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Sherlock Holmes

MAGAZINE

Nicholas Meyer

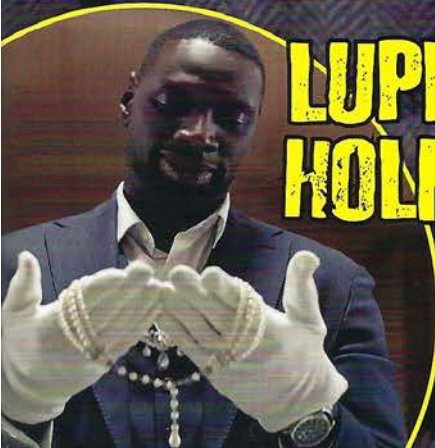
Back to Baker Street

RIPPER FILES

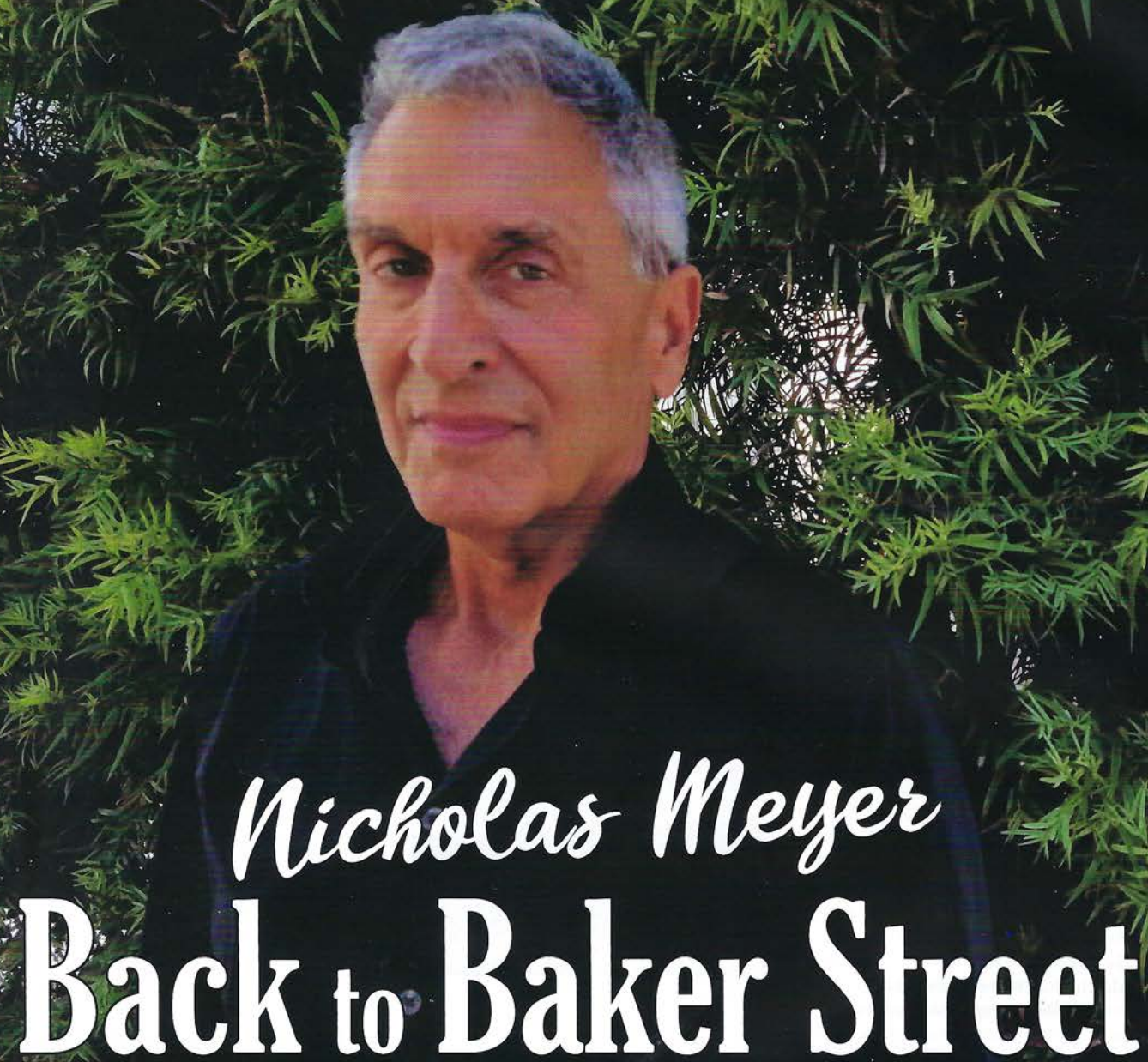
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LUPIN vs
HOLMES



