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Irregular Readers

Arthur Conan Doyle's "six dirty scoundrels", Boyhood and Literacy in Contemporary Sherlockian Children's Literature

Abstract: Young adult (YA) literature is a socialising genre that encourages young readers to take up particular ways of relating to historical or cultural materials. The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a boom in Sherlockian YA fiction using the Conan Doyle canon as a context and vocabulary for stories focused on the Baker Street Irregulars as figures of identification. This paper reads YA fiction's deployment of Conan Doyle's fictional universe as a strategy for negotiating anxieties of adolescent masculinity, particularly in relation to literacy and social agency.

Keywords: Young adult literature, detective fiction, masculinity, literacy, adolescence, intertextuality

Holmes was Billy's hero, the man that more than any other in the world he wanted to be like. Holmes's ability to solve mysteries, using nothing more than his powers of observation and deduction, brought pleas for his help from all over the world. (Pigott-Smith, 18)

At the turn of the twentieth century detective stories and their adolescent ilk, boys' magazine literary cultures (and novels such as those later produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate) were seen as fodder for juvenile delinquency. One significant exception were Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, published between 1887 and 1927, but already being endorsed by no less an authority than Robert Baden-Powell in *Scouting for Boys* (1908). As founder of the scouting movement, Baden-Powell saw the Holmes stories as coherent with a response to delinquency less punitive than didactic: "Discipline is not gained by punishing a child for bad habit, but by substituting a

better occupation that will absorb his attention and gradually lead him to forget and abandon the old one" (Baden-Powell, 315). By contrast, a threat to adolescent masculinity at the turn of the twenty-first century is less the anxiety of bad or inappropriate habits of reading than a perceived failure of boys reading literary texts at all. What was once the great social ill is now being mobilised as a social cure, and a number of young adult (YA) Sherlockian stories explicitly addressed to young male readers bear witness to a climate of cultural anxiety about young men as non-readers, and thus as potentially exiled from social agency.

Literature for young people both reflects and shapes social and cultural understandings of gender and subjectivity. As recent years have seen a wide-ranging discourse of boys and young men as reluctant, resistant, or deficient readers, there has been a simultaneous push towards publishing literature for young readers with explicit "boy appeal". Market-tested and culturally familiar (even authoritative) figures and formulae such as a young James Bond (Charlie Higson); Percy Jackson (Rick Riordan); Artemis Fowl (Eoin Colfer); and the Cherub series (Robert Muchamore) all tell stories of heroic masculinities which combine the conventions of adolescent fiction with genres such as the adventure, spy, or detective story. Caroline Reitz reminds us that such genres flourished in the late Victorian period, and "collaborated with other kinds of texts to shape national identity in England" (xv). They continue to do so today, and exemplify an atomistic urban subjectivity, where one person can serve as an heroic, "special" selfhood, and also be embedded in a post-industrial, urban society.¹ Given such contexts, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first years of the twenty-first century witnessed a boom in Sherlockian YA fiction using the Conan Doyle canon as a context and vocabulary for stories focused on the Baker Street Irregulars or a young Holmes as figures of identification. Series such as Anthony Read's "Baker Street Boys"; Andrew Lane's "Young Sherlock Holmes"; Tracy Mack and Michael Citrin's "Sherlock Holmes and the Baker Street Irregulars"; Tim Pigott-Smith's "Baker Street Mysteries"; Shane Peacock's "Boy Sherlock Holmes"; Tony Lee's "Baker Street Irregulars"; and Tracy Barrett's "The Sherlock Files", address a range of cultural anxieties. In particular, these novels reflect tensions between nostalgia for "the linking of masculinity and intellectual and social superiority" which marks detective stories as "myths of patriarchal domination", and Holmes as a figure who symbolises, and "defends by the exercise of his intellect [...] the British empire itself" (Hourihan, 92).

