

Seven Women

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Almost fifteen years ago, when my collection of series books was much smaller than it is now, I pulled *The Mystery of the Sultan's Scimitar* off my shelf and opened it with genuine, heartfelt sadness. At the time, it was the last series book I had collected that I had never read, and I felt that there just were no other series to attract me. I expected that when I turned the last page of the last Ken Holt book, "newness" would never come again—only repetition.

Fortunately I was spectacularly wrong. Through the recommendations of friends and chance discoveries in used bookstores, I learned about many other series that interested me, and the search was on. In this unequaled fanzine, articles with my byline have appeared on some of these series that had gone under most collectors' radar, such as the Ted Wilfords (The Review # 39, summer 2006) and the Mill Creek Irregulars (The Review # 41, 2007).

A few years ago I found another source of highly satisfying juvenile stories from the era that most of us consider to be the best, namely the 1950s and 1960s. As I was scouring various used bookstores I found a few "weekly reader" books and other single volumes with intriguing titles, and scooped them up for usually three or four dollars each. Gradually I filled a shelf or two with books like these, and read them in odd moments. I had selected them only for an intriguing title and after a quick skim, so I did purchase a few donkeys, but usually I was very pleased with what I found. How much are you risking if you lay out \$3.95 for a book titled *The Secret of the Old Salem Desk* or *The Five-Dollar Watch Mystery*?

Most notably, I found a volume here and there that eventually led to acquiring six exceptionally fine sets of juveniles, produced by seven women. For most of them, I first captured just one volume as I dragged my net looking for inexpensive and interesting titles. When I read them, that one volume stood out so marvelously that I wrote down the titles that appeared in the flyleaf or on the dust jacket and eventually found all the volumes that the author had written. In a couple of cases,

a friend recommended an author whose books I found to be high quality indeed, and that led to my completing the set.

While all but one of these sets are not “series” in the sense that we generally define the term—that is, a sequence of adventures that feature the same characters—these juveniles fit the pattern of young people solving a mystery or facing a dangerous adventure with the customary, highly attractive plot elements that traditional series books include, such as dark forests, old creaky houses, tunnels and caves, exotic locations, resolving old mysteries from years in the past, and the like. Very fortunately, in most cases the books by the authors I found are readily available and inexpensive. A few are somewhat scarce but even then are not prohibitively or extortionately pricey.

One attraction of these series, and one reason why their quality is top, is that none of them was the product of a syndicate (meaning they weren’t expected to fit into a formula), and the publisher was not Grosset and Dunlap (with its haphazard sales department and unreliable standard of quality). The publishers of these fine stories apparently produced a lot of juveniles, knew their audience, and knew that a good quality book was likely to please its readers who would then come back for more. That is, they appear to have known the economic principle that has been cast aside for a generation or two, and which Grosset & Dunlap hit now and then apparently by chance: that if you want to make money, give your buyers a quality product. The fact that these authors were able to publish many titles with large print runs suggests that they were popular at the time they were new. Many of those in my collection are ex-library books, which shows that even librarians liked them. This was by no means the kiss of death, for whenever there is a check-out card in a pocket, there are dates and children’s signatures in abundance. These books were popular!

Well, let’s get to the details. The first of the seven women is:



Phyllis Whitney

(September 9, 1903-February 8, 2008)

Phyllis Amaye Whitney just has to take the prize for the longest-lived juvenile author. She died just a few years ago at the age of 104. She was born in Yokohama, Japan to American parents, and didn’t come to the United States until she was fifteen. Before that she lived in Japan, China, and the Philippines. Even in the United States, she lived in various places.

In my opinion, all seven authors I name in this

article are highly accomplished, but Phyllis Whitney is the best. I shall therefore devote most of the ink in this article to her.

