Two Fandoms, Both Alike in Dignity

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Two Fandoms, both alike in dignity
In fair Baker Street where I lay my talk,
Met when BBC's Sherlock instantly
Caused fan culture clash and fan culture shock

The last Red Circle presentation, Bill Hyder's Evolution in Baker Street, was about "how all this Sherlockian business got started" in 20th Century America. I've been asked to write a bookend talk about how things are looking in the 21st Century. And I'm happy to do so – but there's one slight hitch. For all the flashy technology and younger participants, this new generation is part of something that is actually very old.

So join me in a time machine headed back to the Victorian era, when wide literacy, cheap printing, and the enduring human interest in a thrilling adventure led to a voracious demand for fiction — and not just from the rising middle class, either. Remember "The Problem of Thor Bridge?" Holmes blamed their disastrous breakfast on the new cook reading a "love romance" instead of paying attention to her job. Across the Atlantic, the Lowell Mill workers notoriously ripped pages out of magazines and books and stuck them to their looms to read bit by bit as the machinery ground around them.

They weren't just reading "love romances" either. The massive social and technological upheaval of the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought whole new plotlines to explore. Where are we going with all this change? Could we go too far? What makes a person good or bad? What defines humanity in the first place? What's out there beyond our world? Beyond our understanding?

At the same time as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was arguably founding the detective genre, other authors were founding science fiction. To keep from spending the next hour just listing famous titles, I'll limit myself to those that were published at the same time as the Holmesian canon. This still leaves me with: *The Time Machine, The Island of Dr. Moreau, The Invisible Man, Dracula, War of the Worlds* and the first Cthulu short stories.

These new genres - detective and science fiction - were immensely popular. Arguably the majority of the pulp magazine industry was based on crime and 'what if' stories.

Let our journey to the past now pinpoint a specific time and place: America, 1934. The year the Baker Street Irregulars began is also the year that Hugo Gernsbach encouraged local Science Fiction Leagues to form and keep in touch via letters to his magazine *Wonder Stories*. One of the first to do so was the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, aka the LASFS.

1939. Scion societies are spinning off from the Baker Street Irregulars. LASFS also spins off from the Science Fiction League, declaring its independence and becoming (although it didn't know it at the time) the oldest continuing science fiction/fantasy society in the world. New York City science fiction fans hold the first convention dedicated specifically to their genre. One couple attends wearing futuristic costumes they designed and created, birthing what will someday be called cosplay.

So two distinct cultures based on literary appreciation were evolving at more or less the same time and at more or less the same pace. But evolution throws up a really big mutation now and then and, appropriately, it's science fiction that spawned the new species.

1966. The fall TV season brings the usual crop of new shows. But one of them didn't fit into the standard categories. It wasn't a comedy. It wasn't always a drama either. It wasn't set anywhere recognizable. It wasn't staffed with famous names, and it certainly didn't have a big budget.

What it did have was many of the same touches that have made the Holmes canon so endearing and enduring. It had a continuing cast of characters that the viewers could become attached to, like they had to Holmes, Watson, and Lestrade. It bookended, using the same physical location to introduce the plot, then provide ending commentary, just as most Holmes stories start and end at the hearth of 221B. Like Doyle's, the plots ranged from social commentary to light humor to straight up adventure. But even in the fight scenes, fists and weapons were always accompanied with someone applying logic or a deep understanding of human nature to resolve the situation.

It had, in short, well-told adventure stories. And that's because *Star Trek*, with its lack of anything else to entice viewers to give it a chance, relied on the best science fiction authors of the time to provide its scripts. Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Bloch, Norman Spinrad, and Harlan Ellison all contributed, while others like Issac Asimov cheered from the sidelines.

And that meant that *Star Trek* counted as a perfectly legitimate interest for the members of the science fiction community – indeed, the first Star Trek-only fanzine premiered at Worldcon, the successor of that first New York science fiction gathering 28 years earlier.

Yet for all of this official approval from official big names in science fiction, some of Trek's biggest devotees started to feel like their interests were being considered an afterthought, that they themselves were not being classed as "real" science fiction fans when they showed up at literary events. Annoyed at this whiff of second-class status, Trek fans used their experiences from the science fiction community to establish their own TV-centered fan culture. Over the next five years, all of the basic elements of media fandom as it is known today would be established.

And it would be established primarily by women. Science fiction fandom was always vaguely egalitarian, in that there were a few women authors scattered among the famous men and the attendance at Worldcons was roughly 50/50 gender-wise. But the names that are mainly remembered in Star Trek fan lore are female.

