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Interview with E.J. Wagner

E.J. Wagner



Crime-historian and storyteller E. J. Wagner is the organizer and moderator of the annual Forensic Forum at the Museum of Long Island Natural Sciences, Stony Brook University, New York.

E. J. has presented programs on the folklore and history of crime to riveted adult audiences for more years than she cares to admit. She researches her material in such places as the Armed Forces Museum of Pathology in Maryland, the Suffolk County Office of the Medical Examiner, the crime laboratory of London's Metropolitan Police (Scotland Yard), delving into ancient trial transcripts and medical texts, and judiciously eavesdropping in public places.

Her programs examine such subjects as murder, witchcraft, werewolves, 17th century piracy, the history and techniques of mummification, and the development of forensic medicine and criminalistics. E. J. does not present programs for young children.

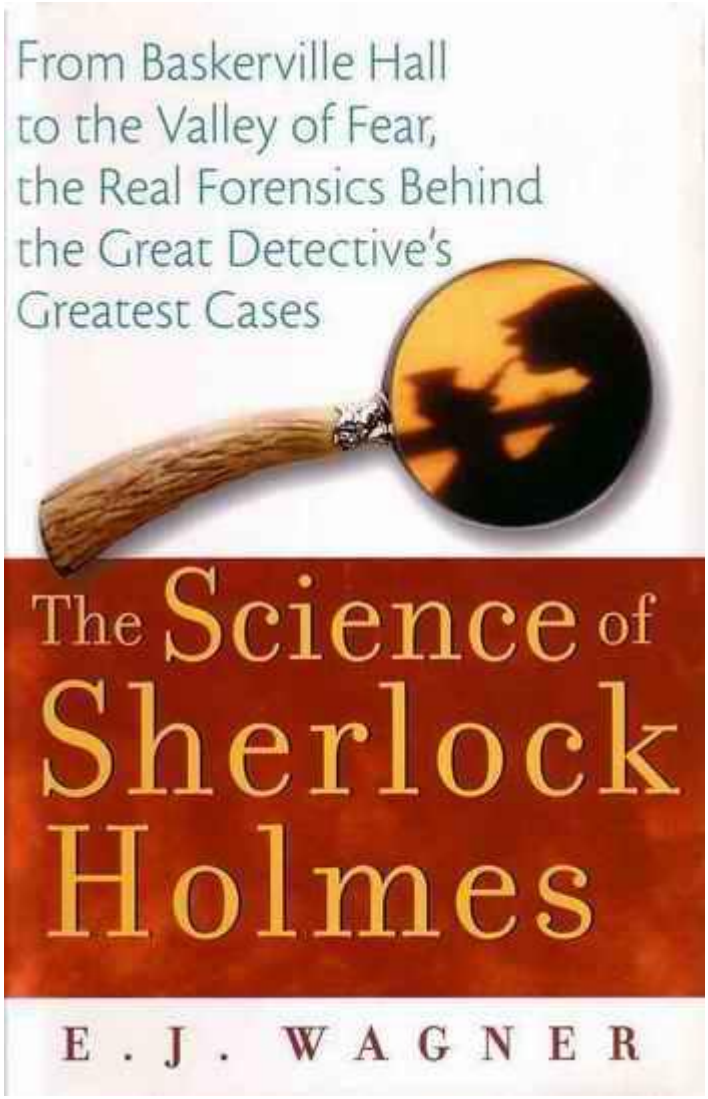
E. J. has appeared in diverse settings, including Brookhaven National Laboratory, Long Island University, University of Nevada (where she was one of the few non-physicists to be awarded the annual Goudsmit Lectureship), Bayard Cutting Arboretum, Society of Forensic Toxicologists, New York Society of Forensic Dentists, Northeastern Association of Forensic Scientists, Holtsville Animal

Preserve, and assorted historic houses and sailing ships including the Queen Elizabeth 2. She served as consultant on Renaissance poisoning for A&E's presentation of BBC's "The Borgias," and has performed on radio and international television. She has served as Sy Ross Distinguished Lecturer at the Stony Brook University's Roundtable.

