

Discovering Enid Blyton in Hay-on-Wye

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I don't remember when I first heard about Hay-on-Wye, but it'd been mentioned to me by several people over the years in almost reverential tones as being *the* place for used books. Trouble is, for a California boy, this little town on the border of Wales and England was a v-e-r-y long way away. "Hay-on-Wye—it has the *world's largest used bookstore!*" I had been told. Of course, I'd been in huge used bookstores before—the cavernous Acres of Books in Long Beach, California, and many-roomed Powell's in Portland, Oregon. Not quite as large as these, the local Book Baron in Anaheim and Cliff's Books in Glendale are noted for having about a couple hundred yards of corridors lined with ceiling-high bookshelves.

But Hay-on-Wye! I pictured an establishment maybe several centuries old with so many narrow aisles that one would need a map just to traverse the interior, with winding wooden stairways to multiple upper floors, unforeseen nooks and alcoves, and stashes of books forgotten since the time of Charles Dickens.

The reality was different from the dream, as is often the case. In May 2006 my wife and I traveled in the United Kingdom on a vacation anticipated for ten years and finally realized. Naturally I made it a priority to go to Hay-on-Wye. After a stay at a bed and breakfast in Llandrindod Wells in central Wales, we drove through picturesque pastoral countryside with sheep on one side of the road and dark forest on the other, then past stone farmhouses set in meadows, and finally approached Hay-on-Wye.

At the city limits a sign read, "Hay-on-Wye, The Town of Books". I smiled broadly with appreciation and anticipation. After parking, it didn't take long to realize that there is no used bookstore the size of an airport terminal in Hay-on-Wye. Instead, there are about three dozen normal-sized bookstores located throughout the town. At any of them one can obtain a map of where all are located and the kinds of books they offer. Only a few offered children's books, and only one or two specialized in the genre. Undaunted, and accepting the facts for what they were, I set out while—or perhaps, considering my location, I should say "whilst"—my wife pursued her own interests.

No doubt most of us know the invigorating experience of browsing used bookstores, so I won't dwell on that. I'll just say that it was quite fun to have so many bookstores so close together, and recount what I found. The best shop was "Rose's Books", which specialized in children's books. Therein I found about eight British Ken Holts in dust jackets, none in particularly good shape. I passed them by. Nowhere else did I find any collectible series books that I could recognize.

However, in Rose's I found several shelves of books by Enid Blyton, a noted English author of children's books. Ian Regan, an English correspondent, friend, and fellow series book collector, had previously recommended Blyton books to me with gusto. I'd never seen any in the States, so I took care to examine the offerings in Rose's. Just the fact that there were probably well over a hundred books for sale was a testimony to the author's popularity.

I learned later that Enid Blyton (1897-1968) wrote an incredible 733 full-length books in forty years, or about one every 20 days if she wrote chained to her desk and never had a vacation...er,

holiday, as they say in the U.K. Her books are still exceptionally popular, especially in India, and several movies have been made of them for the enjoyment of her fans in the U.K.

As I researched later the kind of stuff she had written, I learned that she wrote a huge number of books aimed at preteens, and these did not interest me. However, she produced a few series that would interest the mainline collector of the kinds of series book the likes of us gather in. As I scoured Rose's offerings, I found a good number of books like this. I purchased six or eight of the most likely volumes—nice pieces in dust jackets for the equivalent of about \$12 each. After I read these and expressed my appreciation to Ian, he spent a month or more gathering up many of the books in the series I had started but not completed, and then shipped three boxes to me across the water, charging me nothing but his own costs. What a fine fellow!

I claim no expertise on Enid Blyton, but after reading most of the books that now reside on my shelves, I do have a few thoughts to share.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Many of the books, even across the varied series, are rather repetitive, although without being boring. This is not unexpected from an author who wrote over seven hundred books. Most of the stories feature groups of children, boys and girls aged about 9-14, who show resourcefulness as they have adventures, solve mysteries, or foil criminals. There are no books that stick with only one or two children as the protagonists; there are always at least four or five, and sometimes as many as seven. In several of the prominent series, animals play major roles with the children—usually dogs but also a monkey or parrot or even other birds, bugs, and almost anything else.