Nicholas Meyer

Back to Baker Street

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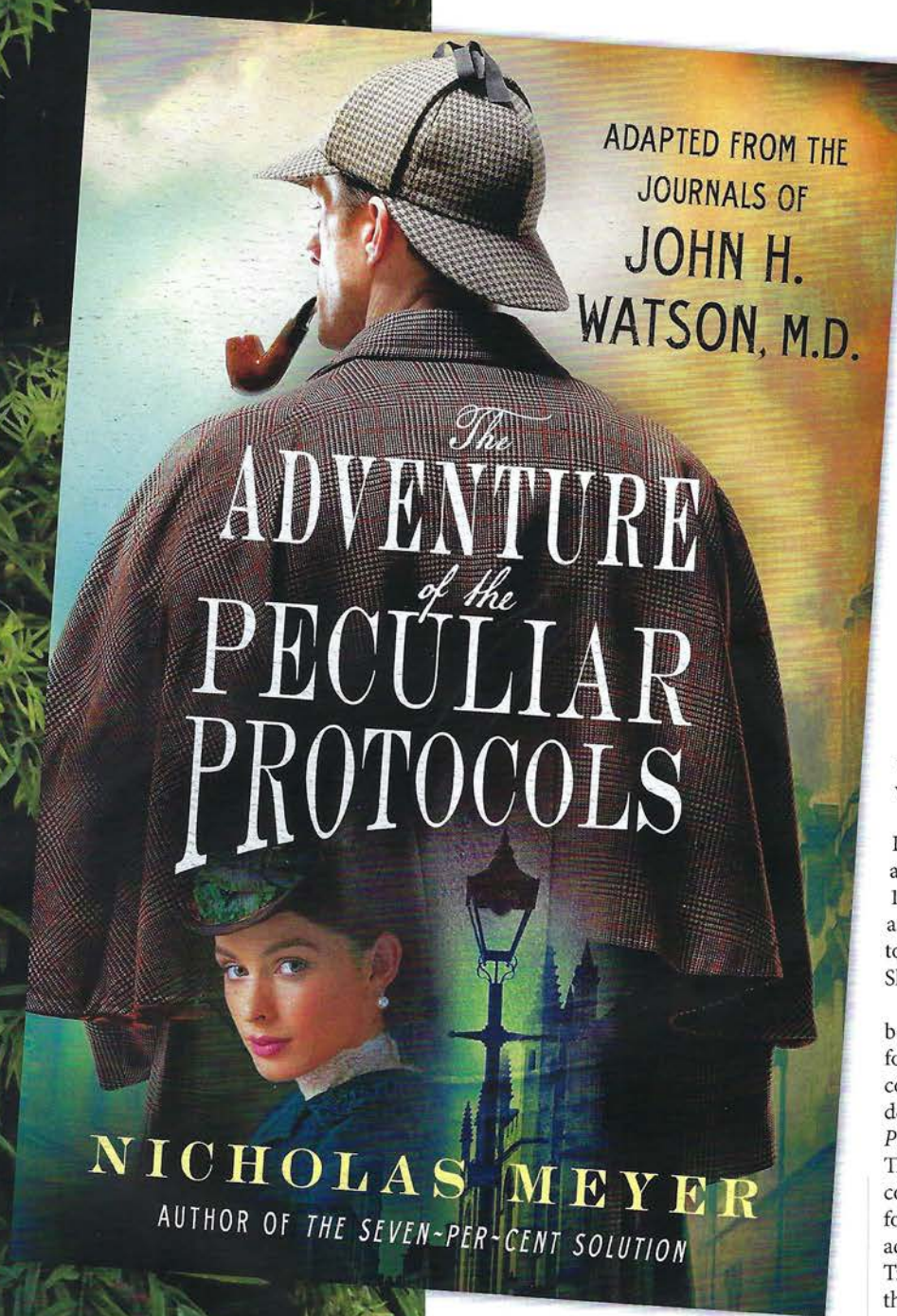
Nicholas Meyer is an author, screenwriter and director. Born in 1945 in New York, his first writing credit was *The Love Story Story*, about the making of the 1970 film. His first major writing credit was probably the screenplay for the 1975 TV movie *The Night that Panicked America*, dramatising the events surrounding Orson Welles's infamous radio adaptation of HG Wells's *War of the Worlds* broadcast on 30 October 1938, which led some Americans to believe that a Martian invasion was occurring in New Jersey. In the intervening five decades, his body of work has been varied and extensive. He made his directorial debut with the HG

Wells-Jack the Ripper time-travel drama *Time after Time* before going on to work as both writer and/or director on films *II*, *IV* and *VI* in the *Star Trek* movie series (known pretty universally as "the good ones"!).

But to the admirers of Sherlock Holmes, Nicholas Meyer is best known as the inventor of the modern pastiche novel with his 1974 masterpiece *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, which he subsequently dramatised for the film of the same name, earning him a nomination for an Academy Award along the way. The book itself was ranked ninth in the *Publishers Weekly* list of bestselling novels from 1974 and made *The New York Times* bestseller list for forty

weeks between 15 September 1974 and 22 June 1975. In 1976, a sequel, *The West End Horror*, appeared, followed in 1993 by *The Canary Trainer*.

