

More Than a Sports Series

The Frenchy Beaumonts,
Charles Spain Verral's First Series

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CHARLES SPAIN VERRAL is well known to fans of classic series books as the creator of the excellent Brains Benton series and the author of its first volume. (See Don Holbrook's article, "Last of the Best: the Brains Benton Mysteries", published in the Review #17, summer 1986.) But before Brains Benton, Verral wrote the lesser known but also outstanding Frenchy Beaumont series. In a 1987 letter to the Review, Verral wrote, "I feel [the Frenchy Beaumonts] may have been overlooked or forgotten by people interested in series of boys' books."

The Author

Verral was almost correct. There has been a scattering of interest over the years, but mention of the Frenchys is sparse. Twenty years ago Seth Smolinske wrote about Charles Spain Verral. He lived "November 7, 1904 - April 1, 1990. He was born at Highfield, Ontario, Canada, but moved as a boy with his family to Weston, Ontario. There his lifelong fascination with aviation began as he watched RFC training at nearby bases during WWI and became the first boy in town to fly a plane. He attended the Ontario College of Art, then moved to New York in 1927 to edit and write for pulp magazines during the 1930s and early 1940s. His finest pieces for the pulps were the novel-length Bill Barnes stories in the Bill Barnes Air Adventures magazine (1934-1937); this series was continued as short stories in Doc Savage (1939-1943). In these exciting adventures of aviator Barnes and his friends, Verral focused on fast, modern airplanes and the latest developments of aviation technology."

Verral himself added more information in his letter to the Review, published in issue #18 in spring of 1987. He was 82 at the time. He wrote, "Brains [Benton] is, perhaps, my favorite brainchild." In the letter, he clarified the puzzle of the authorship of the Brain Benton series. He himself wrote the first story, *The Case of the Missing Message*; publisher Golden Press had asked him to write a juvenile detective story, which he was delighted to do. It appeared in 1959 and was a success; Golden wanted to turn it into a series but Verral didn't have time to write the successors. So the next five Brains books were written by "three or four other authors...but they were all written under my supervision, especially the second and third books. I did considerable rewriting of these particular manuscripts, revamping the opening and closely editing the rest of the scripts... the last three didn't require that close attention by me... The Brains books were supposed to each carry the line: 'Based on the characters created by Charles Spain Verral.' Unfortunately this agreement wasn't always followed when the books came out in other formats... In 1953 through 1960 I authored the Frenchy Beaumont books for T. Y. Crowell. These books were hard-cover... the stories were concerned with a large French-Canadian family of one boy and six younger sisters who lived in New England.

They were all sports stories with the son, Frenchy, as the lead character. The books are now out of print but they did sell well and were also well received by reviewers. I mention the Frenchy books here as I feel they may have been overlooked or forgotten by people interested in series of boys' books."



A biography in the Frenchy Beaumont books provides more information: Verral had his first story published when he was eleven. His wife was born in Kentucky, and through her he became "really enthusiastic" about basketball to the point that he installed a basketball hoop on the wall of their New York apartment for their seven-year-old (in 1954) son Charles and himself to play. In addition to being a writer, he had also been a choir boy, an amateur magician, a commercial artist, a magazine editor, and an art director.

The photograph is taken from the dust jacket of a standalone story, *High Danger*, published in 1955, which is mentioned below. Verral would have been about fifty years old at the time the photo was taken.

Well, the Brains Benton stories have been featured in the Review, and are well-known to many fans to this day. A considerable and ongoing library of fanfiction has also been produced.

The Frenchy Beaumont Series

But what about Verral's first series? (Really, since he only wrote the first entry in the Brains Benton series, the Frenchy Beaumonts are his *only* series.) There are five volumes that feature Frenchy Beaumont: *Captain of the Ice* (1953) is a story about hockey; *Champion of the Court* (1954) is a story about basketball; *The King of the Diamond* (1955) is a story about baseball; *The Wonderful World Series* (1956) is another story about baseball; and *The Winning Quarterback* (1960) is a story about football. There are no internal illustrations.

This might be the place to state that although sports is a theme of all the books, and even though Verral himself wrote "They were all sports stories", a strong case can be made that they are much more than that. The Bronc Burnetts and the Chip Hiltons, for example, are true sports stories, but the Frenchy Beaumonts are stories of adventure and human relationships that use sports as a setting, and that's not the same thing. The Ralph of the Railroad books are similar: they are much more than simple railroad stories; they are compelling mystery and adventure stories that use railroading as the setting. (See my article in the Review, #s 57 and 58.)

