

The complex and well-told mysteries of The Roy Stover Series

by Philip Bartlett

*A review by David M. Baumann
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A series book friend has the admirable habit of giving me some of his extras now and then. He enjoys sharing some of the books he likes or introducing me to a series I hadn't heard about before. Two or three years ago he gave me a copy of a book published in 1929 called *The Lakeport Bank Mystery*. It sat on my shelf unread, waiting for an opportune time. A couple of years later he sent me the second book in the series, also published in 1929. It's called *The Mystery*



of the Snowbound Express. I set it alongside the first book, and for a few months their once-bright, now slightly faded orange spines attracted my glance as they rested at eye level in a bookcase I pass often. Finally, I took the first volume down to read it.

Within a couple of chapters I knew that I had been launched into a topnotch story very well told. Like an ingot of Swiss chocolate among a sampling of Hershey bars, it stood out from the crowd of what was commonly and acceptably enjoyable, and opened my eyes with the unanticipated pleasure of recognizing high quality distinctiveness. "If the other books in this series are as good as this one," I said to myself with an air of self-appointed connoisseurship, "then I owe my friend an unpayable debt of gratitude for introducing me to a set of stories of singular excellence." Or words to that effect. I think what I actually said aloud to my wife was, "Wow, the Roy Stover series is really good!"

It was so good that I determined early in my reading to write this article for the Review. Now, away back in Spring 1982, in issue number 8 of this incomparable fan magazine, an article on the Roy Stovers appeared, written by John E. Abreu. His article is only a little longer than two pages, but deals with the series in a noteworthy manner. I am pleased to contribute another entry on this mostly fine series and add a great deal more to what Abreu wrote nearly 37 years ago.

A little research told me that there are only four books in the series. The third is called *The Cliff Island Mystery*, published in 1930; and the last, published in 1934, has the intriguing title, *The Mystery of the Circle of Fire*. I was fortunate enough to know someone who was gradually selling his late sister's sizable collection of series books, and he had these last two books available, which I snapped up, thereby completing my collection of this series.

Thanks to series book fans Jennifer White and James Keeline, I learned that these four books were a Stratemeyer Syndicate production (which most likely means that Edward had outlined the first three); and that the author of these first three books was John W. Duffield and of the last was Walter Karig. Now I'd known Duffield's writing before, since he is the author of fourteen of the fifteen Don Sturdys, which I collected and read a couple of decades ago. I thought that those books were acceptable but not at all remarkable, so I was surprised to learn that Duffield was the author of the first three Roy Stovers. He did a smashing job on the latter. And if Edward outlined them, well, he outdid himself. The plots are more complex than even the best of the Hardy Boys or other better known series that the Syndicate produced. I suspect that the books may have been aimed at an older audience than their customary juveniles.

Walter Karig already had a good reputation. A while back, when a phalanx of series book fans chided me for having zero Nancy Drews in my collection, I said, "Okay then, give me the titles of what you think are the best Nancy Drews, and I'll get those and try them out." A lot of people responded, and five titles left all the others 'way behind. So I bought those five titles. I found it head-noddingly significant that all three of Karig's Nancy Drews were among the favored five: *Nancy's Mysterious Letter* (1932), *The Sign of the Twisted Candles* (1933), and *The Password to Larkspur Lane* (1933), numbers eight, nine, and ten of the original series. I've only read one of the top five Nancys so far, which was not one of those by Walter Karig, and ... well ... maybe those by Karig will have some merit. But never mind that now, let's move on to Roy Stover.