He has recently returned to the world of Sherlock Holmes with his new book *The Adventure of the Peculiar Protocols*, which is based around the infamous and completely untrue, *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Created in 1903 by the Tsar's secret police as an excuse to justify the massacres of Jews, the Protocols purport to be the minutes of a secret meeting of Jews plotting to take over the world. Although denounced as forgery almost from the moment they appeared, they continue to be regarded as fact in some parts of the world



and have even been quoted by Vladimir Putin.

Through the modern marvel that is Zoom, I was recently able to talk to Nicholas about his work.

The interview was conducted in October 2020, just two weeks before the presidential election in the United States.

I began by asking what had made him return to writing about Sherlock Holmes after so many years.

"*The Adventure of the Peculiar Protocols* was gestating for ten years before I sat down and wrote it.

"I have had a lifelong interest in forgery. Part of this may have to do with the fact that I am a forger myself. I forge Sherlock

Holmes stories. Whether I am forging Watson's hand or Doyle's – or both – I'm forging. And forgery interests me for a great many reasons. It poses a lot of complex questions of a legal, ethical, aesthetic and moral nature. What is the difference, say, between a forgery and a copy? Something you can't see: the intention.

"All works of art are ineluctably products

of the times in which they were created. For example Mozart does not just sound like, inimitably, Mozart. He also sounds like late-eighteenth-century middle European music. Renoir, to take another example, doesn't just always look like Renoir. He also looks like late-nineteenth-century French Impressionism.

"If I were to show you four movies that were set in the Battle of Waterloo and one of these films was made in 1920, one in 1950, another in 1990 and the last in 2015, you would, I would hazard, be able to tell me in five minutes when, within five years, each of these movies were made. A thousand details would give away the circumstances that define their period of creation – sound/silent, black and white/colour, digital, fake eyelashes, whatever the philosophy it is expounding, what kind of acting and so on. This is all fine for art being ineluctably the product of the time in which it is created.

"But it plays hell with forgery because forgery, too, is the product of the time in which it was created.

"So, I may try to sound like Watson or Doyle, but as the years pass I will be more and more revealed as Nicky Meyer from 1974 or 1990, with my own cultural biases and preoccupations coming through. Or, to put it another way, every age gets the Sherlock Holmes it deserves.

"Anyway, when you start collecting books and articles and exhibits about forgery, it isn't long before you come in contact with the biggest, baddest, most destructive forgery of all, which is the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. This is a forgery that won't die despite the countless attempts to debunk it. This is a forgery that is taught and, in many places, accepted as truth – like the worst of Donald Trump's whoppers. But it occurred to me that if you set a thief to catch a thief, maybe you might set a forger to expose a forgery, and that trying to do so through fiction (as opposed to another article in *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* re-exposing these bogus things) might work. It was another way to reach a different audience and shine some light on these absurd but seemingly indestructible lies.

"I spoke to a good friend who was, for seventeen years, the head of the prestigious Baker Street Irregulars, and he said he'd been halfway through the book before he realised that I wasn't making this up, that this in fact was a real thing, that these were real (fake) papers."

I commented that I was a bit worried that writing about the Protocols would give them the oxygen of publicity, at a time when conspiracy theories are on the rise.

"Oh, you can't go on Wikipedia and

read about the Protocols without nuts coming out of the woodwork, but you'll certainly get an earful or an eyeful. The risk I took was that anything you come up with to bat down a conspiracy theory can become itself part of the conspiracy. We've got a president who encourages belief in conspiracy theories as a method of divide and conquer – to set us all at each other's throats as a way of securing his own continuance.

"When I started writing, I wasn't expecting to publish in the middle of a Donald Trump presidency. I was overtaken by events. This book was ten years in the thinking. It wasn't until I read a book called *Pogrom* by Professor Steven Zipperstein at Stanford, which was about the Kishinev massacre and the role that the Protocols played in it, that I really was spoon-fed the information that I needed to write the book.

"Once you read Holmes, you realise that one of the more attractive things about his character is that sometimes he fails. I thought, well, here's a novel-length tale of a failure and, I thought, potentially a touching addition to the canon."

I asked whether it was problematic placing Holmes into a real-life story? One pastiche that I've always enjoyed was Michael Hardwick's *Prisoner of the Devil*, which is based around the Dreyfus case, and he has to have Holmes fail, because otherwise he would have changed history.

"No, rightly or wrongly that fails to stop me. I think the entire province of what we call the historical novel allows for all

“I hated every Sherlock Holmes movie I saw, and especially the ones where Nigel Bruce played Watson as a bumbling jerk”

kinds of interactions between real and historical characters. I think EL Doctorow's 1975 historical novel *Ragtime* (filmed by Milos Forman in 1981) is a recent and very potent example. Other examples include the novels of Walter Scott and similar writers where real people make appearances. Certainly, movie westerns and stories about Wyatt Earp and the gunfight at the OK Corral have been told from multiple vantage points and multiple interpretations without, I think, causing a problem. (There are books about history according to the movies, which are very amusing.) I think it is the province of art to fiddle with that stuff.

"One thing that has come out of the

Covid crisis, is that I think people are reading more because they are stuck. Now if you read a book and it says, 'this is a history of Winston Churchill', 'this is a history of the French Revolution', 'this is a history of the telephone', you assume – and I think are within your rights to assume – that you are getting the facts to the best ability of the author to unearth them and relate them.

