Series Books: Yesterday, Today, and Yet to Come

by David M. Baumann

4,504 words

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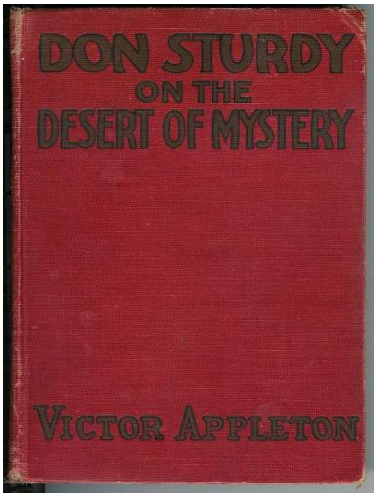
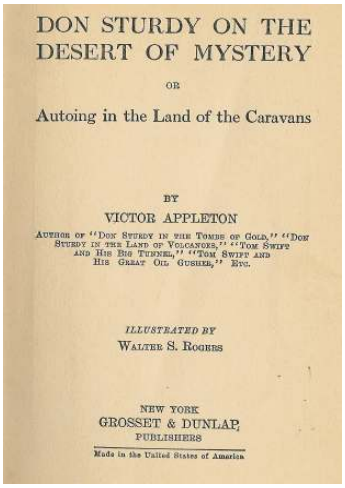
YESTERDAY

In 1959, my grandparents moved to Morongo Valley, California, a small desert community about twenty miles north of Palm Springs. I turned eleven that summer, and was already a voracious reader of the Hardy Boys and other series books. I was quite familiar with the words "Grosset & Dunlap."

For the next decade, my family drove out on a bi-monthly basis to spend the weekend with the elderly couple. Often they took us to various places in the community that had become the biggest part of their world. On one occasion more than forty years ago, we went into a thrift shop. It had the predictable wares for sale—inexpensive clothing on wire hangers strung across makeshift racks, sun-colored glass vases and bottles, costume jewelry, ragged paperback novels, mismatched pieces of silverware. I eased up to a rickety card table that was groaning under a stack of hardback books. On top was a dark red, jacketless volume with the "Grosset & Dunlap" imprint on the bottom of the spine. The title, in attractive, old fashioned lettering, read, *Don Sturdy on the Desert of Mystery*. It was the first time I learned that there were series that had been discontinued, and I can still remember the feeling of wonder that washed over me.




DON STURDY ON THE
DESERT OF MYSTERY

OR

Autoing in the Land of the Caravans

BY

VICTOR APPLETON

Author of "Don Sturdy in the Tombs of Gold," "Don Sturdy in the Land of Volcanoes," "Tom Swift and His Big Tunnel," "Tom Swift and His Great Oil Gusher," Etc.

Illustrated by

Walter S. Rogers

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TWO POWERFUL ARMS CAME DOWN AND CAUGHT HIM.

Don Sturdy on the Desert of Mystery. Page 115.

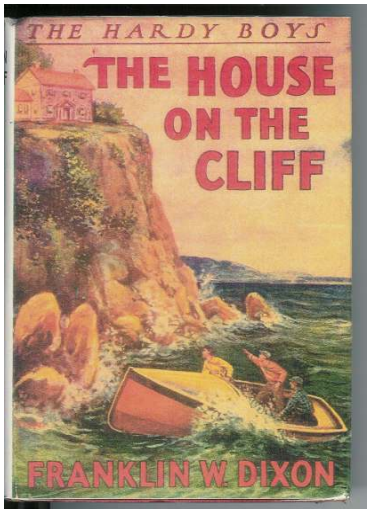
It was a library discard. Someone had obviously donated it to the local branch since it bore a stamp that read "Morongo Branch County Library," but the library might have disdained entering it into their system since there were no signs of a library envelope in the back or marks of the Dewey Decimal System in white ink on the spine. On the blank front endpaper was scrawled a large *—10* in pencil. I laid down a dime at the cash register and it became mine. I wouldn't buy another used series book for a quarter of a century and therefore had no inkling that with that purchase I began my series book collection.

