

Mr. Holmes: Old age, the perils of science, a minor mystery solved ...

David Walsh
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Directed by Bill Condon; written by Jeffrey Hatcher, based on the novel by Mitch Cullin

Bill Condon's *Mr. Holmes* places the famous fictional detective Sherlock Holmes (Ian McKellen), now 93, in postwar Britain. Holmes lives in seclusion in Sussex, in South East England, with his housekeeper, Mrs. Munro (Laura Linney), and her young son Roger (Milo Parker).

Thirty years after his last case and the departure of his chronicler, Dr. John Watson, Holmes faces inevitable physical and mental decline. In fact, he has traveled to Japan in search of prickly ash ("Japanese pepper"), a plant supposed to increase one's mental powers. During the course of that trip, Holmes witnesses the horrible devastation of Hiroshima, targeted by a US nuclear weapon in August 1945 (in fact, 70 years ago today).

Holmes is attempting to write the story of his last case, or correct Watson's fictionalized version of the episode (also made into a film, which we see bits of), but he cannot adequately remember its details, or at least its denouement. Holmes senses, however, that the conclusion of the case must have something to do with his decision to isolate himself from other people.

Meanwhile the aging former detective strikes up a friendship with Roger, a very bright child, who helps him with his bee-keeping and other matters. That friendship threatens, perhaps makes jealous, his working class mother, who lost her husband in the war. She plans to take a job in another part of the country, in part to remove Roger from the older man's company.

In fragments, we see the 1917 case still troubling Holmes. Thomas Kelmot (Patrick Kennedy) comes to see Holmes with concerns about his wife Ann (Hattie Morahan). After two miscarriages, Ann has sunk into depression and apparently fallen under the spell of an

exotic music instructor, Madame Schirmer (Frances de la Tour), for some unknown reason.

Holmes takes on Kelmot's case and finds himself following the latter's wife through the streets of London. Things, of course, are not as they seem. The sad fate of Mrs. Kelmot, once Holmes recalls it, has an influence on the way he responds to and treats human beings in the present.

There are modestly appealing elements in *Mr. Holmes*. McKellen and Linney are of course accomplished performers, and generally interesting to watch. Milo Parker is charming as Roger. Some careful attention is paid to the details of daily life and everyday relationships. Holmes' deterioration is presented with sensitivity, although at times that deterioration and McKellen's aggressive presentation of it threaten to dominate the film, pushing other matters aside. One wants to say on a couple of occasions: we know people get old, what of it?

The "mystery" surrounding Mrs. Kelmot turns out to be rather mundane, though sad enough. The case, wrapped up in the course of a single afternoon, hardly ranks with one of Arthur Conan Doyle's remarkable stories.

It would be mistaken to suggest that *Mr. Holmes* beats the viewer over the head with any particular theme. Director Bill Condon proceeds more "moderately" and discreetly than that, but in so far as his film has a central concern, it seems to be with Holmes' supposed super-rationality. In an interview, Condon suggested that "Holmes has all these steps along the way towards figuring out the limitations of rationality."

In the annihilation of Hiroshima we are meant to recognize the dangers represented by modern science. (Condon: "You watch science taken to that degree

where it becomes irrational, and pure destruction.”) The viewer is also intended to draw critical conclusions about Holmes’ response to Mrs. Kelmot, who needs comforting (and even being lied to) rather than common sense advice. Holmes himself certainly draws that conclusion in the film. He has hid himself away from others, he realizes, because of the damage he thinks he has done.

Neither of these points is especially convincing. “Modern science” as such was not responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—modern capitalist society, and specifically, American imperialism, was to blame.

As for Mrs. Kelmot’s situation, it is not entirely clear what Holmes could have done. His chilly, conventional reaction was probably not helpful, but it seems absurd to fault him for her fateful decision. He did not, as they say, find her wandering around in the woods. Her situation was formed by circumstances that had nothing to do with Holmes.

Condon, who first made his name with *Gods and Monsters* (1998), has an eclectic body of work. His most interesting work remains *Kinsey* (2004), with Liam Neeson as the famed sex researcher, Alfred Kinsey, whose efforts in the 1950s came under attack from right-wing forces. That film, made during the Bush administration and in defense of sexual “variation,” was done with a certain amount of warmth and humanity.

But Condon has also written or directed some trivial works, or worse, including *Chicago* (2002, which he wrote), *Dreamgirls* (2006), *The Twilight Saga* (two parts, 2011 and 2012!) and, most disgracefully, *The Fifth Estate*. The latter work, a hatchet job on WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange (played by Benedict Cumberbatch), left a particularly foul taste in the mouth.

As we noted on the WSWS: “Despite claims by the director and others involved that the film was not conceived as an attack on Assange and WikiLeaks, [The Fifth Estate] is a tendentious work promoting a definite agenda.” An article in *Vogue* confirms Condon’s hostile attitude toward Assange: “Cumberbatch realized that some of Assange’s fears were justified. ‘On a lot of the stage direction, we collided paths because Bill [Condon] did seem to be setting him up as this antisocial megalomaniac.’”

An interviewer suggested to Condon that “you’re personally in support of this way of exposing truth, and the importance of it.” The director replied, wretchedly, “Yeah, but I would never say I agree with total transparency for powerful institutions, because governments cannot function with total transparency. I think that’s a naive idea, you know?”

Condon’s *Mr. Holmes* does not involve dramatizing contemporary political issues and personalities. In a period piece, the director can avoid revealing in so direct a fashion his accommodation to the status quo and the accomplished fact. However, something of his essential conformism *on important matters*, colors Mr. Holmes. It is not an impressive work.



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