

An Overview of the Biff Brewster Series

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Read November 22 – December 13, 2003

4,965 words total

Comments posted on the Ken Holt/Biff Brewster Message Board in December 2003

Posts 1217 and 1222

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kenholt/>

Part I: General Comments

1,333 words

The Biff Brewster series consists of thirteen books published between 1960 and 1965. A number of others have published comments on this series, and I do not plan to duplicate their observations or give the impression that I'm providing much new information. My first awareness of the Biff Brewster series was the comprehensive article by Franklin Rosemont in the "Mystery and Adventure Series Review" (number 18, Spring 1987). Later I also read Mark Johnson's reviews of the first two books in the series; these can be found on Mark's web site. Alex Van Zelfden and Steve Servello have both recommended this series to me, and in about 1999 Alex provided me with reading copies of the first three stories. I read them at the time but did not pursue a search for the rest.

Later, to help fans of the series, I ordered a copy of the American Web Books reprint of *Caribbean Pearls*. Then, in the fall of 2003, I ran across copies of *Arabian Stallion* and *Alpine Pass*, almost without looking. Serendipitously finding myself in possession of six of the thirteen books including the most scarce ones, I shrugged and decided to find the rest of the books and then read them all straight through. This post is the first of two that I will make as a result of that marathon read-through. In the second post, I will give brief reactions to and evaluations of the series, dedicating a paragraph to each of the books and awarding each a number on the "one to ten" scale.

Rosemont's article said that the Biffs are not a product of the Stratemeyer Syndicate. An editor at Grosset & Dunlap created the series and then found writers to bring it to life. The series appeared at the time the Syndicate was rewriting and shortening its original texts. Fitting into that pattern, the Biffs hover at around 170-175 pages. One curious aspect of the Biffs is the absence of the word "The" at the beginning of the titles. *Brazilian Gold Mine Mystery* and *Egyptian Scarab Mystery* and the other titles sound awkward. No other series has this inexplicable characteristic.

The artwork in the series, both covers and internal illustrations, is very well done. Frontispieces and other black and white depictions add a lot to the atmosphere of each tale. I would have preferred that some of the internals be placed two or three pages back from where they occur, since they reveal what happens in the story before the reader actually gets to the text.

As others have reported, the Biff Brewsters have characteristics of a few other series. Biff world-hops for his adventures, just as Rick Brant and Scotty did in about half their books. However, I think the Biffs are most like the Don Sturdy series that appeared roughly thirty years before. Each one of the Biffs has a good sense of place; good

research has been done for each geographical locale, including terrain, culture, and language. I found it helpful to have maps handy for some of the books, especially *Ambush in India*, *Caribbean Pearls*, *Tibetan Caravan*, and *British Spy Ring*. I did the same when I read the Don Sturdys.

Considering that the books appeared during the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., it is pretty impressive that each book features a native “sidekick” for Biff, and that the boys become friends quickly. In the series, Biff makes friends with a Brazilian, Chinese, Hawaiian, Mexican, African, Eskimo, Indian, Dutchman, Egyptian, Nepalese, Britisher, Arabian Muslim, a Swiss, and an American. There are a lot of mutual respect and general boyhood camaraderie across cultural lines. The last line of *African Ivory Mystery* makes explicit one of the main messages in the Biff Brewster series: “You can find wonderful people no matter where you go.”

For all that, there is a whiff of bias in favor of the western world and its culture. Although the cultures and the sidekicks are always presented favorably and respectfully, many of the sidekicks (Tish in Alaska is an exception) all want to be “like a western boy”—one or two of them desperately so. Either that or they have been schooled in the western world and have returned home with western ideas. Of course, there also has to be a reason why the boy speaks English.

Thirteen books in five years is a pretty rapid production schedule, maybe partly explainable by having several different authors. There are probably four, three of whom have been identified: Edward W. Pastore, Peter Harkins, Walter Gibson, and the unknown writer of the second and third books. (It is possible that two different people wrote the second and third books, but without doing a careful analysis I would guess not—there is too much similarity between them.)

