

Visiting Other Collectors

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May 26, 2015

This article has not been published anywhere before.

It is a rewrite of an article written May 13, 2013.

1,841 words

In a recent conversation with a fellow series book collector, we commiserated that the golden age of series book collecting was probably past. Not only has it been a long time since we've made a good find "in the wild", as he put it, but finding a used bookstore with a good selection of series books is rare—not to mention finding a used bookstore at all.

Whenever I drive through small towns or cruise large cities, I stop at any used bookstore I find. More often than not, the juvenile section is comprised mostly of paperback books a quarter of an inch thick that go back maybe to the 1990s. There may be a few hardbacks, but any series books among them are usually jacketless and are the most common of a series. A scuffed copy of *Sea Gold* or *The Tower Treasure* or *The Revolt on Venus* offered for \$4.00 is more of a downer than anything else.

And there are fewer and fewer used bookstores that one can enter through a door that sounds a little bell, and where the visitor is greeted with the heady aroma of old paper, aging bookbinder's glue, and dust. If one finds a good book in a dust jacket, prices are usually pretty high, and they're often in the "classics" section apart from the Goosebumps paperbacks. Or maybe inside a glass case.

In an antique mall near where I used to live in Grants Pass, Oregon there are some Rick Brants in dust jacket offered for \$30.00 each, and they're low numbers. And they've been there for months. Which is another point: now I find books in antique malls more often than in used bookstores. Maybe the proprietors think that classifying them as "antiques" rather than "used books" makes them worthy of high prices. Or maybe by this time they actually *are* antiques! There's a sobering thought.

Well, all things come to an end, and we collectors are in an era that is winding down. We are by no means finished, but there were only a finite number of books to begin with and attrition and other forces are cutting their numbers each year. Even if a print run fifty or sixty years ago produced 20,000 volumes, there are few now to be found. And the demand is low, since most young people today are too busy with electronics, and maybe most of the baby boomers who are collectors have found most of what they want. Occasionally a new collector arises, or someone who reminisces about our favorite books in an article filled with nostalgia. And there's even the occasional young person who's introduced to our books and likes them. I've been delighted more than once to give an extra Troy Nesbit or Hal Keen or Ken Holt or Three Investigators or Connie Blair to a

twelve-year-old whose eyes grow big with wonder and gratitude. Just a couple of weeks ago I was asked to deliver a talk on series books to a middle school, and at the end offered a dozen or so books to kids as long as they *promised* to read them. And I was pleased at the number of hands that shot up! I had to use a game of chance to select the worthy recipients.

As I was reflecting on this article, it occurred to me that there is another pleasure associated with collecting besides entering an aromatic used bookstore suggestive of Amos Grice's general store in *The Mystery of Cabin Island*—and that's visiting other collectors and admiring their collections. If one could once enjoy seeing shelves of series books in a bookstore, there is a related pleasure in seeing shelves of series books in a collection. And I remembered that I have had the pleasure of doing so a good number of times in the nearly 27 years I've been a collector. Whenever I traveled on business or for pleasure, if possible I took the opportunity to visit collectors I had met or corresponded with, and ogled their collections. As I look back, I realize that I've been able to visit a good number of them.

The first fellow collector I visited was the late Hank Gravbelle, who lived not far from me in southern California. By prearrangement I called on him in the late 1990s. He had recently moved from a home to an apartment, and his collection was double shelved and still filled an entire room. I remember seeing hundreds of books in original dust jackets, and was most impressed by a complete collection of Hal Keen so jacketed. His wife avidly supported his hobby, making finds for him and occasionally giving him a volume or two as a gift.

I first visited Fred Woodworth in Tucson, Arizona, the worthy publisher of *The Mystery and Adventure Series Review*, in 2000, and breathed in the smell of his old books where they were neatly arrayed on shelves in a dim room, sharing the space with vintage printing equipment and a few cats. Bookbinder's glue and rollers were scattered across tabletops where he prints, glues, binds, trims, and otherwise makes or repairs books. Somehow the usually blistering heat of Tucson is kept outside Fred's cool workroom where his fanzines are printed, bound, and stapled. Books featuring Tom Quest, the Lone Ranger, Rick Brant, Ken Holt, *et al* range one wall.

