

[Q&A]

PW TALKS WITH MARIA KONNIKOVA

# Thinking Like Holmes in the Age of Google

In *Mastermind* (Reviews, Oct. 29; pub date, Jan. 7), psychologist Maria Konnikova reveals how anyone can strengthen his or her thinking by adopting some of Sherlock Holmes's best practices.

What about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work appeals to you?

I was first struck by the beauty and craft of the writing itself. I hadn't realized that Doyle was an extraordinary writer—not just a great teller of detective stories. And soon after came the psychological realization: the man was light-years ahead of his time in his understanding of the human mind. His insights preceded research in psychology and neuroscience by decades and sometimes by more than a century. They were informed by a deep understanding of human nature and seem surprisingly modern and on point. I was awed at how well Doyle captured the inner workings of the brain and our way of interacting with the world. His training, coupled with his keen, perceptive eye and ear, offered a potent combination for psychological insight.

How did you come up with the idea for this book?

As I reread the stories, I realized just how much psychological material they contained. It struck me that Holmes provided a perfect platform for exploring the human mind in a way that was relatable and might appeal to people who didn't normally care too much about the inner workings of psychology. I tried writing a few pieces in that vein for *Scientific*

*American* and found that the approach had traction with readers.

What surprised you the most?

The more I researched, the more I realized how deep-rooted the problem of attention and multitasking really is. We are terrible at paying attention

and always have been. It's not just a modern ailment. Every generation thinks there is too much going on to allow for proper focus—even monks complained! But the real culprit isn't the big bad world of distraction; it's our own mind's tendency to wander away from the present moment.

How can one be more mindful and attentive?

It's a question of setting limits for yourself and making a point of respecting them. You have to carve out pockets of time where you don't pay attention to anything but what you're doing. Turn off the Internet. Turn off Twitter. Don't respond to e-mail. It can be as little as half an hour, but it's important to start somewhere. You can also make a habit of not multitasking: learn to monitor your own behavior and note when you slip off course, be it by checking your e-mail or looking at the time. How often do you do it? What prompts you to do it? Self-monitoring is an important step to learning to master your focus.

—LENNY PICKER

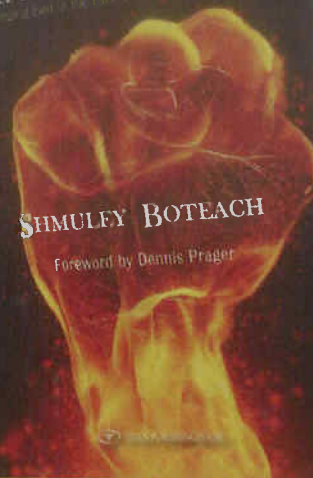


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