



Reading Group Guide

*The Sherlock Society*

By James Ponti

### **About the Book**

Siblings Alex and Zoe Sherlock take their last name as inspiration when choosing a summer job. After all, starting a detective agency must be better than babysitting (boring), lawn mowing (sweaty), or cleaning out the attic (boring *and* sweaty). Their friends Lina, an avid bookworm, and Yadi, an aspiring cinematographer, join the enterprise, and Alex and Zoe's retired reporter grandfather offers up his sweet aquamarine Cadillac convertible and storage unit full of cold cases. The group's first target is a long-lost treasure supposedly hidden near their hometown, Miami. Their investigation into the local doings of famed gangster Al Capone leads them to a remote island in the middle of the Everglades where they find alarming evidence hinting at corporate corruption. Together with Grandpa's know-how and the kids' intelligence—plus some slick gadgets—can the Sherlock Society root out the conspiracy?

## Prereading Activity

As a prereading activity before starting *The Sherlock Society*, have readers complete an anticipation guide structured in the following manner:

<i>Before Reading</i>	<i>Statements</i>	<i>After Reading</i>
	All mysteries are worth solving.	
	Adults always know the right way to approach and solve a problem.	
	It is essential to always be completely honest with your friends and family.	
	When in danger, it is best to play it safe rather than take a risk.	

Instruct readers to complete the guide by placing a “+” sign in the box next to the statements with which they agree, and a “0” next to those with which they disagree. They must commit to agreement or disagreement—there are no conditional responses. Readers should also be assured that there are no correct or incorrect positions.

## Discussion Questions

1. As *The Sherlock Society* begins, Alex tells readers, “Maybe if our last name was Baker, we would’ve sold cupcakes. Or if it was Walker, we might’ve taken care of people’s dogs . . . But it’s Sherlock, so starting a detective agency just *seemed* like the thing to do.” (Chapter one) What does this opening indicate about the motivation, interests, and personalities of the Sherlock siblings?
2. At the start of the book, readers find Alex, Zoe, and their grandpa in the waters of Biscayne Bay, clinging to debris after evacuating a boat before its explosion, and Alex declares, “We should’ve mowed lawns.” (Chapter one) Based on what you learn about Alex and the adventures had by the Sherlock Society, do you believe his statement to be a true indicator of how he feels? Why or why not?
3. While Zoe offers her concerns about becoming shark bait, Grandpa wisely tells her, “Sharks aren’t a concern. If you run into one, all you’ve got to do is punch it in the snout and gouge out its eyes. . . . The apex predator that worries me here is your mother. She’s going to blame me

for this.” (Chapter one) In what ways is Grandpa wise to fear his daughter’s reactions to their current situation?

4. After getting life preservers to Alex and Zoe and upon the realization of the impending arrival of the Miami Marine Patrol, Grandpa tells his grandchildren that he has a “checkered history” with the police. Based on what you’ve learned about him, what might be some reasons for his complicated relationship with the police?
5. What are some ways that the group’s prior experiences in an escape room might give them useful skills to help solve the mysteries they encounter? Have you ever participated in an escape room, and if you have, what was the experience like?
6. At the beginning of the novel, Zoe is difficult, seemingly quick to anger, and generally frustrated and unhappy with those around her, especially her parents. Based on your reading of *The Sherlock Society*, how does her participation in this investigation and working with her brother and newfound friends change her?
7. Which character do you most identify with throughout the novel? Using examples from the book, explain why you relate to this character.
8. Though Grandpa’s official title is Director of Transportation and Logistics for the Sherlock Society, besides driving around his grandkids and the other members of the society as they investigate, what are his other contributions to the group’s efforts?
9. After setting up a meeting with the Sherlock Society as a possible client named Desperate Dan, Alex and Zoe’s mom approaches them with one of their flyers and asks, ““Who is the mastermind behind this colossally bad idea?”” (Chapter seven) Consider her reaction to learning of their business venture. Do you think their mom is overreacting or do you think she is right to be concerned? Explain your answer.
10. Grandpa tells the group, ““A journalist and a detective are the same thing. A mystery is nothing more than a story missing its ending.”” (Chapter ten) In what ways do you agree or disagree with Grandpa’s statement?
11. Considering what they find in there, why does Grandpa’s vault, with his forty-six years of materials saved from his time as a journalist, seem so appealing to the Sherlock Society?
12. After a conversation about whether to continue looking for Capone’s money or to pivot to a search for the culprits of the environmental damage done in the slough, Zoe tells Yadi and the group that, though there is no reward, ““This just happened, and we need to find out who did it.

