

What Might Have Been

A Girls Series That Never Made It

The Mary Louise Gay Series

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In the Great Depression, for most people money for extras and luxuries was scarce. A lot of series bit the dust in those years. Almost paradoxically, however, books were relatively inexpensive, and good books provided a welcome escape from a life that many must have found bleak. So some series endured, and some even made a good start.

As far as girls' series, the long-lasting Nancy Drew got launched in 1930, Judy Bolton in 1932, and the Dana Girls in 1934. The nine-volume Melody Lane series began in 1933, and the four-volume Barbara Ann series began in 1939.

And in 1935, the three volumes of the Mary Louise Gay series appeared. And that's all there were. It's a series I'd never heard of in over a quarter century of collecting series books. The titles are *The Mystery at Dark Cedars*, *The Mystery of the Fires*, and *The Mystery of the Secret Band*. The author was Edith Lavell, about whom there will be more later.

Even if I've only collected a few girls' series, I was at least aware of many of them. An obscure, passing reference made by another collector a few months ago intrigued me enough to try to find one of the Mary Lou books. In spite of the series being no more than a blip in the history of series books, they were not too hard to find. I can't guess why that would be so, but I won't complain.

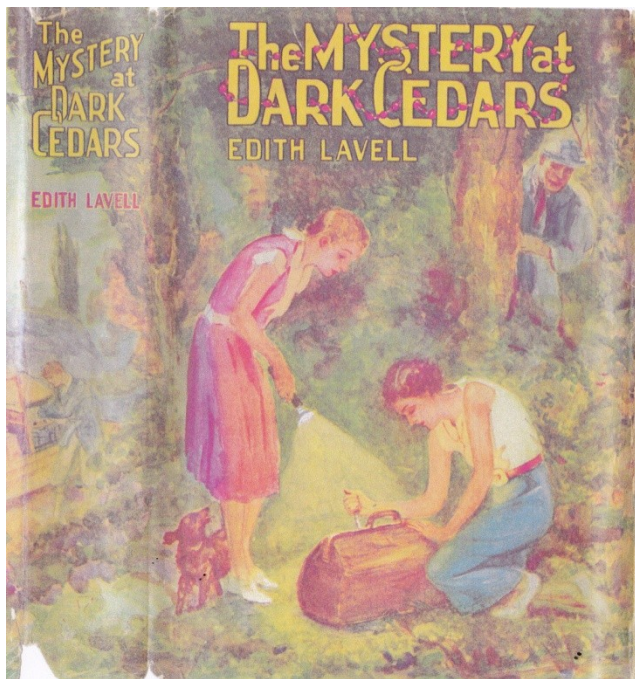
The first I found was the third and last in the series: *The Mystery of the Secret Band*. As I read through it, I could feel my eyebrows lift many times in amazement at how good it was. I was impressed. I am well aware that the long-lived girls' series I mentioned above have their devotees to this day, and I have read some of the tales in those series—but as I read the exploits of Mary Lou, I couldn't help but wonder why this heroine didn't make it beyond her three debut stories.

After I read this one, I was able to find the first without too much trouble. I also found the middle volume, but not in a format that matched the other two. That was okay, but as a collector I really like to have all the books in a series to be in the same format. Imagine my surprise when I had all but given up and then walked into a used bookstore and found it in the children's section—in very good condition, in dust jacket, for less than the price of lunch for two at McDonald's. It was one of those “great find” moments in series book collecting, all too rare now because of internet use by collectors, the demise of used bookstores, and the gradually diminishing number of desirables to be found anywhere at all.

The author, Edith Lavell was born on March 11, 1892. She lived in Philadelphia nearly all her life and died there on April 26, 1957. From information provided by James Keeline, I learned that she was the daughter of Harper and Brothers vice president, Daniel R. Harper (1855-1910). She attended Swarthmore College where she received an A.B. in economics in 1914. She married Victor L. Lavell in 1914. She was a director of Girl Scouts in Philadelphia in the early 1920s which led to her Girl Scout series published by A. L. Burt, ten volumes that appeared 1922-1925. She later produced the Linda Carlton aviation stories, five volumes that were published 1931-1933—another Depression-era girls' series. Her Mary Louise Gay series were her third and last published series.

Well, then, the Mary Lou books: first, the cover artwork is intriguing. Each one shows a scene from the book that takes place in a forest. They are dark and mysterious, both inviting and calling for wariness. The overall color is dark green. The lettering on the titles is well designed to be both easily readable as well as imaginative. Had I seen any of these in a bookstore without knowing anything about them, I'd have paused and picked it up. There are no internals but a frontispiece, each of which is a rather poor black and white redo of the same scene on the cover.

