

Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest

2014 Clarkson Prize Winning Essay

This year, Watson's Tin Box is celebrating its Tenth Annual Sherlock Holmes Essay Contest for seventh graders in Howard County, Maryland. Once again, the Tin Box partnered with Howard County Library System and Howard County Public Schools. Participating students read the *Adventure of the Speckled Band* and wrote essays. English teachers in the Public Schools voluntarily participated, and Howard County Library made the participation possible for home schooled, private school, and public school students (whose teachers do not participate). Watson's Tin Box is very grateful to its partners for making this contest such a success. We survey the teachers to find out how many of them used the *Speckled Band* as part of their curriculum as a result of the contest. This year, we reached approximately 250 children. Over the last ten years, the contest has reached more than 3,000 students, honored 32 students, and bestowed more than \$2,500 worth of prizes.

Each year, the Tin Box has awarded First, Second, and Third Place Prizes to the top three essays. The First Prize in the contest is *The Clarkson Prize*, an award named after Tin Box founder Steve Clarkson, BSI, who was a mentor to so many young Sherlockians. Steve started a Sherlock Holmes literary society for young people in the late 1960s. It included members from across the country. Before the advent of email, the young Sherlockians would distribute their analyses of the Sherlock Holmes stories to each other in real envelopes. Steve continued his mentoring of young Sherlockians until he passed away in 2004.

The 2014 winner was Hanna, a 13 year old student. Hearty congratulations for a job well done! With her (and her parents') approval, Hanna's essay is being published in *Irene's Cabinet*, the annual journal of Watson's Tin Box, and posted on the Tin Box and Beacon Society web sites. It is with great pride that we publish this year's Clarkson Prize winning essay on the *Speckled Band*. Hanna can be proud to be a published author.

From the Journal of John H. Watson

Title: Just some "critique" from Holmes

July 12th, 1891

The dull, foggy light shone through the windows on that warm, humid July evening of '91. It was one of those evenings where, even if you had work to do, things to be done, you hardly had the energy to get out of bed and ready yourself. The slightest movement was a great exertion. I had been busy with my practice as of late, and this was one of the few occasions on which I had time to visit my dear friend, Sherlock Holmes. He sat curled up in his armchair, with his knees drawn up to his chin, and his arms clasped around them, smoking his pipe in his usual fashion. His gaze lingered absent-mindedly on the flames. After some minutes, he spoke rather abruptly.

“Watson, I wish to ask a question of you.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Do you remember that publication you put out, of "The Speckled Band" adventure?”

“Why, yes, I put it out quite recently due to the death of that young woman. Why?”

“I read it.”



“Did you like it?”

He paused a moment. “Some aspects, yes, but on a whole, no. You romanticized too much, as you tend to do.” I started to interrupt, but he held up a hand. “Patience, doctor, I have but a few things to say.

“It was a fair account, but there were a few points I wish to discuss. I noted three main faults. The first was that you over-dramatized, the second was that you did not keep to the facts, and the third was that you kept the reader in the dark for a long period of time.

“Let us begin with the drama. You, Watson, have this tendency to add romance and suspense to your works, even when there is none. I fear that this will never change, but critique may aid you. For instance, when describing our client Miss Roylott, you wrote, and I quote, '... with restless frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal.' Now, did you really need to add that bit? It was unnecessary work. A simple, 'She appeared to be agitated,' would have sufficed. But, ah, drama won out over practicality. You do the same bothersome thing again when describing our night at Doctor Roylott's house. Upon describing the wait we had, you wrote, 'How shall I ever forget that dreadful vigil? ... How long they seemed, those quarters! Twelve struck, and one and two and three, and still we sat waiting silently for whatever might befall.' It was unnecessary to write so much to describe so little. I would have suggested saying 'My companion and I waited quietly for four hours.' It would have been much simpler.”

“Holmes, I was merely...”

