

SERIES BOOKS AS SERIOUS BOOKS

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February 19 & 22, 2001
3,919 words

Published in “The Mystery and Adventure Series Review” #34, Summer 2001

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In the summer of 1955, my family drove from our home in southern California to Illinois to visit my father’s second cousin. We stayed a week on her farm. I was about to turn seven years old. One of my most vivid remaining memories of that summer is seeing fireflies—lightning bugs—for the first time. Like tens of thousands of other children, I kept a few in a jar, fascinated with their ability to glow on and off. Then I set them free and watched the lines of light in the deep dusk as they flew away. The image has remained with me for 45 years.

Most children come with a built-in sense of wonder and fascination. Even the most abused, underprivileged, or restricted children have an imagination that can turn ordinary things into portals through which they may enter a place of splendor. Children who like to read are particularly fortunate, for the splendid places they can reach through books are far more abundant than anyone can reach in a lifetime. All too often, adults who are committed to ensuring that children become familiar with “good literature” serve instead to dull the imagination and blunt the curiosity.

Not to say that matchmaking children with good writing is wrong-headed! It is usually either the method or the choice of literature that serves to bring about the opposite of what is intended. Most of us have heard about librarians, teachers, and parents of previous generations who sought to dissuade children from reading series books. Well, there *are* some bad, even harmful, ones, and we’ll glance at those before the end of this article—but few blanket condemnations (or for that matter, approvals) are without exceptions. Most readers of *The Review* will not need to be convinced that on the whole, series books are pretty good stuff; some of them can even take a deserved place among the great works of literature.

I suppose the truth of that assertion depends on how one defines good literature. To my way of thinking, the “opinion of experts” carries little weight. Often when one “studies” something rather than enjoys it, one may be called an “expert” in the subject, but that’s not at all the same thing as knowing it from the inside. Good literature is that which stimulates the imagination, upholds the basic common virtues like honesty and truth and respect for others, doesn’t need titillation or foul language or exploitative relationships to be popular, and generally expands and improves the mind and heart of the readers.

If someone sees a middle-aged man like me reading *The Telltale Scar*, a Tom Quest book by Fran Striker, however they may react I know I’ve got a book that conveys an effective message against

racial prejudice that's powerful, convincing, and more accessible to more readers (especially children) than *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

It was midafternoon when Tom Quest and his friends left the village with a new slant on the jungle savages.

"They were all right," said Whiz Walton in a pleased voice.

"Sure they're all right," Gulliver replied. "They're just as much all right down here as yo' are in New York. What's more," he said, "I bet they treated us a darned sight better'n they'd git treated if they was to march into one o' them New York hotels."

"You've got something there, Gulliver," said Whiz.

(*The Telltale Scar*, pages 149-150)

And good as *Mockingbird* is, *Telltale Scar* is more fun to read!

The Tom Quest series is excellent, but there are many other series books that deserve serious attention. For example,

"Chief Kane took off his heavy cap and ran a handkerchief around its sweatband." This single line is evidence of the superior level of writing in the Ken Holt series. You'll find it on page 2 of *The Clue of the Phantom Car*. Why is this line evidence of superlative quality? Because an average writer would probably have written, "Chief Kane took off his heavy cap and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief." Author Sam Epstein described the more true-to-life experience that a man wearing a cap on a sweltering day will have to wipe the sweatband, and put that deft touch into the story.

Sam Epstein, writing as Bruce Campbell, filled the Ken Holt series—and for that matter, his other fiction—with thousands of such lines that demonstrate his skill as a writer. For example, in *The Mystery of the Galloping Horse*, page 50, where just about anyone else would have written, "He poured the last of the coffee into his cup," Sam wrote "He tilted the almost empty coffeepot over his cup." His writing lifts the standard from good to excellent, from common to exceptional.

The author of the Ken Holt series (1949-1964) died in January 2000 at the age of 90. His wife and partner, Beryl Williams, died the previous month. Bruce Campbell will be high on the list of any series book fan's roster of favorite authors—for many of us, at the very top. His books read terrifically well today. The Tim Penny books, the Roger Baxters, and the earlier novels like *Printer's Devil*, *Dynamo Farm*, *New Broome Experiment*, and *Water to Burn*, all set and maintain a high standard.

Fortunately, for the connoisseur of series books, there are other writers and other series in the top echelon of the twentieth century series book phenomenon. The Stratemeyer Syndicate, whose resources and methods made it possible to crank out formulaic books by the trainload, was a mixed blessing. By its massive publication runs and prominent publicity, the Syndicate contributed to the popularity of series books even as it lowered the standard and threatened the survivability of the higher quality books produced by independents. Sometimes, though, even the Syndicate had an author who cared about quality.