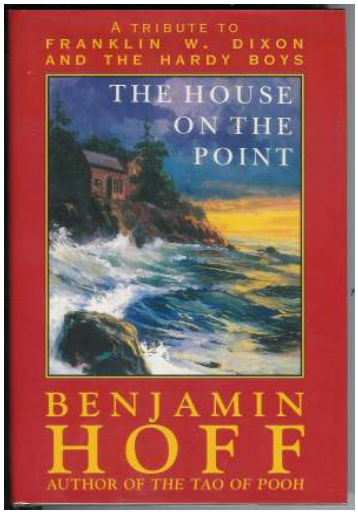
I still own that book. It seemed old then, with its cloth covering somewhat frayed. At the time I found it, it was about forty years old; I have now owned it as long as that. More than likely my heirs will have to decide what to do with it at some future time, because I will not part with it willingly.

Deciding when series books began is a subjective matter, depending at least on how one defines series books. For myself, I pick 1899—the year the Rover Boys were launched. What years span the series book era is equally subjective, though probably most of us would agree that the late 1960s or early 1970s mark the end. A lot of series sputtered out in the Depression. If they made it through that period, then World War II did them in. A few hardy series survived (yes, pun intended). The war actually spawned one or two series, like the Cherry Ames books, but the postwar years saw a surge in new series. The 1950s, in which I spent my childhood, had rich pickings for any prepubescent bibliophile.

Even as a preteen, I enjoyed the anachronistic flavor of the old series books I read. I remember Frank and Joe referring to "the World War" in one of the chronicles of their adventures—I don't remember which one now. And I was deeply satisfied by the episode in which the boys ordered lunch and two desserts each, receive a bill for a dollar and a half, and paid with a two-dollar bill. (*What Happened At Midnight,* pages 133-138)

The stories we like so much radiate the era in which they were written. Just by existing today they are period pieces. Could someone write a story in 2004 set in the 1930s with an atmosphere indistinguishable from, say, Wyckoff's Mystery Hunters, or set in the early 1960s with an atmosphere indistinguishable from Troy Nesbit's *Forest Fire Mystery*? I don't think so. Benjamin Hoff took on that very task in 2002 when he wrote *The House on the Point,* a rewrite of *The House on the Cliff*, set in 1947 instead of 1927. It was a commendable effort but, in spite of obvious careful research, just couldn't convey the feel of the late 1940s.

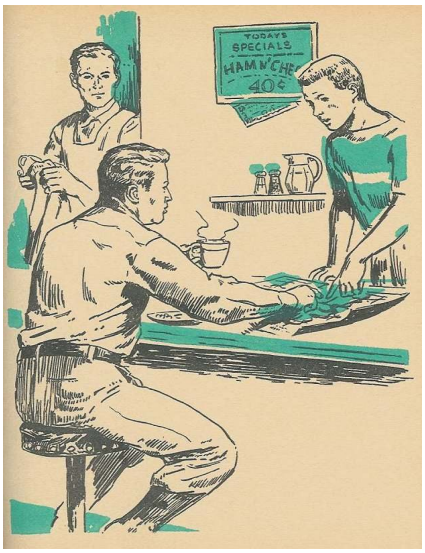




The Nesbit book was published in 1962 and now has a comfortable feeling of "old times." On page 183, one reads,

Art snatched up the family phone which sat on the kitchen window sill near the table. Luckily the party line wasn't busy. If it had been, he couldn't have waited. He would have put a precious dime into the pay phone which Mr. Mills kept out in the front beside the counter for the convenience of customers.

The illustration on page 207 of that book reads "TODAY'S SPECIALS, HAM N' CHEESE, 40c." Ah.