This paper examines recent Sherlockian YA stories to assess whether contemporary detective fiction for young readers confirms or disrupts the cultural myths described by Reitz and Hourihan. A range of texts have been read, attending to genre codes of crime writing, to specific intertextual uses of Conan Doyle's writings, and to explicit discourses of literacy, especially acts and valuations of reading and writing. Such textual examples were then analysed for implicit or explicit connections between detection, literacy, and gender, to consider how the texts construct or endorse a politics of gendered literacy and connect that politics with the history and authority of Sherlock Holmes. The children's stories are significant not only because they draw on Conan Doyle's Holmes canon but also because they use that canon to explore contemporary concerns about masculinity and literacy.

Detective Fiction and Adolescent Readers

Detective stories in particular enable adolescent protagonists to exploit their perceived disempowerment or invisibility within dominant society while also appropriating adult agency and authority (Routledge). The detective offers a figure of identification, of the "rebellious to conform" (Trites, 34) that typifies adolescent fiction. In detective fiction, socially questionable activity may be undertaken in the ultimate service of affirming social cohesion. While fuelling stereotypes of adolescent masculinity, the symbolic links between reading as a social practice and the traditions of literary detection (Hühn), mean that adolescent detective fiction can thematise reading as inherently valuable while avoiding the 'taint' of feminisation. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, writing about dime novels and juvenile series at the turn of the twentieth century, notes that "The detective story proved to be the most resilient and popular formula for juvenile series books because, among other virtues, it solves a key problem of seriality: how to achieve both continuity and variety" (200). Of course, this is precisely the innovation often attributed to Conan Doyle's output of Holmes stories (see Wiltse), and in a symbolic sense, is the task of coming-of-age.

What emerges as a consistent point of socio-cultural anxiety in YA uses of the Sherlockian is that of negotiating between the desired privileges of elite (and elitist) homosocial, masculine networks, and the (presumably more egalitarian) desired social norms of today wherein the regimes of class and gender which structure Conan

Doyle's fictional world are seen as, at best, anachronistic and more frequently as actively detrimental to a civil society. While Dominic Cheetham has recently read Sherlockian texts for young people "in terms of the apparent social class of the children in the stories" (36), it is also true that as a group, these texts are engaging anxieties about gender and literacy as they relate to agency. Such social anxieties are necessarily inflected by logics of social class, but they also speak to a contemporary cultural moment in which ideologies of neoliberalism are subordinating class to other ways of social being (see Hateley, 171-173).

Sherlock Holmes as Culture-Text

Although underpinned by a canon of works by Arthur Conan Doyle (and illustrations by Sidney Paget), it is Sherlock Holmes's status as culture-text which makes him useful to contemporary YA authors. Paul Davis uses the term "culture-text" to distinguish Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) from the text "that we collectively remember" (3), the amalgam and accretions of decades' worth of retellings and reimaginings of Dickens's *Carol*, which "changes as the reasons for its retelling change" (3).

If Dickens's "Scrooge has become common cultural property and is as deeply embedded in our consciousness as George Washington or Dick Whittington, Merlin or Moses" (Davis, 5), then surely a similar claim can be staked for Doyle's Sherlock. Indeed, in the early twenty-first century, for an Anglophone adolescent audience literate in multi-modal textual cultures, including but unlikely to be limited to printed prose and graphic fictions, film and television (in broadcast, exhibition, domestic media, and digital forms), internet/online, gaming, and social-media resources, Holmes may well be a more familiar cultural property than Dick Whittington, Moses, or even Scrooge himself. The Sherlock culture industry has been especially visible recently due to the success of Guy Ritchie's films (*Sherlock Holmes* [2009] and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* [2011]) and Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's TV series *Sherlock* (Series 1 [2010], Series 2 [2012] and Series 3 [2014]), but that industry has been even busier in the sphere of texts for young people. The focus here is on a small selection of reimaginings of Doyle's 'juvenile detectives', but these works are only part of a wider textual culture of Sherlock for young readers (see Cheetham, 36-37).

