



Zen IN THE Art OF Sherlock Holmes

CAN FICTION'S GREATEST DETECTIVE UNRAVEL
LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERIES?  By Stephen Kendrick

"We reach, we grasp, and what is left in our hands in the end? A shadow."

"You see, but you do not observe."

"It is my business to know what other people don't know."

These enigmatic phrases easily could come from some exalted spiritual teacher, imparted perhaps by an Eastern guru or a mystical priest trying to shake listeners free from their everyday perceptions. In fact, they are the words of the world's most famous private consulting detective: Mr. Sherlock Holmes of 221-B Baker Street, London.

A strange religious sage, this unemotional, logical man!

From the moment of his creation by Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes has been a wildly popular figure, known and revered for his uncanny ability to deduce the truth from the smallest clues. Doyle presents Holmes as being thoroughly skeptical and immune to the lure of the supernatural. In 56 stories and four novels, never once are Holmes and Dr. Watson, the detective's trusted friend, shown attending a worship service or expressing the slightest interest in organized religion. Even Watson admits that Holmes seems to be immune to sensitive feelings of any sort. Thoughts of love, in particular, are "abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind." He is, Watson concludes, "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen."

Despite all this, there is a religious teacher here, and a deeply wise one at that. On the surface, the Sherlock Holmes mysteries do seem to be singularly unlikely guides to the ineffable secrets of life. Still, I have discovered in them

 Illustration by Scott McKowen



an intriguing gateway to understanding something quite surprising: that detective stories of all kinds may be seen as subtly humble religious parables. As vividly demonstrated in the works of Doyle, the best mystery stories contain clues—and even a method—for unraveling a deeper mystery we all share.

A competent but unsuccessful doctor, Doyle intended to write only six adventures of a figure he first called Ormond Sacker, then agreed to write six more in response to an explosion of interest. After the original stories were published as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in 1892, Doyle hoped to end the series. He believed that these detective tales were obscuring his other “serious” work, especially his religious life, expressed in Spiritualism. But his mother, his editor, and countless readers thought otherwise. When he suggested killing off his hero, his mother wrote back with keen editorial judgment: “You won’t! You can’t! You mustn’t!”

Late in 1892, new adventures began to appear; and yet, determined to get Holmes out of his life forever, Doyle titled one of them “The Final Problem.” To this end, Doyle created someone who could credibly match the intellect of Holmes, though not his morals: Professor James Moriarty. The master criminal takes the sleuth, literally, to the brink of oblivion, when both go over Switzerland’s 200-foot-high Reichenbach Falls. In this story, Watson sadly records the demise of “the best and the wisest man I have ever known.”

But a resurrection was inevitable. After eight years, Holmes reappeared in “The Adventure of the Empty House.”

(*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, published in 1902 to rapturous reviews and critical acclaim, was slyly presented as a case from the past.) After this, no one took Doyle’s protests seriously until, after *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* appeared in 1927, Doyle finally freed himself from his protean creation.

Doyle died in 1930, but Holmes remains in remarkably good shape, appearing and reappearing in countless movies, television series, and new novels. Why are we so devoted? Because there are qualities about this seeker that make him eternally fascinating. In dozens of dialogues with Watson, Holmes attempts to awaken in his friend the skills and willingness to see things as they are, not as one wishes, believes, projects, or fantasizes they are. As the philosopher Wittgenstein said, in a Zenlike fashion much like Holmes’, “Don’t think. Look!” Indeed, many a case turns on Holmes’ ability to gaze at a crime scene and see it without prior theories or prejudice, to see what is present. Keeping perception clear is the opening to insight.

According to Doyle’s text, Holmes has only one clear religious interest: He’s an eclectic religious searcher, especially concerning the religions of the East. This interfaith curiosity is signaled early, in *The Sign of Four*, when Holmes is described by Watson as chatting away with casual brilliance on many subjects, “on miracle plays, on mediaeval pottery, on Stradivarius violins, on the Buddhism of Ceylon, and on the warships of the future.” Watson adds that Holmes spoke “as though he had made a special study of it.” That Holmes would study Hinayana Buddhism seems surprising, until one actually looks at the ancient sources of this rigorous minority branch of Buddhism. Then the attraction becomes quite clear. Hinayana Buddhism, which claims to be the oldest, most accurate account of Buddha’s teachings, presents the Buddha as cool, rational, and emotionally distant, a strict and intellectually rigorous instructor. (The Compassionate Buddha of Mahayana Buddhism had yet to be developed.) In “The Veiled Lodger,” Watson describes



his friend as sitting “upon the floor like some strange Buddha, with crossed legs.” What’s more, consider how Holmes spent his three-year “hiatus” when everyone thought him a dead man, at the bottom of Reichenbach Falls with Moriarty. Free to do as he pleased, Holmes spent two of those years traveling in Tibet, where, he says, he “amused myself by visiting Lhasa, and spending some days with the head lama.” Some Sherlockians have speculated that Holmes completed his Buddhist initiation during those years and became a Buddhist master, a guru of awareness and observation. Perhaps that explains why Holmes is never again seen using drugs to calm his teeming brain.

