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Twisting Facts to Suit Theories: In Defense of Sherlock

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This essay well represents the difficult and often conflicting relationships between reality and its representation, or between the facts, theories, and practices (of writing and reading).

Through a case study that surprises the Italian reader quite a bit, DeFonzo takes us to a politically correct America, to the exercise of censorship, and raises doubts and reflections on the scholastic system, on the world of information and on the meaning of literature. A truly exemplary way to open a volume that combines fake to true, and an important agenda for those who deal not only with detection but with foreign languages and literatures, journalism and culture.

I am writing on behalf of Sherlock Holmes.

In August 2011, the Albemarle County school board unanimously voted to remove Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* from the sixth-grade curricula. Over twenty students beseeched the board for the book to remain, and they were ignored. Teachers were afraid to voice their opinions on the matter. The novel has not been taught since in Albemarle, on any grade level, nor any other Sherlock Holmes texts.

A Study in Scarlet is the first novel in the Sherlock series and therefore critical in understanding how the series is written, the dynamics between Holmes and Watson, the historical and social contexts of the Victorian era, and its reference in later cases. To be fair, it is not, by any means, the most highly regarded of the series, as Conan Doyle was just getting started, and in all honesty, *The Sign of Four* is my favorite. Regardless of critics, it is what

Sherlock teaches that I am after. By collecting and analyzing the evidence in the case against *A Study in Scarlet*, we can make proper deductions and separate facts from theories. After all, “The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes” (*Hound of the Baskervilles*).

Along with a growing decline in reading comprehension, students in the United States struggle with critical thinking, deduction and reasoning skills, as well as critical analysis and interpretation of texts. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are considered “the most effective models from states across the US...The goal of these standards is to allow consistency in student skill expectations country wide, regardless of where students live, the [grades] 6– 12 history/social studies, science, and technical subjects section focuses on reading and writing.” The CCSS for English Language Arts requires students to “read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter.” But how are they to do so when the most famous detective is not taught? Students in a variety of disciplines, from humanities to STEM, may benefit from studying Sherlock. “As a chemistry and forensics expert ahead of his time, Sherlock uses seemingly trivial observations to solve the most complex crimes. His practices and techniques, created by doctor-turned-author Conan Doyle, profoundly influenced the way police work was conducted at the turn of the 19th century. Many of Sherlock’s methods remain in practice today. Sherlock Holmes has inspired generations of thinkers to use deductive reasoning and apply it to modern sciences. Many forms of forensic sciences appeared in Conan Doyle’s work, including serology, fingerprinting, and firearm identification (*International Sherlock Holmes*). Sherlock is one of the few works that has vast interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary potential. Quite plainly, American schools need Sherlock.

For the last thirty years, challenges to intellectual freedom have increased dramatically in public classrooms and libraries. “Intellectual freedom is the freedom to *access* information and express ideas, even if the information and ideas might be considered unorthodox or unpopular...” The US Supreme Court rules, “If a work contains serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value, [children] have a right to see it as long as their parents do not object” (qtd. in American Library Association). And therein lies the problem: parents. Parents are the greatest challengers of books. A *challenge* “attempt[s] to remove or restrict materials” from a public institution based on textual evidence found “objectionable” such as sexuality, homosexuality, violence, language, racism, anti-religious, anti-government, etc. These reasons to challenge, however, are almost always arbitrary. Often, when a parent pulls a quote or passage from the book in question, it is without context, without a thorough knowledge of the characters, setting, and comprehension in general – incidentally, over 75% of challengers have admitted to never reading said book. Furthermore, when an elementary school child, for example, Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*, the reader follows a young horse who loves his mother and his life in the country until he is taken to London to draw carriages and is subject to cruelty and neglect. Is Sewell condoning and provoking animal cruelty? Absolutely not. The author, instead, is offering a voice for the voiceless and teaching children compassion. The child sides with the horse, not the whipper of the lash. These controversial and painful experiences and environments found throughout literature foster reader growth and understanding of the world, not necessarily provoke or incite said illicit behavior.

Preventative measures of censorship are also put in place throughout public schools and libraries, and yet, they are rarely considered. Reading lists are sent home, parent-teacher

conferences are announced, and/or alternate readings made available. In many cases, parents are disillusioned by the alternatives from fear of alienating his/her child inside the classroom; the student may have to be removed from the room or be disengaged during class time. Other challengers are so personally offended by the book in question, they do not want other children “corrupted” and call for the complete “banning” or removal of the book from the institution. Some go as far as to involve the school board, which supervises the entire district of public schools. This was the case in Albemarle.

