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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



...A REMARKABLE BOOK ...In The Science of Sherlock Holmes , Wagner has produced a highly informative yet readable book on a subject that not many authors can write with confidence. But that is not surprising, considering the immense effort the author had to put in in collecting facts by scanning records and documents and putting them together in a cogent form...

The Science of Sherlock Holmes - From Baskerville Hall to the Valley of Fear, the Real Forensics Behind the Great Detective's Greatest Cases *by* E.J. Wagner. Hard Bound, 9.5" x 6.5" x 1.0".
John Wiley & Sons Inc, Hoboken, New Jersey, USA. Publication Date March 2006. 256 pages, ISBN 0-471-64879-5. Price $24.95 USA, £ 16.99 UK, $31.99 Canada

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Description of this book: http://www.forensic.to/webhome/ejwagner/SSHbook01.html

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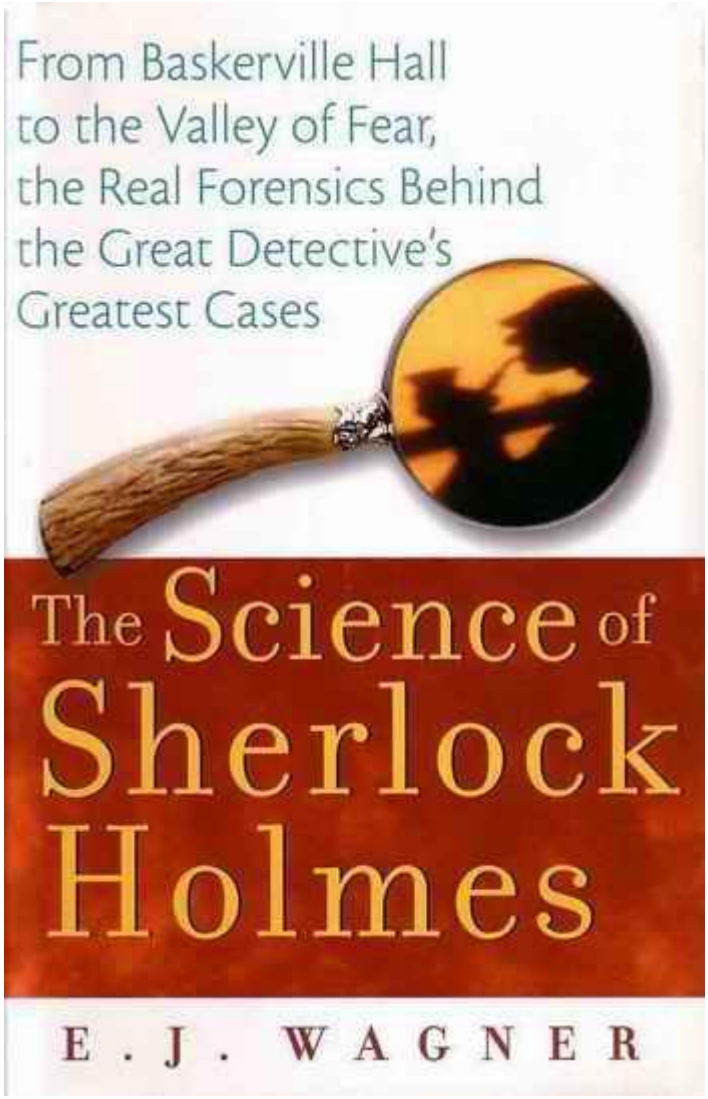

Even today, Sherlock Holmes is considered as the world's greatest detective and one of the most famous characters in fiction. His adventures from over a hundred years ago still enthral readers, and sequels and movies seem as if they are never going to stop. There has been a plethora of recent memoirs of contemporary scientific detectives, but the present volume stands out as distinctly different. Wagner uses the Holmes stories merely as a starting point to give histories of aspects of scientific detective-work. There are many famous cases that she includes, like those of Lizzie Borden or the Tichborne Claimant, which, if Holmes had been on the case, would have been solved sooner to everyone's satisfaction except that of the culprits.

