

BEING SHERLOCK (well, almost)

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My experience in dressing up in a deerstalker hat and an Inverness cape stems from my involvement with the fifth-grade advanced reading classes in the Fayetteville-Manlius (NY) school district. From 2003 to 2008 I visited both the Eagle Hill and Wellwood elementary schools.

Every December the children read *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* and two other short stories from the Sherlockian Canon. The stories are supplemented with a showing of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, either the Granada version with Jeremy Brett or the Basil Rathbone movie. At the conclusion of the unit I would visit the combined classes, in one school or the other, to discuss the stories, answer questions, and provide background information to the children. The combined class sizes typically were from 75 to 100 students.

I do not go into the school as “Sherlock Holmes” although I do wear the Inverness cape and cap. I don’t feel confident enough in myself as an actor to maintain the proper “Victorian Attitude” nor as an historian to present a flawless Victorian persona. So I take a different approach.

I ask the children what the image of the deerstalker cap and Inverness cape, sometimes supplemented by a calabash pipe or magnifying glass, invokes in their minds. I use this as a vehicle to explore the concept of a “cultural icon” and point out how Holmes is recognized all over the world, even by people who have not read the stories. I praise them for their efforts in discovering the real Holmes and then move on to explore the history of the publication of the stories and Doyle’s role in their creation. I generally play the short video “Conan Doyle Speaks” where he talks about the creation of the Holmes stories.

I do not “play the game” of assuming Holmes and Watson to be real, but I tell them about it and how much fun it can be. This gives me an opening to introduce the nature of Victorian society, discuss the history of law enforcement, explore the class system and address issues of prejudice in the stories and (when the children raise the subject) I occasionally talk about drug use then and now. By showing the students how much background information is needed to play the game well I motivate them to do further reading and research in history, politics, and sociology.

Show and tell items are always good motivators: I bring the Sherlock Holmes Christmas tree that the Mycroft Holmes Society created a few years ago. With ornaments representing Holmes’ cases, this is usually a big hit around the holidays; the children have never seen a Christmas tree decorated with items like a bloody ear! I pass around issues of the *Strand Magazine* so that the children can see what the original publication looked like. The teachers are somewhat reluctant to let the 10-year-olds handle these 100+ year old publications, but I generally can calm them down and let the students thumb through the magazines. The opportunity to see the context within which the stories were published is an invaluable educational opportunity. My philosophy is that this is what these items are for – they serve no purpose on a shelf or in a glass case. I also



bring other items from my collection: stamp albums, figurines and graphic novels demonstrate that any of their interests can be applied to the Holmes stories.

The question period at the end of my presentation is always very gratifying. The enthusiasm with which the children approach the subject is enormous and the questions are surprisingly well-thought-out and more sophisticated than one would presume from a fifth-grader. Expect questions like: *What character is most like Holmes in the stories? Wasn't Sherlock Holmes a drug addict? What else do you recommend we read after we have read all the Holmes stories? Would you rather be living in Victorian England or here and now?*

My visits to the school system have been fun, gratifying, and most educational. If you have the opportunity, I highly recommend this method of introducing young people to the wonderful world of literature and Sherlock Holmes.

A long-time Sherlockian, Joe Coppola is a member of several Sherlockian scions, including the Mycroft Holmes Society, The Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes, and The Baker Street Irregulars. He is the current Head Light (president) of The Beacon Society.