



The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics

James F. O'Brien

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La ciencia de Sherlock Holmes, de Jim O'Brien, nos enseña cómo descifrar casos con ciencia y medicina forense. Admiramos a Sherlock Holmes por ser el más astuto de los detectives pero, ¡elemental, querido lector!: no solo era inteligente, sabía mucho de ciencia...

Pocos personajes de la literatura son más reconocidos universalmente que Sherlock Holmes, el detective surgido de la imaginación de Arthur Conan Doyle. Cautivados por sus poderes de observación y deducción, muchos lectores pasan por alto el uso que Holmes hacía de la ciencia para resolver sus casos. Remediar semejante limitación, al mismo tiempo que introduce a los lectores en los fundamentos científicos de las técnicas forenses, es el propósito de este libro. Así, y tras introducir a los principales personajes del mundo de Holmes – Watson y Moriarty, en especial –, James F. O'Brien, un distinguido químico, desentraña los conocimientos científicos de Holmes, especialmente los químicos, materia en la que sobresalió. Analiza, por ejemplo, venenos como el monóxido de carbono, cloroformo y ácido prúsico (el nombre histórico del ácido cianhídrico), y muestra que Sherlock Holmes fue un pionero de la ciencia forense, utilizando las huellas dactilares mucho antes de que Scotland Yard adoptase este método. Consciente de que la realidad no se puede encapsular en la literatura, O'Brien también incluye descripciones de casos reales, en dominios como el análisis grafológico, explicando cómo se utilizó para capturar al denominado "asesino del Zodiaco" de Nueva York y para determinar el responsable del secuestro (1932) y posterior asesinato del hijo del aviador Charles Lindbergh.

The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics Details

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From Reader Review The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics for online ebook

Dylan Benito says

This book made me a bit sad. It could have been so good, instead it read like a jerky thesis paper. There were citations within the text that were distracting, and the language got a bit too dry on more than one occasion. The premise and the ideas in the book were great, I just wish either the author had a better editor, or someone else had written it. Sherlock Holmes should not be boring, and this book was.

Stephen Ormsby says

I loved this book. It had everything that a nerd/geek like me would want to know about Sherlock Holmes. It goes into a lot of detail about his techniques, describing each against real cases where the logic has either supported or failed the case and which investigatory techniques have since been debunked. Amazing. You will not lack for information here, even though it is relatively short.

But the part of this book, I enjoyed even more was the character building elements Conan Doyle used to make the most famous detective. Bits of Poe here, bits of school teachers there, to create a the basis for all modern literary detectives.

On the only downside, I found was the odd section that appeared to have been repeated. Sometimes, I felt like I'd read similar words only a page or two before, which I found slightly disconcerting. Otherwise, this is a great read if you like your analysis on the slightly heavier side.

Birgit says

With The Scientific Sherlock Holmes James O'Brien brought out a book for those who've been as spellbound by the fictional detective as I've ever been.

On first glance the book seems to focus on Sherlock's scientific tools of deduction, yet it also offers a substantial introduction to characters, influences, and stories themselves. On one hand I found this to be a good idea as it offers a more rounded picture, on the other hand the title is a bit misleading with its promise of a scientific emphasis. This probably makes the book more suitable for Sherlock Newbies while those who already know a fair share about Sherlock's world might skip the first part.

About two thirds of this small volume delve deeper into the world of forensic science and mostly chemistry, which Sherlock certainly knew most about. His methods are being illuminated by examples from the stories and brought in correlation with modern-day methods. Especially the discourse by Isaac Asimov, himself an avid Sherlockian, who is a notable critic of Sherlock's scientific knowledge, was quite captivating. Sadly though the two domains of fictional story and science feel cobbled together in a rather dry manner, without much care for a fluent reading experience.

All in all I am torn about this book as I found the topic itself highly fascinating, but the execution lacking. Either way, those genuinely interested in the subject should definitely give this book a try.

