

SERIES BOOKS: THEIR APPEAL

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In addition to the joy of collecting and reading the old series books, there is the equal value of the number of relationships I have developed with a dozen or so other collectors—a number which is growing. The people in this group range in age from 19 to 84, is spread across the country from Connecticut to California, with one or two overseas, and include a devout Roman Catholic and an atheist, a monarchist and an anarchist, a blue collar worker and a professional man, a priest, a college student, and a few retired people, men and women, single and married, and people who live in big cities and in very rural areas.

One day I asked myself, What do we have in common? Why do we search through used book stores and other repositories of old books to look eagerly for volumes long out of print, written for children in the era of the first seventy years of this century? Truth be told, many of the books really have little to commend them; consistent greatness is rare, and there are serious flaws of many kinds in the genre. Where, then, does our passion come from?

Right here I must say that I can't answer the question; however, I think I can identify a few relevant factors.

Bibliomania

Most of us like the physical reality of books as well-crafted items. In series books, we like the thick paper, attractive type style, the artwork, and the color of the dust jackets. If they're old enough, even the smell is intoxicating. Looking for them in used book stores and other places can create a physical condition similar to that which (I'm told) addicts experience before an anticipated fix: sweating palms, elevated heart rate, etc. I experience this when I enter a book store where there is the possibility of finding treasure—especially if it is a store in a place where I have never been. Perhaps there I will find one of those scarce books, or a volume in particularly good condition with a dust jacket. We are less attracted or moved at finding a book in poor condition, are almost moved not at all by the dumbed-down versions of certain books, and usually have only contempt for the paperback versions.

This cannot explain why series books in particular draw our interest and our money, or any kind of book would do the same. When I went into a bookstore in Japan, my experience was not characterized by the euphoria of "the search." There may have been wonderful things in that store, but I couldn't read or even identify them, so there was no rush of adrenaline. Similarly, there is no surge of excitement even in used book stores when I browse sections in which I have almost no interest—I am not attracted, for example, to old books on business or car repair. Series books, then, draw us for much more than simply being old books; perhaps they draw us to themselves because they can take us out of our ordinary lives to places and times of particular significance to us.

Journey to the Past

When we consider the past into which series books can take us, there are two categories to keep in mind: general history and one's personal past. Series books present us with a slice of Americana as generous as a slice of one of Aunt Gertrude's pies. These are not textbooks of history lessons; they are windows opened by a time machine. Looking through the window is not work or study; it is an adventure.

It is not significant that the slice of history is an idealized one; idealized it may be, but it is an idealized slice of a real period—that is, the idealization is itself a real part of the past into which we may enter vicariously. We may enter an age in which Frank and Joe can enjoy a lunch and two desserts, and pay with a two-dollar bill (*What Happened At Midnight*, p. 138). Ken Holt and Sandy Allen cannot get out of the place where they are held captive by using a cellular telephone, and Rick Brant is not a computer genius. The young people can go camping without having to take out numerous permits and pay exorbitant fees to government officials. Official bureaucracy is barely mentioned. The constabulary is presented as either a company of inept buffoons (as in the early Hardys) or as providing desperately-needed and eagerly-welcomed assistance (as in Ken Holt). It is a simpler, purer, slower age, and the idealism is like putting a polish on real silver.

In addition to enjoying the Americana, the reader of these books also can enter his or her own personal past, when the books were first bought or borrowed, and read. Rocco Musemeche at age 84 dearly loves the books of his childhood: the Rover Boys, books by Leo Edwards and Percy Keese Fitzhugh, and others. I, who was a child in the 1950s, remember the original text Hardy Boys; the early Tom Swift, Juniors; the Rick Brants; and the Tom Corbetts. These books are reminiscent to us of real times which we personally experienced; collecting them is a way of reclaiming those days and bringing them into our present. And collecting books of that era which we did not know at the time even makes it possible for us retroactively to extend the borders of our childhood. We can have shelves full of time machines which we can use at will to enter another world which, at the same time, is our world.

Ordinariness Leads to Extraordinariness

In addition to the adventures, the nostalgia, the wholesomeness of the stories, there is compelling attraction to the ordinary pleasures of life of another era. When some of the stories were updated to attract a modern audience, it was almost always this aspect of the story that was omitted. Today's offerings are severely deficient, for they have little place for simple fun and emphasize action and fast-paced excitement over atmosphere and setting. Some of the best times in the old series book world are when nothing momentous is happening. This is what adds real flavor to the stories. We are pleased and entertained and moved when, at the end of *The Tower Treasure*, the menu of the celebratory feast is laid out for us, and the iced-over bay is stirringly, poetically described in the opening pages of *The Mystery of Cabin Island*. The preparation of meals and the picnics in the Hardy Boys make us invisible participants not just in their adventures but in their lives.

It is the same when the reader imagines the warm water of Chesapeake Bay closing over him as Rick and Scotty dive in Rick Brant's *The Flying Stingaree*, the kerosene lanterns in Capwell Wyckoff's *The Mystery of Gaither Cove*, or how the boys fix up the old landlocked shipwreck in *Tom Slade At Temple Camp*. It is the ordinariness of the characters' lives that makes the books about them a source of extraordinary pleasure

today. In the best series books, there is a delight in everything ordinary, which makes the adventure, the mystery-to-be-solved, the puzzle-to-be-unraveled so enjoyable.

