

# “Crime is common. Logic is rare”: Guy Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes

By Kevin Martinez  
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*Directed by Guy Ritchie, screenplay by Michael Robert Johnson, Anthony Peckham and Simon Kinberg*

The original Sherlock Holmes, who first appeared in 1887 in a short story, *A Study in Scarlet*, was a fictional detective brought to life by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), the Scottish physician and writer, in late Victorian England. In all, Conan Doyle wrote four novels and 56 short stories featuring the character.

The works became enormously popular, and Holmes and his sidekick Dr. John Watson have been portrayed innumerable times on screen and stage (in fact, the detective is claimed to be the “most portrayed movie character”). Among many others, Basil Rathbone was a notable Holmes in the 1940s in 14 films, and Jeremy Brett played him memorably on British television from 1984 to 1994.

Arguably world literature’s most famous sleuth, Sherlock Holmes came to epitomize the power of 19th century reason and was renowned for solving apparently impossible mysteries with deductive logic, as well as an impressive knowledge of chemistry and forensic science.

Unfortunately, British director Guy Ritchie’s portrait of the detective, in his recent *Sherlock Holmes*, more closely resembles a quasi-superhero who likes to brawl and fight opponents with his bare hands. While Robert Downey, Jr.’s performance as the detective is imbued with a certain degree of humor, his is the most cynical and “bohemian” incarnation of Sherlock Holmes yet. The plot, which is needlessly complicated and rather boring, has nothing to do with the original Conan Doyle stories.

Furthermore, can anyone seriously imagine a young person (Ritchie’s intended demographic) approaching the original Sherlock Holmes stories after watching this? There have been many better versions of the

detective; especially noteworthy is Vasily Livanov’s portrayal in the Soviet television series, “The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson,” broadcast between 1979 and 1986.

Ritchie (*Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*; *Snatch*; *RocknRolla*) apparently intended to steer clear of intelligence and sophistication in his adaptation, and he hit his mark. As the filmmaker told the *New York Times*, “Even though the stories are a joy to read and reread, they do tend to be fairly small, contained murder mysteries,” he said. “And so for the big mainstream audiences these days, I knew we would have to come up with something where the stakes were bigger and that had a big fantasy element.”

In Ritchie’s send-up of the Sherlock Holmes story, the detective and his trusty assistant Watson (Jude Law) uncover a sinister plot hatched by Lord Blackwood (Mark Strong) to murder a young girl in an occult ritual. Lord Blackwood is caught by the duo and eventually hung for his crimes, which include five murders and dabbling in the black arts. However, Lord Blackwood reappears from beyond the grave and begins killing members of an elite secret society, which asks Holmes to take up the case. It is up to the detective to stop the conspiracy, and thus pave the way for the inevitable sequel.

Ritchie has tried to include “something for everybody” in his new film: occult conspiracies, brutal fist-fights, a pretty face or two thrown in for good measure, in the form of Holmes’ old mistress, Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams), and Watson’s fiancée, Mary Morstan (Kelly Reilly), and voilà: you have all the ingredients for a holiday blockbuster!

The banter between Holmes and Watson is occasionally amusing, but the best lines are those that stay true to the original works, such as, for example,

when Holmes remarks to his companion, “You have the grand gift of silence, Watson. It makes you quite invaluable as a companion.” Or when he declares, “My mind rebels at stagnation; give me logic, give me work.”

This version of Sherlock Holmes is far more antisocial than previous ones. At one point, Downey’s Holmes locks himself in his study for nearly a week and muses to Watson, “There is nothing out there for me any more.” Ritchie has naturally chosen to emphasize the character’s reclusiveness and occasional misanthropy, the least attractive of our Victorian hero’s characteristics.

While the original Holmes was skilled in the martial arts and knew how to defend himself, in Conan Doyle’s version the violent action was always suggested. Since Ritchie specializes in exaggeration, crudity and obviousness, such action becomes the main course in his latest film.

As for solving the mysteries, watching Ritchie’s Holmes at work is very confusing and, in any event, not captivating for long.

The scenes in which Holmes refuses to surrender to superstition and follows his scientific method to rationally investigate Blackwood’s “magic” make up the better parts of the film. It is refreshing to see Holmes deduce the bigger picture from the smallest of details and not give into the prevailing irrational fear about Blackwood, but, unhappily, this theme of science versus ignorance is not seriously thought or worked through.

Ritchie is far more concerned with visual pyrotechnics and endless fights. In the hands of a more talented and sensitive director, a tale about Sherlock Holmes could still make for a genuinely exciting two hours.

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