In short: The little book of Sherlock trivia!

Jean says

I am interested in anything Sherlock Holmes so I was eager to read this book, but I was very disappointed. In the first half, the author is just compiling information on Holmes and other characters in his books, based on quotes from the books and on extensive notes. The books are shown as four-letter acronyms, like Scandal in Bohemia is SCAN, and works cited are included at the end of sentences, both of which are very distracting. The author has no style; he just writes simple declarative sentences, stringing them together. I found this part mildly interesting, but after having read or listened to or seen a movie of many of the stories fairly recently, I found the descriptions boring. Maybe someone who just dropped off another planet might find it interesting to know that Moriarty was Holmes' nemesis, but with two TV shows (Elementary and Sherlock) telling us all about this villain, there's nothing new here.

The second part discusses O'Brien's attempt to explain some of the science behind Holmes' deductions. Again, the author uses the work of others and some of his own chemistry to explain about chloroform, tobacco, footprints, etc. Nothing original, some explanations too long, with lots of chemical symbols and math (yuck!). I was intrigued to find that Isaac Asimov had already written about Conan Doyle's science - I'd rather read the original.

I gave this book two stars because I did find a few parts interesting, but I mostly skimmed through.

Amy Rogers says

The Scientific Sherlock Holmes: Cracking the Case with Science and Forensics by university professor James O'Brien is a systematic discussion of the science and mathematics used by that most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes. O'Brien addresses both the real-life knowledge and ideas of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes' creator, and the expertise of the character as shown by his actions or by the comments of Dr. Watson. The expertise and academic interests of both author and character change over time.

The Scientific Sherlock Holmes is more of a book about Sherlock Holmes than it is a book about science. Written in a readable but formal academic style, this book will appeal primarily to the hard-core Sherlock Holmes fan, a person who knows the story canon inside and out. Nevertheless, as a person who has read only a couple of Holmes tales in my life, I found the discussions of Holmes' exploits fascinating and am now motivated to read more of them.

O'Brien divides the book first into sections focusing on main characters (Holmes, Watson, the archenemy Moriarty, Holmes' brother, Watson's wife, etc.). Then he gets to the heart of what this reader was looking for: the science of Sherlock Holmes. These chapters are organized by academic field, with sections devoted to forensics (fingerprints, footprints, handwriting analysis), chemistry (phosphorus and the Hound of the Baskervilles, amalgams and acids), use of microscopes and magnifying lenses, mathematics (Euclidean geometry, probability, mental math calculations), astronomy, and more. The author includes anecdotes from the Holmes stories and puts the science in the context of real-world cases in which such techniques were used. O'Brien also makes reference to essays written by Isaac Asimov criticizing Doyle's/Holmes' errors in chemistry; by and large, O'Brien is a big Holmes fan and apologist, looking for ways to explain how Holmes was right even when he appears to be wrong. (Reminded me of Star Trek fans who try to explain science fiction phenomena as fact.)

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a medical school graduate and ahead of his time in some of these scientific techniques and ideas. For one thing, he makes Holmes a drug addict (cocaine and opium) and shows disapproval for this at a time when some believed these drugs to be beneficial. As Doyle aged he became less a student of science and more obsessed with spiritualism. This alteration in the author's world-view is reflected in the stories, as later Holmes stories contain less science.

Summary: An enjoyable work of literary analysis focused on the science and math of Sherlock Holmes. Primary audience is Sherlock Holmes fans with an interest in science, but anyone acquainted with the Holmes series and an interest in forensics may find this an intriguing book to page through.

Elmwoodblues says

Possibly a must for any true fan of all things Holmes. Like a Vulcan dictionary, or the 'Risk: Middle Earth Edition', this is hard-core fan fodder, offered in a compact, richly-footnoted edition. Anyone interested in criminal science, deduction, cryptology, or forensics can find more factual, in-depth reading elsewhere; but if you are a Conan Doyle fan, there are plenty of examples of the methods his famous 'consulting detective' employed herein.

