

# Red, Brown, Yellow, Black, and White

## *A Reflection on Racism in Our Favorite Series Books*

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### **Entertaining White Children**

Away back in my earliest years, when I first became acquainted with series books, I read *The Tower Treasure* and, besides enjoying the mystery itself, was enthralled with the chapter in which the Hardy Boys and their friends set out to keep Detective Oscar Smuff and Chief Ezra Collig from getting on a train. With the help of the irrepressible Chet Morton, they hide a ticking package in the proximity of “a fruit stand over which presided an Italian by the name of Rocco.” As he plants the parcel, Chet casually mentions Rocco’s “high prices” and warns him that the Black Hand will be after him because of his overcharging. Rocco responds bravely,

“Poof! W’at do I care for da Blacka Hand. No frighten me!”

The action picks up a few moments later when Phil Cohen stops by the stand.

“W’at you t’ink?” snickered the Italian, “some boys come here a while ago and say da Blacka Hand t’ink I charge too much for da fruit.”

“Well, you *do* charge too much, Rocco. Everybody says so.”

“I sella da good fruit at da good price.”

A page later, Rocco notices the ticking package and the scene explodes.

Rocco, in his white apron, was dancing about in the middle of the street, yelling, “Bombs! Police! Da Blacka Hand!” ... “Da bomb, she go ‘teek-tock,’” he wailed. “She blow da stand into da little piece!”

—*The Tower Treasure* (1927), pages 135, 137

The mention of the “Blacka Hand” and the stereotype of the Italian immigrant did not inculcate a racist attitude in me toward Italians, immigrants, or street-sellers. I knew the narrative was intended for fun. It didn’t even traumatize my innocent childhood picture of police officers. It did, however, make me laugh a lot, and in its own way even expanded my horizon so that I had a broader and more appreciative picture than I had had before of different cultures and ethnicities.

Now when I envisioned putting this article together, I confess that my initial thought was that series book authors’ utilization of stereotypes for foreigners and

dialect for minorities was perhaps patronizing—showing them to be buffoons for the entertainment of presumably non-minority (i.e. Caucasian) young readers. The claim has unquestionably been made by many know-it-alls over the past half century. Two people with whom I corresponded on the topic early in my writing quickly corrected me, however, and put me back in mind of my initial impression upon reading such material well over half a century ago. It was just funny.

One of my correspondents was the undeniably erudite editor of *The Mystery and Adventure Series Review*, Fred Woodworth, who wrote that “in order to have any real meaning racism is or must be proclaiming that a group of people is inferior and should have their human rights violated.” He added, “CAN we poke a little bit of gentle fun at people without being some type of creeps or jerks ourselves?”

My other correspondent was Charlie Campbell, who provided some insightful commentary on the topic, drawing upon his thorough knowledge of the Tom Swift (Senior) series to do so. He wrote, “There is no overt racism (back of the bus, lynching, KKK, church bombings) in Tom Swift. But at the same time, there are no George Washington Carvers (clearly Tom’s peer) either. What is there is mostly a sign of the times.”

True enough, and granted. But one observes that the “times” of which these writings were signs were, well, pretty racist. Segregation was unquestioned in the South, and Jackie Robinson didn’t just waltz into the major leagues. One can find



the word “nigger” in several early mainline series books, as well as “Japs” in those written in the years immediately after World War II, e.g. Rick Brant in *100 Fathoms Under*. The whole nation needed the Civil Rights movement that began in the 1950s.

Charlie added that, in spite of there being no overt racism in the original Tom Swift series, there was the phenomenon that he calls “people knowing their place”. He specifically brought up Eradicate Sampson, the handyman in the Tom Swift series. Charlie wrote,

In Tom Sr. Rad clearly knew his place. He lived in a shack out back of the house and competed with Koku for the attention of his beloved “Massa” Tom. For most of the series, Rad is old and useless but is kept on because he is beloved and his loyalty admired. It is almost as if he were still a slave.

That was my point about George Washington Carver. He was black but one of the greatest scientists of his—and Tom Sr.’s—generation. He would not be living in the shack out back—although if it were not for the Negro colleges, he might well have been. And I’m pretty sure he didn’t call white folks “Massa” either. [But] that’s where [he] would have been if he had been born fifty years earlier. (And that’s what bugs me when people try to cleanse history—you

often miss the real tragedy while trying to create one that seems more appealing.)

