

## Intimate Converse in Baker Street

by Chris Redmond

“Were Holmes and Watson secretly gay lovers?” asked an e-mail message in mid-July 2014—one in a continuing trickle of inquiries from users of my Sherlockian.net website, some asking for basic information, others posing unanswerable questions about the detective’s role as solar myth or superhero, the way the character has been portrayed in recent films, or the chronology of Professor Moriarty.

“I’ve heard that theory far too often,” the July message about homosexuality went on. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. Were they secret lovers or not? Were they just really good friends?”

I told my correspondent that different Sherlockian experts or enthusiasts would likely give different answers to that question. I added, however, that I was confident Arthur Conan Doyle had not intended to portray the Baker Street duo as lovebirds. It was more common in the Victorian era than it is today, I said, for unrelated men to share living quarters out of friendship and, of course, financial need, and no one should read today’s social roles into a story of life in the 1880s.

Of course, I could have said so much more. In particular, I could have traced the history of the “theory” about which my correspondent had been hearing “too often”—the hypothesis that Watson and Holmes were, indeed, linked by sexual ties as well as common interests and, as their friendship grew over the years, a deep and affectionate loyalty. This theory relies in part on wishful thinking, most of it surfacing in the past very few years, but there is a good deal more to be said.

There are, to be sure, a few phrases and passages in the Canon that give it some credence. Although the detective and the doctor clearly have separate rooms at Baker Street—that is made clear from the beginning, the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*—proof is lacking that they always slept where they claimed to sleep. Away from home, they clearly share “a bedroom” at an inn in “The Speckled Band,” and “a large and comfortable double-bedded room” in “The Man with the Twisted Lip.” Holmes touches

Watson's wrist as they wait in suspense in "The Speckled Band," he lays his hand "upon [Watson's] arm" in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and again in "The Devil's Foot," his fingers "clutch" Watson in "The Empty House," the two friends walk arm-in-arm in "A Scandal in Bohemia." In "Charles Augustus Milverton," Watson writes touchingly, "I felt Holmes's hand steal into mine and give me a reassuring shake. . . ." More fancifully, Holmes says to Watson in "A Case of Identity" that "If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on . . . it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable." Queer things, indeed.

The most important scene suggesting affection between Holmes and Watson appears in "The Three Garridebs." Its language arguably carries sexual overtones:

I felt a sudden hot sear as if a red-hot iron had been pressed to my thigh. . . . Then my friend's wiry arms were round me, and he was leading me to a chair.

"You're not hurt, Watson? For God's sake, say that you are not hurt!"

It was worth a wound—it was worth many wounds—to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain.

It is perhaps little wonder that many enthusiasts long to see this scene dramatized by contemporary actors. The scene near the end of "The Devil's Foot" is less emotional in the original text, although the Granada dramatization starring Jeremy Brett and Edward Hardwicke adds a new level of intimacy by having Holmes address Watson as "John" at the moment of crisis.

As best I can tell, the first expression in print of the idea that Watson and Holmes were lovers came with the publication of Larry Townsend's *The Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in 1971 (it was reissued in 1993). In that decade, an explicitly gay retelling of some of Holmes's canonical adventures, no matter how elegantly done—and Townsend's work was indisputably of high quality—was far from socially acceptable, and might well have

attracted censorious attention. Thus it came to be that when the newly established Arthur Conan Doyle Collection at the (then) Metropolitan Central Library had a chance to acquire a copy, it was brought into Canada through special arrangements made by Eric Silk (“The Blue Carbuncle”), who was Commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police. Silk arranged for an FBI official in Buffalo to ship the book to him as “law enforcement documents,” avoiding the eyes of Canada Customs. At least, so I have been told—I wasn’t there, of course. The shabby maroon paperback volume remains in the Toronto collection to this day, and perhaps raises fewer eyebrows than it once did.

A number of canonical characters became gay in Townsend’s interpretation of matters, but above all he wrote of Holmes and Watson. His Watson says in an early passage:

To the rest of the world, we were a pair of bachelor gentlemen sharing quarters because it was convenient and economical to do so. Between us, once the door at 221B Baker Street was closed against the world, we shared such moments of blissful contentment I doubt anyone outside ourselves could have understood or believed.

