



BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH

London & Hollywood

Lynnette Porter

AN UNAUTHORISED PERFORMANCE BIOGRAPHY

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Cover design by Jules Coomber.

About the Author

Lynnette Porter, Ph.D., is a professor in the Humanities and Communication Department at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida, USA. Her many other books about popular culture or celebrity studies include those about television series, such as *Sherlock*, *Doctor Who*, and *LOST*, or films, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, plus the occasional study of artists, such as Vincent van Gogh. She is a contributing editor, often reviewing television series or films, for online magazine *PopMatters* and is the editor of the journal *Studies in Popular Culture*. She is a frequent speaker at academic conferences and fan conventions and has been invited to talk about popular culture in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In 2013, MX Publishing released the first performance biography, *Benedict Cumberbatch, In Transition* and in 2014 published the follow-up, *Benedict Cumberbatch, Transition Completed*. Like its predecessors, *Benedict Cumberbatch: London and Hollywood* can be read as a stand-alone book or companion work.

Thank you to everyone who has helped me with my research for this book, as well as the previous two. As always, I thank my supportive friends and family. Finally, I especially thank Jules Coomber for her wonderful cover design that beautifully captures the spirit of this book.

Introduction

Benedict Cumberbatch in London and Hollywood

“You can’t get too nostalgic. You can look back and go, ‘That was a great year, a great moment,’ . . . I’ve got personal goals and all sorts of things that I want to evolve. I always have been about building a career of longevity.”

Benedict Cumberbatch¹

Throughout his career, Benedict Cumberbatch has had many milestone “moments” in his career: a first role in a school play, university recognition as a young actor to watch, first professional theatrical role, first entry into a mainstream (“Hollywood”) film in *The Other Boleyn Girl*. He also celebrated several “breakthrough” moments that promised great change in the way the entertainment industry and the public view his talent, such as the starring role in the award-winning *Hawking*, internationally acclaimed role as the lead of hit BBC series *Sherlock*, an Emmy win (also for *Sherlock*, the U.S. television award supplementing many U.K. fan and industry awards for this role), an Oscar nomination for *The Imitation Game*, and the fastest ticket-selling record for *Hamlet*. By the time Cumberbatch reached 40, he could already look back on the kind of career of which most actors only dream. He has garnered public attention around the globe, becoming a megastar in Asia in particular because of *Sherlock*, but he also has been winning fans and awards in two of the world’s entertainment-industry hot spots: his native London and Hollywood.

London and Hollywood, the title of this, my third performance biography about Benedict Cumberbatch, reflects the actor’s post-

[1] Keveney, Bill. “Benedict Cumberbatch’s Very Big Year.” *USA Today*. 29 Jan. 2014. Web.

Oscar nomination reality and stardom. His career is no longer in transition from respected, talented working actor to international television and film star. Cumberbatch is now expected to build on that foundation and achieve new heights. He also faces even more scrutiny from fans, critics, and peers—and each group can be a tough audience with very different expectations for his career and public persona.

London

London represents Cumberbatch's home base and source of much of his early and continuing work in multiple media—theatre, radio, television, and film. His U.K.-based projects attract fans from far away, who may be prompted by #Setlock tweets to convene at *Sherlock* filming locations; drawn to live performances, sometimes with accompanying stage-door encounters; or thrilled to be part of a studio audience of television chat shows. Perhaps the “dark side” of Cumberbatch's London life is the paparazzi, who at times may be part of the actor's PR representatives' plan for keeping his name in the media between acting projects but who also may pop up anywhere to catch the actor in a less than stellar moment. Even when Cumberbatch moves house, his address is surprisingly easy for extremely invested fans to find. Simply walking or riding around town invites a flurry of social media comments reporting his every move. Yet London is also the source of Cumberbatch's livelihood and life—where he was born and reared, where his parents often did and do work, where he chooses to live with his family. London is often synonymous with the BBC, which frequently employs Cumberbatch (although BBC Cymru is home to *Sherlock*), and London is the site of much of Cumberbatch's theatrical work, most famously through his association with the National Theatre and, because of *Hamlet*, with the Barbican, although he has worked in many of London's theatres. Finally, in the U.K., Cumberbatch, long-time friend Adam Ackland, and others established SunnyMarch,

a production company that may herald a future direction for Cumberbatch's career as a producer. Although highly regarded as an actor, in London he also is recognised by producers and networks as someone whose name alone can attract a huge paying/viewing audience.

And Hollywood

Whereas London represents these aspects of Cumberbatch's career, Hollywood encourages a different perception of the types of projects and required publicity needed to keep Cumberbatch in the spotlight as a Hollywood A-lister or movie star. Instead of being perceived as a multimedia talent, the actor's work in the U.S. comes primarily from television and film.

