor Moriarty, along with Holmes’ determination to smash the criminal mastermind’s gang. The narrative climaxed at Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, where both Holmes and Moriarty supposedly fell over the cliff during a physical duel.

The result was one of the first massive fan uproars in cultural history. Sherlock Holmes had a very large following, and people were infuriated with their favorite character being killed. Some fans even wore mourning in public. Readers and publishers alike pressured Doyle to change his mind, with one woman going so far as to address Doyle as “You *cad!*” Upset fans stopped Doyle in the street, but Doyle refused to concede, confident that the furor would die down, and that his other writings would quickly be accepted as more important and lasting. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

The fans continued their calls for Holmes’ return, and as Doyle’s other works failed to gain the same level of interest and affection, about seven years later, financial and social pressures compelled Doyle to write “The Hound of the Baskervilles” (published in *The Strand* from 1901 to 1902). Commonly regarded as the best of the novels, this blend of history, horror, and detection was set *before* Holmes’ fall at Reichenbach. The book met with such an uproarious reception that Doyle had to admit defeat, and in 1903, Holmes returned in “The Empty House,” which showed that he hadn’t actually died after all. This and twelve other stories came out over the next year, and were collected as *The*

Return of Sherlock Holmes. (It is widely thought that Doyle being forced to bring back Holmes was borrowed by Stephen King and turned into a plot point in *Misery*.)

Over the next thirteen years, Doyle would write the fourth and final Holmes novel, "The Valley of Fear," appearing in serial form from 1914-1915, and seven more stories of varying lengths which showed a much older Holmes going undercover to bring down a master spy during what would later become known as World War I. All of these stories were published together in 1917 under the title "His Last Bow." The title was meant to make it clear that no Sherlock Holmes stories would be forthcoming. Once again, Doyle's belief in the end of Holmes' career was deeply mistaken.

The final collection of a dozen stories, published individually over the 1920's and anthologized in 1927, was titled "The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes." In his forward, Doyle wrote about his futile attempt to kill off his own creation, writing,

That pale, clear-cut face and loose-limbed figure were taking up an undue share of my imagination. I did the deed, but fortunately no coroner had pronounced upon the remains, and so, after a long interval, it was not difficult for me to respond to the flattering demand and to explain my rash act away. I have never regretted it, for I have not in actual practice found that these lighter sketches have prevented me from exploring and finding my limitations in such varied branches of literature as history, poetry, historical novels, psychic research, and the drama. Had Holmes never existed I could not have done more, though he may perhaps have stood a little in the way of the recognition of my more serious literary work.

And so, reader, farewell to Sherlock Holmes! I thank you for your past constancy, and can but hope that some return has been made in the

shape of that distraction from the worries of life and stimulating change of thought which can only be found in the fairy kingdom of romance.

But it was not “farewell to Sherlock Holmes,” only “so long for now.” Occasional parodies and pastiches appeared over the decades from notable authors. Doyle’s youngest son, Adrian Conan Doyle, with the help of the celebrated crime writer John Dickson Carr, published several stories based upon references in the original canon during the early 1950’s and dubbed them “The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes.” Holmes pastiches regained prominence in 1974 with Nicholas Meyer’s novel “The Seven-Percent Solution,” featuring Holmes battling his cocaine addiction with the help of Dr. Sigmund Freud, and Meyer would write four more Holmes novels. There has been an upswing in contemporary writers continuing the Holmes saga, especially as the Holmes stories fell into the public domain, with the last of them falling out of copyright this year, eliminating any legal barriers to new writers. Publishers like MX Publishing and Belanger Books specialize in publishing new Sherlock Holmes stories.

Not only that, but there has been a massive resurgence in portrayals of Holmes and Watson on the screen, most notably Robert Downey Jr. and Sir Ian McKellen playing the part in feature films, Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller performing Holmes on television, and numerous anime and foreign-language productions inspired by the canon being released in the twenty-first century. Holmes has also appeared on-stage in many productions. Christopher M. Walsh’s *Miss Holmes* was produced at Peninsula Players Theatre in 2018, featuring gender-swapped versions of Holmes and Watson, portrayed by Cassandra Bissell and Maggie Kettering, respectively. 2013 saw Ken Ludwig’s *The Game’s Afoot*, a comedy-mystery featuring a fictionalized version of William Gillette, the actor who made a career out of writing and starring in a play about Sherlock Holmes. Paul Slade Smith played Gillette. 2008’s *Sherlock Holmes: The Final*

Adventure was Steven Dietz's revised take on Gillette's play, written over a century earlier. Greg Vinkler played Holmes and James Leaming was Watson.

Nearly a century after Doyle's 1930 death, critics and readers are increasingly convinced that the man was totally wrong in his assessment of his own work, and that his supposed "serious" work pales in comparison with the Holmes stories, which are in fact his greatest achievements, even if he couldn't recognize this himself. Certainly some of his other works are worthy of merit, and his Brigadier Gerard tales and the Professor Challenger stories (which anticipated a "Lost World" filled with dinosaurs long before Michael Crichton) still have their fans today. But it's Holmes and Watson who still have a hold on the public imagination, and in many different forms, from numerous approaches, their adventures continue.

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