

AN INTERVIEW WITH AMANDA J FIELD

AUTHOR OF *ENGLAND'S SECRET WEAPON*



Have you always been interested in Sherlock Holmes?

When I was a child, in the 1960s, BBC TV broadcast a Sherlock Holmes series, with Peter Cushing as Holmes and Nigel Stock as Dr Watson. I watched these avidly and later read all the Conan Doyle stories. I've always rather preferred Watson to Holmes - though brilliant, Holmes seemed cold and unfathomable, whereas Watson was much more human somehow, particularly in the way that he was portrayed by Nigel Stock. I was deeply envious of the two men in their cosy sitting room at 221B Baker Street, a roaring fire in the grate, afternoon tea being served by Mrs Hudson, and the prospect of a new mystery to solve.

What prompted this particular book?

I was looking for a topic that would form my PhD in Film Studies at Southampton University. I had put up three very different proposals: the wartime films of Sherlock Holmes; the way that western actors have appeared in 'yellowface' as orientals in films such as the Fu Manchu series; or the imaging of London Underground. At the time, I was particularly keen on the London Underground project, but it was an interdisciplinary study (covering film, fine art, literature and social history) and sadly universities are still resistant to research that crosses departmental boundaries. So Holmes got the vote - and I think it was a good choice.

How easy was it to find primary sources for your research?

I had an enormous stroke of luck. Just after I had begun my research, a huge collection of Arthur Conan Doyle material was bequeathed by collector Richard Lancelyn Green to Portsmouth Museum, just a few miles from my home. I volunteered to help sort the collection, and was there from the moment the boxes arrived from Lancelyn Green's home right through to seeing over 20,000 items catalogued on a computerised database. It is an astonishingly rich collection, and gave me, for example, access to previously unseen correspondence between the Doyle estate and the Hollywood studios who were making these wartime Holmes films: this was invaluable for the book. I also went to Los Angeles to look at studio production files, most of which are held by the University of Southern California.

The wartime films brought Holmes into the modern era. How successful was this?

It was so successful that no-one today seems to remember that Holmes had been 'modernised' at all in these films. I was amused to read the headlines about the new BBC adaptation (starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Holmes) which treated it as if this was the very first time that Holmes had been brought out of the Victorian era. In fact, until 1939, Holmes had always been set in contemporary times and it wasn't really until 1959 that the 'cult' of the Victorian prevailed.

Who do you think is the greatest film or TV Holmes?

I think that your favourite Holmes is nearly always the one you grew up with: many people today name Jeremy Brett as the best Holmes, and although he was excellent in the role, I believe the choice has got more to do with the viewer and what's happening in their life at the time than it has to do with the actor himself. So, while I grew to love Basil Rathbone's interpretation when I was researching his films, no-one will ever replace Peter Cushing as my favourite.

Would you describe yourself as a Holmes enthusiast?

Not really, because my knowledge of Holmes is absolutely minimal compared, for example, to most members of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. They know every detail of every Doyle story and they can give you a learned argument (complete with dozens of references to the stories) as to whether Holmes went to Oxford or Cambridge, why Watson's war-wound seemed to move between his leg and his shoulder, or exactly where to find the Diogenes club, of which Sherlock's brother Mycroft was a founder member.

What makes a good film historian?

I think the key is to write about films in their historical context: not to see them as standing apart from time or society, and to recognise that they do not have a single 'meaning' but multiple meanings, depending on when they are viewed and who is viewing them. It's also important to see them as products of an industry rather than works of art created by a single person or auteur (the director).

Have you always wanted to be a writer?

Yes, I have. My mother was a writer and my father a technical journalist. I grew up surrounded by books and writing, and spent many years in corporate communications, where copywriting was the core skill. So I've written countless articles, magazines, press releases, brochures and newspapers for companies like IBM, Vodafone, British Gas, Cunard, The Science Museum, Silicon Graphics and many more. In 2000, I sold my business in order to go to university and take an MA and PhD.

Do you have a writing routine?

It's called 'distraction theory'. I do anything to avoid settling down to writing what I'm supposed to write that day: I mow the lawn, sort out my accounts - anything to put off the awful moment when I have to face the blank computer screen. I've learned it's always best to finish the writing day halfway through a sentence, so that at least in the morning you can start typing straight away. But having said all that, I'm rigorous about deadlines and always turn in work on time.

What's your next project?

I've just written a chapter about the use of Sherlock Holmes in advertising for a book called *The Afterlives of Arthur Conan Doyle*, which is being published by Palgrave Macmillan for the University of Hull. My next book is called *Sucker Punch* and it's a study of boxing films in the 1930s. Boxing films are a neglected area of Film Studies and hopefully the book will appeal to fight fans as well as to the intelligent film viewer.

YOU CAN BUY *ENGLAND'S SECRET WEAPON* BY AMANDA J FIELD FROM ANY GOOD BOOKSHOP, MAJOR INTERNET RETAILERS INCLUDING AMAZON, OR DIRECT FROM THE PUBLISHERS www.chaplinbooks.co.uk