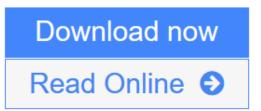# Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of The Hound of the Baskervilles

Pierre Bayard

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Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of The Hound of the Baskervilles Pierre Bayard
A playfully brilliant re-creation of one of the most-loved detective stories of all time; the companion book no Holmes fan should be without.

Eliminate the impossible, Holmes said, and whatever is left must be the solution. But as Pierre Bayard finds in this dazzling reinvestigation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, sometimes the master missed his mark. Using the last thoughts of the murder victim as his key, Bayard unravels the case, leading the reader to the astonishing conclusion that Holmes – and, in fact, Arthur Conan Doyle – got things all wrong: The killer is not at all who they said it was.

Part intellectual entertainment, part love letter to crime novels, and part crime novel in itself, *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong* turns one of our most beloved stories delightfully on its head. Examining the many facets of the case and illuminating the bizarre interstices between Doyle's fiction and the real world, Bayard demonstrates a whole new way of reading mysteries: a kind of "detective criticism" that allows readers to outsmart not only the criminals in the stories we love, but also the heroes — and sometimes even the writers.

Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of The Hound of the Baskervilles Details

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From Reader Review Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of The Hound of the Baskervilles for online ebook

LuAnn says

Part literary criticism and fiction theory and part a dissection of Holmes' deductions. While the author has some plausible reasoning for who the real murderer was, he neglects explaining a major clue involving the ancestry of the novel's victims and killer which renders his argument insufficient. While readers interested primarily interested in the analysis of HOUNd might find the literary criticism and fiction theory tedious and irrelevant, I found in them new ideas for exploring literarature. As another reviewer points out, the author gives spoilers for two Agatha Christie mysteries that he fails to warn readers about!

Todd Stockslager says

First, to get out of the way the least interesting part of this book: yes, Bayard makes a convincing case that the great detective was wrong in nearly every detail in his most famous case.

Second, some suggested prerequisites to get the full understanding and enjoyment from Bayard's seemingly contrarian reading:

--Bayard's slim volume How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read, where he first presents his argument that books have a life beyond the written page: Each reader brings to a book their own "inner library." which might have common titles but not the same content as other readers.

--Martin Booth's biography The Doctor and the Detective: A Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which documents the conflicted relationship Conan Doyle had with his most famous character. Although Holmes made him rich, Conan Doyle killed him off, but had to bring him back to life to meet the demands of his readers and publishers.

As in the case of "How to talk", I picked up this book with the thought that Bayard must be a committed contrarian with no intent other than to galvanize opinion, and as in the first, I found that he was not only serious but successful in his scholarship.

Here he expands on the concept of the "screen books" in our "inner library" to make the argument that stories and their characters have a life beyond and between the words their authors use to create them, as evidenced by the intensity of the distraught reaction of Holmes's fans when Conan Doyle try to kill the character; these readers became, in Bayard's argument, "immigrants to the text". Similarly, in Conan Doyles' intense reaction to his character, Bayard finds "emigrants from the text" as the fictional "nonexistent" character Holmes exerted his control over Conan Doyle in the flesh and blood world where he lived.

The concept is not new to Bayard. The life of characters beyond the control of their creators has been dealt with many times in literature, for example the recent movie Stranger Than Fiction. But Bayard does an excellent job of making this higher criticism understandable and accessible to the average reader, and might inspire some to read their favorite authors and characters with different eyes. And besides that, he's a ball of fun to read!