In many ways the precedent for the noble black character was Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* [1884]. Face it, if I had to run down the Mississippi on a raft, I'd rather have Jim along than Huck—or just about anyone else in the book. It is an interesting case, because everyone talks in some kind of stereotyped dialect—although admittedly, Jim's is stronger than anyone else.

Another great example is Mammy from “Gone with the Wind” [1936]—not only strong and noble, but [in the movie: 1939] Rhett says at one point (I think it was when he bought her the “red taffeta petticoat”) that there is no one whose respect he'd rather have.

And while Mammy and Jim are more admirable characters they share the same trait. [i.e., they “know their place”]



As a follow-up to people “knowing their place”, one may consider the companion to racism we may call “classism” in some of the books written in the first half of the twentieth century, e.g. the nine-volume Melody Lane series (1933-1940), by Lilian Garis, in which gypsies, circus people, etc. have their place, which is definitely not as “equals” with others. It must be pointed out, however, that the heroines of these stories, although acknowledging class differences, are very clear that the differences are irrelevant when it comes to friendship, respect, etc., and those who speak or act otherwise are presented as narrow-minded bigots who are to be thwarted and avoided.

This observation is actually rather important. If series books acknowledged, or even reflected, racism and classism (this article is not about sexism), especially in the first five decades of the twentieth century, that didn't mean that they were comfortable with doing so or that they accepted the *status quo* as proper. If we look a little more deeply, we find something interesting.

### Challenging Assumptions

Let's take a look at one of my favorite passages in a classic series book that features “dialect”:

“Dey ain't no trains pass through Greendale!” declared their rescuer [described as “the big Negro”]. “Ef yoh wait deah foh a train foh Chicago yoh'll wait yeahs and yeahs, and even den yoh won't get no train.”

—*Hunting for Hidden Gold* (1928), page 78

When I read this colorful paragraph in the fifth Hardy Boys book at the age of about eight, I loved it. It was my introduction to this kind of speech. It was the first passage that came to my mind when I began the first draft of this article, though, as I wrote above, I intended to provide it as an example of a racist caricature of the “dumb Negro”. Thankfully, when I sent an abstract of this article to the aforementioned editor of the *M&A Series Review*, Fred responded,

It seems to me that Leslie McFarlane’s negro giving that amusing sentence or statement was just being an amusing character, not a racist caricature. It wasn’t meant unkindly or dismissively; in fact, the negro was giving the boys information that was accurate and vivid.

IN FACT, I myself have always been quite inspired by the other sections of *Hunting for Hidden Gold*, where the very people who do come forward and behave decently and helpfully to the Hardy Boys ARE a bunch of negroes! Didn’t the negroes aid the boys after Frank and Joe had been kidnapped by (white) criminals? Didn’t they take the boys in their poor old jalopy on a chase that the boys could not have made on foot? In other words, weren’t negroes among the very most decent, honorable people in the *entire book*?

*Great Scott*, I thought to myself when I read these paragraphs. *Fred’s right!* At that time I realized that the facile article I was planning had a lot more potential than I’d assumed. Evidently, the topic of racism in series books is in fact rather complex. Thinking a bit more about it, considering what Fred and Charlie had written, and delving into several of my favorite volumes, I drew a tentative conclusion that, contrary to what the know-it-alls have put forth, series books overall actually *rejected* the racist convictions so prevalent in the American society of their time, and did so perhaps as effectively as could be done under the circumstances. To be sure, they were not chock-full of anti-racist propaganda; after all, their primary goal was to entertain juvenile readers, not to change society. But locked into that “entertainment” were various virtues that indicted their culture and could, in fact, change society for the better. Or at least change a significant number of their individual readers. Which could be the same thing.