The challenge against Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* was filed at Henley Middle School in August 2011. A parent, Brette Stevenson, wanted the book removed from the sixth-grade curriculum based on its alleged “anti-Mormon” sentiments (Kindelan). Henley Middle school is located in the affluent area outside Charlottesville, Virginia and *A Study in Scarlet* had been on the sixth-grade reading list for several years prior (Strauss). The official challenge went to the school board made up of seven members: citizens, administrators, and teachers (Seghal). More than 20 former Henley students turned out to oppose the book’s removal. Eighth grader Quinn Legallo-Malone spoke during public comment to oppose banning the book. *A Study in Scarlet* was “the best book I have read so far... I was capable of reading it in sixth grade. I think it was a good challenge...” (qtd. in Kindelan).

The charges? “This is our young students’ first inaccurate introduction to an American religion,” said Stevenson. “The second half of the book deals with very negative representations of the Mormon faith,” said Harley Miles, board vice chair (qtd. in Kindelan). Additionally, Conan Doyle supposedly “apologized” to the Mormons on his visit to Salt Lake City in 1923; thereby, the author knows the book is a misrepresentation (Young qtd. in Schindler). “The book

was used...to look at deduction and reasoning...there are other books just as capable,” continued Miles (qtd. in Kindelan). In order to find the charges justifiable, one must examine the evidence. As Sherlock notes, “The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists and reporters” (*Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*).

To challenge the book, Brette Stevenson did not pull many (if any) quotes from *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), specifically Part II which flashes back to the 1840s and 1850s, but the following passages allegedly criticize the Mormon faith:

‘If we take you with us,’ [Joseph Smith] said, in solemn words, ‘it can only be as believers in our own creed. We shall have no wolves in our fold. Better far that your bones should bleach in this wilderness than that you should prove to be that little speck of decay which in time corrupts the whole fruit. Will you come with us on these terms?’

‘Guess I’ll come with you on any terms,’ said Ferrier. ‘You shall remain here,’ he said. ‘In a few days you will have recovered from your fatigues. In the meantime, remember that now and forever you are of our religion. Brigham Young has said it, and he has spoken with the voice of Joseph Smith, which is the voice of God.’ (Part II, Ch. 1)

John Ferrier had always determined, deep down in his resolute heart, that nothing would ever induce him to allow his daughter to wed a Mormon. Such marriage he regarded as no marriage at all, but as a shame and a disgrace. Whatever he might think of the Mormon doctrines, upon that one point he was inflexible. He had to seal his mouth on the subject, however, for to express an unorthodox opinion was a dangerous matter in those days in the Land of the Saints.

Yes, a dangerous matter—so dangerous that even the most saintly dared only whisper their religious opinions with bated breath, lest something which fell from their lips might be misconstrued, and bring down a swift retribution upon them. The victims of persecution had now turned persecutors on their own account, and persecutors of the most terrible description. It appeared to be omniscient and omnipotent, and yet was neither seen nor heard. The man who held out against the Church vanished away, and none knew whither he had gone or what had befallen him. His wife and his children awaited him at home, but no father ever returned to tell them how he had fared at the hands of his secret judges. A rash word or a hasty act was followed by annihilation.

(Part II, Ch. 3)

Doyle's portrait of the Mormons (forced marriage and violence) had drawn upon what was already an extensive body of commentary in the British press. Portrayals of Mormons, stereotypical or not, were popular in Victorian writing. Nineteenth century writers from Jack London to Robert Louis Stevenson to Mark Twain, all made part of their living by writing about and, often, "by distorting the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints. That era's portrayals of LDS were often of a darkly secretive and violent people" (Williams). An interview with Richard Turley, assistant historian of the LDS Church and co-author of *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, explains the sordid history of the Mormon church and its "religiously motivated acts of violence." On Sept. 11, 1857, a Mormon militia in southern Utah seized a wagon train from Arkansas and brutally murdered 120 people. The two groups of settlers fired on each other for four days. The same day, the Mormon group tricked the besieged, thirsty and terrorized

Arkansans into leaving their circle of wagons. Others from the militia chased, clubbed, knifed and shot the women and children. Soon after, records of the event were destroyed, and Mormon leaders attempted a cover-up (Turley qtd. in Berkes). Will Bagley, historian and author of *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, claims: “Attackers said they did what they were told by religious superiors, who demanded strict obedience in 1857 and who were believed to have divine authority.” The details of the Massacre had been known some thirty years before Conan Doyle penned his own interpretation of the Mormon culture. And though Holmes and Watson are on the *Scarlet* case in 1878 when the novel begins, Conan Doyle places John Ferrier’s death in 1860, only a few years after the Massacre took place.

