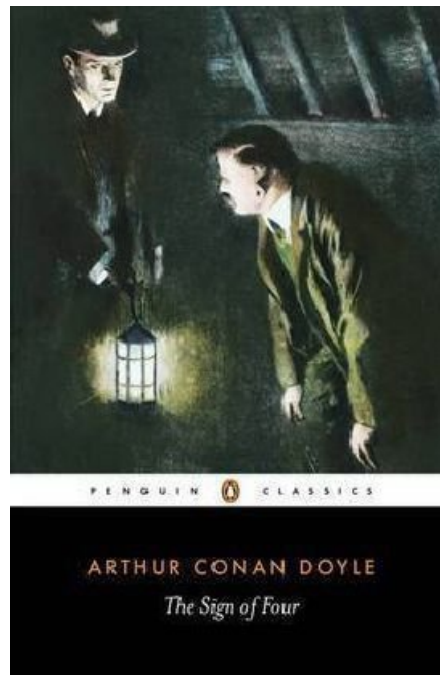




The Sign of Four

Arthur Conan Doyle , Peter Ackroyd (Introduction) , Ed Glinert (Editor)

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'You are a wronged woman and shall have justice. Do not bring police. If you do, all will be in vain. Your unknown friend.'

When a beautiful young woman is sent a letter inviting her to a sinister assignation, she immediately seeks the advice of the consulting detective Sherlock Holmes.

For this is not the first mysterious item Mary Marston has received in the post. Every year for the last six years an anonymous benefactor has sent her a large lustrous pearl. Now it appears the sender of the pearls would like to meet her to right a wrong.

But when Sherlock Holmes and his faithful sidekick Watson, aiding Miss Marston, attend the assignation, they embark on a dark and mysterious adventure involving a one-legged ruffian, some hidden treasure, deadly poison darts and a thrilling race along the River Thames.

The Sign of Four Details

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Author : Arthur Conan Doyle , Peter Ackroyd (Introduction) , Ed Glinert (Editor)

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From Reader Review The Sign of Four for online ebook

Luís C. says

Among the four novels of the bush forming the saga of Sherlock Holmes, the sign of the four is the most exciting, no doubt. Indeed, Conan Doyle abandoned by the usual slow, but not unpleasant (and alas, perhaps so deep) to better get to the heart of the mystery.

The legendary duo here must resolve a story set over several generations, between treasure hunt and bitterness of war from India, in Victorian London. This is partly thanks to this background context that the Sign of Four embodies a whole new atmosphere in Sherlock Holmes: that of an English aristocracy made rich through the pain of the enemy camp during a war may be too forgotten by Europeans. Therefore, action is never (and still do) idiot, because the man behind it is written in his most personal pen, and at a great detective service.

Alejandro says

Greed is murderous!

This is the second book and also the second novel-length by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle about the character of Sherlock Holmes

THE GREAT DETECTIVE RETURNS

The first thing that shocked me when I read the very first time this book was reading that Sherlock Holmes was using cocaine!

Certainly, things were quite different in London, 1890!

In the book is explained that Holmes' mind is so thirsty of being occupied in an unsolved mystery that when cases are absent, he needs cocaine to keep his mind sedated and not getting stressed out of not having something to deduce.

Good Doctor Watson complained about the cocaine since Holmes is abusing of it, so at least there's that.

Good thing that a mysterious case soon comes to 221B Baker Street, with Mary Morstan, their new client, who's asking for assistance, since she needs to attend to a mysterious appointment and since she was allowed to be accompanied by two persons (as long as they won't be police).

Mary Morstan is a humble governess that some years after the mysterious disappearance of her father, she has been receiving for 6 years a valuable pearl per year, and now she got a message telling her that she will be informed about what happened with her father.

The game is on again!

NEW CHARACTERS AND MORE

The Baker Street irregulars returned to this novel and their priceless skills to go around London without being noticed, but also a new asset for Sherlock Holmes is introduced with Toby, a dog which is way useful to follow scents and tracks.

Also, another Scotland Yard detective is introduced: Athelney Jones (that I personally think that since in *A Study in Scarlet* (the previous novel) were already introduced Lestrade and Gregson, I don't know why bother to keep inventing more police inspectors).

Sherlock Holmes is armed with a pistol in this adventure, that I think that I'm not used to think of Holmes of carrying guns, I believe that it's something more proper for Dr. Watson that was a military medic.

Moreover, without spoiling, Dr. John Watson won't be the same after this adventure! But don't worry isn't something bad!

Keith says

Probably the best part of this book is that it begins and ends with Holmes shooting up cocaine because he's bored. I mean, that's just so damn dark, especially when *A Study in Scarlet* wasn't very dark at all.