In 2012, Cumberbatch reflected on whether he should be considered a Hollywood star: "Maybe after *Star Trek*, then I'll become one I don't know, I mean, start calling me it, why not? I can be Benedict Cumberbatch, movie star."² He also told the *Radio Times* that Los Angeles "is all about extremes . . . , so you get the worst excesses of everything—the health-kick thing, over-indulgence, recreational drug use, everything. It's paradise!"³ By August he was weary of being "castigated [in U.K. media] as a moaning, rich, public-school b-----d, complaining about only getting posh roles" and suggested that he might "want to go to America."⁴ His growing celebrity and introduction to U.S. audiences via *Sherlock* made some fans lament that Cumberbatch had "gone Hollywood," especially in light of an *Independent* interview that quoted him as saying "I'm playing a really big game

[2] Lobb, Adrian. "The Lonely Detective." *The Big Issue* (Scotland). 20-26 Aug. 2012, pp. 22-25. Print.

[3] Aitkenhead, Decca. "Welcome to the Pleasure Zone." *Radio Times*. 18-24 Aug. 2012, p. 11. Print.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 13. Print.

now I'm going into studios to meet executives and heads of production I'm interested in just playing the game a little bit, because it gives you a lot more choice. It gives you power and if you become indispensable to that machine it gives you a greater variety, which is what I always wanted. My career is about longevity." In interviews, he repeatedly identified U.S. movie stars Brad Pitt and George Clooney as his role models, actors "who get film screen net They're great people to emulate as a business model."⁵

Hollywood is a temptation and a viable addition to London-based work, but, despite Cumberbatch's reaction to the heady attention following *Star Trek: Into Darkness* or *The Imitation Game*, for example, he still remains ensconced in London. In early 2015, about a week before the Academy Awards he would attend as a best actor nominee, photos of the mansion Cumberbatch was rumoured to be buying in California surfaced online.⁶ When he decided to buy a new home, however, the location was not all that far from his previous London residence.

Whereas *Sherlock* has an immensely loyal following in the U.S., PBS does not usually generate as large a viewership as many other networks. The actor's 2014 Emmy win for *Sherlock*, on a night that also included Emmy statuettes being awarded to Martin Freeman and Steven Moffat, indicates that the series is popular with a wider audience than most PBS offerings (*Downton Abbey* being a great exception as one of the most watched and awarded PBS-broadcast series ever). For Cumberbatch to be recognised as a Hollywood star, however, the casual viewing public must know his name and look forward to buying tickets to his films. They must recognise the name and face of Cumberbatch the actor without having to be reminded of his role as Sherlock (or Khan, Alan Turing, or Doctor

[5] Gilbert, Gerard. "Parade's End: A Series to Challenge Downton." *The Independent*. 11 Aug. 2012, p. 9. Print.

[6] Sources including "Benedict Cumberbatch's New Los Angeles Mansion." PriceyPads.com. 14 Feb. 2015, and Thomas, Kate. "A Castle Fit for a Cumberbatch: Benedict's Sprawling New £10.8 Million Mansion in Los Angeles." *Daily Mail*. 13 Feb. 2015. Web.

Strange). Hollywood awards (e.g., Emmy) and nominations (e.g., Oscar) both reflect Cumberbatch's increasing name/face recognition in the U.S. and help ensure that more people watching or reading about the awards broadcasts around the world can identify the actor as well as his prominent roles.

Cumberbatch's 2016 Emmy nomination was termed a "surprise" by several reporters, but it indicates that, at least to Emmy voters, the actor's work stands out, even in an increasingly crowded field of excellent performances on a variety of broadcast platforms. "The Abominable Bride" did not receive nominations for writing or directing, but it did earn five nominations for special production effects and music and one acting nomination—Cumberbatch's as Outstanding Actor in a Limited Series or Movie. That *Sherlock* only produced one special episode during the period for Emmy consideration and that the series began in 2010—a very long time ago in television terms—the odds of the series or Cumberbatch getting this recognition is, as a *Bustle* entertainment reporter exclaimed, a "surprise By no means am I arguing against [Cumberbatch's] nomination by calling it a surprise, because he is beyond a talented actor. It's just that I wasn't expecting it considering when the last real season of the show came out. With each season and episode, he steals the show as Sherlock and brings a brilliant element to the small screen."⁷ The nomination suggests that Cumberbatch not only continues to catch the eye of awards voters, but his name has become better known within the U.S. entertainment industry and, to a certain extent, the American television-watching public.

