

Sherlock Holmes

Our party of four - Anthony, Bruce, Betsy, and I - went to see the new Sherlock Holmes tonight. We had thought to get in to the 6:30 p.m. show, figuring that the movie isn't that new, the hour was early, the weather was so freezing people wouldn't be venturing out, and the day was Sunday. In any event, 6:30 was sold out by 6 p.m., so we all booked for the 7:30 show. (Next time around I'll wisely sit in the seat nearest the aisle so I don't have to get up mid-movie for the men's room).

Now, first, is it worth seeing? Yes, very much so. A grand adventure in a dark dismal London of the 19th century. Vast panoramas are opened with the aid of computer-generated images. Robert Downey Jr., an actor whom I like and for whom I feel a special sympathy because of his history of drug problems, and Jude Law, who is usually only a pretty face, combine to bring us Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in an entirely new incarnation.

The only actual sighting we have ever had of the real Sherlock Holmes was the remarkable BBC series using photographic techniques based on capturing latent images from past years. For the sake of a skeptical contemporary audience, he was given the stage name of Jeremy Brett, but was in fact the real detective.

However, if we can put aside the real Sherlock Holmes, then Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law make a good case for a new series, one in which Holmes is portrayed as young, athletic, excellent with his fists, with a trace of humanity the real Holmes never had. Jude Law brings to Dr. Watson an integrity and dignity which were notably lacking in the old black and white series featuring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. In short, the pair comes alive more as equals than as the comic duo of Rathbone and Bruce.

Holmes' addiction to cocaine doesn't enter the picture (or I missed it). Watson is engaged to a charming woman - a marriage seems likely - not in this episode but surely in one of the sequels.

The only problem is that the heavy emphasis on a secret order that has run things for centuries - and almost falls into the hands of an arch villain - will give support to those who already believe our lives are run by secret conspiracies. The fact Downey gives a rational explanation for the "death and resurrection" of the villain will have no effect on people who believe that some ancient order of reptiles is in control of our lives.

Some have commented on what they believed to be a gay subtext (between Holmes and Watson). I thought about this but felt it really wasn't there. There were certainly a series of "riffs" between the two guys, but I think more along the lines of male bonding. The sort of thing we accept with women but are a bit embarrassed about with men. Certainly, however, this relationship is very different from the Rathbone/Bruce one, and different from the Jeremy Brett series in which Watson is treated with respect but they are older, Watson is retired, etc. The whole issue of a homosexual subtext recurs in many mysteries. In Hercule Poirot, Captain Hastings has absolutely no redeeming role except to act as a "shadow" to highlight Poirot's brilliance. In Nero Wolfe, Archie is very clearly NOT a gay subtext - but an essential assistant to the fat Wolfe.

Was it because in 19th Century England a woman would not be accepted as a companion? Some modern detectives operate quite alone - Colombo. Some (the Thin Man series) have a woman where you might once have had a Watson. And in the classic Maltese Falcon, Sam Spade is a lone man against a corrupt world.

One of the things which put me off the original series of stories was precisely this business of a mind which had memorized 43 varieties (or however many it was) of tobacco ash. This kind of arbitrary way of solving crimes was there in the original which is why I never got beyond maybe one of the original books. But there is no doubt that Holmes was a genius, a kind of Asperser's syndrome guy (and he appears as such in the Brett series). Downey might well have brought a bit more of Brett to the character - he made him a bit too human.

I don't remember whether in the original stories the reader could have solved the crimes if they had paid attention to the clues. I don't think so. Agatha Christie did this but I never bothered to try to figure it out. But they were there.

Dave Leyden had suggested the fisticuffs of the new Sherlock Holmes were a bit out of character. In fact, not so at all. The other night I was watching one of the BBC episodes, rebroadcast on Channel 21, and while Jeremy Brett was already clearly suffering from the puffiness of his final illness, and no longer able to leap and dash about, (Brett died fairly young, and there is a marked change in his appearance in the earlier BBC shows and the later ones), he engaged in a fist fight, which he won handily. Just now I checked Wikipedia and it turns out that Holmes was quite accomplished at fisticuffs, so the "new" Holmes of the recent film is in character.

Of interest is that in fact (not fiction) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle trained in Edinburgh under Dr. Joseph Bell, who used the method of deduction which Doyle incorporated into the character of Holmes. BBC did two or three excellent films of this earlier duo - I think they are called "Murder Rooms" - and I've got a couple on DVD for some Friday evening.

David McReynolds, 1/11/10