

Thinking Like Sherlock

HOW YOU CAN LEARN FROM THE FAMED DETECTIVE

by Julie Haire

There's sharp, and then there's Sherlock Holmes sharp—deliberative, insightful, observant, astute. It was those qualities that made psychologist and journalist Maria Konnikova think we could learn a thing or two from the 19th-century detective made famous in Arthur Conan Doyle's novels. In her new book, *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes* (Viking), Konnikova examines Sherlock's mind and tells us how we can use some of his tricks of the trade in our own lives.

Brain World: Why did Sherlock Holmes have such a great mind?

Maria Konnikova: If you stop to think about it, Sherlock Holmes doesn't actually do anything all that extraordinary on his adventures. Instead, he does something so simple that we don't normally give it a second thought: He observes instead of just seeing. He is the eternally mindful detective, someone who is always aware not only of his external environment but of the goings-on of his own mind. He doesn't just let the world happen to him, so to speak. He actively takes control of what he pays attention to—and how he pays attention to it.

BW: Holmes talked of the "brain attic" as the space in one's head where their information is stored. Why does "stocking your attic" in the right way matter?



MK: When it comes to memory, our ability is, alas, finite. Not that we can't remember vast amounts of information—we absolutely can, and we can train our memory to retain an ever-increasing number of facts. But whenever we choose to remember something, it becomes a piece of mental luggage, in a manner of speaking. The more luggage we decide to throw up into our attic space, the more it will weigh us down—and the more difficult it will be to store new pieces in any semblance of order so that we can access them when and how we want to. Pretty soon, the attic will be a mess.

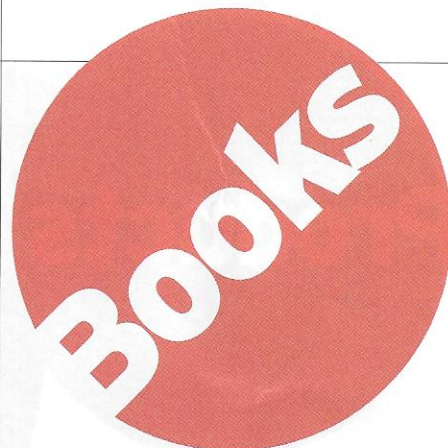
Holmes urges us to realize the importance of mindful order. Not only should we always know what we are putting into our brain attic—what we notice, focus on, and store in our long-term memory—but we should make sure that we store it there in orderly fashion so that we can access it when we need to. It's not enough to remember something; we also have to be able to retrieve it.

BW: How likely is it to "rebuild" one's brain attic, even after years of inattention?

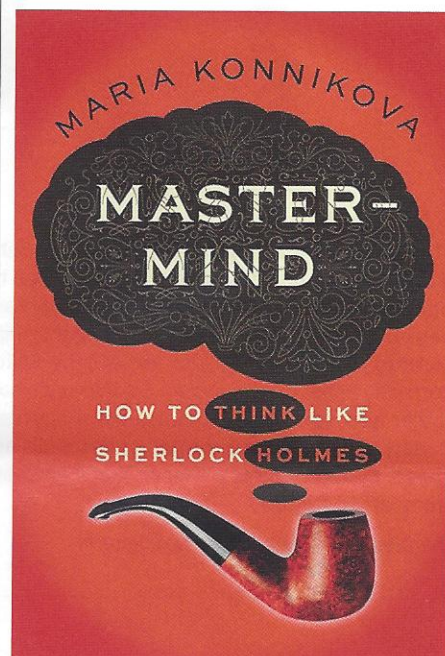
MK: In a way, our brain attic isn't like a physical attic at all. If you neglect a physical attic, it will take massive renovation to get it into any semblance of shape again. In contrast, we have far more control over our mental real estate. Even if we ignore it for huge chunks of time, we can whip it into shape with remarkable speed. Our brains are always changing, and new research has found that we can alter our neural landscape in more profound ways far later in life than previously thought possible. We can sometimes reverse the effects of neural decline (for instance, reversal of hippocampal shrinkage), and we can increase gray matter volume through concerted practice.

BW: Is it possible to train your brain to be inquisitive and observant in areas you might not care deeply about—or even at all?

MK: It is possible—but with one major caveat. For the time that we're being observant, we have to train ourselves to care. It is far easier to retain information if we can find it somehow relevant, even in some surface fashion. Our brain knows—and cares—if we think something is important or not. And it's smart. It will learn



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from us to retain the important things and not the unimportant ones. It realizes that it can't do it all!

Should we decide that something previously unimportant is suddenly worthy of attention, we will need to retrain ourselves to care. If we can find some sort of personal connection, anything at all that trips our interest or makes it possible to relate to it, we will find our brain adjusting accordingly.

BW: How did Holmes's practice of meditation contribute to his success?

MK: Meditation is actually a far broader concept than people realize. All it means, really, is an ability to quiet your mind and hone your focus. And this is something that Holmes does all the time when he is active on a case. If you read through the stories, you will find that, more often than not, Holmes's first action after a new client tells his story isn't much of an action at all. It's rather more of a non-action: Holmes sits down, eyes closed, pipe in mouth, and gives in to concentrated thought. And while that may not be what people picture when they think of meditation, the principle is identical. ☐