

THE SECRET OF THE OLD BOOKS

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A Reflection on the Value and Enjoyment of Series Books

1997

Published in an earlier version of 4,480 words in Dime Novel Roundup, Vol. 67, No. 6,

December 1998;

later expanded to 4,874 words

and posted on my website on the X Bar X Boys

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There was no sign of hidden loot.

"It must be here somewhere!" declared Joe doggedly. "He wouldn't leave it out in the open. Probably it's in behind all this junk."

Frank held the match. They had to be careful, for the place was as dry as tinder and any negligence might have made the whole place a mass of flame from which there would have been no escape. ...

In a neat little hiding place ... lay a bag. It was an ordinary gunny sack, but when Joe dragged it forth he knew at once that their search had ended.

"We've found it!" he exulted.

"The Tower treasure!"

(from *The Tower Treasure*, 1927)

It is a Friday morning in autumn. I am sitting at a small round table at Sharon's Bakery in Yorba Linda, California, a bagel with cream cheese and a small decaffeinated coffee in front of me as the bright but not overwarm sunlight comes through the plate glass window and illuminates the book I am reading. Although I am fifty years old, I am exulting with Frank and Joe Hardy as they reach the climactic moment of *The Hardy Boys: The Tower Treasure*. It takes me back over forty years, when I first read it.

It was the late 1950s, when most homes had only one telephone (those that had two or more called the extras "extensions"). All telephones were black, and were dialed rather than touchtoned. Houses even in suburban California were built on large lots, and there were places for sandlot baseball. The Dodgers were newly-moved from Brooklyn. Cigarette commercials supported westerns on black and white television. In most cases, this new appliance was a bulky set with numerous vacuum tubes that took time to warm up and when you looked in the back, you could see filaments that glowed orange.

My weekly allowance was thirty-five cents. Some of my income I spent on five-cent packs of baseball cards, then saved the rest until I had a dollar. With that sum in hand, I pleaded with my mother to take me to Victor's Toys in Reseda to add another Hardy Boys mystery to my growing collection. One dollar procured for the purchaser a hardbound, beige tweed book with a colorful dust jacket. The first title in the series was

The Tower Treasure, which had first appeared in 1927. Adventures were promised in subsequent volumes with such evocative titles as *The House on the Cliff*, *What Happened at Midnight*, *The Melted Coins*, and *The Secret Panel*.

I saved eagerly for these treasures, and when I was asked what I wanted for birthday and Christmas gifts, they were at the top of the list. As the months and years passed, the shelf in my room provided a home for more and more of these volumes. At last I owned the entire set through number 38, *The Mystery at Devil's Paw*. That story, set in Alaska, appeared in 1959, the same year that Alaska became the 49th state.

When I entered high school, I thought I had outgrown these “children’s books” and decided to pass them on. So that others could know the same pleasure I had had in reading them, I gave them all away. Although it was a generous gesture, as I grew into adulthood I regretted losing the books. To make them more appealing to readers in the 1960s, the texts of the Hardy Boys series began to be updated at the time I gave mine away, so even had I wanted to rebuild my collection, the original texts were out of print.

One day several years ago, I shared my regret at losing these books with a friend of mine who likes books as I do. For my birthday that year, she gave me a copy of Hardy Boys number 26, *The Phantom Freighter*, in the original text, which she had found at a used book store. I had never considered that used book stores might be a source of the books I had given away. I was delighted, and decided to recreate my old collection by searching through used book stores and purchasing the original text Hardy Boys through number 38. After eleven months, my search was completed. This was long before I was aware that anyone else in the country was interested in what I would later learn are called “series books.”

Except in a few cases, the plots of the Hardy Boys were not very memorable. In my reintroduction to these books, I found that what I enjoyed most in the old Hardy Boys was the Americana. In those early volumes, Frank and Joe were boys having fun in small town, east coast, pre-television America in the late 1920s and the 1930s. With their chums they ate at the malt shop, played harmless pranks on the local citizens and constabulary, and drove roadsters that, in a hurry, could exceed 35 miles per hour. They rarely went out without wearing ties and caps.