The stories are, as one would expect, set in the United Kingdom, usually England. Their time frame is the 1940s to the early 1960s. The British culture comes through beautifully, and for me this provides much of the enjoyment. Some of the charm in the books is found in the ubiquitous countryside with rambling old houses, hills and meadows, woods, fogs, and rain. The author is also very strong on islands, tunnels, and caves.

One often runs across mentions of hedges alongside the road, hayricks, and open fields. People travel by bicycles, trains, and buses—only occasionally by car. During the school term the children are at boarding schools and come together during Christmas, Easter, or summer vacations—except, as mentioned above, they are called “holidays”, or merely “the hols”.

There are large houses, vast estates, and old inns and homes with secret passages. Many adventures take place in small villages with histories that go back many generations; there is nothing like that in the United States. The exploits take place sometimes in the country and sometimes on the coast. The houses the children visit or explore are frequently centuries old, and may have massive chimneys into which one can climb and hide (naturally, when a fire is not lit). There are wide staircases, dormer windows, and attics.

There are castles and ruins, many based on real places. It is taken for granted that many buildings are made of dressed stone, and thatched roofs are not uncommon.

The children in the story are generally well-to-do but from time to time they include poorer children as temporary companions. The British are much more “class conscious” than Americans, and were especially so in the era in which the books were written, but this factor of the stories is generally not condescending. It is rather presented as a simple fact of life. I was not too bothered by it.

In the children's homes there are set mealtimes for which they are expected to be present, and in many cases bells are rung when it is bedtime. There are cooks and housemaids. There is often a gardener, which of course also means that there are gardens. These can include fruit orchards, patches of vegetables and berries, abundant flowers, and grassy paths leading to summer houses. The large houses have a ground floor, and then you go up to the first floor, second floor, etc.

The children often exult over how fun it is to bathe together, which does not mean getting into the tub or shower as a group, but rather swimming in the ocean or a river.

Dinner is the midday meal (although it is sometimes called "lunch"), and supper (though rarely mentioned) is late at night. That means that there is a meal that takes place in late afternoon. It is called "tea", though it never seems actually to have tea but always bread and butter, cakes, and jams. Sometimes tongue sandwiches (eeww!). Quite often the children enjoy bottles of ginger beer—sometimes at home but more often taken on a picnic. (Last November, in a small town in California, I ran across an obscure shop that sold hundreds of brands and flavors of soft drinks, including some that had been common fifty years ago but which I haven't seen since then. Galvanized by the opportunity, I looked for and found a bottle of ginger beer. I drank it while reading an Enid Blyton tale. It was something like strong ginger ale.)

The parents are usually presented as the type of people who have no imagination and have forgotten completely what it was like to be a child. The mothers always worry and never seem to understand what the children do. However, they do let them out to play unsupervised for hours at a time, frequently with a picnic. In almost every case the fathers are absent because of their work or are emotionally distant and uncaring; in several cases they are even pathologically angry. The fathers just want the children out of their way.

And this is a key ingredient in the theme of the Blyton books of this genre: children are a different breed from adults, and a huge measure of the books' appeal can be found in this premise. It is nowhere better put in any of her stories that I have read than this quotation from chapter 18 of *The Island of Adventure*:

"You know what grown-ups are," said Dinah. "They don't think the same way as we do. I expect when we grow up, we shall think like them—but let's hope we remember what it was like to think in the way children do, and understand the boys and girls that are growing up when we're men and women."

"You're talking like a grown-up already," said Philip in disgust. "Stop it."

"Don't talk to me like that," flared Dinah. "Just because I was talking a bit of sense."

There are the rare exceptions to the kind of grown-ups Dinah describes with such disdain. There is Bill Smugs in the Adventure series and Inspector Jenks in the Mystery series. These are both "higher ups" in the police force who love children and give them time and attention. They take the children's investigations and deductions seriously and, at the end of the tale, advocate for them to their parents and the local constabulary. By contrast, the local gendarmes are usually oafish policemen who are jealous of the work the children do and try to prevent them from carrying on their investigations.