Probably the worst part is struggling through all the rampant racism, which isn't nearly as funny as the rampant anti-Mormonism was in *aSiS*. The peg-leg jewel thief Jonathan Small (awesome) is assisted by a cannibal pygmy named Tonga (also awesome, but also horribly awful). I had to put it down mid-climax because I was getting a little grossed out by all the Tonga stuff (I'm even having a hard time typing Tonga over and over) and also because I saw there was going to be a big Confession scene at the end (so boring).

But then I finally finished it, if for no other reason than I really wanted to get to the next book with none of those dangling unfinished feelings. And you know, the ending was actually really interesting -- and oddly enough, like a really complex micro-novel about war and imperialism and slavery and revolution and morality and jewel-thievery. In twenty pages of the antagonist telling his backstory, you go from hating him to feeling sorry for him to hating him to feeling sorry for him again, which was a really fascinating thing to go through. Plus his backstory has a completely fleshed-out cast of multicultural characters that actually act (gasp) like human beings, which almost makes up for all the racism until you get to the part where he goes "and then I stopped by some island to pick up a little savage to help me commit crimes with."

Also you have a love interest, two totally different but interlocking multi-generational mysteries, and a couple long speeches about how life is boring without cocaine. On the face of it, that is a rollicking good time -- just maybe not so much in execution, especially with the racism and whatnot. But still, you know? I liked it. I'm glad I read it. I can see myself getting more out of it on a second read.

Also this little bit of poetry, dropped mid-sentence and never referred to again:

"...on miracle plays, on medieval pottery, on Stradivarius violins, on the Buddhism of Ceylon, and on the warships of the future..."

Jeff says

*If you got bad news
You want to kick them blues
Cocaine.
When your day is done and you got to run
Cocaine.
If your thing is gone and you want to ride on
Cocaine.
Don't forget this fact
You can't get back
Cocaine.*

Remind me again what you're singing about, J.J. Cale?

Doyle doesn't waste any time in introducing Holmes cocaine addiction. Something about keeping the grey matter active when he's got nothing better to do than be annoying.

"Hey Sherlock, the first step is to admit you have a problem."

"Hi, I'm Sherlock and I'm an insufferable pedantic butt head, who uses a seven percent solution of cocaine to clear my head. These donuts, purchased at the corner bakery on Bond Street are from yesterday and not only stale but contain mouse droppings and whoever brewed the coffee used one tablespoon too many. That man in the back row is sleeping with a woman (not your wife) who smuggles chinchillas, that man sitting beside him had liver and onions for dinner, the woman beside *him* recently visited Nepal and has a rubber fetish, and this woman in the front row breeds hippos."

"Um, thanks for sharing (?)..."

We're introduced to Holmes ragamuffin teen brigade, Watson falls in love (Ha!), we have evil pygmies using blow dart guns, a pegged leg dude bent on revenge, mega-betrayals, a locked door mystery, a fairly cool chase scene *and* a digression which isn't half as annoying as the one from A Study in Scarlet.

A step up from A Study in Scarlet and a truer more familiar Holmes is offered here, still it took me over a week to get through a little over a hundred pages.

If Holmes really wants to clear his mind, he should try going pantsless, just like the group who I buddy read this book with.

Carmen says

"My mind," he said, "rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the daily routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I

have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it. I am the only one in the world."

The second Sherlock Holmes book opens and closes with cocaine.

For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Watson disapproves of Sherlock's nasty seven-percent solution, but our hero just finds life so boring.

"Hence the cocaine. I cannot live without brainwork. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. Would could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, Doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth."

Nowadays we would recognize Holmes's wild mood swings - which are mentioned quite frequently in this novel - as bipolar disorder or some other variant of mood disorder.

Watson sweetly offers a puzzle to Holmes (a watch) in order to cheer him up.

"Would you think me impertinent if I were to put your theories to a more severe test?"

"On the contrary," he answered, "it would prevent me from taking a second dose of cocaine. I should be delighted to look into any problem which you might submit to me."

Or perhaps not so sweetly.

I handed him over the watch with some slight feeling of amusement in my heart, for the test was, as I thought, an impossible one, and I intended it as a lesson against the somewhat dogmatic tone which he occasionally assumed.

However, after this simple puzzle is solved, it seems nothing is in Sherlock's immediate future but more cocaine. Luckily for all involved, a beautiful young woman (27) comes to the door, pleading with Sherlock for help with a very mysterious case involving her missing father and some gorgeous pearls. She seems hopeful that the dashing veteran Watson will accompany Sherlock on her case.

"But would he come?" she asked with something appealing in her voice and expression.

"I shall be proud and happy," I said fervently, "if I can be of any service."

Mmmmm-hmmmmmm, I just bet you would, Watson - you sly dog! LOL I'm kidding, of course. Watson is about as far from a sly dog as you can get. He is such a good and honorable man in this novel he was starting to get me a little bit excited! Honorable and good men who are patient and kind make my heart beat faster.

...

This gem of a novel yields some amazing benefits for the reader.