On Saturday mornings, when school was out, frequently they were found on dirt roads in the farm country back of town, taking short cuts through orchards on a day hike with four to six boys—which always included their best friend, loyal but timorous Chet Morton, who usually had an apple in his hand and a candy bar in his pocket.

Next day was Saturday, and immediately after breakfast the Hardy boys asked their mother to make up a lunch for them, as they intended to spend the day in the woods with a number of their school chums.

Mrs. Hardy quickly made up a generous package of sandwiches, not forgetting to slip in several big slices of the boys’ favorite cake, and the lads started out in the

bright morning sunshine, with the whole holiday before them.

They met the other boys, half a dozen in all, on the road at the outskirts of town and so, whistling and chattering and telling jokes, the group trudged along the dusty highway. Once in a while they would explore along the fences for berry bushes, and occasionally a friendly scuffle would start, to end with both laughing contestants covered with dust. ...

Willow Grove was about a mile farther on. It was some distance in from the road, and was on the banks of the Willow River, from which it got its name. It was an ideal place for a picnic, and as it was somewhat early in the season it was hardly likely that other parties from the city would be in the grove that day. ...

Once in the friendly shade of the trees they capered about in the joy of their Saturday freedom. Chet took charge of the lunches and stored them in a convenient clearing, and then began the rush for the river.

The day passed in the usual fashion of such days. They swam, they ate, they loafed about under the trees, they played games at imminent risk of life and limb, they explored the woods, and otherwise enjoyed themselves with all the happy energy of healthy lads.

(from *The Tower Treasure*, 1927)

During the summer or school holidays, the same group went on camping trips by motorcycle or motorboat, or worked out in the barn in back of the Hardy house which the "lads" had fitted up as a gymnasium. In this charming context, the boys solved mysteries, captured criminals, discovered treasure, located missing persons, and endured blizzards and rain storms. In the dark of night, they could be found in the woods or listening in on criminals' conversations taking place in old mansions.

There was an undefinable aura in the books, especially the earliest books in the series. Each was a time machine into another era, a time of the simple values and basic ethics of strong America, now so little in evidence. But the unexpected pleasure I experienced in reading the books was more than mere nostalgia or a willingness to look at another age with blinders. In many of them, there was also real quality.

Recently I picked up one of today's popular novels at random. I let the pages fall open and glanced through the text. Just on the two pages facing me one person vehemently cursed another in his absence, blasphemous words were used in an exclamation, and exploitative sexuality was described. Granted, this was a book for "adults" rather than children, but quite recently, on cable television in the late afternoon, I overheard some of the most intensely foul language I have ever run across. Four police officers were fiercely cursing one another, at length, while discussing a case in their police station. The contrast

between this incident, easily available to the after-school crowd, and the Hardy boys picnicking with their friends is astounding.

After I had finished recreating my collection of Hardy Boys, I began to learn about and then to look for other series. I met other collectors, learned about and subscribed to fanzines, and got online and corresponded with other people who are interested in the series books. By a combination of buying and trading books and very good fortune, I managed to complete numerous sets.

I found the fifteen books of the Don Sturdy series (published 1925-1935). Don Sturdy was a teenager who traveled with his uncles and had many adventures in faraway places of the world. Don was held up as a “model for American youth,” and was described as

“... a tall, strongly built boy, unusually muscular for his age, of a frank, straightforward nature, truthful, genial and courageous.”

(from *Don Sturdy in the Land of Volcanoes*, 1925)

Then I found the twenty-one volumes in the X Bar X Boys series, published from 1926 to 1942. These stories, characterized by a subtle and clever tongue-in-cheek sense of humor, features teenage brothers Roy and Teddy Manley who live on a ranch, enjoy the pure out-of-doors, and frustrate rustlers, kidnapers, and other ne'er-do-wells. Their admiration of the beauty of nature and enjoyment of it pulls at the heart today.