In 1988 came *My Dearest Holmes* by Rohase Piercy, which similarly reinterprets canonical cases and events as the experiences of a same-sex couple. It takes its title, of course, from the phrase “my dear Watson,” which Holmes uses 78 times in the Canon, and the reciprocal “my dear Holmes,” which Watson uses only 16 times.

In recent years, there has been a positive explosion of fictional works portraying a gay relationship between the two men, although little of it has been published in traditional book form. An important exception is *Kissing Sherlock Holmes* (2011) by T. D. McKinney and Terry Wylis. In a rhythm not completely different from that of the heterosexually oriented *The Sign of the Four*, this book finds Watson and Holmes’s love scenes alternating with developments in an investigation of espionage at a country house. Much of the gradually unfolding case depends on Holmes’s (and sometimes Watson’s) reading of personalities and human relations, including same-sex affairs, but there are also concrete clues and plausible suspects.

Not in print but in the electronic world, there are literally thousands of Sherlock Holmes stories that work from the same premise. Betsy Rosenblatt, writing in the Baker Street Journal in 2012, explained “fan fiction” or fanfic and observed, “Stories fall broadly into three genres, based on the character relationships depicted. . . . **Slash** stories involve a same-sex relationship, usually imposed by the fan author and based on perceived homosocial or homoerotic subtext in the source material.” The bulk of fanfic is made available to its avid readers through web repositories, particularly the Archive of Our Own (ao3.org). As of late July 2014, AO3 offered 1,240 stories about male-male relationships (presumably nearly all of them Holmes and Watson) grounded in the Canon, and a remarkable 36,150 male-male stories based on the Sherlock and John (not, customarily, Holmes and Watson) of the BBC’s **Sherlock** television series. The latter are known among fans as “Johnlock” fics. Some include detective investigations in their plots, though many do not.

It is difficult to spend much time in discussion of the BBC incarnation of Sherlock Holmes without running into the issue of same-sex attraction. From the first episode in 2010, **A Study in Pink**, a running joke in the series has been the need for Watson (portrayed by Martin Freeman) to deny that he is sexually involved with Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) or shares his bedroom. More recent episodes have hinted at same-sex involvement with Moriarty (Andrew Scott) as well, and **The Empty Hearse** (2013) included some brief male-male scenes, ostensibly as excerpts from someone’s fantasies. Interviews with the creators of the series, Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, have not elicited any promises that things will become more definite, but they have made it clear that they see same-sex affection as an inevitable part of the Holmes–Watson relationship going back to the acknowledged Canon, of which they are whole-souled admirers.

In this interpretation, they are not breaking entirely new ground. Billy Wilder, whose sprawling and memorable film **The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes** appeared in 1970, made his Holmes (Robert Stephens) pose as gay to avoid the unwanted attentions of a Russian ballerina, and left open the question of whether his orientation was really only a pose. (Watson, undeniably a ladies’ man, is outraged at the very idea.) In 1986 in **Ameri-**

can Film Wilder said, “I had wanted to make Holmes a homosexual” but, he implied, had to leave matters ambiguous. In 1970, Townsend’s book had not even been published.

Michael Cox, producer of the Granada TV series of the 1980s that starred Jeremy Brett as Holmes, explained why his writers had kept Watson (David Burke and later Edward Hardwicke) a bachelor, minimizing the role of Mary Morstan: “[T]he relationship between Holmes and Watson is simply one of the ‘greatest friendships in literature,’ and it sort of doesn’t work if there’s a wife around the corner.” Radio dramatist Bert Coules did not go quite as far in an interview: “[W]hat matters is the relationship between the two men. . . .” He added that “opportunities had to be made” to focus attention on the relationship in the scripts he produced. And then there are the more recent films starring Robert Downey, Jr., as Holmes, opposite Jude Law’s Watson: *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *A Game of Shadows* (2011). Tabloid publicity before the first movie speculated feverishly that the central characters would be shown as gay, and once it hit the screen, a number of reviewers alluded to that flavor, although the relationship is not made explicit. The film became Exhibit A for the recently coined word “bromance,” meaning a loving but apparently non-sexual relationship between men—buddies.