Whitney was a prolific writer of fiction, penning several dozen books in her long career, most of them for adults. She also served as a book editor and instructor of fiction writing. She was well-known in her time, winning several prizes, and in her early seventies served as President of the Mystery Writers of America. Twenty books in her output are juveniles. Their titles are

The Mystery of the Gulls (1949)
 The Island of Dark Woods (1951)
(Reissued in 1967 under the title Mystery of the Strange Traveler)
 Mystery of the Black Diamonds (1954)
 Mystery on the Isle of Skye (1955)
 Mystery of the Green Cat (1957)
 Secret of the Samurai Sword (1958)
 Mystery of the Haunted Pool (1960)
 Secret of the Tiger's Eye (1961)
 Mystery of the Golden Horn (1962)
 Mystery of the Hidden Hand (1963)
 Secret of the Emerald Star (1964)
 Mystery of the Angry Idol (1965)
 Secret of the Spotted Shell (1967)
 Secret of Goblin Glen (1969)
 The Mystery of the Crimson Ghost (1969)
 Secret of the Missing Footprint (1970)
 The Vanishing Scarecrow (1971)
 Mystery of the Scowling Boy (1973)
 Secret of Haunted Mesa (1975)
 Secret of the Stone Face (1977)



These fine stories do not feature too much danger to the protagonists, nor is there a strong criminal element. There are, however, complex puzzles and well-crafted mysteries. The author does a magnificent job of presenting the human element as it is challenged and grows, especially across different cultures. I think she has teens pegged—what they think, what they fear, and what is important to them—at least the teens of half a century ago.

The author herself described what was important to her: “Most of my writing has been concerned with understanding between people. Whether of different races, or religions, or even in the same family, I tried in my books for young people to deal with the subject of understanding the other fellow.”

For example, in *Secret of the Samurai Sword*, the mentor to American children who are visiting Japan and who are amused by certain beliefs and practices in the Japanese culture, reminds them that some American customs may be amusing to the Japanese. She states that the Japanese are at least “polite enough not to laugh in our faces.” One of the children learns that lesson. Later in the story, the author wrote, “None of this was very clear from the American point of view. But as Celia was learning, you couldn’t understand other people just from your own point of view. You had to make an attempt to get theirs.”

Readers of the Review may recall my lengthy quotation from Whitney’s book, *Mystery of the Black Diamonds*, in the last issue, in which the half-Mexican girl, Juanita, is brought up short for her own prejudice against Mexicans, infused into her by her biased grandmother. Whitney pulls no punches whatever in her denunciation of prejudice and narrow-mindedness, regardless of the guilty party’s age or ethnicity.

Whitney’s stories are rich for travelogue; many of them are set in foreign climes. Again, in her own words, “My only hobby is collecting backgrounds for new books, and that takes most of my time, since I visit these places and do a great deal of research.”

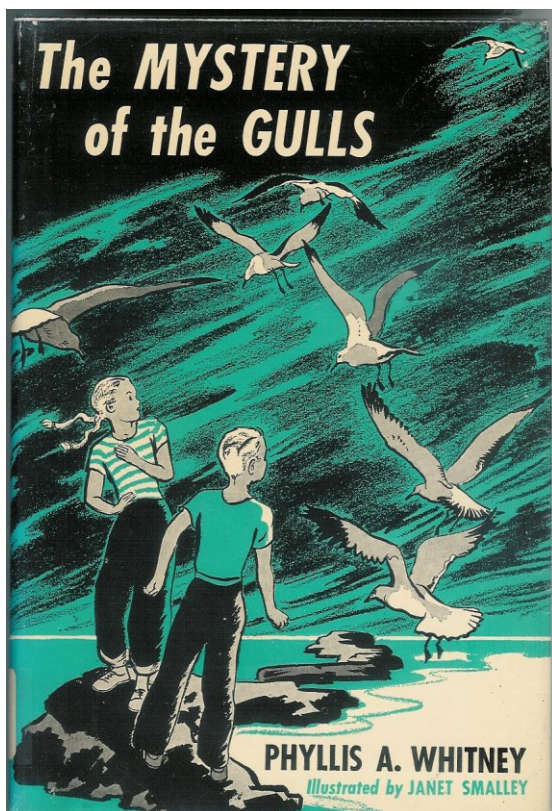
My attention was turned to the juveniles of Phyllis Whitney by Mark Gibbons of Orwell, Vermont, a friend and fellow series book collector. Since his recommendations had always proven worthwhile, I expected that the children’s books by this author would be good. After he wrote to me to recommend Whitney’s juveniles, I noted that coincidentally I already owned one of them. I had picked up *The Mystery of the Golden Horn* when I had visited a used bookstore not long before Mark made his recommendation, and at the time had scooped up a number of titles that looked interesting and cost very little. *Golden Horn* was among these.

