

# An introduction to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

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Sherlock Holmes is perhaps the most popular detective in literary history, famous around the world for his brilliant analytical skills and his ability to sort carefully through the subtleties of complex clues. Inspiration for the character came from one of Conan Doyle's medical professors, Joseph Bell of Edinburgh, who had 'the most remarkable powers of observation'. While other fictional detectives, Conan Doyle stated, obtained their information by chance rather than science, in his detective fiction he wanted science to 'take the place of chance'. The first novel featuring Sherlock Holmes was published in 1887; the character would subsequently appear in three more novels and 56 short stories.

Even if you've never read the original books, chances are you can picture Sherlock Holmes. The pipe, magnifying glass and deerstalker hat. The flat at 221B Baker Street in central London (now a museum). The faithful companion, Watson, and the arch-enemy, Professor Moriarty. Crimes that leave the police dumbfounded, only to be solved by the most brilliant detective the world has ever known. In the years since the original 'Holmes canon' was written, from roughly 1886 to 1927, the legend has been burnished by franchises such as the BBC's *Sherlock* starring Benedict Cumberbatch, in which the great investigator comes back to life in the 21st century, ready to grapple with a new generation of criminal masterminds.

It might come as a surprise that the creator of this most enduring of English literary icons wasn't English at all, but Scottish. Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh in 1859, and as a young child was sent away to a Catholic boarding school, which he hated. Like a number of middle-class Scottish boys of his generation, he opted to study medicine, and entered Edinburgh Medical School in 1876.

Although this, too, seems a world away from his later writing, in fact it was one of his professors at Edinburgh, an expert in medical diagnostics called Joseph Bell, who seems to have been the inspiration for the character of Holmes.

In 1885, he married his first wife, Louisa Hawkins, and all seemed set for a conventional life as a doctor. But Conan Doyle had other ambitions, and by 1886 he had completed what would become the first Sherlock Holmes story, 'A Study in Scarlet'.

Even though the reception of his first two Holmes stories was ignored, the detective's fame grew, particularly in the United States. When Conan Doyle wrote two further stories for *The Strand Magazine*, they were an enormous commercial success. He was a sensation.

What followed was one of the most infamous incidents in 19th-century literary life. Determined to rid himself of his hero, Conan Doyle killed Holmes in 1893's 'The Final Problem' by having him engage in an apparent fight to the death. The diary entry for the day

the author completed the story reads, with a mixture of exhaustion and relief, 'Killed Holmes'. He would devote himself to historical fiction, completing a number of novels and plays in coming years.