Dorothy Catherine 'DC' Fontana went from a story editor behind the scenes to a published author in her own right. Betty JoAnne Trimble – commonly called BJo – turned the organizational skills she'd honed working LASFS conventions into the first modern letter-writing campaign to save an endangered show. Joan Winston became the public face of the mixed-gender group that ran the first Trek conventions when she literally wrote the book on it.

Fan women's contributions also became part of the actual series. Just as Doyle named Holmes' page boy "Billy" because of the Gillette play, *Star Trek* gave Mr Sulu the first name Hikaru from a Vonda McIntyre tie-in novel. BJo Trimble's self-written, self-published Concordance of all known Star Trek facts and episodes was not only eventually professionally published, it became the show bible for subsequent *Star Trek* series. The professionals were relying on the work of the fans.

Or the fans were becoming professionals in their own right. Sondra Marshak, Myrna Culbreath, and Jean Lorrah were only a few who went from writing fan fiction to officially licensed spinoff novels, and some went on to publish original science fiction as well.

Just as the presence of established authors gave *Star Trek* the stamp of "real science fiction," the sheer number of fans —female fans — affecting or becoming professionals made media fandom both a safe space for women and branded their participation, especially via fan fiction, a "legitimate pursuit." After all, it might lead to a career! And this had a massive impact on the nascent media fan culture by bringing the fanzine to the fore.

Fanzines themselves, amateur publications of devotees, by devotees, for devotees and filled with fiction, articles, and art have been around for decades. Arguably, the oldest surviving example of the form is the *Baker Street Journal* itself. In the days before the cheap VCR, much less the days before the internet, the best way of sharing a fandom was via fanzines. Even if you couldn't afford to attend a convention, you could mail a check for a zine – or better yet, get published in one and get it for free. (I'm sure this is sounding familiar to Sherlockians whose only contact with other fans in early days was the *BSJ* or *Serpentine Muse*. Even now, not everyone has a local scion or can get to New York in January.)

The science fiction community found zines particularly fertile ground. The earliest Trek fanzines included fan fiction, interviews, and behind the scenes information. Considering that Trek itself had episodes about body-swapping, time travel, males in heat, interspecies sex, and alternate universes, no fan plot was a stretch too far. (It was Trek fan fiction that established the word "slash" - a term for male/male romance -- in the fannish language.) Also, fans were perfectly comfortable with the dual realities of the Vulcan hand symbol as an alien greeting and the ad lib of a Jewish actor who had seen his rabbi doing it. Tying the fiction into the underlying fact was just as interesting to the audience as pretending the characters were real.

Once the concept of media fandom was established, it absorbed every form of media in its path – book series, TV, movies, even cartoons. (The LASFS dates its anime branch as early as 1977, the same year that the book *The Making of the Trek Conventions* came out.) Technically, all media counts – even the *Great British Baking Show* has a fandom - but science fiction and fantasy oriented media has always had the largest numbers and most participation.

That participation itself became a form of fandom. In the 80s and 90s – when Xerox copies were cheap and online connections primitive – fanzines flourished to the point that there were up to 5 conventions a year where fan writers and artists could meet to teach writing, editing, and drawing while selling fanzines and art to each other. There were no rules about what did or didn't belong in any given fanzine, either – one of the ones in my collection, *Faded Roses*, is 1/3 the TV show *Beauty and the Beast*, 1/3 the play *Phantom of the Opera*, and 1/3 the movie *Amadeus*. Sound too niche for anyone else to care? It drew some of the biggest names in those fandoms and ran for four issues.

The only real change that the internet would bring would be to drop any remaining barriers to participation. Want to chat? Social media, email circles, and chat groups are open 24/7/365. Instead of travelling to a convention to purchase fanfic or art, you could download it for free, even at two in the morning of any given Tuesday. And instead of being limited to what individual editors wanted in their zines, readers could tailor their own options via fan fiction databases like Archive of Our Own.

For the writers, more than any other fannish creators, the internet meant unprecedented freedom. Instead of waiting for an editor to publish a contribution, authors could publish directly as soon as a story – or even just a chapter of a story – was ready. Without page layout constraints or print expenses to juggle, stories could be as short as a drabble – 100 words exactly – or as long as the author pleased. (One BBC Sherlock fanfic, *Gilded Cage*, is notoriously 2/3 the length of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.) And with that fiction available world-wide, an author could potentially contact an international readership of thousands, hundreds of thousands -- all of whom have the option to provide instant feedback via comments.