I recalled skimming the pages before buying the book, and noticed that it was set in Turkey. That intrigued me since one of the characters is a little girl named Cemile. That hooked me since I once dated a Turkish girl with that name. Because of my relationship with her, I knew that the name is not pronounced Keh-MEEL (as I would have thought), but rather JEH-mih-leh. So I bought the book and placed it on my shelf at home for later reading.

After Mark urged me to try the books by Whitney, I extracted *The Mystery of the Golden Horn* from my shelf, read it, and was thoroughly entertained by a plot more complex than most juveniles offer, with excellent character development and a setting as authentic as one could hope for. Whitney had a dedication to verisimilitude similar to that of Hal Goodwin. When Rick Brant had adventures in

foreign places, Goodwin set them in locales he himself had visited and knew well. Whitney, an experienced world traveler, did the same with her juveniles. *The Mystery of the Golden Horn* was set in the Bosphorus.

Rather than review *Golden Horn*, however, I shall review the first of Whitney's juveniles: *The Mystery of the Gulls*. Although her books are not a series in which the same characters are featured in successive books, the first volume is a bit more accessible to the introductory reader than *Golden Horn*. *Gulls* is set on Mackinac



Island, a steak-shaped island three miles long placed in Lake Superior between upper and lower Michigan. The 1980 movie "Somewhere in Time", starring Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour, was filmed on site at The Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island.

In *The Mystery of the Gulls*, a twelve-year-old girl named Taffy Saunders accompanies her mother to Mackinac Island. Very early in the book, Taffy points out that only ignorant tourists pronounce Mackinac as MACK-i-nack instead of the proper MACK-i-naw. Mackinac is a shortened form of the original Indian name for the island. Taffy's mother has unexpectedly inherited from her aunt a small but beautiful hotel, many years old and filled with antiques. The inheritance was

unexpected because, although Taffy's mother used to visit the hotel often when she was a child, she had displeased her eccentric and rather controlling aunt by marrying against her will.

Taffy's father travels for work and takes his family with him. Therefore, although Taffy has traveled widely, she's never had a home with her own room, and has never gone to schools or had friends for any length of time. Her father, however, has just suffered an accident from which he will take several months to recover, and it is unlikely that he will be able to travel again as much as he had.

So the inheritance comes at a good time. Except that "inheritance" is not quite the word: there is a condition to it. Taffy's mother must run the hotel for a full summer and show that she is capable of doing so. If she turns sufficient profit by a

certain date, then the hotel will become hers. Should she fail to do so...well, it's not quite clear what will happen to the hotel.

However, it sounds easy enough. The full staff, including a housekeeper/manager and a gifted cook, has stayed on and will do most of the work. The housekeeper even has a daughter, Donna, who is about Taffy's age. Donna has always lived at the hotel, and before they meet the girls are nervously curious about each other. Taffy hopes to become friends with Donna right away. Problems arise, nevertheless, the minute that Taffy and her mother arrive. The cook, a highly superstitious person, goes on strike because she has perceived a bad omen, and Donna avoids meeting Taffy for as long as she can.

The aunt, who had owned the hotel for decades, had always taken good care of the seagulls that populate the area, and the gulls had always come to her in great numbers. But now the cook observes strange behavior in the gulls and insists that they don't want Taffy and her mother at the hotel. Fussy guests, easily flustered by even slight changes in routine, threaten to leave although most have been coming for years—and some of them do leave. There are strange noises at night, a mysterious locked room, an Indian boy unfriendly to Taffy for no apparent reason and who turns out to be a friend of Donna, and a dark “goblin wood” that frightens Taffy just to go into it.

