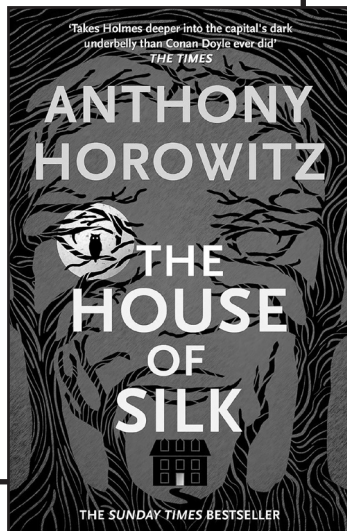


All Roads Lead to Holmes



Mikel Vause

A Conversation with Anthony Horowitz



I am one of the luckiest of people in that I have been able to follow Robert Frost's injunction and "unite" my avocation and vocation: I have made my living reading and talking about literature. Many times in conversation, I've been asked what kind of books I teach, and I always respond with "Frankenstein, Dracula, or Sherlock Holmes," which often comes as a surprise to the conversant.

Well, to me, even to this day – and after many rereads – the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective are still my favorite. I was introduced to the Holmes canon as an early teen, when my parents gave me The Complete Sherlock Holmes for my birthday. Doyle's writings were an instant addiction, leading to a sixty-year habit I've been unable to kick (not unlike Doyle's own dabbling with various substances). Like most addicts, for the last forty years of university teaching, I've tried to entice many young minds to "just try it" – in my case, a literary drug, of sorts.

In 2008, I gave a talk at the annual meeting of The Baker Street Irregulars held in Salt Lake City on what was the 125th anniversary of the publication of A Study in Scarlet. Later that same year, I attended the international meeting of The Baker Street Irregulars held in the Union Club in New York City. What a great experience it was to spend time talking

shop with hundreds of Holmesians who love Doyle's idiosyncratic detective as much as I do. So, when the opportunity arose to meet and interview Anthony Horowitz, another famous lover of all things Holmes and the author of several well-received Holmes novels – not to mention an impressive body of work that encompasses more than fifty novels – it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

*Anthony came to Ogden, Utah, as the featured speaker of the 2023 Ogden School Foundation's Fall Author Event. In support of Weber State University and its journal *Weber*, the foundation kindly arranged for me to visit with him. I want to express my profound thanks to the foundation and to Anthony for their time and generosity. The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.*

I read an interview of yours recently, and your comments about social media are dead on. I think that social media is ruining society.

I feel social media is responsible for a great deal of the unhappiness and divisiveness we feel in my country. However, as you may have heard me say, as troubling as it is, social media does have its value. There's nothing created by technology that is *purely* bad; social media *does* have the ability to bring us together. Many people read, write, or communicate with people through social media. But, social media has also turned everything into black or white, yes or no, right or wrong. Social media doesn't understand that there is a vast territory in between—the gray area—where we begin to examine an argument and look at different layers of agendas; social media can't do that. Social media says, "It's either-or, you're right, or I hate you." It brings out strong emotions. Twenty years ago, when people got angry, they sat in their chairs, and they drank beer, and they threw something at the TV screen. Now, we have a huge platform that we can use to vent our anger all over the world.

Thoughts posted to social media are there forever; you can't get rid of them. During the presidential election when Donald Trump was first elected, I wrote some of my thoughts on social media. A woman who I'd grown up with told me that if I drove through her neighborhood, she'd shoot me. She said that she was a Second Amendment Republican, and she'd shoot me because I'd said that Trump didn't tell the truth and a few other things. After that, I quit using social media altogether.

The public forum is a dangerous one. Especially when one looks at American politics, one can see that there are people who are using it to dangerous ends.

*I'd like to talk about Arthur Conan Doyle. He's been a hero of mine for most of my life. As a child, my folks gave me *The Complete Sherlock Holmes set*; I re-read it every few years. When did the two of you first meet?*

I'm assuming you and I both near the same age and likely both came across Sherlock Holmes and Arthur Conan Doyle at about the same time; I found him in my mid-to-late teens. My father gave me the complete set

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of short stories and novels for Christmas one year, and I fell in love with the stories almost immediately. Not just because of the crime aspect of them, but because I lived in a rather dull suburb of London. It was a quiet place, and I was somebody who yearned for adventure. I loved the stories and the way that the suburbs of London were depicted, places like Norwood—as an American, you may not know that these are dull parts of London—who knew they could be the home to some of the greatest stories ever written. I loved the idea that a temple in Agra, or a conspiracy in the plains of America, or Muhtar, could reach out and find me where I was living. Suddenly, adventure was all around me. That's what *Sherlock Holmes* did for me.

Which story fueled your imagination first?

The story I've always loved most is "The Devil's Foot." There was a Jeremy Brett production of it on television, which terrified me. I couldn't have been that young when it started, but, nonetheless. Jeremy

Brett, to my mind, is still the greatest actor to play on *Sherlock Holmes* by far. I also loved the story called "We're Going to Texas." Holmes stays stationary for pretty much the entire story, lying in bed. The first part of that story is a deception. I love stories where Moriarty takes up a full spot.