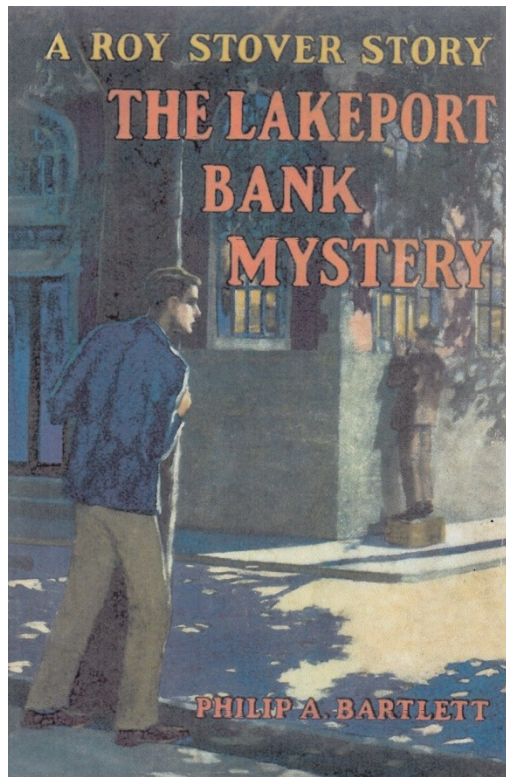
Roy Stover is a recent high school graduate who lives in the small town of Lakeport in a never-identified state somewhere in the northeastern United States. His father owns and runs a local daily newspaper called the *Eagle*. (Sounds like Ken Holt or some of the stories by Graham M. Dean, but Roy Stover predates both.) The *News* is the rival paper in town; the rivalry is intense but aboveboard. Although Roy's father, as honest and hard-working as they come, is the boss, Roy is under the direct authority of Gardner, the editor who oversees the reporters. He is hard as iron, tough to please, expresses his rare approval in grunts, chews out those who fail to come up to standard, and backs his reporters to the hilt when they are in trouble. Maizie is the secretary who engages in witty repartee with Roy, but shows sympathy that verges on affection. There are numerous secondary and tertiary characters who are supportive but seldom seen. Mostly Roy is on his own as he tracks down stories, investigates questionable goings-on, takes risks with courage, and endures opposition and danger with the confidence that truth will out and justice will prevail—all without appearing either naïve or foolish.

On top of these praiseworthy qualities, the books are nearly 250 pages long. This is generously long enough for a whopping good tale with some commendable intricacy.

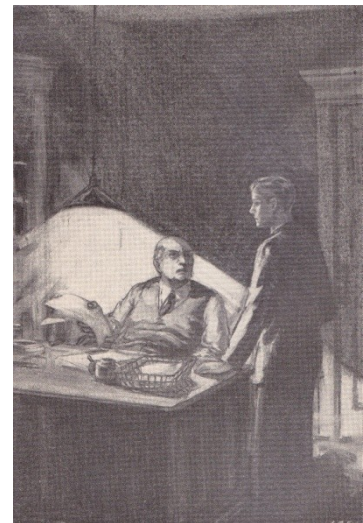
Well, what happens in *The Lakeport Bank Mystery*?

Roy and his pal Elmer Raymond are boating on Eagle Lake, discussing a blue ghost that's been seen a couple of times at night through the windows of the Lakeport Bank. Puzzled witnesses are intrigued by what it might be. The blue ghost of Rick Brant fame is still thirty-one years away, so it can't be that. Further discussion reveals that the bank president, Lemuel Grigg, is a first order crank, a "cold-blooded old skeesicks" who would be outraged if there were an investigation of the blue ghost because the reputation of his bank would be compromised. Grigg, although an upright citizen who has helped many people in town for many years, is a

touchy old goat who has lent money to many businesses and individuals. Nobody wants to cross him.



A few days later, Roy and Elmer graduate from high school, and the former begins a job as a cub reporter for the *Lakeport Eagle*. His first assignment is to cover a fire. He writes what he thinks is a fantastic story, full of excitement and gripping descriptions. He turns the story in to the editor, the aforementioned Gardner, and is already planning how to handle his promotion when that same Gardner rips the new cub to pieces for leaving out most of the facts and for embellishing his story needlessly. It's a skillful way to show the reader just what proper journalistic writing is supposed to be like. Chagrined and smarting from his humbling, Roy sets out on further assignments and before long gives evidence not only of trim writing, but courage and insight coupled with a willingness to work hard



to discern and even anticipate the details of a story as it is happening. If good reporters are “born, not made”, as his father had told him, the reader is learning that Roy is truly a born reporter.

So he is well prepared and undaunted when the Lakeport Bank is robbed. Grigg is outraged at the embarrassment, and wants the case solved quickly but with a minimum of public exposure. The rival paper jumps onto the story, and the police are baffled by how the deed was done. Solving the mystery and getting the scoop on the *News* occupy Roy's day and night hours. There are several possibilities, there are some red herrings, there are several suspects. The solution gradually emerges thanks to Roy's careful investigation. As the tension grows, he is captured by the bad guys but manages to escape and call for help in an exciting turn of events. The tale has sufficient old, abandoned buildings; forgotten tunnels; twists and surprises as suspects are secretly followed; and developments that were unanticipated yet skillfully prepared for—all related by an author proficient in the use of words and adept in describing the intricacies of how people think and reason. Even if the reader is able to guess where the investigation is going, there are still enough surprises at the end to prove most satisfying.