What of the stories? Mary Lou is a sixteen-year-old girl who is the daughter of a noted police detective. On the first page of the first book, she is described as “a pretty girl of sixteen, with dark hair and lovely brown eyes and long lashes that would make an actress envious.” She lives in a small town never placed clearly on the map, but a couple hours' drive from Philadelphia and several hours' drive from the Hudson River—therefore, probably rural New York or eastern Pennsylvania.



The Mystery of Dark Cedars begins when Mary Lou and her friend Jane Patterson rescue a kitten from where it is trapped in a tree, and deliver the beloved kitten to its owner Miss Grant, a miserly old spinster who lives on the edge of town in a big house called Dark Cedars. They learn that a girl slightly younger than their age named Elsie

lives in the house and is treated almost as a slave. Miss Grant is her aunt, and Elsie had to go to her aunt's house when her parents were killed in an accident. Because Miss Grant is a miser, Elsie has no decent clothes to go to school in, so she has become almost a recluse, forced to work at Dark Cedars.

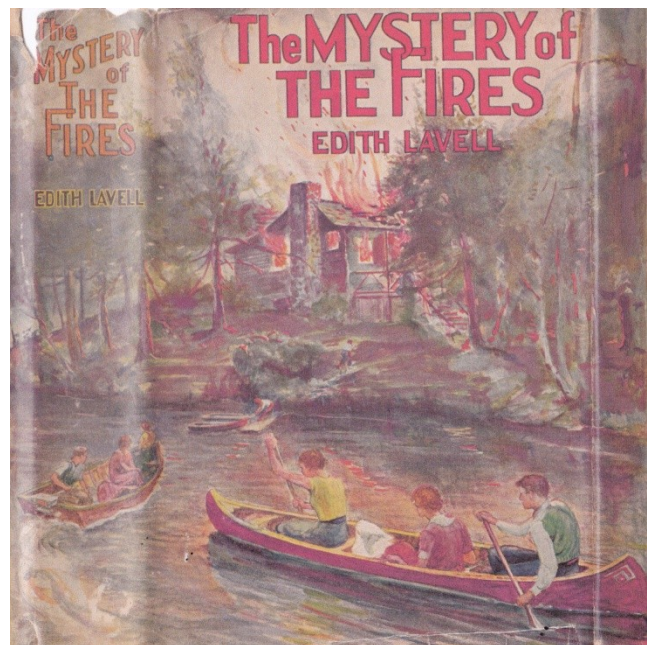
This outrages Mary Lou and Jane, who determine to do something about it so that Elsie can go to school and make friends her own age. Things become very complicated when Miss Grant's safe is robbed of several thousand dollars in cash and a ruby necklace, and the aunt is certain that Elsie is the thief. The girls are hard put to it to determine what really happened, who the thief is, and why the theft occurred. The mystery is well-plotted, tightly wound, and absorbing. More than merely figuring out who did it, there is also danger as Mary Lou in one scene is caught in the trunk of a car of one suspect as she tries to trail him, and in another is wrapped up in a blanket, tied up, and thrown into a closet.

The resolution is satisfying, with proper clues sprinkled throughout the story but none of them obvious, so that the reader, along with Mary Lou, can wrinkle his or her brow trying to unravel the mystery.

In *The Mystery of the Fires*, Mary Lou and her family go on summer vacation for a whole month in Shady Nook, a snoozing kind of place with only a few residents. "Just the mountains and the woods and the lovely Hudson River," as Mary Lou describes it to Jane. "Only a half dozen bungalows, so that everybody knows everybody else. It's all friendly and nice." The Gay family has gone to this place every year for some time, and look forward to their annual vacation.

Except that when they arrive, they learn that one of the bungalows had just been burned to the ground by an as-yet-unknown arsonist. Before too long, other bungalows are also torched. Who is responsible? What is the motive? Mary Lou and Jane, who has come to spend the vacation with the Gays, work to solve the puzzle. Jane, however, becomes more interested in one of the other residents, a young man who is pleasing and unassuming, even though he comes from a wealthy family that owns most of the land around. When he is accused of starting the fires and taken away by the police, the mystery becomes more personal.

The resolution is slow in coming, but layer by layer what is obscure becomes clearer. What happens to Mary Lou when the guilty party realizes that she is close to finding the solution is one of the most frightening passages I've read in a series book—all the more so since I have heard cases like it that happened in real life. It couldn't happen today, but it was quite possible in the



1930s. In reading *The Mystery of the Fires*, I never saw it coming, and when it did happen, I thought that not even Ken Holt and Sandy Allen could get out of this one.

But in the end, justice prevails, and the reader is moved and impressed by the loyalty of Mary Lou's friends. Indeed, that's one of the many strengths of this series: in none of the stories does Mary Lou solve everything single-handed. She does most of the work, but in the end, she needs, and welcomes, the help of others.