1.) The sweet and budding friendship between Sherlock and John. Oftentimes Sherlock is portrayed as a cold son of a gun.

"What a very attractive woman!" I exclaimed, turning to my companion.

He had lit his pipe again and was leaning back with drooping eyelids. "Is she?" he said languidly. "I did not observe."

"You really are an automaton - a calculating machine," I cried. "There is something positively inhuman in you at times."

But nothing could be farther from the truth. Sherlock Holmes does his best to attempt to squash his emotions,

"But love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to true cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment."

...but we all know that he is a loving and kind person.

Don't believe me? Look at how kind and considerate he is to his friend Watson in this book.

When about to track down a murderer:

"Are you game for a six-mile trudge, Watson?"

"Certainly," I answered.

"Your leg will stand it?"

"Oh, yes."

Sherlock isn't averse to lulling Watson asleep with some lullabies.

"Lie down there on the sofa and see if I can put you to sleep."

He took up his violin from the corner, and as I stretched myself out he began to play some low, dreamy, melodious air - his own, no doubt, for he had a remarkable gift for improvisation. I have a vague remembrance of his gaunt limbs, his earnest face and the rise and fall of his bow.

Not to mention Sherlock's dry sense of humor and belly-laughs he shares with his best friend.

Sherlock Holmes and I looked blankly at each other and then burst simultaneously into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

He loves having a friend and a confederate. Sherlock is a social creature, like the vast majority of humans.

"Isn't it gorgeous!" said Holmes, grinning over his coffee cup. "What do you think of it?"

...

2.) (view spoiler)

...

Now I am going to add a racism warning here: Doyle is going to malign black people, Sikhs, Hindus, Arabs... probably other people that I am forgetting right now. And of course, women.

"I would not tell them too much," said Holmes. "Women are never to be entirely trusted - not the best of them."

I did not pause to argue over this atrocious sentiment.

You're warned.

...

Tl;dr - This amazing novel is not only a classic but a pleasure to read. Doyle is a straightforward and clear writer. The subject matter is interesting, and the plot is fast-paced. With staunch friendship, blossoming romance, and lost treasure - you can't ask for much more from a mystery novel. Highly recommended.

Stephen says

Tsk, Tsk, Tsk...apparently that's NOT **tobacco** Sherlock Holmes is **smoking**.

You have to **love** the daring **Sir Arthur** displayed in this novel vis-à-vis his **iconic detective**. How many writers would have the **chutzpah** to risk **tarnishing** the **mystique** of their signature creation by depicting him **shooting cocaine** as a cure for boredom?

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined arm-chair with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Now that is what I call an opening paragraph. Well played, Mr. Doyle.

I'm a big fan of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and one of my favorite aspects of the stories, odd as it might sound, is how thoroughly unlikable Holmes is. Let's face it, the man is an asshole. He's cold, callous, arrogant, misanthropic, consumed with his own needs, and sociopathic in his lack of empathy for others. If it were not for his unparalleled gifts for observation and deduction, there would be nothing to recommend him as a person.

And that is precisely what makes him so interesting and so much fun to read about. He comes across as more anti-hero than hero, despite the fact that he is not generally classified as such. I would argue that he certainly fits under that label, especially now that we can add junkie to his list of flaws. (Incidentally, suddenly casting Robert Downey, Jr. in the role of Holmes makes a whole lot more sense.

...Just kidding).

Anyway, back to the story...

In addition to introducing readers to the monkey on Sherlock's back, this novel's also noteworthy for being

the first appearance of Mary Marston, the beautiful young woman who would go on to be Mr. Watson's beard wife. Mary calls on Holmes and entices him out of his melancholy with the promise of a challenging mystery involving the strange disappearance of her father many years before. Brightened by the prospect of being able to employ his prodigious mental faculties, Holmes accepts...and the game is, once more, afoot.

What ensues is a complex, multi-layered plot that, while not my favorite of the Holmes mysteries, was solid enough to keep my interest. Starting with nothing but a few flimsy clues, a letter from an anonymous benefactor, and a story with large chunks in it, Holmes proceeds to work his usual magic and mesmerizes all concerned with a dazzling display of crime-solving.

Of course.

Along the way, Doyle weaves into the narrative an eclectic assortment of supporting players for Holmes and Watson encounter, including:

a wooden-legged villain,
a killer with baby feet,
a group of criminals with a secret pact,
a pair of corrupt prison guards,
the Baker Street Irregulars,
aboriginal tribesmen with bad attitudes, and
a whole host of dead bodies.

Overall, a solid Holmes mystery with some classic moments of Sherlockian lore, including the first utterance of the famous truism, "*when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*" In comparison to the other two Holmes novels I've read, I didn't like this quite as much as *The Valley of Fear* or *A Study in Scarlet*. The main reason for this is simply that I found the mysteries in the former books more appealing. Still, there is a lot to like here and Holmes manages to unload quite a few notable quotables.