SELECTED SERIES

There are six series in the mystery and adventure genres. I have read all or some of the books in each one.

The Secret Series

1. The Secret Island (1938)
2. The Secret of Spiggy Holes (1940)
3. The Secret Mountain (1941)
4. The Secret of Killimoooin (1943)
5. The Secret of Moon Castle (1953)

The Secret series begins with the story of Jack, Peggy, Nora, and Mike who flee from abusive living situations and set up house, Robinson Crusoe-style, on a little-known island in a lake. Most people who like the stories by Enid Blyton consider that her best story is *The Secret Island*. So far, I agree. If you get only one book by Blyton, get this one. The story is beautifully told and, although not quite believable, is certainly plausible. Reading it fills the reader with a longing to be a part of the little community of children who show courage, tenderness, resourcefulness, and real ability as they fend for themselves and express the caring that none of them had at home. It is a marvelous story. Unfortunately, after the first book I thought the series went downhill. I read the third and fifth of the later offerings but was not interested enough to seek out the others.

The Secret Seven

I have only read one of the fifteen books in this series. As I searched for Blyton books in the United States and eventually found one, I discovered that some had been republished in the States and rewritten for that setting. I got one of these by accident and didn't care for it quite as much as other Blyton titles I'd read. I found after I'd bought it that, to my chagrin, the story was set in Philadelphia rather than somewhere in England, which was disappointing. Moreover, the series is aimed at younger children than the other series I enjoyed. Although the Secret Seven series is sometimes touted as a good mystery and adventure set, I found this volume only mildly entertaining and will not search for more titles in this series. I won't even take the time and space here to list the titles.

The Barney or "R" series

1. The Rockingdown Mystery (1949)
2. The Rilloby Fair Mystery (1950)
3. The Ring O' Bells Mystery (1951)
4. The Rubadub Mystery (1952)
5. The Rat-a-Tat Mystery (1956)
6. The Ragamuffin Mystery (1959)

This series features Roger and Diana Lynton and their cousin Snubby who owns a dog named Loony. They are joined by a boy named Barney whose companion is a monkey named Miranda. Barney works in circuses and traveling shows while looking for his father. Barney's mother had died and, on her deathbed, had told him that he had a father who did not know that he had a son. The four children, the dog, and monkey get embroiled in some imaginative adventures. This series features a lot of huge houses, secret passages, and tunnels. I'd give this series a solid B.

The Famous Five

1. Five on a Treasure Island (1942)
2. Five Go Adventuring Again (1943)
3. Five Run Away Together (1944)
4. Five Go To Smuggler's Top (1945)
5. Five Go Off In A Caravan (1946)

6. Five on Kirrin Island Again (1947)
7. Five Go off to Camp (1948)
8. Five Get into Trouble (1950)
9. Five Fall into Adventure (1949)
10. Five on a Hike Together (1951)
11. Five Have A Wonderful Time (1952)
12. Five Go Down to the Sea (1953)
13. Five Go to Mystery Moor (1954)
14. Five Have Plenty of Fun (1955)
15. Five on a Secret Trail (1956)
16. Five Go to Billycock Hill (1957)
17. Five Get into a Fix (1958)
18. Five on Finniston Farm (1960)
19. Five Go to Demon's Rocks (1961)
20. Five Have a Mystery to Solve (1962)
21. Five Are Together Again (1963)

The Famous Five are Julian, Dick, and Anne who get together with their cousin George who owns a dog named Timmy. George is actually a girl named Georgina who wants everyone to think she is a boy. In our age one might easily conclude that this is an example of “gender confusion”, but real fans of Enid Blyton aver that the character of George was really a blow for women’s rights—a girl striving to break out of the stereotype of femininity expected in the mid-twentieth century U.K. All the Blyton books I read are virtually sexless. I only own and have read four of the books in this series, and would rate them as above average—maybe a B-. George gets tiresome.

