

Brian McCuskey. *How Sherlock Pulled the Trick: Spiritualism and the Pseudoscientific Method*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. ix + 208 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-08987-4. \$34.95 (Hardcover).

In his recent study, *How Sherlock Pulled the Trick: Spiritualism and the Pseudoscientific Method*, Brian McCuskey delivers a convincing argument regarding the proximity between Sherlock Holmes's thinking and that of his literary creator, Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). The latter had, as is well known, been an ardent practitioner and missionary of spiritualism, publishing and lecturing widely on spiritualist topics during the first half of the twentieth century. Where biographers and historians have been at pains to separate Holmes from Doyle, depicting the former the antithesis of the latter, McCuskey pursues the contrary goal of demonstrating their fundamental likeness. He argues that Holmes's allegedly rational method of investigating crimes evinces the same circular logic that Doyle deployed in his rallying for the spiritualist cause. He further argues how these modes of thinking have penetrated the public sphere today, and how the authority of Holmes is used to legitimise contemporary pseudoscientific discourses, whether throughout the 9/11 Truth Movement, Intelligent Design, or climate change denial. As such, McCuskey's study is not only a compelling work of literary criticism and cultural history, but a plea for scientificity in a rapidly heating world.

In *How Sherlock Pulled the Trick*—or what he alternatively considered calling “*Why Not to Think Like a Fictional Detective*” (165)—McCuskey drives home the point that “insisting on hard evidence does not guarantee sound logic” (68), compelling us to unmask the discursive strategies of people who, in the name of science, spread conspiracy myths and disinformation. With this, McCuskey demonstrates the analytical validity of a term often eschewed by scholars of religion: pseudoscience. Analysing Holmes's thinking in light of Doyle's spiritualist lectures and vice versa, McCuskey identifies a number of strategies

that pose as rational and empirical but reveal to be forms of circular reasoning, confirmation bias, or excessive speculation disguised as logical necessity. Hence, McCuskey shows that we need to go further than those (largely postmodern) critics who “may debunk the scientism of [Doyle’s] stories” but “let the pseudoscience stand” (68). Though not the first to draw attention to the “Sherlock Holmes fallacy” (77), McCuskey’s intervention comes at a handy time when methods of intellectual discernment and reasoned discourse are sought in the face of forces that undermine the fundamentals of collective knowledge-building and viability for a sustainable future.

Divided into five chapters, *How Sherlock Pulled the Trick* reconstructs the cultural context of Holmes’s creation and traces the legacy of his appearance in the 1880s to his place, and function, today. Chapter one sets the stage by illustrating the heated debates that were taking place in London around 1887—the year that Holmes was conceived—between natural scientists and Christian apologists. It surveys the questions—reason or revelation? evidence or authority?—that mobilised Victorians to defend and champion their respective positions publicly. Polemics between figures such as the biologist Thomas Huxley (1825–1895) a.k.a. “Darwin’s bulldog,” and the creationist Duke of Argyll (1823–1900) make up the canvas against which the contours of Holmes’s figure will gradually emerge. In light of incompatible epistemologies, McCuskey shows how “Holmes was Doyle’s good faith solution to the irreconcilable differences between scientists and apologists” (4). Holmes could appeal to the scientific mind by means of his elaborate deductions and simultaneously reassure his religious readership—and author—by making logic appear like revelation. At the same time, readers could identify with Holmes’s assistant, Dr. Watson, when unable to reconstruct the Holmesian chain of logic, and remain content with placing trust in the resemblance of reason guaranteeing its actuality.

Chapter two follows Doyle’s footsteps along his intellectual and spiritual path, tracing his Roman Catholic upbringing, medical education, exposure to Theosophy and final conversion to spiritualism. It was during the honeymoon with spiritualism

that Doyle gave birth to Holmes, so McCuskey argues, contending that “soaked in ectoplasm, the detective did not arrest Doyle’s religious development” but rather “abetted it, liberating the doctor [Doyle] from materialism” (48). Situating the detective’s emergence within the cultural context of the late 1880s, McCuskey makes a strong case for how Holmes’s mode of reasoning much rather resembles the instructions to “higher knowledge” and “intuitive certainty” as disseminated in Theosophical journals like *Lucifer* than the reasoning of a Thomas Huxley in his Darwinian discourses. In the same chapter, McCuskey shines light on the greater social anxieties surrounding religious movements such as Mormonism, and how Doyle’s disparaging depictions of the same in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) should be read as attempts at dissociating spiritualism from the new religious movement, as the two were being conflated and pushed into the margins of the “lunatic fringe” (54) by contemporaneous adversaries. This again demonstrates the necessity for scholars of esotericism to look beyond what is typically studied under the label, as it indicates the degree of entanglement of movements such as spiritualism and other religious currents in the wider context of the time.

