

Do We Need a New Age Sherlock Holmes ?

by Balaji Narasimhan, Bangalore, India

Should we reinvent The Great Detective so that youngsters can understand him better?

Or should we leave this grand icon of a bygone era alone so that we always have a magical world in the past to slip into whenever we need to?

My nephew is today over six years old, and I remember that even when he was just over a year old, he used to say the name of The Great Detective much to my delight.

He would say 'cheek omch' when I pointed to a photo of Holmes in my room and since I have written a small book on Holmes*, I hope one day that my nephew will follow in my footsteps and also write about Holmes.

But what Holmes will he write about?

We know that Sherlock was born on January 6, 1854, and by that reckoning, he is around 155 years old today.

If somebody were to write about Holmes when he is 200 years old—and I for one believe that Holmes will be written about even when he turns a thousand—then what stories will one write about?

There are two schools of thought possible here.

Those who belong to the old school—and I count myself among such people—will say that Holmes should always be a Victorian character.

His world should always be 1895.

Any story, written even in 2154 when Holmes is 300 years old should conform to the Victorian period, period.

"Here, though the world explode, these two survive, and it is always eighteen ninety-five," as Vincent Starrett wrote.

But there will always be the "modernists" who will say that Holmes should move with the times.

They will want us to rewrite (God forbid!) the Canon and have Holmes send an SMS (instead of a telegram) to Watson when he requires the good doctor's help.

Should we do this?

Before we answer this question we should engage in a little self-evaluation—what does Holmes represent to each of us? What does he stand for?

To some, Holmes is merely a master logician, a brain without a body, a soul without a heart.

To many others—and again I wish to be counted among these numbers—he is a friend, somebody who helps us to navigate this modern world with his logic that is unchanging and unchangeable, somebody whose relevance is as much in evidence today as it was yesterday.

Whenever the cares of the modern rat race get to us, we can always slip into 221 B, Baker Street, and listen to the famous Stradivarius, see the 'VR' created by the bullet marks on the wall, view the famous Persian slipper and gaze upon the unanswered correspondence transfixed with a jack-knife to the centre of his wooden mantelpiece.

Of course, you can only do this in your mind's eye, but the fact that you can do this means that you can return to the modern world knowing that its abilities to trap you are limited.

"The modern rat race can't keep me in a cage," as William P. Schweickert so rightly observed.

And for this reason alone we need to ensure that Holmes stays forever in 1895.

Not just because he belongs to that age but because a part of each of us too belongs to that era with him.

*Balaji Narasimhan is a friend of ours who recently reminded us that our association extends over the last full decade (Tempus Fugit)!

He is the author of Sherlock Holmes: Solutions from the Sussex Downs in which Mr. Holmes, in retirement, receives accounts of cases confronting his old colleagues back at Scotland Yard and solves the cases merely by reading the letters.

Not only are they "armchair cases," but they are "Sussex cottage cases" for Holmes never leaves his retirement cottage to solve these cases.

Unfortunately, we could only print a limited number of Balaji's book when we initially published it and have long since sold out of stock.

Balaji's thoughts set forth in his article seem particularly timely, considering the controversy over the impending new Holmes movie soon to be released.