E. J. studied acting at the Piscator Dramatic Workshop; and at Syracuse University and New York University, earning a degree in Theatre Arts from the latter. She is an avid photographer and collector of old books pertaining to crime and medicine. Her suspense fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine (one of her tales, "Cook's Choice," has been anthologized and translated into Japanese), her nonfiction in The Lancet (article entitled "History, homicide, and the healing hand" in Volume 364, Supplement 1 December 2004 whose theme is "Medicine, Crime, and Punishment") and The New York Times. E. J. is a member of the Authors Guild, and an associate member of the Northeastern Association of Forensic Scientists. She and her husband live on Long Island in the custody of a large Labrador Retriever named Dr. Watson.

We at the *"Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology"* became interested in her work mainly because of her seminal work on the science the great fictional detective Sherlock Holmes used to solve his great cases (*The Science of Sherlock Holmes*). We approached her for an online interview and she graciously agreed. The interview was conducted by the editor-in-chief Dr. Anil Aggrawal for well over two months. Some excerpts....)

The Science of Sherlock Holmes, the best selling book by Wagner. Click cover to read its review



Q. Tell us something about your early life?

A. I was born and raised in New York City and largely educated there. I was trained in ballet from an early age, and was very serious about it until a leg injury made pointe work difficult. It seemed natural to segue into the theatre, as I missed having an audience. Storytelling was a large part of my family life, and I soon discovered it was an art form with which I was very comfortable. For one thing, I had all the good lines.

Q. Is this (*The Science of Sherlock Holmes*) your first book? Which books have you written before? On which subjects?

A. *The Science of Sherlock Holmes* is my first book. I have written previously for a speech writing and research group, for *Ellery Queens Mystery Magazine*, for *The Lancet*, for small publications, and of course for all of my own presentations. Both *The Lancet* and John Wiley & Sons, the publisher of *The Science of Sherlock Holmes* reached out to me as a result of seeing my website which was designed by my husband, Bill Wagner (for E.J.'s Web site, the linked page (http://www.forensic.to/webhome/ejwagner/)).

Q. Tell us something about "*The Science of Sherlock Holmes*". We know this has been the hot favorite around the world among readers.

A. The jacket copy says that "*The Science of Sherlock Holmes* is a wild ride in a hansom cab along the road paved by Sherlock Holmes . . . through medicine, law, . . . anatomy . . ." and I think this is very apt. Each chapter examines a specialty of the forensic sciences as they emerged from the carapace of superstition during the Victorian period in Europe. The chapter on pathology, "Dialogue With the Dead" for instance, explains how autopsy evolved from anatomical dissection, how cadavers were obtained, how they were stored, and what conditions were like in 19th century dissecting rooms. Each chapter includes accounts of relevant crimes, many grimly amusing.

Q. How did you do research for this book? Any interesting experiences?

A. "Sherlock" is based on years of lecturing on the history of crime, interviews with forensic experts in many fields, a large collection of antiquarian books on crime and medicine, and an instructive amount of time in autopsy rooms. Autopsy suites, I find, always provide interesting experiences. It was there that I observed a subject whose organs were reversed, a condition undiscovered during his life, and a chap whose new heart valve had been incorrectly installed, with unfortunate results . . .

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Q. What is your next book about? Does it have anything to do with Sherlock Holmes?

A. This, in more ways than one, is a secret . . .

Q. Can you tell us about your career? Your educational background?

A. Elementary school in the Bronx, New York. I was skipped two and a half years (put in class with older children) a not very comfortable situation. I attended the Bronx High School of Science for a year, then won a scholarship to the Bentley School, a small private high school in Manhattan. I served two years unhappily at Syracuse University, then transferred to New York University from which I graduated with a BS in Theatre Arts. I have worked at various times as a riding instructor, a speechwriter, a storyteller, and a teacher. I now lecture on criminal history, and moderate the Forensic Forum at the Museum of Long Island Natural Sciences at Stony Brook University.

Q. How were you attracted to forensic science? Any interesting experiences?

A. My late cousin, Theodore Ehrenreich, was a pathologist, and although he was 26 years older than I, we became very close friends. He had trained in Paris, served in the OSS during World War Two (stationed in India for part of that time). After the war he returned to civilian life, and while he was head of pathology at Lutheran Medical Center in New York City, he also served as consultant in clinical pathology to the New York City Medical Examiners Office, headed by Dr. Milton Helpern. It was through my cousin that I first became fascinated by the forensic world.