That's an interesting story that has to do with medicine and tropical diseases.

Joseph Bell, one of Doyle's professors at university, ingested drugs himself in order to test them. He also tested medicines on his students. The idea of sitting in a room and imbibing a poisonous substance to see what happens is very much at the heart of Doyle's DNA of life.

*That kind of experimentation was very much so a British tradition. An 18th century British surgeon named John Hunter was the focus of a book called *The Knife Man* by Wendy Moore. He would inject himself with poisons and even infected himself with syphilis to see if he could cure it.*

You're correct; it is a part of the medical tradition in Britain.

With that in mind, how do you respond to Doyle's obvious mistakes within his stories, particularly when having to do with scientific topics?

One of the things that I loved Doyle for was the mistakes he made within his stories. I make mistakes in my books; I've written over fifty-five novels, and people regularly write to tell me that I've made a mistake about a time period, or a name, or about something else I should have known which I didn't. Part of me kicks myself and thinks that I should work harder and be more precise, but then my books are edited two or three times before they reach book-form, so it's not entirely my fault. But even so, I find it consoling to know that Doyle made mistake, after mistake, after

mistake—some of them critical mistakes. Some of my favorite mistakes are in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.” The story is still one of his greatest in many ways; it is quintessential Sherlock Holmes. In the story, the killer uses a pipe or a flute to attract snakes. One snake climbs a rope to get out of the room they are in; that is a physical impossibility. Another mistake occurs in “The Adventure of the Priory School,” in which Sherlock Holmes follows bicycle tracks made in the soft ground, which, again, you can’t do because you can’t possibly know which way the bicycle was going. There are other simple mistakes like getting names wrong—is it James or John Moriarty? The name changes once or twice. Where was Watson shot, the shoulder or the leg? These mistakes tell me that the greatness of Doyle is not in the detail; it’s in the world he creates; it’s in the language; it’s in the characters; it’s in the imagination. If you make little mistakes, it shows you are human, not a bad writer.

Doyle did not particularly like writing Sherlock Holmes. He knocked them out with powerful imagination and wonderful writing, but I don’t think he ever pored over those manuscripts, checking for mistakes, because

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he had his eye on a bigger prize: romantic history.

Sherlock Holmes was a payday for him.

He wasn’t being paid very much at first; he only earned five pounds for his first book. But that money grew very quickly.

Hundreds of pastiches have been written based on Doyle’s stories. Some of the stories that I like best are by Adrian Conan Doyle and John Dixon Carr. And then you’ve got The Seven-Per-Cent Solution by Nicolas Meyer.

I liked that story very much; it includes Dr. Freud, doesn’t it?

Yes. The way he introduces the story is by stating that he found the manuscript in a chest in the attic of a woman’s home in Minnesota.

It was a clever idea and very well written. It was quite a good film, too, for that matter.

It was nominated for a few Oscars. And then, there was The Italian Secretary by Caleb Carr.

I really like Billy Wilder and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. I’ve always thought it to be a good film pastiche.

Right. And then, of course, your book, The House of Silk, is great. How was it to deal with the Conan Doyle Estate while working on that novel?

When I was asked to do the Sherlock Holmes novel, I didn’t use the word pastiche. I find the word pastiche to be inaccurate because I don’t think what I was doing was pastiche. It was more of an homage—if you’ll forgive the difference between them—it was more of a *continuation* of the novel. Pastiche suggests to me that it’s sort of a rip-off or comical interpretation of the

original—in the way that *Austin Powers* is a pastiche of *James Bond*, but that’s just me.

How was dealing with the estate? Well, when I was commissioned to write the first book, I did two things. The first thing I did was to say that I would only sign the contract if I took no notes from the estate at all, which may sound like arrogance, but I was very nervous about being interfered with during the process. I wanted to immerse myself and do the book my way. The second thing I said was that I wouldn’t sign the contract until they’d read the first chapter of the book. I wanted them to see that I could do it. Sherlock Holmes is one of the most beloved characters in literature. There are whole organizations built around him, one of them being The Baker Street Babes. There are societies you can belong to; you can be a Sherlockian or a Holmesian. I believe in America you are a Sherlockian, and in Britain you are Holmesian.

I’ve been to the Reichenbach Falls with the Shakespeare Society; I’ve spoken in The House of Parliament for them as well; I’m very immersed in that world, and so one thing I didn’t want to do in *House of Silk* was to offend or annoy anybody. If you write a book about a great character, about a great writer, you risk spoiling people’s pleasure by making it into a pastiche—it would make you want to fling the book across the room. The reader would think, “he would never say that; he would never behave that way.” It makes me so cross because it damages the dream we all carry; the love we all have for these books.

The Doyle Estate was absolutely fine; they’re not an estate like the Fleming Estate. They’re not people who meet every week and control the books; they’re on a copyright anyway. They are the descendants, but they didn’t interfere. I did get notes from them that said they loved the book—it was a joyous right.