Through science fiction (SF) or fantasy franchises (e.g., *Star Trek*, *The Hobbit*, *Doctor Strange*), Cumberbatch receives a lot of media attention during the casting, filming, and promotion of a movie, as well as positive reviews of his performance. SF or fantasy films

[7] Koerner, Allyson. "Benedict Cumberbatch's 2016 Emmy Nomination for 'Sherlock: The Abominable Bride' Is a Pleasant Surprise." *Bustle*. 14 July 2016. Web.

also give him the opportunity to attend fan-friendly events like conventions, especially pop culture barometer San Diego Comic-Con. Even when Cumberbatch is part of a large cast, he gains a lot of attention through promotion of films marketed to a large, well-established fandom—and many promotional events take place in the U.S.

Although association with blockbusters is an important part of Cumberbatch's Hollywood resume, he also gets more on-screen face time with U.S. audiences via small roles in films starring widely recognised U.S. stars like Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts (*August: Osage County*) or Johnny Depp (*Black Mass*) or “must-see” movies (e.g., *12 Years a Slave*). Although Cumberbatch's lead role in *The Fifth Estate* did not do nearly as well as expected at the box office, his starring role as Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* made non-*Sherlock/Hawking* audiences aware of Cumberbatch's talent to channel a genius and celebrate Otherness. *The Imitation Game* in particular required him to promote the film—including awards shows, red carpets, multiple interviews—during the U.S. award season. Harvey Weinstein, co-founder of The Weinstein Company, which backed and distributed *The Imitation Game*, shepherded Cumberbatch through the Oscar-season's promotional events and is keen to continue working with him. During a 2016 interview, Weinstein touted *The Current War*, starring Cumberbatch, as one of the company's forthcoming prestige films.⁸ In addition, the actor has increasingly worked with big-name Hollywood directors like Steven Spielberg (*War Horse*), J.J. Abrams (*Star Trek: Into Darkness*), and Bill Condon (*The Fifth Estate*). He has made inroads into late-night television chat shows, especially those hosted by Jimmy Fallon or Jimmy Kimmel—who often tweak and tease Cumberbatch's name, the moniker adopted by some of his fans, or the infamous comparisons of the actor with an otter. Although by 2016 the American public was more aware of Cumberbatch than

[8] Kilday, Gregg. “Harvey Weinstein Explains Recent Movie Release Shifts, TV Growth, and Oscar Prospects (Q&A).” *Hollywood Reporter*. 21 July 2016. Web.

ever before, especially in light of the publicity for *Doctor Strange*, Cumberbatch still was not a household name. However, he is increasingly sought after because of his talent and considered a Hollywood star.

The Public Persona

Around the time of the late 2014-early 2015 Oscar campaign for *The Imitation Game*, Cumberbatch's public persona underwent an important shift. He has frequently straddled the line between what some fans term "Dorkybatch"—the man pulling a face to poke fun at himself or an absurd situation, the fanboy grinning wildly or impulsively making an awkward comment upon meeting one of his idols—and the serious Hollywood actor whose solemn gaze stares out from the "Hollywood A-list" issue of *The Hollywood Reporter* or who makes *Time's* 100 Most Influential People list.

Cumberbatch has had a difficult relationship with fans—sometimes publicly recognising and thanking them for their support or going out of his way to sign autographs before or after events but other times bemoaning the fact of their existence (as in a 2014 photoshoot portraying him running away from adoring fangirls⁹ or a 2016 *Vanity Fair* interview in which he described fans as stalkers¹⁰) and avoiding interacting with them. Post-transition from working actor to star, Cumberbatch appears to struggle at times with the need for a bodyguard to accompany him on location and the fact that every word, gesture, or action is likely to be debated online, whether in the tabloids, news or entertainment media, social media, or fan sites.

In many ways Cumberbatch's career embodies the perceptions and expectations of an actor working in London and Hollywood. The actor has not moved from London (physically or in mindset) to

[9] Yuan, Jada. "Benedict and the Cumberbitches." *Vulture*. 18 Nov. 2014. Web.

[10] Schulman, Michael. "Cover Story: The Mind-Bending Benedict Cumberbatch." *Vanity Fair*. Oct. 2016. Web.

Hollywood, nor has he embraced one metaphorical or geographic location at the expense of the other. His career illustrates the often-conflicting desires for public recognition and privacy or the value of personally rewarding small acting projects versus the thrill of international acclaim for blockbusters or award winners. In the London-Hollywood dichotomy of Cumberbatch's professional world, he must be assertive in getting the roles he wants but not seem too hungry for fame, willing to play the game of promoting and publicising his work without seeming to have sold his soul, and working on Hollywood films without "going Hollywood."

