

**The First Two Pages of “The Twenty-Five-Year Engagement”  
by James W. Ziskin**

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An Essay by James W. Ziskin

In *A Study in Scarlet*—the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes— Arthur Conan Doyle defied today’s popular advice of jumping straight into the action of the story. His narrator, Dr. John Watson, takes his time in getting to his meeting of Mr. Sherlock Holmes and their first adventure. Watson describes his recent personal history instead, from earning his medical degree to his deployment to India—just in time for the Second Afghan War—to his wounding in battle, subsequent long recovery, and convalescence. Once back in London, Watson finds himself living beyond his modest means and decides he needs to find more reasonably priced lodgings. A fortuitous encounter with an old acquaintance steers him to a man who is looking for someone to “go halves with him in some nice rooms.” That man, of course, turns out to be Sherlock Holmes.

Conan Doyle uses the first two chapters to present his main characters, describe some of their backstories, and settle them into their shared Baker Street lodgings. He even has Watson catalogue Holmes’s talents, including that he is “an excellent singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman,” and he “plays the violin well.” As Holmes and Watson were brand-new, unknown characters when *A Study in*

*Scarlet* was released in 1887, readers didn't know the first thing about them, and an introduction was necessary.

It isn't until the third chapter that Watson finally begins his first adventure with Holmes, "The Lauriston Garden Mystery."

So much for starting your story in medias res.

Of course, I didn't need to introduce the characters for my story, "The Twenty-Five-Year Engagement," which is a straightforward Holmes-Watson pastiche. There were, however, plenty of other challenges, not the least of which was writing a story that would satisfy Holmes aficionados and casual readers alike. To accomplish that, I wanted to strike the right tone and construct an investigation that rang true for Holmes fans.

So, using *A Study in Scarlet*'s "patient" opening as my guide, I decided to begin "The Twenty-Five-Year Engagement" with a similarly unhurried introduction. I realized, of course, that I could only delay the action for so long. As things turned out, I put off the start of the actual case for exactly two pages. The first two pages.

My story is only 6,000 words, while *A Study in Scarlet* weighs in at more than 43,000. Still, I thought I could set the period—early 1880s—as well as re-enforce for the reader the friendship that has bound Holmes and Watson, through all the stories, novels, movies, radio plays, fan fiction, and re-imaginings of the past 130-some years. And, much as a mimic would do, I wanted to approximate the narrative tone of

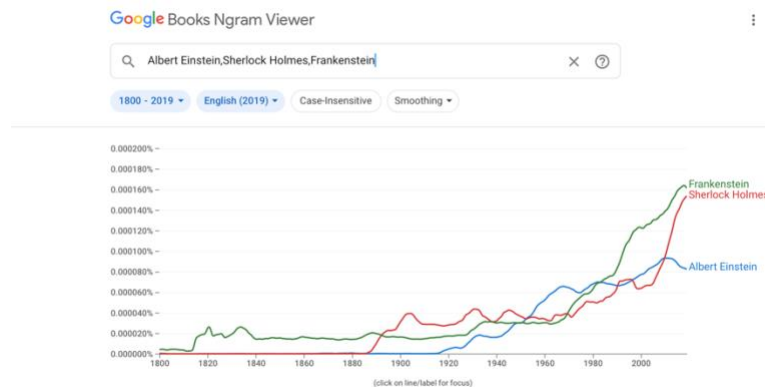
the early Sherlock Holmes stories. This meant adopting a style, which—besides being out of date—was foreign to me. I had neither attempted a pastiche before, nor had I ever written anything with a nineteenth-century Brit as the narrator.

In preparation for the writing, I re-read the Holmes stories and novels again, for the first time in many, many years. Decades, actually. This proved extremely useful in getting a better feel for the language, from style to turns of phrase. Themes, too. Revisiting the adventures inspired me to come up with a plot that seemed at home in a Sherlock Holmes story.

And, of course, I had to avoid anachronisms, historic and lexical. Language, in fact, presented perhaps the highest hurdle in crafting a convincing pastiche. Let's look at the first paragraph of the story.

During the time of my early acquaintance with Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I confess that, now and again, his vanity inspired in me flashes of pique that tested my equanimity. It is understandable, of course, that two intimate friends **lodging** together in close quarters might suffer bouts of discord in counterbalance to the good cheer they normally enjoy. And while on occasion I found myself prey to such ill humors—tame though they were—Holmes remained immune to similar agitation in his attitude with me. The inevitable outcome of these episodes was, of course, a return to harmony and respect for my companion.

Here, I wanted to remind readers of the strong bonds of friendship between the two men. Also, to suggest time and place, I included vocabulary commonly used in Conan Doyle’s stories. “Lodging together,” for example, fits the era and the location much better than, say, “living together.” In fact, a quick check of the Sherlock Holmes Concordance shows that “lodging” and “lodgings” appear thirty-two times in the novels and stories, always referring to “residing” or “residences.”



In addition to the Concordance, I highly recommend Google’s Ngram Viewer for writers of historical fiction (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>). Ngram Viewer allows users to search for terms that appear in works published from 1500 to 2019. Not every work is included, of course, just those that have been digitized using optical character recognition (OCR).

Here’s my second paragraph:

Reflecting on our long collaboration, through all the adventures and investigations I’ve chronicled over these many years, I can recall no

incident that so well exemplified this subtle peculiarity of our friendship than **the Case of the Twenty-Five-Year Engagement**.