Derek Emerson says

In preparation for Pierre Bayard's Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong I returned to my childhood favorite reading. Granted, the Hound has never been my favorite Holmes story, but I found it to be a fun, exciting, and an interesting read. The story is steeped in the gothic tradition with the large estate, deadly moor, oppressive fog, and desolate landscape. Doyle succeeds in creating a character out of the landscape in a way that Willa Cather's does (and you try fitting those two in the senetence.) The ending still tends to just fizzle out, but the steps in getting to the end are worth the effort. Most people know the story in one way or another (my oldest said he remembers it best as a Wishbone episode -- for fans of the literary dog), but just in case: Holmes is called in when a member of the Baskerville family dies. Although it appears a simple heart attack, a doctor and friend of Baskerville thinks he was frightened to death by a giant hound which has haunted the family as a curse. With a new heir arriving can Holmes solve the mystery of the hound before the next (and last) member of the Baskerville family dies? Watson plays a major role in this book in part because some scholars assert the novel was originally written without Holmes -- this was written after Doyle killed Holmes off and before he returned him in "The Empty House." When the publisherr offered double the royalties, Holmes was inserted. Doyle even throws in an insane murderer haunting the moor to throw everyone off track and there are is no shortage of clues to build a case upon. But I leave the ending to you.

Which leaves us Bayard's assertion that Holmes is wrong in this case. His book is in part a look at the Hound, but it is more a lively exploration of literary theory. His has applied his theory of "detective criticism" to Agatha Christie as well and what is appealing is his willingness to apply his theory to practical interpretations. Bayard's theory in general is not original: texts cannot be objective references since every reader completes the story with his/her own background. In fact, the same reader cannot read the same book twice since the second reading will be changed by the first (e.g. you cannot step in the same river twice). In practice someone employing "detective criticism pays close attention to the way the facts are presented, accepting no testimony without reservation and systematically calling into question everything that is reported to him" (70). He then calls into question much of what Holmes concludes and what Doyle writes. The Hound is not a tightly written novel, but then Doyle could not even keep the location of Watson's war wound in one spot -- details are not his strength, which make his success as a detective writer even more surprising. Without spoiling the ending, let it be said that Bayard falls prey to some of the same mistakes he charges Doyle as a writer and Holmes as a character with -- his idea of the real "murderer" has too many holes as well. In some ways Bayard is having fun, so I do not take his reading of the Hound too seriously -- is was an easy target for him.

One of the most interesting chapters is "Does Sherlock Holmes Exist?" in which he explores the the long standing debate about if fiction and reality can intersect. He places himself in the extreme side of the "integrationists," in which he believes that "literary characters enjoy a certain autonomy"(114). I tend to disagree rather strongly, but the disagreement has less to do with what he sees as opposed to how he interprets it. Bayard can argue that the outcry Doyle heard when he killed off Holmes shows the intersection of fiction and reality and thus makes the character autonomous. While I'm happy to play the literary theory game, I also know when people like their stories to continue and characters they like to live (see: Potter, Harry), but this does not give a separate life to the characters. In fact, the argument fails because they are dependent on the readers for the reaction. But his whole discussion of characters who seem to exist independent of their works is very interesting.

As you can see this book got me thinking and was one of the more creative approaches to literary theory I've

ever read -- wish they gave me this one to read in my lit. theory class!

Sandy says

This slim volume takes a clever idea (re-solving the mystery of the House of the Baskervilles) and pads it out in an attempt to be able to justify the idea being presented as a full book instead of a single essay. Bayard expounds on literary theories of whether or not fictional characters can do things without the author knowing (handled pretentiously here; much more cleverly done in the fictional universes of Jasper Fforde), he has a tediously long chapter on whether or not Sherlock Holmes makes mistakes (um, yes), he actually has a chapter where he recaps other books he's written. Each of these things might have been useful to touch on in an introduction, but expanding each out to its own chapter feels like clawing for page space.

The re-solving of the mystery itself is pretty great, albeit a fairly small part of the total book. It takes a lot of things that didn't quite sit right with me when I was reading the novel, and fits them together in an alternate theory that holds up as a superior resolution to the mystery.

I would say, if you're interested in this book, pick it up and read the chapter where he details his alternate Baskervilles solution and skip the rest of it.
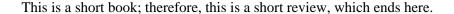
Two stars.