About This Performance Biography

At 40, most people begin to take stock of all they have achieved and perhaps chart a course for where they want to be in the next decade or two (or three or four). By 40, a chronological milestone Benedict Cumberbatch reached in July 2016, he had achieved a great deal of professional success as an actor starring in multiple media: radio, theatre, television, and film. He had received or been nominated for the top acting awards in the U.K. and U.S. and developed an international fan following. He helped establish a production company and stated an interest in the types of films he hoped to develop and produce. He lent his name to a number of philanthropic and political causes, even when the latter did not endear him to a vocal segment of the British public. After more than a decade of hard work earning him some fame but more often the respect of peers and critics, he came to international fame, and 2014-2015 became a time of peak interest and, perhaps, overexposure before stabilising at a "normal" level of fame for a London-based actor deemed a Hollywood star.

This performance biography serves as a look back at the pivotal career performances along the way to Cumberbatch's stardom and some significant performances in his career through 2016. Cumberbatch often chooses projects with the greatest appeal

and likely long-term payoff (personally or professionally). As the actor noted in a *Star Trek* interview, “you can get paid more for doing TV work than you can for films... I could have made much more money if I’d stuck around doing plays than if I was in *Star Trek*. But you just get to play with bigger toys that no other schedule or budget would allow in a TV structure.”¹¹ Of course, as Cumberbatch’s popularity and bankability increase, so do his paycheque and perks. A close look at the trajectory and range of his roles explains not only how and why Cumberbatch became a star but how he intends to maintain that status and secure the much-desired longevity of his career.

To achieve this close look, *Benedict Cumberbatch: London and Hollywood* summarises many key moments in Cumberbatch’s career, some which have been discussed in greater depth in previous books *Benedict Cumberbatch: In Transition* and *Benedict Cumberbatch, Transition Completed: Films, Fame, Fans*; however, they are put into a different focus either through new information about specific projects (such as stage managers’ reports regarding *After the Dance* and *Frankenstein*) or a fresh perspective. Older projects, for example, take on different significance when regarded from the vantage point of hindsight and the progression of Cumberbatch’s early projects on the way to his current status as a star. Also, many newer fans may still be unaware of or have not had the opportunity to visit archives or otherwise view recordings of his earlier work. This performance biography encapsulates the career highlights of a famous actor who must either maintain a high level of international popularity (a difficult feat for any actor) or advance into new, perhaps surprising directions. That is why some chapters, such as those about theatre, include in-depth analysis of his performances in *After the Dance*, *Frankenstein*, and *Hamlet*, and what they indicate about his career at various stages of his path to stardom.

[11] Jeffery, Morgan. “Benedict Cumberbatch on ‘Parade’s End’: ‘My Look Suits a Period Drama.’ Digital Spy. 21 Aug. 2012. Web.

In addition, this book emphasises Cumberbatch's projects completed or released since late 2014—such as his star turn as Hamlet at the Barbican, mesmerising role as King Richard III in *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*, return as Sherlock Holmes in “The Abominable Bride” and the fourth series of *Sherlock*, and entry into the Marvelverse as the title character in *Doctor Strange*. The biography also delves into the significance of his accolades since 2014, including being nominated for an Academy Award for *The Imitation Game*, receiving the CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire), and earning another Emmy nomination for *Sherlock*. As a result of his roles or awards—or sometimes his interviews in light of them—Cumberbatch's career is at times controversial. The controversy surrounding the actor or his projects is also noteworthy in an analysis of this star's career and public perception of it.

In a 2012 interview, Cumberbatch noted that fans “know you from the trail you leave with your work; . . . the slightest edge of frustration in his voice. “They assume things about you because of who you play and how you play them, and the other scraps floating around in the ether. People try to sew together a narrative out of scant fact.”¹² In a performance biography, I do not attempt to draw conclusions about the actor himself or his personal life based on any comparisons between Cumberbatch and his roles. A performance biography, as part of the academic area of analysis and documentation known as celebrity studies, provides a critical evaluation of an actor's body of work, including his preparation, performance, and impact on popular culture. In this case, the performance biography is an analysis of Cumberbatch's work through 2016 and the popular and critical response to it, which illustrates a great deal about popular culture and the making of stars.

[12] Seale, Jack. “Benedict Cumberbatch on Fame, Science and His New Radio 3 Play, Copenhagen.” *Radio Times*. 11 Jan. 2013. Web.

As the introductory section of a *Times* article noted during the 2016 promotion of *The Hollow Crown*, “No matter how you slice it, Benedict Cumberbatch, the man with a surname that sounds like a fart in a bath, the man who looks like Sid the Sloth from *Ice Age* (both his descriptions), has somehow become a whopping great multimedia macro-millennial megastar. A good portion of his fame is that rare thing—deserved.”¹³

Benedict Cumberbatch is a highly talented actor whose work entertains or enlightens audiences, a star who sometimes gets in trouble for what he says off script, and a performer still navigating the perilous waters of fame as he frequently crosses the pond. He is a star, one whose career is worth investigating more closely and documenting for fans now and in future.