A few of the top scenes in the genre come from the writers of Syndicate books. In my opinion, this was because the writers were able to prevail over the business people in the Syndicate and at the publishing house of Grosset & Dunlap who oversaw the production of the books. Passing

through the obstacle course that hampered these writers, their books made it to the bookshelves of stores across the nation, and we can still enjoy such scenes as

Gradually they were nearing a wildly picturesque mountain range. Ahead of them was a veritable forest of pine trees. The road led through it.

"Isn't this great?" Roy shouted. There was a green dusk under the wide-spreading branches. The only sound they could hear was made by rushing, tumbling water, and that was not very near.

"Sounds like a cascade over on a mountain," Roy exclaimed.

Then through an opening he beheld a view so beautiful he drew rein to gaze at it. The forest ended abruptly at the edge of a narrow, though deep, ravine. Beyond rose the jagged gray wall of a mountain. Over its side from a great height a waterfall tumbled. ... For many moments he stood there admiring the waterfall with its rainbow of colors in the setting sun.

(The X Bar X Boys At Triangle Mine, pages 68-69)

The X Bar X Boys series (1926-1942) consistently provides some of the grandest, most inspiring descriptions in the series book world. The earliest Hardy Boys contain some of the most exciting scenes.

At last they emerged on the hilltop that overlooked Willow River. Below them lay the stream, with water shining in the moonlight. The deep banks of willow trees along the borders cast heavy shadows, and a light mist overhung the fields and hedges in the distance. Gloomy and mysterious, the heavy bulk of the old mill rose from beside the river, near the shimmering silver streak of the mill race. Not a light shone from the building and it appeared absolutely deserted. ...

Inch by inch they made their way forward. The moon was high in the sky and seemed like a giant searchlight. It seemed impossible that they could cross that open space without being discovered. Every blade of grass seemed clearly revealed by the moonlight. When they were about half way toward the mill they heard a sound in the distance. It was the banging of a heavy door. ... For a moment a deep silence prevailed. Then, from the mill, they heard a surly voice: "I saw some one out on the hillside."

A dark cloud that had been creeping across the sky began to obscure the moon, and gradually the vivid illumination that bathed the hillside gave way to gloom and darkness. The cloud hid the moon completely. "Now's our chance!" whispered Frank, to his brother. "Head toward the willow tree." ... Their feet made no sound in the deep grass.

(The Secret of the Old Mill, pages 173-177)

The first Hardy Boys stories carried much more atmosphere than the later books in the series, even the books of the 1940s and 1950s. Most, though not all, of the earliest books had better plots and were better written; there was also an undefinable aura that emerged as the generations passed. Seventy years later, the books open the door into another era, a time of the simple values and basic ethics of strong America, now so obviously lacking. This is more than mere nostalgia or a willingness to look at another age with blinders. There was good quality there.

In spite of the occasional gem in a Syndicate-produced book, there should be no argument that the better quality writing is overwhelmingly to be found in the camp of the independent writers such as Capwell Wyckoff, Percy Keese Fitzhugh (who also wrote under the pseudonym Hugh Lloyd), the above-named Fran Striker, Franklin Folsom (who wrote most of his juvenile novels of the southwest under the pseudonym Troy Nesbit), and of course Harold L. Goodwin ("John Blaine") and Sam Epstein ("Bruce Campbell").

The books of Franklin Folsom, for example, are uniformly exceptional. Folsom excels in telling stories in which young people are empowered in the world of adults, many of whom have allowed themselves to be weighed down by routine and lack of imagination. Because of this, these shallow adults relate to young people with brute, mindless authority.

For example, in *The Indian Mummy Mystery*, there is a scene, simultaneously humorous and serious, in which a ranger named Mr. Price hauls two boys before a museum official accused of "stealing government property"—a human skull the boys have found in the wilds of the southwest. The ranger doesn't give the boys an opportunity to explain. A mindless bully in a uniform, he takes them into custody, finds the grandfather of one of the boys who is in charge of them at the moment, and hustles the group before the superintendent.

The ranger laid the skull on the superintendent's desk triumphantly, as if he were making a touchdown. Then he explained the facts as he saw them. While the ranger talked, the superintendent was turning the skull over in his hands and examining it.

Now Mrs. Hansen, who seemed to have pulled herself together, broke into the story suddenly. "I found the thing in the icebox in my car. I was so frightened that I fainted dead away. I can't imagine how it got there, and I'm sure these boys don't know, either."

"But the fat boy said distinctly it belonged to him," Mr. Price said in a firm, accusing voice.