Youth in Doyle's Sherlock Stories

It should be remembered that youth is marginal but significant in the Holmes canon. In light of Catherine Belsey's reading of the Holmes stories as "haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women" (114), it is possible to see youth as another potentially destabilising social presence which both confirms and disrupts visions of mature agency within the Holmes corpus. Jann notes that "the abnormal cruelty of a child can incriminate his parents in 'The Copper Beeches'" (692), but more usually, young people are mobilised by Doyle to encourage readers' sympathy as much as their anxiety.

Of course, in the first Holmes narrative, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), we are introduced not only to Holmes and Watson, but to:

the Baker Street division of the detective police force [...] half a dozen of the dirtiest and most ragged street Arabs that ever I clapped eyes on.

"Tention!" cried Holmes, in a sharp tone, and the six dirty scoundrels stood in a line like so many disreputable statuettes [...] He handed each of them a shilling. "Now, off you go, and come back with a better report next time."

He waved his hand, and they scampered away downstairs like so many rats, and we heard their shrill voices next moment in the street. (Doyle, 51–52)

Just as the Baker Street Irregulars burst into the rooms of 221B Baker Street only to be "managed" by Holmes, childhood or the condition of youth is "managed" by the Holmes stories. The productive harnessing of street boys mirrors a wider cultural logic of 'helping youths help themselves' (within specific parameters). So the Irregulars are made over for their own and the social good: "their potentially subversive ability to 'go everywhere and hear anything' is transformed by Holmes's superior bourgeois 'organization' into more useful 'work' – that is, more effective social control – than the official police could produce" (Jann, 696).

Today's Irregulars

The title of "Baker Street Irregulars" is now connected most fully with worldwide organisations of informed and committed fandom/appreciation of Sherlockian cultures. However, in twenty-first century texts for young readers, the Irregulars continue to serve as symbols and tools of socialisation, and as figures of somewhat direct identification.

Falling beyond the purview of this paper are a number of recent texts for young audiences which draw on what might be thought of as the Basil of Baker Street tradition, where analogue or diminutive Sherlock Holmes serve as detectives. In Eve Titus's 1958 story, *Basil of Baker Street*, an anthropomorphised mouse detective solves crimes in late Victorian London. The narrator of this story, Dawson, tells the reader:

Basil was as famous a detective in our world as was Mr. Sherlock Holmes in the world of people.

This came about because he studied at the feet of Mr. Holmes himself, visiting him regularly in his rooms at Baker Street, Number 221, B. (Titus, 10)

Such stories are metaphors for the ways young people can read Conan Doyle's stories and themselves study at the feet of Holmes. More recent books for young readers, such as A.J. Low's *Sherlock Sam and the Missing Heirloom in Katong* (2012) make this explicit: Sam is growing up in twenty-first century Singapore, but tells the reader "Sherlock Holmes is one of my heroes, and I want to be a great detective, like him!" (Low 3). For all the differences between them, texts such as *Basil of Baker Street* and *Sherlock Sam* are direct descendants of Baden-Powell's dictum that reading Sherlock Holmes is appropriately character-building for young men.

Another strand of Sherlockian adaptation interpolates Holmes into existing franchises, including *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* (2009), and *Tom and Jerry Meet Sherlock Holmes* (2010). In 2010, an issue of *The Muppet Show Comic Book* had Fozzie Bear play Watson to a Sherlock figure. Perhaps more powerfully, narratives about adolescent incarnations of Holmes himself have become increasingly popular in recent years. In 1985, Barry Levinson directed *Young Sherlock Holmes* which imagined Holmes and Watson meeting at boarding school and embarking on their first joint investigation. Recent series of novels by Andrew Lane and Shane Peacock also imagine Holmes's youth; as a group, such texts affirm the significance of adolescence in shaping – even determining – adult identities, behaviours, and social functions. Although the shared normativity of detective fiction and YA fiction may help account for the popularity of Sherlockian content in recent texts for young readers, it is valuable to heed Wiltse's point that "Foucauldian readings of Holmes have consistently failed to account for the degree to which he is himself *on* many of the boundaries of bourgeois normality he has been assumed to patrol" (107). Sherlock Holmes's own threshold locations speak to a deeper

resonance with heroic adolescent masculinity than with social normativity: Sherlock Holmes is something to pass through *en route* to adult masculinity, rather than an ideal vision of adult masculinity for the early twenty-first century.

