INTERVIEW

Steven Moffat

by Andrew F. Gulli

"I'm not a psychopath . . . I'm a high-functioning sociopath."
—Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*: "A Study in Pink," 2010)

SMARTPHONES, the internet, GPS, and the modern London cityscape don't traditionally come to mind when thinking of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Victorian detective, Sherlock Holmes. It was July 1891 when the Great Detective first appeared in *The Strand Magazine* in the short story "A Scandal in Bohemia." His last appearance, in "The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place," was April 1927. The enduring success of these stories—and their subsequent adaptations for the stage, film, and television—speaks as much to the chemistry between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson as to the narratives themselves. These two beloved characters have sustained the kind of worldwide popularity that is unrivaled in the annals of classical literature and popular culture. Which is why removing Holmes and Watson from their traditional setting and transforming them into modern men in today's London would be a courageous act for any writer. Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss undertook this task with *Sherlock*. The television show finds a young Holmes (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) and Dr. Watson (Martin Freeman) alive and well in modern day London and living at their old Baker street address, complete with computers, smartphones, and all the conveniences modern technology has to offer. First airing in 2010, the show was met with critical and commercial success, and surprised skeptics who had thought everything that could be done with Doyle's stories had already been done.

Like Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat grew up reading the Sherlock Holmes stories, and it was while they were writing for the television series *Doctor Who* that they started trading ideas about a contemporary version. While these contemporary adaptations are not exactly true to Conan Doyle's original stories, Moffat and Gatiss keep them true to the spirit of the originals, by ensuring that the characters and their relationship with each other are consistent with Doyle's rendering. Even if "A Scandal in Bohemia" is now retitled "A Scandal in Belgravia" and Charles Augustus Milverton is now Charles Augustus Magnussen, and Moriarty is no longer an older master-criminal mathematician, but instead a young psychopath, and Holmes now uses the internet and text messages to help solve cases, Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's *Sherlock* has further cemented Arthur Conan Doyle's timeless stories and characters into the psyche of a new generation of fans.

AFG: How have you managed to keep the classic feel of Sherlock Holmes, but move it to a modern era?

SM: The essential thing is that Sherlock Holmes *was* modern. I mean, when Doyle was having his biggest success with it—when it was in the *Strand Magazine* coming out on a monthly basis with a new story of Sherlock Holmes—it was a story of a modern young man living in modern London. And that sold it to the people reading it. It felt so vivid. Everyone liked to play the game of him being real. That's how fresh it felt.

Over the years, something odd happened to Sherlock Holmes. He became a period piece, actually during Doyle's lifetime, as you know. And as it became a period piece, it became something else. It became something slightly grander, more important, and, weirdly, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson got much older. If you read the original stories, it's perfectly obvious they're young men. In *A Study in Scarlet* Doyle refers to Holmes as a student. They're not in their fifties. And yet, as it became a period piece, they became sepia'd into middle age—Basil Rathbone was fifty when he played it. Jeremy Brett was fifty when he played it. Both fantastic, but both actually older than the character as suggested in the original.

So, I think, when you put it in the modern world . . . Mark [Gatiss] and I always refer to it not as a revamp or reboot, but just as a restoration in which you put him back into the modern world. Not "updating." You're putting him back into the same world as the consumer of the story. Then you rediscover something about it. You clear away the fog and our hilarious modern version of Victorian London, which is nothing like Victorian London was, and you have him revealed again as who he was. I think it works perfectly because Sherlock Holmes was not designed to be a period piece. It was designed to be a contemporary story. I would always view it as putting him back where he belongs, which is right now. It's odd that people make a fuss, in a way, about the updating of Sherlock Holmes. We never mention James Bond as "updated." He's a Cold War spy. He fought in the Second World War, you know? Yet, all of [the Bond movies] are set in the modern day. One of the most successful runs of Sherlock Holmes in the movies was Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce in updated versions of Sherlock Holmes. I know that sometimes they were not taken very seriously as movies but they were very popular and it worked. I never questioned it.

AFG: It did work! I love Basil Rathbone. I liked Jeremy Brett, because I thought Brett was a good actor, but at times he played Holmes as very manic, and you don't feel that from the stories.