Down and down the boys went, making their way carefully over the rocky trail until at last they came to the roaring waters of Bitter Rock Creek.

“What a view!” Teddy was impressed by the grandeur of the scene. “Never saw anything like it before, did you, Roy?”

Roy did not answer, but stood gazing at the beautiful vista before them.

Almost at their feet rushed the waters of the creek, sparkling and leaping over white stones that glistened and shone in the bright sunlight. On all sides rose the mountain peaks, their thickly wooded slopes rising almost perpendicular in places, and forming a natural frame for the shimmering water.

“The heart of the Rockies!” murmured Roy, at last. “Looks as if we’re a million miles from nowhere. Gosh, it’s good to be here, Teddy!”

(from *The X Bar X Boys Lost in the Rockies*, 1930)

The twenty-one volumes (1929-1936) which came from the hand of Capwell Wyckoff are some of the finest books of the era, well balanced with both quality writing and well-crafted plots. He wrote three different series of ten, four, and two volumes each, with the remainder of his works comprising five unconnected single mysteries. Unusual in that he occasionally featured villains who reformed, Wyckoff’s writing is atmospheric,

imaginative, and exciting. Boys who set out on ordinary adventures like camping trips or outings gradually become involved in puzzling situations or mysteries. His books breathe the air of the 1930s.

Settings include small isolated lakes in New England surrounded by dense forest, hand-made rustic cabins, fearfully cold winters, and wood-paneled corridors of long-established academies. The quality writing leads the absorbed reader to a place where he can almost find himself warmed by fresh coffee brewed over a campfire in the very early morning, or striving hard to keep the canoe paddles from being heard by possible eavesdroppers when the friends set out by moonlight to cross the lake. Unusually creative plot lines include solving a years-old mystery which arises when friends take shelter during a storm in a long-abandoned opera house, or looking for treasure long-lost in an old house about to be sold.

The following is typical of Capwell Wyckoff's writing:

They soon paddled up to the jutting tongue of land that ran out into the lake near the mouth of the swamp creek, and after hiding the canoe, they sat on a rotted stump to wait. The time dragged heavily. From the swamps close at hand came a rank odor that seemed to drip, and the mist was heavy at that point. In low tones they conversed, arguing the case from many different angles, none of which was satisfactory.

"Good night, if they don't come out pretty soon, we'll have to beat it!" yawned Ren. Dave clutched his arm.

"Quiet! Here they come!"

There was a faint drip of water as the row boat shot out of the swamp grass at the head of the creek, all three of the men still in the boat. The Lakeman still sat in the bow while the other two rowed. This time they cut straight across the lake and were soon swallowed up in the dense gloom that was now wrapping up the entire region.

(from *The Mystery at Lake Retreat*, 1931)

Another popular series of that era were the ten Hal Keen books, published from 1931 to 1935. Adventure was regular fare for nineteen-year-old Hal Keen, with whom the reader may enter an abandoned mansion on a rainy night, peer through a clinging mist while standing on the deck of a fog-shrouded ship off the coast of Maine, or make a desperate horse-ride through a stormy night in Montana. The ever-popular gothic element was common in these books.

Storm clouds had been gathering since sunset and now in the gloaming they were massed and ready to loose their pent-up fury upon valley and hill. Wind whistled and screamed along the concrete highway, but so far, Hal had managed to keep his trim, sport roadster just ahead of it.

Suddenly, a deafening peal of thunder rolled over the Ramapo and its frowning green hills stood out in bold relief as lightning flashed across the murky heavens.

The velvet shadows on either side of the road were full of dismal sounds and eerie echoes. Trees bent their leafy heads before the masterful gale and the rustling foliage moaned in a strange, small voice. Then, as the rain swept down from the mountain, they noticed the car ahead blinking its rear light on and off like an evil red eye in the dusk...