I was born at a good time. I had a childhood in the 1950s and grew through teen years into adulthood in the 1960s. The daily life of an era—the decades of my youth and earlier—interests me when I read series books. What did ordinary people do? Headlines from the 1950s are about Sputnik and Khrushchev and civil rights and the space race, but the richest memories I have are about my neighborhood, friends, and activities. It was an era when hurrying around the corner to my best friend's house in Northridge, California presaged an adventure, and riding our Schwinn bikes two miles through tree-shaded, asphalted streets to our small town's "main street" seemed like going somewhere. Brown's Tack and Feed store was there, across the street and down a bit from the massive stone, two-story elementary school where I started kindergarten.

Climbing trees was easy, for there was an orchard of black walnut trees across the street from my house. My allowance was 35 cents and I didn't think it was too little. My friends and I made rubber band guns from discarded lengths of wood and clothespins. Skateboards were really made of skates and boards—the skates were the kind that took a key to tighten the two-piece metal contraption onto your shoes. We took the skates apart, nailed the pieces to a plank, and took off. We bought baseball cards, five in a nickel pack, and sorted them while we chewed the bubble gum that came with them in wads so large it made your jaw muscles sore.

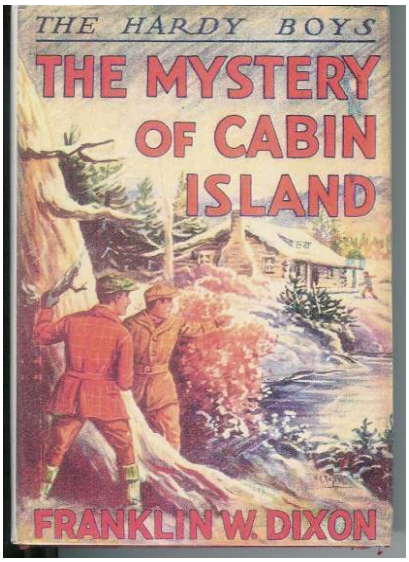
And series books were in their second heyday. It was an age of science, optimism, and westerns on black and white television. Bookstores and even toyshops had shelves full of the books we seek so painstakingly now.

Tom Swift, Jr. appeared precisely fifty years ago, making accessible to juveniles the excitement of science and technology as the be-all and end-all of progress and beating an Eastern block country called "Brungaria". We all knew who that really

was. The series celebrated the exuberance of the post-World War II era and the USA's entry onto the world scene as a major power. The generations of Tom Swift series show the progression through the ages from *Electric Runabout* (1910) in the first series, to *Aquatomic Tracker* (1964) in the "junior" series, to *Cyborg Kickboxer* (1991) in the fourth incarnation. Even the titles reflect the era in which they appeared.

Now we're in the odd position of collecting books that were part of our childhoods, some of which even then could bring us into an "old world"—for the Hardy boys, it was the era of the late 1920s and 1930s. Nearly everyone's favorite original text Hardy boys story is *The Mystery of Cabin Island*, set in 1928.

This charming scene is found on pages 84-85.



The Hardy boys reached the little village down on the mainland in a short time. It was a summer resort, and at this season of the year most of the houses were closed and boarded up, but a few permanent residents stayed on the year round, among them being the general storekeeper. His name, as it appeared from a weatherbeaten sign hanging above the store, was Amos Grice.

The boys left their boat by a little wharf which was almost covered with snow and made their way toward the store.

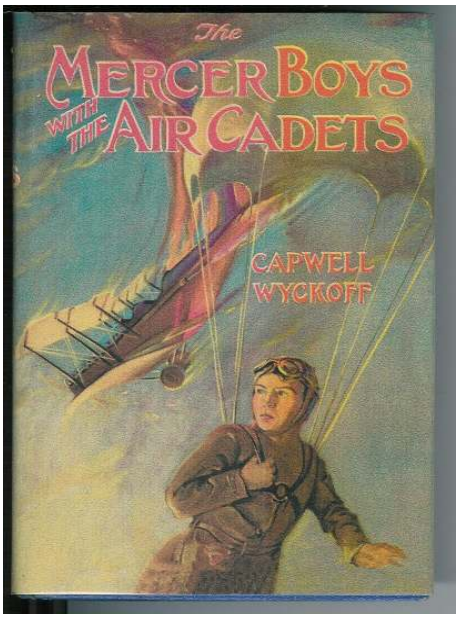
An elderly man with chin whiskers peered at them through his glasses as he entered. He was sitting behind the stove, reading a newspaper and munching at an apple, and he was evidently surprised to see any customers so early in the morning, particularly strangers.

