

Series Books and a Better World

by David Baumann with Jon Cooper

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Jon Cooper and I met in the summer of 1998 and developed a friendship that eventually led to the writing and publication of the Starman series. I was born in 1948, but Jon was born in 1980. I read the classic series books as they were being published, but Jon came to them long after their era had ended. As recounted in the last issue of the Review, in 2005 I came across the Ted Wilford series, a set of fifteen books written 1951-1967. It is one of the finest and best-written of the classic series. On my recommendation, Jon collected these books also.

When Jon began to read the books, his foray into the 1950s world of Ted Wilford led to an exchange of between Jon and myself on the subject of how the world has changed in half a century. We think it is worth sharing, and that many readers of the Review will identify with our observations.

Jon:

I've been reading the first Ted Wilford book [published in 1951]; I've read maybe 25% of it and have been enjoying it – the book is a lot of fun. One thing that has particularly struck me is how strange Ted Wilford's world is. Has that much really changed in 50 years?

David:

Well, yes, it has.

Jon:

Ted Wilford actually went with his friends out into the hills for days at a time, completely without any sort of supervision, and no one seemed to mind. I realize that Ted is not nine years old, but even so I wonder how many parents would feel comfortable with an expedition like that today. The whole world seems so innocent; in the second book Ted actually gets into trouble for writing an editorial in which he expresses an opinion, and was told that in newspapers a person's personal opinions must never enter into articles. The world seemed so open and devoid of any real evil and there was so much care and concern put into newspaper articles – it just amazes me. I can't imagine a world like that.

Did a world like that really exist at one point, not that long ago? In the old black-and-white TV show "Dennis the Menace" you see young kids wandering all over town, all without adult supervision; they seem to have free reign to go wherever they want.

David:

Yes, the world really was like that. It is how I grew up in the 1950s. When I was growing up, kids could wander all over the neighborhood and older preteens and young teens could ride their bikes miles away to play. I remember the big day

when my friend, ten years old, was finally considered old enough to ride his bike without adult supervision the two miles through the shaded neighborhood to the town's main street where the shops were. I'd been allowed to do so for a year or so already.

I imagine that the way the newspaper business is presented in the Teds is somewhat idealized, but not much. I remember being taught in journalism classes in the early 1960s that one's own opinion *must not* influence how one reported news. The news was to contain only facts, and quotes were to be direct and accurate.

High schoolers camping for a few days on their own? Well, I never did that, but I suppose that in small towns of 3,000 population or so it could well have been common. There are many series books from that era that imply that this was commonplace. And now that I think about it, I did actually do that once or twice with friends—we went into the hills near my home and camped alone for a night or two by ourselves.

Jon:

If the Ted Wilford books are to be believed, the world has changed enormously since the 1950's – changed beyond recognition, really. It seemed like a nice world – not a bad place to live!

David:

The 1950s were a great time. In a lot of ways, so were the 1960s. Things began to change, I'd say, in the mid-sixties. The series books of that era are pretty consistent in presenting the time as it was: the Rick Brants, Ken Holts, Tom Swift Jrs., Hardy Boys of the 1950s, Brains Benton, and lots of other series, do reflect the time in which they were written. Certainly there was crime and immorality, but the overwhelming aura of the culture was upright. Divorce was extremely rare. Most moms with young kids stayed at home. Television shows extolled courage, wisdom, self-sacrifice, family affection.

Of course, there was still a lot of evil in the 1950s—racial hate crimes were common in the U.S., there was political oppression and atrocity in other parts of the world, etc. Air raid sirens went off once a month, to ensure that they were in working order—the fear of nuclear war was real. There was child abuse, mostly unreported. There were drugs, no doubt. Cigarette ads were commonplace on TV. There will always be evil. It's just that for mainstream America I think it actually was a better world. I really don't think that this is just nostalgia for the “good ole days”; I think the days were really good.

Jon:

I think that what I like most about the Ted Wilfords is the general atmosphere of the books – the little things that tell of an era that is as alien to me as the far side of the Moon. I would dearly love to live in a world like Ted Wilford's.

The older I get the more I wonder at the way we've used technology. Generally speaking, I don't think that technology itself can be good or bad, but I don't think civilization has made very good uses of what it's got. Being able to transmit visual signals over cables is a neat trick, but I don't like the way we've used that to replace good books with so much mindless soul-sucking nonsense. Being able to get in a machine and travel five hundred miles in a single day is a wonderful blessing, but I'm not a big fan of these huge cities we have where nobody knows anyone and all sense of community is lost.

The world of Spindrift Island showed such a sense of family; everyone on the island knew each other and cared about each other, and you had the feeling that Rick knew the people in Whiteside just as well. You didn't have an individual in a sea of individuals; you had a group, working together, caring for each other, and pitching in as needed. Honest people, doing the right thing, even if the right thing came at great personal cost – now there's a world I'd like to inhabit.

In Ted Wilford you really get the feeling that you could trust the newspapers to give you an honest shake, and that the reporters were good-hearted people who were more than willing to go out of their way to help someone when they needed it. Even the Wilford family was close; Ted and his older brother got along just fine, and clearly had a close relationship; Ted thought nothing of spending time taking care of the much-younger Tim, and the two enjoyed each other's company. I have trouble imagining an era where it's perfectly ordinary for older teenagers to take up with a young kid and enjoy spending time with him – I'm sure it still happens, but it is most definitely not normal.

David:

As I read these books, it is effortless to move back into the era when I was a preteen in my neighborhood, with fields and orchards nearby, and the world just seemed fresh and clean. I suspect that nostalgia is something serious. Even where memory colors the good things and forgets the bad things, we human beings are longing for something better than the world we live in. Series books often provide a glimpse into a world where evil is muted, good always triumphs, friendship is its own reward, and justice is valued and eventually achieved. I know the world we live in now isn't like that very often, but there was a time when the real world wasn't so much different from the world we read about in these books we love.