A sudden blinding flash of lightning lighted up the entire hill and he saw a narrow turret raising its gaunt head high into the storm-blackened night. In the flash that followed, he saw the crumbling garden wall, and the house, all but hidden in the undergrowth behind it, seemed to rest uneasily on its creaking foundation. He couldn't help but liken the structure to some gaunt old witch and the still more gaunt turret made an admirable dunce's cap on her weather-beaten old head.

(from *The Lonesome Swamp Mystery*, 1932)

Under the influence and urging of fellow-collector Rocco Musemeche, who lives in Louisiana, I became acquainted with some of the earliest series books of all, produced in the first decades of this century. He had known and loved them when he was a child. These included the original Tom Swift books, the adventures of the Rover Boys, and especially some of the Boy Scout books. The latter were produced by Percy Keese Fitzhugh, a prolific writer who devised several interconnected series, each featuring a boy who was a member of the Boy Scouts of America. These include Roy Blakeley, Tom Slade, and Pee Wee Harris. I remembered Pee Wee Harris from my reading of Scout literature in the late 1950s, when his character had moved from full-length boys' books in the post-World War I era to comic strips in the era of my boyhood.

These books, marked on the front covers with the words, "Approved by the Boy Scouts of America," were designed to advertise the Boy Scouts and urge boys to join what was then a new youth movement. Emphasizing adventure, responsibility, ability, independence, virtue, inventiveness, and service to others, these books presented well-crafted plots marked with humor and innocent fun, as well as realistic character development. There were many passages of piercing beauty as well, such as the following:

The fog was so dense that they could not see ten feet ahead... Somehow the sight of grass was welcome. It seemed to rise up out of nothing, all steaming like a volcano. It was only close beside them that they could see it at all; ahead it faded away in the dense fog bank. Thus the slope beside them seemed to move along with them. The area of it

that they could see was covered with spider-webs spread out on the smoking grass like clothes to dry.

(from *Pee Wee Harris in Luck*, 1922)

The Tom Slade books are my favorites from this genre, as they emphasize honesty, humility, heroism, and justice, while warning against hasty judgment—all with the vehicle of good adventure stories. Here also are noteworthy descriptive passages, such as

They approached the Gulch at the lower end where Conner's ruin was. The place looked desolate enough in the waning light, the dead trees, of which there were a number, standing like outcast things amid the living foliage, their soulless look emphasized by the deepening shadows. Their bare, crooked branches, black and brittle, seemed the very symbol of death. Tom wondered if little June Sanderson had been timid in the haunted twilights of this uncanny place. What a scene for a little girl to witness in the bedtime hour!

(from *Tom Slade at Bear Mountain*, 1925)

Many of these series came to an end either in the Depression when few people could afford to buy them, or in the second World War when paper was rationed and interest was directed elsewhere. But in the late 1940s, a number of new series began, which hit their stride in the 1950s. In addition to the Hardy Boys, these days of my childhood were also the heyday of Rick Brant, Tom Quest, Ken Holt, Tom Corbett, and Tom Swift, Jr.

The eight Tom Corbett books (1952-1956) told how Tom sped through the solar system with his friends in the early 2350s, four hundred years after the books first appeared. One of the most impressive passages recounts how three mutually-antagonistic cadets learn to help one another and forge a tightly-bonded friendship as they make their way in desperate circumstances across the scorching heat of a desert on Mars.

Tom Quest, in an eight-volume series which appeared from 1947-1955, was the brain-child of Fran Striker, the creator of the Lone Ranger. While enjoying exciting adventures, Tom learned the value of self-reliance in times of necessity, unswerving loyalty in friendships, and the importance of assisting the weak and overlooked of society.

These heroes did not know cellular telephones, pagers, fax machines, or computers, but this is not to say that technology was unimportant. Being up-to-date with technology was a common theme in many of these series books; this theme was not unknown even in the earliest series. In one of the first Don Sturdys, published in 1925, this passage appears:

"Gee, but we're lucky to be living now!" exclaimed Teddy. "Just think of it! A hundred years ago there wasn't any railroad, or ocean steamer, or electric light, or telegraph or telephone or automobile, or phonograph or radio or airship."