Many of the Irregulars texts incorporate girls into the team—presumably to widen the audience, and to diversify the characters. However, the stories remain firmly aligned with the conventions of “boy sleuth” narratives: adherence to moral “ideals” above individualism; working in teams as preparation for the work (both physical and social) of manhood; and, a subordination of selfhood as a paradoxical strategy for the assertion of subjectivity (Cornelius). These narrative elements affirm heroic masculinity and its attendant social norms of middle-class, white, patriarchy. The narratives are less clear about affirming the heteronormative, because in Sherlockiana there is always-already a potential slippage between the homosocial and the homoerotic, which recurs as a site of ideological policing in many Sherlock texts for audiences young and old. A number of tensions between classed and gendered norms characterise contemporary Irregulars stories, as the Sherlockian intertexts and contexts not only enable the explicit exploration of adolescent masculinity and socio-cultural agency (especially when represented by literacy), but also constrain the possible formulations of acceptable visions thereof. This can be seen in three Irregulars texts which enact a kind of cumulative narrative of gender, literacy, and agency.

Anthony Read’s *The Case of the Disappearing Detective*

Anthony Read first imagined life for the Irregulars in a British television program, “The Baker Street Boys”, in 1983. The series is not readily available today, but ran for six episodes and content from those shows including titles and characters has made its way into the (to-date) seven novels Read has published since 2005 under the series title “The Baker Street Boys”. Although the series and their protagonists are called the “Boys”, there have always been some female members of the Irregulars as imagined by Read.

In the first of the series, *The Case of the Disappearing Detective* (2005), the Irregulars must swing into action to both recover the kidnapped Holmes and foil a plot to assassinate Queen Victoria by blowing up a railway bridge. The convergence of the personal and public investigations is a characteristic of junior fiction about the Irregulars. In texts for young people, the notion of the “greater good” may not seem compelling in and of itself, but the genre conventions of detec-

tive fiction on the one hand and adolescent fiction on the other hand seems to demand the dual pursuit of the public and the private (or the individual and the social). There is a pattern in Irregulars stories of the public crime literally operating at the level of Royal / Sovereign authority, suggesting overt ideological connections between individual agency and state power.

While Wiggins is the action leader of the Irregulars and explicitly models his comportment and behaviour on Holmes throughout, the novel closes with an affirmation of Beaver – the literate Irregular – emulating Watson:

“Thought I’d try and write down all what’s happened these last couple of days. Like Dr Watson does for Mr Holmes [...] I think I’ll call it ‘The Case of the Disappearing Detective’.” (Read, 141)

The play on the title of the book being the title of Beaver’s narrative offers an extratextual privileging of narrative production and literacy over the actions described by such narratives.

The Irregulars’ youth is positioned as an advantage when it comes to physical fitness (Read, 131), daring social behavior, and willingness to act on instinct (135). Nonetheless, the Irregulars’ actions are ultimately validated only when sanctioned by police and other civil authorities. Similarly, emphasis is placed on the Boys having honest work (flower selling, boot blacking), which is valuable because it provides them with economic and knowledge resources; they can interact believably with/near adult culture; embeds the Boys within social spaces/institutions – Paddington Railway Station, Theatres, and Covent Garden – to aid investigation (and which to early twenty-first century readers are likely to seem quite safely middle-class, but which all represent decidedly ‘liminal’ spaces in the nineteenth century).