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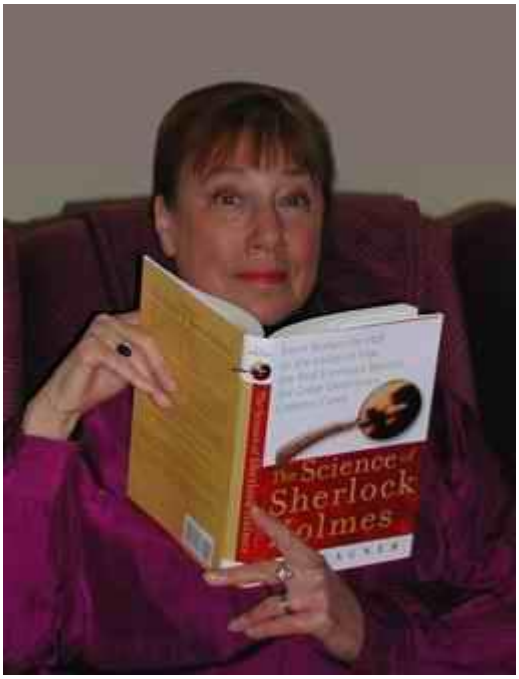
Wagner follows the developing science of criminal investigation from its infancy in the nineteenth century into the earliest twentieth century. She carefully traces the beginnings of forensic science from the work of the great Italian physician Giovanni Battista Morgagni who, she writes, "began to change the focus of anatomical dissection, not only searching for an understanding of the structure of the human body, but also trying to match the changes in the cadaver to the clinical symptoms of disease reported before death. From there," she says, "it was a short step to the idea of dissecting bodies to look for changes caused by criminal acts."

We learn about the unique character of Holmes, as Wagner reminds us, from Stamford 's description of him as told to Watson in *A Study in Scarlet* . "Holmes is a little too scientific for my

tastes", says Stamford , "it approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects. To do him justice, I think that he would take it himself with the same readiness. He appears to have a passion for definite and exact knowledge."

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.

Finally if you are curious to know the full name of the author, don't worry too much; she is not going to tell you. She jokes that people might call her **E**xpensive **J**ewel or **E**xtreme **J**udgement Wagner!

Holmes was rationality triumphant - a cool thinker who could outwit the best brains that the underworld could produce. Surprisingly, he never studied medicine, neither did he appear to have pursued any course of reading which might fit him for a degree, in science or any other recognized portal which would give him an entrance into the learned world. Yet his zeal for certain studies was remarkable, and within eccentric limits his knowledge was extraordinarily ample and minute. One of Holmes's attractive tributes was his reliance on scientific evaluation of the clues he found; he not only used forensic science as it was then known, he originated aspects of it, at least in fiction.

We find, as Wagner points out, a remarkable example of Holmes's inventiveness in *A Study in Scarlet* where he tells Watson of his discovery of a reagent which is precipitated by haemoglobin, and by nothing else. "Criminal cases are continually hinging upon that one point", he tells Watson. "A man is suspected of a crime months perhaps after it has been committed. His linen or clothes are examined and brownish stains discovered upon them. Are they bloodstains, or mud stains, or rust stains, or fruit stains, or what are they? That is a question which has puzzled many an expert, and why? Because there was no reliable test. Now we have the Sherlock Holmes's test, and there will no longer be any difficulty."

Before Holmes's time, people were just as fascinated as we are by crime, and discussed physical evidence left by evildoers, but the evidence was often evaluated with superstition or folklore.

But Wagner has not depended solely on Sherlock Holmes stories to talk about his science, but rather has used them to introduce a topic or, occasionally, to relate a true crime that occurred before a Holmes story was written, and then to show the parallels that indicate that Doyle had based his story on that true crime. She has blended familiar examples from Doyle's accounts into a history of the growth of forensic science, pointing out where fiction strayed from fact, avoiding the technical details that often make writings on the topic incomprehensible to the layman. Basically, The Science of Sherlock Holmes is a book on forensic science written for the non-specialist. And it goes to the credit of the author that she could make it so engrossing that there is not a dull moment in the entire text.