"You're dead right," agreed Don. "It shows," he added, with a grin, "how wise we were in choosing the right time to be born."

(from *Don Sturdy Across the North Pole*, 1925)

But in the 1950s, new technology had become important. This was the time of the Cold War and the Space Race. The new series books often featured teenage heroes who excelled in scientific inventions which became vital when their inventors fought and foiled the bad guys in globe-trotting adventures.

Digby Allen, a resourceful seventeen-year-old Space Explorer in 2161, appeared in six books which featured his adventures. His partners, Jim and Ken Barry, entertained readers from 1959 to 1962. They solved mysteries, made remarkable discoveries, and had exploits on Mercury, Venus, Mars, Ganymede, and Uranus—not to mention in the asteroid belt.

Rick Brant lived on Spindrift Island off the coast of New Jersey, where his father Hartson Brant headed a scientific foundation. Those who read Rick Brant knew that the first rocket to fly to the moon was built and launched at Spindrift. Rick was a teenage electronics genius. This becomes evident when he introduces his new friend Scotty to his room, described in the first volume of the series, which first saw print in 1947.

As they entered Rick's room, Scotty stopped short, his glance taking in the weird assortment of gadgets.

"Come on in," Rick said. "I'll explain the place to you."

"You'll have to. What is it? An electrical museum?"

"Brant Hall of Electronic Science," Rick replied, and proceeded to show his new friend the arrangements he had made for what he called "the simple, more comfortable life." ...

He was proudest of all of the old leather chair he had rigged up. Along one arm was a row of buttons. The first controlled the reading lamp, a motor rheostat giving just the amount of light required for any purpose. The second turned on the radio, the third controlled the volume, the fourth gave a choice of five stations, depending on how many times it was depressed.

(from *The Rocket's Shadow*, 1947)

The better-known Tom Swift, Jr. built upon the reputation his father had established when his adventures were recounted in a series of forty books which appeared from 1910 to 1942. Blond, crew-cut Tom Junior produced vehicles that enabled him and his company to travel anywhere from the bottom of the ocean, to the inside of volcanoes, and even into outer space. His stellar mind also created numerous instruments, large and small, which enabled him to make incredible discoveries while frustrating a variety of nefarious foes.

Nearly all connoisseurs of series books today agree that the highest standard of quality in any series book writing was set by the author of the Ken Holt series, which appeared from 1949 to 1964. This series told how Ken Holt, son of a world-famous news correspondent, solved complicated and plausible mysteries with the help of his friend Sandy Allen, whose family produced a weekly newspaper in Brentwood, New Jersey. Unlike the characters in many other series books, the boys did not depend on coincidence or bumbling adversaries to save them in times of danger. The plots and predicaments in which Ken and Sandy became involved required that the boys use their wits to escape from peril or solve the mystery.

The quality of writing is exceptional, with story lines noted for being intriguing, challenging, and believable. The crafting of the words is dependably compelling, and the personalities of the characters well developed and consistent. It is difficult to select a passage suitably representative of the series, though the following shows how the author can create an atmosphere of subtle menace breathing through an apparently serene night, the landscape occasionally lit by an undependable moon.

The hillside was rough and full of brambles, and they saved their breath for the climb.

They were disappointed when they reached the crest. The moon was behind a cloud just then, and nothing was visible below them except the bare branches of a heavy stand of trees.

Cautiously they started the descent.

Halfway down Sandy caught Ken's arm. "There—right below us," he whispered.

Ken could just make out the towering stone walls of the ruined building.

Suddenly he caught his breath. "Look—a light!"

The both saw it the next time—a dim brief flicker almost at ground level, at the foot of the old structure.

"Come on," Ken whispered.