Wagner's Superlatives



Wagner is an amazing personality with so many facets. We requested her to answer some questions in short, so our readers could know her better. Here in a very short question and answer session you get to know Wagner better:

Calling in life : To interpret science through art

First award : Goudsmit Lecturship

First book: "The Science of Sherlock Holmes: the Real Forensics Behind The Great Detective's Greatest Cases"

Greatest inspiration: Mr Holmes and my Cousin Teddy

Greatest love of my life: My husband

I am most sensitive about: My mechanical ineptitude

I am passionate about: Animals

I am superstitious about: Harboring superstitions

I don't compromise with: Illogic

I hate: Rudeness

I look forward to: Dinner

I Love: My family

I would like to be marooned on a desert island with: My husband, our dog Dr. Watson, lots of books, and someone to do chores.

If I could change one thing about my family, it would be: They would live closer.

If I could change one thing about myself, it would be: I would remember faces.

If I could change one thing about the world, it would be: Stamp out terrorism

My biggest assets: Humor and a really good appetite.

My biggest fear: Losing the people I love.

My Birthday: is in December.

My current state of mind: Edgy.

My favorite bedroom line: Did you open the window?.

My favorite food: Latkes.

My favorite one-liner: You can't make this stuff up.

My favorite possession: World War 2 issue Minox.

My favorite quote: "Do not theorize before you have data" - Sherlock Holmes

My favorite journey/holiday: London and Bath.

My greatest extravagance: Books.

My greatest necessity: Grapefruit juice.

My greatest regret: My parents didn't see my book.

My Hero: My husband.

My idea of perfect happiness: My husband, my dog, Dr. Watson, and a warm fire (in the fireplace).

My life's mantra: Still looking.

My most treasured possession: Dr. Watson, although I think he owns me.

My sex appeal: Mature.

My spice: Cinnamon

My strength: Logic.

My wildest fantasy: Oprah Winfrey features "The Science of Sherlock Holmes" and on the same day the plumber shows up.

Place Of Birth: New York City, NY, USA.

Real Name: E.J. Wagner.

The move/case/book that kick started my career: The Speckled Band (Sherlock Holmes story).

What touches me most: Neglected elderly people and abandoned animals.

When or where was I happiest: July 2003. I had just signed the book contract.

Where do I see myself five years down the line: Still answering these questions....

Who or what would I like to be born as in my next life: President of the United States.

My favorite dish: Roast chicken.

My favorite book: Fathers and Sons (Turgenev).

My favorite movie: Brief Encounter.

My favorite star: Judi Dench.

My favorite person: My husband

Q. Any fascinating experiences while writing this book, or while researching for this book?

A. I discovered that many old cases were decided, with dreadful consequences, on shaky scientific evidence, and that errors of fact have a way of sneaking into textbooks and prestigious journals and taking on a life of their own.

Q. What is your main profession?

A. I am a performer who specializes in tales of the history and folklore of crime.

Q. Could you tell us about your family? Did you inherit the love of science/writing from your parents? How many children do you have? Would you be happy if they took up the forensic science as a profession? What are they doing now anyway?

A. My family contains a number of physicians and writers, and evidently this has been true for generations. My mother taught drama; and while my father earned his living in the dress business, he was also a fine storyteller and a superb athlete.

My husband Bill and I have two daughters and a grandson. Our eldest is a social worker and the Director of Response of Suffolk County, a suicide prevention hot line. Our younger daughter teaches English as a Second Language. I don't think either of them is considering a career change.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with your current book?

A. I hope the book will entertain and give the reader a clear picture of the history of the forensic sciences, as well as an appreciation for the very real contributions the fictional Sherlock Holmes made to advances in criminal investigation.

Q. What do you love most (besides your professional work and writing of course)?

A. My husband (a software engineer and my tech support) and our family, including Dr. Watson, our Labrador Retriever. I value, as well, music, books, animals in general, photography, cooking, logic, a respect for empirical evidence and the novels of Ivan Turgenev.

