

LET ME GIVE SUCH ORDERS AS I LIKE†

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As we all know, there are sixty original Sherlock Holmes stories — four novels and 56 short stories. That’s almost as many books as in the Bible, and incidentally the Sherlock Holmes Canon has almost as many words as in the Bible. Not that I’m comparing.

Sixty is not just a nice round number but a significant one in science, religion and sports. If you are as old as I am, you will probably know that Babe Ruth’s legitimate record for the number of home runs hit in a single baseball season was 60. If you are Jewish, you may know that a mixture of foods can be considered kosher if less than one part in 60 is *treif*, or unclean. Of course you know the number of seconds in a minute (of either time or longitude) and the number of minutes in an hour. Wikipedia informs us that 60 was the basis of the ancient Babylonian number system, probably because it has so many factors (60 is 2 times 2 times 3 times 5). And James Moriarty, who earned his living as a professor of mathematics, doubtless knew that 60 is the smallest number that is the sum of two odd primes in six ways. I could go on, but you may be hoping I won’t.

We sometimes hear about high performance car going “from zero to 60” very rapidly — the 2015 Porsche 918 Spyder can supposedly do it in 2.2 seconds. It took Arthur Conan Doyle forty years to go from zero to 60, since the first Sherlock Holmes story was published in 1887, and the last one not until 1927. Again, most of us know the general outline of that forty-year journey. First came *A Study in Scarlet*, published as a cheap paperback for Christmas 1887, and then *The Sign of the Four*, commissioned for *Lippincott’s Magazine*, February 1890. After that, ACD went into partnership with the newly launched *Strand* magazine, and over the years all the remaining stories

† Title from “The Priory School”

appeared there, with many of the later stories also being published in one of several popular American magazines. The *Strand* appearances included two more novels, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Valley of Fear*, as well as the short stories that were subsequently collected in five volumes. I expect you can name those too: the *Adventures*, the *Memoirs*, the *Return*, *His Last Bow*, and the *Case-Book*.

Shortly after the author's death in 1930, the American publishing firm of Doubleday ventured to bring out a two-volume edition of the whole works, which it called *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. This so-called "Memorial Edition", bound in black cloth, is a classic for Sherlockians. My own copy, much repaired, is one of my greatest treasures. The Memorial Edition had erratic and repetitive page numbers because it was printed from the plates previously used for separate volumes of the various tales. Page 99, for example, appears in six different places.

A one-volume edition of the *Complete* followed in 1936. Early Sherlockian writings frequently refer to page numbers in its 1,323-page layout, now with no repetitions. One-volume and two-volume editions in a new format of 1,122 pages were introduced in 1960 and remain standard today, in part because over several decades the Book-of-the-Month Club distributed many thousands of copies. The one-volume Doubleday edition has also appeared as a Penguin paperback. These editions, widely and inexpensively available, have been the standard to which reference works have usually been keyed. In recent years, however, the Doubleday has had rivals, including two-volume paperback editions from Bantam Classics and Barnes & Noble, and from the now-defunct Canadian bookseller Coles. The title "The Complete Sherlock Holmes" is used on many of them, and you can also get a Complete Sherlock Holmes for your Kindle.

And in nearly all these collections, the stories are in the same order. You might reasonably assume that the order in the book reflects the order in which the stories were published, between 1887 and 1927, and for the most part you would be right. But here and there, it gets more complicated. I'm going to go quickly through the sequence in a moment, but first let me comment that I don't think somebody who is new to the stories should start at page 1, with *A Study in Scarlet*, and plod through to the end. When somebody asks me where to begin, I usually recommend *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the twelve short stories of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which are possibly the best of the whole Canon. Of course your opinion may vary.