As I researched with this hypothesis in mind, the pleasure I had had when I first read *The Tower Treasure* and *Hunting for Hidden Gold* came back to me; with the eyes of the child I had been, I saw again that “dialect” was not a bit patronizing. It simply showed how some people actually spoke, which meant it ain’t any racist invention, but rather (as Fred observed), “touching, interesting, and (yes) amusing”. Seen in this light, dialect adds



atmosphere and ratchets up the entertainment value. It would have been an entirely different kind of story if Jadbury Wilson in *Hunting for Hidden Gold* didn't say things like, "dad burnit", "ain't", and "mebbe".

In fact, to *take away* the distinctiveness of one's race, speech patterns, or culture in a story in order to present a conversation of basic, sanitized, unadorned English verges on the *opposite* of "combating racism"—the result is not only blandness but a subtle kind of racism in the guise of trying to *avoid* it. Removing or wiping out or ignoring what makes up a vital part of a person is not "removing stereotypes", it is "whitewashing" (the word is intentionally chosen) the fascinating variety in human cultures and races.

If the Ramapans in *The Crisscross Shadow* showed zero sign of Indian culture, the story would be ridiculous. As it is, even when I first read that book as a child, I was disappointed when Ted Whitestone told the Hardys and Chet,

"No, we don't live in wigwams," the Indian boy replied with a smile. "Just regular houses like everybody else. And we don't dress up in feathers and big war bonnets, either. I hope I'm not disappointing you fellows," he added with a grin.

—*The Crisscross Shadow* (1953), page 105

And a few sentences later, Ted adds, "Nobody in our tribe talks with an accent." Sadly, the Ramapan tribe seems to have retained little of its own culture. The Indians play lacrosse, work in leather, and beat tom-toms occasionally, but the reader has the impression that there really is very little genuine American Indian left in the Ramapans. The erasure of their culture is far more alarmingly racist, though perhaps unintentional, than any "dialect" one may have found in earlier Hardys. Far better, I think, to acknowledge the reality of racial and cultural diversity and deal with it positively in the context of the society that the readers would have known.

Let's look at an example. There's a little scene in the first book of the Barbara Ann series (1939-1942), written by Ruth Grosby, which would be easy to pass over today, fifty years after the civil rights movement began, until one puts it into historical context:

When Barbara stepped into the elevator of the large office building, the Negro operator touched his cap respectfully and said, "How do, Miss Barbara! Glad to see you. You sho are getting to be reg'lar young lady—I hardly reco'nized you at first."

Barbara responded to his greeting in friendly fashion. "Yes, I guess I have grown up quite a bit, Sam, since you first started riding me up in this elevator. You have been here for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes'm. It will be twelve years next month. Tha's a long time!"

—*The Stolen Blueprints* (1939), page 36

One might question what could appear to be an over deferential attitude in Sam, but it might just be proper respect shown by an employee to the boss's daughter in an era where such respect was more commonly shown than today. The fact that we have such a scene—completely unnecessary to the story—written and published in 1939 in which an adult black man talks to an unaccompanied young white girl in an enclosed space like an elevator and they converse “in friendly fashion” is actually pretty bold.

Maybe the best way that series books addressed the topic of racism was to preserve dialect without implying that it was a sign of inferiority. It was just the way things were. For example, Sung Lee, the Chinese cook in the X Bar X Boys series, always speaks in dialect, yet he is also overtly included in all of the family gatherings without patronizing or even explanation. Interestingly, Lee's Chinese cousin, Mr. Wang, who appears in the last book in the series (*Following the Stampede*, 1942), not only does not speak in dialect, but uses highly educated English.

Whenever series books placed minorities in the position of being either the good guys or the bad guys, they were just being realistic. Being a hero or a villain or an eccentric character is an aspect of human nature that knows no barriers of race or culture. The “Negroes” in *Hunting for Hidden Gold* are “among the very most decent, honorable people in the entire book”, but in *The Hidden Harbor Mystery* (1935), a Negro is the bad guy. In *Footprints Under the Window*, the bad guy is Chinese—but so are many of the good guys. That's real life.

McFarlane entertained me once again with skillfully created dialect when I read that book for the first time:

“No wantee hear about Sam Lee!” shouted Louie Fong with sudden anger.  
“No talkee 'bout him. Gone away. No come back.”

He was in a towering rage. His lanky, skinny hand pointed toward the door.