And then of course, there's that other interesting man in my life, a Mister Sherlock Holmes . . .

Q. What do you dislike most?

A. Fanaticism, followed by stupidity, then lack of humor.

Q. What do you consider as your biggest achievement in life?

A. My marriage and my children.

Q. If God asked you choose your profession again, what would it be and why?

A. A member of the mounted police, because I love horses.

Q. Have you ever traveled to India, or to Indian subcontinent? Would you like to visit, if such an opportunity arose?

A. I have not been to India but would love to. Just as long as I don't have to fly economy - I simply can't remain in a fetal position that long.

Q. What has been your biggest failure/disappointment?

A. Injuring my leg so that I had to give up ballet was hard at first - but upon contemplation, I realize that a compulsive talker like me would never have been happy as a mute swan.

Q. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be, and why?

A. I would improve my memory for faces, which is abysmal, as well as my dreadful sense of direction and inability to cope with mechanical devices of all kinds.

Q. If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be, and why?

A. I would like it to be less geographically scattered so that we could all be together on holidays more often

Q. Which living person do your admire most? Which person in entire history? Why?

A. The living person I admire most is my husband Bill. I am not given to hero worship so, in historical terms, I admire a number of people for individual traits, always keeping in mind they were not perfect. I admire: Eleanor Roosevelt, for overcoming a restrictive upbringing and giving decency and grace to politics; Aaron Burr, for doing so much, in many ways, for the education of women; Abraham Lincoln, for writing lucidly, eloquently, and without a speechwriter; and Ivan Turgenev, a fine writer and a truly good man, who lived a life in keeping with Christian ethics, while holding no belief in a deity.

...I hope the book will entertain and give the reader a clear picture of the history of the forensic sciences, as well as an appreciation for the very real contributions the fictional Sherlock Holmes made to advances in criminal investigation...

Q. What is your life's mantra?

A. I haven't discovered it yet.

Q. In one line, how would you best describe yourself?

A. I worry creatively, irreverently, and with my tongue tucked firmly in my cheek.

Q. Are you interested in Science Fiction? Do you think SF is a good means to teach science to children?

A. It depends on how one defines science fiction. I love the Holmes stories, which some consider SF, but I hate the stuff about outer space as a rule. It often seems to me indifferent fiction laced with poor science.

Q. If you were marooned on a desert island, who/what would you like to be marooned with and why?

A. My husband, not only because he is the love of my life, but because he is a talented engineer. I find the secret to a successful life is to always travel with an accomplished member of that profession. It solves a myriad of problems. Also, he could bring his guitar and flute and provide background music.

Q. Who/what would you like to be born as in your next birth?

A. The President of the United States. First I would fund stem cell research, then create a Health Care system which includes everyone, etc., etc.

...I love the Holmes stories, which some consider SF, but I hate the stuff about outer space as a rule. It often seems to me indifferent fiction laced with poor science...

Q. If you were allowed a choice to live in one era of time (past, present or future), which one will you chose and why?

A. I think the 1990's were pretty good. The future seems treacherous to me; and the distant past, bloody and war torn and rife with ghastly racial prejudice.

Q. What do you do in your spare time? Your hobbies, interests?

A. Cook, bake, read, collect old books on crime and medicine, listen to music, argue.

Q. Are you religious? If yes, how do you reconcile religion with science, which is your profession?

A. No, although I feel a strong cultural attachment to the Jewish people to which I belong.

…Any message for your readers? Well, remain objective, apply the scientific method, do not theorize before collecting data as Mr. Holmes suggested, and buy my book…

Q. If a youngster of about 12-13 years wanted to take up writing/science writing as a career, how should he proceed?

A. Read extensively, on many subjects, fiction as well as non-fiction. Learn the basics of research, the importance of primary documents, and the real meaning of independent sources.

Q. Your favorite authors/books?

A. Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Leon Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, Shakespeare's *Scottish play*.

Q. Any message for our readers?

A. Remain objective, apply the scientific method, do not theorize before collecting data as Mr. Holmes suggested, and buy my book.



E.J. Wagner can be approached via E-mail at ejwagner@worldnet.att.net.

Interviews : Collective Index

Interviews in our sister publication : Collective Index

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