The Carson Street Detectives

by David M. Baumann
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1,893 words

In the spring of 2020, a fellow collector mentioned in passing that he had just finished reading The Carson Street Detective Series and really enjoyed it. “Whaaa…?” I thought, “the *what* series?”

I’ve been collecting and reading series books for more than thirty years, and I think I am reasonably familiar with the major series and a lot of minor ones. Every now and then, though, somebody mentions one I’d never heard of.

The Carson Street Detectives. It turns out it’s in the genre of short series that feature “mid-twentieth century kids who solve mysteries in small town America”. Others I know of in the genre are Brains Benton, the Mad Scientists Club, the Jack McGurk Detectives, Alvin Fernald, Ted Wilford, the Three Investigators, and the Mill Creek Irregulars; girls’ series in the same genre include Ginny Gordon, Penny Nichols, and Penny Allen. Each of these series has its own charm, and each one is pretty good or better.

A brief aside on small-town America in the mid-twentieth century. I wonder sometimes how much of the common nostalgia about these days is the result of selective and sifted memories, but I do think that there is much truth to the longing for what “Andy of Mayberry” represented. Small towns were where everyone knew everyone else, crime was almost non-existent, and people were hard-working and honest. Children were safe. Teachers were strict but loving.

I grew up in a small town in the 1950s; I remember its tack and feed store and old picturesque train station. I could play all day outside with no one looking out for me, and by age ten I was allowed to ride my bike the two miles from my house to the main street. There was a soda fountain at the drugstore, where my best friend and I could buy a tall Coke for ten cents, with optional cherry, vanilla, or chocolate flavoring squirted in if we liked. We were happily innocent in many ways, and it made for a childhood of great joy and simple wonder in the world.

The above-named books took such a world for granted. The criminal element more often than not came from “outside”. Teens and preteens could spend nearly all day doing their detective work, but needed parental approval to do it, and that was given only after their chores were

done. That world, even if today it is mostly the product of nostalgia, was heart-warmingly attractive. And it is generously served up in the Carson Street Detective series.

In the third Carson Street book, the boys meet a man at the library, get to talking with him, and he offers to drive them to his house to show them some stuff and then return them to town. “Okay,” say the boys, and that’s what happens. They also hitchhike frequently, with no mention whatever of “watching out for strangers”.

In the fourth book, the heroes go to the local drugstore, sit at the soda fountain where they order large sundaes and enjoy repartee with the squeakily upright and somewhat gullible twenty-one year old fellow who’s been serving them for several years. They pay with a one dollar bill and get thirty cents back. Sigh. Those were the days.

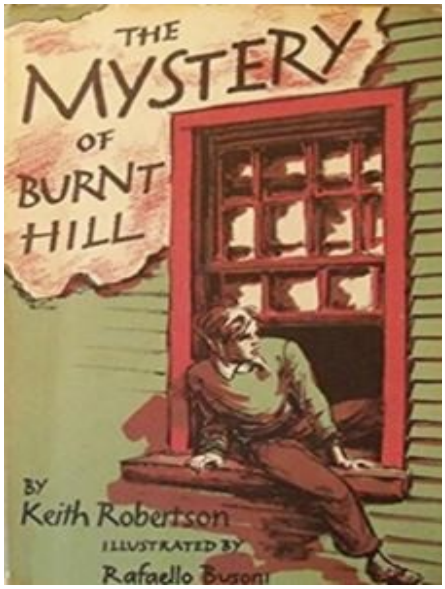
Well then, what about this series?

There are four books in the Carson Street Detective series: *The Mystery of Burnt Hill* (1952), *Three Stuffed Owls* (1954), *The Crow and the Castle* (1957), and *The Money Machine* (1969). As was the case in the Ted Wilford series, it is the first book, not the last, that is scarce. *The Mystery of Burnt Hill* is really hard to find; I was just plain lucky to find a copy. The other three books are not too difficult to find, nor are they particularly expensive. Strangely, only the second of the four books mentions the existence of the first one; and the fourth book mentions the titles of only the second and third as if that is all there are.