“Go 'way!” he ordered shrilly. “Why you come here and talkee, talkee, ask question? Laundry not leddy until tomolla. Go 'way. Come back tomolla.”

—*Footprints Under the Window* (1933), pages 74-75

So I concluded that the inference that this is “racist stereotype” is actually *in the mind of the critic*, and not in the actual writing.

Admittedly, a lot of what I propose is subjective guesswork, including making assumptions about people's motivations for what they wrote and published, but I feel confident and comfortable in concluding that series books mostly did a not too shabby job of presenting minorities in a positive light, and encouraging their readers—mostly white children—to treat minorities with consideration and respect, and recognize that they could be honorable, intelligent, trustworthy, and deserving of friendship. Though critics of the classic series books often accuse them of fostering racist stereotypes, I believe that a strong case can be made that

series books are Not Guilty and on the contrary (considering the milieu in which they were written), actually worked effectively to *overcome* racism.

### **The Abominable Exception**

This being said, there is one aspect of racial or ethnic relations in early series books that I find enormously disturbing, and that is the attitude shown toward primitive peoples in what we now call “Third World” countries. Tom Swift and Don Sturdy, in particular, present alarming incidents of total disregard of the most basic rights of native peoples, and even their very humanity.

I have only read one or two of the Tom Swift (Senior) books and went no further, mostly because of this phenomenon. I depend upon Charlie Campbell’s encyclopedic knowledge of this series for quotes and details, not to mention his thoughtful and considered insight into the issues. In correspondence with Charlie, I told him that I remembered reading *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* (the 10th volume in the series, published in 1911), and was more than bothered by a certain episode in that story. Not having the volume in front of me, I asked him for the reference, and he wrote back,

Here is the battle from *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle*, chapter XXIV, “Two Other Captives”. The scene is an action-packed account of the Swift party’s escape from a horde of African pygmies from whose clutches they have just rescued a couple of captives. The brutality of the Swifts’ retaliation without any mention of any humanity attributed to the pygmies bothered me intensely. The picture of a scientifically-advanced party of whites mowing down primitive peoples by the hundreds in their own territory leaves an awful taste in the mouth. The chapter begins by noting,

Those on the airship were still in danger, and grave peril, for all about them were the red savages, shouting, howling, yelling and capering about, as they were now thoroughly aroused, and realized that their captives had been taken away from them. They determined to get them back, and were rallying desperately to battle. Nearly all of them were armed by this time, and flight after flight of spears and arrows were thrown or shot toward the airship.

Ned advises the Swift party,

“Keep on pouring lead into them. We’ll soon be away from here!”

When it becomes evident that flashes from the guns reveal the location of the Swift party, Tom Swift’s horrific electric rifle is brought into play.

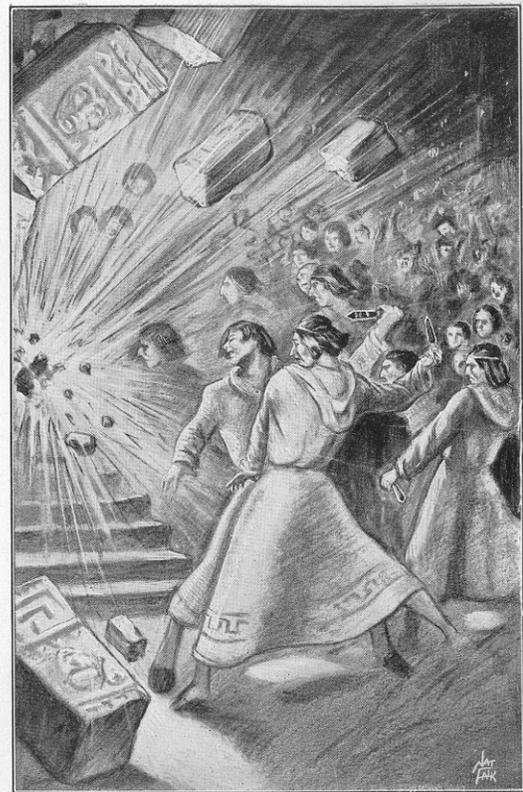
Once he had a mass of red pygmies located, he could keep on shooting charge after charge into their midst. “Use it full power!” called Tom... The elephant hunter turned on full strength in the electric gun and the wireless bullets were sent into the midst of the attackers.