The Adventure Series (for older adolescents)

1. The Island of Adventure (1944)
2. The Castle of Adventure (1946)
3. The Valley of Adventure (1947)
4. The Sea of Adventure (1948)
5. The Mountain of Adventure (1949)
6. The Ship of Adventure (1950)
7. The Circus of Adventure (1952)
8. The River of Adventure (1955)

The stars of the Adventure Series are Jack, Philip, Dinah, and Lucy-Ann and their pet Kiki the parrot. They always get involved in some kind of adventure. I’ve only read five of these and thought they were not bad. *Castle* and *Valley* were quite good. C+ or B- for these.

The Mystery series

1. Mystery of the Burnt Cottage (1943)
2. Mystery of the Disappearing Cat (1944)
3. Mystery of the Secret Room (1945)
4. Mystery of the Spiteful Letters (1946)
5. Mystery of the Missing Necklace (1947)
6. Mystery of the Hidden House (1948)
7. Mystery of the Pantomime Cat (1949)
8. Mystery of the Invisible Thief (1950)
9. Mystery of the Vanished Prince (1951)

10. Mystery of the Strange Bundle (1952)
11. Mystery of Holly Lane (1953)
12. Mystery of Tally-Ho Cottage (1954)
13. Mystery of the Missing Man (1956)
14. Mystery of the Strange Messages (1957)
15. Mystery of Banshee Towers (1961)

Ian has told me that the Mystery series is the best of the Blyton offerings, and I heartily agree. There are fifteen books in this series. In each there is a mystery to be solved in or near the small village of Peterswood. This series is more intricately written than the others—that is, it demands more of the reader as the mystery unfolds and its solution revealed. In these stories, there are no islands or secret passages, but rather a challenging mystery of the more “normal” kind.

Several fans have alleged that the Mystery series resembles the Three Investigators series. There are some similarities in that the style of mystery is in the same class, and both series feature an overweight boy who has a very sharp mind. In the Blyton series the boy named Frederick Algernon Trotteville but who is called “Fatty”—allegedly because of his initials but mostly because of his being overweight. I found this nickname distasteful. He is a boy whose parents distribute more money than affection. He also has a dog named Buster who participates in all the mysteries. The other children are two pairs of brothers and sisters: Larry and Daisy and Pip and Bets.

This series offers the best example of Blyton’s occasional personality who demonstrates “official obtuseness”; this is the character of Mr. Theophilus Goon, Peterswood’s sole police officer. He endlessly orders the children to “clear orf” whenever he finds them in his way, and quickly gains from them the appellation, “Clear Orf”. Oscar Smuff has nothing on him. He provides piquant comic relief in the mysteries, and the inevitable occasion when he gets his comeuppance is entirely satisfying. I must say, however, that the children do treat him rather cruelly, and this propensity continues through the books even as Goon’s obtuseness deepens well beyond curmudgeonliness.

Ian reports that, “General consensus seems to be that the series doesn’t actually hit its stride until the fourth or fifth title. By that time, I think Blyton had finally realised the importance of Fatty’s character, and promoted him to head of the group, as well as fleshing out both his personality and deductive skills.” I believe that Ian is right on the money. If you want to get only one series by Enid Blyton, this is it.

FINAL COMMENTS

I can’t finish this article without observing that some of the books feature fine illustrations by an artist named Stuart Tresilian. These are in the Adventure series. He did wonders with pen and ink. His illustrations are atmospheric and evocative.

Blyton books are uncommon in the U.S., though I have known one or two collectors who have located some—I don’t know whether they found the American versions or not. The books are, however, plentiful in the U.K. After I left Hay-on-Wye, I stopped at every used bookstore I saw and almost always found at least a few and sometimes many. If you’re going to Britain or have friends there who can search for you, I recommend them. I’ve been warned to watch for the insidious “updated text” versions. And don’t buy any of them in London. Don’t even look. Books I found for \$10 in other parts of England were priced at \$70-100 in the used bookstores in the City—same books, virtually same condition. Bad show!