As I was saying, the *Complete Sherlock Holmes* starts with *A Study in Scarlet*, and then *The Sign of the Four* and then the twelve stories of *The Adventures*, appearing in exactly the order in which they were published in the *Strand* in 1891 and 1892. So far so good. Then come *The Memoirs*. Not surprisingly, there were twelve of these as well, published in the *Strand* from late 1892 through late 1893. But what do you know: the *Complete Sherlock Holmes*, and for that matter most one-volume editions of the *Memoirs*, include only eleven stories. One story has been wrenched out of the sequence: “The Cardboard Box”, which first appeared in January 1893, was dropped from *The Memoirs*, apparently on the instructions of the author himself, who thought on sober reflection that it was not suitable reading for boys, apparently his preferred audience. He did not address the question of whether girls should be allowed to read this story of adultery and brutal violence at all. He did, however, let himself be persuaded 25 years later to revive the story and include it in the collection that we know as *His Last Bow*. And that’s where we find it in the *Complete Sherlock Holmes* to this day.

After the *Memoirs* there was a long break in the publication of the Sherlock Holmes tales. This break, from 1893 to 1901, is represented by the transition from volume 1 to volume 2 of the various two-volume editions of the *Complete Sherlock Holmes*. Turn to the beginning of volume 2, however, and what you will find is not something that was published in 1901, but rather the collection of stories that became *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, published in 1903 and 1904. Perhaps for aesthetic reasons, Holmes’s death at the Reichenbach Falls is followed immediately (if there’s no delay in getting volume 2 from the library) by his return to London. And the immortal tale that was published in 1901 and 1902, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, is pushed down from its rightful place in the order.

The fun is just beginning, because what the *Complete Sherlock Holmes* offers after *The Hound* is not what ought to come next, but rather the fourth of the four novels, *The Valley of Fear*, which first saw print in 1914 and 1915. Just as *The Hound* was dropped below its proper place, *The Valley* has been lifted above its proper place.

What remains after that is the two final collections of short stories, *His Last Bow* and *The Case-Book*. And here some very odd things can be found. *His Last Bow* includes “The Cardboard Box” from 1893, as I have already noted, but otherwise the stories in this collection, a rather meagre eight of them altogether, were published in 1908 through 1917. Surprisingly, they don’t appear in the book in anything like their original order; if you look at the eight stories and their publication dates, the sequence is 1908, 1893, 1911,

1908 again, 1913, 1911, 1910 and 1917. I do not know, and as far as I am aware nobody else knows, why this rearrangement was made.

In any case, the eight stories were graced with a one-paragraph “Preface”, signed by John H. Watson M.D., which is our only authority for some information about Sherlock Holmes’s retirement: “The friends of Sherlock Holmes will be glad to learn that he is still alive and well, though somewhat crippled by occasional attacks of rheumatism. He has for many years, lived in a small farm upon The Downs five miles from Eastbourne, where his time is divided between philosophy and agriculture.” None of the sixty actual stories tells us about Eastbourne, or about the rheumatism.

Finally we come to *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, with twelve stories dating from the last decade of Arthur Conan Doyle’s life, but jumbled together: 1924, 1926, 1921, 1926 again, two more from 1924, 1922, 1923, 1926 a third time, two from 1927, and finally 1926 for the fourth time. One effect of this confusion is to make us think that “The Retired Colourman” is the last of the 60 stories, because we are used to seeing it that way in print and also because the story is thick with the gloomy atmosphere of old age. In fact, it was published 58th in the sequence, and the sixtieth story should really have been “Shoscombe Old Place”, which includes enough about bones and burials to justify its place at the gloomy end of the saga. The *Case-Book* has an introduction rather than a preface, and it is signed not by John H. Watson but by Arthur Conan Doyle. It ought to be read more often than I think we generally read it, especially for its memorable phrases about Holmes’s place in what the author actually calls “the fairy kingdom of romance”.

It now seems very natural to us that a collection of detective stories should be called *The Case-Book*, but in fact it appears that it was Arthur Conan Doyle, assembling this volume in this haphazard way, who invented this use of the word “case-book”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* attests the use of “case” to mean “an incident or set of circumstances requiring investigation by the police or other detective agency” as early as 1838. It dates “case-book” in the sense of “a book containing an account of legal or medical cases” at least to 1762. Up to the 1930s, most works that identified themselves as “case-books” were collections of legal readings, though there are exceptions. In 1833 a medical gentleman produced *Sketches from the case book, to illustrate the influence of the mind on the body, with the treatment of some of the more important brain & nervous disturbances which arise from this influence*. A large enough library’s catalogue will also reveal a “case book in the principles and problems of journalism” in 1925 and even a “hypnotist’s case book” in 1930.

