

Charles Sutherland, age seven

Extract from journal (pale blue)

Today I was playing Monopoly with Sherlock Holmes and we were talking about semiotics. It was my third day at home with a cold, and Holmes's second day out of his book, which is a record. I brought him out last night by mistake, and Mum agreed to let him stay out because I had a fever and a sore throat and putting him back would make it worse. Dad told Mum she always worries too much about people seeing the characters anyway. "Who's going to guess the man staying in our guest room is a fictional Victorian detective?" he said. "And who would possibly believe them if I did?" I wasn't meant to hear that part. They thought I was asleep.

Anyway, Holmes and I were playing Monopoly, because I was bored and I didn't feel like doing the catch-up work the teachers had set. I don't really like Monopoly, except for recognising the parts of London from Dickens and Conan Doyle. I waste all my time trying to get Piccadilly (because Mr Micawber wanted to live there) and Fleet Street (because David Copperfield takes Peggotty to see a waxwork there), so I never win except by accident. Rob likes it, though. Mr Holmes had been to all the locations, and he told me stories about them, which was interesting even though of course I'd read them all. That was when semiotics came up, because we were talking about the similarities between detective work and literary analysis, and the importance of reading details and signifiers of meaning.

"The two practices are identical to a point," Holmes said. He was sitting cross-legged at the foot of my bed, his pipe between his teeth. "Both require observation and analysis. Both involve the construction of a theory, a theory that must be tested, justified, proved. Both require years of study and experience. But the world in which you operate is more shadowy than mine. I can look at a room and tell you who has been in it, when they were there, and what they did, based on details. Those are facts. Those same details in a book have meaning beyond fact, and the way you read them changes them."

“Is that why you're always different?” I asked. “You change every time I read you out of a book.”

“I stay the same,” Holmes says. “At least, the text from which I come remains unaltered. You change, and you see different things in me. And so every time you read me, your image of me is a little different.”

“So that means yes?”

He smiled. “That means yes.”

I coughed for a bit then, and he took the opportunity to buy Trafalgar Square. “So what are you like inside your book?” I said, when I could speak again. “In the moments when I'm not reading you? Outside my interpretation?”

“You assume I exist when I'm not being read,” he said. “That any aspect of any book does, in any way except as text on a page. That it isn't the act of reading and interpretation that makes us real.”

I thought about that. “Is it?”

“I do not know,” he said. “It seems an obvious fact. But I also know there is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact. You've landed on one of my hotels.”

There was a point I was going to make about all this. But it took me so long to write all that out that I've forgotten what it was, and now it's time for dinner and there's fish and chips so I have to stop writing. But anyway, it was interesting.

Charles Sutherland, aged 13

Extract from diary (dark green)

It's my first night in Oxford, and I can't sleep. I suppose it's really my second morning now; midnight's already come, stalked around the room a bit, and slunk away. But that's technical. It feels like night. It's winter here, so it will feel like night for a long time.

At home, at this very moment, it's the middle of a long, hot summer's day. I know it's hot, because when Dad phoned this evening (his morning), he said the sun was already fierce outside. The grass will be dry and parched. It's raining outside my window. That might be part of what's keeping me awake, perhaps, but I usually love the sound of rain on window panes in the dark. I think it's really because a part of me is lodged back in that summer's day in New Zealand. It was sleeping through a summer's night earlier today, while we were taken around the college and introduced to the lecturers. I didn't miss it. Now it's awake, and the rest of me is crying out and straining to get to it, so that my chest hurts and I feel like I might shatter into a thousand pieces. I said a much more confused version of this earlier – not all of it, just the waking-sleeping part – and Mum said, “Yes, that's called jet-lag, Charley,” rather dryly. And I *am* jet-lagged – I could barely keep my eyes open at dinner, which was actually good in retrospect, because I would have been over-awed by the massive dining hall if I hadn't been concentrating on not yawning instead. But that's not what I'm talking about.

I think I'm just trying to say I'm homesick. It's such an ordinary word. Like seasickness, or the common cold. Or heartbreak.

Dad and Rob will be eating lunch now, probably. And then Rob will probably be sorting things out to go down to Wellington, even though he doesn't leave for a few weeks yet. He won't be homesick when he starts university, and he definitely won't miss me. He can't wait to be there.

I want to be here. I do. I was *happy* to be here, earlier today. I will be again tomorrow, I think. My happiness has just gone with the light, turning gray then dark as the shadows lengthened;

it will come back when the sky lightens in a few hours.

“Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration.”

Think of something else.

I went into the Bodleian library for the first time today. I can't describe that now. I'll give it a page later. But it was like my soul had unfurled a little to bask in words and paper and dust.

And they let me climb all the way to the top of Tom Tower, where Lewis Carroll lived for most of his life. It felt like going back in time. I could hear bits of letters and poems and nonsense whispering from the corners. I was being figurative there, but I really do need to be careful about that. When the tutor who was showing me around gestured me up, he recited playfully,

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch!”

And straight away I felt a shiver of unease run through the world, and the shadows begin to gather; I had to stop thinking quickly, or something might have appeared from nowhere. This place is too stimulating, and I'm still too foggy from jet-lag: I can feel interpretations bubbling beneath the surface of my mind, trying to come out. I wonder what a Jabberwock would look like? The jaws and claws are all you get of it in the poem. It's pure nonsense, really, but because of that it seems to stand in for the most dangerous beast that can be imagined. I think a reading would probably tell you more about the reader than about the Jabberwock.

Mum's very worried that I'll slip and let something loose in the middle of Oxford. I can see the tension in her eyes whenever I look at her, though she's trying to be reassuring for me. She must be wishing she was at home too, and missing Dad and Rob as much as I am. I didn't mean to cause any of this. I just want to apologise to everyone, over and over again - for being what I am, whatever that is, for breaking the family up, for making everyone's lives difficult, for *existing*. But I

imagine that gets annoying after a while.

So much for thinking of something else. I've already devolved from homesickness to self-pity, and I've only been writing half an hour or so. Well done, Charley. I think sometimes words can be too self-indulgent. The stupid thing is, I actually do feel better now.

The rain's dying down, and it's very cold sitting up to write. I might just try to get some sleep, and wait for the day to brighten things up. Classes start in a week.

Yours,

Charles Sutherland

They all call me Charles here. The dean started it – gravely, respectfully, as if I were a fellow scholar – and the others followed his lead. I could have corrected them, but I didn't. I think I want to be Charles Sutherland for a while, and see how it goes.