"How do, boys! Where you from?" he asked.

"We're camping on an island farther up the bay," Frank explained. "We came here in our ice-boat."

"Camping, hey? Well, it ain't many that camps in the winter time. As fer me, I think I'd rather set behind the stove when the colder weather comes on. It's more comfortable." …

The boys spent some time giving the storekeeper an order, and when the goods had been wrapped up, Amos Grice invited them to sit down beside the cracker barrel and "chat for a while."



Only four years later, Capwell Wyckoff's *Mercer Boys and the Air Cadets* saw print, and regaled readers with a similar scene on page 176. Not much had changed in four years.

They opened the door and entered the dark little crossroads country general store. A smell of mixed goods, kerosene oil and soft coal reached them as soon as they left the cold outer air. There was an iron stove at the far end of the store and a country man sat there with his feet on the stove rail, chair tilted back and a newspaper before him. An ancient corncob pipe was in his mouth and this odor mingled with the rest.

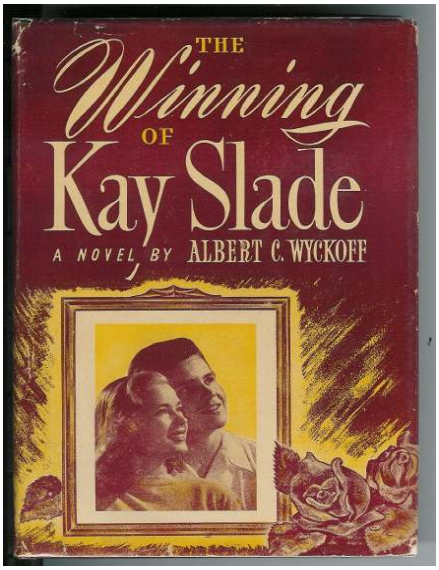
"Come right in," he invited, getting up from his chair. "What kin I do fer you?"

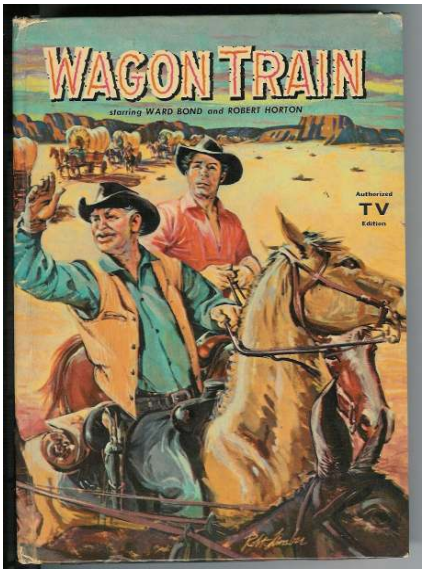
"Well, we're kind of hungry," grinned Vench. "Could you make us a cup of coffee and find us something to eat?"

"Sartinly. I keep some cold meat and I got plenty of canned things. I'll go make you some coffee."

Baby boomers are the last generation to grow up in a time before television had totally taken over and when books could hold their own. A few years ago I read another Wyckoff book, *The Winning of Kay Slade*, published in 1951, and found this curious passage on page 109:

Kay sat down gingerly in a big over-stuffed chair, trying not to gawk at her surroundings. To someone more trained in observation than Kay it would have been evident that the Waltons were not wealthy, but that they were comfortably well off. The furnishings were good and arranged with taste there in the living room. Kay did not recognize one large bit of furniture with a glass front, but she was later to know that it was a television set. At the moment, it looked to her like a cabinet with a gold fish bowl in it.