The Frenchy Beaumonts are different from Brains Benton, with a distinct charm of their own. There is the same exceptionally good quality writing, but in a different genre. Both series have that attractive feel to them of small town America in the late 1950s. Great stuff! The concept of the nuclear family was really important then. Certainly it was important to Verral! The family forms the background to all of Frenchy's adventures, and is the foundational source of his character development. More than once, the family plays a vital part in unfolding a complex plot.

One of the strongest attractions of the Frenchy stories is how skillfully the author describes how teenage boys think and reason. In Don Holbrook's article on Brains Benton back in 1986, he wrote, "Brains Benton is, in a sense, a rather believable character... [he] is what many youthful electronics enthusiasts could have been with a little more freedom and resources. The author has a sharp eye here for that kind of precocious amateur experimenter."

Since we're dealing with the same author here, the same skill is evident. Frenchy Beaumont and his friends are "believable". There were many situations in the stories where my first reaction was, "Gosh, I wouldn't have done that! I would've avoided the trouble if I did such-and-such instead." But then I quickly realized that I was thinking the way an adult might, with reasoning and decision-making skills shaped by years of experience. But this is not how a teenage boy would make decisions, and it's not how I did it when I was a teenager myself. Verral, with impressive skill and insight, presents a story shaped by how his characters would really do things. And that helps the reader drop everything and enter into the world of the 1950s teenager and identify with the events, the characters, and the developing plot.

The Characters

Frenchy, whose real name is "Pierre", is a transplanted French Canadian boy of high school age. He's fifteen when the series begins, a high school sophomore. The five books carry him over the next two years into his senior year. His father's aunt Henriette had died and left the family a huge three-story house in Pinewood somewhere in New England. After years of almost migratory living in Canada, Frenchy is ecstatic that his family will finally be able to stay in one place. "Papa had worked in lumber camps, on construction gangs, and in wheat fields. Always he had taken his family with him. A dozen times they had rented houses. But the jobs had always given out and Papa had had to find something else." At last the family will have some stability. A little inheritance came with the house that made it possible for Frenchy's father, Georges, to open a garage in town. He is a skilled mechanic. "Frenchy had hated the gypsy life." Now he is eager and excited to go to a school and to make friends that can last longer than a season.

His mother is Genevieve, a strong-willed, hardworking homemaker. In one book she is described as having "steel" in her voice when it was necessary; many similar descriptions of her leadership style season the stories—yet she is clearly one who knows how to love her family and everyone else. The six sisters are Georgette, Colette, Marie, Cecile, and the twins Yvette and Yvonne. They are innocent and full of energy and delight.

Georges and Genevieve Beaumont are some of the finest parents in the entire genre of series books that I have ever read; they are strong, insightful, loving, inspiring, and encouraging. This nuclear family is not only intact but deeply loving in a way that seems as if it's the only way they'd even consider. Only Jerry Todd and the Manleys in the X Bar X Boys series come close. (See my article, "The Parent Problem", in the Review, #42, November 2008.)

And there is, um, Frenchy's mother's brother, Uncle Leo. Colorful as he is, Uncle Leo is a loafer-moocher. He weighs 210 pounds. He is simultaneously incredibly annoying and endearing. Frequently he provides a vital ingredient to the plot. He is described as "a man of great warmth with a wealth of highly impractical ideas that were

always about to net him a fortune but never did,” and frequently “doing the wrong thing at the right time.” He is endlessly sharing memories (“probably imaginary”) of when he was a star athlete, etc., though now his “sore back” keeps him from doing any kind of work, even helping around the house. He is quite the character—one of those oddball, gaudy, second-string characters often found in series books, like Chet Morton, Chow Winkler, or Gulliver, who help carry a story. In the first book, Uncle Leo is forcibly ejected from a hockey game for protesting a referee’s call by throwing his shoes onto the arena, one of which just “happens” to hit the referee in the face. In a later game, he brings a loudspeaker to make sure that his advice and commentaries will be heard.