And “when they were far enough up so that there was no danger from the spears or arrows,” the savages are still mowed down. “A few shots for them to remember us by!” cried Mr. Durban, as he sent more of the paralyzing electric currents into the red imps.

Charlie reported that Jon Cooper had pointed out a similar disregard of non-white ethnicities, even in their native land, when Tom bankrolls a Central American revolution just to get the Talapa wood for his *Ocean Airport* (1934). Charlie also mentioned the machine-gunning of natives in *Circling the Globe* (1927). I have not read these Tom Senior books, but the report of those who have confirms my decision not to read further in that series.

Nevertheless, my intention to hold aloof from such abhorrent accounts is not unsullied, for on my shelves rests the entire Don Sturdy series including its twelfth entry, *Don Sturdy In The Temples Of Fear* (1932). In this villainous volume, Don and his party are after gold artifacts owned by a tribe of primitive people that is modeled on a stereotype of the Mayans. Our heroes have been captured and are destined for human sacrifice as an offering by the bloodthirsty primitives. Machine guns and electric rifles being apparently too tame for the Sturdy party, they break free by hurling dynamite into masses of the Mayans who are congregated in the narrow tunnels of their temple.

After the first blast, “Those who had escaped destruction cowered back at the farther end of the room, all desire to fight having gone from their minds. Why try to cope with these mighty white men who hurled thunder and lightning from their hands?” (page 184). Nonetheless, at length the Mayans do decide to fight back, and a few pages later not only have many of them been literally blown to pieces by sticks of dynamite thrown by the Sturdy party, but their temple has been reduced to rubble. The Mayans, having found half a box of dynamite, thought they could destroy it by putting it on a fire, with the obvious result of blowing up the entire temple. Most shocking of all, the Sturdy party laments the destruction of the temple whose design they describe as “priceless”—but there is not a single concern expressed for the hundreds of natives whose body parts are buried in the ruins.



SUDDENLY THEIR VOICES WERE SWALLOWED UP  
IN A MIGHTY ROAR.

*Don Sturdy in the Temples of Fear.*

Frontispiece.

These passages amount to no less than groups of technologically advanced white men committing vicious genocidal massacres against primitive native people who are justly resisting the forcible stealing of their treasures and resources. The My Lai massacre on March 16, 1968, in which American soldiers murdered 350 to 500 unarmed citizens in South Vietnam, all of whom were civilians and a majority of whom were women, children, and elderly people, outraged the world and aroused the conscience of the American people to this class of atrocity. Echoing the evident attitude of the Swift and Sturdy parties, one soldier explained years later, “I don’t think we thought of them as human.”

One may well wonder why similar scenes presented in popular children’s series books of a generation and more earlier raised no eyebrows that I have ever heard of.

“Victor Appleton” is the author of both the Tom Swift and the Don Sturdy series, but the ghostwriter of the Tom Swifts under consideration was Howard Garis, creator also of the delightful and popular Uncle Wiggly. (It’s interesting to note that Howard Garis was the husband of Lilian Garis who wrote the above-referenced Melody Lane series, in which “classism” is repudiated.) The Don Sturdy volume was written by John W. Duffield.

Any hope that this loathsome attitude toward aboriginal peoples was the exception is not to be satisfied. It appears that the mind-set may have been more widespread in our society a hundred years ago than we would like to think.

Consider this: on December 29, 1890, in a ravine near Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, the U.S. Army, supported by American Indian mercenaries, slaughtered approximately 300 Lakota Indians, who were mostly unarmed and had already surrendered. It appears that the shooting started after a rifle discharged when soldiers were trying to take it away from an elderly, deaf Indian man because he wouldn’t release it unless he got paid for it. Two-thirds of the massacred Lakotas were women and children. Only 31 of the 470 soldiers were killed, many by “friendly fire” from fellow soldiers.

L. Frank Baum, the author of the well-known *Wizard of Oz*, published in 1900, wrote a commentary that appeared five days after the massacre. In the 1890s he was the editor and publisher of the “Aberdeen Pioneer”, a newspaper in Kansas. On January 3, 1891 his “Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer” published an editorial that included this monstrously repulsive paragraph:

The PIONEER has before declared that our only safety depends upon the total extirmination [sic] of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.