As television began to take a place in the American home in the 1950s, a lotta books, especially the Whitman products, provided stories that were takeoffs of popular television shows. In a few cases, shows featured episodes that were inspired by series books. That symbiotic relationship was more the exception than the rule, and by the time we got to the 1960s, what was already being called "the idiot box" had become a fierce competitor for the attention of the young.

Sigh. There wasn't much of a contest. The Stratemeyer Syndicate capitulated, and gutted and dumbed-down its most popular series to appeal to the television generation, and the best series were all but gone by the end of the 1960s. A few others held on for a little longer, but the age of series books was unquestionably over. There were other reasons that contributed to the demise of series books, but my guess is that television was the major culprit.

TODAY

Not long after that, the age of the collector began. We're still in that age, but it too will come to an end. Series books recede more and more into the past. It is harder to make a "find" now, harder than ten or even five years ago.

Today even the best series books now are almost as anachronistic as a pocket watch. Even if they're beautiful, high quality, and serviceable, they're from another era and only the eccentric really use them. (I own three pocket watches.) For that reason, there is a poignancy to being a collector. I am constantly mindful of the fact that I enjoy and value things that are from another time, and that today's youth hardly have the capacity to understand, much less value, what is so prized by me.

Now that I am 56, sometimes, in a rare quiet moment, I watch the space at the window, looking after the years for some sense of myself. As night falls I see my face there, with the eye that has caught the light, and there is some char, and some euphoria, and in middle age the vacuum of heritage that is bequeathed to native sons and daughters, few of whom will ever know the weight of history. It is a southern California night, and I am sighting up into the barrel of a cobalt sky to find time and place and name. My history is the scrub and sage of the California back lots my friends and I compassed as boys, the back lots whose disappearance was called "progress," the channels that sluice suburban evolution.

Not long ago, I stood in dry weeds at the crest of a hill in the mountains that rim the San Fernando Valley where I grew up, and saw the roofs coming up through the orange groves like a measured but inexorable tide. They were the arbors of my years. I looked out over where the pavement and the shingles had appeared, where tractors had laid under the leaves and branches and turned the roots into the air to put down roads that ran straight across the plains of my youth. I think that accelerated transitoriness is really the heritage of the last fifty years. When I stood in the few remaining hilltop weeds to look over my hometown I hardly recognized it. The longitude and latitude may be the same and maybe even a few buildings are vaguely recognizable, but four decades have eroded the shores and changed the contours of my childhood.

What are memories to me are history to today's youth. John Lennon sang "When I'm Sixty-Four" when he was 27. Turning that age seemed an impossibly far-off event in those wonder years of the 1960s. Amazingly, had he lived, Lennon would have been 64 this September. One can only wonder what today's youth will find familiar and comforting. Where will their myths and the stories of their formative years come from? Movies? Videogames?

As always, growing up means leaving things behind. It is not easy. Nostalgia is pretty popular now, and "antique" shops will sell you the bottles, cans, posters, and sheets of music you grew up with for outlandish prices. More than one "oldie station" is on the radio dial. Commonplace are computers, cell phones, televisions with 84 channels, DVD players, VCRs—but mostly they are beyond me. I can use some of them but don't know how to get beyond the simple steps. Tom Swift Jr. would be ashamed of me.

Leslie McFarlane voiced an uncomplimentary observation about adults who clung to his juveniles. I found some unpublished interview notes in his file in the Whitby, Ontario mortuary where his memorial service was held in 1977. The document had no title, no date, and no other information. McFarlane said,

Because The Hardy Boys really represent such a very small part of my output over the years and because I was a sort of foster-parent I don't take them very seriously. However, I realize that millions of boys did take them seriously and that millions still do. So maybe they are more important than I imagine. This is a visual age, kids prefer to look at pictures (comic books and tv) so anything that induces the reading habit is all to the good. Obviously no kid in his right mind will stay with the Hardy boys but if he goes on to read better and better stuff and learns the joys of reading he'll be a better man and a happier man.