It might be said that the resolution to this story is a little too tidy, but we must keep in mind that this is, in fact, a juvenile and that sometimes that happens in such stories. While the guilty party is indeed brought down, one may well wrinkle one's brow over the facile, smug, half-wits who cooperate without question in the means by which Mary Lou's investigation is muzzled; or with the release of the friend who had been falsely accused without any kind of comeuppance for the jerk who made the accusation. These parts of the story are less than satisfying, but I have noticed that in many such stories the vindication of the innocent is rarely accompanied by any chagrin for those who were quick to condemn, or any apology from them, either. Maybe, however, that is more true-to-life than we would wish.

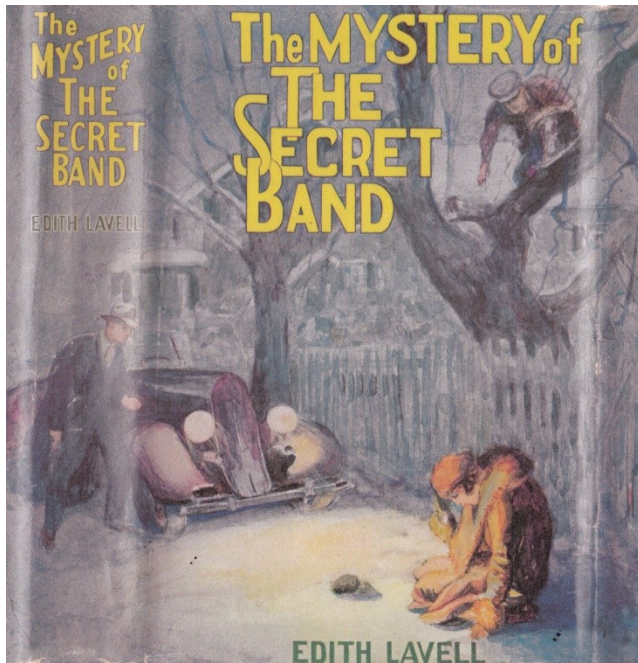
The characters are neither two-dimensional nor formulaic. Each has an individual personality, well drawn and consistently portrayed throughout the series. Father is strong and loving and mother is caring and insists on responsible behavior, but both allow Mary Lou to be on her own—these are not the usual “series book parents” who have to be out of the picture for the hero or heroine to be able to function. Friend Jane is a little flighty and not entirely reliable, but she is loyal. Boy friends Max Miller and Norman Wilder are good lads, interested in cars, a little “roosterish” without being overbearing or shallow—and are willing to put real costly effort and commitment into helping when that is needed.

And Mary Lou herself? Well, she is strong and tenacious when it comes to solving a mystery, dedicated to seeing justice prevail especially when an underdog is in need, and she is thoroughly female without being prissy. But she seems to have no scruples when it comes to doing what she wants to do, even if it means going against what her mother says (“Make sure you're home by 9:30.” “I will.” followed an hour later by, “Let's get in the trunk of this suspect's car and see where he takes us” even though she has no idea where he's going and has no way to get back home from wherever it is they end up.)

It doesn't faze her to break into a house to see if what she's seeking is found there, or even ripping open someone's valise to see if the stolen goods are inside. “Don't worry, Jane. If he's innocent, we'll buy him a new one.” One can wonder at this lack of propriety, but to put the best face on it, it can be refreshing to have a heroine who's obviously imperfect, and who, when confronted with it later, can drop her eyes in shame and admit it. Her misbehavior is never held up as the way to go. Lavell is *not* teaching us that the end justifies the means; she is telling us that even good guys are not perfect.

The Mystery of the Secret Band begins when Mary Lou's father asks her to work undercover at a modest apartment house for women in Philadelphia whose residents have suffered a rash of thefts. Mary Lou's father, impressed with his daughter's detective work in the previous two

stories, trusts her to take on this assignment. She is excited and proud to do so, even if it means missing the great Christmas party her friends are putting on in a few days. Nevertheless, to the friends' dismay, she travels to Philadelphia.



As Jane asked Mary Lou at the beginning of the second book, “Didn’t you have enough excitement and mystery at Dark Cedars?” “I never have enough,” returned Mary Lou. This statement applies equally well as the third mystery gets under way.

This is a story in which it is gradually revealed that there is a “secret band” of girls who rob guests in hotels, a band run by a particularly clever and nefarious older woman. Once again, we have a complex story sprinkled with clues, with a broad array of suspects and, as the story develops, increasing danger. The resolution is more than satisfactory, except for one thing: there are no more stories that follow.

One can only wonder what might have been if the Mary Louise Gay stories had taken off. If there were twenty or thirty or more of these books, I’d have put my energy and money into finding them. Second maybe only to Connie Blair, I think the Mary Lou mysteries are the best girls’ series out there.

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