This writer remains unidentified. Pastore is very clearly not a very skilled writer and the books in which he had a hand are decidedly inferior. This was obviously known to the powers behind the books since Gibson rewrote two of the volumes Pastore wrote. The two Pastore wrote alone are mediocre at best. Gibson was good, but in my opinion Harkins and the unknown author were the best.

In spite of the different authorship, there is pretty good internal consistency throughout the series with characterization, names, and knowledge of previous volumes. This is not usually the case when several different authors are behind the books in a series. Variations between the authors are mostly minor. Harkins puts more humor in the dialogue than the other authors. The major authors of the series, obviously, are Harkins and Gibson, and their writing styles are different but equally entertaining.

Harkins, of course, was co-author with Hal Goodwin of the first three Rick Brants, and Gibson wrote “The Shadow” and many other pulp stories. In 1964, when Sam Epstein grew tired of writing the Ken Holts, he asked Peter Harkins to take the series over. Peter agreed to do so, but Grosset & Dunlap dropped the series instead. One can only imagine how Ken Holt would have developed under Harkins’ skilled hand.

The Biff Brewsters have a strong sense of the era in which they were written. In *Chinese Ring*, which came out in 1960, Viet Nam is a single country, a few years before the division of the country and the war that would embroil the U.S. The presentation of Red China and Russia is very 1960s. The series is definitely set in the Cold War era, since more than once the bad guys turn out to be Communists, and Biff's inevitable triumphs in these cases are really triumphs of the "free world" over the "Commies."

Other signs of the times are nostalgically entertaining today. For example, a full college education at MIT or Cal Tech cost about \$5,000 (page 73, *Hawaiian Sea Hunt*). This line in *Hawaiian Sea Hunt* (page 111) threw me back into another era: "The rain hit the deck in drops as big as half-dollars." Whatever happened to half-dollars, anyway?

I agree with Mark Johnson, who commented that there are a few improbables in the plots, but they are minor in the overall enjoyment of the series. Mark reviewed only the first two books, but the occurrence of improbable events remains throughout the series. *British Spy Ring* is the worst of the lot for this phenomenon. Like the "convenient coincidence," such writing didn't appear in a Rick or a Ken.

Another curiosity: there is a chapter called "The Lost City" in *Ambush in India*, and another called "Danger Below!" (even including the exclamation mark) in *Mexican Treasure*.

My impression overall? It is not among the great series, but it is a very good series. One or two books are pretty poor, several are very fine, and one is absolutely topnotch. I am glad that I have the books on my shelf. In a few years I will probably read them again. Thanks to Alex and Steve for the recommendation. I'm glad I finally followed up.

Part II: Brief Reviews of the Books

NOTE: The commentary that follows is kept pretty general so that there will be no major spoilers, although some plot elements are mentioned.
3,594 words

1. *Brazilian Gold Mine Mystery* 1960 [Edward W. Pastore & Walter Gibson]

In this book, Biff helps his father locate an elusive gold mine in Brazil while being pursued by greedy enemies. (Someone observed that the location of the mine actually turns out to be in Venezuela!) Overall, it is an engaging story and a worthy book to launch a new series. Series books that are placed in jungle settings have a certain similarity to them just because the terrain is limited. In most jungle stories, the requisite cliffhangers are predictable: snakes, carnivores, insects, quicksand, impassible waterfalls, hostile natives, losing the trail, etc., etc. I have not read any of the Bombas, but have heard that this is so in that series. It surely is the case, for example, in Hal Keen's *Kidnapped in the Jungle* and *The Lost Mine of the Amazon*, Tom Swift Jr.'s *Electronic Cycloplane*, original Tom Swift's *Electric Rifle*, Marshal South's *Curse of the Sightless Fish*, Tom Quest's *The Telltale Scar*, and several Don Sturdys. However, *Gold Mine Mystery* makes the most of the opportunity, probably because the writer did his research, and the tale is convincing and exciting. That makes this story, and all of the Biffs, more realistic than other series of the same genre. This book introduces a trademark of the series: Biff's friendship with a local boy—in this case, the Brazilian lad Kamuka. Biff is pretty independent for his age, yet his father is still present, a strong but not

overwhelming figure. He is a dad any kid could look up to. The ending of *Gold Mine* includes a real twist.