All these things could be explained away as nothing out of the ordinary, but when it becomes clear that someone is determined to make Taffy's mother fail by sabotaging various aspects of the hotel's life, it is undeniable that there is a genuine mystery. A bat's skeleton is left in the bed of the fussiest guest. A large seagull bangs on the windows of selected guests on the third story. The Chinese gong that is rung for meals is clanged loudly in the middle of the night. A very friendly man who seeks a room is turned away by the housekeeper, who tells him that the hotel is full when in fact there are two unoccupied rooms.

Questions quickly arise for Taffy. What is inside the locked room, and why is it locked anyway? Who is behind the sabotage, and why? Who will inherit the hotel if Taffy's mother fails to make the required profit? What is behind the strange behavior of several people on the hotel staff, among the guests, and in the wider community?

Whitney builds an atmospheric mystery by unfolding her tale in settings of thick fog, sheets of rain, swirling leaves in dark winds, the old hotel with its long passages, enormous attic with a widow's walk above it, and rooms filled with history. And always, there are the gulls.

To date, I have read nine of the twenty juveniles by Phyllis Whitney, including the prize-winning *Mystery of the Haunted Pool*. All provide the same high quality of storytelling with well-developed characters, atmospheric settings and descriptions, and intriguing plots. I expect the other eleven books will be equally entertaining.

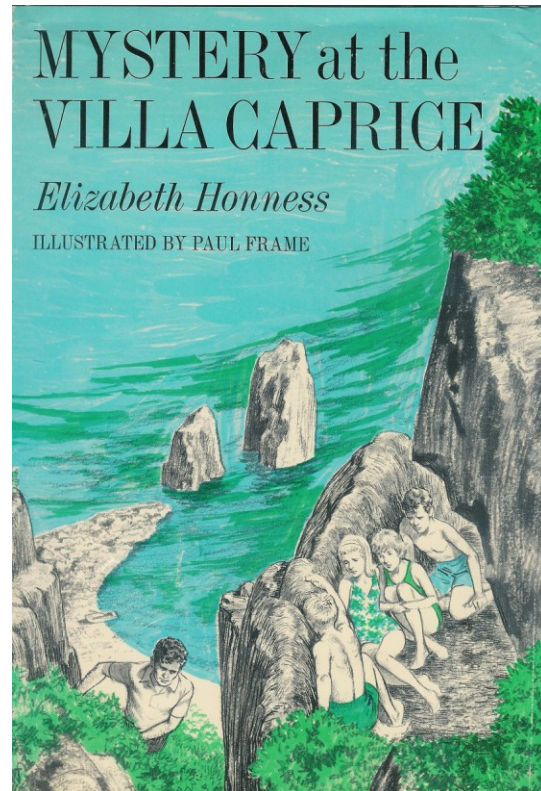
My article on Ted Wilford, published in this magazine in 2006, led to the depleting of the supply of available books and a rapid increase in prices. Thankfully, that should not be the case with the juveniles of Phyllis Whitney. Her books are in plentiful supply and inexpensive. I found all of them in dust jacket, the cheapest at \$5.00 and the most expensive at \$21.50.

The second of the seven women is:

Elizabeth Honness

(June 29, 1904-Aug. 12, 2003)

If Phyllis Whitney is the longest-lived juvenile author, Elizabeth Honness is an impressive runner-up. She died at the age of 99.



There is not much information on her life in public records. She was born in New Jersey, and wrote advertising

copy early in her career. She was also a managing editor of *American Girl*, and involved in organizations dedicated to art and museum. She was very interested in archeology, and like Phyllis Whitney, traveled widely.

Like many writers, she based many incidents in her books on real-life experiences. Several of her stories are placed in overseas settings, and many have to do with resolving long-unsolved mysteries. During her career she visited archeological sites in southern Italy, Sardinia, Rome, Guatemala, Mexico, Israel, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Cyprus, and Malta. Some of her juvenile mysteries are set in these places.

The titles of her eleven juveniles are:

The Great Gold Piece Mystery (1944)
 Mystery of the Diamond Necklace (1954)
 Mystery at the Doll Hospital (1955)
 Mystery of the Auction Trunk (1956)
 Mystery in the Square Tower (1957)
 Mystery of the Wooden Indian (1958)
 Mystery of the Secret Message (1961)
 Mystery of the Hidden Face (1963)
 Mystery of the Pirate's Ghost (1966)
 Mystery of the Villa Caprice (1969)
 Mystery of the Maya Jade (1971)

The third of the seven women is:

Mary Childs Jane

(September 18, 1909-July 26, 1991)



Mary Childs Jane was born in Massachusetts and lived in New England all her life. Most of her stories take place in that part of the world. She

wrote, "The settings of my stories are usually places I have found exciting or interesting when I've vacationed there."



