

The Arden Blake Series

Another Fine Girls Series That Never Made It

By David M. Baumann
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In the spring of 2015, a brief article I wrote on a good three-volume girls' series that never made it appeared in issue #49 of the Review: the mystery-adventures of Mary Louise Gay. Recently I came across the Arden Blake books, another three-volume girls' series that never went beyond its initial offering. They were written by Cleo Garis, of the famous Garis writing family. Father Howard wrote a huge number of stories for Edward Stratemeyer when he wasn't producing thousands of his own Uncle Wiggily stories. Mother Lilian penned the Melody Lane series, along with many dozens of other books. Brother Roger devised a few volumes in the Outboard Boys series and the excellent first volumes of the X Bar X Boys series.

Cleo wrote the three Arden Blake stories, but no more. One can sigh in regret, for these tales are good. She was only twenty-nine when all three were published by A. L. Burt in 1934. Each one is a generous 250 pages long. Since they were printed only once, and at the height of the Depression, all these years later they are extremely scarce and almost always unbelievably pricey if they can be found. My stepmother gave me a most unexpected large check for my birthday, and I chose to spend it on this series, for almost by chance, and having recently learned about the books, I had found a complete set in dust jacket in a rare books and antique store in a small town in Iowa.

There are no identifying marks inside the books, so I can't know for sure that they were someone's collection that was kept for a lifetime, but I suspect it. It is gratifying to be able to keep someone else's treasure together, especially when it was probably on their shelf for eighty years or more, perhaps over more than one generation.

The plots are not particularly unusual—missing persons, a haunted house, and the like—and yet Cleo handled them with admirable imagination and originality. There are hundreds of little touches in the stories that add depth to the development of the tales, such as the description of a teenage girl who is new to driving and therefore goes blocks out of the way in order to minimize the number of turns she must make; and two girls who are eager to take a walk in a snowstorm to pick holly. These touches elevate the quality of the

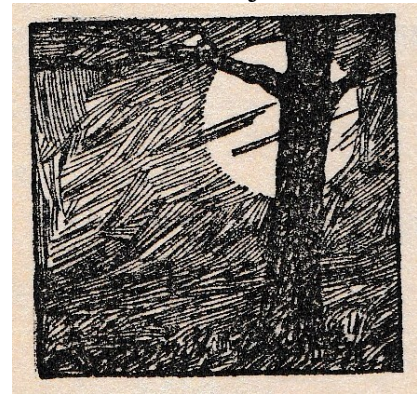
story-telling to make it easy for the reader to enter into the time, the lives, and the adventures of the main characters.

Speaking of teenage girls, the books are about Arden Blake and her two friends, Sim Westover and Terry Landry. They had grown up together in



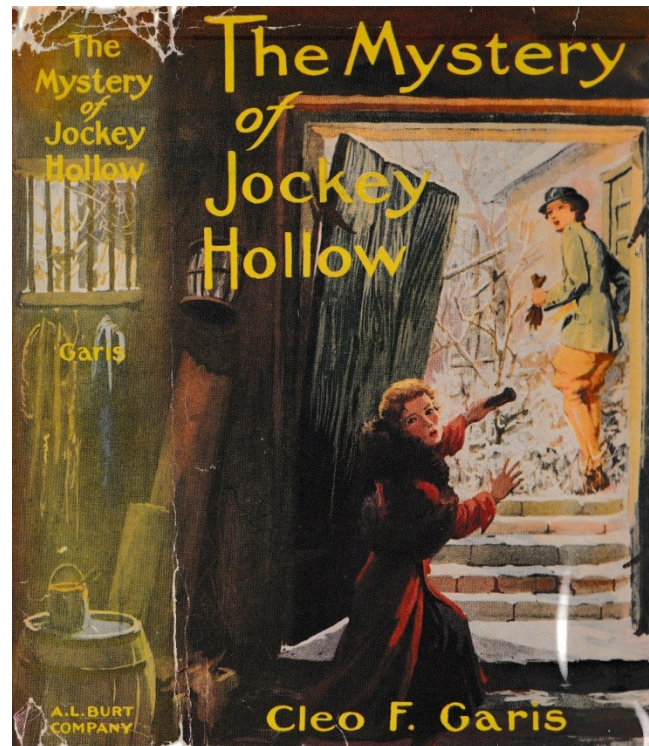
Pentville, a small, rural town not far from New York City. As the first book opens, they are beginning to attend Cedar Ridge College together in small city called Morrisville not far from where they grew up. This book, *The Orchard Secret*, tells what happens when they begin their studies. Part of the school's grounds is an apple orchard that holds some mysteries that prove to be somewhat dangerous. Further, in the post office is a flyer that advertises a search for a missing heir to a great fortune. There is a reward offered for finding this young man, which the girls want to earn in order to cover the cost of repairs to the college's swimming pool. The girls break rules repeatedly in order to carry on their

investigations, which is somewhat refreshing. These are flawed heroines, much as Mary Louise Gay was. The writing is high quality overall, the story is well developed, and the girls' friendship and activities are attractively presented. When I was well into the book, I heaved a sigh of relief, for I had taken a chance on buying the expensive threesome on the strength of only a small number of opinions that said that the stories were "good, but not great." I thought the story was thoroughly enjoyable: yes, very good.