Overall rating, 8.

2. *Mystery of the Chinese Ring* 1960 [author unknown]

In this book, Biff, with his Chinese companion Chuba, crosses from Burma into Red China to look for Biff's uncle Charlie who has disappeared. Biff was to spend a few weeks with Charlie in summer. Charlie had flown into China on a sensitive mission and hadn't returned. It is a pity that the author of this story is not known. *Chinese Ring* is well written, exciting, and has a good sense of danger and tension. The scene when Biff escapes from his three Chinese captors in the Rangoon airport is beautifully crafted. Another excellent scene is the one where Biff and Chuba cross the border from Burma into China. One flaw, or at least a question: a point is made that a certain Chinese character is roughly equivalent to our letter "K"; I don't think that Chinese works that way. Chinese characters do not stand for sounds but rather words or concepts. As in all the Biffs, there is no place where racism can get a foothold—Biff and his father bow to their Chinese friend in the States, and Uncle Charlie bows to the Ancient One toward the end of the book. Chuba is a well-drawn character. The narrative is engaging; there is good use of local color in descriptions of trees unique to China and the local food. Sadly, the ring from which the book takes its title is snatched by a bad guy and never regained—unless I missed that part of the story.

Overall rating, 9.

3. *Hawaiian Sea Hunt Mystery* 1960 [author unknown]

In this book, Biff looks for the sunken wreck of a ship off the south coast of Hawaii. The wreck contains information about the location of some valuable ore sought by Biff's father Tom. Again, it is a pity that the author of this story is not known. Biff quickly becomes friends with Likake, and their loyalty to each other during their adventure is strong and enjoyable. Biff's father's attitude toward his son is admirable. On page 125, he says, "Don't think I'm not worried. I am. But I do trust Biff. He's been up against many a tough situation and has always come through. He will this time, too." There is plenty of evidence in this and other books when Biff's father treats him with respect. As in all the Biffs, the writer's research creates a strong sense of place. He describes places I know and have visited, and does it well. This book was published when Hawaii had been a state for only about a year. I kind of think of it as a companion to the Hardy Boys' *Mystery at Devil's Paw*, set in Alaska when it had just been made a state. It is probably not a surprise that these two books were written when they were. I did notice a couple of small errors: On page 110, Hilo is described as "a city on the west side of the Big Island." However, it's on the east side. Also on page 98, "A slight sliver of a new moon could just be seen rising in the east." New moons are only seen in the west, aren't they? Now some might counter that the writer who had the entire planet Earth rotating in the wrong direction (*Descent Into Europa*, pages 35-36) shouldn't be picking nits in other people's writing. Umm, so I'll stop here.

Overall rating, 9.

4. *Mystery of the Mexican Treasure* 1961 [Walter Gibson]

In this book, Biff helps his father examine an ancient Aztec mine in a rural Mexican town where it is suspected that the Aztecs hid much of their gold so Cortez wouldn't rip it all off. It is another good story, although not quite up to the first three. Biff's friend is Miguel, who prefers to be called Mike. The author's use of Spanish is convincing and the bit about the note torn into pieces and then assembled was very well done. There are some good red herrings. I anticipated the twist ending, however, very early in the book, so the buildup of tension to the great revelation at the end fell a little flat for me. A juvenile reader might not have seen it so easily. The windup in the last chapter was slightly reminiscent of those irritating scenes in the Hardy Boys where all the bad guys take turns spouting off who did what in the mystery, each almost interrupting the others in his haste to confess and explain. Nevertheless, this is a fine entry in the list of series book stories set in Mexico, such as the Hardy Boys' *Mark on the Door*, Ken Holt's *Green Flame* and *Plumed Serpent*, Roger Baxter's *Riddle of the Hidden Pesos*, Tom Quest's *The Secret of the Lost Mesa*, Tom Swift Jr.'s *Electronic Retroscope*, Mercer Boys' *On a Treasure Hunt*, and a couple of the Marshal South novels.

Overall rating, 7.5.

