

10 Rules for Sherlockian Pastiches

With no apology whatsoever, I offer my own highly opinionated rules for good pastiches, Willis G. Frick.

1. Write short stories, not a book. The longer a work becomes, the harder it is to maintain another writer's style, sense, language, characters, and situations. The best pastiches I have read were short stories; some of the most execrable were endless books. Part of the literary agent's brilliance is his ability to set a stage for a time, a place, and a situation in less than a paragraph.
2. No famous people as characters! The character of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are already made and set. So is the overall situation. Apply your creativity to the plot and the rest of characters and do not recycle the person of Teddy Roosevelt to sell mufflers.
3. The end of civilization as we know it should NOT depend on the outcome of your pastiche. Not every case is simultaneously crucial to the future existence of the Queen of England, the Pope, Argentina, and the Royal Navy. You will recall the interesting matter of a red-haired pawnbroker.
4. Check your facts! Don't assume that Tower Bridge was there in 1890, that trains to Scotland leave from Victoria, or that a critical mass of Uranium can be assembled from two pieces at walking speed to make an atomic bomb.
5. Set the story in London or at least England! Yes, I know you have lived in Hicksville Ohio for 30 years, know the geography and people well, and want to provide an explanation for the area's great mystery (who killed old man McCarthy in '06). Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson belong in Victorian England.
6. Sherlock Holmes is not Rambo. Very seldom in the Canon is action "on stage" used to forward the plot or resolve the story. The fight with Woodly was off-stage. Even when action by Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson is vital to the plot it is done in a few sentences. Take a look at the short scene in "The Adventure of the Three Garridebs" where Dr. Watson is shot.

7. The characters, behaviors, and expertise of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are set, with enough internal inconsistencies for a wide variety of behaviors. Yes, I know you are an expert on stamps from the Belgium Congo, but don't make Sherlock Holmes a world-leading philatelist. And, with no apologies to a certain writer, don't marry anybody off!
8. Dialog is hard, but study the Canonical style and try. Long third person paragraphs, the comments on an imaginary narrator, or words from outer-space are generally absent from the Canon. While Victorians may of been more formal in their speech, that is not an excuse for horrendous, convoluted dialog.
9. Follow the rules of detection and play fair with the reader. No long lost identical twins or time machines.
10. If you must be politically correct, then use Victorian politics. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are men of their time. While we might cringe at their prejudices, don' t bring them up-to-date – they don't live in Kansas City!

You can probably find an exception to each of these rules somewhere in the Canon, but not all 10 at once.

But, you ask, why doesn't Mr. Frick write pastiches if he knows all the rules? Well, I am ready to admit I am not much good at creative writing but at the same time I enjoy good creative reading.

Happy Writing! Willis Frick, sherlock1@cox.net