Well, McFarlane was in error. There are a lot of us in our right minds who stayed with the Hardy boys and other juvenile books. Admittedly, as adults we read them differently from the way we read them as children, but they still give us immense joy and pleasure; now they are doorways into the real life of another time and the era of our own youth.

A few months ago I was in Pasadena, California and stumbled onto Cliff's Books. Except for being rather short on collectible series books and the few they had being flamingly overpriced, it was the kind of establishment one dreams about and hopes for. Narrow aisles fifty feet long ran parallel to one another from the front of the shop to the back, with interruptions here and there caused by magazine racks, display cases, separate shelves, partitions, and one or two small rooms that intruded into the general space. Books and magazines were laid on bowed shelves that ran almost to the ceiling with extras piled on the floor. The stacks were dim, illumination being provided by naked light bulbs spaced with apparent randomness, an effect made more atmospheric by the occasional burned-out bulb. The ambiance was of shadows, dust, and the heady scent of old books that have been on the shelf for years, probably decades.

I took pleasure in rambling through the aisles and browsing even though I only bought an old copy of *Life* magazine. One doesn't have to buy anything to find oneself uplifted by being inside such a shop. That in itself is part of the pleasure of being a series book collector. The internet and "book search engines" have, admittedly, made a lot of searches faster and more successful and maybe even cheaper, but there is something horribly, appallingly lost—as when Walmarts are brutally spread over the site of a mom and pop store where three generations of family-owners had served a deep-rooted neighborhood. Amos Grice's little store in *The Mystery of Cabin Island* is one of the most compelling series book images in my list of favorites, and the description of the used bookstore in Marshal South's novel, *Robbery Range,* is perhaps the finest I've run across in popular literature. The worthy editor of this incomparable fanzine reproduced that scene in the previous issue.

YET TO COME

I suspect that the piquant experience of browsing a used bookstore will become as uncommon as sitting at the counter in a soda fountain. In the previous issue of this most excellent magazine, the editor printed a letter I had written about visiting a bookshop whose owner refused to let me in, saying he only did internet sales now. Horribly, an even worse experience followed a few months later.

I drove up to a small California town for a wedding. Having a few free hours in the afternoon, I checked the Yellow Pages under BOOKS—USED and located one entry that I will call Books Up the Wazoo. I thought, *Excellent. A small town off the beaten track with a used bookstore—a likely spot to make a good find.* My first warning that not all would be well came when I called the number in the book.

A recorded male voice, well-modulated and even more mellow than that of an announcer for a classical music FM radio station, and perhaps even computer enhanced, said, "Thank you for calling Books Up the Wazoo. We only do business via the internet. (Information provided) We do not take any telephone orders. Please do not leave a message. Do not send us any cash, checks, or faxes. We will return any checks sent to us. Thank you again for your call and have a great day."

Still, the address in the telephone book was only a couple of blocks from my hotel, so I went anyway. On one side of the road were farmlands that stretched without a break to the distant foothills. On the other was an industrial park. I pulled into the driveway at the right address and saw a cement building that extended about a hundred yards. The only signage showed the street number. On various doors were suite numbers and tiny letters to inform the postal worker and maybe persistent passersby what businesses were located there.

I cruised the narrow parking lot slowly, looking for a door that said Books Up the Wazoo, but found nothing. Just as I was turning around to leave, I saw two empty parking places. On the cement tirestops were the words Books Up the Wazoo. I parked in one, debarked, and approached the closest suite. A double glass door featured two lines of letters. One microscopic line said Books Up the Wazoo and underneath that, in large capital letters, were the words NO RETAIL.