(from *The Secret of Hangman's Inn*, 1951)

Another passage, showing the extremely high quality of writing, is found in *The Mystery of the Shattered Glass*.

Slowly at first, and then with a rush, the new day came. The black water became lead-colored, faded to a silvery gray, and finally began to glow a deep blue, laced by the red-tinged foam that caught the rays of the young sun.

Once more the *Helen Rogers* steamed a full, slow circle. No sign of life showed on either side of the ship, except for half a dozen gulls skimming and soaring over the ruffled wake.

(from *The Mystery of the Shattered Glass*, 1958)

From the same pen which produced Ken Holt came the three-volume Roger Baxter series (1946-1948). Roger Baxter is a younger version of Ken Holt. These three books appeared just before Ken Holt got started in 1949, and lead directly into that series.

In this reflection, I have mentioned only the series directed toward boys, but only because they are the ones I know best. There were numerous books for girls as well, foremost of course being the top-selling Nancy Drew series. In the first decades of the century the thirty volumes of the Ruth Fielding series were popular, along with series like the Outdoor Girls. In the thirties and forties, series began which were dedicated to the adventures of detectives like the Dana girls and Judy Bolton, as well as nurse Cherry Ames, stewardess Vicki Barr, and many others. These series emphasized girls' independent thinking and action in the context of adventure and travel.

For several reasons, most of these series came to an end in the mid-1960s. Only the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew continued and still exist today, but in formats which have almost no recognizable connection with their predecessors. The appearance of the books made a transition from hardbacks with dust jackets; to hardbacks with picture covers, no jacket, and fewer pages; and finally to thin paperbacks, with a matching decline in the quality of both story and writing.

Very few of the children who read these books today have any idea of their venerable history. I've been gratified to be able to share some of my old original Hardy Boys with the seven-year-old son of a friend of mine who had known only the revised texts. He is inhaling the old texts with great pleasure. Fortunately, those who want to read these books can still find them without too much effort in the children's section of used book stores across the nation.

Critics of these early series books point out the blatant racism and ethnic stereotypes which many of them contain. There is no denying that many of the books do contain material which is quite offensive today—though others are remarkably free of it, and a few even went against the accepted standards of their day by presenting friendships across such social barriers. In the Tom Quest series, for example, the chief characters have frequent contact with American Indians and primitive peoples on other continents, who are invariably presented in a positive light. One passage in a Tom Quest book shows amazing sensitivity to the issue:

It was midafternoon when Tom Quest and his friends left the village with a new slant on the jungle savages.

"They were all right," said Whiz Walton in a pleased voice.

"Sure they're all right," Gulliver replied. "They're just as much all right down here as yo' are in New York. What's more," he said, "I bet they treated us a darned sight better'n they'd git treated if they was to march into one o' them New York hotels."

"You've got something there, Gulliver," said Whiz.

(from *The Telltale Scar*, 1947)

In addition to the frequent racial stereotyping and prejudice, several of the older series show a complete lack of awareness of today's vital ecological concerns. The eager hunting down of what we now know to be endangered species, and the utter ignorance of the need to protect the environment, can make today's reader shudder. Once again, Tom Quest shows a welcome attitude, when he says to his father,

"Fishing and hunting are all right, Dad, if you need the food you kill, but somehow it doesn't seem right to shoot animals or take fish just for the sake of killing. I don't see any sport in it."

(from *The Clue of the Cypress Stump*, 1948)

Overall, I much prefer these admitted flaws to the abundance of foul language and minimal, shifting ethical standards so prevalent in today's popular "entertainment."

So on my day off, when the rest of my family is at work or at school, I drive over to Sharon's Bakery and open up *The Tower Treasure* over a light breakfast. It might as well be a Saturday morning on the way to Willow River. Although now I am well into middle age, I don't feel too self-conscious reading such a book in public. My enjoyment of series books fulfills a desire to bring into maturity the innocence and excitement of youth, and the deep satisfaction of a simpler time into the complexities of today.