As you can see, in media fandom, participation is highly encouraged. All voices can speak, and they speak equally.

Now, I've been describing science fiction media fandom and Sherlockian fandom as though they never came in contact. Of course they have! There is a pastiche out there where Holmes was dropped into every single science fiction story I listed earlier, plus other major science fiction works. Hundreds of people have a foot in both camps - I've already mentioned Issac Asimov, perhaps the most famous one.

But until recently, the distinct cultures have been fairly strictly compartmentalized. When someone was being a Sherlockian, they participated in Sherlock fandom as a traditional Sherlockian, meaning scion meetings, online chat in Holmes forums, very likely playing the Great Game, and understanding Baring-Gould as a cultural touchstone.

When the same person – and it was often the same person – was being a science fiction fan, they would go to conventions and cosplay and draw and write fan fiction in all its variations, not pastiche. *Star Trek* alone had enough crossover fans for multiple issues of the fanzines *Holmesian Federation* and *Sherlock Bones*. BSI member Brad Keefauver ran *The Dangling Prussian* for a decade (a periodical unaffiliated with any Sherlockian group and best described as "send me anything you want and I'll send it out to all the members.")

This compartmentalization held when Granada aired its *Sherlock Holmes* series in the mid-80s. Because the TV show hewed so closely to the original stories (at least at first) to be a media fan of Granada who wanted to join other Sherlock fans was de facto to be interested in the canon. I myself joined Red Circle because Granada brought me in.

However, things would permanently change in the 21st century.

First, as Bill Hyder noted last meeting, enough time had passed that it was no longer possible to pretend that Holmes and Watson were still alive, even at ludicrous ages. Second, because two distinct fannish cultures – equally long established, equally proud, equally passionate, but separately evolved – were about to collide head on at the speed of broadcast.

July 2010: *A Study in Pink* airs on the BBC.

Media fan culture had the advantage because it is a massive machine tailored specifically for real-time dissemination, discussion, and participation in television. Furthermore, by 2010, no one under the age of 48 (give or take a couple years) even remembered a world without media fandom, a culture in which "I like it" wasn't immediately followed by "I will show how much by opining about it, writing fiction about it, drawing the actors, and recreating the costumes. Also, I now need to know everything about how it's made and see every other thing my favorites have ever done."

Within hours of broadcast, *Sherlock* found its way to American computers following the same pathways created to bootleg *Doctor Who*. The first BBC Sherlock-specific fan fiction went up on Archive of Our Own within 11 days. The first essay about *Sherlock* and where it fit in the overall Holmesverse hit the Archive within a month – lagging well behind general discussions on Facebook, Live Journal, and other social media.

Suddenly, it was possible to love Sherlock Holmes and not know a thing about Arthur Conan Doyle, BSI/ASH or scions, or the Great Game. More than that, BECAUSE you liked *Sherlock* you would eventually be expected to be at least conversant with *The Hobbit, Cabin Pressure*, and even Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. (For those who might have wondered why there's at least one lemon appearing in random places around 2221BCon, it's a reference to the radio comedy *Cabin Pressure*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch as a private airline pilot.)

Now, it's very important to stop and note at this point that there is NO wrong way to be a fan. The entire point of fandom - ANY fandom - is to participate in what you love in the manner in which you most enjoy participating. Fandom is the ultimate grow your own adventure.

But the culture clash in 2010 was immediate and undeniable. A culture that still includes a handful of gender-segregated or invitation-only groups, a culture that generally prefers a specific format of pastiche, suddenly found itself handling a massive influx of people from a culture where gender is irrelevant, and whose only entrée requirements are a keyboard, a modem and possibly a microphone. A culture whose writing rules sum up as "there are no rules, only writing challenges." (Indeed, BBC *Sherlock* fandom would create a new form of fanfic as one of those challenges: a short story of exactly 221 words, the last one starting with the letter b.)

Sometimes a whole new vocabulary needed to be learned simply to communicate: DEVI, HOUN, Great Game, the literary agent; AO3, shipper, AU, 'verse. Depending on who you were talking to, "Thor" or even "canon" would conjure up vastly different mental images!

And for some of these new media fans, yes, the original writings of Doyle are one Holmes among many and possibly not the most interesting one. To be fair, not all of Doyle's language, attitudes, or plots have worn well – note how Moffat and CBS had to dance around "The Five Orange Pips," for example. I can certainly see why it would feel that "in the 21st century the original Holmes has been marginalized."