The author was Keith Robertson (1914-1991). I recognized that name; I had a single title of his which I thought was excellent. That book, *In Search of a Sandhill Crane,* was published in 1973. It is about a teenage boy who must spend the summer in upper Michigan with an aunt, and he’s not happy about it. To help him work through his displeasure, his father gives him a camera and urges his son to find a sandhill crane and take a photo of it. The adventures the boy has in his search mature him in a satisfying way. Robertson was an admirable wordsmith, so when I

learned that he had written a series about boy detectives, I didn't hesitate to search for them. I'm glad I did.

The Mystery of Burnt Hill
The first book introduces our two friends. They are Neil Lambert and Stephen (known as Swede) Larson, both fifteen. They live in a small town called Belleville, located in New Jersey in a place similar to where the author actually lived. Both come from intact families with strong, caring fathers and mothers who are no-nonsense but flexible when it comes to boyish activities. This volume is written in the first person by Neil. In the first three books, Neil has an animal (or animals) which contribute to the plotline. In this volume, he has a number of homing pigeons.

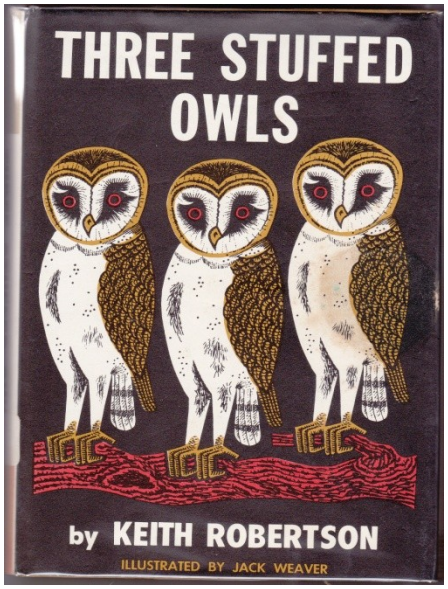


As the story gets under way, the boys visit an old woman named Mrs. Hankin, whose home is through the woods eight miles out of town; she has no telephone or electricity. She is the last descendant of an old family, once wealthy. (Well, there's a distant nephew, but he doesn't appear in the story.) Mrs. Hankin lives in her family's old farmhouse, parts of which are two centuries old. She lives in only two or three rooms of the old place, and barely subsists on what food she is able to raise, but she has a sparky and darned attractive personality full of courage and grit.

The plot involves an old desk she gives the boys for a favor they had done her. Neil's mother decides to have the desk refinished. An antiquarian bookseller (with a noteworthy personality of his own) and a woodworker whose skill is most admirable but whose inclination toward dishonesty is well known both contribute to the plot. The desk turns out to be valuable, and contains a secret that—maybe—hints at information about a treasure in the old farmhouse that everyone had forgotten about. How to thwart bad guys and make sure that Mrs. Hankin gets the benefit of the discoveries is a major part of the tale. The story is intricate, plausible, sometimes surprising, and marked with more than one "aha" moment that make it well entertaining. There are old woods, historical landmarks, quirky characters, and satisfying plot devices to create a commendable initial entry in the series.

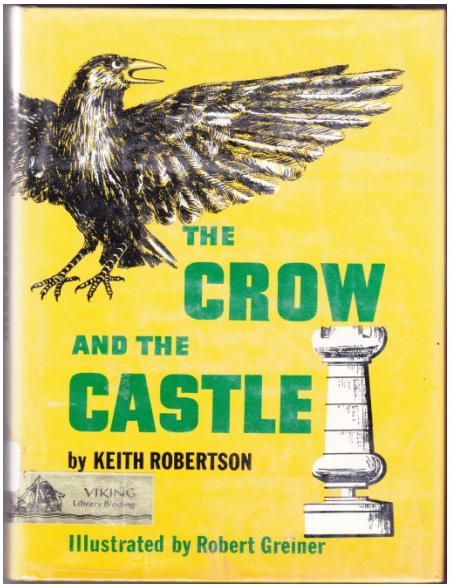
Three Stuffed Owls
The second entry in the series is also a good quality tale. Told in the third person, in this story the boys, now sixteen, become friends with a

taxidermist whose combination home and shop are on the outskirts of town. He is a recently-immigrated foreigner and therefore unacquainted with American ways, but he gives every impression of being a hard worker. He has three stuffed owls in his display window, and they are the inspiration for the title for the book. Local people question why a taxidermist would settle in such a small town as their own, and they wonder how he makes enough money to survive; there just isn't that much demand for his services.