Sherlockians have always seen affection between the original Holmes and Watson as well. They could hardly do otherwise with a relationship that Watson himself characterizes as “intimate” half a dozen times in the Canon, from “the very intimate relations which had existed between Holmes and myself” (“The Final Problem”) to a few moments of “intimate converse” (“His Last Bow”). Thus television fans who say that the heart of the Holmes and Watson narrative is not the mysteries (let alone the foggy Victorian atmosphere) but the relationship between detective and doctor are not saying anything that has not been recognized all along. The first annotated edition of portions of the Canon, edited by Christopher Morley and published in 1944, was titled *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: A Textbook of Friendship*. H. W. Bell in 1932 published *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: The Chronology of Their Adventures*—Holmes and Watson, not Watson alone. The original Ronald De Waal compendium of all that had been written and done by and for Sherlockians was *The World Bibliography of*

*Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: A Classified and Annotated List of Materials Relating to Their Lives and Adventures*—again plural, not singular.

But the assumption has almost always been that the friendship, however fast, was non-sexual. Victorian literature and life are full of strong male friendships, sometimes threatened (but not subverted) by the arrival of women on the scene. If Sherlockians did any speculating about Holmes's love life, it was generally to match him up with Irene Adler (with minority views drawing attention to Violet Hunter and Maud Bellamy). "Here's to Irene Adler, the woman who was a pip," Harry Hartman wrote. "He almost fell for a petticoat, but she managed to give him the slip." The hugely influential biography *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* by William S. Baring-Gould imagined a tryst for the detective and the contralto in Montenegro, producing both a lifelong sweet memory and a son. A later generation of writers would reinvent Irene Adler in other ways, but that is another story. Watson, meanwhile, notoriously had experience of women on three continents (*The Sign of the Four*), was acknowledged by Holmes himself to be an expert on the fair sex ("The Second Stain"), and was married at least twice, although Dorothy L. Sayers balked at attempts to assign him "as many wives as Henry VIII."

One great Sherlockian famously dissented, not by suggesting homosexual relations between Watson and Holmes, but by telling the 1941 gathering of the Baker Street Irregulars that the Baker Street household was a heterosexual one. That was Rex Stout, one of the BSI's pioneers, and the creator of Nero Wolfe, the literary detective whom Baring-Gould would later identify as Holmes's son by Irene Adler. If there really were howls of outrage when Stout read his paper "Watson Was a Woman" to the BSI dinner that January, they were simulated; the whole thing was tongue-in-cheek, though it became a *cause célèbre* when subsequently published and republished. Stout (himself twice-married) claimed that the frequent remonstrances about Holmes's untidy behavior and smelly pipes clearly prove Watson to be a woman—and, indeed, to be the detective's wife, since even Holmes would not munch toast in silence at breakfast with his mistress.

The tables were turned by *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street*, a 1989 study by C. Alan Bradley and William A. S. Sarjeant. In a dozen

chapters and several appendices, they argue that Holmes was the woman in the Baker Street household. As well as explaining Holmes's notorious mood changes as the effects of a hormonal cycle, they review every nuance of the interactions between Holmes and Watson that would tempt a later generation to look for a romantic and sexual connection between the two men. Bradley and Sarjeant do not, however, go so far as to suggest that Holmes was a wife to Watson; indeed, they maintain that Watson never realized he was sharing rooms with a woman.

