



Published When the Times Were Right

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When talking about the state of Sherlockian, or if you prefer Holmesian, publishing, the phrase that comes to mind is “an embarrassment of riches.” There’s so much to choose from. A disclaimer: I’m a “big tent” person and include under our canvas pretty much everything that concerns, mentions, references, gives a nod to, or otherwise allies itself to the canonical 56 short stories and four novels. I don’t have to find it to my personal taste—I’m just thrilled when folks want to play in our collective sandbox.

So, that said, the breadth and depth of the choices available is astonishing. From hardback pastiches published by traditional houses, to limited-run collections of scholarly articles by niche publishers, to print-on-demand trade paperbacks hand-sold at conferences, to fanfiction posted in online archives—there’s something for everyone, including annotated reprints of the Canon, periodically updated because of cultural changes and the unearthing of new historical information.

I’ve penned some pastiches and written a few articles, as well as worked on the other side of the transom (and I’ve just dated myself horribly with that phrase). I’ve been fortunate to work with Chris Redmond on his About 60 series—anthologies on aspects of the Sherlockian world, including why each Sherlock Holmes story is the best, personal experiences with being a Sherlockian, why Sherlock Holmes is like a historical or fictional character, and the upcoming volume on finding Sherlock Holmes. I’ll be offering up Chris on the example altar, and I hope his ears won’t burn.

What’s it like to publish Sherlockiana? I’ve found that shepherding a book through the publishing process isn’t too different from writing a Holmes pastiche.

So, following the old adage that if you’re going to steal, you might as well steal from the greats, I’m lifting a page from Ronald A. Knox’s “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes.” He outlined eleven criteria for creating a Holmes story, and although not every criterium is used in every story, they are all familiar to Sherlockians. But they’re not just useful for writing a pastiche—there are definitely publishing parallels.

We start off with the “*Proömion*, a homely Baker Street scene with invaluable personal touches, and sometimes a demonstration by the detective.” In the publishing world, this

compares to an initial query letter or email—for a short story for a magazine, a novel-length pastiche, or a proposal for a more scholarly work. Everyone’s polite and on their best behavior, gratefully accepting a chocolate biscuit and cuppa, even if you don’t particularly want one. This step is short, civilized, and sets the scene, like a well-written query. In Chris’s case, we were emailing about another topic, and he mentioned that he wanted to put together an anthology and would Wildside Press be interested. I believe my initial response was “hell yes!”, followed by “but let’s pin down the topic before we go further.” After a rather vigorous email exchange, Chris refined his vision and we were good to go.

According to Knox, we move on to “the *Exegesis kata ton diokonta*, the client’s statement of the case.” Here we discover the problem, get the backstory, and generally establish the plot. This corresponds to receiving the manuscript. For longer works, we often request the first 50 pages or so, along with a synopsis of the story, which is really what the client does—condensing the backstory into a manageable length, telling us the important bits and leaving out all the dull stuff. In Chris’s case, he did a lot of the hard work—deciding on the scope, assigning topics, editing the essays and writing the introduction—before sending me the manuscript, which meant I could move on to the next step.

This is the “*Ichneusis*, or personal investigation, often including the famous floor-walk on hands and knees,” when Holmes gets his teeth into a problem, and begins to come to grips with what’s involved in finding a solution. In publishing, this is the part I enjoy most—reading the manuscript for the first time. This is where you enter the author’s world, wander through the rooms, open the closets, peek behind the curtains, sounds the floorboards, and generally investigate that world as you move through the story. You also notice discrepancies, inconsistencies, plot holes, and character slips, not to mention syntax, language use and, of course, typos. Every element is grist to the decision mill, and all the elements must be ranked and sorted, their importance evaluated, and a direction for further investigation established. As I said earlier, Chris had edited the essays before sending them to me, so reading the manuscript was a joy. This isn’t always the case, however.

Which leads to the next criterium: the “*Anaskeue*, or refutation on its own merits of the official theory of Scotland Yard.” In publishing, this is where the publisher says to the author “yes, we love your story and want to publish it... with a few changes.” Seasoned authors generally respond with enthusiasm: “Of course I’m open to changes! Bring ’em on!”, and yes, there are a few exceptions. I’ve noticed that at this point many novices bare their teeth, protectively clutch their manuscripts to their bosoms, and snarl about the purity of their artistic visions. They act not unlike Inspectors Athelney Jones, Gregson, or Lestrade when Holmes questions their theories. Fortunately, I didn’t have this problem with Chris. Because of the complexity of his project and Chris’s familiarity with the publishing process, he understood that you can’t catch every problem on the first pass and knew that a few of the essays weren’t as strong as the others and could use further revision.