At the beginning of Doyle’s first short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Holmes performs his favorite trick, one that would open many stories. He deduces from small details of Watson’s appearance, clothing, and shoes that his friend has been walking in the country, has a careless servant girl, and is back in medical practice. After Holmes carefully details how he picked up all the little clues, Watson laughs. “When I hear you give your reasons, the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I believe my eyes are as good as yours.”

Holmes agrees, and makes one of the most important statements in all the canon: “You see, but you do not observe.”

Watson never quite awakens to the fact that he is living with someone as focused as a Zen master, a spiritual teacher who just happens to have a fondness for tracking down criminals. Despite the light tone of the stories and their sly wit, Holmes is not playing a game with his “teachings” but rather showing how to truly see our world. The stories are, at last, not just about apprehending criminals, but about apprehending reality.

Throughout them, the detective is instructing his friend

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to learn what Buddhists call “bare attention.” An old Zen tale describes a student badgering the teacher Ikkyu over and over about the core of the teaching. The master writes with his brush the word *Attention*. Not satisfied, the student asks, “Is that it?” In response, the master writes, *Attention, Attention*. Now irritated, the student replies, “What is profound about that?” Writing the word three times, the master calmly answers, “Attention means attention.”

Bare attention is seeing things exactly as they are. Holmes sees with brilliance, true, but he sees, more importantly, with keen accuracy and without grand theories that twist truth into ideas and down blind alleys. The Buddhist psychotherapist Mark Epstein describes bare attention as “impartial, open, non-judgmental, interested, patient, fearless, and impersonal.”

Jesus speaks to this in Matthew, alluding to Isaiah’s observation that “You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.” To which Jesus adds: “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and right-

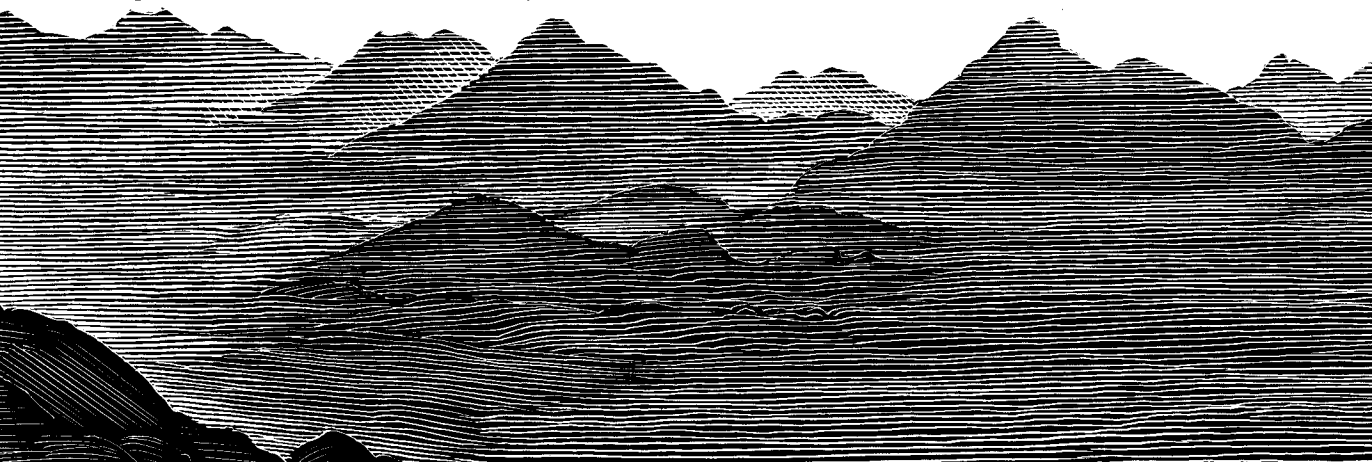
eous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it” (13:16). Not to mention the police!

You and I are generally used to seeing things the way Watson does. Holmes, however, clearly thinks *anyone* can reach insight in the way we approach seeing. Here are five principles drawn from the Holmes stories that show us how to see with new attention.