Stacy says

I feel like I just read someone's dissertation. The book was barely readable - filled with end of sentence citations, title abbreviations and other people's work.

Brian Clegg says

I'm a fan of Sherlock Holmes in every form from the original stories to the modern day TV version Sherlock, so it was with some enthusiasm that I came to The Scientific Sherlock Holmes. What I hoped for was something along the lines of one of the better 'the science of' type books – but in reality this is something quite different.

As the understated cover suggests, this feels like more of an academic book than a popular title. This comes through in a number of ways. James O'Brien is too interested in cataloguing every instance of something, rather than giving an interesting narrative. He also uses an infuriating approach, apparently common in academic writing about the Holmes stories, of using a four letter code to represent each story. So after a first reference to, say, The Hound of the Baskervilles, it is thereafter designated as HOUN. Similarly, A Study in Scarlet is STUD and so on. Unless you are a devotee, this makes the text rather impenetrable. Another academic tendency that does the author no favours is to keep referring to the way someone has theorised something about the particular topic, then giving a reference – not a great way of putting an argument across.

There is some interesting material in here as to how Doyle got his ideas, and examining in detail the different aspects of Holmes' use of scientific and forensic methods – sometimes quite groundbreaking – and the degree of his scientific knowledge. In this, O'Brien is generally quite defensive of Holmes, giving him the benefit of the doubt when others like Isaac Asimov have suggested he was actually not up to scratch. But

overall the package does not give the reader enough to get their teeth into and is presented in such a dry fashion that it is hard to consider it any more than a passing interest.

If you are deep Holmes enthusiast, the kind of person who buys and studies all the surrounding literature, this will be a must-have addition to your collection. Otherwise, probably not for you.

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The Luke says

Creí que este era un libro de divulgación científica en el que, aprovechando la popularidad de Sherlock explicaba distintos aspectos científicos para acercarlos a todo el mundo.

Pues, no.

El libro es un paper MUY LARGO (xq un paper tiene unas pocas paginas de largo en gral, no 230) sobre todas las cosas referentes a alguna ciencia que se hayan nombrado alguna vez en algún relato de Sherlock Holmes. Un registro, por decirlo de alguna forma, ya que enumera CADA UNA de las veces en la que se haya nombrado algo científico. Tiene cosas de papers que, si uno lo lee en una revista científica, es decir, leer un paper propiamente dicho, y bueno, esta bien xq es el formato que se usa y que es necesario. Pero si estoy leyendo un libro no quiero que se repita algo que me acaban decir 5-10 paginas atras.

y lo mas triste de todo es que me pareció mas "entretenida" o interesante toda la parte de la introducción que la parte en la que hablaba de las "cosas científicas".

Quizas a algún sherlockiano le interese para sumar a su colección, pero para alguien q le interesen los libros de divulgación científica, no le va a gustar.

Tracey says

When I think of Holmes, I think of a scientific method of deduction. I think of a human version of a CSI lab before there were CSI labs, able to observe and interpret the smallest grains or threads of evidence and effortlessly build a case against the evil evildoer. I admit, I haven't read the canon lately, so I have to take the author's word for it when numbers are cited – the frequency of occasions when Holmes used a magnifying glass or a microscope, or dabbled in chemistry. Which I have no problem doing – it's obvious that Mr. O'Brien was thorough in his tallies. He's thorough in every aspect of the book. Which, in a way, is why it did not rate more than three stars.

Let me 'splain.

This book reminded me a little of one of the Shakespeare biographies I've encountered lately, which tries to bake a cake with about a half a cup of batter. They present the little information that exists from a different angle, and basically fill in the rest with art and artifice – like using a styrofoam layer for that cake. With *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes*, the angle is a good one: see, here is how science is involved in Sherlock Holmes's investigations. The practice, though, brings in the styrofoam. There are fifty-six short stories and

four novels ("long stories") in the canon, and when all is said and done there isn't much more batter to work with here than for a Shakespeare bio.