The mystery doesn't get into gear until well past the halfway point of the book, but several storylines that emerged in the first half come together admirably, and a serious criminal enterprise shows itself. An important contribution to the solution comes to the boys by a coincidence, but sometimes in life there are coincidences; making the most of them in a plausible way can contribute to the story.

For a book written in the 1950s, I was impressed that it didn't take the then widely-accepted position that the police are always your friends and justice will always be served; the author handles the subject carefully and tastefully, but makes it clear that it may not always be so. Once again, descriptions in the story of the woods, barns, old country roads, and wildlife are inviting. Character development and another carefully-woven and gradually-developed plot make for a fine story. Neil's animal in this story is an entertaining pig named Mildred, and she has a key part to play in the resolution of the mystery. Unusual in series books, the first two entries include the account of a death.



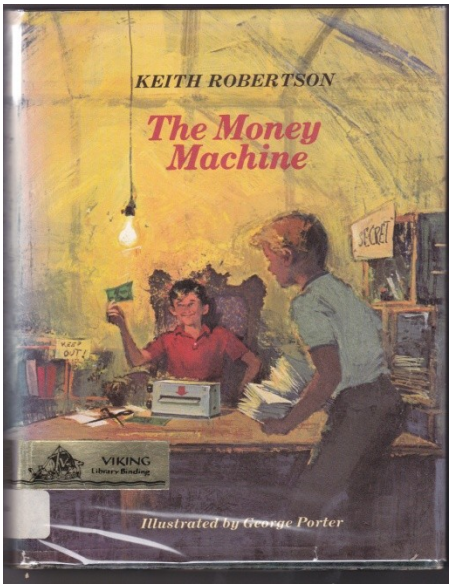
The Crow and the Castle

In this story we return to the first person narrative style, again with Neil as the story-teller. Early in the tale, Neil's mother states firmly, "As far as I know, you haven't been in danger of imminent death for months. I want to keep on in the same way." There is a good measure of clever and subtle humor in the stories, and this is an example of it.

This mystery begins when the lads become

acquainted with “the Captain”, a long-time collector of chess sets who lives on one of the back roads of town. He has dozens of sets, many of them valuable. Several have fascinating histories. When it is suspected that a treasure was hidden in a chess piece two centuries before, and that some bad guys are after it, the mystery gathers momentum.

Like the previous mystery, this story has coincidences in it that drive the plot, but once again they are plausible. Neil’s animal in this story is a crow he has tamed, and it lends itself to the title of the book. Whether it helps the Carson Street detectives in the case is, um, a matter of the reader’s opinion. The story is skillfully plotted and engaging, and the denouement is gratifying.



The Money Machine
In this final mystery we return to the third person storyteller. Twelve years have passed since the last entry in the series. This story is about how the lads take the lead in discovering a counterfeiter, with the Secret Service making the final arrest. A girl two years younger than the boys joins them in some of the work; she is a terrific character and doesn’t detract from the lads’ partnership at all. There are a lot of bike riding and hitchhiking in this story, and a couple of well designed humorous incidents.

As in the second and third books, there are coincidences that are essential to the plotline but they are subtle enough that they’re easy to accept. There is an escape scene that could be a match to those of the

Ken Holt series. The appealing descriptions of country roads, old houses in the woods, and engaging characters that are characteristic of Robertson's writing come through with this mystery as well.

In my opinion, the Carson Street Detective series is one of the finest of the genre. It has multi-faceted, well designed plotting and skillful attention to detail, all of which make for a thoroughly enjoyable reading experience. When I came to the end, I was sorry that there were only four books in the series.

Sidebar on Coincidences

1,092 words

A few years ago, I revealed to fellow collectors that I owned no Nancy Drew stories; the collective gasp nearly pulled me off my chair. So I responded, "Okay then—which do you think are the best Nancy Drew books?" Fans' responses showed me that five titles were 'way out in front; so I bought them to give them a try. I won't go into detail about my impressions, except to observe that Nancy often concludes a mystery (I won't say "solved") by a liberal application of "coincidence".