Brian Bess says

A short book with a thin premise

This is a short book. It would be even shorter without the first 30 pages or so, which consists of a lengthy but well-written summary of 'The Hound of the Baskervilles.' While this recap is not really necessary to the audience for this book—for how many people would care to read this book without having first read the original?—it may serve useful for readers wishing to refresh their memories of the novel. I had just read 'The Hound…' and I read it, although I did not know that it would take up such a large portion of the book.

My first reservation concerns Bayard's interpretation of this novel as a simple police procedural, a mystery containing an obvious solution in the manner of most of the stories that preceded it in the series. 'The Hound of the Baskervilles,' however, is as much an atmospheric fantasy as it is a detective story. It owes as much to 'Wuthering Heights' or the frenzied stories of Edgar Allan Poe as it does to any previous detective fiction written by Doyle or anyone else. What Bayard interprets as Doyle 'stacking the deck' to make us believe the family legend of the Baskervilles as well as the possibility that it might be being reenacted in the novel's present time I see as missing much of the force of the novel. In a Poe story, one doesn't question the existence of Roderick Usher's dead but zombie-like sister or whether the initial narrator of 'Wuthering Heights' REALLY perceives the ghost of Cathy trying to enter his room. Bayard carefully picks apart Doyle's, through Watson's, word choices—"running desperately," "crazed with fear," "the desolate, lifeless moor" He claims that these phrases deliberately manipulate the reader into accepting the pseudo supernatural explanation of seemingly bizarre events. I would counter, however, that this is word painting and mood

setting, as any good storyteller and fiction writer would do. Poe, Lovecraft, and dozens of other writers have built entire careers on such techniques and Doyle is venturing into that territory and largely leaving realistic detective fiction behind, at least on this occasion.

Bayard also makes entirely too much of Doyle's 'hatred' of his greatest creation. His explanation of how Doyle tried to kill off his hero and then reluctantly brought him back to life while resisting giving him full freedom to 'live' within the pages distorts his interpretation of the mystery while being oblivious to the other factors such as the aforementioned gothic mood setting as well as the broadening of his scope to encompass not only Watson's experience but the effect of these 'desolate, lifeless moors' on its disturbed inhabitants. While he cites accurate instances of inconsistencies where the clues do not add up and even uses the analogy of the master magician focusing the audience's attention elsewhere when he performs his real tricks, he fails to realize that he himself is duped by Doyle's magic and pursues an alternate path to lead to the 'real' murderer, or rather, murderess. He attributes far too many qualities of a diabolical murderer to Beryl Stapleton than any of her actions warrant. While he makes some plausible points—the mysterious figure that trails Mortimer, Holmes and Henry Baskerville in London could quite possibly be Beryl—he follows a path to a conclusion that makes less sense than any conclusion accepted by Holmes, Watson or legions of readers for over a hundred years. Just to take one example, he simply states that Beryl tied herself up. How can one tie herself up, much less inflict bruises upon herself with the strength of a man? This statement alone is utterly absurd but Bayard fails to even provide a plausible explanation of the result.

This is a short book; therefore, this is a short review, which ends here.

Bert says

Well thought out argument and actually had answers for some issues that had bothered me when I read The Hound of the Baskervilles. Fun insightful and thoughtful read.

Tori says

I thought this was going to be some lighthearted read about a guy making fun of Sherlock Holmes and how awful he is. But this is actually an in depth piece of literary criticism on Sherlock as a character. Parts of it were rather dry, and it took a long time to get to the point, but I still enjoyed (and mostly buy) the author's conclusion about who the real murderer is.

Rachel says

I made the mistake of thinking this book was a parody. Unfortunately, it was not.