He smiled gently. 'It is of the first importance,' he said, 'not to allow your judgment to be biased by personal qualities. A client is to me a mere unit, a factor in a problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning. I assure you that the most winning woman I ever knew was hanged for poisoning three little children for their insurance-money, and the most repellant man of my acquaintance is a philanthropist who has spent nearly a quarter of a million upon the London poor.'

As I wrap this up, I want to give a final kudo to Doyle for the very end of the novel. In my opinion, it could not have been written better and I almost bumped the whole novel up to 4 stars based on it alone. Even though it doesn't give away any plot information, I'm still going to hide it behind a spoiler tag since it includes the final lines of the novel. (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

In a word...Perfect.

3.5 stars. Recommended.

Apatt says

SH: *"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."*

JW: *"Good Lord, Holmes! You just said something iconic! I shall have to write this down. Say that again? "When the what is impossible, and what do you do afterward?"*

Nah! Watson never said that.

The Sign of Four (originally titled "The Sign of **the** Four", I suppose that is one "The" too many, so the publisher dropped one) begins with Holmes shooting cocaine out of boredom and then proceeding to humiliate Watson for his mundane intellect, much to the latter's delight (if I was Holmes I'd be creeped out by Watson's fanboyism). Soon Miss Mary Morstan (best known to SH fans as Mrs. Watson in subsequent stories) shows up with her peculiar case concerning the mysterious disappearance of her father and somebody sending her pearls in the post on an annual basis. The game is then afoot!

Sherlock Holmes stories books are always a hoot, they are clever, fast-paced and often subtly humorous. *The Sign of Four* is everything I want from an SH novel. The amazing deduction, the incompetent policemen, Holmes creeping about on the floor, sniffing things, Watson often makes fool of himself with his Captain Obvious questions etc. In addition to that, we have a fierce poison darts blowgun vs revolver battle (???) and our heroes chasing a man with a wooden leg (???). Yes, Holmes finally meets his match (???). There is even a romantic subplot which you don't often get in SH stories. This is the book where Watson falls head over heels in love with Mary Morstan, practically at first sight.

Mary

"A wondrous subtle thing is love, for here were we two who had never seen each other before that day, between whom no word or even look of affection had ever passed, and yet now in an hour of trouble our hands instinctively sought for each other. I have marvelled at it since, but at the time it seemed the most natural thing that I should go out to her so, and, as she has often told me, there was in her also the instinct to turn to me for comfort and protection. So we stood hand in hand, like two children, and there was peace in our hearts for all the dark things that surrounded us."

Aww...

The villains are wonderfully colorful characters, the aforementioned man with the wooden leg and Tonga, his Andamanese blowgun sharpshooter.

The lovable Tonga by j(ay)

Like every Holmes novel, this book features a lengthy "story within a story" flashback. These are always quite interesting in and of themselves but the absence of Holmes and Watson from the narrative is always a distraction. This little issue notwithstanding, *The Sign of Four* is another excellent Holmes adventure, and it is one of only four SH novels so we should treasure them all. It's elementary.

Notes:

- **Audiobook Credit:** Free Librivox audiobook, *brilliantly* read by David Clarke. What a gent! Thank you!
- Watson is of course, not stupid, but he is the reader's surrogate and narrator so it is his function he ask obvious questions. How he tolerates Holmes' condescension is beyond me (the Martin Freeman version of him (on "Sherlock") is less tolerant of Holmes' BS, good for him).

- The policemen in the Holmes canon, however, are invariably idiots, though. Unfortunately, Inspector Lestrade is not in this one, but Inspector Athelney Jones keeps up the PC plod tradition.

- The four SH novels:

- A Study in Scarlet
- The Sign of the Four
- The Hound of the Baskervilles
- The Valley of Fear

I hope you will check out my reviews of these, though I have not read The Valley of Fear yet!

Quotes:

"Ah, I expected it. Look here!" He pointed to what looked like a long, dark thorn stuck in the skin just above the ear.

"It looks like a thorn," said I.

"It is a thorn."

(???)

"My mind rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession,—or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world."

"I was annoyed at this criticism of a work which had been specially designed to please him. I confess, too, that I was irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings. More than once during the years that I had lived with him in Baker Street I had observed that a small vanity underlay my companion's quiet and didactic manner. I made no remark, however, but sat nursing my wounded leg."

"But love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment."

Anne says

Oh, Holmes!

I still love you, but *this* was...*not* your best book, buddy.

Hmm. Ok, now I remember why I never really read the **full-length** Sherlock stories very much, and usually preferred to stick with the shorties.

This was kinda...**cough** dull. And really hard to get through. Plus, (and I know it was written in a different era) it was pretty cringe-worthy when dealing with race. Yep. Pretty much anyone who wasn't white was a snarling savage or a faithful servant.

So, yeah. Not very entertaining to read about that sort of thing at all.

