How Is the Weather?

or,

Snow, Wind, Rain, and Sun in Series Books

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The Rose Parade splashes over television screens across the nation on New Year's Day (or sometimes the day after) every year. In its 100-plus-year history I think it's been rained on only once. Usually we are treated to views of high school girls from Minnesota twirling batons in warm, bright sunshine and wearing clothes with only a bit more fabric than swim suits. I imagine their proud, beaming parents ensconced on their sofas back home with a blazing fireplace to one side and six or eight feet of snow in subfreezing weather outside.

I live about 35 miles from Pasadena where the Rose Parade takes place. The last time it snowed near where I live was 1956. The snow fell on that quirky day for only a short time and only stayed on the ground for an hour or two. The incident was unusual enough that the front page of the newspaper the following day showed a couple of grinning kids who'd made a tiny snowman in their front yard.

So when I sat down this December for my annual winter re-read of *The Mystery of Cabin Island,* I was ready for the opening paragraph that some have described as the best-written paragraph in the entire original Hardy Boys canon:

> Driven by a stiff breeze from the west, a trim little ice-boat went scudding over the frozen surface of Barmet Bay. The winter air was cold and clear, the hills rising from the shores were blanketed in snow, and although a patch of black water away off toward the east gave evidence that King Frost had been balked at the Atlantic, the bay itself was a gleaming sheet of ice.
>
> (*The Mystery of Cabin Island,* page 1)

Now it's not that I hardly ever get to see snow—there are mountains not far from me and in wintertime I can make a two-hour drive to the 6,000-foot level and fashion and hurl snowballs as effectively as most. I came close to being snowed in up there once, and have

had my share of scary automobile excursions on icy asphalt. But I don't live in a place where it snows or where winter takes a real bite. As long as I live where I do, I'll never have to shovel the white stuff.

Since I was born in southern California, I got my first "taste" of what winter can be like by reading series books in my childhood. Readers of the *Review* who live in the Midwest or New England may scratch their heads or even snarl when they learn that the wintery scenes that appear frequently in our favorite series books intrigued and excited me, but these books described frivolities I could never experience.

Ice-boating? Sounds like fun, but utterly foreign to my childhood. But even ice-boating on the bay was just the prelude to the merriment that Frank and Joe had with their chums Chet and Biff while spending a snowy week camped out on Cabin Island.

What about ice-skating along a frozen river? Doesn't this scene make one leap with eagerness to share the adventure?

> The mystery hunters set off for the Buffalo River, which flowed close to the residential section of Cloverfield. It was a clear, cold day, and their spirits rose with each step forward. The sun sparkled on the snowbanks and the icicles, until all the landscape flashed with beauty. All four of them rejoiced to be alive and able to go.
>
> "I just feel like I could strike out and skate for hours," Mac said. …
>
> They sat on a rotted log beside the river and put on their skates. It was a cold job, and more than once they paused to blow on chilled fingers. But at last the skates were adjusted and the campers were ready to swing up the river toward Lake Arrowtip. They clumped down the side of the bank and slid out on the ice, cutting a few circles by way of warming up. …
>
> Leaving Cloverfield far behind them, the boys followed the little river into the deep woods. In the forest the stream became narrower, but there was room for all of them, and they had gone seven miles before it became necessary to leave the ice sheet and take to the shore.
>
> (*The Mystery Hunters at the Haunted Lodge*, pages 42-44)

The closest I've come to that giddy experience is going to the ice rink up in the mountains and renting skates so I could wobble around on a slick oval under a roof. But in their debut volume, Capwell Wyckoff's Mystery Hunters skated up and down their small village's frozen river with as much ease as if they were on a slidewalk at a major airport.