5. *African Ivory Mystery* 1961 [Edward W. Pastore]

In this book, as they go on a safari Biff and his Uncle Warren work for Interpol to track down poachers of ivory. Uncle Warren Becker is apparently Biff's mother's brother, where Uncle Charlie is his father's brother. I began this book anticipating that the writing would be poor, considering Pastore's reputation as a mediocre (at best) writer. Gibson rewrote two Biffs (*Brazilian Gold Mine* and *Egyptian Scarab*) that Pastore had initiated. However, I was pleasantly surprised—the story is not bad at all. It keeps you guessing right to the last chapter who is a good guy and who is a bad guy. The ending resolves very well. There are some great descriptive phrases. Sensitivity to racial concerns is present, as usual—the native crew on the safari are referred to as “boys,” but in the next sentence (page 35) it is made clear that this is a customary title for their work, and the crew is immediately referred to as “men” who serve as “drivers, cooks, waiters, skimmers, porters, and tent servants.” Biff's companion is the boy Monda, who joins the safari partway through the adventure. It is refreshing to see that Biff decides he doesn't want to shoot any big game animals—a statement made repeatedly (pages 38, 45, and 84-85) while he is on safari with his uncle. This is quite a contrast to Don Sturdy, Tom Swift (Sr.), and other series book heroes of an earlier era who blow away many creatures on four legs for sport. Biff's attitude is all the more commendable since it was apparently not common in the 1960s; some of the Boys' Life magazines I own from that era contain ads that urge young teenage boys to ask for .22 rifles for Christmas so they can go out and shoot squirrels.

Overall rating, 8.

6. *Alaska Ghost Glacier Mystery* 1961 [Peter Harkins]

In this book, Biff helps his father find a deposit of ore hidden inside a glacier while unknown enemies try to sabotage their project. They are following the cryptic notes sent to the U. S. government by a late eccentric glacier-dweller, Lank Leominister. Originally considered a crank, his information was later proven to be accurate. This tale is the first Biff entry by the Rick Brant co-author, and it is magnificently written. The sense of danger and tension is intense and believable. Here, attacks and threats are many but are all connected. The character of Shake Lakum, the bush pilot, is well-drawn; through him Biff meets his Eskimo friend Tish. The description of the mine inside a glacier is exciting, and the notion of taking hot showers inside a huge chunk of ice is certainly unique. It is a gripping story. Published in 1961, like the Hardy Boys' *Mystery at Devil's Paw* it is a story set in Alaska shortly after it had become a state. There was probably a lot of interest in the new states. Tish and Biff, as one has come to expect, become good friends quickly. However, in this volume, there are points of difference. Tish gives credence to the existence of ghosts and spirits and legends, while Biff hesitates. Tish berates him for being a "city dweller" who depends too much on "logical explanations." Moreover, uncharacteristically, with Tish, Biff is ready to run and hide under his bed when the two boys witness an apparent ghostly manifestation. This book leaves one matter unresolved: what was it that frightened Aniak to the point of shock, and what did Biff see at the end of the book? It had to have been the same phenomenon. The implication is that maybe it was the frozen body of Lank Leominister, but that was not made clear enough to me. I was left with a slight feeling of irresolution, but I conclude that it's because I was dense and not so much a flaw in the book. Overall it was a thrilling story. Also it is rare, but not unique, in including human death in the tale when the bad guys buy a one-way ticket to eternity. Overall rating, 9.5.

7. *Mystery of the Ambush in India* 1962 [Walter Gibson]

In this book, Biff is entrusted with an enormous ruby that had been taken from a lama so that he may return it. Biff's father is apparently being held—comfortably, but still held—until the ruby is delivered. While pursued by enemies and accompanied by friends, Biff has to take the ruby across the countryside to the secret city where the lama dwells. I found having a map helpful to track their journey. Again, this tale has a terrifically effective sense of place through descriptions of clothing, culture, and the use of native words. It is good to see Kamuka and Likake back, and later Mike and Chuba, and a new lad named Chandra appears. There is an amazingly prescient anticipation of laser sights in the shooting of the tiger at night, pages 83-84, when Barma Shah uses a flashlight and a "narrowed beam" to serve as the sight for his high-powered rifle. It is a rip-roaring story. There are some great scenes, especially when the boys escape their pursuers by "pool diving" from a height. The twist at the end was very well done—completely unexpected but plausible. The final triumph was a bit of a *deus ex machina*, but tolerable. Overall rating, 8.5.