"It doesn't, either," Huff protested. "It belongs to me. If you'll just let me, I'll tell you all about it."

(*The Indian Mummy Mystery*, pages 94-95)

One of the most unusual and compelling images in the series book world is found in Capwell Wyckoff's Mercer Boys series. In the seventh book of that series, *The Mercer Boys as First Classmen*, a villainous dynamiter is bent on destroying a dam. On one occasion, he blows a hole in the earthworks and releases a massive amount of water which cascades down a mountainslope. Since the book is set in the dead of a freezing winter, it doesn't take long for the water to freeze. The reservoir behind the dam, which had been iced over, has been emptied of water, but its frozen surface, a sheet of ice several inches thick, remains in place. The result produces an eerie ceiling of ice over the drained lake—a captivating image that astounds the imagination. In Wyckoff's own words,

On the following day the cadet body was in possession of the story and that afternoon there was another hike to the watershed to look at the damage done. From a hilltop nearby a dazzling and beautiful spectacle showed itself. For almost a mile a sheet of ice which spread out like a fan showed on the slope of the

mountain, a fan which held DeLong's house in the center of it. The hole in the earthworks was a long and tearing one, and the basin itself presented an interesting sight. The water had run out under the ice, leaving most of the big basin roofed over with a blue-white roof, though the ice at the breach had been shattered and torn.

(*The Mercer Boys as First Classmen*, pages 120-121)

Is it possible to find such quality today? Much has been said and written about J. K. Rowling and her Harry Potter books. Rowling has become almost a cult figure. Single mother, struggling through poverty, rejected by publisher after publisher, blah blah blah. Presented to the public with a smart blend of confidence, humility, and babeness, she has been on the cover of several major national weeklies. One can imagine the makeup artists and airbrush experts putting their skills into creating the image of childhood's new heroine. Children faint over her the way thousands of teenagers of my generation swooned over the Beatles.

Well, Harry Potter can't stand up to Ken Holt and his peers. For a moment, let's take leave of the great era of series books and examine today's popular book hero: Harry Potter. I admit right off that I've only read the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. I was not interested in reading further. The story just can't compare to the books we know and love.

Many times the story is furthered by coincidence, convenience, or contrivance. The reader should expect a lot of improbabilities when reading a story about magic, but there are just way too many. Magic is described in such variety that we are in a world almost entirely unconnected with order. Food appears on plates by magic. Getting from one's room to the dining hall is an adventure, since passageways and doorways change almost at random.

The characters are poorly drawn. The "bad guys" are corrupt, truly dangerous people, and the "good guys" are, at best, mixed. There is no one who is really "good." Those who are evil are thoroughly, horribly evil, but the good guys are little better than wimps.

The book breathes danger and enmity. There is no dependable safety, there is no love shown, the authority figures are capricious in their discipline and lay down and enforce rules without much sense of order or purpose. It is a world in which most authority is either abused or abdicated. The world of Harry Potter is a bleak and dangerous world without affection, colored by anger and hatred, in which one succeeds by disobedience to fickle authority, where the greatest crime is getting caught, and where one's allies are not completely reliable.

What is the appeal of Harry Potter, then? The only reason I can think of, beyond the skilled marketing hype that picked up the momentum and polished it, thus filling some people's coffers fatter than Uncle Scrooge's money bin, is that the writing is better than what had recently preceded it. We are all aware that series books were "dumbed down" forty years ago; compared to much popular writing of the past few decades, the Harry Potter books have been "smarted up." That is, they are better than most recent popular fare. Looking at *Goosebumps* and the *Hardy Boys Casefiles*, that's no major achievement.

And Harry's world will be familiar to children who are products of broken families, absent fathers, and who attend school with metal detectors. This is not the series book world of the 1920s or even 1950s. Sadly, many children today will not note the lack of safety and affection in the Potter books. In Harry's world, children are empowered not only with magic but can develop

courage, initiative, and independence by enduring daily challenges. But they are not likely to learn love, respect, or hope. Harry Potter may jump-start the reader's imagination, but it tastes to me like literary M&M's and cotton candy. I want something solid, deep, and nourishing.

To be honest, Potter is also better than some of the old series books, but most of us have not hesitated to point out that some series were pretty bad. In contrast to what one finds in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the best series book authors, Hal Goodwin and Sam Epstein, said that they wrote to express virtues which are common to all people: honor, honesty, generosity, service to others, heroism, loyalty to friends, perseverance, creativity, mental acuity, patience. The best of all the classic series books extolled these virtues, and this is what made them great books. Overall, Harry Potter falls far short of the standard set in the best series books we collect and value.