Apparently munchkins and citizens of the emerald city (*The Disappearing Floor's Ozonites?*) are entitled to more respect and rights than the red man in his own country.

This abominable philosophy lasted in the United States well into the twentieth century. A few series books expressed it, and if anyone objected to it when these books for children were published, I know nothing about it.

Whew. Moving right along.

### **The Civil Rights Movement**

Charlie Campbell also wrote, “Tom Jr. avoided these topics altogether. I can’t recall a single black character [in the Tom Swift Jr. series]. And that is also a sign of the times. ... The modern Civil Rights movement started at the same time as Tom Jr. [1954]. Everything was racially charged throughout the series’ life span so it was the safe path for the syndicate. (If Tom Jr. is guilty of stereotyping, it is stereotyping Texans.)”

Yet in the late 1960s many series books took a deliberate and overt stand against racism. Consider, for example Phyllis Whitney’s *Mystery of the Black Diamonds* (1954). *Black Diamonds* was published the same year that the Tom Swift Jr. series began; Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man on December 1, 1955, arguably igniting the civil rights movement thereby.

In *Mystery of the Black Diamonds*, there is a young girl named Jinx whose grandmother is prejudiced against Mexicans. Jinx’s real name is Juanita because her mother was a Mexican. Jinx’s parents were killed so her grandparents are now raising her. Poisoned by her grandmother’s prejudice, she has an awful self-image, and has even absorbed a negative attitude of her own toward Mexicans. She despises her real name.

In one powerful scene in this book, this reserved and guarded, even rude young girl has her eyes opened wide when the mother of Angie, a friend of hers, finally breaks through her shell. In the course of a conversation, the mother responds to Jinx’s question, “What have I got to be proud about?” Half a page into her answer, the mother pops this sentence out:

“Then there’s your wonderful, exciting background.”

Jinx grew very still. “My what?”

“Being the daughter of a beautiful Mexican girl, Juanita...”

“I only want to be an American,” Jinx said.

“Of course we all want to be that. But just as I’m part Irish and proud of it, and as your grandmother is proud of her Cornish people, you have a heritage to be proud of. ... You have to remember that the Mexicans are a wonderful people. They’re gay and full of music



and spirit. They're generous beyond anything we understand. And they're creative and artistic."

"They're dirty and lazy," Jinx said, and Angie gasped.

It took a lot to make Mom angry, but when she did get mad she did a really good, spark-spitting job of it. She looked at Jinx now and Angie could see that the sparks were getting ready to fly...

They do fly, and then the mother states,

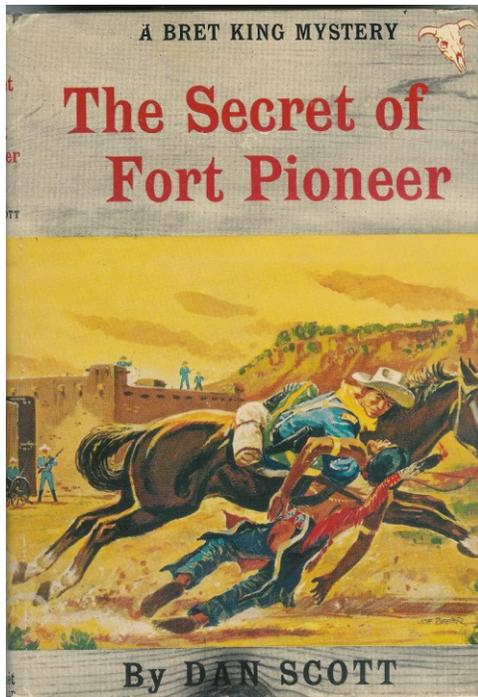
"I thought you were a really smart girl who was just making a few natural mistakes," Mom snapped. "But now I know that you're just prejudiced and unkind and foolish."

Jinx's lips parted in astonishment, but she could make no suitable answer.