Such tensions between allegiance to any sense of realism or historical authority or authenticity, and a construction of youth desirable in the current moment can also be seen in the notes which appear at the end of the book. Readers are offered a brief explanation of “Baker Street” which refers to Doyle’s Sherlock stories and makes clear that other than Wiggins, the “other children have all been created by Anthony Read for this series of original adventures” (142). The facing page offers a potted history of “Windsor Royal Station”, which makes a concrete connection between the station’s original function as a marker of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee and its contemporary role as shopping center, train station, and home of a replica of

Queen Victoria's royal train (Read, 143). These notes both defer to and distance themselves from Doyle's writings and the real Windsor Royal Station, signaling a characteristically ambivalent relationship with the "real" Sherlockian, and an attempt to both retain a sense of literary and social history while appealing to young readers of the twenty-first century.

Tracy Mack and Michael Citrin's *The Fall of the Amazing Zalindas*

The Fall of the Amazing Zalindas (2006) is the first in a series of four novels which show the Irregulars working under the direct guidance of Holmes. More even than Anthony Read's works, these books combine an action-packed plot (replete with circus-based hijinks in *Zalindas*) with educational elements.

Ozzie is the most recent addition to the Irregulars, but he holds symbolic leadership because of his literacy and his capacity for higher-order thinking. In other words, because he is more similar to Holmes than any of the other Irregulars are. Indeed, an early scene depicts Ozzie reading aloud Watson's "A Study in Scarlet" story to the Irregulars from *Beeton's Christmas Annual* (Mack and Citrin, 33). Ozzie has been unwillingly apprenticed to a forger pretending to be an honest scrivener – this location will ultimately help him negotiate valuable reading from unthinking writing, and indeed, to resolve the central investigation of the novel. Ozzie is an analytical *reader* (like Holmes), more than a creative *writer* (like Watson), representing an advancement on desirable literacies from Read's book.

The converging criminal plots in this novel are the murders of circus performers, and a burglary at Buckingham Palace. *Zalindas* foregrounds and thematises competing values of books and reading in its depiction of psychic "readings" at the circus – which despite the novel's very Holmesian emphasis on rationality, remain both reliable and unexplained – and the importance of the stolen *The Stuart Chronicle* as an artefact with enormous material and symbolic value. Tellingly, the *Chronicle* is ultimately valued for its concealment of "the Eggs of Galilee. Possibly the most valuable emeralds in the world" (Mack and Citrin, 225). And, it is Ozzie's capacity for reading which reveals this fact: "He said it was not a book, but a treasure chest, and that the writing meant nothing. Vile and Moriarty must not have read it" (210–211). The progression towards an ideal literacy in and for adolescent detection remains firmly in the realm of the masculine. *Zalindas* advances the implicit claims for literacy made by

The Disappearing Detective by making literacy central to the detection plot. The next example serves to illustrate “why”.

Julian Kemp’s *Sherlock Holmes and the Baker Street Irregulars*

Sherlock Holmes and the Baker Street Irregulars (2007) is a British telefilm originally intended as a pilot for an ongoing series (that never eventuated) focused on the Irregulars. Although operating under the direction of Sherlock Holmes (Jonathan Pryce), Holmes himself is contained, as he is placed under house arrest having been framed for the murders of several police officers. For the Irregulars, the local crime is the abduction of one of their members, Jack (Benjamin Smith), and this is directly linked to the public crime of a planned robbery of the Royal Mint. The villain of the story is Irene Adler (Anna Chancellor), who achieves her nefarious goals here by killing and then disguising herself as a middle-aged, male jeweller.

