

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was born on May 22, 1859, in Edinburgh, as Arthur Doyle (he later used his middle name, Conan, as part of his surname). His father, a civil servant and frustrated artist, became an alcoholic, and Arthur was sent to boarding school in England to escape the chaos at home.

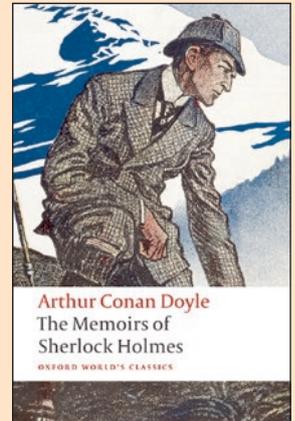
He went on to study medicine at Edinburgh University, where one teacher, Dr Joseph Bell, made a big impression on him. An **eccentric** character in his long coat and deerstalker hat, Bell had an **uncanny** ability to diagnose patients purely by making logical **deductions** from their appearance.

Conan Doyle's first medical practice was slow to take off, and while waiting for patients, he wrote fiction. It was many years before his first novel was published, introducing the detective Sherlock Holmes, who was clearly based on Dr Bell. A series of Sherlock Holmes stories followed.

Doyle grew tired of writing them, but when he killed Sherlock off in one story, there was a huge public **outcry** (people wore black armbands!), and Doyle had to bring him back to life.

Doyle combined writing with a keen interest in sport; he played first class cricket and was goalkeeper for Portsmouth AFC. More surprising, given the ultra-rational character of Sherlock Holmes, was Doyle's fascination with the supernatural.

In 1893, Doyle's father died in a psychiatric hospital, and his wife Louisa was given months to live. His resulting depression led Doyle to investigate **spiritualism** and communication with the dead. Later, during World War I, he lost several family members, and he became especially desperate to make contact with his dead son.



Doyle remarried after Louisa's death. His second wife, Jean, became a medium, and Doyle devoted all his time to giving lectures and writing about supernatural phenomena. In his book, *The Coming of the Fairies*, he insisted that the photographs of the 'Cottingley fairies', taken by two young girls, could not have been faked.

The women finally admitted their **hoax** in 1983: 'He had lost his son recently in the war,' explained 81-year-old Elsie Wright, 'and I think the poor man was trying to comfort himself in these things.'

Despite heart problems, Conan Doyle went on a lecture tour of Europe in 1929. He returned in pain and was **bedridden** until his death on July 7, 1930 (though shortly before he died he was found lying in the garden, **clutching** his heart with one hand and holding a flower in the other). His last words to his wife were, 'You are wonderful.'

Six days after his death, a séance was held at the Royal Albert Hall, attended by 6,000 people. Jean was alone in claiming that she had heard a message from Arthur.



Harry Houdini



Harry Houdini was born on March 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary, as Erik Weisz. His family moved to Wisconsin in America when he was four, and for some unknown reason Houdini later claimed he'd been born there on April 6. It's said this may have been because his father had to escape Budapest after killing a prince in a duel and Harry wanted to disguise his roots.

Houdini became fascinated by magic as a young boy, and when he read the autobiography of the great French magician, Robert-Houdin, he was **hooked**. At 17, he began performing tricks, using Houdin's name to create his own stage name.

Harry had little success as a magician at first, and was ready to give it up, but his career took off when he made escapology the focus of his act. He had long been a keen amateur athlete, boxer, swimmer, and cyclist (he was even considered for the US Olympic team). Combining his athleticism with an extraordinary ability to contort his body, he was able to escape from **handcuffs** in seemingly impossible situations, including locked crates which had been dropped into rivers. Adverts for Houdini's shows claimed he could escape through solid barriers by dematerializing, but Houdini himself always denied he had any supernatural powers.



After the death of his beloved mother in 1913, Houdini investigated the popular interest in mediums who claimed to contact the dead. He said he never **dismissed** the possibility of communicating with spirits, but had never found anyone who could actually do it for real. It may seem paradoxical that a magician and illusionist should be so **sceptical** about the supernatural, but magicians know what fakery is, and Harry spent much of his life exposing the tricks that so-called mediums used in their séances.

In 1926, despite having broken his ankle, Houdini wouldn't cancel a US tour. After one of the shows, an enthusiastic fan decided to test Harry's famous ability to **withstand** any punch to the stomach, but without first warning him. Harry was clearly injured by the blow, and performed with severe stomach pains for two days. When he finally saw a doctor, he was diagnosed with **acute** appendicitis. He tried to go on with his next show with a fever of 40°C. He **collapsed** on stage, and died in hospital on the somewhat **inauspicious** date of October 31 (Halloween). His last words were, 'I'm tired of fighting.'

Houdini had arranged that his wife, Bess, would hold séances after his own death, in which he would communicate a secret message if it proved possible. The séances continued for ten years, before Bess finally ended them saying, 'Ten years is long enough to wait for any man.'