[13] Wilson, Benji. “Benedict Cumberbatch: King of All He Surveys.” *The Times*. 8 May 2016. Web.

Chapter 1

The Family Business

“I get out of bed to make [my parents] proud.” Issue 949,
16 May 2011

“I wasn’t really born with a silver spoon in my mouth or as part of the landed gentry. My parents just worked f---ing hard to afford me a very expensive education.” Issue 1014,
20 August 2012

The Big Issue, favourite Cumberbatch quotations¹

The Londoner born Benedict Timothy Carlton Cumberbatch on 19 July 1976 has varied his professional name throughout the years. He was originally known professionally as Ben Carlton, following his father Timothy Carlton not only into acting but using a more common stage name.² Certainly that variation was easier to say and spell, but it also failed to be as memorable as the young actor’s performances. “When I started, I just assumed I couldn’t be called Benedict Cumberbatch,” he told *The Guardian* in 2008.³ When he changed agents, he agreed to change his professional name. His agent thought that the name Benedict Cumberbatch is formal and unique, but the actor himself originally considered it “a bit bumbly and messy.”⁴ The name change was part of a “rebranding process,”

[1] “Interview—Benedict Cumberbatch at 40: Our Favourite Slices of Wit and Wisdom.” *The Big Issue*. 19 July 2016. Web.

[2] Kelly, Laura. “I’ve Been the Next Big Thing for about 10 Years.” *The Big Issue* (Scotland ed.). 16-22 May 2011, p. 19. Print.

[3] Lawson, Mark. “Under Their Skins.” *The Guardian*. 28 Apr. 2008. Web.

[4] Dessau, Bruce. “Benedict Cumberbatch’s Rising Star.” *The Times*. 3 Nov. 2007. Web.

he explained on radio program *French and Saunders* in early 2011 but joked that “I don’t change my name as often as I change my pants” when the hosts prodded him to talk about the name change. The discussion led to a bit of history about his surname, which supposedly means “a person who dwells in a valley with a stream.” Cumberbatch told the story of how, one day on the *Creation* set, a cast mate happily told him that the name has Welsh origins; however, the name also was reputed to come from the very English town of Cumberbatch, in Cheshire, which the actor’s mother, Wanda Ventham, confirmed was the true origin.⁵

Going back farther than any link to Cheshire is the name’s German origins. Long before acting became a family profession and generated new wealth, a branch became plantation owners in the Caribbean (Barbados) and, as was common with that profession, also were involved with the slave trade. One article claimed that “generations ago the family had made a mint as owners of a sugar plantation in Barbados.” Playing roles like Edmund Talbot in *To the Ends of the Earth* and later, in 2012, a U.S. plantation owner in *12 Years a Slave* helped him, he once said, “draw on this part of his DNA,” although other roles, such as abolitionist William Pitt in *Amazing Grace*, were “a sort of apology.”⁶ Despite that connection to family wealth, Cumberbatch’s half-sister Tracy told *The Sun* in 2011 that the actor’s father “had to scrimp and save to pay for Benedict to go to private school” and “set up a trust fund even before he had the idea of having Benedict.”⁷

Cumberbatch once described his upbringing as a sort of hybrid. On the one hand, he went off to boarding school at age 8; he attended public schools Brambletye Preparatory School in West Sussex and later Harrow, “whose former pupils include

[5] Wilson, MacKenzie. “Benedict Cumberbatch and His Mom Chat with ‘Saunders and French.’” BBC America. 3 Jan. 2011. Web.

[6] Lawson, Mark. “Under Their Skins.” *The Guardian*. 28 Apr. 2008. Web.

[7] Rollings, Grant. “Ben Has Trouble with Girlfriends Because He’s So Like Sherlock.” *The Sun*. 14 Jan. 2012. Web.

eight [Prime Ministers].”⁸ On the other, unlike his classmates who went on skiing holidays between terms, for example, he visited his grandmother in Brighton. Indeed, she helped pay for his education.⁹ When criticised for making comments about posh actors, the actor differentiated himself from his landed or titled class peers. Despite having the benefit of a public school education and the social connections it includes, Cumberbatch has tried diligently in public to straddle a middle (or perhaps a middle-class) line between being affluent and just a regular guy. That balance is increasingly difficult to maintain as the actor achieves greater fame.