In chapter three, McCuskey delves further into Doyle’s spiritualist missionary and publishing activities, examining Doyle’s discourse in light of Holmes’s rhetoric. Again, McCuskey elegantly reveals how Doyle recycles Holmes’s language in spiritualist works such as *The New Revelation* (1918) or his two-volume *History of Spiritualism* (1926), endowing these with the halo of “science.” On the other side, in Doyle’s fiction, McCuskey suggests that Holmes’s use of the imagination “looks like astral projection” (85), thus confirming the already firm impression that Doyle’s religious and literary activities essentially resemble two faces of the same Janus head, or a Möbius strip: the further we track Holmes’s reasoning, the sooner we arrive at spiritualism; the more we listen to Doyle’s spiritualism, the louder we hear the voice of Holmes.

Chapter four is haunted by the following question: “If Sherlock Holmes has the power to re-enchant our world, does he also have the power to hex it?” (122).

Unfortunately, McCuskey suggests a response in the affirmative. Tracking the *Nachleben* of Holmes after Doyle's death in 1930, McCuskey observes the implosion of Holmes into the public sphere by looking at everything from dedicated fan clubs (The Baker Street Irregulars), journals devoted to Sherlockiana (*Baker Street Journal*) to the BBC tv-series *Sherlock*. While comprising much innocent play, McCuskey suggests that Holmes's exponential proliferation also poses a menace to society. Before engaging this issue in the following chapter, McCuskey inserts an interlude on literary theory and engages critical (self-)reflection on the ironies and, indeed Holmesian, pitfalls of literary criticism. This section is especially laudable as McCuskey clarifies the unique challenges and uncertainties the literary scholar is confronted with when attempting to construct a convincing narrative whose epistemic claim reaches beyond mere subjective interpretation.

In his final chapter, McCuskey brings contemporary pseudoscientific discourses under his magnifying glass: Intelligent Design, the 9/11 Truth movement, Holocaust denial, climate change denial and other discourses are examined as to their Holmesian composition. McCuskey reveals how much of the rhetoric not only evinces likeness to Holmes's reasoning in a comparative sense, but shows how these discourses appropriate the fictional character in an overt manner. Libertarian think tanks such as the Heartland Institute quote Sherlock Holmes when denying the scientific findings of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and 9/11 Truth blogs stage dialogues between Watson and Holmes who discuss the likelihood of Israeli Mossad agents crashing planes into the Twin Towers. Holmes is thus rendered an authenticating tool for the Pandora's box of conspiracy narratives, and McCuskey provides sufficient evidence to suggest that this phenomenon is here to stay with us.

*How Sherlock Pulled the Trick* is a refreshing scholarly contribution, brilliantly argued and written, and is highly recommended to scholars both of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism as well as contemporary esotericism. Though not the focus of McCuskey's study, it should be evident why this book is also, for instance,

relevant to the notion of “conspirituality”—the confluence of conspiracy theory and contemporary spirituality—as well as other categories such as “occulture,” or “invented,” “parody,” and “hyper-real” religions. Scholars of esotericism may be in need of further tools to detect and analyse the mechanisms of collective myth-making, esoteric conspiracism, and related phenomena, and McCuskey delivers them here. Though clearly a work with a strong normative slant, *How Sherlock Pulled the Trick* nonetheless remains a reliable introduction to the life and thought of Arthur Conan Doyle, his work, spiritualist activities, and cultural environment within which he raised his detective. I would like to allow McCuskey his final word of admonition: “Science is powerless to change a Sherlockian mind, and so let us eliminate Holmes from our thinking before nothing on earth remains” (167). Much as we may cherish Doyle’s creation, McCuskey’s proposition does not seem unreasonable after reading his book.

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