



THE SHERLOCK SOCIETY

By New York Times bestselling author
JAMES PONTI

Classroom Discussion Guide

PREREADING ACTIVITY

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

BEFORE READING	STATEMENTS	AFTER READING
	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 "O" 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.



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.

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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.



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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?



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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?



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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?



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- 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 National 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.



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- 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.



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- 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.



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HURRICANE HEIST

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Educator Case Files: Classroom Discussion Guide

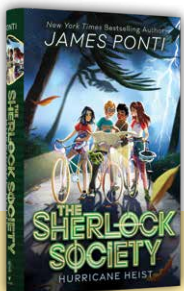
ABOUT THE BOOK

When a category-three hurricane hits Miami Beach, it uncovers a body buried at the renowned Moroccan Hotel. The body is identified as the man who served as the hotel's bell captain sixty years ago and the presumed culprit of the million-dollar jewel heist that took place just before his disappearance!

Since the bell captain clearly didn't take off with the goods as had been long believed, the Sherlock Society sets its sights on uncovering the real culprit of the theft. But when the thief may also be implicated in the bell captain's murder, even sixty years later there are people who want the truth to stay buried.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the very first paragraph, Alex declares, "My life was filled with countless embarrassing athletic failures. . . . But none were as humiliating as being outrun by my grandfather." Is it surprising to learn that the members of the Sherlock Society are literally trying to outrun harm because of their investigative choices? Based on what you already know about them, why or why not?
2. Alex explains that they were at the Dades Valley Ranch "because we were trying to crack a case more than sixty years old." (Chapter one) From an investigative perspective, what do you believe will be the biggest challenge for the team working on a case that old?
3. The cold case the team is reopening focuses on a jewel and art heist that occurred at the Moroccan Hotel in Miami Beach during Hurricane Cleo in 1964. An innocent man was wrongly accused of the crime, and the case remained incredibly personal to Grandpa throughout his professional career. As the Sherlock Society begins to examine this sixty-year-old case, how do you think Grandpa's connection to it will cloud or influence his perspective?
4. During the 1964 investigation of the Moroccan Hotel theft, Ignacio "Doc" Gonzalez was the FBI's prime suspect in the heist. Young Pete Lassiter defends him to the FBI agents and asserts, "'Because I know that Doc's innocent. He's kind and moral. He has plans for the future. He wouldn't—I mean he couldn't—have committed this crime.'" (Chapter nine) Why does Pete feel so strongly that Doc is innocent? Do you think he's right to do so? Why or why not?



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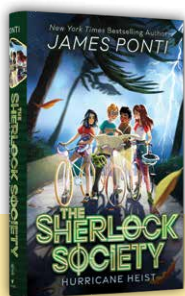
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5. While explaining to the FBI why he calls Ignacio "Doc" and why they should call him Ignacio, young Pete states, "I call him Doc because we're friends. But you should call him Ignacio when you interview him because your relationship is professional." (Chapter three) What are your thoughts about the friendship between Pete and Doc? Are there any adults with whom you have a special relationship that aren't family members? If so, what do you like best about it?
6. Consider the shift in the story's setting between present-day Miami and 1960s Miami. What do you find most appealing about the timeline pivots? In what ways does it help you better understand Alex and Zoe's grandpa by seeing him as young Pete? Which of his personality traits were already evident as a boy?
7. Describe how the hurricane approaching Miami creates a sense of urgency for the Sherlock Society. How does it affect how they attempt to solve the case, and why?
8. Consider Grandpa's investigation assignments for each member of the Sherlock Society. How does dividing the research up and allowing each of them to focus on a different aspect of the investigation benefit the team overall?
9. Which character do you most identify with and why? Has that changed any since the first novel?
10. How do Grandpa's personal connections to this case work to the group's advantage? Are there any ways that his own experiences might make him less objective to the findings of the case?
11. Does the Sherlock Society operate best as a team, or do you think their individual investigation work is equally effective at resolving the case? Support your argument with textual examples.
12. When discussing his attempt at writing and publishing a book, Grandpa tells them, "I'm not a novelist; I'm a journalist. Or, rather, I was one. I miss it, but that doesn't mean I don't still have a great life." (Chapter fifteen) Based on this comment, what do you believe are the greatest benefits to being a part of the Sherlock Society for him?
13. While watching two firefighters practice their work, Lina remarks, "Check out the teamwork. . . . They move in unison, almost like they are dancing." (Chapter eleven) Similarly, the Sherlock Society regularly engages in research, analysis, and discussion, often challenging each other's ideas. How is their teamwork similar to the ways in which the firefighters work together? Why is this so effective?



