

A House Split in Half

— AN ESSAY BY —

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The book is heavy, bound in dusty black buckram that is now faded to the gray of cigarette ash. The dust jacket was discarded years ago. The pages are chamois-soft and the color of weak tea, the ends ridged like an irregular fingerprint. *Tome* is the word that comes to mind, something archaic and mysterious and rewarding. On the spine, the title, originally in gilt letters, has been all but rubbed away. But if the light catches the book just right, you can read the two most important words of the title, in ghostly black like a photo negative: *Sherlock Holmes*.

My grandfather gave me this book when I was eleven or twelve. It is the complete stories of Sherlock Holmes: all four novels and fifty-six short stories. As a child I had loved the Encyclopedia Brown mysteries, and I had graduated to the Hardy Boys, but this was the real deal, the fountainhead of modern detective fiction. I inhaled the book, pored over every detail of Dr. Watson's narration, struggled with some of the Victorian-era vocabulary (what, exactly, is a *brougham*?), and came to hero-worship Holmes and Watson and their extraordinary friendship.

That was my first clue that I wasn't just a mystery junkie. I enjoyed the twisty and tension-filled plots, but the actual mysteries were not why I kept returning to these stories. Aside from a few spine-tingling passages in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the writing was merely serviceable, although occasionally surprising — you read “My dear Holmes!” I ejaculated” and see if you aren't thrown off momentarily. No, I was fascinated by the characters and their relationships with each other.

A few years later, I came across a copy of *Gorky Park*, the first novel in Martin Cruz Smith's illimitable Arkady Renko series, and I was hooked. However, it's in his third Renko novel, *Red Square*, that Smith offers his most succinct description of the kind of stories he writes. A character asks

Arkady why on earth he would choose to be an investigator in the Soviet Union. Arkady says such a job gives him permission: “When someone is killed, for a short time people have to answer questions. An investigator has permission to go to different levels and see how the world is built. A murder is a little like a house splitting in half; you see what floor is above what floor and what door leads to another door.”

All stories have at their heart a mystery, a question to be answered. Will Prince Hamlet avenge his murdered father? Will Sherlock Holmes solve the riddle of the speckled band? Will Jane Eyre find true love? In asking questions, a protagonist discovers or creates doorways. We follow the protagonist through those doorways only if we are drawn to him or her. I worried as a young writer about how to build a good mystery, how to follow the rules of the genre without writing something that was stale or boring. What I eventually learned is that I need to create a compelling character, and then imagine that character in a situation that demands answers.

Some people can walk right into another person’s life and open their closets, look under their rugs, peer into their refrigerators. In the real world, I hesitate to ask people about their personal lives, because I don’t want to pry. When writing fiction, however, nothing else is more rewarding than this search for answers. Asking certain questions can split a house in half, reveal hidden attics and basements, lead to places the questioner may not have intended to go but that prove to be surprisingly fruitful.

BOARDING SCHOOLS conjure up thoughts of exclusive all-male enclaves, of privilege and hard work, of privation and ritual and *The Catcher in the Rye*. While nothing guarantees acceptance at the college of your choice, attendance at a good boarding school used to be and often still is thought of as a considerable advantage in the admissions game. I was certainly well prepared for college and adult life by my own boarding school experience. But in the changing world of the twenty-first century, what if the promise didn’t always hold? And what if someone came to question everything he had been taught, everything he knew about his own alma mater? That’s the situation Matthias Glass faces in *Shadow of the Lions*.

But it’s more than that. Rather than have my protagonist slowly come to realize that the gilded promises made by his boarding school might not

always be kept, I wanted him to experience a shock in the opening pages, a shock that will reverberate through his life. The question at the heart of this book — *what would happen if your best friend disappeared?* — is one that haunts Matthias. The mystery of that scenario, of Fritz vanishing into thin air, might be compelling enough. But just as fascinating to me is what happens to the people left behind in the aftermath. What kind of shadow would such an event cast over your life? And what if you suddenly learned something about this long-ago event, something that shined a light on it, that made you wonder if maybe you could actually do something to find out what happened to your friend? What kinds of questions might you ask? What house would split in half for you, and what secrets would be revealed?

And what would you do in the face of such uncertainty?

Would you hesitate, reconsider, and leave the mystery for others to answer?

Or would you take a breath, steel yourself, and step through that doorway?