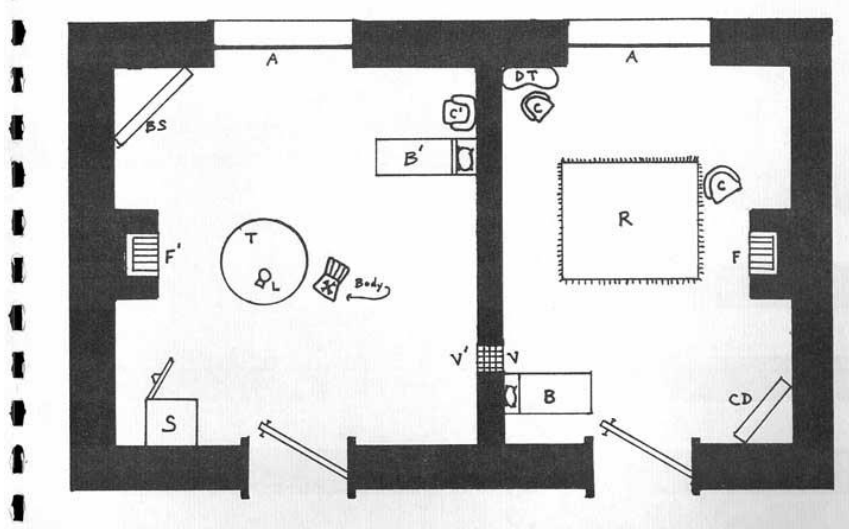
“Let me finish, Doctor, let me finish.”

I closed my mouth sullenly, awaiting the next bit of criticism.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling slightly at my frustration.

“Onward we go, Watson, to our next fault: you do not stick to the facts. observe a tendency to continuously interject with your own thought and opinions. As an example, I present this. When describing our ride down to Stoke Moran, you wrote, 'It was a perfect day, with bright sun and a few fleecy clouds in the heavens.' I am sure you know that all of that is strictly opinion, which strays very much from facts. It was also rather unnecessary to describe the weather, as it had no effect on the murder, which all occurred indoors. Next, I present this example. You said, when writing of the attack by the doctor's pet snake, 'They say that away down in the village, and even in the distant parsonage, that cry raised the sleepers from their beds.' Doctor, this is nothing but hearsay, which is rarely true, and almost always exaggerated. It means nothing, and has no basis in fact other than that Roylott did cry out. Not factual, therefore unnecessary.

“Finally, Doctor, we come to the fault of keeping the poor reader in the dark. Throughout the story, you continuously write as though you yourself know nothing, which is true. However, this should not prevent you, as the writer, from placing knowledge you did not have at the time in your work. For instance, when we conversed about my expectance of a ventilator in Miss Roylott's room and the crime which I predicted, you should not have left out my deductions. Instead of writing your shock at my knowledge, you should have put the steps I took to reach that conclusion. Here is my example: 'My companion came to the conclusion that there was a ventilator and connected it to the crime through a series of observations and deductions. In Miss Roylott's story, she mentioned that her sister could smell the Doctor's cigar. Henceforth, there must be some connection between the Doctor's room and hers. The obvious answer is a Ventilator. This, however, is not an effective ventilator if it leads not outside but to another room, so it must serve some alternate purpose. Holmes also observed that there was a dysfunctional bell-pull and that the bed was clamped to the floor. From these comes the conclusion that something from the Doctor's room was to come through the ventilator, down the bell-pull, and onto whoever was in the bed. From the symptoms of poisoning that the victim had, a possible answer would be a snake. Coupled with the Doctor's love of odd foreign animals, this theory becomes very likely.' This would have been much more informative.



(Credit to Tom Hanratty, Milwaukee, WI, http://redbirdstudio.com/CrimeScenes/speckled_band.html)

“And so, to finish off, I repeat that you over-dramatize, stray from the facts, and keep the reader in the dark too long. But, with some effort, these errors can be corrected.”

Here my friend stopped, and gave me a questioning glance. I was somewhat overwhelmed by his onslaught of critique, but I managed to say, “Thank you, Holmes, I’ll keep that in mind. But wasn’t there any particle that you liked?”

He smiled, almost gently, and said “I appreciate your displaying of this to the public, and more so to possible clients. You have given me quite a lot of business.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in, pray, sit down.”

And business, as usual, resumed.