She was a teacher, and enjoyed getting children to enjoy reading. She especially liked getting a slow reader, one who

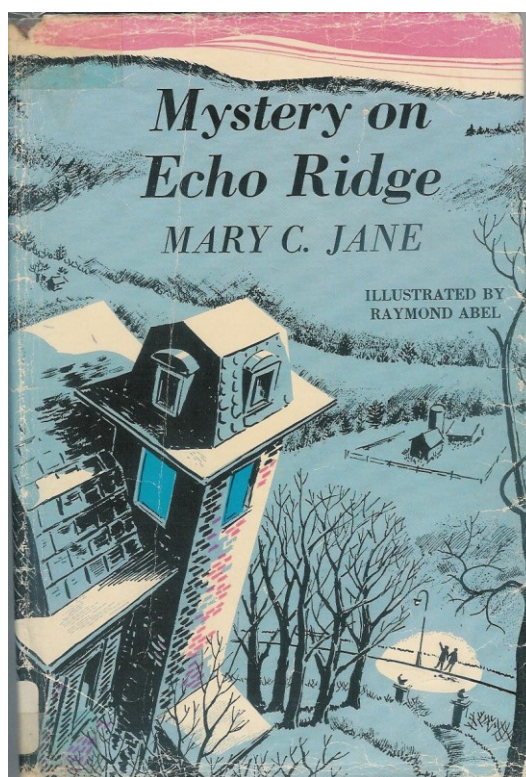
found no fun in books, to start reading by reading a juvenile mystery aloud. “That’s why I write mysteries: *I hope to lure children into becoming readers.* [italics original] Other writers with greater artistic skill and talent may write books that these children will love later—but first, we have to get them to enjoy books.”

Jane believed that life “can and should be adventurous. Mysteries ... may also enliven imaginations so children gain a truer idea of what adventure really is.”

The sixteen juveniles penned by Mary Childs Jane are hauntingly distinctive, with absorbing descriptions of weather and atmosphere of place. The first of her books that I read was *Mystery on Echo Ridge*. It takes place in a small New England town in winter, and features many scenes of children walking through icy streets at dusk, crunching through snowy fields, pushing through black, bare trees, and investigating incidents that had taken place long before in a dark old mansion now lived in by a mysterious old widow. The cover of the book admirably sets the scene.

The titles of her sixteen books are:

Mystery in Old Quebec (1955)
 The Ghost Rock Mystery (1956)
 Mystery at Pemaquid Point (1957)
 Mystery at Shadow Pond (1958)
 Mystery on Echo Ridge (1959)
 Mystery Back of the Mountain (1960)
 Mystery at Dead End Farm (1961)
 Mystery Behind Dark Windows (1962)
 Mystery by Moonlight (1963)
 Mystery in Longfellow Square (1964)
 Indian Island Mystery (1965)
 The Dark Tower Mystery (1966)
 Mystery on the Nine-Mile Marsh (1967)
 Mystery of the Red Carnations (1968)
 The Rocking-Chair Ghost (1969)
 Mystery in Hidden Hollow (1970)



The fourth of the seven women is:

Margaret Goff Clark

Margaret Goff Clark was born on March 7, 1913 in Oklahoma City. At the age of five, she and her family moved to New York. She began writing when her children were young and published her first book, *The Mystery of Seneca Hill* in 1961. This

book and her second have to do with Indian artifacts excavated during archeological digs; in the course of the story, she pays great honor to the Indian peoples of past ages. Their culture is presented in admirable fashion, and their passing is lamented as a great loss and a tragic injustice. As a result of her first book, she was adopted into the Seneca Indian tribe the year after its publication.



