



Brian McCuskey, *How Sherlock Pulled the Trick:
Spiritualism and the Pseudoscientific Method.*

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Since its inception, the iconic detective figure of Sherlock Holmes has served in the cultural imagination as a powerful emblem of scientific positivism, observation, and deductive reasoning. In his 2013 book *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes*, James F. O'Brien claimed that Arthur Conan Doyle "blazed a new trail" (O'Brien 2013) in his employment of chemical analysis, forensic investigation, and other sciences throughout the Holmes canon. Ronald R. Thomas, in his *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (1999), locates complex points of intersection between the detective genre and the specialised body of scientific knowledge underpinning the history of forensic technologies, including the lie-detector, the mugshot, and the fingerprint. The dominant trend in current and recent Holmes scholarship is to position Doyle's creation as the product of a period during which Doyle was substantially influenced by scientific naturalism. While Doyle's long-standing interest in psychic phenomena, séances, and mediumship is well documented, as a rationalist materialist par excellence, Holmes the detective is typically held apart from, or in tension with, the beliefs of Arthur Conan Doyle the Spiritualist. That tension has been brought to the fore by Bernard Lightman, who reads Doyle's determination to see his famous creation plummet to his death over the Reichenbach Falls in 1893 – two years before he joined the Society of Psychical Research – as an indication that "the scientific naturalism that originally inspired the creation of the character became increasingly at odds with Conan Doyle's fascination with spiritualism" (Lightman 2014).

How Sherlock Pulled the Trick issues a bold and at times provocative challenge to this critical tradition. Taking a biographical approach to the Holmes canon, Brian McCuskey considers Sherlock not as “the scientific antithesis of his spiritualist author” but as “the pseudoscientific thesis of spiritualism itself” (7). Holmes, McCuskey insists, “may look and sound like Huxley’s ideal reasoner” (48), but he is not, and has never been, a rationalist. In fact, when Holmes claims that “he needs only the tiniest traces of evidence glimpsed only for a moment, to reach infallible conclusions, he undermines the scientific method that he apparently represents” (48). He does not draw upon the data or gather and analyse information so much as apply guesswork and construct narratives that adhere to what he already believes. This, according to McCuskey, is not reason but “intuition with certainty” (50), which more closely resembles the thought processes and arguments of the spiritualist movement of the period than it does the natural scientists.

McCuskey’s reading of Holmes’s logic as a form of magical thinking, or “confirmation bias so strong that it reverse engineers reality to catch up with and then run alongside Holmes’s train of thought” (62) is the crux of this project and it is by far the most compelling and valuable part of the book. This argument is made in Chapter 2, after an interesting but somewhat extraneous first chapter dedicated to the main trends in scientific, philosophical and religious debates appearing in *The Times* in the years leading up to the publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887. Chapter 3 continues to read Holmes alongside his creator’s ongoing investigations into Spiritualism before, McCuskey argues, Doyle himself took on the persona and methodologies of Holmes in a religious conversion that utilised the same language and ex post facto reasoning of his fictional detective. The book then takes a dramatic turn in focus. Chapter 4 takes up the narrative after Doyle’s death in 1930, tracking his Spiritualist legacy via his appearances at séances around the globe, alongside his literary legacy and the critical reception of Sherlock Holmes. In the final chapter, McCuskey identifies Sherlock Holmes as a pervasive cultural touchstone amongst internet conspiracy theorists, detailing instances of 9/11 revisionists, climate change deniers, and alt-right fake news promulgators, who cite the great detective to support their own flawed reasoning and magical thinking.

While McCuskey does at one point emphasise that he is not claiming Doyle “*intentionally* designed Holmes as a secret weapon against rationalism” (123), he nevertheless seeks to demonstrate that the *idea* of the genius of Sherlock Holmes operates in the world as just such a pernicious force, dangerous to public health and sanity. McCuskey’s rhetoric here is forceful and impassioned, and it makes for compelling reading, although his bold declaration that “wherever history is being revised” and “wherever reality is being distorted, you will find Holmes” (165) is surely overstating the case. It seems extreme to hold Doyle accountable for the proliferation and the flawed logic of conspiracy theories within the political, social, and cultural contexts of modern America – and the implied analogy here between nineteenth-century Spiritualism and such present day theories is at the very least an over-simplification. Nonetheless, the power and impact of such readings of Victorian popular fiction in the public domain is important, and likely of interest to readers of this journal.

How Sherlock Pulled the Trick is highly readable and often very engaging, driven as it is by the author's energy and, at times, his outrage. It is also filled with a fascinating array of primary sources on science, spiritualism, and ways of thinking, from the nineteenth century to the present. While the closing, impassioned plea that we "eliminate Holmes from our thinking, before nothing on earth remains" (167) pushes the argument too far into the realms of hyperbole, the book's central, innovative hypothesis that Sherlock Holmes was more pseudo-scientist than rationalist opens new and complex pathways to reading both Arthur Conan Doyle and the Sherlock Holmes canon.

Works Cited

- Lightman, Bernard. 2014. "Conan Doyle's Ideal Reasoner: The Case of the Reluctant Scientific Naturalist." *Journal of Literature and Science*, 7.2: 19-36.
- O'Brien, James F. 2013. *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.