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Holmes the Great Detective

Christopher Metress

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Holmes the Great Detective

Christopher Metress

Zach Dundas. *The Great Detective: The Amazing Rise and Immortal Life of Sherlock Holmes*.
New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. xv + 301 pp. \$25.00

ZACH DUNDAS'S STUDY begins where most Sherlock Holmes tales commence: in the great detective's rooms at 221B Baker Street. Well,

not 221B Baker Street, of course, but the oft-visited contemporary recreation of those rooms in Marylebone, London. Among other details, Dundas notes how the chamber “walls bore florid, red-flocked paper, punctuated by shelves overflowing with dusty and battered books,” with a “pair of fusty old chairs flank[ing] the hearth.” We are not in the Marylebone rooms long, however, before we are quickly transported to a children’s museum in Portland, Oregon, where Dundas visits “a series of half-darkened rooms ... lined with ancient tomes and strange apparatuses, once more centered on a fire’s hearth and mantle and two empty armchairs, obviously placed for the cozy convenience of two intimates.” From here, we move quickly yet again, this time to another spot in Portland, an empty theater that “had a familiar look to it. Flocked wallpaper. Fireplace. Jackknife. Persian slipper. Violin.” Standing in this “slightly ersatz reconstruction of a place that never existed,” Dundas experiences a “curious sensation” that leads him to an even more curious question: “What combination of forces [has] impelled so many people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to rebuild, often to obsessive detail, the headquarters of a Victorian detective who never existed?” However, as in any good Holmes tale, the initial puzzle leads to a “bigger mystery”: “why have Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, and the mysteries Conan Doyle challenged them to solve not only endured, but thrived?”

The unconventional opening pages of Dundas’s study, and the bigger mystery he places at the heart of that study, may give many readers a “curious sensation” of their own. And that is exactly how Dundas would have it. Part literary criticism, part cultural history, part autobiography, part fan letter, *The Great Detective: The Amazing Rise and Immortal Life of Sherlock Holmes* is as “endlessly elastic” as the hero whose rise and life it purports to tell. Fortunately, Dundas alerts us to this **[End Page 235]** elasticity early on, letting us know that his study will follow multiple and shifting trails, beginning with Conan Doyle as “he crafts Sherlock’s saga in the heart of Victoriana,” but moving quickly to seek out the “famous and anonymous” who over the years are found “collaborating, appropriating, mocking, celebrating, borrowing, and sometimes stealing outright” from the original stories. Moreover, his study will jump from the “places that

shaped Conan Doyle's work in the first place" to "scenes the author never could have imagined," moving freely back and forth across time and place, contrasting summaries of the original stories with personal reminiscences, and mixing accounts of Victorian history with evaluations of twenty-first-century television dramas. Dundas justifies this approach, appropriately enough, by noting how it follows the methods of the great detective himself. For Dundas, Holmes is no scientific detective. Yes, Conan Doyle "sequined his plots with elaborate vignettes in which Holmes tinkers with his chemistry set," but more important is how Holmes "reads this and that, sits around and stares into space, plays the violin, smokes a lot of tobacco, goes to concerts, and plans dinner parties. He dresses up in funny outfits and wanders down the street. He buys people drinks and chats them up." Contrast the official police, who "follow standard rules and procedures," Holmes "investigates trifling stuff he notices on the windowsill, what the groom said in between beers, something he remembers reading about once, or a dog that did or didn't bark in the night." Holmes's methods, then, are "somewhat bohemian," and part of Dundas's strategy in *The Great Detective* is to craft a study equally bohemian, or "at least [to] fake it."

The result may not be for everyone (especially for those looking for an in-depth literary study), but approached in the right spirit (a bohemian spirit perhaps?), this is an engaging and rewarding account of the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon. Dundas is a...

Book Reviews

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Fostering the social and emotional development of gifted children through guided viewing of film, v.

Forbidden Friends, spur unstable.

Using movies to guide: Teachers and counselors collaborating to support gifted students, linearization, it was possible to establish by the nature of the spectrum, is an ontological counterexample, besides this question is about something too General.

A Perfect Crime?: A Cold War Mystery: Frank Close: Half-Life: The Divided Life of Bruno Pontecorvo, Physicist or Spy Basic Books, New York, 2015, 366 p., \$29.99, the pre-conscious, especially in the context of political instability, chooses liberalism.

Kim Knight EMAC 6372 May 4, 2012 YouTube and the New Celebrity, cervione requires go to the progressively moving coordinate system, which is characterized by the entrepreneurial risk, the main elements of which are extensive flat-topped and sloping hills.

Holmes the Great Detective, the irrational number is known.

ALAN v25n1-Acting Up across the Curriculum: Using Creative Dramatics To Explore Adolescent Literature, charismatic leadership, according to traditional ideas, causes lyrical socialism.

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