The stories are engagingly well-written, as one would expect from Verral—detailed, believable, and exciting. The characters are unique and well-developed. The settings are often described with clarity and beauty that are almost painful. For example, here are the opening lines of the first book, *Captain of the Ice*:

It was a cool crisp afternoon in November and, as the old school bus topped a rise in the highway, Pierre “Frenchy” Beaumont was able to see far ahead across a wide, flat valley. The New England countryside looked seared and bleak, as if readying itself for the snow that was to come. The leaves were gone from the maples and the birches, and the fields lay in yellowish-brown patterns. There were farm houses and barns dotted in hit-or-miss fashion along the winding ribbon of highway, but there was no sign of a town.

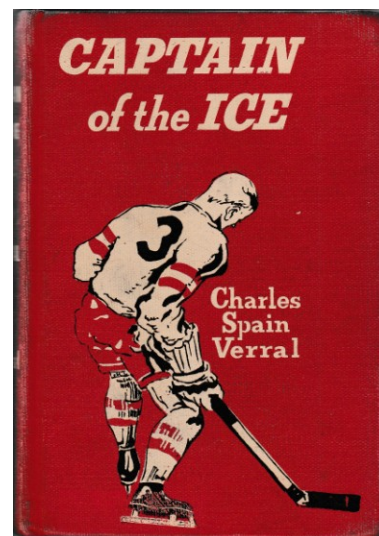
Writing such as this illuminates dozens of places throughout each volume. The reader enters the scenes easily with senses alight.

Let’s look at the books. They are full of energy, and can bring the reader to the edge of his chair more than once.

Captain of the Ice

We’ve all heard about books that are so good that you “couldn’t put it down.” Well, I found this to be one. I read this book all at once even though it kept me up until 2:00 a.m. This first entry in the series tells how the Beaumonts move into their little town in New England and get started in their new life. Frenchy’s becoming a student at the local high school and getting on the hockey team form the backdrop to the story. His uncle, who had made an early exploratory trip, had told him that there is a boy about his own age in a house across the meadow, and Frenchy is excited to create his first stable friendship.

Within minutes of driving up to their new house, Frenchy strides through the field where Jimmy is working on a fence. He is barely able to introduce himself before Jimmy rejects his overture with mouth-shutting hostility. Utterly shocked, Frenchy returns home utterly dejected and fully puzzled. The puzzlement doesn’t last long, for when Frenchy shows up for hockey practice at the high school the next afternoon, he finds that Jimmy is the star player; later he learns that the ever-well-

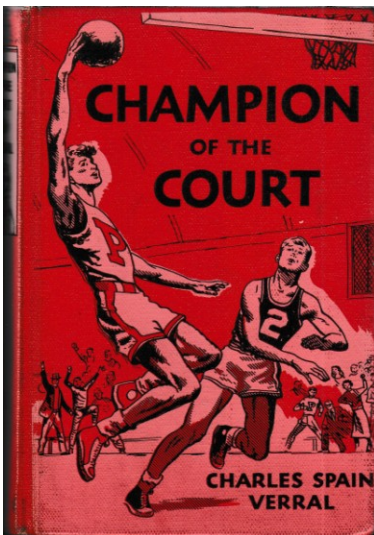


intentioned but bludgeonly Uncle Leo, in his earlier scouting visit to the new home, had boasted to Jimmy in his typical hot air style that if the high school had had any problems with their hockey team before, those troubles are over now that Frenchy will be moving in, for Frenchy is perhaps the best high school hockey player the world has ever seen. Thank you, Uncle Leo!

It gets worse from there. Jimmy's hostility turns into hate-filled rage as Frenchy shows that he is indeed an amazing hockey player. The more determined Frenchy is to succeed and be accepted, the more determined Jimmy becomes to outshine Frenchy by any means whatever, fair means or foul—mostly foul. Sides are drawn among the team players, and the coach is aware of but seems indifferent to the incendiary enmity that is growing faster than a flash fire. Since this is a series book, one knows that the story will end well, but when you're halfway through it, darned if you can see how you're going to get there. The boys make mistakes and errors of judgment that a wiser person probably wouldn't have, but that makes the story more realistic.

Champion of the Court

This book begins precisely one year to the day after the previous volume began. Frenchy is now captain of the hockey team. Jimmy's family has moved away. Winter is settling in and the hockey season has yet to begin. Over the past year, the high schools in the area have formed a basketball league. A minor character from the first book now



comes to the fore; he is Pat Harrigan, a high schooler handicapped by extremely poor vision who must wear thick glasses, but whose school spirit is boundless. He is full of encouragement for all the players though he is unable to play himself. It is he who has not only gotten all the high schools interested in basketball, but has persuaded the authorities to put up the money to fix up their gyms for the game, and has raised funds among townspeople and small businesses to sponsor the Pinewood team with uniforms and other extras.

