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Who Is Enola Holmes? Everything You Need to Know About Sherlock's Sister

By Ryan Britt



She may not be in the Arthur Conan Doyle canon, but she is on Netflix. Photo: Courtesy of Netflix

The number of things Sherlock Holmes has *failed* to deduce about the world could fill a book. In fact, considering that his little-known sister, Enola Holmes, is — according to Nancy Springer's apocrypha — significantly smarter and more worldly than he, perhaps the things Sherlock fails to deduce could fill just as many books as the young-adult author has penned on the fictional brilliant young woman few people recognize. (That'd be six.)

In the new Netflix movie *Enola Holmes*, Millie Bobby Brown brings the titular teenage sister to wider acclaim in a streaming story that feels aimed at people who like *A Series of Unfortunate Events* but would prefer something slightly less funny and with only one orphan (who is not exactly an orphan). In both the film and the detective novels, Enola is the similarly gifted youngest sibling of Mycroft and Sherlock, but because she's a young woman living at the tail end of the Victorian era, she's forced to navigate sexism and prejudice the likes of which her brothers would never understand. In this way, Enola's story is a rallying cry for young

Enola is not a character in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's canon.

In the original 56 short stories and four novels written by Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes has only one sibling: an older brother, Mycroft, who appears only in “The Greek Interpreter,” “The Bruce-Partington Plans,” and “The Final Problem,” among the original stories. The idea that Sherlock and Mycroft have a younger sister — in this case, Enola, a finishing-school defector and budding detective in her own right, who specializes in missing-persons cases — is entirely the creation of Nancy Springer, who began publishing the Enola Holmes novels in 2006, starting with *The Case of the Missing Marquess*.

The possibility of a secret, third Holmes sibling is the stuff of very old fanfiction.

While Enola herself is Springer's creation, the old-school fan theory that Mycroft and Sherlock have a secret sibling is almost old as the fandom itself. Though Doyle never used the name Sherrinford Holmes in print, it is reportedly a name he considered for his fictional detective before settling on Sherlock. William S. Baring-Gould's book *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* asserts something different: that Mycroft and Sherlock may have an older brother named Sherrinford, who manages their family's country estate. That theory was evolved on the BBC series *Sherlock*, when the name Sherrinford was appropriated to describe a prison that contained Eurus Holmes, who, in the fourth season of that series (2017), is revealed to be Sherlock and Mycroft's secret sister. That said, because the Springer book was published in 2006, Enola predates the Eurus season of *Sherlock* by nine years, making Enola the original secret Holmes sister. Like Baring-Gould's super-old fan theory, Enola and her mother (Helena Bonham Carter) occupy the Holmes family's country estate, which in *Enola Holmes* is called Ferndell.

people looking for non-male detectives who aren't named Nancy Drew. Beyond that, however, is a richly specific tale involving missing mothers, ciphers, and anti-corset diatribes. Still asking yourself, “How did I not know Sherlock had a sister?” Fair enough. As the Baker Street resident himself says, “I cannot make bricks without clay! Give me data!” Here are the essential details about Enola and how she fits into the larger world of her famous cokehead older brother.

Millie Bobby Brown's Enola is pretty faithful to the Enola of Springer's books — with two big changes.

At the beginning of Springer's first Enola Holmes book, *The Case of the Missing Marquess*, we learn that Enola's mother has gone missing on the eve of her daughter's 14th birthday. In the

movie, her age is changed to 16 (probably because Brown is a 16-year-old in real life). As far as Enola's smarts and general detecting skills go, the books and the movie give us pretty much the same character. But because this is a movie, and movie things have to happen in it, there's one slightly more noticeable change: In the film, Enola is trained to be a fighter by her mother and is pretty well versed in a variety of martial arts. It's not that Book Enola can't handle herself, but a penchant for battle is definitely not a defining aspect of her character. Meanwhile, Movie Enola says, “I was taught to watch and listen. I was taught to fight. This is what my mother made me for.”

Overemphasizing Holmesian characters' fighting skills is nothing new for film adaptations set in this beloved Victorian universe. Although Sherlock himself was noted for his ability to box some ruffians ("The Solitary Cyclist") and wrestle people using the martial art Doyle calls "baritsu" ("The Empty House"), it's not as though he was beating up bad guys Batman-style in every short story. And yet in the 2009 movie *Sherlock Holmes*, that's exactly what Robert Downey Jr.'s Sherlock seems to do. Brown's Enola doesn't go full-on Downey with the violence, but her Enola is much more physically active than the character is in Springer's books.

Enola's relationship with Sherlock is much cozier than it is in Springer's books.

Although both Mycroft and Sherlock eventually come to view Enola as an equal in Springer's sixth book, *The Case of the Gypsy Good-bye*, at the start of the first novel, Sherlock is mostly dismissive of his sister. In this way, Springer's books take a somewhat one-note approach to Sherlock's character, casting him mainly as sexist and ignorant of women in the extreme. At the end of the first Springer book, Sherlock says this of Enola: "Thoughtful and imaginative, perhaps, but certainly no stranger to the weakness, the irrationality, of her sex."

But Henry Cavill's Sherlock in *Enola Holmes* is *nothing* like this. From the very beginning, he is supportive of Enola and attempts to help her where he can throughout the story. In the majority of the Springer books, Sherlock certainly *likes* Enola more than his older brother Mycroft, but their overall relationship is much chillier. In contrast, Cavill's Sherlock acts the way any big brother in a Victorian period piece might; he's aloof and brooding, but he's basically a good person. Cavill's Sherlock isn't a terrible interpretation of the character from the books (either Doyle's or Springer's), but he is a little more low-key than most onscreen Sherlocks. He smiles a lot, he barely smokes, he never mentions shooting up his "seven-percent solution" of cocaine, and his best friend, Watson, is nowhere in sight. In Springer's novels, Dr. Watson is very much around. In *The Case of the Bizarre Bouquets*, Enola even gives Watson an assist. But in the end, the Enola Holmes book series takes five installments for Sherlock

and his sister to make peace. In the movie, their estrangement happens mostly off-camera, and from the moment Cavill saunters in, you know he's going to be a nice Sherlock.

And it works, sure. But perhaps the most arresting thing about Nancy Springer's books is that Sherlock Holmes is perceived — at least for a good chunk of the series — as kind of a bad guy, and Enola stands in great contrast to him. In *Enola Holmes*, the Netflix movie, he's mostly just a woke, Victorian Superman. Which, in a film that isn't about Sherlock anyway, is probably fine.

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