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'How Sherlock Changed the World' shows evolution of modern crime-solving

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NCR Today

"How Sherlock Changed the World"

9 p.m. EST Tuesday, PBS (Check local listings)

For fans of Sherlockology, this two-hour BBC documentary will confirm the belief that Sherlock Holmes is the greatest and most influential detective in history, even if he is a fictional character created by a Scottish eye-doctor-turned-writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930).

The BBC-produced "How Sherlock Changed the World" and its producers are in love with the BBC drama "Sherlock," starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as Dr. Watson. "Sherlock" may be the best show on television you are not watching. As much as I enjoy CBS's modern interpretation "Elementary," starring Jonny Lee Miller as Holmes and Lucy Liu as Watson, "Sherlock" is contemporary, compelling, intelligent, entertaining and simply brilliant.

Forensic science would not exist as it is today without the prideful and quirky Sherlock Holmes, Doyle or Doyle's professor, surgeon Joseph Bell (1837-1911) of Edinburgh University in Scotland. Bell was considered the first surgeon to practice his profession on a scientific level, and Doyle modeled Sherlock Holmes on him. Both Bell and Doyle were eventually involved in solving criminal cases.

The first forensic lab was established in the UK in 1935, but a French detective was way ahead. Edmond Locard ran the first forensics lab beginning in Lyon in the early 1900s. Then, in 1906, Austrian judge Hans Gross noticed how inept investigations were in his jurisdiction and, basing himself on Sherlock Holmes, wrote what the documentary calls "the most important book ever on criminal investigations."

Today's police procedurals on television and in film owe their popularity -- and claims to authenticity -- to the stories about Sherlock Holmes' methods that even 120 years ago were hugely popular. Doyle's first book, *A Study in Scarlet*, was a forensic science manual that reflected the spirit of the age of scientific inquiry. It gave birth to the "proud, eccentric, clever and pioneering" detective.

The first hour of the documentary is repetitive, but it lays the groundwork for all the areas Sherlock developed through his keen powers of observation, silence, reflection and deduction. Before Sherlock, crimes were solved through eyewitness accounts or confessions, mostly forced. Sherlock was the first to preserve the crime scene and to look for evidence in blood, ballistics, bullets, evidence under fingernails, invisible blood evidence, fingerprints, gait analysis and toxicology. It would be 40 years after Sherlock Holmes was first published before the FBI began matching ammunition to guns after the St. Valentine's Day massacre.

Several forensic experts add their praise to Sherlock's pioneering ways, including Dr. Henry C. Lee, a blood-spatter expert who has testified in several high-profile trials, and Karen Smith, who has worked 20,000 crime scenes over 500 deaths and is also an expert in blood-spatter analysis. Several famous cases, including the unsolved murder spree of the unidentified Jack the Ripper that occurred not long after the publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, are examined in the documentary. Sherlock Holmes believed in the now-basic principle of the preservation of the crime scene; the police investigating Jack the Ripper's murders never gave this a thought.

Sherlock Holmes believed one had to approach each crime with an open mind and not go into it with a theory already in place. When I watch "48 Hours," "Dateline" and other true crime shows about convictions that are eventually overturned -- or not -- due to unreliable eyewitness accounts or circumstantial evidence that conveniently supported a theory of the crime without actual evidence, I wonder how these prosecutors and law enforcement people can keep their jobs. They obviously never read the stories about Sherlock Holmes or consider the meaning of justice.

According to the experts in the film, the lasting legacy of Sherlock Holmes is that he created a character that led the way to solving crime better; that is, discovering the truth so that justice will out.

In the documentary, Smith said she loves the way the BBC series "Sherlock" shows how delighted he is when he discovers the truth based on evidence. Wouldn't it be great if Holmes' methods were used universally today so people would not be unjustly convicted and sometimes sentenced to death while the real perpetrators go free? I don't know for sure, but I bet The Innocence Project relies on the scientific breakthroughs made by Sherlock Holmes.

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For this reason, if no other, "How Sherlock Changed the World" is an important, laudatory and informative documentary for people of goodwill to watch. And please do add "Sherlock" to your must-see TV list. Logical deductions based on observation and substantiated by science that lead to truth are good skills for all of us to develop as we learn from that which Watson learns, though we need not be as socially "peculiar" as Sherlock.

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