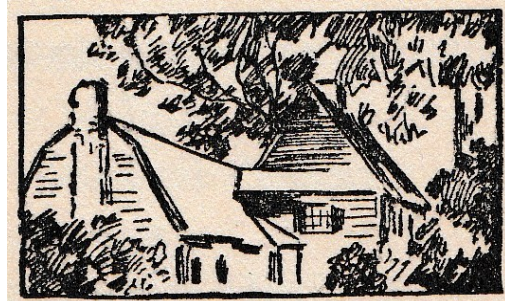


The second book is called *The Mystery of Jockey Hollow*. It is set during the Christmas break that follows the girls' first months at Cedar Ridge. The three of them (later joined by a fourth friend from college) are together at Sim's home while the parents are away for the holiday. They deal with the troubling story of a strongly built Revolutionary-era mansion which is slated to be torn down to make room for a road. The family that owns the home, whose ancestors had built it and where several generations had lived, cannot produce the documents that establish their ownership. So the "state" has appropriated the home and forced the old granny, her sister, and the two grandchildren to move

into the servants' cottage while the house is demolished. The grandchildren are the same age as Arden and her friends. But the contractor's crew flees time after time when they begin work, for apparently supernatural phenomena, based on a powerful true story from the earliest days of the mansion, scare the wits out of them. The story is well developed, for both granny and the contractor are presented as admirable people. The contractor is determined to do the work he's been hired to do, but he is an upright man who cares for his workers, trying to give unemployed men some work during the Depression so they can provide for their families.



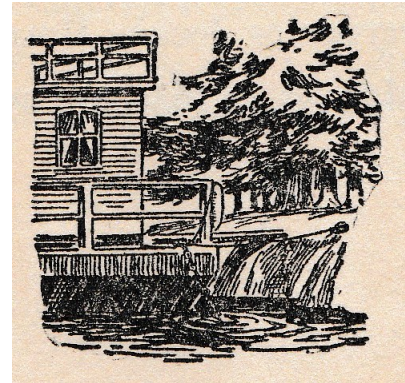
One negative feature of this story is its unquestioned racism. By that I don't mean accented dialect typical of stereotypical minorities and ethnicities often found in other books of the era, which was probably relatively true-to-life and intended to be somewhat humorous, but out-and-out white superiority. Negro and then Italian workers are the first to flee the haunted house, and then the contractor gets "better men", i.e. white. At one jaw-dropping point, one of the privileged teenage girls inexplicably refers to Sim's family's Negro cook's daughter as "the slave". Yet, oddly enough, perhaps, that same cook and her daughter do not speak in dialect, and the girls treat them with affection and respect, although clearly with a class-conscious attitude.



The last story is called *Missing at Marshlands*. The dust jacket erroneously calls it *Missing at the Marshlands*, but in the story it is obvious that that is a mistake; the book proper gets the title right.

In this story, Arden, Sim, and Terry have finished their first year at Cedar Ridge and are spending the summer with Terry and her mother in their cottage situated in a small seaside town called Oceanedge, but popularly known as Marshlands. There is a lot of sunbathing and swimming, and plenty of pleasant girlish talk and activities. Early in the story, the girls meet Dmitri, a mysterious young Russian man who has rented a houseboat for the summer where he intends to live a reclusive life and paint. The relationship between him and the

girls is friendly. There is also fourteen-year-old Melissa, a native of Oceanedge, who swims like a seal but is under the authority of an emotionally abusive, autocratic father. Melissa and the girls develop a friendly but awkward relationship, always on the watch for her shouting, ever-controlling father.



About halfway through the book, Arden and her friends learn that Dmitri has disappeared, clearly having been taken against his will. In fact, he's been gone for several days before his absence is discovered. That he had been visited two different times by fellow-countrymen, at least one of whose visit was



obviously most unwelcome, and that a treasure that he owned has disappeared with him, contribute to a gripping story. The girls do a decent job of grappling with the mystery, but also make a couple of foolish decisions, which contributes to the development of the story. The resolution, however, is a bit simplistic and therefore a bit of a letdown. The last page advertises a fourth story, *The Hermit of Pirate Light*, but of course it never appeared.

Cleo died in 1998, two days before her 93rd birthday, sixty-four years after her stories of Arden Blake saw print. Having read books produced by all four Garises, I conclude that Cleo was the best writer of the family. I think that the Arden Blake series is perhaps “near great”; it certainly carries its own unique and attractive character. How unfortunate that Cleo was the least productive writer of her family.

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