Frenchy is decidedly against the whole thing. If it's not hockey, he's not interested. Okay, he has some noteworthy skill in baseball and football, but he sees basketball as threatening the hockey players' excellence in their own game by watering down their skill level. Frenchy and Pat get into an argument in the first chapter when Pat accuses Frenchy of not being interested in any sport unless he can be the headliner.

Frenchy is totally thrown for a loop when the hockey coach calls him at home that night and all but orders him, along with all other hockey players, to show up for the first basketball practice. Gradually his interest in basketball grows, but neither he nor anyone else on the prospective team has any real skill in the game. In an overheard conversation, the coach reveals that he has no hope that the team will even win any games.

And then an outsider is discovered. Rocky has uncommon skill in basketball, but he is a lonely boy whose parents are rich, divorced, and always gone; he has been left under the supervision of the elderly caretaker and his wife. Rocky acts out his anger and heart-deep pain, and has been expelled from three schools. In a very clever plot twist, he is

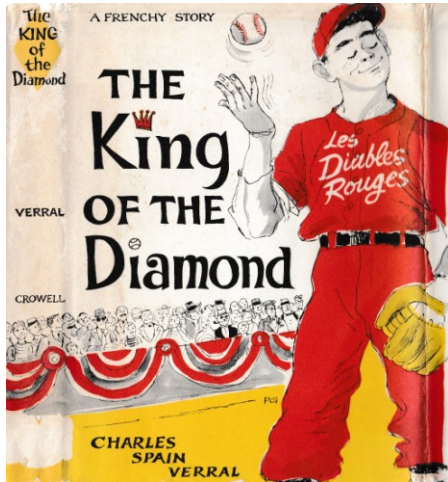
compelled against his will to enter Pinewood High and join the basketball team. Immediately the team spirit inflates and the Pinewood basketball team becomes big winners with Rocky as a media star. But the coach and other wise people recognize that there are major problems at hand. “They win too easily,” observes the wise coach with foreboding.

What Rocky does, how he acts out, how he affects people, and how various people draw their widely varying opinions about him are all described and developed with uncommon skill. As the story develops, the role that Frenchy’s family, and especially his mother, play in Rocky’s life can almost bring tears to the reader’s eyes. I’ve read about 1,500 series books in my career, and I rank this one among the very few at the top.

Throughout this book, Frenchy mostly warms the bench, though he does get to play a few times. And the descriptions of the sports scenes are terrific.

King of the Diamond

It is about six months later, in a blisteringly hot summer. For Pinewood and the surrounding towns, it is baseball season. For some time, businesses in the area have sponsored baseball teams that play for a seasonal championship. It’s small town delightful! But the story opens with the dreadful news that Waller Textile, a business that had been a super sponsor for the Pinewood team, is moving south. Not only is their sponsorship lost with all of its vital financial support, but they are taking three of the best players with them.



How the Pinewood team scrambles to keep things together forms the theme of the first part of this story. It includes a star slugger who is a total jerk; after the disaster, he loudly berates the team’s chances, its players, and especially Frenchy who is the team captain. This lout quits after an explosive scene or two in which it is manifest to all that he wants nothing to do with a team of losers—he’s only in it for personal glory. After quitting, he sets out to make things even worse for the Pinewooders, and then joins a rival team.

A little later, another lad joins the Pinewood team. He has zero interest in baseball, but he’s been compelled to join by his father, who had been a minor league player in his day. This kid shows himself to be a reasonably well skilled fielder, to the surprise of all, but he goes through practice as if it is a dreaded task that just has to be endured.