Still not having learned my lesson, I went in and found myself in a sparkling clean foyer with highly reflective linoleum flooring. There was no one in evidence, but a disembodied voice said, "May I help you?"

Following the voice, I crossed the floor and entered a small office in which a youngish fellow sat at a desk. He had sandy blond hair, glasses, and a friendly smile. On one side of him was a computer. There were a few papers strewn on the

counter in front of him. A poster or two were on the wall, including a map of the continental United States broken into shipping zones.

"Hi," I said disarmingly. "I saw your ad in the Yellow Pages and came by. I'm looking for a book."

"Naw," he said with a shake of his head. "We only do business by the internet."

"You don't have any books I can look at?"

"Naw. All we have is a big warehouse. Even I have to look up the internet to see what we've got."

"I'm only looking for one book. It's *The Midnight Rally*, by Eric Speed, in the Wynn and Lonny Racing series." His fingers flew over the keyboard.

"Nope," he said. "I don't have it. Bookfinder.com doesn't have it. Sorry."

"Um, well, okay, thanks for checking."

"No problem."

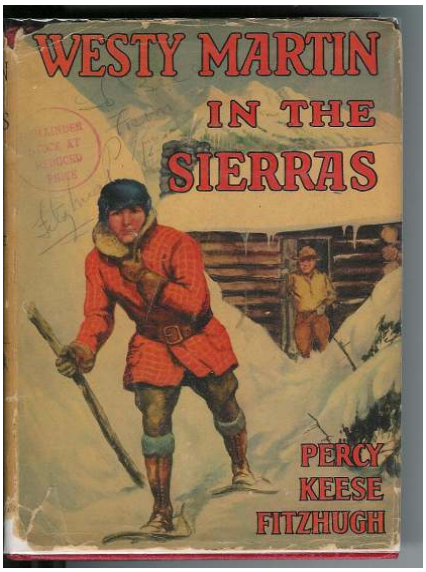
I slunk out of the office. As I passed back into the foyer, two young women peered out of another office, both nattily dressed in sheath dresses like executive secretaries. Their wide-open eyes followed me as I crossed the sparkling linoleum floor, past the artificial plant in the plastic pot, to the exit. I could imagine them saying to one another after I'd left, "That Amish relic actually came in here looking for a book. He should get a life."

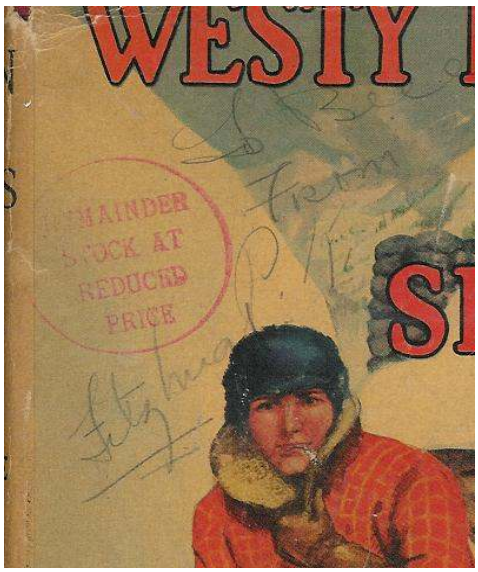
So I got back into my buckboard, chucked the reins, and said, "Geeyup, Nellie." My old gray mare clip-clopped out of the parking lot. I knew I could nod off on my way home. Nellie knew the way by herself.

Series books ended more than a generation ago, but the books will have a second demise when their collectors get to the point where "they can't take their books with 'em" and the kids today, raised in what McFarlane accurately called "a visual age," an age of movies, DVDs, computers, video games, and television with more channels than the seven black and whites I grew up with, won't know what to make of the troves their elders will bequeath to them.