8. *Mystery of the Caribbean Pearls* 1962 [Edward W. Pastore]

In this book, Biff and his Uncle Charlie outmaneuver thieves who are trying to jump the claim of one of Charlie's friends who has found a productive bed of pearls in the Caribbean. Biff's companion is Derek Zook, the son of the man who had made the claim. Derek's father has disappeared, and Uncle Charlie and the lads have to protect the claim while looking for Derek's father. The quality of writing takes a dive in this book. Derek and Biff are described as being as identical as twins. I don't care too much for the "exchange of identities" gambit, so right from the start, for me there was a huge dose of implausibility. Some of the dialogue is contrived or even ridiculous, and several ploys in the plot are asinine. Often Biff and his Uncle Charlie seem like doofuses. Biff's threat to use "magic" against Crunch, the huge but stupid Carib Indian, while he bounces around inside the prison is imbecilic. One must frequently wince and groan throughout the reading, although in spite of numerous absurdities the plot has a good foundation. I think it is basically an unskilled writer messing up a decent story idea. It could have been a great book! The setting—Curaçao—is a terrific place for a story. Maps of Curaçao and Martinique were invaluable in following the action—also in finding a minor error. On page 119, Derek says the spot in the ocean they're looking for is "almost directly west of the town of Le François." A cursory check of the map shows that he must mean "east" of the town, since five miles west puts them in the middle of the island. Crunch is a good name for the giant Carib Indian, though he is not presented in a very attractive light. Idiotically, Crunch holds the answer to Derek's search for his father for FIVE DAYS before passing on the key information. His explanation? "You too busy finding pearls. Crunch no want to bother you." Aargh! Groan! As in *Alaska Ghost Glacier Mystery*, the bad guys die at the end of the story. Overall rating, 5.

9. *Egyptian Scarab Mystery* 1963 [Edward W. Pastore & Walter Gibson]

In this book, Biff helps his father search for an ancient tomb along the Nile in the Valley of Ghosts before it is to be flooded by a dam. They are hounded by unknown persons who seek to prevent them from succeeding. The story never really gels. The adventures, dangers, and escapes are rather disjointed and in more than one instance stretch plausibility beyond the point of acceptability. Biff's sidekick in this story is Chandra from *Ambush in India*. Kamuka also reappears. As I read the story, it seemed always to be leading on to some sort of climactic event that never really occurs. "Native superstition" is relied on too much. The ultimate bad guy is identifiable almost from the first time he's mentioned, although there are some surprises at the dénouement. There are a few descriptions that are skillfully depicted, such as the account of the flooding of the valley, but overall this story is rather two-dimensional and the characters cut too much out of cardboard. It is unusual that the bad guys escape justice. I suspect that Pastore's initial work remained too much in evidence when Gibson set out to ameliorate the story. Overall rating, 6.5.

10. *Mystery of the Tibetan Caravan* 1963 [Peter Harkins]

In this book, Biff looks for his father who has disappeared with a companion in Communist-controlled Tibet on a search for a Golden Buddha. The item is sacred to the

Dalai Lama and all Tibetan Buddhists, who want to bring the artifact out of Tibet into the free world so that the Chinese Communists cannot appropriate it and misuse it to sway the Tibetan people. Biff's sidekick is the Nepalese boy Tazling Norkay, called Taz. (One wonders if Tazling Norkay is an adaptation of the name Tenzing Norgay, the Sherpa who accompanied Edmund Hillary to the summit of Everest in 1953. If so, it's a nice touch.) Taz's father is Biff's father's companion. It is refreshing to get back to writing by Peter Harkins, and we may look forward to the remaining books in this series—three in a row by Harkins and the last by Gibson. This story brings back Shake Lakum, the pilot in the previous book that Harkins wrote, *Alaska Ghost Glacier Mystery*. The descriptions add much to the tale as Biff and Taz make their way through the mountain passes in the high elevations of Nepal and Tibet. The banter Harkins puts into the story is a new touch in the series. It is welcome, but at this late entry in the series it changes the character of Biff slightly, and is therefore a teeny bit of a jar. This is a story with a lot of tension and sufficient plausibility to make for an exciting tale. If Peter Harkins never visited Tibet, he sure did his research on the customs, foods, geography, and politics before stirring it all up into a humdinger of a story!