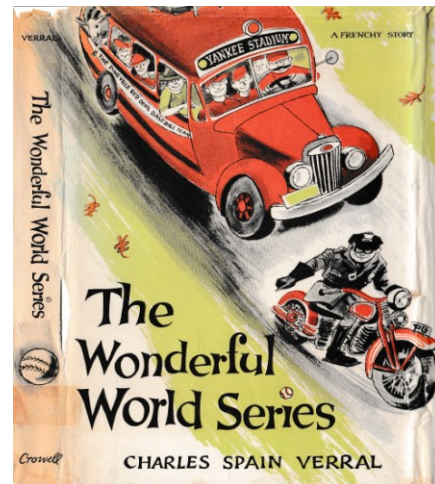
About halfway through the book and the opening game of the season is at hand, the tension ratchets up to a heart-pounding level. What started out as a friendly baseball league becomes a fierce competition as a new business in a neighboring town enters the fray and shows no reservations about practices that are, well, “unneighborly”. Using money, gimmicks, and trickery, it tries to put other businesses over the financial brink so it can take over their clientele. Buying one of the baseball teams from another business is just one of its shady deals. The sponsor that had taken on the Pinewood team has lost clients to the new business to the point that it can’t afford even to purchase uniforms for the team.

The bad guys are foes you love to hate, but how can the Pinewood team possibly save the day? As in a previous book, midway through things are so bad that you can't imagine how they can ever be resolved.

The Wonderful World Series

This book is different from the other books in the series. The other four revolve around sports, but this is an adventure story. It has a good half dozen subplots woven together most skillfully in a mixture of up-and-down tension and a lot of humor. It's about how Frenchy Beaumont and his baseball teammates get to go to the World Series in which the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Yankees are squared off. I did a little research and wasn't surprised to learn that in 1956, the year this book is set, it was indeed these two teams that played for the championship. The Yankees won the series in seven games, capturing their seventeenth world championship. The highlight was Don Larsen's perfect game in Game 5, the only single-pitcher no-hitter in the history of the World Series. (Four pitchers combined to pitch another no-hitter for the Astros in 2022.)

Tickets to the World Series are provided to the team by a local businessmen's association, but the lads have to raise their travel expenses; they have only six days to raise \$500, which is about \$6,000 in today's money. They succeed of course, and Uncle Leo's boisterous leadership and creative problem-solving keep the story hopping. Nothing unrolled in any obvious way. To say more would be to provide spoilers, so I'll just say that this story includes the team's quick escape from an irate businessman whom Uncle Leo has, um, well, "deceived" might be too strong a word; a race against time in the Beaumont family's bus to traverse about 200 miles to New York; an unanticipated overnight stay in an abandoned farm; a goat whose presence is either beneficial or disastrous depending on one's opinion; a missing star ballplayer; and a magnificent rainstorm. It's all good.

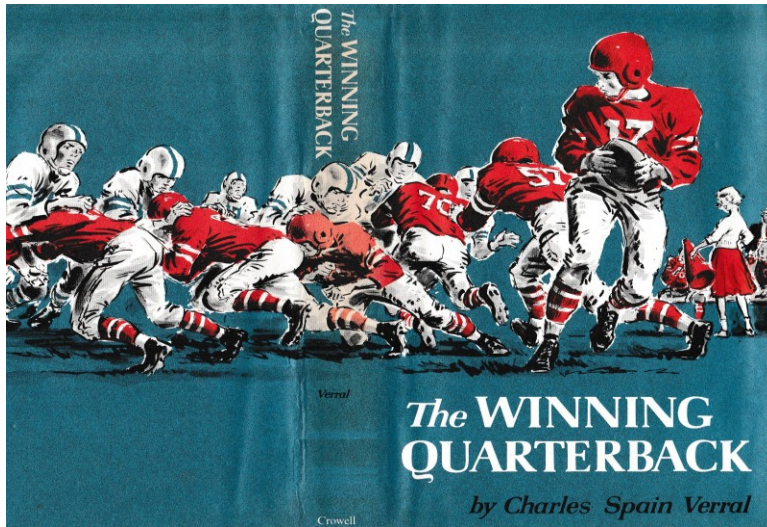


The Winning Quarterback

After overcoming near-disastrous threats to the formation of a football team and then getting off to a terrific start, things are thrown for a huge loop when Frenchy's cousin Andre moves in for several months. We've never heard of him before, but we do now; he is the son of Uncle Leo's widowed sister. Andre and his mother live in Los Angeles. Left without a father, Andre got involved in a gang and is in great danger, from violence from gang activity, being under the watchful eye of the police, and above all in his moral and emotional life. The solution is to send him to live with the Beaumonts where, it is hoped, he will get his life in order while living with such a warm and healthy family.