The only jarring part of the narrative is the use of offensive expressions that thankfully passed out of common use many decades ago. At one point, Roy is advised by a friend to watch for a “nigger in the woodpile”. In another place, Roy expresses his gratitude to a benefactor by saying “that was very white of you,” and elsewhere two friends commend a third by saying that “he's all white.” The expressions were frequently used in their day, and can be kept in their place as

evidence of the historicity of the story and its setting. But it is evident that Duffield took the prevailing racism of the day for granted.

Roy is riding high at the end of this story, having proven himself to be not only a capable reporter but a gutsy investigator. His father's newspaper has an impressive number of new subscribers and advertisers, their rival paper is holed up licking its wounds, and the populace of the town is button-busting proud of its young man who has made good. Roy takes it all with impressive modesty. He is therefore well set up for his next story, which is

The Mystery of the Snowbound Express. A blizzard of overwhelming intensity hits the town of Lakeport. Several interesting short adventures involve Roy on assignment before the big news hits that the Express, the important passenger and freight train that comes into Lakeport regularly, has been snowbound about twenty miles away. It is carrying the enormous rolls of newsprint that both the *Eagle* and the *News* need to print their papers. Moreover, it is carrying several prominent passengers.

Roy manages to get out to the train in an ingenious and challenging manner, and as he is interviewing the passengers in the hope of getting a scoopworthy human



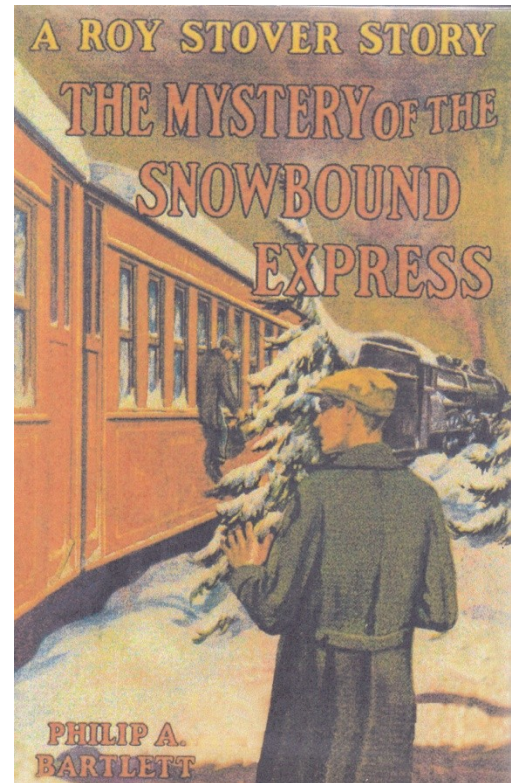
interest story, a man runs into the lounge shouting that his diamonds have been stolen. He is a jewel merchant who had been carrying \$100,000 in uncut diamonds. (That's about a million and a half

smackeroos in today's money.) He claims that they had been lifted from his room while he was shaving.

Although it seems obvious that someone aboard the train has to be the guilty party, it doesn't take long before it's evident that things are more complicated than that. On his way to the train, Roy happened to find the empty jewel case without knowing what it was; and in his final approach he saw a man climbing

surreptitiously out of the window of the train, making every effort not to be seen. When Roy offers this information to the police after they arrive and begin their investigation, he is staggered to find himself suddenly but vehemently denounced for the theft not only by the diamond merchant himself but by others on board.

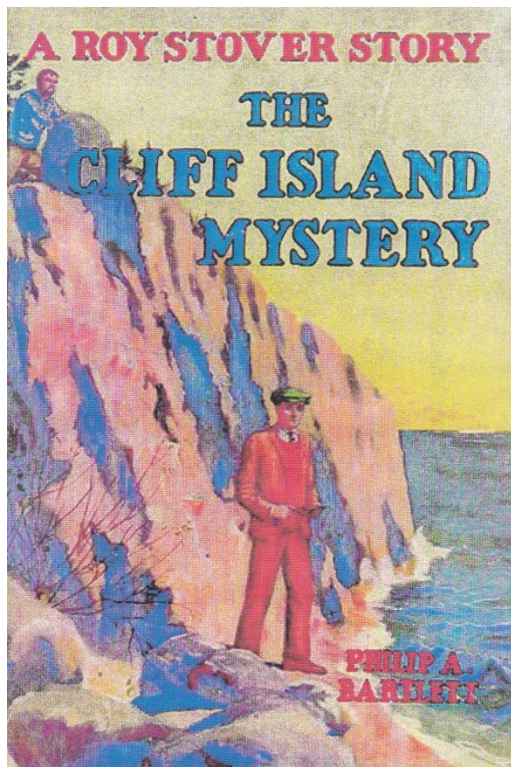
The case against him is circumstantial, but that's enough for some people to be convinced, even though the police, the court, and the general populace of Lakewood stand by him. Yet as time passes and there are no other leads, public opinion begins to waver. Roy is not held in custody, but he is carefully watched. Driven to investigate the theft not only to get a crackerjack of a



story but also to clear himself of suspicion, he tracks down “clews” with impressive cleverness that takes cognizance not only of pieces of obscure information but of how people think, how they connive, and how they make choices. You don’t see that kind of depth in most series books, even the best, but it’s an impressive hallmark of the Roy Stovers.