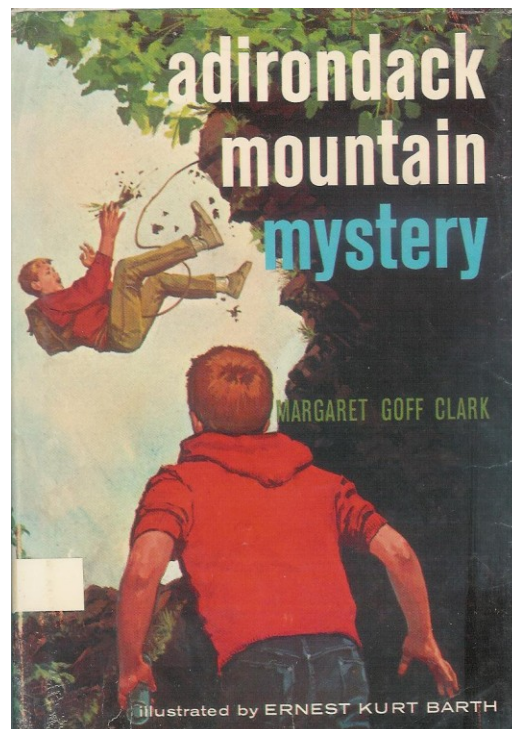
Many of her books are based on her experiences traveling to parks and nature areas, and reveal her dedication to history, environmental concerns, and respect for native peoples.

Of the seven writers in this article, Clark is the one whose last books were published most recently. They reflect the times in which they were written, showing the transition from the culture of the 1960s to the early trends of modernism that were already influential in the 1980s. The latter books ratchet up the tension by presenting situations that would probably

have been considered unsuitable for earlier generations, moving from “adventure” to “suspense”. One of her books features a conscienceless murderer who pursues two brothers in a wilderness setting; in another, a girl witnesses the kidnapping of her deaf friend.

In addition to those twelve stories listed below that I classify as obvious juveniles, Clark also wrote suspense, historical fiction, stories on environmental issues, and science fiction aimed at a very young audience. I did not collect these books.

The Mystery of Seneca Hill (1961)
 The Mystery of the Buried Indian Mask (1961)
 Mystery of the Marble Zoo (1964)
 Mystery at Star Lake (1965)
 Adirondack Mountain Mystery (1966)
 Mystery of the Missing Stamps (1967)
 Mystery Horse (1972)
 Death at Their Heels (1975)
 Mystery of Sebastian Island (1976)
 Mystery in the Flooded Museum (1978)
 Who Stole Kathy Young? (1980)



The Latchkey Mystery (1985)

The Mystery of Seneca Hill is difficult to find and rather expensive, and *The Mystery of the Buried Indian Mask* is also a bit of a challenge.

Curiously, Clark's agent was Dorothy Markinko of McIntosh & Otis, the same agent for Sam and Beryl Epstein.

The fifth and sixth of the seven women are a mother and daughter team:

Elizabeth Noble Govan (1898-February 28, 1985) and **Emmy West** (1919-?)
Emmy's full name is Emily Payne Govan West.



Mrs. Govan was the matriarch of a literary family that included a historian/journalist husband, Gilbert Govan; a librarian son, James F. Govan; and three generations of writers, with every member being “bookish” in one way or another.

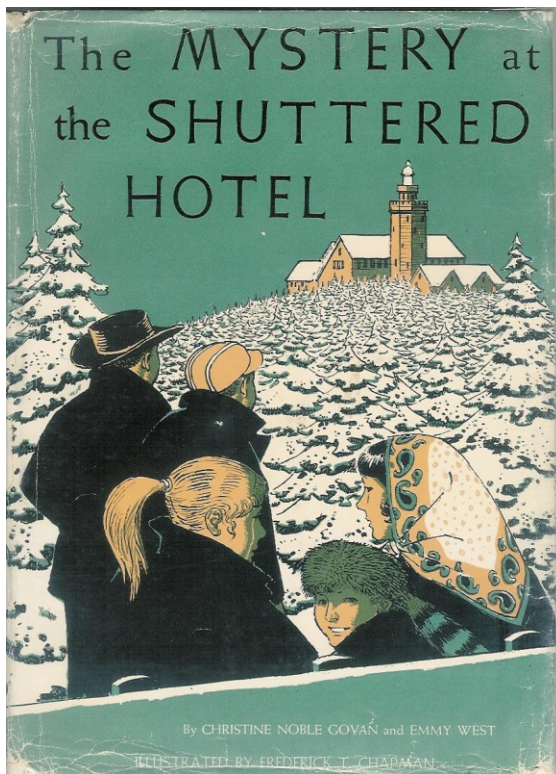
After barely graduating from high school, she taught first grade in a rural elementary school. Students' ages in her class ranged from four to fifteen and included three whom she described as “congenital idiots”. She walked five miles one way to school. The schoolroom had no facilities, not even running water.