Anyway, the main thing that makes this book noteworthy for fans is that this is where **Watson Falls In Luuuuurve**.

Was it a *good* love story, you ask?

Well, not particularly. But at least Watson seemed to admire Mary as a person, and not think of her as some sort of an arm decoration.

So, yes, as backward as Doyle is when it comes to race, he's at least got an *itty-bitty* lick of sense when it comes to women. And when Holmes makes derogatory statements about women & love, Watson gallantly defends us womenfolk with grunts of disapproval.

I believe this was written when Doyle was sick and tired of writing about Sherlock, and it shows. Sherly is almost as obnoxious as he can possibly be portrayed, while still being considered the *hero* of the story. I mean, the first scene describes his cocaine habit which isn't likely to endear him to many people. Even back in the day, before Nancy Reagan got her hooks into folks, a drug habit wouldn't have been considered an especially attractive quality.

Beyond that, the *mystery* is just a bit far-fetched, even for a Sherlock story. And maybe that's another reason I prefer the shorts? While they're still fantastical, they're more *street-level* stories. OR maybe they're not, and I'm just remembering them with rose colored glasses...

In the end, I felt like Holmes was really unlikable in this one, the mystery was too convoluted and over the top, and the story itself just went on too long. I can't bring myself to hate the book or the characters, so I guess I'll check out one of the short stories to see if I can bring back that lovin' feeling.

Buddy Read with some Non-Crunchy friends.

Kemper says

Despite being a huge crime/mystery reader, I've never been a big fan of the Sherlock Holmes stories. After recently reading *A Study in Scarlet* and now *The Sign of Four*, I realize that it's not me to blame. It's Holmes. He's just too much of an obnoxious show-off for me to like. Add in some Victorian-era English arrogance, and I feel like flipping off any Holmes novel I see on the shelf when browsing a mystery section in a bookstore.

Holmes and his full-time professional kiss-ass Watson get hired by a young lady who has been receiving expensive pearls anonymously and now has a mysterious request to meet someone regarding the jewels. Accompanying the woman, Holmes and Watson soon get wrapped up in murder involving a wooden legged man, a savage cannibal and a hidden treasure. Oh, and Watson stops heaping compliments on Holmes long enough to fall head over heels for the girl.

I don't need a likeable main character to enjoy a story. In fact, someone who is brilliant but arrogant and abrasive can be a very interesting if done right. (See Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* for a recent example.) I'm a little surprised at how much I found myself disliking Holmes. It's not like I didn't know he was an aloof logic junkie.

James says

It is also difficult to think of any literary characters other than Sherlock Holmes, who have created such an aura of mystery surrounding them, a mythology, an industry almost - very much blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction - creating (in some quarters) a belief that Holmes was indeed a real person, who lived at 221b Baker Street, London - it's there, you can visit 'the home of Sherlock Holmes' - thus adding to and fueling the whole mythology.

'The game is afoot'

(Originally Shakespeare - appropriated unforgettably by Arthur Conan Doyle for Sherlock Holmes).

Ahmad Sharabiani says

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Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

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

I initially went 3.5 stars and rounded up to four, but only a week later, after reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, I could barely remember what this one was about. It's mostly pleasant but forgettable.

In Sherlock Holmes' second outing with Dr. Watson, Sherlock explains that he needs to shoot up cocaine and morphine to add spice to his life (apparently these were legal drugs at the time). Watson chastises Sherlock (unsuccessfully) for taking chances with his mind, and then distracts him with a question about his old pocket watch. Sherlock, true to form, dazzles the good Dr. Watson once again with his deductions. But this only occupies them for a few minutes.

Luckily for everyone except Holmes' drug supplier, Miss Mary Morstan arrives on the doorsteps of 221B Baker Street with a better distraction: a puzzle about a decade-long missing father and a mysterious annual gift of valuable pearls that she's been receiving from an unknown source for the past six years. Could these two mysteries possibly be related?

Holmes is intrigued; Watson is in instalove.

This is a reasonably good Sherlock Holmes novella, marred somewhat by some period racism toward Africans and a rather lengthy flashback toward the end that explains the mystery.

And now I have to go rewatch the Sherlock episode "The Sign of Three" and see what cool connections may exist to the plot of this book.

September 2015 buddy read with the Pantsless Crunchy Bunch.

Dan Schwent says

Sherlock Holmes sets aside his cocaine addiction for a case. A young woman has been receiving pearls in the mail once a year for four years and now has a chance to meet her mysterious benefactor. Can Holmes and Watson figure out what's really going on without being ensnared in a web of deceit and murder?

I read this with those scamps in the Non-crunchy Cool Classics group.

So, Sherlock Holmes. For years, Holmes has been akin to H.P. Lovecraft for me in that I'm a much bigger fan of the works they inspired than the original works. When Jeff and his cohorts decided to read *The Sign of Four* in September, who was I to resist? After all, Sherlock is one kick ass show...

