

Sherlock Holmes Lives ! Celebrating 125 Years of Sherlock Holmes

by Beth David



With a glance that lasts no more than a second, he knows everything there is to know about you.

He sees your haircut, your posture, your shoe size, and your whole life's story.

With the smallest, insignificant details, he cracks codes and solves mysteries, untangles puzzles and makes sense out of the impossible.

He knows, because he sees.

Since his debut in 1887, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes has starred in over 10,000 stories, 400 films (portrayed by over 70 actors), and various television shows, radio shows, stage productions, comic strips and even board games.

He's been around for over a century, and his stories have been upgraded and retold for generations.

What is it about Sherlock Holmes that has allowed him to become so timeless?

From the classic portrayals by Basil Rathbone and Jeremy Brett, to the recent Robert Downey Jr. and Benedict Cumberbatch, how has Holmes managed to remain an international icon for over a hundred years?

Joel and Carolyn Senter are Cincinnati Sherlock Holmes scholars, and they feel the reason for the consulting detective's success is actually thanks

to Holmes's friend and colleague, John Watson.

"We think that Arthur Conan Doyle hit upon a most remarkable literary vehicle by inventing Dr. Watson as the story teller. Reading Watson's account of Mr. Holmes's adventures is a little like looking over someone's shoulder as they are writing in their diary."

The friendship between Watson and Holmes is what makes the accounts so authentic.

Had the story been told by an outside observer, Joel says, the narratives would probably seem just as impressive; but coming from Watson, who has a first-person account of everything, the stories seem real.

In their opinions, Watson gives the stories a sense of believability and he acts as a window into the life of Sherlock Holmes, making him seem more and more like a real person, rather than a character in a book.

"Sherlock Holmes has more of the qualities of a real person than do most of the people who have actually lived."

But there's also something very unreal about Sherlock Holmes that makes him even more appealing. Holmes's unbelievable level of intellect is often what draws readers (and movie-goers and TV-watchers) to him most.

He is a scientist and master detective, with the ability to know a man's whole life story based on the spot on his tie, or the laces of his shoes.

The smallest details and observations are Holmes's greatest tools, and his own mind is his greatest weapon.



Holmes is a chemist, a violinist, a martial-artist, and a genius; yet, as we see through Watson's accounts, he is still just a man.

He can be conceited, arrogant, and insulting, but he does have the capacity to be caring and even humble at times.

"There is a softer side of Holmes," Carolyn Senter says.

Her personal favorite Holmes story is 'His Last Bow' because, "it involves more emotional feeling than one encounters in many of the other cases."

This combination of humanity and superhuman intellect is likely the cause of Holmes' success.

His level of reasoning far surpasses that of what most would consider even possible, and his ability to see and solve mysteries is very admirable, but when it all comes down to it, Sherlock Holmes is still just a man.

Because of this appeal, Sherlock Holmes has been the subject of countless films and television adaptations.

Some of the earliest of the films, fourteen black-and-white movies, starring Basil Rathbone as Sherlock

Holmes, were released between 1939 and 1946.

The first two of the series take place in the Victorian Era, the setting of the original Conan Doyle stories.

In 1942, the setting shifted to then present-day 1940s, partly for financial reasons, but also to give a more modern feel.

Many of these films paralleled real-life events, as Holmes faces Nazis and works with shell-shock victims.

Between 1984 and 1994, the Granada Television company released a series of Sherlock Holmes TV movies, starring Jeremy Brett.

Out of the original 60 Holmes stories, 42 were adapted in the series (36 one-hour episodes and five feature-length specials).

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes is considered to contain the most faithful screen adaptations, as it stays true to the time period and plotlines.

Brett was consumed with presenting Holmes in the most accurate way possible, and is known for having introduced Holmes' more eccentric side.

He brought out qualities of Holmes that hadn't been portrayed before, such as his outlandish hand gestures, and short bursts of violent laughter.

He would throw himself to the ground to examine a foot-print, or launch over furniture and bridges with no concern for personal safety.

More recently, Warner Bros. Studios released two films, starring Robert Downey Jr., that give a new action-packed look to the classic Sherlock Holmes.

Filled with quick wit and explosive Hollywood special effects, it's an exciting rendition, but not entirely accurate.

A.O. Scott of the New York Times said that the films were essentially, "cool movies about cool guys with cool stuff" and that they lacked the true essence of Sherlock Holmes, focusing more on stunts and poses rather than Holmes's powers of deduction and perception.

However, the films have received a considerable amount of positive feedback including that the movies are clever, entertaining, and all-around crowd-pleasing.

In television, Benedict Cumberbatch stars in the BBC series ***Sherlock***, which takes place in 21st century London.

It has received largely positive feedback since its premiere in 2010 and is considered by many to be the best adaptation of Sherlock Holmes to date.

"[Benedict's] portrayal of Holmes is very faithful to Sir Arthur's



representation of the character," Joel and Carolyn say.

"Holmes wasn't a very nice guy.

He was arrogant and self-possessed, moody, irascible, and impatient, with little tolerance for lesser minds (and everyone's is lesser!).

Cumberbatch also seems to depict Holmes's amazing ability to observe and deduce at an almost unconscious level with no real intent or effort."

Often, modern Sherlock Holmes scholars question how Holmes would behave with modern advances in technology, whether he would view them as "cheating" or use them to his advantage, as a tool to amplify his own remarkable mental skills.

"It would appear that the creators of the Cumberbatch BBC productions are, at last, addressing this question and, we think, doing it quite well."

PS: (eds note) The drawings above were also done by Ms. David; Rathbone, Brett, Downey, and Cumberbatch, in that order l to r. She asked us to say about her merely, ""Beth is a junior in high school and a reporter for her school's newspaper. Her admiration for mystery stories (especially those of the Holmes variety) started at a very young age. Upon seeing the Disney cartoon, "The Great Mouse Detective" when she was little, she developed a strong appreciation towards Sherlock-esque mysteries and enjoys all the different adaptations. She also likes to draw, and plans to pursue a career in animation one day."