Through the decades when such speculation was being offered, most Sherlockians (and until 1991 all Irregulars) were male. Thus it may be little surprise that stereotypical male behavior was common, and that included a real or assumed disdain for homosexuality. Julian Wolff, Commissionaire of the BSI and editor of the *Baker Street Journal*, noted in 1964 that the Irregulars found themselves on the mailing list of the Homosexual Voters Advisory Council: "I never thought it would be necessary to point out that there are some areas to which our Irregularity does not extend. . . ." As women entered the Sherlockian world in greater numbers, a movement symbolized by the creation of the *Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes*, there is little evidence that most of them did anything to challenge heteronormativity. Female admirers of Jeremy Brett, who began playing Holmes in 1985, wrote appreciatively of his sexy cheekbones—strikingly, a feature that would be much noted on Benedict Cumberbatch three decades later. (The Canon offers some description of Sherlock Holmes's forehead, brows, eyes, nose, and lips, but nowhere his cheekbones.) There remains in some quarters a belief that female enthusiasts, dubbed "fangirls" in a somewhat derisory tone, devote their attention to Cumberbatch because of his sex appeal, and unquestionably in some cases that belief is correct. However, there is more to the story.

In April 2014, more than 800 enthusiasts of Sherlock Holmes gathered in Atlanta for the second annual 221B Con. The vast majority of them were female, mostly young; it seems clear that the new generation of Sherlockians, in general, includes far more women than men. The program at 221B Con did not include any session explicitly devoted to Cumberbatch or his counterpart Freeman, although Brett, Basil Rathbone, Christopher Lee, Doug-

las Wilmer, and Peter Cushing were all on the menu. So were panels on Victorian crime, Irene Adler, “Teaching Sherlock Holmes,” and the Holmes–Dracula connection. Most characteristic of the 221B Con experience, however, was its many sessions about cosplay (the art of dressing in costume as Holmes and his associates, either canonical or as they are portrayed in the BBC series) and, above all, about fanfic.

Most fan fiction is written by women, and I have already noted that the bulk (not all) of Sherlockian fanfic involves sex, primarily explicit male–male sex. This phenomenon, which may be unfamiliar to many Sherlockians even now, is something of a puzzlement to many men: why should female Sherlockians favor erotica, indeed pornography, about a male Holmes and Watson? (The phenomenon of “slash” extends well beyond the Sherlockian world: Archive of Our Own offers 1.2 million fanfics in total, including 30,000 identified as involving male–male sex by characters from the Harry Potter series.) The desire to interpret Holmes and Watson as lovers also extends outside fiction: One enthusiast has created the whimsical Twitter hashtag #consultinghusbands (on the model of “consulting detectives”) to flag a moment in a movie that can be interpreted as same-sex affection.

Men sometimes ask why women, including many who are heterosexual in their real-world lives, like to think this way and to write and read such material. Discussion of the motivations behind the writing and reading of fanfic reaches far into feminist theory and the politics of gender relations, but it may be of interest to quote from one online statement. Says a blogger who calls herself “teresa-dances-in-sequins”:

Slash is, first and foremost, a reaction against the sexual and gendered stereotypes that follow women in real life. It is also a direct result of the dearth of female representation in media. Using two male bodies offers an escape from forced identification and subverts the heterosexual male viewpoint taken in film, television, video games, and advertisements. Slash fiction is a world wherein women, for once, are not the ones who are “on display.”



Other fanfic enthusiasts may have other ways of formulating their explanation, and there is, of course, little accounting for what piques anyone's literary fancy or pushes anyone's sexual buttons.

Using the characters and stories of Holmes and Watson to meet an urgently felt need for same-sex attachment seems a far cry from the traditional Sherlockian escapism in which two heroes battle villains and solve mysteries amid the London fog. It seems far away, too, from the academic interest in "masculinity" as expressed in two books published by scholars about a decade ago: *Sherlock's Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle, and Cultural History* (1997) by Joseph A. Kestner, and *Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity* (2000) by Diana Barsham. Under the scrutiny and keyboards of a generation of (mostly) women, assumptions about the masculinity of Holmes and Watson are being thrown aside, and new patterns of interaction made available for enthusiasts to enjoy or wonder at.

In 1933, Vincent Starrett wrote in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, "So they still live for all that love them well: in a romantic chamber of the heart: in a nostalgic country of the mind: where it is always 1895." So they still live indeed, though it may be 2014 for "Sherlock and John" rather than 1895 for Holmes and Watson. But in that romantic chamber, some things are being done a little differently these days.

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