What's really happening in these scenes, I think, is that my imagination is being stimulated. And isn't this what good writing is supposed to do? Isn't the final and most

essential ingredient in good writing the fertile imagination the reader brings to the book? Isn't good writing at its most enjoyable best when it puts a match to the reader's imagination so that he can take part in events or adventures he hasn't known personally? Of course, a good writer has to have a magnificent imagination in the first place to put down the words that do the stimulating, but writing is at its best when it gets the reader's imagination juiced up.

The books we collect are keepsakes and valued possessions in themselves, but their value really lies in that they are the means by which a storyteller of decades ago compels readers to enter the story! When Leslie McFarlane or Capwell Wyckoff in the above stories make me feel cold when I read those passages even though I am sitting in an easy chair in California when it's 82° outside, I know that they are good writers! They can make me feel an experience I've never had, and most likely will only enjoy vicariously through their stories.

Now when the faithful reader of the *Review* who lives in Vermont reads this article, he may well, at this moment, be scrawling notes to make sure he forgets nothing when he fires off a letter to the editor of this eminently worthy magazine to tell me that the reality is quite different. To that charge I plead "no contest," thereby saving him the effort of writing. I know that winter is more than what appears on the fronts of various Christmas cards.

Naturally the dismal and dangerous side of winter is well represented in these stories we love. It can't be all cavorting, and beyond that is where the adventure begins. When mystery hunters Barry and Kent get lost in the above-named volume and are caught "in the grip of the storm," as the chapter is called, it is a major calamity.

> The packages were soon ready, and the boys took them out and tied them in place. Over the top they spread the canvas to keep the snow out, and then they were ready. Barry looked around and then shook his head.
>
> "It is beginning to snow harder and faster," he said. "We'll have to step right along."
>
> Leaving Fox Point behind them, the two boys started off through the woods toward Bluff Lodge, striding along as fast as they could. The snow was coming down hard, and before they had gone two miles it was blinding. The two chums said very little but both of them were apprehensive as the sky grew darker and the whirling flakes more bewildering. Their clothing became white….
>
> Kent stopped and pointed.
>
> "Look! There is that same ledge. We've come around in a complete circle!"
>
> Barry nodded bitterly. "We have. I hate to admit it, but we're just lost! And if you ask me, we've managed to get lost at a might serious time!"

They started forward once more, striking out in a new direction which seemed to both of them to be the right way. The wind was searching and they lowered their heads, both to keep their faces out of the cutting blast and to shelter their eyes from the driving snow.

(*The Mystery Hunters at the Haunted Lodge*, pages 124-125, 148)

As one would expect in series books, much attention indeed is devoted to the "adventuresome" side of the winter tale. Here are three quotations that progressively step up the pace of the danger. We begin with Hal Keen who must embark on a cross-country trek in bad weather.

Hal awakened to a leaden-colored world at seven o'clock next morning. Chester was standing at his bedside looking freshly tubbed, but grave.

"Well, old thing," he was saying, "how do you feel about this long journey to Sainte Beauve on such a morning?" He pointed to the windows where the moaning wind still beat the snow against them in a sort of perpetual tattoo.

Hal rubbed his heavy eyes and got out of bed. He slipped into dressing gown and slippers and yawned lazily.

"So the weather's still cutting capers, huh!" he said, stumbling toward the windows. He rubbed a good-sized oval on one of the frosted panes and blinked his eyes at the landscape which loomed up before him. "Goodnight, it's dismal looking."

(*The Doom of Stark House*, page 72)

In the following excerpt the certainty of danger to young Westy Martin is sealed when he and his companions wake up to find themselves snowed in while they are staying in a cabin that has been robbed of all of its provisions:

"All right," said the engineer, "come over to this window and see what makes it so bright for this time of day. Just take one nice little glance now that the sleep has gone from your eyes."

Westy did and his eyes widened with amazement as he looked off into a snow-banked world. The flakes were still falling, thick and fast, adding and adding to the great drifts that had already piled up to the window sill. The snow-capped peaks on either side rose high up into the frowning heavens, barely visible through this white mist, while below, the canyons and mountain forests seemed all but buried under the glaring mantle.