The “first *Promenusis (exoterike)* gives a few stray hints to the police, which they never adopt,” and “the second *Promenusis (exoterike)*, which adumbrates the true course of the investigation to Watson alone,” can be combined in the case of publishing. Here we provide high level comments to the author, with questions about consistent character motivation, gaping plot holes, and problematic resolutions, as well as suggestions to fix any structural issues. (In Knox’s “10 Commandments for Detective Fiction,” among the no-nos listed are identical twins, Chinamen, supernatural or preternatural agencies, and not more than one secret room or passage per story.) All I can say here is, thank god for Word’s Track Changes and comments features.

They make pointing out overarching problems and fixing minor issues much easier. No matter how open an author is to edits, it's generally a painful process, and after a certain amount of grumbling and cursing, the author returns the next draft of the manuscript. It's true that I never heard any grumbling or cursing from Chris, but that could be because he lives in Canada. Or because he didn't have to make the revisions himself, and instead just passed on my comments to the essay author. I rather liked having two degrees of separation, although that's not often the case.

The next step is "*Xetasis*, or further following up of the trail, including the cross-questioning of relatives, dependents, etc. of the corpse (if there is one), visits to the Record Office, and various investigations in an assumed character." So, with the new draft in hand, I focus even closer on the various story elements. As with Holmes's theories, this is the time when every thread is pulled, every trap anticipated and safely sprung, every floorboard tested. Failures are noted, fixed, and tested again, until the story hangs together. By this point, the author loathes me. "Yes, I know that bit doesn't quite make sense, but the reader won't notice. Can you just handwave it? Please?" Like Holmes, I am adamant that it all works, and we don't move on from this stage until it does. Is this as tedious for the editor as it is for the author? Of course, especially if you're re-reading the manuscript for the nth time and it *still* isn't quite right. But unraveling tricky timelines, or wrestling motivations into submission can help keep the process interesting and fun. Or at least, I keep telling myself that's the case.

Now we reach the "*Anagnorisis*, in which the criminal is caught or exposed." In other words, we have the final manuscript! There's a sense of relief, as well as jubilation. We've finished the first part of our journey, reached our immediate goal, and understand the route taken to get there. Is the manuscript perfect? Of course not. There will always, to the ends of our days, be laundry and typos. But it's as perfect as we can make it right now. With Chris, we reached this spot relatively easily, with only one or two rounds of edits. I'm currently working on a non-Sherlockian project that's involved three almost complete rewrites, and six or seven rounds of minor edits. I can't tell you how happy I am to have reached this point, and how much I never, *ever* want to read this story again.

Now we have a final manuscript and the author can take to their bed for a well-deserved rest, and it's time for the next stage in the publishing process to kick in. The "*Second Exegesis (kata ton pheugonta)*, that is to say, the criminal's confession" is our next step. The criminal acknowledges their guilt and reveals their motivations and actions. We take the final manuscript and prepare the components necessary for the book's public reveal: laying out and typesetting the manuscripts, creating the cover art, and writing the back copy or blurb. No, we haven't forgotten the author—they still must proof the galleys, which yes, means reading the whole story yet again because typos are always with us. It's even better if you can get someone else who is detail-oriented to read it, or if you read it out loud. There will still be typos, but fewer of them. Chris divides the galleys among several readers, which is very sensible, so no one person is overwhelmed and loses focus, and I always try to take one last look, especially at the layout and front matter, where problems can creep in. At Wildside, we're fortunate to have some creative graphic artists to do our covers, but we still try to run them by the author and appreciate their comments. Sometimes, an author will request we use cover art they provide—"hey, my son took a graphic arts class in college and look what he did!" Occasionally it's even good. So once we have the corrected galleys and the cover, we're ready for the next step.

Number ten in Knox's list is the "*Metamenuis*, in which Holmes describes what his clues were and how he followed them." This is where Holmes reveals his brilliance and hard

work by displaying it to the reader. And where we send the cover and interior to the printer to create ARCs, or advance reader copies, which are sent to reviewers and select readers. Here is where the reviewers appreciate the brilliance and hard work of the author and publicly sing their praises, not unlike the way we laud Holmes's insight and talents. We were so pleased that Chris's hard work, and the work of all the contributors, received some lovely reviews.

And finally, there is the "*Epilogos*, sometimes comprised in a single sentence." Holmes has finished the case, often successfully, but even if the resolution is wanting, Holmes generally wraps things up with a satisfying conclusion. In the publishing world, the manuscript has gone through rounds of polishing and then been carefully designed and packaged, hopefully receiving positive reviews, and now the book is released into the wild. It may be incredibly successful, it may not, although we really hope that doesn't happen.

But like Holmes, we have poked, prodded, scabbled around in the soil, climbed the mantelpiece, interrogated a suspect, mocked a copper, exasperated a Watson, and done all in our power to reach a successful conclusion. We have "published when the times were right," and helped bring about a new volume in the global Sherlockian library.