Despite the sensationalistic, and factual, news surrounding the Mormons, “since the late 1830s, ...Mormons had begun to attract English converts...with its message of a new revelation and a restored biblical theocracy.” Sebastian Lecourt claims the “British were both dismayed and fascinated by the Mormons for essentially creating a new religion versus a Christian sect; they had a ‘prophet, a text, persecution and exodus’ – which provoked anti-establishment notions” (89). On the one hand, polygamy was a bad fit with Victorian values; but some English commentators “started to identify with the Mormons, celebrating their establishment of a thriving colony on the Utah plateau as a great vanguard movement of Anglo-Saxon settler colonialism” (Lecourt qtd. in Eschner). For Conan Doyle, Mormons were at once sort of English-Christian, white, and descended from English people or from England themselves—and profoundly Exotic. His choice to put Mormonism at the center of his story would have attracted the attention of the reading public (Eschner). “By juxtaposing these two very different images of Mormonism, Doyle’s novel suggested that the Mormons’ success as settlers somehow depended

upon what seemed most backward about them. If Greater Britain was the fantasy that one could have settler expansion without a serious clash of differences, then Doyle's Mormons, in a sort of return of the repressed, came to suggest that there were already strangely foreign elements within Anglo-Saxon tenacity itself" (Lecourt 97). The novel actually presents the Mormons as brilliant settlers, "an expansive power" (Lecourt 103):

Maps were drawn and charts prepared, in which the future city was sketched out. . . In the town, streets and squares sprang up, as if by magic. In the country, there was draining and hedging, planting and clearing, until the next summer saw the whole country golden with the wheat crop. (Part II, Ch. 2)

Before Conan Doyle visited Utah, he was asked (via letter) about his depiction of the Latter-day Saints' organization as being "steeped in the assassination of apostates, and that polygamy was white slavery" and so forth (qtd. in Sehgal). Sir Arthur responded that in the future he would write of the Latter-day Saints as he found them. He insisted, "all I said about the Danite Band and the murders is historical, so I cannot withdraw that tho[sic] it is likely that in a work of fiction it is stated more luridly than in a work of history. It's best to let the matter rest" (qtd. in Sehgal). Conan Doyle was invited to give a lecture in May 1923 at the Univ. of Utah on the subject of spiritualism and psychic phenomena. He was well-received and grateful (Williams). After the lecture, the presiding bishop of the LDS Church blasted Conan Doyle for accepting his speaking fee: "I think he had a lot of gall to take Mormon money when he attacked us so bitterly in his book." The bishop had clearly intended to sabotage Conan Doyle's reputation, but thinking ahead like Holmes, and perhaps expecting as much, Conan Doyle had never taken a penny (Schindler).

In a unanimous vote, the Albemarle County school board chose to ban the novel, claiming *A Study in Scarlet* “age-inappropriate.” “It certainly can be used in older grades, but there's lots of other books that could be used for sixth grade,” claimed board vice chair Miles (qtd. in Kindelan). “...[L]earning goals could be met using another Sherlock Holmes book or another book...but [remove] the issue of inaccurate information about the Mormon religion and broaching topics that would be sensitive at age 11,” Maury Brown, school district spokeswoman, told *ABC News*. “The MDL [Mormon Defense League] is never in favor of banning books from libraries or public access, but we are pleased that Albemarle has looked at what's appropriate for a sixth-grade curriculum and considered removing a book that might promote bigotry,” Scott Gordon, president of the Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research (FAIR), a non-profit focused on addressing misconceptions of the Mormon faith (qtd. in Kindelan).

One student interviewed about the verdict said: “I feel like they weren't really listening to student input on this issue, and this is who it is going to effect, the students and the teachers,” (Kindelan). The middle school banning, which would have impacted approximately 120 sixth graders within the school, instead reached 1,000 sixth graders in the district (Kindelan). Since 2011, roughly 21,000 middle school students in Albemarle County have never been introduced to Sherlock. Though the parent who initiated the challenge suggested *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to take *Scarlet's* place, no such switch was ever made. No work of Sherlock has since been taught in any middle-school grade level in Albemarle County (Thomas). The Albemarle Superintendent of the county has refused any correspondence regarding the case of *A Study in Scarlet*.

The *Scarlet* case findings are certainly ironic: the Mormon parent who censored a county against “anti-Mormon” sentiments, carried out the same censorship by Mormons referenced in the novel. The Latter-day Saints continue to police their good name and go after anti-Mormon messages and stereotypes throughout America, even online versions. In separating fact from fiction, truth from theories, like Sherlock, we cannot always free the innocent nor bring criminals to justice.

Although school administration does not typically side with students or teachers in cases of book challenges, often out of fear of political or parent backlash, primary and secondary institutions must strive to teach Conan Doyle, not self-censor, recognizing his great impact on our culture, history, and science. Parents must trust that children are smarter, and more mature, than they want to believe. Educators must work harder to communicate with parents and illustrate why *banning* is not the way to compassion, curiosity, and critical thinking. Equally, fans of the series can fight against censorship and continue to follow Sherlock, embody his methods, speak his name.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people do not know” (*Adventures of the Blue Carbuncle*).

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