SM: I know, but what Jeremy Brett did, I thought very impressively, was find a new way to do it. I mean, once Basil Rathbone had come

along he knocked everybody else out of the way and said, "No, this is how you do this." He was a handsome, sexy, and curious Sherlock, and you think, "Oh, that's the real one," and I think in fairness he is a version of the character Conan Doyle would most easily recognize. But what's an actor as good as Jeremy Brett going to do when the intellectual property had been owned by another actor? He went and scoured the stories and made him into a sort of manic depressive, which is a very, very skewed reading, in a way, but it was very electric and exciting and revitalized the character and allowed him to take ownership of that part. For many people, he is the definitive and never-to-be-bettered Sherlock Holmes.

AFG: What is your favorite Sherlock Holmes story? I know that's an impossible question . . .

SM: Well, you know, I do have a favorite one, actually, just because of my reaction to it when I first read it, which is the very traditional choice of "The Speckled Band." I first read that when I was twelve or something. I just thought it was the most exciting thing I had ever read. I thought it was utterly amazing, and I still think it's jam-packed with incidents and twists. Sherlock Holmes straightens up the bent poker, and there's a great villain, and there's a snake, and not one piece of it makes, on any level of inspection, the slightest bit of sense, which is also kind of important to Sherlock. The villain keeps a snake in a safe. He whistles to it to lure it back. He brings it a saucer of milk. I mean it's just bonkers, but when you're reading it you don't doubt a single word, and Doyle's enormous storytelling risks are on such display there. It's unstoppable. I couldn't put it down. But, I love most of them. I don't think I ever was quite as much in love with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as everybody else seems to be. I always got frustrated that Sherlock Holmes disappears for so much of it, because that's more or less admitting that the plot is so simple that Sherlock Holmes's presence throughout the story would turn it off too quickly. He'd just walk onto it and say, "Well, it's not a ghost dog, is it? We've just got to look for someone who has the opportunity to own a dog," and that's it.

When we redid the story for our version, God, we went into hell when we decided we weren't going to cheat, and we were going to keep Sherlock Holmes present throughout the story. Because you can't have Benedict off screen—good heavens! And, I mean, we got into such trouble trying to make that work, because it's such an obvious answer, you know? It's not a ghost dog, clearly!

AFG: How did you choose Benedict for Sherlock Holmes? We all know he's said to bear the physical resemblance to Holmes, but he's also so effective at playing the character.

SM: I would say he does bear a reasonable physical resemblance to Sherlock Holmes. He doesn't quite have the nose, but other than that, he's tall and thin and dashingly handsome in a way that Doyle never ever thought Sherlock Holmes should be but all the Sherlocks who have succeeded have been. And so, belonging to that broad type, he was sort of the coming man—everyone was saying that he was going to be a big star when he got the role. We auditioned him and he is such a fine actor—a brilliant actor—that we didn't need to audition anybody else. It was obviously going to be him, and obviously that's worked out for us rather well.

AFG: You're from Scotland, of course. What is the feeling like for you to be carrying on the tradition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with *Sherlock*?

SM: You mean because Doyle was Scottish?

AFG: Exactly. And you also did the TV series *Jekyll* based on [Robert Louis] Stevenson's character.

SM: To be honest, the fact that I share my Scottish heritage with them all isn't a big deal to me. I never really thought about it. The Stevenson and Sherlock Holmes stories were ones that I always loved. I didn't know Doyle was Scottish when I was a kid reading those stories. I don't think I knew he was Scottish until, oh, I must have been in my twenties when I saw that lovely interview with him on film, when I suddenly heard that roaring Scottish accent, not only Scottish but *very* Scottish.

AFG: So what about your choice of Martin Freeman as Watson? Were there internal debates between you and Mark about putting the moustache on Martin Freeman?

SM: No. I mean, we obviously had that out a couple of times. We took it out and then put the moustache back on, and he grows one for one episode, but, I mean, the kind of man Dr. Watson is would have worn a moustache back in Victorian London and wouldn't have worn one in modern-day London. That's just the fact. We decided to update [the stories] properly, and that means that there have to be some changes. In the stories, they call each other Holmes and Watson. Two modern young men just wouldn't—that's for public school boys—so they'd have to call each other Sherlock and John. Equally, it's highly unlikely that someone of John Watson's type would have a moustache in the modern era, so the moustache went. So, we always decided to do the right thing as far as modernity was concerned.