Celebrity from an Early Age

Cumberbatch might have been expected to have a show biz life, given his parents’ circle of friends and colleagues in the British entertainment industry and the amount of press given to them during his childhood. Baby Ben was only five days old when the *Daily Mirror* published photographer Freddie Reed’s first picture of him. “Little Big Ben takes a bow” the paper wrote under the headline proclaiming him “Wanda’s Little Wonder.” Indeed, his parents look very happy in the photo: his mother beams at the camera, his father pecks her on the temple. Front and centre is nine-pound Benedict, looking more alert than most new babies, gazing calmly back at the camera. The paper noted that the new father had “helped to bring Ben . . . into the world at Queen Charlotte’s Hospital.”¹⁰

The *Daily Mirror* often chronicled the youngster’s life in its reports of Ventham’s television and theatrical career. For six months after her son’s birth, Ventham was largely out of the limelight, but

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] “Eee! It’s Wanda’s Little Wonder.” *Daily Mirror*. 24 July 1976, p. 5. Print.

she decided to return to acting when she received a contract for *Crown Court*. Carlton, then working in the television version of *Dick Barton*, worked during the day but looked after their son when Ventham performed in the theatre during the evening. Her return to television in a *Doctor Who* episode generated press about the role, but she also mentioned her little boy: “[My] one regret about *Dr. Who* is that Ben is still too young to watch.”¹¹

Ben seemed much more precocious at three. His mother, then starring in television drama *Fallen Hero*, described her son’s confusion about Father Christmas. According to the *Daily Express*, Ventham explained that “this is the first year he has really understood about Father Christmas, and he is very excited. But he is a bit puzzled because he has been taken by friends to see two separate Father Christmases and he can’t understand why there were two faces! He’s worried, too, that Father Christmas will come down our chimney and land on the electric fire.” Even as a three-year-old, Cumberbatch was thinking ahead and making some interesting observations. Ventham’s solution was to remind Ben that the family would be spending the holiday at his grandmother’s, where the fire would be extinguished in plenty of time for Father Christmas’ visit; a side note added that the parents “will have an old rigger sock on Benedict’s bed” to hold the presents Father Christmas would surely bring.¹²

Descriptions of Cumberbatch as a child vary widely, depending upon whom is asked. His mother recalled her son as a sweet boy considerate of her, but Cumberbatch referred to himself as a hyperactive nightmare.¹³ Sometimes, however, even his mother was less than pleased with her little boy’s conduct. When Ventham was interviewed at home in 1979, she apologised for her three-

[11] Bell, Jack. “The Solid Gold Girl Comes Back.” *Daily Mirror*. 29 Oct. 1977, p. 15. Print.

[12] “Tips for Nervous Santas.” *Daily Express*. 17 Dec. 1979, p. 17. Print.

[13] Stanford, Peter. “It’s No Good, Benedict Cumberbatch Can’t Stop Us Liking Him.” *The Telegraph*. 18 Aug. 2012. Web.

year-old's "vile" behaviour that day; Carlton, who his wife said was good with their son, entertained the child the interviewer dubbed "boisterous Benedict" in another room. First impressions are memorable, however, and the article initially describes the boy as "an energetic handful who was treating the living room like a sports stadium." The youngster's tonsils had recently been removed, and, according to his mother, "his temperament has gone slightly loopy in the last day or so."¹⁴

Ben must have matured a bit by the next year (or he was on best behaviour around his mother's friends). Una Stubbs, who worked on movies with Ventham and decades later would be cast as *Sherlock's* Mrs. Hudson, remembers going out in her Kensington neighbourhood "with my pram, and Wanda and I would be talking," while "poor little Benedict, who I suppose was about four, [was] standing there while we were gossiping in the high street for hours!"¹⁵

Such "quiet" memories have been seldom recorded in the press, whether through his own interviews or as referenced in his parents'. Often his life away from acting seems thrilling or daring—at least, far from sedentary or quiet—and the best anecdotes indicate young Benedict's fearlessness. The actor once said Elaine Stritch early on determined that Cumberbatch would be successful as a performer. She "saw me walking across a field in my red dungarees despite the presence of a bull. 'That boy,' she drawled, 'is going to be a star.'"¹⁶ His ability to charm anything in his path was a worthy trait to turn toward acting.

[14] Knowles, Stewart. "Timothy, Wanda . . . and the Rose That Changed Her Mind About Marriage." *ITV Playhouse/TV Times*. 28 July 1979, pp. 9-10. The article has been discovered by fans and appears in transcripts or scans on several fan sites.

[15] Brealey, Louise. "Sherlock: Meet Lara Pulver, Louise Brealey and Una Stubbs—the Baker St Babes." *Radio Times*. 16 Jan. 2012. Web.

[16] Spencer, Kathryn (Ed.). "When Veteran Elaine Knew a Star Was Born." *The Express*. 14 Sep 2007. British Library Newspaper Index. Record No. 58644804.