While touted as a love-letter to crime novels, this book seeks to destroy one of the best loved crime novels. Basically, I got the impression that the author genuinely dislikes the Hound of the Baskervilles and wanted to re-write the novel how he thought it should be written, because obviously Sir Arthur Conan Doyle - the author - didn't actually know who committed the crime. On top of that, the author spent a lot of time trying to discredit Sherlock Holmes, not only during this mystery, but most of his work. While trying to show how ridiculous his deductions were during the book, he credits other fictional work as scientific proof.

The book is slow going considering much of the book is either a summary of the ACD story or whole portions of the actual text.

One thing not mentioned in the summary is that this reads like a book needed to pass a psychology class, the author attempting to explain how it was possible for Conan Doyle to miss the "obvious." And then trying to turn the Hound of the Baskervilles into a ghost story.

Basically, if you didn't like the original story, go ahead and read this "re-opening." But if you, like I, love the original story, don't waste your time.

Jay says

The idea that Sherlock Holmes might be wrong is a little like the idea that the king of France is bald.

Bayard plays the game all mystery readers play, testing the theories against the evidence, and the game most readers play, testing the solution revealed by the detective against the evidence. So far, nothing too unusual. Is Templeteton's strategy for enriching himself improbable, far-fetched, and likely to fail? Absolutely.

Where he is, um, original, is where he suggests that Templeton therefore isn't really the killer. We now know we're in for some ontological sleight of hand.

Bayard demonstrates several points of stress in the constructed narrative, and if he were looking at actual, objective evidence, he would have valid objections. This is the sort of thing defense attorneys do all the time. But he's not, and it's not. The evidence was invented by Conan Doyle to support just the sort of improbable, fantastic narrative that Holmes fans love.

Bayard objects that characters are real--they have real effects on readers, as shown by the outpouring of feeling attending Conan Doyle's attempts to shut the franchise down. But he seems to miss the detail that having real effects isn't the same as being a human being. A bit of the issue is the fuzziness of the word "real" -- Holmes is certainly a real idea, with more effect on the world than many real people. Similarly, the "worlds" Bayard compares are not worlds; they are stories, or conceptions of worlds. They may have internal logic, and that logic may not be entirely under the control of the author (though this may depend on the author's skill), but that logic is not that of the world that we human readers inhabit.

If Bayard had articulated a solution to the mystery that was less improbable than Conan Doyle's solution, I'd swallow my objections and congratulate him. It would be a bit, as the creationists say, like a hurricane assembling a 747 out of a junkyard, but it's not strictly speaking impossible. (Quite a bit more likely, actually, as a story is considerably less complex than an organism, and is constructed in large part of shared archetypes, etc. etc.) But he doesn't. If there is a detective story waiting for a reader to find a better solution than the person who invented it, the Hound isn't it.

Niklas says

Sadly, this is not a very amusing read. Unlike "The Physics of Superheroes", a book with a similar idea of applying real world reasoning to a world of fiction, this book takes itself a bit too seriously. I will say however that when Bayard's version of the crime was fleshed out in the final chapters I could not disagree with his findings. Annoying as it is, his theory does make a lot of sense.

That having been said, his overall reasoning is flawed at best. He makes assumptions based apparently solely on the french translation of the book. Which is, like the language itself, slightly more romanticized and makes more allusions to the moon and the apparent wolf-like properties of the Great Detective and are not apparent in the original English. One would think Bayard would have omitted such parts had he found they dd not fit in with the original novel, as his reasoning stems a lot more from how he believes Doyle felt about his creation than the narrative itself at times.

While there are, as previously stated no real flaws with Bayard's ultimate theory based on the narrative itself, his attitude towards both the reader and the original author is one of almost smug superiority. He paints himself up as being wiser than most for having figured it all out. A quality that would have been much better suited had his theory been based on facts and not an interpretation of a fictional story. Regardless of how good it is.

Helmut says

Holmes war ein blutiger Anfänger
Wirklich faszinierend: Die Aufzählung so vieler Fehler, die Holmes im Laufe seiner Ermittlungen gemacht hat. Kaum zu glauben, dass so jemand einen solchen Ruf haben kann. Aber Holmes' Macken überspielen seine Inkompetenz grandios, das muss man ihm zugestehen.