In *Nancy's Mysterious Letter,* to take just one case, there were FOUR utterly unconvincing coincidences by page 130! First, Nancy learns in her eponymous letter, misdirected to her from a legal firm in England, that there is another Nancy Drew somewhere in the country of 125 million people, who is a missing heiress; right away her odd neighbor shows up and just happens to mention another Nancy Drew she knew who'd moved to New York years earlier. Second, Nancy traces that other ND to a wealthy family in New York for whom she had been governess a decade earlier; and then our Nancy goes to a football game six hours' drive away from River Heights and sits in the stands with 25,000 people, where she just happens to sit behind the daughter of the NY man who had hired the other ND; she tells our Nancy that the other ND had left their employ eight years before and they have no idea where she is now except they know that she became an actress. Third, in that same stadium with 25,000 other people six hours' drive from her home town, Nancy just happens to see the man who is suspected of stealing a mail bag from her front porch, and is a part of the mystery. Fourth, that very night she attends a play and just happens to learn that that other ND had been involved in the play and is somewhere on site.

Now, I like coincidences. They make life interesting because they are completely unexpected, serendipitous occurrences in one's day. I've

experienced a few that I remember years later, and still shake my head with wonder as I bring them to mind.

Back in the mid-1990s I was trying to find a scarce book. A book dealer I knew suggested that I contact a fellow named Fred Woodworth in Tucson, Arizona, who had made an authorized reprint of the book. I made the contact, and have enjoyed a friendship with Fred for almost twenty-five years. But about two weeks after the book dealer's recommendation, I was visiting a print museum in California, and spent a little time talking with the owner. He mentioned that he knew a printer who still used the old-fashioned methods and machinery. I was amazed when it dawned on me that he was referring to Fred.

Back in 2012 when I was living in Orange County, California, I headed out to visit a friend. In front of me as I entered the freeway was a car with an unusual and clever personalized license plate. I went on to visit my friend twenty miles away, spent an hour with him, then drove back home. As I turned off the freeway to the surface street that led to my home, I saw that I had pulled up behind the same car with its clever license plate. Orange County has a population of several million people and its freeways are almost always crowded with hundreds of thousands of cars.

After I moved out of Orange County, there was one teenager I regretted not saying good-bye to; I was just too busy with many things under deadlines to take the time to do everything I wanted. Two years later I came back to visit friends and they suggested that we go to a movie at a local mall. I remembered that it was that teenager's birthday. We went to the mall, and, in this same county with its millions of inhabitants, I saw the teenager. We had a very welcome meeting and a satisfying closure.

About twenty years ago I did an "online search" for David Baumann to see what would come up. I found another fellow of my own name who lived about 700 miles away. He had a website about his life, including a short movie he had taken during a concert called Newport '69. It had taken place in June 1969; about 200,000 people came for three days of performances by well-known rock musicians. The staggering thing is that I also attended that concert, and the fellow's video was taken from just about where I was sitting. So we both found out about thirty years after the fact that there were two teenagers both named David Baumann in about the same place at the same time; and if it hadn't been for his video and my finding it, neither of us would ever have known it.

Any of these coincidences could have been missed had something been slightly different. Ten seconds either way, or looking in the wrong direction, or making another decision in a matter of apparent

insignificance, and the coincidence would either not have happened, or would have been unrecognized even if it did happen. Sometimes I wonder how many near misses we have in our lives.

Clearly, coincidences are a part of real life, and therefore can have a fitting place in the plotting of series books. For example, in Ken Holt's *The Mystery of the Galloping Horse*, the bad guys set up their operation in the very place that Ken and Sandy have fled to avoid them. Such an episode can be true to life and is not objectionable. The coincidences in the books of the Carson Street Detective series are a wee bit of a stretch, but easily acceptable. I think that if a coincidence is reasonably true-to-life, it can work in a story; but if "coincidence" is frequently used as a standard plot device, it just devolves into lazy story-telling, and can even be insulting and exasperating to the discriminating reader. I enjoy coincidences, but I will never depend on one coming along to solve my problems.

For a laugh, and to close out this sidebar, I'll relate that while I was reading *Three Stuffed Owls,* I got to a part where a big storm hit the area where the boys were and the power went out; just at that moment, a strong rainstorm erupted in my area and the power went out.