Are you familiar with Robin Campbell by chance? He’s is a professor of psychology at Stirling University, and he’s written a

handful of Holmes short stories. One story in particular, “The Case of the Great Grey Man,” features Holmes as he works to dispel the myth of The Great Grey Man of Ben Macdui. Ben Macdui is the second-highest mountain in Britain.

John Norman Collie, the great British chemist who invented the neon tube, was also a mountaineer. He claimed to have seen The Great Grey Man. He talked about the experience at a mountaineering conference later on in his life, and he said that he never went back to Ben Macdui again because it was such a frightful experience. That’s Campbell’s story, which was published in The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal.

I haven’t read many continuations outside of Doyle’s novels because Doyle is enough for me. I re-read his stories every now and then; I re-read *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerrard* and his other books too. I am such a fan for Doyle and for other 19th-century writers

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who I read. My reading time is limited, and therefore I tend to stick with the originals.

There is one story I'd like to write, which I haven't yet done. There are a great many stories inside the books that Watson mentions but hadn't been written. The one I would like to write is *The Giant Rat of Sumatra*. What is it and how does it rear its ugly head?

Nicholas Meyer tried his hand at that, but it didn't turn out very well.

I might try and do better.

I think it'd be great. I recently read some books in your Hawthorne & Horowitz mystery series, and I saw things that could reflect back to Holmes's stories in their theme.

There is a bit of Holmes in Hawthorne, which I shouldn't write, because I know it is kind of like stealing from the master, but I just enjoy doing it. Occasionally, when he says something like, "I see you've just come to the country and you've got a new dog," I do enjoy doing that. Even the other day, as I was walking through this very town of Ogden, I was by myself and I was thinking about a sequence in Hawthorne; I was walking up a street and being able to tell where somebody has been and what they've been doing just by looking at them as they walk towards you, taking in your surroundings; I could do that here.

Was it by accident or intent that you established your home in Suffolk?

I live in Suffolk because it is two hours from London in the right direction. And it's somewhere I love and, in fact, I wrote *The House of Silk* there.

Have you read Rodger Garrick-Steele's book called The House of Baskervilles? In the book, he accuses Doyle of having killed Burton Robertson.

I did read it a long time ago; it wasn't an old book, was it?

It's maybe fifteen years old. It showed up in all the magazines: The Independent, The Daily Mail, and Newsweek carried articles about him accusing Doyle of plotting with Robertson's wife, who he was having an affair with, to kill Robertson by giving him doses of laudanum until he died.

I have heard this story somewhere else. My love of Holmes and Doyle has inspired a great deal of my own work and my writing, because I love them so much. I knew I wanted to be a writer, then I read Doyle, and suddenly I wanted to be a *crime* writer. But, I haven't pursued Doyle in the same extreme way that perhaps you have. It is something which I love, but which I have channeled into other things, and those other things have taken me in different directions. That's why I haven't read, for example, that self-published story about Doyle, and I have much less knowledge about the man than you do—about the character anyway.

You said that you like to read 19th century novels. I do, too.

My life has been an immersion of 19th-century literature, which really helped me when I came to write *The House of Silk* and *Moriarty*. But, you know, I've read the whole of Dickens *twice*. I've read most of Trollope, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, George Orwell. George Gissing is one of my very favorites; I've read everything of his; no one reads him anymore. I rec-

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commend reading George Gissing's *New Grub Street*. It's one of the greatest novels about what it's like to be a writer ever produced. It's about the world of writers and writing. It is the book that inspired George Orwell to write *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*; it was his favorite book. Gissing is out of favor because his books are so bleak. He's slightly later, between Dickens and Doyle is where you'll find Gissing. He helped me very much in the creation of that world. Just exploring the 19th century has taken years of my reading life.

In 2002, I was the chair of the Boardman Tasker Mountain Literature awards. That year happened to be the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the award, and the Queen was the patron of the Boardman Tasker. As part of the event celebrations, we had dinner with the Queen at St. James Palace. During the event, the Queen shook my hand and said, "What do you like?" I said, "Nineteenth century." She said, "Which one?," and I said, "Thomas Hardy." She

said, "Which novel?" And I said, The Mayor of Casterbridge. She patted my hand, smiled, and said, "Mine too."

I'm fascinated that the late Queen liked *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. I re-read it recently and it's a brilliant though very sad novel. I did meet Queen Elizabeth II—but we never had such an insightful exchange! That said, I have been working with our current Queen who is very involved in literacy and reading, and thanks to her I visited the Great Library at Windsor Castle. In the library, they have a miniature book written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I held the original in my hand and I'm very proud of that. Better still, they are producing a new Queen Mary's Doll's House and they've commissioned me to write a short story for it: it's called "A Tiny Ghost Story." You have no idea how happy this makes me.

How wonderful. It was so nice to talk with you.



Mikel Vause (Ph.D., Bowling Green University) is a Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Weber State University. He is author of numerous articles, short stories, and poetry collections, and the editor of six volumes of prose. His poem "What said the Thunder" was nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize. He is a member of the Alpine Club (UK), the British Mountaineering Council, and the American Alpine Club. He has also served on the board of the Boardman Tasker International Mountain Literature Awards.