Although a 1980 article claimed that Ventham found full-time domesticity difficult and thoroughly enjoyed her acting career, she did not want to miss out on her son's childhood. She explained that "Ben starts school next year and because I'd worked for some long spells away from home making *Fallen Hero* last year, I decided to spend as much time as possible with him [this year]. I turned down any job which involved leaving London for more than a few days."¹⁷ The bond between Cumberbatch and his parents seems strong; they often visit, even when he is working overseas, and, in an appropriate turnabout, he often mentions them during interviews.

Being at least peripherally in the public eye for much of his life did not seem to hamper his inner child as he became a working actor, and he seems not to have outgrown some behaviours noted in descriptions of young Benedict. An early *Sherlock* article described how the actor kept cast members in stitches with his impressions of other people or how he sat nervously on his hands or bounced his leg up and down during the interview, unable to contain his energy.¹⁸ A scriptwriter's blog comments that Cumberbatch still giggles.¹⁹ These descriptions echo an early school report that "Ben is slightly more controlled, but he must try to be less noisy. A good start, but we hope Ben will calm down a little next term."²⁰

Talkative and energetic seem to be keys to the actor's personality at any age. During a 2010 radio show, when asked about her son as a very young child (Cumberbatch muttering in the background "oh, great"), Ventham remembered that he "always talked a lot. He had a very loud voice. . . . He was active, but he always slept. I think

[17] Kingsley, Hilary. "Is Wanda Laughing All the Way to Bed?" *Daily Mirror*. 6 Dec. 1980, p. 15. Print.

[18] BBC Press Office. "William Golding's "To the Ends of the Earth."" 19 May 2005. Web.

[19] Sivell, Vaughan. "On Benedict Cumberbatch." Mug7. 9 Sep. 2011. Web.

[20] Wilson, MacKenzie. "Benedict Cumberbatch and His Mom Chat with 'Saunders and French.'" BBC America. 3 Jan. 2011. Web.

he knew he had an older mummy, and he was very kind to me.” In the background, Cumberbatch added, “I’m very grumpy without eight hours sleep, which is a luxury in adult life.” As an older child who accompanied his parents on a six-week tour during a half-term break from school, young Ben received permission to sit just off stage while his mother worked and “got terribly overexcited because of the laughter. And he was standing there, actually shivering, saying ‘I wish I could come on with you.’”²¹

Cumberbatch developed observation skills early and studied the people around him. He remembers that he and his parents “lived sort of in the shadow of the Royal Garden Hotel in Kensington,” where “there were floors and floors of all these silhouettes and I was fascinated with people doing things. I was far too young to know what was going on, if anything was going on. But I always listened through the [door] jamb to this adult world, to see what was going on.”²² (As he became famous and easily recognisable on the street, he mourned the loss of such opportunities to observe others unaware: “One of the fears of having too much work is not having time to observe. And once you get recognised, there is nowhere for you to look any more. You can’t sit on a night bus and watch it all happen.”²³)

Soon enough Cumberbatch was acting in school plays. Recalling an early role as Joseph in his prep school’s nativity play, the young actor gained notoriety by shoving Mary off the stage because he was “furious about how self-indulgent she was being.”²⁴ Unwittingly, he earned a laugh from the audience, but playing to the crowd to get that laugh was not his intention. He simply wanted the performance to go as it should and, even as a youngster, was more

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Mitchison, Amanda. “Benedict Cumberbatch on Playing Sherlock Holmes.” *The Guardian*. 16 July 2010. Web.

[24] Secher, Benjamin. “Plummy Depths.” *The Telegraph*. 11 Aug. 2012, p. 39. Print.

focused on the work than courting audiences'—or his parents'—approval. “Mum and dad were mortified”²⁵ but even then might have realised their son's dedication to his future profession.

What Cumberbatch once called his “first, big, silly role at school was as Arthur Crocker-Harris in [Terence] Rattigan's *The Browning Version*, where my job was to make schoolmasters' wives weep with recognition.”²⁶ Other roles during his school years included Titania, Queen of the Fairies, and Rosalind. He was encouraged to act on stage as a way to direct his energy other than fighting, or, as he once put it, “to repress the tearaway in me.”²⁷ Harrow typically produces about twenty plays per academic year, which certainly provided plenty of opportunities for the young actor to participate in theatre and study with the department's director, Martin Tyrell, who has described Cumberbatch as “the best schoolboy actor [I] have ever worked with.”²⁸

Cumberbatch's preference for sports, especially rugby and cricket, also helped to acclimate him to a life on stage, not only by honing his natural physical prowess but by introducing him early on to teamwork. During the BBC documentary *The Rattigan Enigma*, Cumberbatch points himself out in two group photos taken during his years at Harrow in the early 1990s. A blond lad “with wicketkeeper's hands” represents the sporty side of Cumberbatch's Harrow education, but a later photo of the teenaged thespian shows him wearing his “rats” tie in honour of playwright Terence Rattigan, who not only attended Harrow but once lived in The Park, the house where Cumberbatch lived as a student.²⁹

[25] Rochlin, Margy. “Holmes at Last.” *New York Post*. 6 May 2012. Web.