The family lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee near Lookout Mountain in a house about a hundred years old when they moved in. She described it as “a beautiful place—all azaleas, pines, hemlocks, laurel, and dogwoods.”

Her daughter Emmy Govan West wrote *Katy No-Pocket*, which was published in 1944 when she was just twenty-five. There is very little information publicly available on Emmy, and I found no photographs of her.

The mother and daughter team wrote the Cherokee/Lookout series. It is interesting and unique in my experience in that although it is a true series—that is, with recurring characters—they change partway through the series. This is one of those

rare series in which the children grow older in each book. At one point, the first set of children grows too old to participate in juvenile adventures any more, and their youngest companion, a little older than when the books began, finds new friends and continues the adventures with a new group. He is the only character who is consistently involved in all of the stories. For that reason, I call this series the Cherokee/Lookout series. The first group of children called themselves the Cherokees, but when that group grew out of youthful adventures, the new group called itself the Lookouts.



There are sixteen books in the series.
Their titles are:

Mystery at Shingle Rock (1955)
Mystery at the Mountain Face (1956)
Mystery at the Shuttered Hotel (1956)
Mystery at Moccasin Bend (1957)
Mystery at the Indian Hide-out (1957)
Mystery at the Deserted Mill (1958)
Mystery of the Vanishing Stamp (1958)
Mystery at the Haunted House (1959)
Mystery at Plum Nelly (1959)
Mystery at Fearsome Lake (1960)
Mystery at Rock City (1960)
Mystery at the Snowed-in Cabin (1961)
Mystery of the Dancing Skeleton (1962)
Mystery at Ghost Lodge (1963)
Mystery at the Weird Ruins (1964)
Mystery at the Echoing Cave (1965)

All of them take place in a setting that is clearly rural. Lookout Mountain, Tennessee is even mentioned as one of the locales, so these are the surroundings that the Govans called home. Govan wrote, "Practically all my books are autobiographical." Like the books of Capwell Wyckoff, the authors' ability to recreate the feel of an era makes these stories thoroughly enjoyable reads.

The children frequently get about their neighborhood on horseback. Forest and streams surround their homes. There are stories set in heavily-snowed winter, springtime bursting with new growth and the lazy flight of insects, and the warmth of summer with sunlight and shadow. There are mysteries dealing with old, forgotten pieces of furniture; cabins set alone in deep woods; and sites redolent with events of the past. The children live in houses with screened-in front and back porches. There are washtubs and vegetable gardens, and trips to town on

horseback to purchase supplies. Even in the 1950s and 1960s when these books were published, I suspect that the setting was suggestive of an older era.

As far as I can tell, Emmy is still alive. If so, she would be 92 this year. I wrote to the address I dug up as that of the family homestead, but received no reply.

Mark Gibbons introduced me to this series also. Unfortunately most of the books—and it is a traditional series, mostly—are difficult to find and somewhat expensive when you do, especially if you’re looking for hardbacks in dust jacket. I can’t guess why, since the authors were clearly skilled.

The last of the seven women is:

Mary Quintard Govan Steele

(May 8, 1922-June 30, 1992)

Mrs. Steele was a younger Govan daughter who wrote under the names Mary Q. Steele and Wilson Gage. In personal comments, she wrote, “I did not become a writer, but was born one, waking up in the morning to sort the day into scenes and characters and descriptions.” These are the words of one who was born into the “bookish” Govan family of writers.