The book is broken into sections relating to the different sciences, and each one augments the information derived from the Holmes canon with anecdotes from reality, and discussion of where Doyle obtained his information. The section on fingerprinting, for example, is a nice little history of the science, including its earliest appearance in fiction in Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson. The section on astronomy – dealing more with Moriarty than with Holmes – brings in an acquaintance of Doyle's who was the likely source for the references. The section on handwriting analysis goes into some detail about the Lindbergh kidnapping, among others, and that on footprints (which was a little disappointing; I didn't realize footprint evidence had been so thoroughly discredited) went, surprisingly, into the OJ Simpson trial.

Another way in which the little available material was puffed up to fill the 208 pages was simple repetition. Some of the same points were made (in nearly the same phrasing) two or more times. In a longer work reiteration can be helpful, but this was fairly brief (and illustrations, an appendix, bibliography, and index took up a fair amount of space). (The appendix is concerned with the totally off-topic but wildly weird and interesting "Doyle conspiracies" – I had no idea that he was blamed for everything from an archaeological hoax to, God bless us, the Jack the Ripper killings. There's a certain irony to the latter given that the most recent Holmes I've read was Dust and Shadow.)

The exploration of science in the Holmes stories was fun and interesting, but where it would have made for an excellent longish article, it simply was not enough to fill a book.

This was a Netgalley advance copy, read with thanks.

Shannon says

This book had too many summaries of the plotlines of almost all of the sixty Sherlock Holmes stories and not enough exploration of Sherlock as a scientist. Additionally, I came into the book believing that it would be about how Sherlock uses science and forensics to understand his cases, but it was more a discussion of the science he does outside of the confines of a case. The book was well written and the author obviously knew what he was talking about, but the topic seems more suited for a lecture at a Sherlock convention and not as a book adaptation.

Rhonda Elfstrand says

A book that doesn't need to be read straight through. Quite intriguing. It's true that most of us know more about the character Sherlock Holmes than about the author. Fascinating to find what scientific discoveries were available to him and how cutting edge he really was.

Sparrowhawke says

I am not the intended audience for this book, which I take to be Sherlock Holmes scholars with little

background in science. I am neither a Holmes scholar nor untrained in science, while the author is both an obvious devotee of Holmes and an emeritus professor of chemistry (my undergraduate major). As a devotee, he seems more intent on impressing other devotees with his research into the Holmes canon. As a chemist, he does little to bring to life either Holmes's science or forensics.

Stefan Collini once observed, "In many forms of experimental science, writing plays no really creative role: it is not itself a process of discovery, as it is in the humanities, but an after-the-event report – ‘writing up,’ as the idiom revealingly has it. Accuracy, clarity, economy are certainly required in the presentation of results, but arranging one’s findings in intelligible form is regarded by many research scientists as something of a chore." Professor O'Brien among them, I suggest. The writing here is a dry piece in an academic style that comes across as a "writing up" of the author's research intermixed with enough filler to turn what might better have been a paper or two in some journal into a manuscript for a short book. Had one of my students turned in writing like this, it would have cost that student a letter grade. Here it costs Professor O'Brien a star.

Lauren Little says

An interesting read, though I felt the book was written like a dissertation at points.

Athena says

For all Sherlockians out there this is a great account of the scientific Sherlock Holmes

John F Arnold says

Good read, the science is enlightening

4 stars for logical conclusions supported by experts and fans of Holmes alike. This book added to my enjoyment of one of my favorite collection.