(*Westy Martin in the Sierras,* pages 91-92)

Things get really dreadful for Roy and Teddy Manley when they are riding home on Flash and Star and get caught in a blizzard of near-hurricane intensity.

Faster and thicker came the snow. Louder and higher shrieked the wind, as it whipped the flakes into fantastic shapes that seemed to Teddy to be pushing against him and trying to keep him from going forward. …

The two boys rode out of the grove and into the teeth of the howling gale. There were only slight traces of the trail, and they had to trust to luck as they started down the open mountainside. The fierce norther blew the snow in their faces and eyes and blinded them, cutting their cheeks with sharp particles of ice. …

The wind had now risen to a ninety-mile gale which blew the light, dry snow in great, whirling eddies in every direction. It was possible to see but a few feet ahead, and the winding trail was covered with little drifts which, in places, blotted out the path and covered the dangerous gullies with which the trail was intersected.

(*The X Bar X Boys At Grizzly Pass,* pages 3, 9, 11)

There are plenty of other winter tales on my shelves, such as *Hunting for Hidden Gold, The Yellow Feather Mystery,* and *The Mercer Boys as First Classmen.* Maybe next winter I'll set them out and read through them all one after the other!

Two Ken Holt stories are in a special category. Among all of the "winter tales" I own, these two alone convey the treacherously biting cold of that season with little or no mention of snow at all. I don't give the page numbers in these quotations because the mood is not set by shivery descriptions such as those above, but by a scattering of sentences throughout the book. This superior method of story telling makes the impression of cold claw deeply into the reader. He is relentlessly reminded of the suffering chill outside and the discomfort of the protagonists with whom he identifies.

In these cases, author Bruce Campbell does not describe what winter looks like—he describes what it does to the people in it. In Ken Holt, there are plenty of rubbed hands, lifted collars, and eyes blurred by cold.

Now Ken and Sandy had a clear view of the man standing just behind the dog. He was dressed in corduroy trousers and a heavy leather Mackinaw, and there were big ear muffs on the cap he wore. …

"Does he now?" A woolen gloved hand reached up and removed the pipe. "And how would you be sure of that?" …

"We may as well cut short this conversation right now and get inside out of the cold." …

He grinned and rubbed his gloved hands together against the bitter cold. …

Sandy deliberately unclenched his gloved hands from around the wheel …

They turned up their collars against the cold and strode wordlessly past the battered buildings …

(*The Mystery of the Grinning Tiger*)

It was more than cold at six thirty the next morning when Ken hurried Sandy out of the apartment and along the quiet gray streets toward Barrack's address. It was bitter. Ken had pointed out that Sandy out to wear a hat, to hide his all-too-obvious red hair, and for once Sandy had raised no objections. But he had complained loudly when Ken insisted that they both put on sunglasses, to further conceal their identity.

"If you don't think dark glasses will look crazy, in the dead of winter—" Sandy began.

"They're a protection against snow blindness," Ken told him. "Go on. Put them on."

They walked quickly, their chins buried in their coat collars, …

They found a sheltered doorway a few yards down the block and did their best to keep warm by stamping their feet. But the icy chill crept through their overcoats and into their very bones.

At nine o'clock Sandy said grimly, "I've had enough of this. I'll agree to anything…. Have it any way you like. But if I don't get some hot coffee pretty soon—" …

The man ahead of them walked at a steady pace, hands deep in his pockets, the collar of his pea jacket turned up high around his ears. He seemed in no hurry to get inside out of the cold …

"Wow!" Ken said softly, as a sudden bitter gust of wind straight off the icy river almost drove them back against the building they were passing. … His eyes were watering from the wind. He rubbed his gloved hands across them, clearing his blurred vision …

(The Mystery of the Iron Box)

Now, even though this California native is writing these words on January 7, 2002 while honeyed-sunshine comes through my study window in mid-morning on a shirt-sleeve kind of day, I am empathetically mindful of my fellow series book-aficionado in Massachusetts, wrapped in layers of wool and preparing to push his way through a six-foot snowbank so he can get to his car and scrape his window free so he can see his way to the post office to fire off that infuriated letter to the editor complaining about this twisted and torturous article.