"But with novels and films, there is a downside. And the downside is an audience that may not know the difference. To give an example, in a post-literate world where people get their information from the movies, if you go to see *The Deer Hunter* (which is a pretty terrific movie), you will learn that the North Vietnamese forced American prisoners of war to play Russian roulette. This is not true. There is not a single documented instance of any Vietnamese forcing any Americans to play Russian roulette. But if you watch the movie, and if you are getting your information from the movie, then you will think that is true and as a result get confused.

"Some movies, more responsible than others, may put a disclaimer at the beginning (I certainly have) saying 'this is a dramatisation of real events'. Then one understands – starting at least with Shakespeare – that liberties are being taken. Shakespeare wrote terrific dramatisations of history. What Antony and Cleopatra were really like pales compared to what he made them like. But, if you read a novel about the Battle of Waterloo like *Vanity Fair* with the Duchess of Richmond's ball, we understand that it's fiction because it says novel.

"The Italians even have a phrase for it 'se non è vero, è ben trovato' – if it didn't happen that way it should have. It makes a good story. It's well told. As long as you understand that that is the case, I don't see it as too much of a difficulty.

"Take *The Daughter of Time* [Josephine Tey's famous historical detective story]. Having her detective Alan Grant investigate the disappearance of the Princes in the Tower plays to our desire to have our cake and eat it too – and of course her character is not the first to have exonerated Richard III. So maybe he didn't kill his nephews and do all those terrible things, but still we like him the way Shakespeare wrote him."

In the forty-six years since Nick wrote *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, there has been a veritable tsunami of new Sherlock Holmes stories. I asked Nick what he thought of those who followed him. He responded with humour.

"I think it's a very bad thing because I now have competition, though most of them are terrible. That said, my feeling is that the history of art is a history of cut



Basil Rathbone, right, and Nigel Bruce as Holmes and a 'bumbling' Watson. Below, the cover of Meyer's first Holmes novel.



and paste. Everybody builds on what goes before, going all the way back to Homer. We are adding to it, we are retelling it, we are putting it in outer space or whatever. And that is what is good and that is what is fun. Much as I would love to have the whole Holmes pastiche field to myself, I have to admit and acknowledge that all this cutting and pasting, yes, it may be a glut on the market and much of it may be wretched but I don't think you can prevent the cutting and pasting. It's a form of fan fiction. It's a form of enthusiasm.

"The first person who put his hand print on the wall of a cave had the field (or cave!) to himself. Somebody else must have said 'That looks cool. I think I'll do that too' and drew a picture of an animal, and art was off and running."

Although *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* was published with the blessing of the Conan Doyle Estate more than forty-five years ago, in 2011 Anthony Horowitz's *The House of Silk* was billed as the first non-Conan Doyle Sherlock Holmes pastiche

to be authorised by the estate. I wondered what Nick thought about this.

"The word 'authorised' excites all my suspicions. Authorised biographies for example. I don't want an authorised biography. That implies that the subject

“The Holmes stories took place long enough ago and far enough away from my world to have a sort of fairy-tale quality”

had some kind of kill rights to opinions or research that he deemed troubling to his own self-image or mythopoeia. Similarly, there can be no 'definitive' biography. A biography is a collaboration between a painter and a sitter. The sitter may be willing or unwilling, he or she may be

alive or dead, but the painting remains a collaboration between artist and subject. If you ask three artists named Cezanne and Raphael and Picasso to paint an apple, you are not going to get a definitive apple. You are going to get three different apples.

"Everybody creates a Holmes in their own image. When I wrote *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, I was very young. I convinced myself that I and I alone could replicate the voice of Holmes, and in particular I wanted to replicate the voice of Watson, which I felt was consistently wrong. I hated every Sherlock Holmes movie I ever saw, and especially the ones where Nigel Bruce played him [Watson] as a bumbling jerk. Why? Because I could never understand why a genius hangs out with a dolt and I could never visualise that Watson as the narrator of the cases. So I told myself, 'you alone can write this book...' That is obviously untrue because other people have done it and some have done it very well, which I hate to admit."

Meyer wrote *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* back in 1974, when he was caught up in a Hollywood writers' strike. Unable to write scripts, he decided to write a novel instead.

Prior to *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, very few Holmes pastiches had been allowed by the Conan Doyle Estate. They were pretty much limited to Adrian Conan Doyle and John Dickson Carr's collection of short stories *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes* and the adaptations by, respectively, Ellery Queen (no less) and noted British Holmesians Michael and Mollie Hardwick of the films *A Study in Terror* and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

So how did a New York City boy come to write about a very English detective?

"I was introduced to Sherlock Holmes at the age of about ten or eleven by my father, who I suppose introduced me to most things. I guess he gave me the one-volume American edition that contains all sixty stories and I inhaled these one after another. I do think that childhood encounters – experiences with people, with art, with everyday events – somehow make the deepest, most lasting impressions. Whatever the first movie you saw, the first book, the first bully that you ever met – these things stay with you. And Sherlock Holmes hit me right between the eyes at that impressionable age.