. . . The reward is doing what’s right, not what’s easy.” (Chapter eighteen) How does Zoe’s statement help Alex realize that his sister has returned to the caring and kind person she was before? If you were in a similar position where you had a chance to search for a treasure or to try to find the culprit in a crime, which would you choose?

13. What makes Grandpa’s 1964 Cadillac, “Roberta,” so special to him? Do you have something you own that you’ve treasured for much of your life? If so, what is it, and what makes it so special to you?
14. Based on what you witness throughout the novel, what are some of the specific ways Yadi and Lina prove themselves to be good friends to Alex and Zoe?
15. After discovering the ecological damage being done in their community, the Sherlock Society makes it their mission to find the culprit and help see them brought to justice. Have you ever been witness to a wrongdoing? Did you handle the situation in a manner you are proud of? If not, what would you do differently now?
16. After considering Morris Kane’s behavior toward them during his video interview, Yadi shares his doubts that Kane could be the type of person okay with hazardous waste being dumped into the Everglades. Zoe retorts and shares, ““That’s because you don’t hang around with the same people I do. . . . You’re honest, so you expect others to be honest too. . . . You’d be amazed at how phony people can be. He talks a good game, but he’s only concerned with himself.” (Chapter twenty-six) Based on what you’ve learned about her school friends, what do you think Zoe is trying to tell him?
17. After Zoe states, ““You know what they say about Miami,”” Yadi, Lina, and Alex reply in unison, ““A sunny place filled with shady people.”” (Chapter thirty-two) Why do you think Miami has such a colorful reputation? Have you ever had a chance to visit? If so, what was your impression?
18. Given what she’s had to do to keep them out of legal trouble, do you believe the Sherlocks’ mother is too hard on Alex and Zoe, or is her reaction justified? Why or why not?
19. Consider the conclusion of the novel. What do you predict will happen in the next installment of the Sherlock Society series?

## Extension Activities

- From the events in *The Sherlock Society*, readers are introduced to the US Treasury Department and the Department of Homeland Security and their work in investigating crimes here in the United States. Have readers use what they learned to create a short essay, presentation, or debate about the best and worst parts of these jobs.
  - What are the primary functions of the Treasury Department and the Department of Homeland Security in the United States?
  - What are their primary duties, and what types of investigative campaigns do these organizations undertake?
  - What are the criteria for working as an agent?
  - What other types of crime do these organizations investigate?
  - What other agencies have dedicated departments that investigate crimes similar to those committed in *The Sherlock Society*?
- As the Sherlock Society decides what their first investigation should be focused on, they agree to search for Al Capone’s missing one-million-dollar treasure, believed to be buried. Alex says, “‘The game is afoot.’” (Chapter nine) Have readers investigate the meaning and origin of this expression: How does it tie back to the fictional character of detective Sherlock Holmes and the legacy of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s iconic character, including the ways his legacy lives on in modern media and entertainment? After gathering these important connections to the Sherlock name, ask readers to apply what they’ve learned to the Sherlock siblings and their friends. What are the ways in which the Sherlock Society functions under similar motivations as the legendary Sherlock Holmes?
- While reading *The Sherlock Society*, readers learn that Florida’s coastal ecosystem, such as the Everglades, and the world’s oceans are in danger from a variety of human-led activities. Working in groups, examine the National Wildlife Federation and the Environmental Protectional Agency website resources here: <https://www.nwf.org/Our-Work/Waters/Great-Waters-Restoration/Everglades> and <https://www.epa.gov/sourcewaterprotection/how-can-you-help-protect-source-water>. While reading and examining these resources, have students journal or create a “What I’ve Learned” notes page, detailing what information is new to them, and why they believe it to be significant. After finishing, be sure they share their findings with others.