Where will my own collection, or yours, be in two or three generations? Garage sales, library collections, used bookstores, a recycling bin? I have a copy of *Westy Martin in the Sierras* signed by Percy Keese Fitzhugh. It came through a used

bookstore. On the front, written in fading pencil are the words, “To Bill from P. K. Fitzhugh.” The book is in pretty good condition, especially for a volume that was published in 1931. I suspect that young “Bill” excitedly got his new book signed when the author appeared in his hometown, and then preserved it all his life. More than sixty years later, when he died his children or grandchildren gave it away. Now it is mine and particularly valued for its surmised history. Whoever Bill was, I salute him. But what will my own children do with this treasure?





The rewards of my searches over the past fifteen years are now all in one room jammed with bookshelves more crowded than a commuter train at rush hour in Japan. Some are remarkable finds, others are gifts from family and friends, most are ordinary books that gradually came together to form complete sets. I imagine that forty years from now they will inspire as much interest as a set of the 1971 Encyclopedia Britannica does today. The old classics are just not popular anymore—they’re not even known. Though I am acquainted with a few teenagers who like these books, these perceptive young people are, of course, the exception. The second demise of series books is sure and certain.

What is the brightest future we can imagine for our series books? Perhaps university libraries where only scholars will have access to them. There’s a place for that, but nothing can replace the youth who curls up on a sofa on a rainy day to read Ken Holt’s *The Clue of the Phantom Car* for pure pleasure.

Fans may scan their books and put them into computer files. How reliable will these files be? How dependable the retrievable system? Even if they are preserved, one will be able to read them only on an electronic screen. The words may be there, but they will definitely not be a book, even if the illustrations and dust jacket artwork are scanned—which is unlikely. That stimulating experience of

holding an old volume in one's hands with its scent of dust and old paper, carrying its weight of unknown previous ownership with perhaps an inscription on the flyleaf or a fifty-year old shopping list between the pages, will be lost forever.

A depressing scenario? Well, yes. But it is the way of the things of the world. Shoe buckles, bustles, hitching posts, spittoons. Some things must give way for new things to come. They are not always improvements, but that's the way it is.

If readers will forgive me the conceit of quoting myself, I put this very sentiment intentionally into the first book of the Starman series, *Mutiny On Mars*.

> Richard put the moonbus in first gear and edged the vehicle over the ridge. Before them lay a great plain, filled with the wreckage of antiquated space ships—officially called the Field of Obsolescence, but usually called the Boneyard. There were several square miles of hulls of various colors, representing more than 150 years of history. Since there was no weather on the Moon, the condition of the oldest ships was little different from the most recent discard. Many of the ships looked undamaged, but there were also many grotesque wrecks and eerie ruins of spacecraft on the airless plain.
>
> "History," mused Richard. "Too many of these old ships were discarded only because something newer came along. There is nothing wrong with most of them—some of them are even better than what's out there now. Sometimes the eager search for what is bright and new leaves behind something that should never have been forgotten."

I will do my part for the rest of my life: I will thoroughly enjoy the books I have, and if I ever get to the point where my eyes grow dim and I can't read them myself, I hope someone will read them to me.

Recently I sold a Tom Slade book to a woman who was searching for a complete set. In our exchanges, she wrote,

> I'm working on getting the whole set, but not necessarily with dust jackets. I have some my father had when he was a boy and I just thought it might be fun to collect the rest. I don't think I told you that when my Dad had suffered several small strokes and had to go to an assisted living place for the three years before he died, one of his friends used to read to him from the Tom Slade and Roy Blakeley books and he loved it.

I wonder if such a scene is in my future, thirty or so years from now. If so… I could live with that, and be happy. After that, preserving the treasures will be up to others.

I just hope that my collection doesn't end up in a book warehouse like that run by Books Up the Wazoo. The thought that Bill's treasured, autographed volume of *Westy Martin in the Sierras* might become Item # 376229 really depresses me. If it does, though, and if my books are sold piecemeal, I can only hope that the last one to go will be the final story in The Three Investigators series: *The Mystery of the Cranky Collector*. The irony of it would provide me with a little posthumous pleasure, feeble as it might be.

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