Yeah, I'm still not a tremendous Sherlock Holmes fan. I understand that Arthur Conan Doyle was largely inventing the genre as he went but the longer Holmes stories always seem unnecessarily convoluted. Watson is a sycophant with very little personality of his own and Holmes is an ass, although not in an entertaining Benedict Cumberbatch sort of way.

Still, I didn't hate it. It was interesting to see how the detective fiction genre has evolved over time. I wasn't expecting the pulpy boat chase near the end and Holmes actually had a bit more dimension to him than I remember.

Due to its place in the genre and because I couldn't bring myself to actually dislike it, I'm giving this a hard-earned three out of five stars.

Delee says

[image error]

Jan-Maat says

I am quite impressed and curious that this 1890 novel is better than Conan-Doyle's 1912 *The Lost World* it is as though the repeated practise of writing exhausted his talent, and he got worse over time - but this is just a passing thought, further research is required to make it a theory.

Truly it is just like a typical Sherlock Holmes short story, except five times longer, it doesn't seem any more complex, but neither does it seem padded out .

I wondered though if money is at the root (or treasure or assets broadly, fixed or liquid) of all Sherlock Holmes stories? I can't think of any motivation for criminality in his stories that doesn't concern gaining control over an inheritance, an income, or the fear of loosing the same. Perhaps this is the great late Victorian obsession - wealth buys you status and position, it alienates you from the realities of the South London streets- with gaudy pubs on their corners full of scruffy men drinking their breakfasts, that Holmes and Watson with a borrowed dog tour in pursuit of a criminal who made the fatal mistake of stepping in some creosote. The prospect of great wealth means that Doctor Watson will be unable to marry the young woman that we are introduced to in this story. Wealth then plays a curious role in the world of Holmes at once desirable, the lust for it will push people into committing crimes and because of that alienating destructive of intimacy and connection between people. Naturally once you've 'acquired' wealth, in this story stolen from somebody who had stolen it from somebody who had (view spoiler), you have to guard it like a dragon, I don't know if Conan-Doyle saw the Ring cycle on stage but his work has something of that flavour (particularly here in the ending), with great wealth comes great insecurity and fear because truly who can protect themselves from the avenging power of a midget with a blowpipe and a man with a wooden leg, eager to steal what was stolen from them.

Holmes is an interesting figure because Conan-Doyle shows him as uniquely able to move through the atomised and alienated segments of Late Victorian people - he can talk to anyone, he can move unnoticed among any class of people - this for example is not true of the police. Taken with Holmes cocaine habit one has the sense of him as a transgressive figure, able because of that to shift across the boundaries of society in pursuit of the solution to a crime. However he also has a wayward eccentricity which will become, curiously the abnormal norm, or the norm of abnormality for generations of fictional detectives, they all have to have their quirk, how unfortunate for all future writers that Conan-Doyle devised such an extremely odd character.

Because of this Conan-Doyle is able to turn one of the conventions of the adventure novel on its head. Normally in such books the world can be approximately divided into two. Home - which is safe, nice, good (but possibly a tiny bit boring) , and the locus of adventure - which is foreign, exotic, perhaps extra-

planetary, or in the past or future, or some fantasy land accessible through a wardrobe (view spoiler). What Conan-Doyle says is no! Adventure, crime, lurk everywhere there is no safe non-adventurous space - you take on an ordinary consulting Engineers job- Crime, crime (the Engineer's thumb)! You can't trust your parents even as you are about to waltz off down the road in your electric blue dress and the money you are due to inherit (The Copper Beeches, the Speckled Band (view spoiler)), behind every door there is the potential for crime just for the chance of a few Guineas more.

In this story there is a nice touch of both Magwitch and his Great Expectations as well as Treasure Island, the criminally dangerous man with a wooden leg, the prosthetic leg itself a deadly weapon, the terrible frightening danger of sinister disabled people which no doubt helped put back work towards equality and accessibility for generations, and the heart warming tale of an escaped convict coming back to Britain only to get stuck in the North Kent marshes (view spoiler).

In this story of treasure from India there is an implication that all the world's wealth, and every big house, surrounded by a wall topped with broken glass (view spoiler) are the proceeds of crime.

Wounded veteran of the Afghan war and mentions of the Langham hotel in London (also appearing in a Scandal in Bohemia) as passing bonuses for the reader. I wasn't entirely convinced by the ending, but you can't have everything. More graphic drug taking than I recall from other Holmes stories, down to the scared forearm.

Jayson says

(A-) 82% | Very Good

Notes: Better structured, with more character depth than its predecessor, but it feels like a short story padded into a novella.