It is this act of cross-dressing which reveals the film’s central concerns, not least because it sheds light on the film’s true point of anxiety: the Irregular, Tealeaf (Alice Hewkin), who is introduced and lives as a boy but is actually a girl. Holmes first sees Adler through an exhibition glass which superimposes facial hair (see Figure 1) – and, of course, serves as foreshadowing of the major crime. Irene’s cross-dressing is literally criminal, where Tealeaf’s is constructed as an act of self-protection – she explains it away via the Orientalist



Figure 1: Holmes’s first view of Irene Adler (Anna Chancellor) makes manifest the film’s anxieties of gender. Image courtesy of RLJ Entertainment Australia Pty Ltd.

discourse which pervades the film: “if you saw how they treat girls in China, you’d understand” (Kemp). Tealeaf becomes the quintessential Other because she is linguistically and physically deceptive (as a translator and a cross-dresser); she is Orientalised and is made to originate stereotypical claims about Chinese; and, is the focus and origin of the film’s several “jokes” about illiteracy.

The film closes with Holmes revealing to Watson that he has always known Tealeaf to be a girl, and that this is acceptable because it is useful and more significantly, temporary:

Holmes: Another year, it’ll begin to show on the girl.
Watson: You knew?
Holmes: Oh, Watson, please. Give me some credit.
Watson: Why didn’t you say anything?
Holmes: Well, I’m sure one day it’ll prove very useful to have a boy, who’s a girl playing a boy on the team.
Watson: Well, they *are* called the Irregulars. (Kemp)

This is part of a wider logic whereby adolescence is privileged until its properties are wrongly carried over to adulthood. The Irregulars themselves seem to be concerned that once they “grow up” they will not be able to play detective. They believe Holmes can do so because he is a “gentleman” and “has brains”. Recognising their exclusion from Holmes’s social status, Finch (Aaron Johnson) seeks to equip himself with the tools and skills he associates with Holmes: questioning, a magnifying glass, etc. This kind of adult aspiration is constructed as acceptable, as Finch is attempting to embrace an adult version of his adolescent self. By contrast, adult female-to-male cross-dressing has been identified as criminal, so it is “rational” that Tealeaf will have to leave her female-to-male cross-dressing behind in adolescence. Presumably, though, she cannot leave her “Chinese-ness” behind, and may not be able to leave her illiteracy behind, so she continues to bear the weight of the text’s multiple anxieties.

The Future Past

Twenty years ago, Joseph Bristow could claim convincingly that,

Even if consensus affirms that imperialism is a dirty word, and that its ideals have been exposed as a sham, there is still an imperialist war being played out by ‘boy’s own’ heroes against both real and

imaginary enemies, whether in the Third World or in the film industry. (218)

More recently, Paul notes of young adult fiction that, “the harkening back to the Victorians is more often than not an ideological smoke-screen for the promotion of conservative family values and national chauvinism” (13). To these formulations, it can be added that newly inflected by neoliberalism, Sherlockian neoVictorian writing for young people effaces the material conditions which produce “Street Arabs” in favour of deceptive discourses of self-efficacy. Such neoliberal logic works insidiously to naturalise accompanying ideologies of patriarchy, white supremacy, social aspiration and individualism. Even as there is much pleasure available in revisiting and rethinking the Holmes canon, and the renewal of detective fiction for contemporary readers, such pleasure cannot be divorced from the fact that today’s adolescent readers are being encouraged to view themselves as basically “like” late nineteenth-century youths. Rather than contesting inherited cultural values, and for all the contemporary narrative veneer, one can almost feel the paternalistic approval of Robert Baden-Powell, Samuel Smiles, and Arthur Conan Doyle colouring these texts about Irregulars which promote very regular agendas indeed.

Notes

1 This is complicated in the case of Conan Doyle’s Holmes, but it is nonetheless pertinent – Holmes could not serve as heroic detective if he did not have a deep, quotidian knowledge of his social as much as of his material environment. Where Percy Jackson, Artemis Fowl, and James Adams (the Cherub series) embody individual heroism, they also operate in environments fantastical or hyper-real, safely distinct from the real environments likely inhabited by their readers. Sherlockian YA texts are often distinguished by their historical as well as their social or physical settings and offer twenty-first century readers a heightened moral and social fictive world wherein action is character.

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