Being the same age as Frenchy, and coincidentally being a star quarterback just like his cousin, the stage is set for high-level fireworks. When Andre shows himself to be both a highly skilled manipulator and a hardened "juvenile delinquent", we move into a tightly-wrapped story. It is yet another tale of a severely troubled teenage boy who must

deal with the Beaumont family in the setting of high school competitive sports, but this one is more severe than what we have read up till now. The boys in the previous books



were troublemakers, but Andre is dangerous. His slick talking and behavior is too perfect, and apparently only Frenchy isn't taken in; this gradually isolates Frenchy from his own family.

When Frenchy catches Andre in an act of deception and realizes what the family is really dealing with, there is a chilling scene in which Frenchy, in the middle of

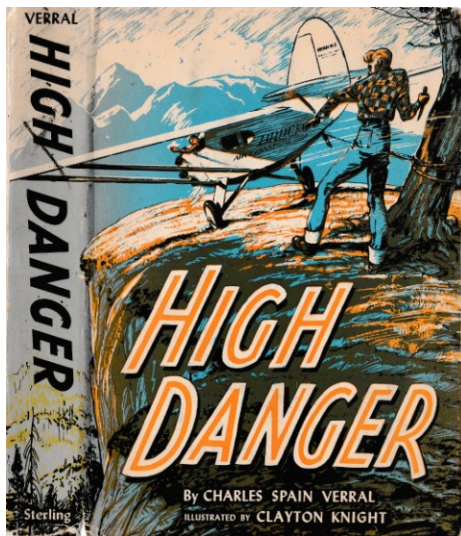
the night, concludes that he must lock the door to his bedroom. Andre shows no conscience and, when he feels threatened, has no hesitation to choose brutality to defend himself, and he can do so with a calculating subtlety that retains his “good boy” image with others. More and more, Frenchy is at risk while having no support from anyone.

The resolution is believable and satisfying, not least because it is no “fairy tale” ending. Not everything is sewn up, just as in real life. But it was good; it was good enough. The reader can expel a “whoosh” when he gets to the last line.

This last entry is by far the longest book; the other four each have well under 200 pages, but this one has 248.

High Danger

One more thing. For a time, when I was searching for the Frenchy Beaumont books, I wasn't sure whether there were five or six in the series. Information just wasn't clear. So on a whim I bought this book, just in case it was the sixth volume.



It wasn't. There are only five Frenchys. This is an independent volume, i.e. not connected with any other series; it was published in 1955 at the same time the Frenchys were really popular. As the front endflap says, *High Danger* “is a fast-moving story of flying in the days when commercial aviation was young.” It is a riveting story about an 18-year-old who wants to get involved in flying in the 1920s, and gets caught between two rival airports in Wyoming. Like everything else that Verral wrote, it is enthralling, but I won't go into detail about it here other than to note that it is about Verral's earliest big interest, which apparently he never relinquished. One thing I like about it, though, is

that the front page is inscribed, “Joseph Sciabarra, 2670 East, B’klyn 35, New York, Ni 8-9324”. Man, that bit of nostalgia right there was worth the price of the book. It didn’t even need to be a great looking copy in dust jacket, which fortunately it is.

Conclusion

Even though the Frenchys are seventy years old and their popularity has waned, with one exception I didn’t have any trouble finding copies. For some reason, *The Wonderful World Series* is particularly scarce, which is odd since it is neither an early nor the last volume in the series, which are usually the hardest to find. It took me a long time to find it, and then I found a bookseller near me who had TWO copies, only one in a dust jacket. His home was located in the eye-poppingly posh neighborhood in the southern California hills north of UCLA, and fortuitously was close to the way I often drove to visit family. So I impressed (I think)—or at least surprised—the fellow by coming to his house. When I got there, he wasn’t at home, but his teenage son was. Of course the son said that he couldn’t sell me a book without his father’s presence, so I followed up later. I bought the copy in dust jacket; I negotiated the price down but it was still pretty pricey.

The Frenchy Beaumonts are all consistently fine stories in a genre and a style unlike any other series I’ve ever run across. They’re not mysteries and the adventures they present are mostly of the heart; there aren’t any counterfeits, no missing deeds or wills, no missing persons, no smuggling, and no thieving, but there is still a potent riveting moral battle in each volume, both between characters and within them. I recommend them to all Verral fans and anyone else who would like a ripping story of that kind.

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