But what about detective case-books? Only in 1927 did we get *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, with twelve cases of the great man, and the title caught mystery authors' imaginations. The original was followed by the case-book of Ronald Camberwell in 1931, the case-book of Albert Campion in 1937, and then many more. No detective can now be without such a compendium, and "The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes" is arguably a title that carries more meaning to the general reader than even "The Adventures" of that same familiar figure. Note, however, that it was not used by the producers of the Granada Television interpretation of Holmes's adventures until their fifth series. They had that much respect for the original sequence of titles.

All these observations about the order of the Sherlock Holmes stories are important tonight because of the long tradition that the Bootmakers have, like many other Sherlockian societies, of reading through the stories in a systematic order, so that we can know what's going to be discussed at each meeting as it comes along. Since the society was founded in 1972 we have gone through the entire Canon three times, and we are about to start on the fourth time round.

We could, of course, do the stories in any order. You will see that there are a good many possible arrangements of any 60 items — mathematicians use the expression "60 factorial", and in case you are trying to do the arithmetic in your head, I'll quickly advise you that the result is an 82-digit number, starting with 8, that is so large it doesn't even have a mathematical name. This number is approximately the same as the number of atoms in the observable universe, and so far we have only gotten to three.

But with some minor variations, we have used the same order three times, and it's not any order that I have mentioned so far in tonight's remarks. The explanation for this is the Sherlockian tradition of looking at the stories not as works of literature but as fragments of the biography of Sherlock Holmes as a real historical figure. A great deal of Sherlockian writing follows that convention, and it was at the heart of one of the great monuments of scholarship in our field, *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes* by William S. Baring-Gould, published in 1967. He arranged the stories in the order in which he imagined they had happened. So the two stories that show Holmes as a university student, "The Musgrave Ritual" and "The Gloria Scott", come first, followed by the novel in which Holmes meets Watson, *A Study in Scarlet*, and then the cases that seem to come before Watson gets married and leaves Baker Street, and so on through the detective's colourful career, winding up with the retirement story "The Lion's Mane" and the post-retirement story "His Last Bow". From a biographical point of view this

makes sense, but it can get pretty confusing, especially to those who don't have *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes* on a handy bookshelf.

The *Annotated* was new and exciting in the early days of our society, a window into everything that had been written about Sherlock Holmes and everything that was being done in the rapidly expanding Sherlockian world. So the Bootmakers decided to take up the 60 stories, one by one, in the order Baring-Gould had assigned to them. And that's what we have been doing ever since.

Things have changed now. We're more willing to talk about Sherlock Holmes as literature and Arthur Conan Doyle as its author. Fewer of us have the old *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* on our shelves. And there is a *New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, a masterly work edited by Los Angeles Sherlockian Les Klinger, published in 2005. This three-volume work has some peculiarities of its own, notably that the four novels are in a separate volume rather than mixed in with the short stories. But at least the short stories are in a conventional order, the *Adventures* and then the *Memoirs* and so on, except that "The Cardboard Box" has been taken out of *His Last Bow* and moved back into the *Memoirs* where it belongs. Apart from "The Cardboard Box" and the novels, the order in Klinger's *New Annotated* is exactly the same as the order in the many editions of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* with which we're all familiar.

So it's simple and straightforward. And I was pleased when the Bootmaker executive decided, as Meyers announced at our December meeting, that on our fourth cycle through the stories, which starts tonight, we'll be following the conventional order of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. And that is why the theme story for tonight is *A Study in Scarlet*, the first of the blessed 60 original stories. I look forward to being here for *The Sign of the Four* next month, and for "The Retired Colourman" in the fall of the year 2029.

Thank you.