??? 2.? says

Book two in which Sherlock adds cocaine addiction to his list of proclivities. It seems the cases are few and far between, and his mind *rebels at stagnation*. He abhors the dull routine of day to day living and requires some sort of mental stimulation. Dr. Watson, while highly annoyed, is still much too reserved to ever dare to take liberties. Watson tries to engage Holmes with a discussion of the pamphlet he's written about their first case, "A Study in Scarlet." But Holmes promptly dismisses it and accuses Watson of attempting to romanticize the cold hard science of deduction. Watson is more than a little upset at the casual criticism of a story he had specially designed to please Holmes, but once again holds his tongue. Thankfully their lover's spat is soon halted when a young lady shows up with a new case.

Mary Morstan tells a strange tale of how her father disappeared from her life. Then a few years later, after replying to an inquiry, she received a package containing a pearl. Every year since she's received a similar package with another pearl. Now this unknown benefactor wishes to meet to discuss his motivations. She can't help but wonder if any of this is related to her father's disappearance. Holmes and Watson agree to accompany her to the meeting. Things go awry, the situation becomes more complicated, and it appears as though Holmes can finally set aside the cocaine for a proper bit of detective work . . .

Overall, another decent mystery, not horribly exciting except for the steam-powered boat chase. Followed once again by a ridiculously long interview with the culprit. The final chapter is nothing more than another

boring and detailed explanation of the crime and takes up a staggering 22% of the novel. There's also a side plot in which Watson is struck with a case of insta-love for Miss Morstan, and even proposes marriage . . . or does he? My edition included an alternate ending which may have been deemed too controversial for the times in which this book was published. It reads as follows:

The game is afoot!

I shook Holmes awake, for I had been reticent for far too long and could no longer hold my tongue. I would rather have all my hopes dashed upon the rocks than sit for another moment with this remarkable man, without professing my true feelings. Holmes saw my troubled expression at once, gave a knowing smile, and took my hand. "My dear boy, I too have been waiting for this moment, of course, I've felt those same longings," said he. His powers of deduction never failed to amaze. "Oh, praise the good Lord!" I exclaimed, pulled his wonderful face to my own, and ravaged his mouth. A few moments passed before he gently pushed me away, and kissed the tears from my eyes. "Now Watson, we must consider our curious predicament. For I fear this society in which we live will never allow for the possibility of two men to profess feelings of love for one another. We may find ourselves shunned, as though we be lepers." He stood and began to pace around the room incessantly, as I racked my brain for a solution, analyzing the problem from all possible angles.

"Alas!" he ejaculated, a short while later, "I may have just the fix. For I recently read of a new surgical technique whereas a man can be transmogrified into that of a female form. What say you to undertaking such an endeavor?" I had long since learned to always trust in his reasoning, never to question his sagacity. "I must say, it strikes me as rather ingenious," said I. I noticed a smirk come across his features. "On the contrary my good doctor, it's actually quite *Elementary!*"

One year removed.

The wind ruffled my dress, as I stepped across the gangplank onto the deck of the huge ocean-faring vessel. I turned to Sherlock, reached for his hand and said, "How fitting that we shall begin this glorious new chapter, in our unique story, upon the very shores of the New World itself!"
? Start spreading the news ?

A Study In Scarlet (Book One): ★★☆☆½

The Sign of Four (Book Two): ★★☆☆

Ann (Little Bear) Baratheon says

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

After some consideration, I'm giving the second Sherlock Holmes story 3 stars (maybe a 3.33-3.5 or so, if we're being nit-picky). While the first, *A Study in as Scarlett* utterly blew me away and captivated me completely, *The Sign* was good, but in time, forgettable.

Also, it was pretty racist. But I'm not gonna get into that.

I don't think that being forgettable is totally a bad thing, really. This story is perhaps a fluffy one in between more meaningful and memorable mysteries. It was Doyle stretching his legs, er, fingers, with the characters

and his version of London.

I think this one was learning more about both Watson and Holmes and their inner workings. We see Watson fall in love, which to me was rather unexpected. Holmes's reaction to that (and all) romance is cold and apathetic, which tells you a lot about him. But we also have characters throughout this story who somehow know Holmes from the past, which leads to curiosity about how he got to be the infamous man he is in the present. How did he make all these connections, being as antisocial as he seems?

We also get into **Sherlock Holmes's dark side - which was by far my favorite aspect of this book. It shows vulnerability in a seemingly invincible character.**

So much has been written about addiction and drugs, especially in recent times with the rise of the Big Pharma fueled opioid epidemic (cough), but, as a recovering addict myself, I can confidently say that a majority of writers fail miserably in this aspect. As with any aspect of human existence, you can never truly know what it is like unless you've been there. Hearing Holmes talk about using morphine and cocaine struck such a nerve in me...it was like taking the words right out of my mouth - with a bit less "thus"'s and replacing "heroin" with "morphine".

"He thrust the sharp point [of the needle] home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction."