"I am not a very analytical person but I would hazard a guess that the Holmes stories took place long enough ago and far enough away from my world to have a sort of fairy-tale quality to them. At the same time, they were close enough to my recent past (it was about 1956 or '55 when I read them) that talking about the telegraph or horse-driven taxis or whatever was entirely unfamiliar. I think it was the teasing combination of those two locales,

if you like, time periods that captured my fancy.

“And then of course there is the relationship between Holmes and Watson, the friendship, so reminiscent in a way of certain other friendships, whether you are talking about

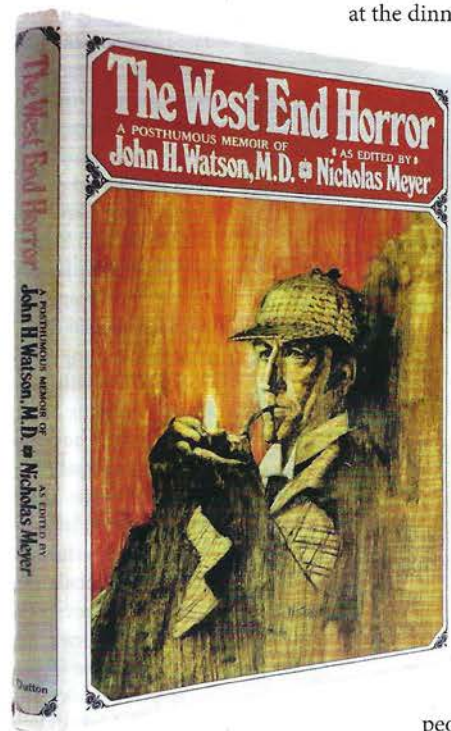
Quixote and Sancho Panza, Batman and Robin, or Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering. This last was certainly ripped off by Shaw from Holmes and Watson – I mean Holmes lives at 221B Baker St, the landlady is Mrs Hudson, Dr Watson is just back from Afghanistan – Col Pickering is just back from India and they are at 27A Wimpole Street presided over by Mrs Pearce. The idea of the hero and his admiring sidekick seems to have been, if not initiated, certainly exemplified by Holmes and Watson. That’s as far as my analysis got.

“There’s probably also a third component to this besides the impressionable age and the sidekick duo and that is my infatuation from a very early age with English and, in particular, I think, Victorian and Edwardian prose – whether we’re talking

“You have to take the comments of artists about how they create with a ton of salt because chances are we don’t know”

about Edgar Allan Poe or Robert Louis Stevenson or Anthony Hope, H Rider Haggard or George Eliot – I just thought that it was beautiful. Their English was beautiful. As a more recent example, I’m now reading for the first time in my life *Justine* by Lawrence Durrell – I am just drunk on the prose. I’ve never read anything like it.

“In writing *The Seven Per-Cent Solution*, I was very much inspired by my father.



My father was a psychiatrist, and as a child trying to understand what it was he did, I came up with my own definition, which he thought was pretty good. I said ‘my papa is a feelings doctor’, and when I read Holmes at age eleven, I realised he reminded me of someone. Because we would sit down at the dinner table and my

father would say something like, ‘What do you think about a man who always shows up five minutes late for his appointments?’ We would go round the table speculating: ‘maybe he doesn’t have a watch’, ‘maybe he doesn’t want to be there’, or ‘maybe he wants to show you he doesn’t want to be there’ – and so on.

“Then in High School people would say ‘your

old man’s a shrink, is he a Freudian?’ I didn’t know, so one day I said, ‘Pop, are you a Freudian?’ And he said, ‘Well, it’s kind of a silly question.’ And when I said ‘Why’s that?’ he said, ‘Because it’s really not possible to discuss the history of psychoanalysis and not start with Freud any more than it is possible to talk about the discovery of America and not begin with Columbus or the Vikings, whichever you prefer. But to suppose that nothing has happened since the Vikings is to be pretty rigid, pretty doctrinaire, because a lot has happened in the meantime. And understand, even if all Freud’s theories turn out to be wrong, that in no way diminishes his claim to genius.’

“And I said, ‘How can that be? If his theories are all wrong, what’s his claim to genius?’ My father replied, ‘In a way, his claim lies in the field of cartography. Sigmund Freud was arguably the first non-artist to set foot on a hitherto uncharted continent, which he called the land of the unconscious. And if his maps of that place were subsequently proved to be in error, does anybody really remember or care any more than they make a big deal of the fact that Columbus thought he was in India? It just pales compared to the achievement.’

“When a patient comes to see me, I listen to what they say, I listen to how they say it. I am especially curious as to what they do not say. I am interested, are they



Watched on by Watson (Robert Duvall), Freud (Alan Arkin) attempts to hypnotise Holmes (Nicol Williamson) in the film version of *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*.

on time? What kind of clothing are they wearing? What is their body language? I am, in short, searching for clues from them as to why they are not happy.’ And I thought, I know who this reminds me of!”

