

On Playing Sherlockia

Those people are crazy!"

This is what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said about the very earliest, almost cult-like, devotees of his creation, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the world's first consulting detective.

To this day, many people are still calling Sherlock Holmes aficionados "those crazy people."

Nonetheless, thousands of folks — among them some of the most interesting people in the world — routinely flock together to pay respect to Mr. Holmes and to preserve and enhance the memory of a man who never lived.

This month's feature article is addressed primarily to those among you who might not (yet) be serious devotees of Sherlock Holmes!

We do hope that the confirmed Sherlockians, to whom this introduction will be old hat, will forgive us while we try to explain ourselves to those not yet proselytized.

It probably goes without saying that there is no fictional character in all English literature who has enjoyed greater acceptance as having been a real person than has Sherlock Holmes.

No one is quite sure why Holmes enjoys such a prominent place in the contemporary human mind — even to the extent that several letters per week addressed to Mr.

Sherlock Holmes are still being delivered to his "221b Baker Street" address in London!

Perhaps it could be that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes' creator, hit upon, more or less by accident, a very clever literary tool: He created Dr. Watson to whom is assigned the task of relating Mr. Holmes' exploits, either from first-hand knowledge, or by recounting adventures as told to him by Mr. Holmes.

This is something of a novelty in the literary world.

Most fictional stories are told either in the first person by the protagonist, who is actually experiencing the action, or in the third person (sometimes called the God's Eye view) through which some detached outside observer relates all the action.

With the exception of a couple of the original 60 Holmes cases (called "The Canon," by devoted Sherlockians) the narratives are ascribed to Dr. Watson so that the accounts are something like "first person once removed" stories.

Sir Arthur created a medium through which the reader has the impression that he/she is looking over Dr. Watson's shoulder reading his "journal" or "diary" and this lends a most persuasive aura of "presence" to the narratives and "existence" to the Sherlockian characters.

In more recent times, social scientists have found that messages

(like advertising) are more effective if they do not seem to be aimed directly at the listener — this is why we experience so many radio and TV commercials in which the virtues of some product, or service, are being discussed between actors.

We, the audience, then, are simply overhearing their dialogs.

So, for whatever reason, Sherlock Holmes is "kept alive" by a varied and interesting collection of people who call themselves Sherlockians (in Britain, Holmesians) and who sustain "The Master's Memory" through their mutual participation in a "game" which we like to call "Sherlockia."

The essence of Sherlockia lies in certain assumptions which turn out to be "rules of the game."

We have never seen these rules written down anywhere, but Sherlockia participants seem to know, and obey them, almost intuitively.

Basically, the primary assumption of the game is that the Sherlockian characters, Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson, Mrs. Hudson, Inspector Lestrade, and all the rest, were all real people.

A second assumption is that Dr. Watson really was the author of the original Holmes chronicles (with a couple of exceptions).

In playing "hard ball" Sherlockia is seems to be some sort of foul ever to acknowledge Sir Arthur Conan

Doyle as the author at all (much to the distaste of the Arthur Conan Doyle Society and to Sir Arthur's relatives who are still living).

If Sir Arthur is acknowledged at all, it is as Dr. Watson's literary agent.

And finally, it is assumed that, within certain limits of "writer's license" exercised by Dr. Watson, all of the events described in the original Canonical cases actually happened.

Now, once these basic assumptions of Sherlockia have been accepted as fundamental rules of the game (even though everyone who is playing knows that they aren't really true!) there are certain logical correlates which follow.

First, if it is assumed that the Sherlockian characters were real, then those people have all the attributes normally associated with real people, e.g., they were born of a particular set of parents at some specific time, they lived someplace or some places, they went to school somewhere at some time, etc. — in short they have biographies.

Secondly, if Dr. Watson actually wrote all those chronicles of Mr. Holmes' adventures then everything written reflects Dr. Watson's personality proclivities, and motivations, not Sir Arthur's.

And, finally, if the adventures actually happened, they must have happened in real places and at real points in time.

As incredible as it might seem for those not already initiated into Sherlockia, quite a lot of well educated, intelligent, adult human beings have spent a considerable

portion of their lives in trying to construct the biographies of the people who never existed, as well as the chronologies and the spatial locations of events which never actually happened!

They do this by piecing together events which Dr. Watson described in his accounts with actual historical events all seasoned with a measure of imagination and conjecture.

A firm rule, though, seems to be that chronologies and biographies must be internally consistent; no fair having two events happen at the same time and no fair creating dates for events which are completely out of phase with historical reality.

Therefore, through a really strange marriage of pure fiction and recorded historical facts, devoted Sherlockians have created what appear to be perfectly reasonable accounts of the lives of Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, Professor Moriarty, etc. even though none of these characters ever actually existed.

Hence, in bookstores and libraries all over the world one can find a number of published biographies of Sherlockian characters and at least a dozen books establishing the chronologies of all the Sherlockian adventures!

To add to this entire systemized delusion, various "fan clubs" have seen to it that plaques have been erected commemorating various events in Sherlock Holmes' life.

One of these has been erected near the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland commemorating the

site of the famous battle between Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty in which Mr. Holmes "...was thought to have perished ..."

Another plaque graces the north wall of the Criterion Building in Piccadilly honoring the place at which Dr. Watson met with "young Stamford" just prior to Stamford's introduction of Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes.

One of the most flamboyant of all these commemorative plaques hangs near the pathology laboratory in St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

It reads, "At this place New Year's Day, 1881 were spoken these deathless words 'You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive' by Mr. Sherlock Holmes in greeting to John H. Watson, M.D. at their first meeting."

None of these plaques is worded with any qualifiers which would intimate that the events being commemorated were fictional; these Sherlockian plaques are indistinguishable from markers commemorating actual historical events!

In spite of the fact that both Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and his son Adrian Conan Doyle, took a fairly dim view of Sherlockians (calling us "crazy"), the game of Sherlockia has persisted and proliferated throughout the twentieth century and is showing no sign of diminishing with the advent of the twenty-first century.

Perhaps one of the most compelling attractions of Sherlockia is the fact that its followers have the opportunity to emulate their

revered star without ever competing with him.

The imitation comes from the fact that Sherlockians are forever digging around in the Holmesian literature finding a scrap of information here, a quotation there, a bit of meteorological data somewhere else and weaving all these scraps of data together in such a way as to recreate the events and experiences which constituted Mr. Holmes' "life."

This process of weaving bits and pieces of information together to derive some wholistic truth is the

very process of inductive reasoning (often erroneously called "deductive reasoning") which made Mr. Sherlock Holmes the world's greatest detective.

Sherlockia is a very engrossing hobby which the hobbyist can pursue in quiet dignity while surrounded with all the accoutrements, effects, and processes associated with traditional scholarly enterprises.

It is really a hobby which can become charmingly engrossing and can lead to associations with folks

of like interests with whom lifetime friendships often develop!

If you have not yet embraced the excitement of Sherlockia, let us invite you to give it a try.

We will be pleased to offer whatever guidance we can in helping you to get started and to form associations with other Sherlockians, both in your own neighborhood and around the world.

Join us and help build a Sherlockian bridge (would that be a Thor Bridge?) to the 21st century!