Real Quality

Apart from emotional or sentimental attachment, there are probably three categories by which a series book can be judged: writing, plot, and artwork (which would include internal illustrations, frontispieces, and covers). It must be admitted that many series books, and some entire series, are severely deficient in one or more of these categories. There are many examples of poor writing, abominable plotting, and bad artwork. Yet I have found that rarely do the series book aficionados agree on which is which. Agreement is much more obtainable on what is good. Almost everyone acknowledges the consistent excellence in the Ken Holt and Rick Brant series. Other than that, frequently what one person disparages another will love.

But even in the books and series which usually fall to the mediocre level or below, there are elements of greatness. Sometimes a dismal plot will feature passages of surpassing beauty. Excellent, atmospheric artwork may adorn the cover of a poorly-written adventure.

All of these features can be evocative of many things beyond the artwork, writing, or plot. Even if a portion of a story is an unillustrated, poorly written passage in a forgettable plot, sometimes the image or event itself stands out with signal clarity. Times of classic boyhood play which contributed little or nothing to the plot but much to the atmosphere of the early Hardy Boys, take us back to the late 1920s and early 1930s; the “can-do” attitude of Rick Brant and Tom Swift, Jr. are clearly the products of the 1950s. These essential but almost undefinable elements of series books are independent of plot, writing, or artwork.

And nearly each series includes books and moments of notable quality, almost painfully joyful to read in their presentation. Among these would be the winter scenes of the Hardy Boys’ *The Mystery of Cabin Island*, the severely cold wind of the city canyons in Ken Holt’s *The Mystery of the Grinning Tiger*, the sparkling South Pacific in Rick Brant’s *The Phantom Shark*, pristine Alaska in *Don Sturdy Lost in Glacier Bay*, the desiccated red sand in Tom Corbett’s *Stand By For Mars!*, the coolness of the air inside the cave in contrast to the fierce dry heat of the southwest desert in Troy Nesbit’s *The Diamond Cave Mystery*, the clinging fog on the rocky coast of Maine in Hal Keen’s *The Clue at Skeleton Rocks*, the dry and clear vistas of Tom Quest’s *The Secret of Thunder Mountain*, the grandeur of *The X Bar X Boys Lost in the Rockies*, rowing across an Atlantic bay at midnight in Capwell Wyckoff’s *The Sea Runners’ Cache*, young Roger Baxter and his younger brother painting a porch in *Stranger in the Inlet*, Dig Allen moving through passages illuminated by fireflies in the city of the Kohoolies in *Trappers of Venus*, and Tom Swift and Bud Barclay’s exploration of the bottom of the sea in *Tom Swift and His Jetmarine*.

In addition to the piercingly beautiful word-crafting in these volumes, there are the values which are taught in the stories as the characters address the challenges which confront them. Through the stories we see many powerful values held up as sterling examples for the formation of youth, such as loyalty to friends, self-reliance, a love of adventure, passion for justice, courage, humor, honesty, respect for others (frequently, but sadly not consistently, including people of other cultures, races, and economic level),

ingenuity, love of nature, the necessity of cooperation, and other values of universal appeal and approval.

Connecting With Others

Thomas Merton, writing in 1948 about the work his grandfather was doing as a prominent employee for Grosset & Dunlap in 1923, said, “Pop worked for Grosset and Dunlap, publishers who specialized in cheap reprints of popular novels, and in children’s books of an adventurous cast. They were the ones who gave the world Tom Swift and all his electrical contrivances, together with the Rover Boys and Jerry Todd and all the rest. And there were several big showrooms full of these books, where I could go and curl up in a leather armchair and read all day without being disturbed until Pop came along to take me down to Childs and eat chicken à la king” (Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 1948). Reading this account puts most collectors into a transport, imagining the summer this eight-year old boy spent in what most (including the employees at Grosset & Dunlap) would have viewed as merely a place of business, but which we now understand to have been the beginning of an era which would change our lives.

Another collector is someone who *understands* this passion. When I first started collecting, my wife looked upon me with amusement, then with amazement, and now with alarm. (I don’t know what is coming next.) But other collectors know what it is about. Those who collect series books these days, at least many of them, find in each other a connection through their commitment to the hobby. Over the past couple of years I have met (in person, by telephone, or through the postal mail or e-mail) a number of other collectors. With rare exception they are a wonderful bunch of people, helping one another with kindness and generosity.

As noted above, we are a diverse lot—people of various backgrounds, widely different in political affiliation and interest, educational level, profession, economic resources, religious convictions, and across the spectrum of age. In most cases, these matters are only incidental to our passion for series books, and only arise in the course of communication about them. Friendships arise and grow which almost certainly would not have been made otherwise, and would not exist without this common interest.

Additionally, we are interested in learning about the people who made the series books possible: the authors and artists, and to a lesser degree, the publishers and others involved in the books’ production. When the authors and artists are still alive, we want to know about them, hear from them, and thank them. These contacts extend widely our appreciation for series books.

Other Matters

Could these things have happened with something other than series books? Of course, and frequently do. There are groups organized around the Civil War, the Titanic, and rock groups. But for us, it is series books. Which leaves us with the original question: Why? Why *these* books? What is the bug that has bitten us?

There is a certain emotional intensity to the hobby, which may be why there is the occasional dust-up in the field, and why so many are justly offended and angered whenever someone tries to gouge someone else by offering a book at a ridiculously-inflated price, seeking a windfall profit from someone else’s naiveté or desperation. It is almost like someone’s selling a piece of your own childhood.

Perhaps we just have to conclude that we don't know why we like these books—adding that it really is not very important to know. What *is* important is that we do. For the most part the hobby is inexpensive, and although it may be addictive the hobby isn't inherently harmful, and the benefit and enjoyment are acute. More important now than answering the question Why do we like series books, is What series shall I collect next?