Maia says

The Scientific Sherlock Holmes is a scholarly fan's discussion of the use of various scientific methods for crime solving in the Sherlock Holmes stories. The book includes chapters on finger prints, foot prints, hand writing analysis, cryptography and tracking dogs, comparing each of these as used by Holmes against their uses in modern criminal cases. I was surprised to learn that many of the techniques discussed (particularly finger prints) were, at the time of Conan Doyle's writing, revolutionary new ideas in police work. Also examined are Holmes' knowledge of chemistry, biology, geology, physics and mathematics. Two sections I particularly enjoyed were a discussion of false gems and brief afterward about famous hoaxes credited to Conan Doyle himself. Google “The Piltdown Man” if you are curious about the later.

Laura LVD says

Una buena adición a mi estante de sherlociana, pero un poco escueto. O será que por provenir de las ciencias exactas algunas explicaciones me parecen un poco breves o simples. De todos modos sirve para hacerse una idea de cuán avanzado era Sherlock Holmes en temas forenses (o mejor dicho, cuán bien informado estaba Conan Doyle siendo nada más que un oftalmólogo del montón)

A Reader says

The book enjoyable enough, with explanations and summaries capable for a layman such as myself to read. While not having read the short stories of Sherlock Holmes, I had still wanted to know about the science behind them. The book did not disappoint in that regard, with short summaries of what had happened in the story along with a dive down into what Sherlock Holmes had done. I probably will not read again, but it was good while it lasted.

Ben Cardall says

When one looks at the idea of learning to think like a fictional character, you definitely have to take said idea with a pinch of salt. For there is no set list of things to do or not do, there are a variety of lessons we can learn from the Canon, but to put them into practice nowadays is an entirely different kettle of fish. It relies upon an acknowledgement of what works for you on an idiosyncratic level. We know the wheelhouse of methods and approaches, things he was good at doing as well as things he wasn't so good at doing. There are many books that look at Holmes' approach to problem solving, as well as his observational and reasoning skills. There are few that look at his scientific skill, even less that shine such a magnifying glass on the methods that are discussed in depth in this book and that is the reason for me choosing it as my first review.

To put it quite succinctly, *The Scientific Sherlock Holmes* by James O' Brien is a book that I absolutely adore. That adoration never dwindles with each time I peruse its contents. In particular because it references the difference between the fiction of the tales and how the techniques would work in reality. The sciences the book enumerates is plentiful and varied. The Bertillion fingerprint approach, footprints, written text, codes, dogs (this is a particularly insightful part due to the way that Mr. O'Brien highlights the way that dogs are utilised in investigative in today's world. As well as their pros and cons and what the histories of using dogs in detection are. I find the histories of any technique to be very useful because it helps you to better understand how and why a technique works.) As many aspects of chemistry as any Sherlockian would need.

To touch on the histories again, they are concise and to the point. Though not in such a way that it detracts from any useful information not being there. They may be abridged but that only means that the passages contain all useful pieces of knowledge to be stored away safely in the attic of everyone's memories. For the sherlockian each piece of science is accurately compared to the scene or scenes that it is used in the Canon.

The 'other sciences' chapter toward the end of the book contains gold on maths, biology, physics, astronomy, geology and meteorology. A veritable cornucopia of Holmesian delights showing not only the full workings of how to complete some of the seemingly offhand mental calisthenics the famed detective is

capable of but demonstrating alternative uses too. Discussed within those final pages is how to tell a person's height from the size of their stride, the geometric principles behind divining the height of the infamous tree in the Musgrave Ritual is taught and showing the maths behind calculating the speed of the train in The Silver Blaze and how we can utilise these thoughts ourselves, today.

There is no doubt that this book contains a lot of well thought through and useful information. It shows the parallels between real life and the Canon and the differences between the techniques as well as highlighting any pros and cons, which is something I really enjoy given that it is my current vocation. It presents a valuable and worthwhile read for any who are in pursuit of sharpening their mind, and for the avid Sherlock fan who aims to develop a skill set like the famed genius, you will see the dedication it will take to reach the success you want but above all, that it is possible!

It is a very different look into the head and mind of Sherlock Holmes, but very worthwhile and worthy of every penny and minute contour time you will invest in it.