Overall rating, 9.5.

11. *British Spy Ring Mystery* 1964 [Peter Harkins]

In this book, Biff sets out with his friend Peter to make a bicycle journey through the south of England. The story starts off rather rakishly and then gradually becomes increasingly intricate. A series of unusual and inexplicable adventures happen to the boys as they travel. The premise is one of the most incredible that one can imagine, and the explanation that finally comes made me gasp at its utter implausibility. For all that, the story is engaging. The countryside and weather of England are described effectively. The tale has hints of a Ken Holt mystery and the flavor of an old English whodunit. It resolves in a dénouement that comes together rather well. Then, just when it seems that everything is almost wrapped up, a secondary mystery crops up that needs resolution. That development is unusual and welcome in a series book. Although the identity of one of the bad guys is immediately evident, there are a number of surprises that emerge as the plot unfolds. I was all ready to give this book a high mark until I got to the last chapter. Fittingly called "Comedy of Terrors," the action suddenly devolves into slapstick. Now throughout the story the boys joke with one another, and much of the humor is clever and enjoyable, but the clandestine entry of Biff and his friend Peter onto the great moor where they locate the gang in a gothic stone mansion is no place for farcical jokes when their lives are in danger. It was an absurdly disappointing ending to an otherwise fine story. Had the story finished with serious tension, like Ken Holt's *The Secret of Hangman's Inn*, this tale would have been among the top in any series.

Overall rating, 7.5.

12. *Mystery of the Arabian Stallion* 1964 [Peter Harkins]

In this book, Biff and his friend Ahmed track down Ahmed's horse that had been given to him by the King of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, as a reward. The horse had apparently been stolen. The search for the horse takes place while Biff's father is in Saudi Arabia helping

an oil company solve the puzzle about dropping pressure in its oil wells. This forty-year-old book presents, apparently accurately but without commentary, the rigidity and intolerance that exists in so much of the Muslim nations that is more widely known today. Harkins has done his research well again. The culture of Muslim Arabs is described well, and the use of Arabic adds a lot of flavor to the story. The mystery is well crafted and unfolds with drama and excitement. The settings move from the oil field to an empty desert in the morning, to an abandoned village, to a sheik's tent with its lavish hospitality, to a heavily populated town, to the King's palace, to the waterfront. The climax is exciting and believable. This is an excellent story—in my opinion, the best of the lot, and a credit to any series book collection. Overall rating, 10.

13. *Mystery of the Alpine Pass* 1965 [Walter Gibson]

In this book, Biff and his Uncle Charlie are in Switzerland where Charlie is involved in learning about funicular railways for possible adaptation in the United States. Early in the book Biff is mistaken for Tim Larkin, a young chess master, whom he and Charlie meet later. Tim is on the lam from his notoriety while waiting for a major chess tournament that is scheduled in a few days. Biff and Charlie decide to let the public continue to think that Biff is Tim in order to let Tim have a normal life before the tournament begins. The misidentification, however, brings about a series of puzzling events when mysterious people follow Biff and strange occurrences take place. As the mystery unfolds, Biff makes friends with a Swiss boy named Junius, who plays a major part in the latter half of the book. As usual in the Biff Brewster series, local color is well researched and depicted. Skiing, architecture, terrain, watchmaking, and merrymaking are all part of the atmosphere that is carried off beautifully. The situation becomes increasingly complex and sinister until the resolution, which involves a nighttime balloon ride over the Alps. The ride is beautifully described, but the escape is an unconvincing *deus ex machine*. Overall rating, 8.5.