Here, I linked the introductory theme of Watson's occasional annoyance with Holmes's vanity to the case he's about to narrate. The mention of their long collaboration and friendship again was intended to stress their closeness, as well as to give this story a place in the chronicles of Sherlock Holmes's cases. And though I don't object to starting stories with weather, the first two paragraphs provided me cover from what many believe to be that "cardinal sin" of writing. Here's the third paragraph:

**A late-November gale** was raging outside our shared **rooms** in Baker Street, cooling any eagerness we might have felt for venturing into the night in search of a meal. The rain thrashed against the windows in waves, as fierce squalls rose and fell, whistling down the chimney and through the rafters, causing the **gaslight** to dance on the walls. In such inclement conditions, we decided to ring the landlady, **Mrs. Hudson**, who delivered to us the remains of a toothsome **steak-and-kidney pie** from her **larder**. We made short work of the dish, rinsing it down with a serviceable **claret** I'd procured from the wine merchant. Alas, without advance instruction, Mrs. Hudson had prepared no **pudding**. Our appetites nevertheless tolerably sated, we repaired to the sitting room where I intended to dive into a **yellow-back book of sea stories**. I drew up the basket chair and settled before the hearth, a dash of brandy and soda within easy reach. My companion placed his post-prandial pipe on the mantelpiece and took up his **violin** at the music stand. After a moment's attention to the rosinning of his bow and the tuning of his instrument, he began to play.

I love using weather in my books and stories. It can create terrific atmosphere and—sometimes—plot points. In this passage, the storm outside allowed me to mention flickering gaslight, which conjures late 19th-century London.

Here and later in the story, I use “rooms” to describe Holmes and Watson’s lodgings in Baker Street. According to the Concordance, the word “rooms” appears 124 times in Sherlock Holmes, almost always with the meaning of living quarters. This is another attempt to mimic Watson’s narrative style by using words easily at home in the original works.

Furthermore, to make this setting as authentic as possible, I made liberal use of British food terminology. For instance, “steak-and-kidney pie” is not a dish one typically eats in North America. We also say “Bordeaux” for “claret” in the US. “Pudding” is what Americans call “dessert,” and “larders” are where one stores food in Holmes’s world, not ours.

I mentioned Mrs. Hudson to provide readers with a familiar and beloved character, while Holmes’s violin and Watson’s penchant for reading sea stories are intended to call to mind the original works.

The next few paragraphs present an homage to Holmes’s musical talents—indeed his ingenuity—as well as a reminder of his cocaine habit and healthy opinion of his own brilliance. They also show readers Watson’s deep affection and respect for Holmes, even when vexed by his companion.

He was soon lost in a rapture of transcendent euphony, an aspect—I noted—not dissimilar to the vacant look of satisfaction he displayed when under the spell of one of his **cocaine solutions**. Yet at no point on that cold and rainy November evening had he injected himself with a stupeficient or consumed a medicinal concoction of any kind. The source of his delight was, I knew well, **vainglorious**, not chemical. It

was, in fact, **pride** at his own musical talents that inspired his contented mood. Truly, so enchanting was the melody he summoned from the violin that, despite the bother I felt at his satisfaction with himself, I closed my book, folded it in my lap, and chased all thoughts from my mind, save for the enjoyment of the recital. The music coursed along merrily for a few minutes more until, in the midst of a particularly energetic burst of spiccato, Holmes fell victim to what I can only surmise was overmuch zeal. Basing my conclusions on the visual and aural evidence available, I arrived at the most logical interpretation, namely that the extreme friction produced by his bowing had caused the A-string of his violin to snap. A man possessed of lesser sangfroid would surely have abandoned his performance forthwith and restrung the instrument. But not Sherlock Holmes. He carried on—I presumed—out of native contumacy and the desire to demonstrate the full measure of his considerable skill. Without hesitation, he contrived a mysterious solution that veiled from the listener the loss of the A-string altogether. Once he'd brought the piece safely into port with a stirring tremolo at the finale, I forgot the annoyance that had beset me earlier, and I begged him to enlighten me as to what clever artifice he'd employed to accomplish the feat with only three strings.

“Simplicity itself, Watson,” he said, lighting his pipe. “As the D-string lies adjacent to the A, I needed only elevate the pitch of the former by a factor of one-fifth to produce the notes usually dispatched by the latter. An unorthodox but effective fingering method, I’ll allow, though one that should be within the abilities of even the most prosaic fiddler.”

“Well done!” **I ejaculated**. “Had I not witnessed it with my own eyes, I would never have believed it.”

Watson’s congratulations gave me license to use the outdated “ejaculated,” a word subject to much ridicule and snickering today among writers. And while I may have put this word in my story to provoke a smile, I also did so for authenticity. Conan Doyle, after all, used one form or other of “ejaculate” twenty-two times in his Sherlock Holmes works.

The last paragraph of my first two pages finally brings us to the main storyline of “The Twenty-Five-Year Engagement.” Holmes puts down his violin and introduces the mystery.

“Thank you, Watson. And now I would ask your indulgence as I intend to recount a singularly fascinating case that was presented to me recently. As you will have no doubt observed, for some time I have been wanting of a challenging investigation to stimulate my interest. And, so, it was with great relief that Thursday last I received in these very rooms an attractive visitor of middle age.

While it may seem I dragged my feet in getting to the point, writing two full pages—fully fifteen percent of my story—without advancing the plot in any demonstrable way, I would argue that a great part of the point of a Holmes pastiche is to offer readers a brief sojourn in the familiar world Conan Doyle created with his original stories. And to accomplish that, the pacing of the narrative, the quirks of the characters, and the language of the place and time must be included.

If the opening of “The Twenty-Year-Engagement” stirs any interest in you, you can find the rest of it in Laurie R. King and Leslie S. Klinger’s latest anthology, *In League with Sherlock Holmes*, available in bookstores and online portals everywhere. You won’t be disappointed by the other stories in the collection, either. Wildly inventive and clever, the contributions are varied and universally entertaining.

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