In 2004 I visited Steve Servello in Waltham, Massachusetts, and stayed a night in his home in that suburb of Boston. As I recall, his collection began at the top of a stairwell, descended into the guest room, wound around a corner, and kept going into a basement: shelf after shelf of series and other collectible books in hardback and paperwork. I remember the Tarzan and Pellucidar series in one corner.

On the same trip I visited Jim Towey in West Granby, Connecticut, whose collection was housed in the lower reaches of his sprawling home. One room in particular was devoted to series books, every wall taken up with shelves of dust jacketed volumes, many of them scarce. More shelves lined corridors, and there was a workroom with even more books, including those he was working on for his reprints or restoration of dust jackets.

On my way home on that same trip, I visited Jon Cooper near Knoxville, Tennessee. His collection is comparatively small but select. Only the best series. Jon has the distinction of having traded an extra copy of *Danger Below!* for a copy of *The Magic Talisman* to complete his Rick Brant collection.

On a business trip in 2007 I spent an afternoon with George Beatty near Philadelphia. Like Steve, George's collection was in the lower parts of his home, with shelves that wrapped around corridors, filled odd corners, and covered high walls. His workstation is above, however, where, like Jim, he repairs and recreates dust jackets. He also binds books, painstakingly putting together photocopies of ultra-scarce volumes to resemble the originals.

Driving north from the Beatty home I eventually came to western New York and had the joy of meeting and staying with Mark and Debbie Gibbons. Their guest room is rife with series books, as are other rooms in their home. There were series there I had never heard of but have since collected, such as Morgan Bay and the excellent Cherokee/Lookout Club series.

That same year I was in Wisconsin, and had the joy of staying a night with Steve and Barbara Romberger in Fond du lac. It was Steve who introduced the heretofore unknown Ted Wilford books to the series book world a few years ago. Steve and Barbara took me to maybe the largest repository of used books in the country—certainly *one* of the largest—at a farm not far from their home. Several entire large buildings are taken up with hundreds of thousands of used books. There are so many that it is very hard to make a find! Steve, however, over the years has made one incredible find after another, not only at this farm but in antique malls and book drives. His own collection, like Jon Cooper's, is relatively small but well chosen.

I visited Mark McSherry on his dairy farm in southern Wisconsin on the same trip. It was a terrific joy to get the tour of the farm, with a peacock named Poindexter butting me now and then as I lifted my eyes to see the top of the silo or nodded my head at the tractors. After the tour we went into Mark's living quarters where shelves of series books and science fiction classics fill his living room, workroom, and the room at the back.

James and Kim Keeline live in San Diego, just a hundred miles from where I used to live. One day in 2005 I took a half dozen people I had just gone camping with to visit them. Car trouble made us three hours late, so we missed the lunch that Kim had prepared for us. We showered at a truck stop and then arrived, late but clean. In his dining room James has several pieces of original artwork from series book covers on display, mostly Tom Swift Jr. Down the hall and to the right is an entire room dedicated to Stratemeyer books and memorabilia, beautifully arranged and categorized.

Most recently, in the spring of 2013, I visited Valerie and Evan Kramer in Port Orford, a small town on the coast of Oregon fifty or so miles north of the California border. I moved to southern Oregon in late 2012, and made a point of visiting the Kramers without too much delay. Valerie's books fill living quarters of the house and more: hallways are

narrowed by bookshelves, there is a back room whose walls consist mostly of laden bookshelves, one living room wall is filled with books, and there are bookshelves in nooks and under windows. Finally, there is the library itself, at one end of the home. An entire room is not only lined with books, but contains tall bookshelves standing back to back in the center, making narrow passageways like the stacks in a university library. Evan assured me that Valerie has read nearly every book in the house. Valerie's encyclopedic knowledge of what she has read and her ability to recall it are astonishing.

As I left, Evan said he collected coins. He took out a silver dollar from his pocket and said, "I'll bet you haven't seen one of these in a while." I grinned and pulled another silver dollar from my own pocket.

These are the collectors I remember visiting. If I have forgotten someone, please forgive me. I hope to visit others before too long. And any fellow collector is always welcome to visit me. For the next few years I'll be living in Salem, Illinois. At last I have room for all my books. And series books on their shelves set the tone for the décor of the living room. And den. And hallway. And guest room.

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