But! New members still flooded into Sherlockian fandom, found both a welcome and an introduction to the canon and are still here seven years later. For the first few years of 221BCon, I would offer free copies of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* or *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to attendees who had never read any Doyle. There haven't been any takers recently. They're all as familiar with the highlights of canon as they are with the online in-jokes about tunalock and hedgehogs.

And while I repeat that there is NO WRONG WAY to be a fan, it was Vincent Starrett who pointed out a long time ago that only BECAUSE these two men of note never lived, they can NEVER die.

More than that, Starrett promised "though the world explode, these two survive."

THESE two.

The original, canonical Holmes and Watson still survive over a century later, as if they had been eating royal bee jelly or cryogenically frozen. Not just survive but thrive – there wouldn't be Robert Downey Jr. movies. . .or *Sherlock.* . .or *Elementary.* . .or the latest Russian miniseries. . . or the *Sherlock Gnomes* parody. . .or *Miss Sherlock* (the upcoming Japanese miniseries) if the world did not fondly remember the 19th century detective and his medical companion. Nobody's dusting off Auguste Dupin these days. *The Woman in White* hasn't been modernized once, much less thrice. Inspector Bucket doesn't have four series dedicated to him. The closest competition are the relative latecomers Miss Marple and Hercule Poroit, neither of whom are at the center of a multi-series, multi-movie international renaissance.

These two SURVIVE.

After the Nazis, the dog, the mouse, the crossovers, the Saturday morning cartoon, the parodies, the hot new star with the funny name, and the internet memes, they survive. They survive in the BSI and ASH and scion societies. They survive in Archive of Our Own and 221B Con. They survive in the Museum of London's tribute exhibit. They survive in the Beacon Society and the Watson's Tin Box essay contest, both promoting school children reading the one, the original, accept no substitutes, canon. They survive in a 3rd and 4th grade gifted class in Tennessee, which looked at the Tin Box's evidence box for "The Blue Carbuncle" and wrote an impassioned defense of their belief that a vital piece of evidence was missing - and are now honorary scion members before their teens.

Science fiction media and Sherlockian fandoms may have collided, but both cultures are far too strong to have been destroyed. Instead of compartments, bridges have been built that make it all the easier for everyone to participate as they please, how they please. Cumberbatch lockets are worn by traditional Sherlockian movers and shakers. BSI and ASH members headline panels at 221BCon and GridlockDC.

Fandom is fandom yet, for all our fears.

Will these two men of note continue to survive? As science fiction media fans settle in to stay, as they write alternate universes based on alternate universes and choose favorite retellings, will they forget the canon, distracted by all the other Sherlocks out there? If they don't forget, will they still love the original canon as well and deeply as it's been loved by the Sherlockian scholars?

Well, let me read you a short passage:

Sherlock Holmes was a fictional detective who solved crimes. He used forensic methods. These include scientific observation and powers of logical reasoning. Dr. John H. Watson was Holmes' partner in solving mysteries.

The same source will go on to add "Sherloc has an eye for detail" and "Sherloc collects clues."

Does anyone know what I just quoted?

It's the NASA website. The same nerdy website that mixes science fact and science fiction – it has convention reports, a page about Star Trek, and official photos of astronauts in character as Jedi, Starfleet personnel, even Pirates of the Caribbean – gives a potted description of Sherlock Holmes in an obvious attempt to introduce the character to young scientists. Why?

To answer that, I need to send our time machine a little bit into the future. 2020, and NASA's latest Mars rover blasts off. Its analysis tool is named "Scanning Habitable Environments with Raman & Luminescence for Organics & Chemicals." One of Sherloc's main recording cameras is the "Wide Angle Topographic Sensor for Operations and eNgineering."

Now, this isn't the first time NASA backyronymed terms or simply used a fannish name. Astronomy is fond of finding words and shoving definitions into them. The web page

Dumb Astronomy Acronyms lists fan favorites like BATMAN, SAURON, yet another THOR, and my personal favorite, WISEASS.

But!

There is no fiction on the Voyager golden records. The shuttle Enterprise was a prototype and never flew. SAURON and BATMAN weren't used by NASA and there are no Star Trek backronyms at all, probably due to copyright.

The race to actual space is about to be won by Holmes and Watson. Marginalize these two men of note? The science fiction geeks are writing their names in the stars!