Whether we are living in 2002 or reading books written in the 1920s and 1930s, spring always follows winter, so I gladly pass on to mood-setting scenes other than those marked by shivery temperatures and frozen crystal precipitation. Following is one of many scenes provided by the incomparable Leslie McFarlane, scenes which gave character and depth to the early Hardys. Scenes which are considered "filler" by today's standards, and which were ruthlessly excised when the series was "modernized" forty years ago.

Frank and Joe sweated over the ablative absolute and grumbled over the heroic exploits that could be resurrected from the deathless lines of Caesar and Virgil if one could distinguish verbs from nouns, and wondered, as schoolboys have wondered from time immemorial, why they should be obliged to concern themselves with things that happened two thousand years ago and more when they might better be outside playing.

When Friday night came they emerged from the haze of declensions and vocabularies, axioms and theorems, equations and symbols in which they had been engulfed all week and decided that Saturday should see them as far away from school as possible.

"Let's get out of the city altogether," suggested Frank, as the Hardy boys left the classroom on Friday afternoon. "What say we all go for a hike out into the country?" …

The boys started off at last, trudging along the broad highway in the early morning sunlight, whistling away in the best of spirits. They were decorous enough while they were in the city limits, but once they struck the dusty country roads their natural activity asserted itself and they wrestled and tripped one another, ran impromptu races, picked berries by the roadside and laughed and shouted without a care in the world.

(*The Secret of the Old Mill*, pages 33-34, 38)

Spring inevitably leads to summer, whose lazy days the youth of a bygone era filled with carefree exploits, and which today's former youth can look back on with nostalgic longing. The books of Franklin Folsom, also known as Troy Nesbit, are consistently set in the regions of the hot southwest. In his books, mysteries are solved and adventures are had by boys generally a few years younger than the heroes of better-known books, but the fun they have is just as appealing.

The Jeep sped along the highway through the barren countryside, and they could hardly believe that they'd had such a feeling of terror in the cave. The intense, light blue of the sky and the brilliant sunlight gave them a sense of relief from the closed-in silence of the deep underground chambers. They had each had three hot dogs and

a malted milk at a roadside stand, to make up for the lunch they missed. It was even a pleasure to feel hot and sticky again. …

Hal had an idea. "Isn't that horsehair lariat of your father's still in the back of the Jeep?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, why couldn't we climb up in that old cottonwood tree and tie it to the big limb that sticks out over the water? Then we could use it to swing ourselves way out and let go and drop in."

"You're a low-down genius!" Chuck said. "Sure we could."

Walking gingerly in their bare feet to avoid cactus plants, they climbed up the bank and went back about a hundred feet to where the Jeep was parked. …

Before long, Hal had shinnied out on the big limb and fixed the lariat so that it made a pendulum on which they could swing way out over the water and come down with a satisfying splash. Now the day took on new interest.

(*The Diamond Cave Mystery,* pages 153, 156-158)

Another story filled with the shimmering heat waves, empty spaces, and sun-heated boulders of the broiling southwest is Tom Quest's *The Secret of Thunder Mountain*.

Though liquid precipitation may be only slightly less discomforting than snow, nonetheless series books would be gravely impoverished if they did not include scenes of rain. Who can forget the lashing rain of *The Missing Chums* or *The Secret of the Caves*? And here is an offering from another prolific author, Percy Keese Fitzhugh:

Storm clouds had been gathering since sunset and now in the gloaming they were massed and ready to loose their pent-up fury upon valley and hill. Wind whistled and screamed along the concrete highway, but so far, Hal had managed to keep his trim, sport roadster just ahead of it. Suddenly, a deafening peal of thunder rolled over the Ramapo and its frowning green hills stood out in bold relief as lightning flashed across the murky heavens.

