
Physicians have long admired the observational skill and rapier-like reasoning of the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes and the calm and reliable assistance of his friend, companion, and chronicler Dr. John Watson. In addition to the many short stories and novellas of the Holmes Canon, there are dozens of stage plays, movies, and radio and television shows that have been given birth from the Holmes and Watson duo.

Only a subset of Holmes devotees may know that their creator, Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), was a physician who graduated from medical school at Edinburgh University and tried his hand at general practice and as an ophthalmologist. As a medical student Doyle was fascinated by the clinical acumen and teaching ability of one of his professors, Joseph Bell M.D. As a patient silently stood before him Bell dazzled his students by describing the patient’s profession, recent travel, and ailments from the callouses on their hands, their speech and gait patterns, the appearance of their clothes, or the splattered mud on their boots. Many people see, but few really observe.

Doyle worked hard at his avocation as a writer, sitting in his rooms above his medical office, writing short stories and novels and peddling them through the mail to magazines and book publishers. He wrote on a wide variety of topics, fiction and non-fiction, until he hit financial pay dirt and international fame with Holmes. When he did, it was good-bye to the practice of medicine and he sold his office equipment.

Michael Sims intertwines a biography of Doyle, from birth up until the time of his achievement of fame with Holmes, with thorough research on Doyle’s family, his publishers, and the business of literature in late 19th century England. The reader will also learn a good deal about a wide range of Holmesiana: a deep dive into Joseph Bell as a medical school professor, why the illustrations of Holmes don’t look anything like what Doyle envisioned his character would look like, the deerstalker hat, and how the travails of Doyle’s alcoholic father may have worked their way into the stories.

A relatively quick and entertaining read for the Sherlock Holmes aficionado.