

SHERLOCK HOLMES' DETECTIVE CLASS

(Program designed for Elementary school children)

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http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/uni_spe_conan_doyle.jsp

At the Toronto Public Library's Arthur Conan Doyle Collection, we often host class visits and other presentations for children right in the Arthur Conan Doyle Room. The opportunity to explore this combination of a library and a 221B reproduction is a great way to give the kids a memorable experience with Sherlock Holmes. However, if groups can't come to the ACD Room, we try to take the ACD Room to them. The 2009 Summer Reading Club program run by the library system featured a detective theme, offering a good opportunity to do this kind of outreach to promote the Collection and introduce Holmes to young readers. The resulting program, "Sherlock Holmes' Detective Class" was designed for kids ages 7-12. As with any program directed at children, each session was a little different, but the basic structure went something like this:



INTRODUCTIONS

What do the kids already know about Sherlock Holmes? Ask them what a detective is, and if they've ever heard of Holmes. Prepare a bag full of Holmesian objects such as a deerstalker hat, a doll wearing an Inverness cape (Snoopy was a popular choice), a magnifying glass and a calabash pipe. Kids enjoy guessing what's in the bag based on what they already know about what a "real detective" looks like. Most groups I've worked with can guess the contents of the bag, although they usually don't know the terms "deerstalker" or "Inverness." (If you're concerned about encouraging smoking, you can point out that one doesn't have to smoke a pipe to be a detective.)

DISGUISES

The talk about Sherlock Holmes's appearance is a good segue into a talk about disguises. Point out that the hat, cape, etc. make Holmes very distinctive-looking, so sometimes he has to disguise himself. Show pictures of Holmes and other persons from the Canon in disguise. (An elderly bookseller in *The Empty House*; A common loafer in *The Beryl Coronet*; A simple-minded clergyman in *A Scandal in Bohemia*; Neville St. Clair as a beggar in *The Man with the Twisted Lip*.) You can also show a picture of the King of Bohemia and tell how Holmes saw through his disguise right away. (Note that in the Paget drawing, he looks every inch a king except for his little mask. Kids find the feebleness of this particular disguise amusing.)



Activity: Brainstorming disguises

On a whiteboard, blackboard or flipchart, draw a very simple outline of a person. Invite the kids to come up and draw suggestions for disguises on the figure—a wig, sunglasses, a dress, etc. This simple exercise is very popular with kids. They enjoy adding disguise elements and watching as the figure gets more and more absurd. The result is usually a comical picture of strangely incongruous disguise items.

This can also be followed up with some practice disguising voices. Get the kids to say "Hello, Sherlock Holmes!" in their deepest voice, their highest-pitched voice, an "old" voice, a "baby" voice, a made-up accent, etc. This provokes giggles.

OBSERVATION

Introduce the importance of careful observation in detective work, and Holmes’s distinction between “seeing” and “observing.”

Activity: Practicing careful observation

Show the kids a picture that has a lot of details in it. I chose a colorful cover from a Holmes graphic novel to add some additional Holmesian details, but any picture with a lot of detail will do. Give the group about a minute to look at the picture, encouraging them to make a mental note of as much as they can, including small details that they think others will overlook. When the time is up, put the picture away and get the kids to call out what they saw, and write them down on a whiteboard or flipchart. See how long you can make the list of things observed. This activity gets everyone participating.

LOGIC

“When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains—however improbable—must be the truth.” Give examples of how Holmes uses logic and creative thinking to solve puzzling mysteries.

Activity: Riddles

Choose some riddles that have unexpected, but logical solutions. Any standard book of riddles can be used as a source, but there are some that specifically feature Holmes and Watson that help to emphasize the main theme. (See *Resources* section, below) This is a popular activity—kids love trying to guess the solution to the riddles. (n.b. I found that kids often wanted to follow up by offering riddles of their own. By all means, allow this if you’d like, but be aware that young children can be endearingly inept riddlers, forgetting details midway through the telling. Be ready to move on when necessary.)