Wie bei vielen Büchern Bayards gibt es Missverständnisse - viele Leser meinen, dass es Bayard darum gehe, Holmes (oder Conan Doyle) in Misskredit zu bringen, aus Neid, Arroganz, Besserwisserei oder sonst einem niederen Motiv. Doch in Wahrheit nutzt Bayard immer wieder solche frechen Thesen, um literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien knallig zu verpacken. Subjektivität auf allen literarischen Ebenen (Autor-Erzähler-Protagonist-Leser), die Stilfigur des "unzuverlässigen Erzählers" und die Idee, dass sich Texte vom Autor und vom Leser lösen und ihr Eigenleben aufnehmen, das ein eigenes "lückenhaftes Universum" bildet, das in sich analysiert werden kann, werden unter anderem in diesem Buch behandelt. Wo endet Realität und beginnt Fiktion? Und gehen beide nicht irgendwie ineinander über?

Besonders fasziniert mich diese letzte These, die Bayard von Thomas Pavel aufgreift. Eigentlich ist sie, so verrückt sie sich auf den ersten Blick anhören mag, doch irgendwie plausibel - für mich ist beispielsweise Benjamin Franklin oder sogar Angela Merkel nicht "realistischer", oder besser gesagt, weniger fiktional, als Sherlock Holmes oder James Bond; ich kenne alle diese Figuren nur aus den Medien, und man kann sicher nicht sagen, dass Holmes weniger Einfluss auf mein Leben hat als Franklin.

Wie immer ist Bayard herrlich unterhaltsam, mit seinem feinen, aber ausgesprochen wirksamen Humor, und einer absolut beneidenswerten Klugheit und Sinnesschärfe, die aus jedem Satz strahlt. Das mag auf den einen oder anderen vielleicht einschüchternd, arrogant oder herablassend wirken - aber Bayard kann schließlich nichts für die Minderwertigkeitskomplexe mancher Leser.

Ach, hätte ich doch im Literaturwissenschaftsstudium statt den Professoren, denen es wichtig war, die Bedeutung der Farbe *blau* in diesem oder jenem Text in mich hineinzuzwängen oder ihre angelesene Interpretation eines Texts dann auch noch mir überzustülpen, einen Lehrer wie Bayard gehabt. Das Studium wäre nicht so elend stumpf gewesen; ich hätte es durchgehalten statt gefrustet nach der Zwischenprüfung hinzuschmeißen und mich der Informatik zuzuwenden.

Wichtig ist nur eins - wenn man noch vorhat, ein paar der hier besprochenen Stories von Conan Doyle oder Agatha Christie zu lesen, sollte man dies vorher tun, denn es wird hier massivst gespoilert.

Michael says

I'm going to chalk much of my distaste for this book due to bad translation. The flow of language is terrible, making this a difficult read for me from the start.

Another large part of my distaste is the sheer arrogance of the author that drips from every page. Holmes was arrogant, too, but his was derived from his success in solving problems where others where having trouble discerning the mere existence of an issue. Holmes also showed a more humble side numerous times. Pierre Bayard exemplifies the stereotype the Anglophone world has of the French: snide, arrogant and dismissive.

He spends too much of the book retelling the story in a most pedestrian and boring manner, boldly poking the reader with quick jabs about the original conclusion while telling us that all will be revealed later. I don't know if this was a nod to the way Holmes worked in the original stories, but Bayard lacks the charm of the former.

Bayard does pick up on one thing that's quite apparent: Holmes was fixated on Stapleton from the very beginning. Bayard's problem is that he keeps harping on it rather than allowing the Great Detective this one idiosyncrasy. His conclusion is just as forced as he claims the original one is, reading into Doyle's writing in a way only a psychologist can. At the end, I'm left with wondering why I plodded through this and why it took me so long to read less than 200 pages. I give this book two stars simply because it wasn't boring in the sense that I wanted to finish it so I could yell at the book like one does at a referee on a televised sports game.

