

The First Two Pages: “The Forlorn Penguin” by Daniel Stashower
From *School of Hard Knox: Stories That Break Father Ronald Knox’s
Ten Commandments for Crime Fiction*,
edited by Donna Andrews, Greg Herren, and Art Taylor (Crippen & Landru)

An Essay by Daniel Stashower

You probably remember *Murder Ink: The Mystery Reader’s Companion*, a quirky, addictive compendium of essays, lists, and other oddments compiled by the late, great Dilys Winn. The titles alone make for great reading. “Confessions of a Slush Reader.” “The Barrister’s Wig-Maker.” “Are Girls More Inherently Evil Than Boys?”

It was here that I first stumbled across Ronald Knox’s “Ten Commandments for Crime Fiction.” *Murder Ink* was published in 1977—the year of *Close Encounters*, *Hotel California*, and Fonzie jumping the shark. I read it that year, so it’s probably fair to say that I’ve been waiting 46 years to break rule nine: “The thoughts of the ‘Watson’ must not be concealed from the reader, and he must be slightly less intelligent than the reader.”

Here’s the thing. I know perfectly well that Father Knox was referring to all narrators of mystery stories, and not specifically THE Watson of the Sherlock Holmes stories. And I also know that this rule has been thoroughly bent, folded, spindled, and mutilated over the years by any number of brilliant authors. (Looking

at you, Agatha.) But for my purposes, the Watson in question could only be Dr. John H. Watson of Baker Street, late of the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers.

I go back a long way with Dr. Watson. My first book was a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, and once you've tried walking a mile in his shoes (leather ones, badly scuffed by "a most clumsy and careless servant girl"), you develop a certain affinity for the man. There's a long tradition among Sherlockians of speculating about Watson—the location of his war wound, the number of his wives, the degree of his gambling problem. On one notorious occasion in 1941, Rex Stout informed a gathering of Baker Street Irregulars that he could not join in a toast to the second Mrs. Watson for the simple reason that Watson was a woman. "Pandemonium ensued," writes John McAleer, Stout's biographer. "In certain quarters 1941 would be remembered as the year that began with the Stout hypothesis and ended with Pearl Harbor—two nightmarish happenings."

So it had to be Watson. At the same time, I'd long had a bottom-drawer idea for a story that would start off in a conventional way but take a strange pivot on page two, as if a separate, entirely different story had bubbled up below the surface. "The idea amused me," as Conan Doyle once wrote of Sherlock Holmes, but I could never hit on a way of making it work. So when Jeffrey Marks and Donna Andrews came along with the idea for *School of Hard Knox*—with its rule-breaking premise—it seemed as if providence had taken a hand.

The first paragraph was pretty straightforward:

I saw little of my friend Sherlock Holmes during the chill winter of '97. His exertions in the singular affair of the vagabond gate house had placed a worrying strain on his constitution, so much so that by the end of February I entertained serious fears. On the second Tuesday of March, however, I emerged from my bedroom to find him seated comfortably at the breakfast table in his dressing gown, with a formidable array of unanswered correspondence before him. Though he appeared pale and haggard, a serene expression had settled across his features, signaling that the crisis was past.

So far, so good. A fairly routine Baker Street curtain-raiser of the type that I, of all people, might be expected to write. Fine, if you like this sort of thing. But now, having set the hook, I started to push at the edges.

“Ah, Watson,” said he, as I took my accustomed place opposite him. “You are just in time. I was about to ring the bell.” He paused to light his before-breakfast pipe, which was composed of all the plugs and dottles left from his smokes of the day before, all carefully dried and collected on the corner of the mantelpiece and seasoned with the tears of forlorn penguins.

Wait. Seasoned with the tears of forlorn penguins? I hoped this would be something of a needle scratch, alerting the reader that there was something happening beneath the placid surface.

“Holmes,” I remarked, “it is good to find you here. Am I to conclude that you and the batman have succeeded in recovering the president’s rubies?”

“We have,” answered Holmes. “Once we realized that the humpback whales could be transported comfortably in the doctor’s curious police box, which proved to be considerably larger on the inside than it appeared from the pavement, the matter became a childishly simple one.”

Full disclosure: I threw in the references to *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* and *Batman* in the hope that one day my sons would happen across them and get a chuckle. (Ditto for the deep-cut nod to Burt Macklin of *Parks and Recreation*, a staple of our pandemic viewing.) In any case, I felt sure that the general reader would now understand that something was seriously amiss in Baker Street. Having come this far, it was time to drop the other badly scuffed shoe.

I reached across to open a packet of Mallomars while Holmes gave a sovereign to a passing tramp and please, Abby, if you still love me—please, please, please—don't lose your nerve now.

So there you have it. I hope readers will want to stick with it, if only to satisfy themselves that there hasn't been some sort of mix-up at the printer. It was a fun story to write, nearly forty years after my first crack at writing in the voice of Dr. Watson. As always, the final word goes to Conan Doyle. "We all learn by experience," Sherlock Holmes once said, "and your lesson this time is that you should never lose sight of the alternative."

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Daniel Stashower is a New York Times bestselling author and a winner of the Edgar, Anthony, and Agatha awards. His most recent book is *American Demon: Eliot Ness and the Hunt for America's Jack the Ripper*. His previous books include *The Hour of Peril*; *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* and *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle*.