

Sherlock

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

Theologians have long posited a God who is omniscient. The British television show *Sherlock* (six episodes have been produced, with more planned for 2013) delights us with a human being who is omniscient. This spiffed-up version of Arthur Conan Doyle's detective series about Sherlock Holmes has a recurring motif: Holmes, played by the spot-on (as the Brits say) and impossibly named Benedict Cumberbatch, tells us everything he can see that other mortals cannot.

For example, Holmes immediately spots that his future colleague, Doc Watson (Martin Freeman), is a war veteran and so asks, without introduction, "Afghanistan or Iraq?" "Sorry, how did you . . ."

That's not all he knows. Holmes notices that Watson's therapist thinks his injury is psychosomatic: "Quite correctly, I'm afraid." Holmes always explains things later through ultrafast editing, wooshing close-ups and Cumberbatch's voiceover. It never fails to thrill. Freeman's Watson regularly sits back in awe, exclaiming, "That's amazing." Such self-congratulation in the script shouldn't work, but here it does.

Sherlock circa 2011 is a different animal from the Victorian stories created by Doyle, but it constantly tips its hat to its predecessors. Holmes and Watson live and work, like the original characters, at 221B Baker Street—but this pair must regularly explain to outsiders and each other that they are not gay (with even more nonchalance than Jerry Seinfeld's line "not that there's anything wrong with that"). This Holmes has the same nicotine addiction as the original, but he satisfies it with patches rather than a pipe. He pairs with detective Lestrade again, but now the tools of their trade include text messaging and a blog that details the exploits that have made Holmes famous. A literal hat tip to tradition comes when Sherlock wears a deerstalker hat like his 19th-century predecessor—only here it is in a failed attempt to hide from paparazzi.

The ultimate update is Cumberbatch's portrayal of Holmes as a genius on the Asperger spectrum. A jealous detective at one point denounces Holmes as a psychopath, to which Holmes replies: "I'm a high-functioning sociopath. Do your

homework.”

A sensational character in the story is the city of London itself, which appears in full glory—cabs, phone booths, cobblestones and narrow streets, the London Eye and Buckingham Palace. The show is mainly shot in Cardiff, but it sizzles largely because of its city setting. London is a fast-moving, diverse and utterly secular place. Religion is a literary reference only, a databank of language and history, useful for the solving of crimes, less helpful for the living of lives.

Sherlock is the brainchild of Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, who previously collaborated on the revived version of *Doctor Who*. Their greatest coup in *Sherlock* is devising the conclusion to season two, “The Fall” (nothing to do with the biblical one), in which Holmes’s archenemy, Jim Moriarty, corners him, and in the ensuing conflict Holmes commits suicide. This is faithful to Conan Doyle’s telling of the story of Holmes’s faked death—except the master’s version never produced a body. *Sherlock* does—down to the crunch on the sidewalk and a blood-soaked Cumberbatch, inspected by none other than Dr. Watson.

But at the end of the episode we see Holmes very much alive, watching Watson grieve at his (empty?) grave. A writer for the *Guardian* asked: “Who or what lies in the grave over which Martin Freeman’s Dr. Watson delivered the lovely soliloquy that made around 7.9 million Britons’ stiff upper lips tremble on Sunday night?” Freeman did indeed deliver: “Just do this for me, Sherlock. Don’t be dead.” He’s not. But how can that be? Season three awaits.

The creators are giddy that no one seems to have noticed the clues they left or added them up to a satisfying whole. Does the answer lie with the request Holmes made to the pathologist with a crush on him? Does it have to do with the crisps in his pocket or with the man who bumps into Watson on his way to inspect Holmes? Who knows? We don’t have Holmes’s gift of omniscience.

But even Holmes’s omniscience is still human and not divine. One of the most endearing moments in *Sherlock* is the episode in season two, “The Hounds of Baskerville,” in which the detectives think they’re chasing genetically enhanced animals. It turns out they are dealing with cold war-era chemical weapons (a timely theme in the era of terrorism—a topic not otherwise touched on in the show). Holmes is irritated that his mind cannot catch up to the facts. Like the rest of us, he’s mortal, making mistakes, unable to see the patterns. He can see only the evidence right in front of him—extended by the technology in his handheld device.