“So then I found myself wondering how much did Arthur Conan Doyle know of the life and writing of Sigmund Freud? And the first thing I realise is, ‘Oh, they’re both doctors. They both died in the same town. Within nine years of one another.’ And this is very interesting to me, and I now recall that Sherlock Holmes is a cocaine addict, that Freud for a time was a user, and

that Freud became involved with cocaine when he teamed up with two eye doctors to write a piece about the use of cocaine as an anaesthetic during eye surgery. Then I remember or learn that Doyle went to Vienna for six months to study... ophthalmology! And at this point my head is starting to explode.

“At first I thought of writing a non-fiction thing but I don’t write non-fiction, I just make up stories. And I thought, what an exchange of gifts! Watson brings Holmes to Vienna to cure him of his cocaine addiction (now that Freud has

become disenchanted with the drug), and they wind up combining forces on a case, during which, in exchange for having been cured of his addiction, Holmes exposes Freud to his own psychological method of deduction that puts him on the path to psychoanalysis! So I wrote a book about them both.”

Sherlock Holmes readers may well recall that Conan Doyle himself said that he had based Sherlock Holmes on a doctor, his tutor in Edinburgh, Dr Joseph Bell.

“You have to take the comments of artists about how they create with a ton of salt

because chances are we don’t know. Doyle was very generous in saying it was based on Bell, but Bell knew better and said, “That’s all very nice, but Holmes is you, pal”, although to be honest, Doyle looks more like Watson.

“How does one explain the act of creation? I certainly can’t.

“It all reaches back into antiquity. According to Plato, Socrates was told by the Oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest man in Greece. And Socrates thought that can’t be right. So he decides to disprove the oracle by finding someone wiser than

himself. And he goes to all classes of Greek society, and eventually he got round to the poets. And I think by poets he meant artists in general, sculptors and whatever. He said to himself, surely these people who write and create so insightfully about the human condition will prove to be wiser than I. And he said, this turned out to be absolutely untrue. The poets were the stupidest people he talked to. They were

“If I had known what a legal labyrinth I was entering, I probably wouldn’t have written the book”

like idiots, like children except when they do their art, at which point they would go into a kind of suspended trance and take dictation from God. This is what they called inspiration, as do we. And when you come out of it, you have no memory or knowledge of what it is, what happened. You just look up and you go, ‘Wow, it’s dinner time.’

“Last night I showed my girlfriend the movie of Houdini that I wrote based on my father’s book, starring Adrien Brody, which I’d not seen since it came out. I looked at it and I had no memory of having done it. And I thought, ‘Wow, this is really rather good’, but could not for the life of me remember it. And occasionally I’ll open, say, *The West*



Watson (Robert Duvall), and Holmes (Nicol Williamson) in the film version of *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*. Pic: Shout! Factory.

End Horror [his second Sherlock Holmes novel] and read at random – (after all, it’s about a pandemic) – and I’ll be sort of amazed, not that it’s good or bad, but that I don’t remember writing it. Because I think when artists write, they go into a kind of suspended place.”

Sherlock Holmes may have appeared in the Victorian era but his appeal seems as strong and broader than ever. I wondered if Nicholas had any ideas about why that should be?

“It might be the buddy idea that I mentioned earlier. I know I implied in *Star Trek VI* (and, by the way, I am not a *Star Trek* expert), but in *VI*, I certainly implied that Spock was a descendent of Holmes. Spock implies it in the movie. And it’s interesting to me that when he quotes the line that is a giveaway and I watch *VI* in movie theatres (we all remember movie theatres!), there are screams of delight and identification showing at least that many *Star Trek* fans know their Holmes as well. So to that degree perhaps the answer is yes there is an overlap. But as to why?” Meyer shrugs.

Famously, when

Professor Moriarty appeared in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Conan Doyle Estate objected.

“I didn’t know there were actual instances in the *Star Trek* canon where Holmes and Moriarty appear, but the reaction of the estate doesn’t surprise me.

“I wasn’t aware of the estate when I wrote *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*. In 1742, Thomas Gray said in his “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” that “where ignorance is bliss, tis folly to be wise”. If I had known what a legal labyrinth I was entering, I probably wouldn’t have written the book. So it was a very good thing that I didn’t.”

So, would Nicholas be tempted to write another Sherlock Holmes book?

“Yes, in fact the next book is finished although it probably won’t come out until next year. It’s just that everything is backed up because of the virus.

“It’s called *The Return of the Pharaoh*. It takes place between 1910 and 1911 and it’s set in Egypt.”

My thanks to Nicholas Meyer for generously spending his time talking to me so engagingly about his work from his home in Los Angeles.

The Adventure of the Peculiar Protocols is out now, and *The Return of the Pharaoh* will be published later in 2021. If you want to know some more about Nicholas Meyer’s life and work, do read his 2010 memoir *The View From the Bridge: Memories of Star Trek and a life in Hollywood*. It is due to be released as an audio book in the next twelve months. And there’s always his website, nicholas-meyer.com. ♪



The Watson Solution

How the controversial casting of Robert Duvall as Dr Watson helped rehabilitate the reputation of a character seen by many as a bumbling buffoon

For much of the twentieth century, the character of Dr John Watson was considered by the public at large as something of a joke: doddery, bumbling, clumsy, slow on the uptake, and perpetually bewildered – the antithesis of his razor-sharp companion, Sherlock Holmes.