A case in point is the story of one Charles Walton, a rheumatic old man of seventy-four who was found dead in 1945 in a field, his body pinned to the ground with his pitchfork, and a cross deeply carved in his chest. As a youth, Walton had had an encounter with a spectral dog that Wagner tells us "changed shape, until it appeared to become a woman wearing a black cloak and revealed a dark figure without a head." The story is reminiscent of Doyle's novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* ,

but in the novel Holmes ensures the triumph of fact and science over fantasy and superstition. He is able to establish how a cunning individual of the Baskervilles family had changed his name to Vandeleur and fled from Costa Rica to England, where he established a school in the east of Yorkshire with the sole intention of grabbing a valuable estate, and how he used a real dog to kill the owner of the estate taking advantage of a prevailing folklore of the spectral dog. He proved conclusively that the "enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen"-as Doyle described it- was no supernatural bringer of death to the Baskervilles, but a ruse that took advantage of superstition. " *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was an enormous success," Wagner says, "not least because of its resonance with ancient folklore."

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"Unusual animals and insects fly and creep and slither through a number of Sherlock Holmes stories" as Wagner observes. Besides the haunting hound that terrifies the peasants in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* , we have the snake in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* , and the jellyfish in *The Adventure of the Lion's Man*. "But the bizarre animals are not there just to frighten - they are foils for scientific inquiry."

Wagner extends the concept further. She describes how insects - even those "too tiny to notice. . . left traces of themselves in the form of larvae and exudates. . . . Clearly, these creatures were often present at the scene of violent crime. Could science find a way to make these silent witnesses give testimony?" Although this was a new concept in most of Europe, Wagner describes how it had actually been put to use in China as far back as A.D. 1235.

Wagner cites Sherlock Holmes's eye for detail in solving a murder mystery in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery* , where he reminds Watson that his method "is founded upon the observance of trifles." And the trifles he observes and weaves through his reasoning include not only traces of tobacco ash and varieties of earth but, as Wagner tells us, also the effects of bullets. Holmes, hot on the trail, remarks in *The Adventure of the Dancing Men* , "It is now necessary that we should try to throw some light upon this third bullet, which has clearly, from the splintering of the wood, been fired from inside the room."

...In this book Wagner has produced a highly informative yet readable book on a subject that not many authors can write with confidence. But that is not surprising, considering the immense effort the author had to put in in collecting facts by scanning records and documents and putting them together in a cogent form...Without doubt, she has done a remarkable job...
"Observations of the direction of a bullet's path and its individual characteristics are the basis for the science of ballistics. Coupled with Holmes's vast knowledge of scientific esoterica, these observations often lead to the unravelling of intricate crimes. In using ballistic evidence as a detection tool", observes Wagner, "the fictional Holmes is following a path already blazed by real-life detectives, such as the dashing Vidocq of the Sûreté and the indomitable Henry Goddard of the Bow Street Runners." (Sûreté is the French security police.) Wagner tells us that the French detective Eugène François Vidocq "is credited by a number of biographers with ordering, in 1822, the removal of a bullet from an aristocratic murder victim's body in order to compare it with her husband's duelling pistols.

In *The Science of Sherlock Holmes* Wagner has produced a highly informative yet readable book on a subject that not many authors can write with confidence. But that is not surprising, considering the immense effort the author had to put in in collecting facts by scanning records and documents and putting them together in a cogent form. As she states in her preface, the task involved "contacting old friends who were specialists on fingerprinting, trace evidence, poisoning, and a number of other esoteric subjects and begging them for information." It also required "detailed reading of old autopsy reports, crumbling newspapers, and lecture notes." Without doubt, she has done a remarkable job.

Please the linked page (wagner) to read an exclusive interview with the author E.J.Wagner conducted by the editor-in-chief of this journal.

the linked page (mailto:ejwagner@worldnet.att.net?subject=Forensic Science&bcc=dr anil@hotmail.com) to send an Email to E.J.Wagner, the author of this book.

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