

**The Curious Incident of the Title of the Play**  
**Christopher Boone and Sherlock Holmes**

By Jerry James

*“How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?”*

—Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



Sherlock Holmes

**The Problem**

Wellington, a dog, is dead. Christopher Boone, age 15, resolves to find out who killed him, using the methods of his idol, Sherlock Holmes. But Christopher’s brain works differently than most. His condition (never named in the play) is autism spectrum disorder (ASD), so termed since 2013.

Christopher has a binary brain: Things are either right or wrong, true or false. It follows that he’s very good at mathematics and very bad at interpreting unspoken social rules. Christopher sees Wellington’s death as a murder mystery. He likes those because they’re puzzles, and puzzles have solutions.

Christopher will use the epigraph to this essay as his guide in his search for the solution. But in the same way that his ASD allows him to focus only on certain aspects

of Holmes, it will likewise affect the focus of his investigation, conducted with the aid of his Dr. Watson, his teacher Siobhan.

Sherlock Holmes is mentioned only once in the play. (He’s much more present in the novel.) But that once is striking. Christopher doesn’t like things that aren’t true. And yet, Siobhan points out, he likes Sherlock Holmes, who isn’t real, and Christopher knows it.

Christopher’s inflexible sense of truth will be seriously challenged as the original mystery changes and deepens. And because *Curious Incident...* really *is* a mystery, there will be no spoilers here. The only thing revealed will be the source of the title.

**The Author**

If Christopher is a great admirer of Sherlock

Holmes, he is less fond of his creator.



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930)

Arthur Conan Doyle began writing in medical school and sold his first story in 1879. The first Sherlock Holmes story was the 1886 novel, *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes was based on Conan Doyle's teacher at the University of Edinburgh, Dr. Joseph Bell, whose abilities in close observation made him a pioneer of forensic science.

Conan Doyle wrote four novels and 56 short stories featuring Holmes, most of them told through Dr. John H. Watson. But although Holmes made him rich and famous, the author longed to write historical fiction instead. So in 1893, Conan Doyle killed Holmes off. Having wisely left a loophole—the body was never found—he could then resurrect him a decade later. Actors from Basil Rathbone to Benedict Cumberbatch have been very grateful.

Contradictory as it may seem, the man who created Sherlock Holmes was also fascinated by spiritualism. Since 1897, Conan Doyle had endorsed the practice as proof of life after death, a gift offering solace to the bereaved. (His 1927 filmed interview on the topics of Holmes and spiritualism may be seen on YouTube.)

### The Fairies

The following photo of Frances Griffith, age 9, was taken in 1917 by her cousin, Elsie Wright, age 16, in the town of Cottingley. This photo (one of two) came to

public attention in 1919. The next year, Conan Doyle, having been engaged to write a magazine article on fairies, contacted the family.



Frances Griffith and fairies

Although many experts said the photos were fakes—one was amused by the fairies' Parisian hairstyles—Conan Doyle was absolutely convinced they were real. He concluded that their existence would “jolt the material twentieth century mind out of its heavy ruts in the mud.” Oh, and make it easier for the world to accept spiritualism, too.

The cousins did not fully confess their deception until the 1980s. They had gotten themselves in so deep—they'd fooled the Sherlock Holmes man!—that to admit the truth would have been far too embarrassing. The 1997 film, *FairyTale: A True Story*, is a fictionalized account of the incident.

After all his scorn for Conan Doyle, Christopher will unexpectedly discover that he, too, has been believing something that isn't true. And after eliminating the impossible, he will find the improbable truth difficult to deal with.

### The Detective

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* in Christopher's favorite Holmes story. Perhaps it's because that here, Holmes finds something that appears supernatural and proves it to be very much of this earth, which is more than Conan Doyle did with

the Cottingley Fairies.



Watson and Holmes in a first-class carriage

For Christopher, Holmes represents a life lived by truth and a set of rules. These keep the mind on track. But does Christopher's ASD-influenced adherence to truth and rules make it difficult for him when Holmes allows the guilty to go free in the service of a higher justice ("The Abbey Grange" and "Charles Augustus Milverton")?

How does Christopher deal with Holmes being beaten ("A Scandal in Bohemia")? How does he assimilate Holmes' entire investigation coming to naught, sometimes humorously ("The Yellow Face"), sometimes tragically ("The Missing Three-Quarter")? We don't know.

But we do know how strongly Christopher identifies with Holmes' possession of, as Watson puts it, "the power of detaching his mind at will." It's why Christopher excels at chess. It's why he can confidently plan to take the UK's advanced level mathematics exam, the A-level maths.

But Christopher misses how Holmes behaves when he realizes his detachment has gone too far. In *The Sign of Four*, Watson tests Holmes by asking what he can make of a watch. Holmes examines it and quickly deduces that it belonged to Watson's late older brother. "He was a man of untidy habits—very untidy and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances, lived for some time in poverty with occasional short intervals of prosperity, and finally, taking to drink, he died."

Watson angrily accuses Holmes of

having investigated his brother beforehand—and Holmes immediately apologizes, something completely alien to Christopher. "Viewing the matter as an abstract problem, I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be to you. I assure you, however, that I never even knew that you had a brother until you handed me the watch."

Nor does Christopher remark on Holmes' extraordinary reaction when, in "The Three Garridebs," Watson is shot:

"You're not hurt, Watson? For God's sake, say that you are not hurt!"

It was worth a wound—it was worth many wounds—to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain.

Having found that Watson isn't seriously hurt, Holmes turns to the shooter. "If you had killed Watson, you would not have got out of this room alive." How can Christopher be expected to understand that?

Despite Christopher's deep identification with the detective, Holmes' name will disappear halfway through the story. Christopher will remember to detach his mind and focus on the problem at hand, perhaps taking heart from the fact that Holmes frequently traveled by train. But primarily, he will have to channel the strengths of a Conan Doyle hero unmentioned in *Curious Incident...*, Professor George Edward Challenger.

### The Professor

When we first meet Professor Challenger, he frankly states, "By nature I am, I admit, somewhat fiery, and under provocation I am inclined to be violent." Christopher might certainly identify with that!

Conan Doyle wrote five books centered on the professor, the first of which is *The Lost World*. In order to discover the truth,

Challenger must make a long journey into the unknown, during which he will encounter many strange things, some of which he will have to struggle against mightily in order to succeed.



Sir Arthur as Professor Challenger

Christopher must do the same, entering a world where things aren't always true or false, and where the rules are unknown. He will remember Holmes saying, "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes." So he will observe, learn, try, fail and succeed.

In order to convince his doubters, Professor Challenger must return from the Lost World with a baby pterodactyl. To convince his doubters, Christopher must pass his A-level maths. Who is to say which feat is the greater?

### **The Answer**

In "Silver Blaze," the eponymous favorite for Tuesday's running of the Wessex Cup has gone missing from his stable. Holmes treks to Dartmoor to examine the situation at the request of Inspector Gregory. After a day of observing and

asking questions, Holmes astonishes him by announcing he will be returning to London that evening. Furthermore, no one should worry. Silver Blaze will run as scheduled.



Gregory has a question:

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

Which means Holmes has deduced that the reason the dog didn't bark was because it knew the horse-napper; this was an inside job. And yes, Silver Blaze does run and win.

But to find out how this relates to the play, you'll have to see it.

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*Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.*