1. NOTHING IS LITTLE

When Watson first meets the young Holmes in the short novel *A Study in Scarlet*, the great detective is just starting his career. Holmes quickly establishes himself as essential to the London police because he notices things that others miss. At the scene of a murder, Holmes spends more time there than anyone else, picking up small physical clues after the police have already searched the premises.

“They say that genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains,” he tells Watson. “It’s a very bad definition, but it



does apply to detective work.” And what are these pains? As Holmes explains to a befuddled policeman, “To a great mind, nothing is little.”

The little things are the signals to what is ultimately crucial. If detective fiction has any importance beyond entertainment, it is in the lesson that meaning is found in kneeling down to the small, the overlooked, the pieces and shards of our days. I once heard John Updike say “Eternity is littleness piled high.” It takes genius to see that low.

Everything rests on the small. Every detective knows the case opens at the point of the overlooked bent blade of grass, the ripped laundry stub, the hair, the fiber, the bestirred grime. Our muddled and muddy lives have structure and order, and the detective reveals it to us when it has been obscured by lies and violence. Jacques Barzun, perhaps the greatest critic of mystery fiction, says, “What happens in modern detective fiction is that objects . . . are taken literally and seriously. They are scanned for what they imply, studied as signs of past action and dark purposes. . . . Bits of matter matter.”

2. NOTICE WHAT YOU SEE

When Watson praises Holmes, saying “You see everything,” the detective resists, insisting that this skill is nothing special. When Watson further remarks that Holmes’ deductions about a certain client are drawn from details “quite invisible,” this will not stand.

“Not invisible but unnoticed, Watson. You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that was important.”

Once we accept that the little things are crucial, we still have to “notice” what we are seeing. The world stands before us all in perfect clarity; it is our lenses of attention that are clouded and obscured. We do not have to train with Holmes to learn “the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a boot-lace,” but we can learn how to observe what we see. There is an old Hasidic story about a rabbinical student who traveled a great distance to visit a famous teacher, not in order to listen to his learned discourses but to see how he tied his shoelaces.

When I was preparing a class on Buddhism in America, I discovered a quote from Van Gogh in a letter from Arles that described how Japanese woodblock prints were affecting him: “We see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends time doing what? In studying Bismarck’s policy? No. He studies a single blade of grass.”

Spinning great theories is not a detective’s task, nor is it ours. A little bare attention goes a long way. G.K. Chesterton said that a detective story is the only form of literature that actually conveys “some sense of the poetry of everyday life,” because it presents our life back to us, each stone, brick, and signpost a hieroglyphic.

Perhaps the greatest mystery we ever confront is the visible, not the invisible.

3. THE ORDINARY IS DECEPTIVE

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, after his friend has deduced that he has been in his club all day, and after

hearing the reasoning explained to him, Watson bursts out, “Well, it is rather obvious.”

Holmes replies, “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.”

This response is one of Holmes’ wisest observations. In the world of the intimately familiar, we so readily lose sight of what is important, and even what is holy. We think we have our world in view, but sometimes what is most crucial lies hidden in plain sight. In the Zen collection *The Gateless Gate*, it is put quite plainly: “It is too clear and so it is hard to see. A dunce once searched for a fire with a lighted lantern.” As Holmes would put it, “There is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace.”

It takes a rare observer to stay sharp, to keep the channels open—not for the mysterious, but for the ordinary. Sarah Coakley, a professor at the Harvard Divinity School, tells of hearing the frustration in the voice of a Russian scientist, a recent immigrant who was driving a taxi to make ends meet. In their new country, he feared, his children were losing “the capacity to attend.”

Our culture “doesn’t know the meaning of listening,” the cabbie exclaimed. “It doesn’t know how to focus—on a sound, on an idea, on each other, on God.” Coakley thought as she listened to this expatriate’s anguish she could hear the continuing refrain found in the Russian Orthodox liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom: “Wisdom, attend.” This is what we are always being asked to do, and yet we so easily lose this attending, this holy curiosity for the surface of the life we have been presented.

4. THE BIZARRE IS NOT NECESSARILY MYSTERIOUS

Although the ordinary contains the most powerful mysteries, Holmes also tells us to beware of the allure of the bizarre. When Holmes is drawn into a murder investigation far from London, in the Boscombe Valley, he says, as he surveys newspaper accounts, “It seems, from what I gather, to be one of those simple cases which are so extremely difficult.”

Watson, quite understandably, replies, “That sounds a little paradoxical.”

“But it is profoundly true. Singularity is almost invariably a clue. The more featureless and commonplace a crime is, the more difficult it is to bring it home.” He later says in the stories that the more bizarre a case appears, the less truly mysterious it actually is. Featureless crimes, on the other hand, could be totally baffling. In other words, the odder and more strange a matter, the greater will be the odds that the solution will be clear and straightforward.