[26] Curtis, Nick. “Benedict Cumberbatch—Stepping into the Lead.” *London Evening Standard*. 1 June 2010. Web.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Jarvis, Alice-Azania. “Benedict Cumberbatch: Success? It's Elementary.” *The Independent*. 29 Jan. 2011. Web.

[29] *The Rattigan Enigma*. BBC. Benedict Cumberbatch, writer. 28 July 2011 (original broadcast).

In November 2012, as master of ceremonies celebrating Harrow's Jubilee Churchill Songs in Royal Albert Hall, Cumberbatch jokingly recalled the "mixture of nostalgia and terror" that summarises his memory of the school but praised the way Harrow prepared him for his career:

I was thirteen and a Shell the last time I sang Harrow songs here. It was an extraordinary occasion and one I found a little terrifying up on this stage in case anyone was looking at me [I]t cannot be denied those years were formative—though at the time it is a rare thing to be able to deduce where those experiences will lead you. For example, little did I think my time at school would lead to the BBC asking me to play Sherlock Holmes.³⁰

In the same year (2012) as the Harrow presentation, Cumberbatch recalled during an interview that while at Harrow, he had been asked to audition for director Andrew Birkin, who was casting the film *The Cement Garden*. The subject matter dealt with incest between teenaged siblings and required nudity. Although he would later overcome his reticence for nudity in, for example, *To the Ends of the Earth* and, most notably, *Frankenstein*, Cumberbatch explained that his younger self "was really prudish at that age," and he "didn't want to take my clothes off. I was terrified. I didn't want anyone seeing what I looked like."³¹

After Harrow, Cumberbatch travelled to Asia for his gap year "to make use of the opportunities I had at school." He wanted to teach English to Buddhist monks at a monastery in West Bengal, in Eastern India, but realised "I had to do something about it really quickly; otherwise it was going to get allocated. I was very decisive. I worked for six months to drum up the finance as it was

[30] "Extracts from the Introduction to Songs." *The Harrovian*. 1 Dec. 2012. Vol. CXXXVI, No. 11, p. 114. Print.

[31] Secher, Benjamin. "Plummy Depths." *The Telegraph* magazine. 11 Aug. 2012, p. 39. Print.

voluntary—there was no income. I worked in Penhaligon’s the perfumery for almost five months and I did waiting jobs.” The resulting gap year has proven memorable not only to Cumberbatch but to many of his fans, who are familiar with the many times he has mentioned it during interviews.

When, in 2016, the promotion of *Doctor Strange* went into higher gear with the release of the first trailers, fans wanted to know more about the actor’s gap year and its continuing influence on his outlook on life. The movie completed some location filming in Nepal during November 2015, and promotional photos showed a grinning Cumberbatch meeting with a monk.³² Although the original photos were posted via social media (e.g., the Dilgo Khyentse Yangsi Rinpoche Facebook page), media like the *Daily Mail* quickly picked up the story and photos. During an *Entertainment Weekly* interview in December 2015, Cumberbatch reiterated that, during his gap year, he “became interested in the meeting point between Western logic and Eastern mysticism.”³³ Ironically, the article’s headline is “How Tibetan Monks Inspired Benedict Cumberbatch to Become Doctor Strange,” yet the text quotes the actor as saying Stephen Strange had never been on his bucket list of roles, and, although Cumberbatch seemed engaged and thrilled by his conversation with a monk during filming for *Doctor Strange*, it is highly doubtful that this end-of-location-filming meeting, or even his gap-year experiences, had a significant bearing on the actor’s portrayal. However, the photos from late 2015 do indicate that Cumberbatch’s interest in Buddhism continues past his gap year, even if, now that the actor has become a star, such an interest can be turned toward media promotion of a film.

Despite entertainment media’s publicity of Cumberbatch’s gap year as a way to make readers aware of *Doctor Strange*, a few fans

[32] Thomas, Kate. “Benedict Cumberbatch Gets in Touch with His Spiritual Side as He Visits a Monastery in Nepal to Learn About Buddhism During Doctor Strange Filming.” *Daily Mail*. 8 Jan. 2016. Web.

[33] Collis, Clark. “How Tibetan Monks Inspired Benedict Cumberbatch to Become Doctor Strange.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 29 Dec. 2015. Web.