—*Mystery of the Black Diamonds*, page 190

The mother goes on for half a page more, expressing the most rip-snorting denunciation of prejudice that I've ever read. The end of her strong but careful and controlled rant is, "Your job isn't to change your grandmother—it's to change *you*. So don't try to blame anyone else."

Angie's mother's mouth-shutting speech is an amazing statement to any young reader—or anyone else—on the subject of racism and prejudice. And remember, this was published in flipping 1954! (The twenty Phyllis Whitney juveniles will be the subject of an article in the next *Review*.)



Other series in the next ten years show a marked difference from their classic predecessors of the first half of the twentieth century, deliberately, even blatantly, putting minorities in positions of prominence and "equality". The nine-volume Bret King series (1960-1964), set in the southwest, provides a high place for Indians. In my opinion, it is not badly done at all. When I first read the Brets, they struck me a little bit like juvenile Tony Hillermans: Indian culture preserved, fairly accurately described, taken seriously, treated honorably, and yet clearly distinct from "white" society.

The Biff Brewster series (1960-1965) includes a trademark friendship with a native boy wherever Biff goes in his world travels. The partnerships are presented as natural, spontaneous, and adventuresome. Biff's

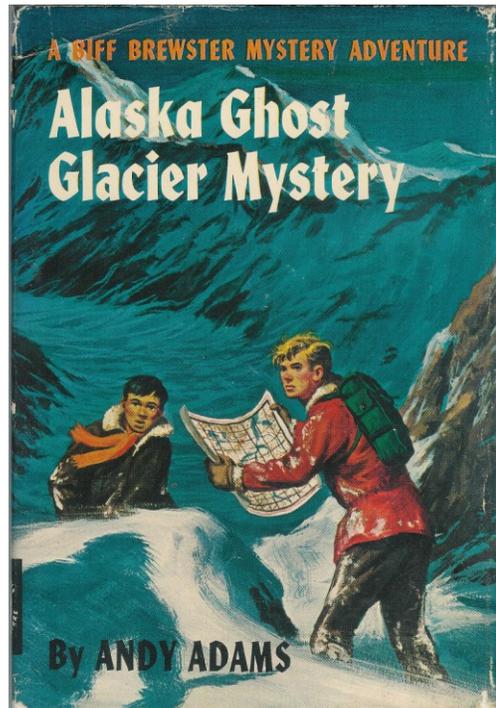
friendships are with boys who are Brazilian, Chinese, Hawaiian, Mexican, African, Eskimo, Indian, Dutch, Egyptian, Tibetan, British, Arabian, and Swiss. The reader wishes he could travel and make the same kinds of friends.

Even the camp Christopher Cool series (1967-1969) tries to make being an American Indian, well, “cool”.

### **The LaCrosse Conference**

A couple of decades later, in June 1984 there was a conference on series books and their place in American culture. It was held at the University of Wisconsin in LaCrosse. Three noted series book authors made presentations: Margaret Sutton, author of the Judy Bolton series; Sam Epstein, author the Ken Holts; and Hal Goodwin, author of the Rick Brants. Each one of them addressed the subject of racism in a panel discussion on “Series Books and Social Values”.

Margaret Sutton said that in *The Ghost Parade* (1933) she had named the “colored” maid Crystal White. Fifty-one years later, she expressed regret. “I thought it was funny then,” she said. “I don’t think it’s funny anymore.” But Margaret also pointed out that when Judy was criticized for speaking to the colored maid in *The Haunted Attic* (1932), she had her protagonist retort, “Why not? She’s a girl about our age.”



Sam Epstein affirmed that he had been deliberate in not providing any villain in any of the Ken Holts with a “minority” name, but added that some of the detectives had Mexican names, or other ethnic names.

Hal Goodwin, commenting on racism in series books, said, regarding Rick Brant, “I paid no attention to it... As people who were black or Oriental or Hispanic entered, they were just people.” Notwithstanding the rather mild appellation “Japs” in *100 Fathoms Under*—an understandable epithet, perhaps, in the years immediately after World War II for one who had fought in the South Pacific.