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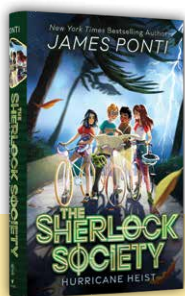
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14. When Lina suggests that the “Ignacio Imposter” would have had to have an ID at the airport to board a plane, Grandpa tells her, “You do now, but things were different in 1964 Then you could walk up to an airline counter and purchase tickets without any ID at all.” (Chapter eleven) What did you find most surprising about Grandpa’s description of air travel in the 1960s? Why do you think it’s so different now?
15. As they visit retired FBI agent Stuart Forrest at the Euro retirement home to share the updates to the Cleo Caper case and the discovery of Ignacio Gonzalez’s remains, Stuart tells Grandpa that he was right about his belief in Ignacio’s innocence all along. Grandpa retorts, “I was right about who *didn’t* do it. Unfortunately, I have no idea who did.” (Chapter fourteen) Why does he see these former FBI agents as important resources in finally solving the Cleo Caper? What does the chance to return and right this case offer for the retired agents?
16. Consider the way in which the Sherlock Society works on this case: their methods involve reviewing old case files, gathering new information through interviews such as with former FBI agent Forrest, and utilizing modern tools like phone-based searches. They also use symbolic tools like bedpans and poker chips to represent suspects and evidence. Why is this layered approach to the investigation so successful?
17. While discussing Lina’s resistance to interacting with Zoe’s other friends, Lina tells Zoe, “You shouldn’t have to know someone to be decent to them. . . . I know they’re your friends. . . . It’s just that I’d rather hang out with Alex and Yadi.” (Chapter sixteen) Based on what you read, what are some of the specific ways Zoe and Lina’s friendship has developed, despite the bad behavior of Zoe’s other friends?
18. The importance of truth and justice are central to the story as the Sherlock Society seeks to clear Ignacio Gonzalez’s name after decades of wrongful accusation. Why does this become such an important goal for the entire group, not just Grandpa?
19. Considering the conclusion of the novel, what do you predict will happen in the next installment of the Sherlock Society?



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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

In *Hurricane Heist*, the Sherlock Society works together to investigate a cold case even the FBI was unable to successfully crack known as the Cleo Caper, a jewel and art heist that occurred at the Moroccan Hotel during Hurricane Cleo in 1964. Begin by having readers use the following Ebsco database resource: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/law/cold-cases> to learn more about cold cases, specifically to discover the following:

- What is a cold case?
- Why are they significant?
- What types of law enforcement divisions are put in place to work on them and how are they typically staffed?
- What technology is used, and why are modern technological advances important to solving cold cases?
- What are the most common kinds of cold cases?

After the completion of this research, have readers discuss what they learned with one another.