I’ve often thought the following dictum of Holmes should be inscribed across the portals of every church and temple: “It is a mistake to confound strangeness with mystery.” This is a mistake people attracted to all forms of religious life can, and do, make.

In spirituality, we are often attracted by the grotesque, the outlandish, the startling and strange. We confuse these qualities with effusions of the divine. But the truth is that great spiritual masters urge their followers to beware the strange; that true enlightenment means a deeper appreci-

ation of the very life in which we find ourselves. If we want mystery, it is never far from our sight. "What is mystery?" asked Dostoevsky. "Everything is mystery; in all is God's mystery. . . . Whether the tiny bird of the air is singing, or the stars in all their multitudes shine at night in heaven, the mystery is one, ever the same."

Beware the bizarre—it is too easily solved to be truly mysterious.

5. PRESUME NOTHING

Over and over, Holmes restrains himself from jumping ahead of his perceptions. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* he states, "I presume nothing." He keeps his mind free, his options open. Bare attention is very hard to accomplish. The first and last thing we bring to this way of seeing is a mind without theories, without preconceptions, without prejudices.

"I make a point of never having any prejudices, and of following docilely wherever fact may lead me," claims the detective. True faith isn't believing outlandish things, but being perfectly open and free to see the sacred in the ordinary and the commonplace. There is a Zen saying that surely would have appealed to Holmes: "If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything—it is open to everything." Holmes is trying to teach Watson, and us, how to awaken our senses, how to move past sight into insight and then into a Zenlike state of realization fused to fact.

To come at reality without prejudices or preordained views means, at times, that we can sense and experience something truly miraculous without rejecting it outright. And this approach to truth leads naturally to one of the master's most famous sayings: "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?"

To gaze at the world with bare attention and open curiosity can lead us to improbable places and unlikely solutions to the holy. When we learn to presume nothing, we can see everything, anything.

I have found that people who teach me to live with holy curiosity allied to this willingness to "presume nothing" are not spiritual writers at all, but artists. Indeed, as Van Gogh wrote to his brother, the artist is someone who "has paid attention to the things he sees with his eyes and hears with his ears, and has thought them over; he will end in believing, and he will perhaps have learned more than he can tell. To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, *that leads to God.*"

The passion aroused by the radical painters of Holmes'

own time—the impressionists and their successors—came from their rejection of a false realism. Painting how the eye actually perceives the play of light on the world, they "presumed nothing" and painted accordingly. That is what made the impressionists shocking. It is, as Holmes says, human nature to see what we expect to see, and that is why we so seldom observe and notice what we see.

Though he may be a scientist before anything, driven to understand the texture and processes of this world, Holmes is also presented as a special sort of artist. Doyle has laid the clues cunningly for us, having his character identify himself as the grandnephew of the French painter Émile Verne—*an actual person*. "Art in the blood," Holmes declares, "is liable to take the strangest forms." As Watson notes: "Holmes had the impersonal joy of the true artist in his better work"; and again, "Holmes, like all great artists, lived for his art's sake." He shows us again and again how to break out of the stale and stolid ways of seeing in preconceived ways. How to observe. How to reach the state of bare attention. How to attend. How to value and treasure the smallest details of the world set

before us. How to realize at last that nothing is little.

Many years ago I was working on a sermon while my son, who was 4, played with miniature cars next to me with a child's serene concentration. I idly asked him what love was. Without looking up, he said, "Love is the eyes we see with." I made a promise to my family a long time ago not to use them as sermon illustrations, but I will never forget the cold chill I got as I hurriedly scratched his definition down. I have never found a better way to express it.

Any faith is a way of seeing, an inner vision that can become true to reality and as vibrant as a Van Gogh painting with curling, swirling color that reveals the objects of the world bathed in light and reflecting and revealing their full energy and power. To see deeply and well and *accurately* is to know that nothing is invisible, but rather simply unseen.

The mark of good spiritual teachers is that, no matter how demanding, how irritable, how pressing, how paradoxical and mystifying they might be, they ultimately never give up on us. Holmes never lets Watson believe for a moment that the doctor's eyes are not as good as the detective's. Now it is time for us to observe what we see, alert and open to what is happening.

Stephen Kendrick is the parish minister of the Universalist Church of West Hartford, Connecticut. Adapted from the book Holy Clues: The Gospel According to Sherlock Holmes by Stephen Kendrick. Copyright ©1999 by Stephen Kendrick. Reprinted with permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

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