This negative impression of Watson is thanks in large part to the performance of Nigel Bruce, who played sidekick to Basil Rathbone’s Holmes in fourteen films, which have been repeated endlessly on television ever since.

Although more recent adaptations have done much to improve the good doctor’s reputation, back in the 1970s, if you mentioned Watson, most people thought of Bruce.

So, when producer/director Herbert Ross and writer Nicholas Meyer began casting the film version of Meyer’s novel *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, they were determined to find an actor who would play Watson much closer to the character Conan Doyle created.

They wanted him to be a companion of strength, integrity and intelligence.

Meyer explained: “Like the novel from which it was derived, the idea was to make audiences re-look at these famous characters, to blow the cobwebs

off their more familiar (and to me, frequently inaccurate) portrayals.”

“I wanted an original for the part of Watson,” Ross said. “An English actor who could surprise us by doing a Watson who didn’t bumble in the original way.

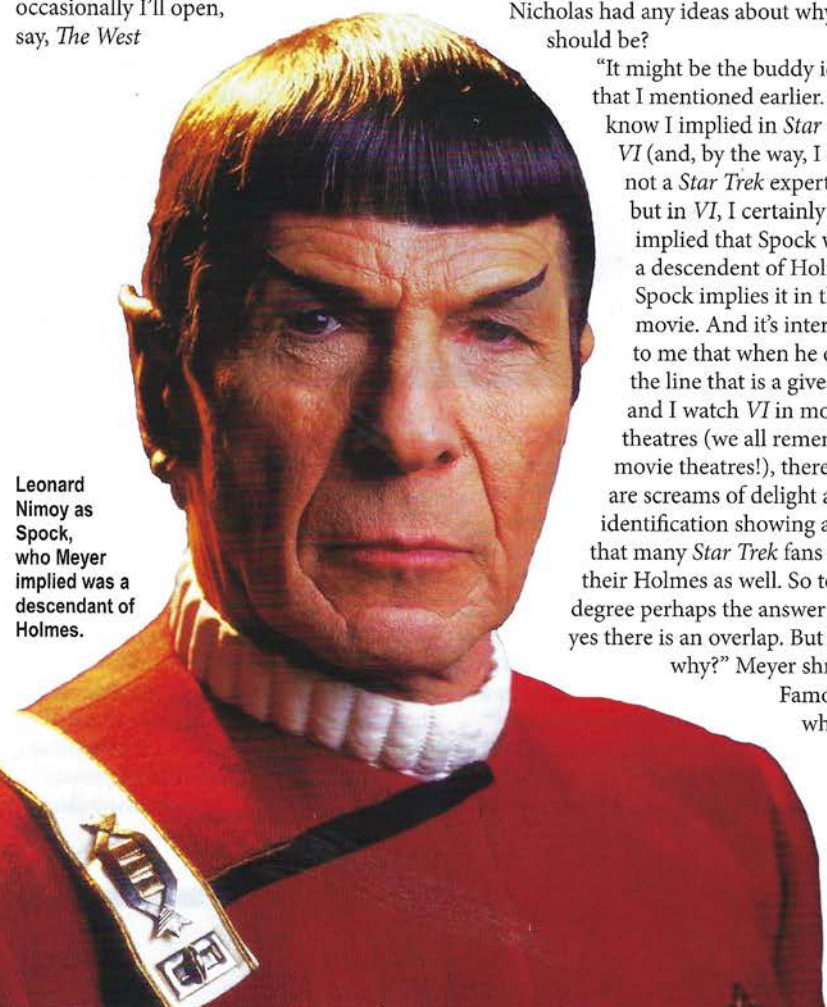
“Then one day this unsolicited tape was sent in. I listened to it without knowing who the actor was, and I was enchanted. When I was told it was Bob Duvall I was amazed. Vanessa Redgrave thought the man [on the tape] was South African. Others pinpointed the voice as coming from one remote part of England or another. One man guessed Canadian, which brought him closest, but nobody said American.”

Robert Duvall was not the most obvious choice to play such an archetypal Englishman.

Born in San Diego, California, in 1931, he had built a reputation as one of America’s finest character actors.

Duvall joined the cast of *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* soon after his acclaimed portrayal of Tom Hagen in *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974).

He was hot property – one of the most-in-demand actors in the business – and able to pick and choose



Leonard Nimoy as Spock, who Meyer implied was a descendant of Holmes.



Robert Duvall and Nicol Williamson as John Watson and Sherlock Holmes. Once in costume, Duvall bore a striking resemblance to the Sidney Paget illustrations of the character.

the roles he wanted. *People* magazine described him as “Hollywood’s No. 1 No. 2 lead”.

Duvall had just turned down the role of Chief of Police Brody in a little film called *Jaws* when he accepted the offer to play a very different crime fighter.

“I definitely wanted Duvall,” said Meyer, whose idea it had been to cast the American. “Anything to get away from Nigel Bruce’s totally preposterous Watson.”