The velvet shadows on either side of the road were full of dismal sounds and eerie echoes. Trees bent their leafy heads before the masterful gale and the rustling foliage moaned in a strange, small voice. Then, as the rain swept down from the mountain, they noticed the car ahead blinking its rear light on and off like an evil red eye in the dusk.

(*The Lonesome Swamp Mystery,* pages 1-2)

Few, if any, can set a mood better than Capwell Wyckoff. To open one of his books is to be transported back to the 1930s—not just for a scene or two, but from cover to cover. I

believe I now own a copy of every book he published, but the following comes from one of the first I ever read. The scene still grips me with its autumnal loneliness and splendor.

When Dilly stepped out of the front door of the Queen's Inn he found that it was cold. The air held a crispness that was at first a bit uncomfortable, but after he had walked a block and gotten into the swing of it, he found the night air distinctly inviting. He drew in several deep and satisfied breaths.

"This is great," he decided. "It was nice to sit around the fire, but this feels even better."

The streets of Woodlawn were deserted. But almost every house was lighted up, giving an impression of homelikeness that was delightful. Dilly knew that happy parties and gatherings were going on inside of them all, and for a moment he felt a slight attack of homesickness, but that passed in a moment.

"After all, my father and mother may be having a lonelier time than I," he thought. "They are in a foreign country, traveling, and I'm here with the boys. Great day, this Thanksgiving day."

There was a small piece of moon in the sky and the stars were shining brightly. He enjoyed the very quietness of the atmosphere of the town as he walked along, feeling like a solitary being in a strange city.

(The Mystery of the Armor Room, pages 61-62)

Describing the experience of reading the weathery mood-setters used by the most skilled authors of our beloved series books, and attempting to share that with my fellows in this column, has been a challenge. The more I tried to achieve this goal, the more intangible it became. A line I ran across in the writings of one of my favorite nineteenth century authors puts it well.

The evening began to grow dark. The autumn wind met us again, colder, stronger, … It was a wind of the worlds, not a wind of the leaves.

(George MacDonald, in his novel *Robert Falconer,* published in 1868)

In the many fine series of the twentieth century which now grace our shelves, the depiction of snow flurries in winter, picking wild berries in spring, the ol' swimming hole in summer, and autumn's rich, dark expansiveness, we find comfortable but unnamable things that curl up into our hearts even as they take us outside into places and times far off. More than the winds that move the leaves, these are winds of the worlds—those places far off in time that we can enter whenever we open the cover of one of these books.

Though there are better series and better writers, it was Leslie McFarlane and the Hardy Boys who began it for me when I could still count all my years on my fingers. I began this article with a quotation from the Hardy Boys of 1929. It is fitting to close it with another quotation by the same author, who was born one hundred years ago this year. We return to winter and its unearthly beauty. Describing the days immediately after he had written the first three Hardy Boys books (in his cabin on Lake Ramsey 300 miles north of Toronto), he lay a hauntingly beautiful scene reminiscent of the beginning of *The Mystery of Cabin Island* when he wrote,

I returned to Haileybury, moved back in with my parents and brothers, rented an office above a bank and set up shop as author-in-residence. … Haileybury will always be my home town. … Even in its primitive days Haileybury was a lovely town because it was built on a sloping hillside overlooking a majestic lake called Temiskaming. … The lake was the enduring element that gave Haileybury its character. … In winter it was a vast expanse of white snow, acres of purity in a light so clear that even the small dwellings on the other shore were sharply defined. When the snowstorms came they advanced with white banners flying in an onrush of dancing flakes that softly enclosed our world.

(*Ghost of the Hardy Boys*, Leslie MacFarlane, pages 77-79)

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