- As the Sherlock Society works on their inquiry about Capone, they learn about Jack Roland Murphy, a jewel thief believed to have stolen the Eagle Diamond from the American Museum of Natural History. The gem was never recovered. Have readers learn more about Jack Roland Murphy by first reading coverage in *Smithsonian Magazine* and the *New York Times*: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-three-amateur-jewel-thieves-made-new-yorks-most-precious-gems-180949885/> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/05/nyregion/murph-the-surf-jewel-heist.html>.

After discussing as a class or group what was learned from the articles, ask readers to use library and internet resources to learn more about the American Museum of Natural History:

- Where is the American Museum of Natural History located?
- When was it established?
- What's the museum's size, and how many items are in its collection?
- How many visitors does it have annually?
- What are some of the most celebrated treasures in the collection? Why was the theft of the Eagle Diamond and other gems noteworthy?

After completing their research, have students share their knowledge with their peers. For an extension, similar to the interest in Capone's missing treasure and the Eagle Diamond, are there other missing treasures that pique their interest? Allow readers to explore and share.

- As Grandpa gets the group started in their training to do detective work, he takes them through a journalism bootcamp, focusing on the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why. Then he teaches them that solving a mystery is like a story missing its ending. Give readers a chance to conduct their own investigation on a topic of high interest to them using the five Ws framework. After time spent "investigating," allow them to share what they learned in a manner of choice.
- In the novel, the Sherlock siblings, along with their friends Lina and Yadi, focus their energy by solving the mystery of a missing treasure believed to be the property of notorious gangster Al Capone during his time in Miami and Southern Florida. Begin by reading the FBI's famous case report here: <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/al-capone>. After reading, ask readers to summarize what they learned about the gangster and then focus their own research on Capone's life after prison and specifically on the time he spent in Palm Island, Florida. Upon completion, lead a discussion about their collective findings.

- Special Agent Eliot Ness remains one of the most famous federal agents, and he led a team known as “The Untouchables.” Begin by learning more about Ness here:

<https://www.atf.gov/our-history/eliot-ness>.

After reading and discussion, work in pairs to make a list of additional questions you have about the Capone case or any other interesting work Ness and his team participated in during their tenure as agents. Exchange questions with another team, and see if they can find answers to the other team’s questions. After conducting more research, have readers report back what they learned to one another.

- In addition to being fascinated by conspiracy theories of all kinds, Sherlock Society member Yadi shares a fascination with the existence of cryptids, such as the skunk ape, Florida’s version of Bigfoot. Learn more about cryptids here:

<https://science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/strange-creatures/cryptids.htm>.

After an examination of cryptids that are believed to be located in the Florida region, offer readers a chance to do more investigating on other cryptids around the world. Have individuals share more about their favorite cryptid finds and the local lore behind these creatures.

- In *The Sherlock Society*, author James Ponti goes to great lengths to help readers better understand the complexity of the biodiversity of the geographic region of South Florida. Using the library and trusted internet resources, learn more about the Florida Everglades, being sure to focus on this unparalleled landscape that provides important habitat for numerous rare and endangered species, as well as the Everglades National Park. Alternatively, have readers look at photos and Google images to create a map of the specific locations mentioned in the book, such as Domino Park, Biscayne Bay, Palm Island, and more, making sure to denote any specific descriptions of the area.

*This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock. Rose is an associate professor in the Library Science Department in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University and holds a Ph.D. in Library Science, specializing in children’s and young adult literature.*

*This guide has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.*