That is almost difficult for me to read, as I know other addicts will agree. But what an incredible opening scene! **With one opening paragraph, Sherlock Holmes transforms from a shining hero, into a mysterious, struggling antihero.**

In the middle of the book, Watson makes some remark about how Holmes would make the perfect criminal, if he had chosen the dark side instead of the light. It makes the reader think ***Why? Why is this brooding, boastful drug addict solving crime instead of committing it? With his knowledge, they would never catch him. What makes him good?***

Now I need to do some research on Doyle's own habits, but my gut tells me that there's no way he could have wrote about Holmes's dirty habits with such certainty if he hadn't experienced addiction himself. Every addict knows the basic story and struggle of another addict.

This story also had humor that was rather unexpected. My favorite line, which had me cackling while chugging coffee and driving 70mph on the interstate at ten AM, was this:

"I would rather have [the dog] Toby's help than that of the whole detective force of London."

It's both a little jab about the police as well as an example of Holmes's dry sense of humor, that I just adore. Also, Toby is *such a good boy* and I loved his part in solving the mystery, however improbable it sounded. More crime fighting dogs, please.

I said this with the first book, but I'll say it again: but I cannot believe it took me twenty six (and a half) years to start reading Sherlock Holmes! Though of course, I'm also a firm believer in the theory that **books come to us when we are ready for them.**

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*Note: I listened to this book, and will with all other Sherlock Holmes stories, by audiobook. They are narrated by Simon Vance, and the version is called The Complete Sherlock Holmes by Brilliance Audio. I HIGHLY recommend this version if you're going for an audiobook. It is nearly 60 hours, broken up in 7 parts, about two books per part. The perfect road trip selection.*

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## **Karlyflower \*The Vampire Ninja, Luminescent Monster & Wendigo Nerd Goddess of Canada (according to The Hulk)\* says**

### **2.5 Why Did This Take Me Three Months To Read?? Stars**

**Verdict: IT CRUNCHES! It crunches soooooooo bad!!**

It almost never bodes well when a book that is this short takes me this long to read (The one exception is Donna Tartt's Secret History which took me ~~half a lifetime~~ over a year to finish). And while I can't say I dislike Doyle's writing overall this short novel does basically nothing for me.

Incidentally, the instalove is **STRONG** with this one! Watson falls madly, deeply, entirely in love with Mary in the course of, like, an hour I think. We've been here before, in the place where I vent about the absurdity of instalove. I don't believe I need to go over it again, at least not here. It makes my face feel growly.

I could not invest in this story, and while the explanation portion of this shortie was far superior to the completely confusing method used in A Study in Scarlet it's appearance after a slogging read through three threads of stories murking up each other's waters failed to save my read. This is, in my opinion, another case of a short novel trying to contain more than its structure allows.

Thanks to the Non-Crunchy-Pantsless-Brigade for not kicking me out of their midst for taking this BLOODY long to read a mere hundred and twenty-nine page book!

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## **Henry Avila says**

Sherlock Holmes is bored, he hasn't had a new, interesting case in quite a while, no big deal you say? It is if the man is the notorious self- destructive detective, the best whoever was, (or will be) as his arm will clearly reveal....too many injections of mind - numbing drugs can testify to this horrible fact, the ugly scars. The worried Dr. Watson fears for the health of his best friend...unable to prevent it, he knows Holmes brain needs constant stimulation otherwise, the inevitable decline into ennui, not moving, in the chair, staying in his room, unable to function as a human being. A sight the kind-hearted Watson cannot endure. At last a strange mystery brought by a young, attractive woman , escorted by the tolerant landlady Mrs. Hudson, Miss Mary Morstan, causes Sherlock to move his limbs, the powerful brain begins turning faster and faster , we have liftoff , soaring into the unknown universe from the seedy side , an unlimited territory... yes the land of the

criminals, their greed, nothing is beyond the grasp of those who want wealth without working very hard to accomplish this goal, why should they, if only a little killing and stealing will get them this.... Even Watson feels happy, he likes the nervous lady. The Sign of Four begins in actuality in colonial India, convicts in a hellish penal colony in the remote Andaman Islands, far from the Indian coast, the leader of a group of these not very respectable men, a white man and three natives, discloses information of hidden treasure buried in a distant fort. Stolen from a rich nobleman, during the time of the vast Indian uprising against British rule, in the 19th century, (1857 ) the owner of these trinkets involved in the late rebellion flees for his life when it ..the spirit of freedom is crushed. Leaving all the beautiful jewels, and exquisite pearls , orphans. He that digs them up shall become fabulously rich, nobody except the gang knows where . A deal between the convicts and two English officers are solemnly pledged, still there's no honor among thieves as the proverb states so well. That is where our friend the eager, Holmes arrives on the scene, Mary, who tells the story, the little she knows, is the daughter of one of the army officers that struck the bad bargain , as time will show, nevertheless not all gentlemen are honest. This will give fans of the Baker Street two, (not to forget the irregulars) crime fighters a good read... Plus an exciting, surreal trip down the Thames ...And a nice puzzle to solve...After all Sherlock Holmes is the master...

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