Other things of detail that are quite important about the original Sherlock Holmes character is that he's a God-fearing man, and he's a Royalist. These are impossible character attributes for a modern-day version of Sherlock Holmes. He just wouldn't be. That's not what that sort of man does now, so you have to change those things, because the societal norms around those characters to which they conform or rebel have changed so much that the characters themselves are altered by the landscape in which they stand.

AFG: And equally you have Lestrade as this sort of very nice guy. How did that happen?

SM: Well, because there's no consistency to Lestrade in the stories at all. He doesn't even appear that often, as you know, and he's different every time. I think he goes from being a completely unprincipled, aggressive moron to being the best of the Scotland Yard. So, we just chose a moment from the "The Six Napoleons" where Lestrade says to Sherlock Holmes, you think we all hate you at Scotland Yard. Well, we don't. We admire you, and if you came round we would shake your hand. And we took that version. Although Sherlock Holmes is a bit dismissive of him, actually Lestrade is Sherlock Holmes's number one fan. He likes him and uses him, and he sort of gets a little bit impatient with Sherlock Holmes, who doesn't really appreciate that he's an ally, not an enemy. So we went for that version from, as I said, so many different versions. I quite like the completely insane version. He was so incompetent that it was hilarious.

AFG: And I love Watson in the Rathbone films.

SM: He's wonderful! Nigel Bruce was a comical genius, and the combination of him and Basil is magical. It's magical. I could watch them all day. They're just beautiful. I know that purists say that's not a very authentic version of Dr. Watson. Well, it's slightly more authentic than we give it credit for, because in some of the original stories Doyle himself didn't think Watson was [particularly intelligent]. We've not gone that way. We've gone with a rather more intelligent, sardonic Watson, because that, again, fits the modern world. But I thought what they did with Nigel Bruce as Watson, while outrageous in some ways, was delightful. Just such a funny, funny performance and the first Dr. Watson to be as important as the lead. You know, he was an absolute foil to Basil Rathbone . . . there they held the screen together, and when they're separated, they're not quite as interesting.

AFG: Were you surprised by the success of *Sherlock*? I mean, it's such a phenomenon.

SM: Of course, of course! You could never expect that to happen. Ever. You'd have to be a psychopath to think that you were going to get a level of success like that. We knew it was a good show. It felt to me like quite an art-house show—self-consciously beautiful and all that—a big contrast to my other show, *Doctor Who*, which is a big, old, mad sort of blockbuster. Here's our little art-house piece for the connoisseur, and of course it just becomes almost instantly this rock star of the show. Of course we were surprised. You couldn't not be surprised by that. It surprises me on a daily basis that it's as unlimitedly huge as it is.

AFG: And how long do you think you'll keep on going with it? I know that must be a big challenge because Benedict Cumberbatch is a bigger

star than he was six years ago, as is Martin Freeman, and you have your thing going, and Mark has his thing going.

SM: The secret weapon is that we make very few of them not very often, as you may have noticed. So, it never takes up everybody's time. There is space to do it, if you want to, and it doesn't matter if we leave a long gap—we can still come back after that—because we always leave long gaps. I have no idea how long we're going for. I would be happy if we did more. I think the others are happy to do more. We haven't really talked about it yet, because the first thing that has to happen is that Mark and I have to go and have a long chat about what we'll do with the next series, and then we have to pitch it to the boys and see if we're all up for it. We don't ever want to do it once we've run out of ideas. We want it always to be good. None of us are starving. We can survive without it. It's a passion project, so it must remain . . . It can't just become a project. You always have to be passionate. We always have to be, in our deluded way, making the best show in the world. If we don't feel that, we don't want to do it anymore.

AFG: How do you decide on the particular story to adapt? Is there debate?

SM: As you know, most of the stories would resist adaptation. Only *The Hound of the Baskervilles* would be long enough. You could just about get a movie out of *The Sign of the Four*, but that would be pushing it. It's more like you take a character or an idea from one story, and you trick it out with other stories or combine the stories, and you take elements from the original, and you make a new story out of it. I mean, in the second year, we just decided to do all the biggies in a row—Irene Adler, the Hound, and the Professor. We felt just like we'll do all the big ones. Why wait? Let's get them done now, and then we'll move on to the lesser-known characters, like Charles Augustus Magnussen and the characters we've got this year. So, it works that way. I mean, I always had my eye on "A Scandal in Bohemia." I always wanted to do that one. But other than that, it tends to be characters or ideas that you trick out into a different story.