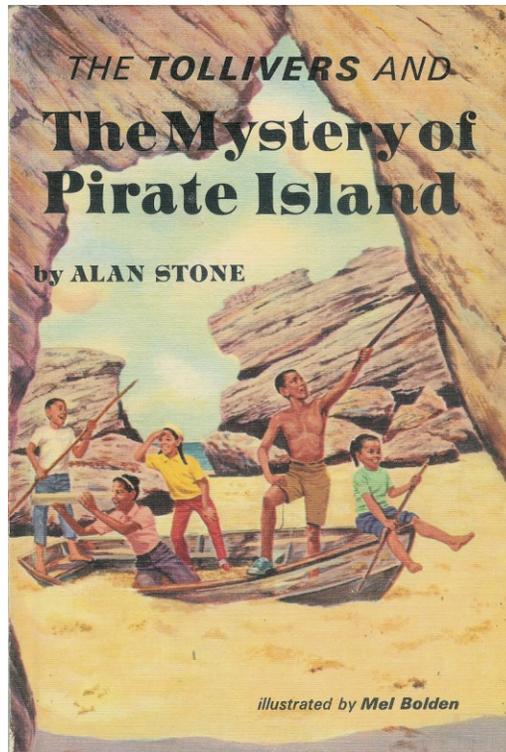
### **The Tollivers—Nice Try**

The most obvious deliberate attempt by series book writers and publishers to make a positive statement about racial equality is probably the Tolliver series, which features a black family. This is the only series I’m aware of that tried to appeal to a specific minority. There are three books in the series, all published in 1967. The titles are

*The Mystery of the Lost Pony*  
*The Mystery of Pirate Island*  
*The Mystery of the Old Jalopy*

One assumes that the intentions were good, but the overall impression that I had when I read these stories is that they tried to show that blacks are “just like anybody else”, i.e. “whites”. I remember no sign whatever of a distinctly black element in the stories. If there were no illustrations, one would never know that the Tollivers were “African-American”. So, “nice try” but not very effective in doing much more than producing three entertaining stories for older preteens.

But collecting the Tolliver series and reading them in preparation for writing this article led me to an insight about how people, maybe as individuals but almost certainly as a culture, recognize, address, and overcome racism. There are stages one goes through, and for a culture it takes several generations. Series books produced throughout the twentieth century show these stages.



### **Conclusion**

First is outright racism, which Fred Woodworth described well: “racism is or must be proclaiming that a group of people is inferior and should have their human rights violated.” To introduce the analogy of a rose garden, this is the stage when red roses declare that a rose of any other color is inherently inferior to red. Most early series books reflected this situation in the United States but also showed discomfort with it in a variety of ways.

Next, people recognize that racism is something unjust that must be overcome. People try to “get along” and treat each other nicely, and point out that everybody is just as good as everybody else. Genuine differences and distinctions are ignored. It’s still racist but trying not to be. The Tolliver series is an example of this stage. The author of these three volumes was Andrew Svenson (May 8, 1910-August 21, 1975), a middle-aged white man who had grown up in the eras addressed in this article. In the rose garden, this is when the red roses try to pretend that all other roses are just as good as a red rose.

Racism is finally eradicated (this word is a conscious nod to Tom Swift Senior’s doofus black “handyman”, Eradicate Andrew Jackson Abraham Lincoln Sampson) when racial differences can be acknowledged and even enjoyed, without being thought of as an issue of comparative worth. In the rose garden,

this is when all the roses finally come to realize that the beauty of the garden is simply because there are so many colors, each color contributing to a rich whole that none of them could create alone.



I don't think we're there yet. It'll take a long, long time, if we ever get there at all, before the whole human race accepts the dream that the visionary hermit, desert philosopher, and adventure-story author Marshal South embraced, and which he expressed in *Desert Magazine* in the column that appeared in July 1944. Referring to the American Indian, South wrote that he "is a human being fashioned of the same clay as we all are. He is our blood-brother, as are all other members of the human race, irrespective of creed, nationality, or color. And just as no one man can gather all the treasures of the earth into his own satchel, so is it impossible for any one nation or race to be the possessor of every good quality and virtue. The wise man seeks for pearls of beauty and understanding in every quarter."

If I am right in the thesis put forth in this article, there were a good number of authors of classic series books who nudged their readers along in the right direction all those years ago.

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*The warrior shook Rick's hand and smiled*