Sarah W says

I can't quite decide if this is a perfect example of tongue-in-cheek meta-criticism, or a nutty rereading padded with chapters of justification that essentially sum up to "It's my opinion, so it can't be wrong." I suggest skipping to the last chapter and just enjoying Bayard's reworking of the plot, which isn't without its own gaping holes but is somewhat more satisfying than the solution in the original.

Jonathan Terrington says

With such an ambitious, and in some aspects arrogant, title Pierre Bayard was always going to have to write a very convincing analysis. Which in my opinion he managed to do while also throwing in a hint of literary criticism of a type I had not paid attention to as of yet. And while such things appeared at first disconnected

from his analysis he managed to pull everything back together by the end to throw the entire case on its head.

Bayard for the first half of the book begins with a recap of past events. This is the more taxing and uninteresting aspect of his work. And when he leaves The Hounds of the Baskervilles to talk about how he developed a mode of detective criticism for use on Hamlet and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd serves to do little but tell how good Bayard is at solving mysteries the writers cannot. However once you pass through this unnecessary hurdle the true magic of Bayard's analysis appears.

He begins by breaking down Holmes' method through drawing attention to passages from both The Hound of the Baskervilles and other notable stories in the canon. Through quotes and references he quickly reveals the subtle flaws behind Holmes' technique.

Bayard also indicates that since the crime is observed from Watson's point of view all observation of clues and suspects is tainted by his opinion. This of course influences the way the reader observes the case in the end.

The next part in the investigation involves a look at the accused parties and creating proper alibis from the text. (view spoiler)

A proper examination of the crime out of place Bayard proceeds on a slight tangent. It is this aspect of his work which lowers its overall standard. His observations are quality and his final judgements profound but his method of informing the reader lets him down. Perhaps that is in part resultant from translation but nonetheless it is an obvious flaw.

The tangent involves a look at how the literary and real worlds collide. The author of course uses this to point out how Sherlock Holmes took on a life beyond that which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle intended. After all Hound of the Baskervilles was written after he had killed the great detective. This look at how Holmes became an almost real character provides some intriguing discussion apart from the case but is also used to provide reasoning to the structure of Doyle's bizarre tale.

The penultimate procedure is an explanation of how Holmes falls into being manipulated and used. In this section a brief examination is made of how Holmes comes to ignore his own rules about theorising and gathering data.

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgement."

And again:

"It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

For it becomes clear that in The Hound of the Baskervilles Holmes does theorise before gathering all data. As such his final judgement appears on the whole flawed despite his surety that he is correct.

Sherlock Holmes is renowned for one of my personal favourite quotes. *"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."* However, as Bayard shows in his conclusion, the impossible has not in this case been completely eliminated. There remains one highly possible and more probable solution passed over by the detective. And it is this revelation of the true and more likely suspect which makes reading Bayard's work worth all the flaws and disjointed sentences.

In summary I would state that this is a work with on the whole excellent depth. A book that reveals how superficial the seemingly conclusive solution is in The Hound of the Baskervilles. And it is worth all the painstaking disassembly by Bayard to see the end conclusion. A conclusion which will flip your idea of The Hound of the Baskervilles on its head. So I suggest that if you haven't read The Hound of the Baskervilles that you do so and then right afterwards delve into this. You'll go from being impressed with the depth of the book to being impressed with the crime behind the crime. And I still cannot figure out if the brilliant Sir Arthur Conan Doyle intended his work to end that way or not. Although it seems he did with all the obvious threads...

Barbara says

An enjoyable, at times intriguing, but, to me, not quite convincing argument as to who 'really was' the killer in the 'Hound of the Baskervilles'. Includes an exploration of the nature of literature and reality.