AFG: Why do you think people are still fascinated with Sherlock Holmes, this character with all his flaws and idiosyncrasies, after 125 years? He's not somebody that we want to be best friends with, obviously.

SM: I think we probably *do* want to be best friends with Sherlock Holmes. Everyone wants to be best friends with Sherlock Holmes. We always want the approval of somebody who withholds it most of the time. That's the person you want to like you, and actually the thing that can be overlooked in all the fun of the show, of course, is he's actually quite a nice person. He's not really that bad at all. He can be rude at times, but you know in the stories and in our version of the series, he gets slowly nicer, and he's always on the side of good, and people obviously do like him.

But what's fascinating? Those stories are amazing. I mean, it's a thing that's seriously overlooked . . . The main reason Sherlock Holmes is a huge hit and continues to be is Arthur Conan Doyle was unreasonably good at what he did. He really knew how to do that kind of story. He was an amazing writer whose success with that character was so great that he almost gets forgotten in the story. He made it up. He's an amazing storyteller—absolutely amazing. Underappreciated, because there's always something slightly jokey about Sherlock Holmes, it's as if he's somehow lightweight, which I suppose it is, and just an entertainment, but those things are tremendously hard to do. Conan Doyle thought about quality. He was brilliant, and that's why people like it, and that's why people keep coming back to it and haven't got tired of it for well over a century. I don't think we'll get tired of it.

AFG: Speaking of quality, when I looked at the first episode of *Sherlock*, that was a great, great production job. How difficult is it to get funding? How difficult is it to start a great production like this? It's very expensive.

SM: Yes, it was expensive, I suppose we have to admit. This is a question you should ask my wife, who produces the show. She knows more about that. We were ambitious for it. I mean, believe me, we've got a miniscule budget compared to most American shows. I mean, they'd laugh at our budget. We just wanted to be stylish, you know? We wanted it to look good. Often, looking good is about working well as opposed to expensively. That's not me saying there are advantages to a low budget. That's actually bollocks. There are piss-all advantages to having a low budget. It just works people harder and more unfairly, but it's not the end of the story. Paul McGuigan's amazing direction of it . . . The fact that we sort of launched Benedict when . . . I mean, Benedict was not heard of when he played that part at all. And now he is a big star. It's one of those magic things that happened, and I'm very, very glad that it happened to me. I don't anticipate it ever happening again on that scale. I'm appreciative of how much blind luck comes into moments like this.

AFG: I think it was a lot of skill, too, because the writing is incredible, and writing, I think, is something that's undervalued in a lot of studios. They think that they can just throw a lot of money at things.

SM: Well, to be fair, I don't think that's quite right. I think you are highly valued if you're considered to be a good writer. You have a pretty good life, you know. If you're one of the good ones, you're never out of work. So it's, dare I say, quite rare. Truthfully, I don't think that writing is that undervalued. I think if you can turn in a good script, then the world will keep beating a pathway to your door, and you'll be fine.

AFG: I was looking at some of the films that we have here over in the United States where there's just a lot of focus on action. A lot of the characters get lost in between, and I think that *Sherlock* resonated with people because I think a lot of people want something a little more cerebral than having a Jack Reacher beating up a lot of people.

SM: Well, yes, but I've got nothing personally against action. I'm happy for people to have lots of action in the movies. But *Sherlock* has to be cerebral—because we can't afford the action scenes! I don't know. I think it's important not to be a snob about these things, too. There's nothing wrong with a big blockbuster with lots of action and explosions to keep people happy, but it's good to have a story, too. I think there is a rhythm with the action scenes. As much as I love them, they go on far too long. You get a bit bored, especially as most of it is CGI [computer generated imagery] and you can probably play it slightly better on your Xbox. But that doesn't mean that I hate the principle, because I don't. There's nothing wrong with a blockbuster.

AFG: I know you produce the *Doctor Who* series. Who's your favorite Doctor Who?

SM: Who's my favorite Doctor Who? They're all my favorite . . . I can't choose. I chose two of them, so I'm not getting into that. I think the list of actors who have played the Doctor is an incredible list, given that it's an early Saturday evening adventure serial for the family. The quality of the actors who have played that part is really incredible, and I wouldn't like to choose a favorite. Obviously I have a particular soft spot for Matt Smith and Peter Capaldi, because I cast them, but you know what? They're all amazing. Why have one hero when you can have twelve? ◆