In *Hurricane Heist*, readers are introduced to and offered a great deal of information about hurricanes. Using library resources and the internet, learn more about what make the following stages of a hurricane unique:

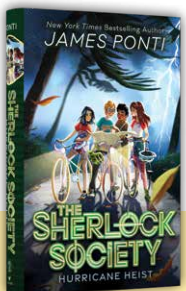
- tropical disturbance
- tropical depression
- tropical storm
- hurricane

After they synthesize that information, have readers dig deeper and work together to learn the difference between a squall and a gust and what the lack of lightning and thunder indicates, as well as other interesting hurricane facts. Finally, have readers find out about the hurricane cycles in the early 1960s that impacted the Miami area to compare those real events to those depicted in the novel, specifically looking for parallels or ways in which author James Ponti was inspired to capture this atmospheric event.

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In the novel, Carlos the Cat (Carlos Aguilar), a jewel thief who advised on *Hurricane Heist* (the movie being filmed at the Moroccan Hotel), is largely eliminated as a heist suspect because of his quick entry into the witness protection program (WPP), which made him unlikely to have had the ability to keep or hide away any stolen goods. Today, the federal witness protection program remains active. Have readers research the WPP to learn the following:

- How is the Witness Protection Program defined?
- Why are individuals and families typically put in this program?
- What are the general statistics of the number of people placed in the WPP?

After completing their research, ask readers to share the most interesting facts they uncovered with others.

Note to Educators: In case researchers come across this, know that the current Federal Witness Protection Program was officially established in 1970, after the events of the flashbacks in the book. However, throughout the sixties, there was a precursor, also known as the Witness Protection Program. Despite some technicalities, they can both be considered part of the same program.

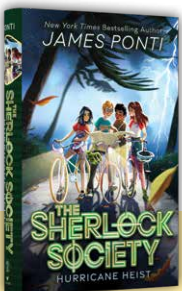
In reading *Hurricane Heist*, readers learn about the SUSTAIN Lab (SURge-STructure-Atmosphere INteraction), the largest hurricane simulator in the world, located at the University of Miami. Have readers begin by watching the following news piece: <https://www.gulfcoastnewsnow.com/article/university-miami-hurricane-forecasts-simulation-technology/61863579>

Then have them learn more about the simulator by visiting the University of Miami's website: <https://sustain.earth.miami.edu/> to better understand the purpose of the SUSTAIN Lab. After investigating both, ask readers to discuss the valuable benefits of such a tool and have them share the five things they found most interesting from their investigation of SUSTAIN and the University of Miami's hurricane detection and preparation resources.

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Educator Case Files: Classroom Discussion Guide

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Edna van Buren is introduced in this novel. She is the famous reporter for the *Miami Herald* who ultimately inspires young Pete to become one of the paper's most popular writers. Edna's character is inspired by real life Pulitzer Prize winner and police and crime reporter Edna Buchanan. Have readers learn more about her by using trusted Internet and library resources, or by reading this coverage of Buchanan (Warning: this article does include mentions of suicide, drugs, and various murders): <https://www.pulitzer.org/article/miamis-nonpareil-police-reporter>

Then have each reader create a K-W-L chart to capture what they discover from their research, encouraging them to research more about what they wrote in their Want to Know column.

In a flashback sequence, readers learn that "the 'fun and sun capital of the world' [Miami] had become a ghost town in preparation for Hurricane Cleo. The streets were empty, and the windows of most buildings had been boarded up. Trash cans, benches, potted plants, and anything else that might become airborne had been moved inside. Even the traffic lights on Biscayne Boulevard had been dismantled to keep them from blowing away." (Chapter two) In the present, the Sherlock Society and their families are also working on planning for the impending storm heading their way. In anticipation of natural disasters like hurricanes, there is a great deal of preparation that happens in hopes of helping minimize additional damage. Ask readers to research and learn more about hurricane preparedness by utilizing resources offered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Working in small teams, have readers select one of the following areas to further investigate and prepare to share with the larger group:

- Know your risk: water and wind
- Prepare before hurricane season
- Understand forecast information
- Get moving when a storm threatens
- Stay protected during the storms
- Use caution after the storms
- Take action today

Using a digital tool of choice, have each group take turns sharing their findings.

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.

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