CLUES AND DEDUCTION

Explain the meaning of a clue, or invite participants to supply a definition if they know it. Give Canonical examples of how Sherlock Holmes uses his powers of observation to find clues, and then uses logic to solve a mystery.

Activity: “Who am I?” game

Prepare slips of paper with different occupations, or the names of countries or celebrities written on them. Also prepare some double-sided tape or little rolls of scotch tape. Have the children line up and stick one of the pieces of paper on their back. They then mingle as if at a party and get clues about their identity, until they are able to guess it correctly. Everyone will have a slip of paper on their back, so they will take turns giving and getting clues. Emphasize giving clues that are not too obvious. For example, clues should not include any of the words written on the paper. It’s a good idea to demonstrate this in front of the group before they start. Choose a slip of paper for yourself and get the group to practice giving you clues.

A variation on this is to allow the children themselves to write down the celebrity names or occupations, etc. on the slips of paper. This is good if you don’t feel connected to the celebrities popular with their age group, but sometimes you wind up with a very large proportion of “Hannah Montanas,” etc. Some basic literacy skills are required for this game, but I found that it also worked with a mix of ages because the older ones would usually help the younger ones with the reading.

SECRET CODES

This part tells how Holmes sometimes needed to crack codes to solve a case.



Show the “dancing man” code as well as some simple codes appropriate to the group’s age and literacy level. Some examples can be demonstrated on the whiteboard/flipchart.

Activity: Code breaking

Copy some activity sheets with codebreaking activities of the “cryptoquip” variety from riddle/activity books (See *Resources* section) or create some sheets of sample codes yourself. If the group includes younger children or children who have difficulty reading, it’s a good idea to include simpler versions such as word-find puzzles or coloring sheets. If time allows, the kids can work in groups to break the codes. Alternatively, the sheets can be given out at the end of the program, and they can do them on their own time. In the case of the programs I conducted, they were always given out at the end. The kids were surprisingly eager to receive this simple “parting gift.”

CONCLUSION

If you’re at a school or public library, it’s a great idea to make a display of books the kids can borrow. Choose any age-appropriate editions of the original Sherlock Holmes stories, or suitable pastiches such as the Enola Holmes books by Nancy Springer or the boy Sherlock Holmes series by Shane Peacock. You can briefly introduce the stories and encourage them to take some home. Hand out the activity sheets, if using them, and wrap it up!

RESOURCES

Most of these books may be difficult to find unless you have access to a large collection of “Sherlockiana.” However, any standard riddle, puzzle and activity books can be used as a substitute if you look for examples of activities with a general Victorian era or detective theme.

Sherlock Holmes Puzzles of Deduction by Tom Bullimore. NY: Sterling, 1997.

[openlibrary.org/b/OL1009842M/Sherlock_Holmes%27_puzzles_of_deduction]

Secret Agent Codes by Chris Sasaki. NY: Sterling, 2004. [amazon.com/Detective-Notebook-Secret-Agent-Codes/dp/1402713991]

50 Mysteries I Can Solve by Susannah Brin and Nancy Sundquist. L.A.; Price Sloan Stern, 1988. ISBN-13: 978-0843118698

Wishbone Coloring and Activity Book. NY: Modern Pub., 1997 [www.coloringpages.net/wishbone2]

Disney’s The Great Mouse Detective Coloring and Activity Book by the Walt Disney Company. Racine, WS; Western Publishing Co., 1986.

Picture Puzzles for Armchair Detectives by Doug Anderson. NY: Sterling, 1980.

Scrambled Exits: The Greatest Maze Book Ever by Gyles Brandreth and David Farris. NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976.

Peggy Perdue is curator of the Arthur Conan Doyle Collection at the Toronto Reference Library and an active Sherlockian. Her library career has included work in rare book and asian studies libraries as well as a very enjoyable stint as a children's librarian. Peggy feels fortunate to be working with a collection that not only combines all these things and more, but also keeps her in constant contact with Mr. Sherlock Holmes.