Admittedly, a friend of mine who has a well-trained and critical appreciation of literature begs me to continue to read the Potter books and promises that they get better. When I run out of series books to read, maybe I'll try another Potter. Until then, even if there were never any posters of Franklin W. Dixon available, even if John Blaine never appeared on Oprah, even if Bruce Campbell's visage never appeared on the cover of Time magazine, and even if Capwell Wyckoff didn't make the talk-show circuit, I think that the best of series book literature is far beyond Harry Potter, and now gladly turn back to the best.

It is difficult, almost impossible to select a scene in a Ken Holt book that showcases a slice of Sam Epstein's writing. It's not because there are no scenes—it's because the scenes are so multi-layered, so complex, that a few lines or even paragraphs can't do them justice. An example is the scene in which Ken and Sandy have barricaded themselves inside the garage in *The Mystery of the Green Flame* and are assailed by vicious enemies trying to get in. The situation is simply so demanding of the reader, so dependent upon the flow of the rest of the book, that a snippet of text can't show it to best advantage. It is like trying to see an entire room by peeking through a keyhole. (There aren't keyholes any more, but I think the analogy still works.) Sure, you can get a small idea of what's inside the room, but you miss 98% of what's in there.

The atmosphere in such a book is so delectable that it waters the reader's imagination to the roots. The gothic charcoal and gray atmosphere of the Ken Holts, the Hal Keens, and selected Hardy Boys have this effect on the reader. The bright golds and bold reds of the Rick Brants and Tom Quests do the same in another way. The grand sweep of the X Bar X Boys takes the reader into the broad-minded, warm-hearted, solid foundation of excitement. The lush fecundity of Wyckoff's settings and the dry heat of Folsom's desert and cave stories extend the reader's sense of the world in which he lives.

In these stories, one can find oneself in an abandoned mansion on a rainy night, a fog-shrouded ship off the coast of Maine, on a desperate horse-ride through a stormy Montana night, scudding along sparkling blue seas of the south Pacific, cooling off in a dusty cave entrance on a blazing summer's day in the desert, or bundled up in thick wool while a blizzard rages around one's flimsy shelter among the rocks.

As hinted above, they weren't all classics. There were some awful series and some awful series books. Even the worst, however, will have their fans—probably because of the imagination of childhood that ran deep and has left many pleasant places in the contours of the grown, adult mind. Children have less discriminating tastes than adults, and can enjoy many stories that their elders can't tolerate, but which will leave a comforting memory in later years. I fondly remember

buying *Don Sturdy on the Desert of Mystery* in the late 1960s. It cost me ten cents in a thrift store. I read it in my late teens and enjoyed the account of how young Don and his uncles crossed the Algerian desert with Don's new-found friend Brick. Thirty years later I located the rest of the Don Sturdys and realize now how mediocre they are.

In my opinion, the distinction of being the worst series book belongs to *Don Sturdy in the Temples of Fear*—an execrable volume in which Don and his cohorts invade a primitive culture to take some of their artifacts. When the rightful owners protest this theft, Don and company escape them by blowing up crowds of the pursuing natives with dynamite. Don is a worse villain in this book than the dynamiter of Wyckoff's Mercer Boys story—in fact, I can think of no worse atrocity committed by the most unredeemable villain in any series book I've ever read! By all means, keep this book out of the hands of children or you'll twist their imagination for life!

In the summer of 1967 I turned 19. Once again I traveled into the interior of the country and saw fireflies. I haven't seen any since. That summer was a kind of signpost in which I left my childhood behind. It was, coincidentally, a time close to the demise of series books. It was the last summer in which I could spend time in the wide fields near my home with a friend, when the heat warmed the hills north of our homes. We took long, rambling walks on Saturdays, and if we became thirsty, we could put our mouths to the sprinklers of our neighbors' lawns and drank.

Now there are few fields left in the place where I grew up. The neighborhood has grown older, as I have, and the empty places where wonder and imagination could run wild have been covered over with houses and strip malls. Paved roads and manicured lawns have replaced the dirt lanes and scraggly trees that grew beside them.

The doorways into my childhood and the wonder that colored it are now on my shelves. Words on a page rather than weeds on a vacant lot lift me above the confines of the daily grind. Perhaps there is a bit of Peter Pan in all of us—at least there is in me. But that is not all there is, for the enjoyment of series books is not a refusal to grow up; rather it is a desire to bring into maturity the innocence and excitement of youth. My imagination is still fertile, maybe even more now than it ever has been. If that is true, I credit the series books I began to collect over a dozen years ago. Serious stuff.