One reviewer wrote, “Christine’s love of ‘cozy’ stories [another Govan daughter] was not apparently inherited by Mary Q., who wrote a number of decidedly dark and disturbing novels including the 1970 Newbury Honor Book *Journey Outside*.”

I disagree. *Journey Outside* is indeed a much darker story than the other juveniles that Steele wrote, but it is atypical of her stories. The author used her own name for this book, but she wrote juvenile adventure mysteries under the pseudonym Wilson Gage that

are just as “cozy” as anything her mother or sisters wrote. There are four of these:

Secret of the Indian Mound (1958)

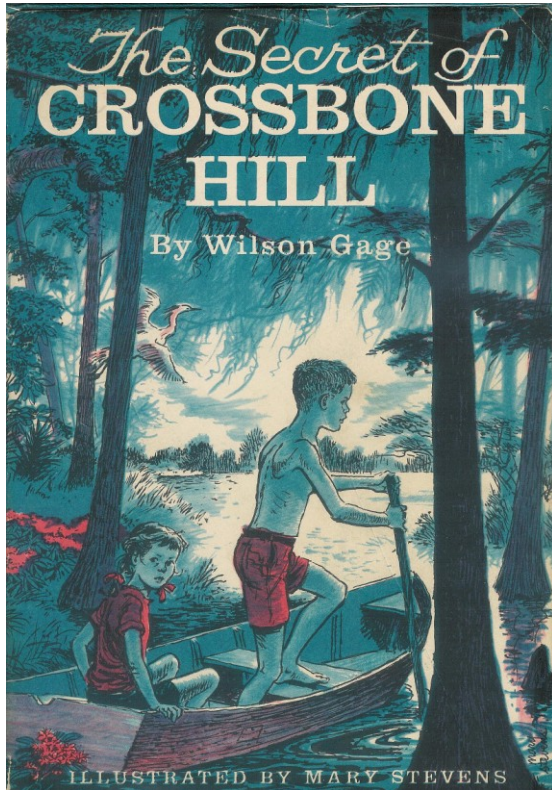
The Secret of Crossbone Hill (1959)

The Secret of the Fiery Gorge (1960)

The Ghost of Five Owl Farm (1966)

If we include *Journey Outside* (1969), these five are the only stories by Steele that fit into the genre I was interested in. She wrote many other juvenile stories but they appear to be aimed at a much younger audience.

In my opinion, *The Secret of Crossbone Hill* has one of the best, most compelling juvenile cover illustrations I have ever seen. It shows a young boy and girl in an



open boat emerging from a woods onto a small lake surrounded by trees. The illustration's got dark but attractive colors, both shadow and sunlight, woods and water. There are a bird and some flowers, and more than a suggestion of furtive vines or other straggling growth suspended from the lowest branches of the trees. The boy is looking ahead, but the girl is looking carefully backward at something the viewer cannot see, implying a hint of menace.

Perhaps this is what the reviewer meant by Steele's books being "dark", although I dispute the word "disturbing". Steele's juvenile books are dark in the sense of impending mystery that can give one a feeling of unease when entering a barn at dusk. In her stories, clues are found in birds' nests, woodland glades, and

rolling hillocks that are the burial grounds of long-ago Indian villages.

Steele's own words describe her intention in writing: "What I am talking about always is the world around us, about stars and mushrooms and foxes and birds and ants and trees. How can I convey to anyone else the magic and marvel of it, the vast astonishment of being alive?" I don't think her stories are "dark and disturbing" at all, but rather mysterious, adventuresome, and full of zest. It is too bad that she wrote so few juveniles.

I am now in my seventh decade, and recall with fondness the days of childhood and the simple joys of literary adventure, wonder, and learning about many new places in the wider world. For too many people, these charms of our earliest years fade and disappear as they grow older and become jaded. The world becomes too

familiar to us, and the professional media specializes in news of death, loss, crime, tragedy, and corruption. For those among us who still long for stories of simple adventure or mystery with the relative innocence of half a century ago, series books and juvenilia of the twentieth century meet that need. Their supply is limited but, fortunately, plentiful and usually inexpensive; there are still many wonderful stories to be found. Get them while you can.

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