“Bruce may have had a genuine accent but I could never understand why a genius would hang out with an idiot.

“And Bruce was never the narrative voice I heard when I read the original Doyle, whereas Duvall’s stolid, dependable doctor came much closer.”

Duvall shared Meyer and Ross’s vision for a more Doylean Watson.

“Watson is too often played as a bumbling buffoon. I want to emphasise the

solid decency of the man, the loyalty to his friend,” he said.

In another interview he added: “I saw Dr Watson as a good, loyal and even protective friend and companion to Sherlock Holmes.”

“You have to remember that he was an

“Dr Watson is more forceful than we have seen him before, and Mr Duvall makes this switch believable”

ex-rugby football player, an ex-boxer, a brave ex-soldier, a highly skilled doctor of medicine and, of course, a practised writer. He’s also a quiet, rather self-effacing man, but a staunch one to have around in company.”

Duvall’s Watson was also more authentic in his appearance than Bruce’s. He was younger and trimmer, and, when in costume, Duvall bore a striking similarity to the Paget illustrations of Watson – certainly far more so than the portly Bruce.

When *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* was released in 1976, many critics approved of Duvall’s steadfast, level-headed version of Watson.

In his review of the film for *The New York Times*, Vincent Canby – who called it “nothing less than the most exhilarating entertainment of the film year to date” – held up the performance of Duvall for special praise:

“The particular revelation of *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* is Robert Duvall, one of America’s best actors, who plays the English Dr Watson with such wit and control that it’s difficult to believe he’s ever played an American with equal conviction.

“It’s a very funny performance, and very important to the overall shape and cohesion of the film.”

One reviewer noted that “Dr Watson is more forceful than we have seen him before, and Mr Duvall makes this switch believable”, while another remarked that Duvall “turns from his sinister Godfatherisms to give us a rousingly fussy Watson.” A third commented that he “gives Dr Watson more depth than other Watson portrayals I have seen... refreshing vigour and muscularity.”

Chris Steinbrunner and Norman Michaels, in *The Films of Sherlock Holmes* (1978), said that Duvall was “extraordinarily well cast” and that his “thoughtful portrayal is worthy of the top billing the role receives”.

“Robert Duvall, a young American whose greatest previous success had been in portraying a member of a ruling Mafia

family in *The Godfather* and its sequel, was given the role of an athletic, courageous Watson, studiously avoiding the older Nigel Bruce image.”

They added that his is “the very first Watson to noticeably limp on the screen from that old war wound”.

In *Sherlock Holmes on the Screen* (1977), Robert W Pohle Jr and Douglas C Hart said: “Robert Duvall, seemingly miscast, very quickly proves to the contrary, presenting us with a Watson more than worthy of standing among the great Watsons.”

Ron Haydock, in 1978’s *Deerstalker!* went further: “Realistically speaking, Robert Duvall’s Watson in the film was about as close as anyone had ever gotten to the Watson of the original Conan Doyle stories. Duvall even looked like the Watson of Sidney Paget’s original *Strand Magazine* illustrations.”

However, a more recent survey of Holmesian films took a very different view.

“The film’s most conspicuous flaw remains the casting of American actor Robert Duvall, fresh from *The Godfather Part II*,” wrote Jonathan Rigby in *Sherlock Holmes on Screen* (2002).

The problem most reviewers have with Duvall’s performance is his English accent.

Even before he began his acting career, Duvall had enjoyed adopting different dialects, saying he had always had “a mimic ear. We were a military family, and we moved from one part of the country to another very often as my dad would shift from one base to another. That’s typical of service families, and also explains why

nobody can tell whether I’m from New York or California or Texas. I’m from all of them, so to speak.

“In any case, I’ve fooled around with languages for years. And I’ve always wanted to play English. The first time I tried Watson, I was winging it, but I knew right away that I could do it.”

Reviewers – particularly those in Britain – were unconvinced.

Rigby observed that Duvall “saddles Watson with a strangulated English accent (apparently modelled on the famous conductor Sir Adrian Boult) that has to be heard to be believed”.

Films and Filming said his “English vowel seems to have been prepared by some badly programmed computer”.

Meanwhile John Coleman in the *New Statesman* mocked the effort with the phrase: “I feah the fawg hez delayed arse.”

And Nicol Williamson’s biographer Martin Dowsing called it “a rather charmingly absurd English accent”.

Some have suggested that the way Duvall chose to speak as Watson was deliberately tongue-in-cheek, but Meyer felt this was not the intention.

“I certainly think Duvall was doing the best accent he could; tongue-in-cheek was not his style at all.”

Despite the problematic accent, Duvall’s performance as Dr Watson was vitally important in the development of the character on the screen. It helped pave the way for the host of more dynamic, intelligent Watsons who were to follow, from David Burke and Michael Williams to Martin Freeman and Lucy Liu.

Duvall showed the viewing public that Watson is much more than just a bumbling foil to a genius detective; he is an able companion, with brains, physicality and vitality. Watson is a help, not a hindrance. 🐾