Another bit of what we now recognize as racism made for a key part of the story. The first person Roy meets as soon as he boards the train is the “colored porter” named Tony Toms. Chapters later, when Roy is desperate to prove the time when he entered the train and thereby give evidence that he came on the scene only after the theft of the diamonds, he never thinks of using the “colored man” as a witness. Tony could easily have testified, “Why shoa, dat young man he cam ’boahd de train ’bout 10:35. Yassuh, Ah knows fo’ sho’, ’cause Ah was makin’ muh rounds an’ Ah was watchin’ de clock.” But he was never asked, apparently never even thought of.

The resolution to the story takes place in one of the most exciting pieces of series book writing I’ve run across, involving a hotel room on a third story, surveillance from two directions, fancy reasoning, a brilliant use of patience, and a satisfying and most aptly deserved punch on a chin. The story starts with few suspects, but the number grows throughout the story as the clews are unearthed, and then are narrowed down until only one remains. Then all that is needed is the proof. The story is beautifully designed, and the writing is first-rate. Maybe the most dramatic moment in the book is when Roy bursts into his father’s office and blurts out, “Dad! I’ve found the diamond thief!” But there are still 34 pages packed with excitement to go before the needed proof is in hand.



Duffield continues his high quality writing with *The Cliff Island Mystery*, the third entry in the Roy Stover series. Published in 1930, the plot is timeless. It is the story of a conscienceless businessman who scams gullible people while staying just inside the law. John Brackenbone is a real estate tycoon of abundant wealth and a strong reputation for business acumen. He lets it be known that he has purchased a large piece of property which he plans to develop, and offers numerous citizens of Lakeport a chance to be in on the ground floor. Many of them are ordinary hardworking people who have saved up a small pile dollar by dollar by scrimping and sacrificing; they entrust the realtor with the bulk of their savings. Brackenbone provides a contract that assures them of marvelous returns once the development is under way.

When two or three years pass with no action, and Brackenbone explains the delay by assuring his investors that the time is not yet optimal to start the development, people become more and more uneasy.

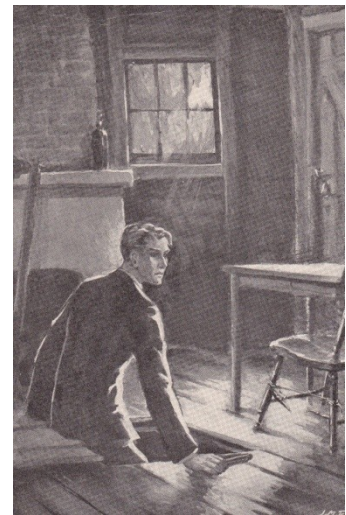
When Roy and his father look over the contract, they discover that there is nothing in it that requires the work to begin on any particular schedule—Brackenbone can hang onto people’s investments as long as he likes and do nothing. The story does not merely present the victims as

being trusting people who had been hoodwinked, but adds the observation that they had been gullible and foolish. This thought is uncommon for a story of this kind, but it is an impressive nod to realism, and further evidence that the author knows how people think, reason, and act, and works this feature into the tales he unwinds.

As time passes, the tension ratchets up and the antagonism and enmity grow to the point of threatened violence against the realtor; suddenly Brackenbone disappears. When Roy finds out that he has mortgaged his home and taken cash loans against his property, it becomes likely that the realtor has absconded with about \$100,000 cash; as in the matter of the stolen diamonds in the previous book, that's about a million and a half in today's money.

Roy begins his investigation by searching the grounds of Brackenbone's mansion, and has an interview with the "colored man" who was responsible for keeping the property in good shape. This individual intimates that his employer may have gone to Cliff Island, a property that the realtor had bought two or three years earlier. It is an overgrown, forbidding island in Eagle Lake where there is a decrepit but functional stone vacation house. One side of the island is a nearly sheer cliff for which the place is named.

Sensing a terrific story for the *Eagle* if only he can track down and apprehend the realtor, Roy heads out to the island. In the stone house he finds a suicide note in which Brackenbone admitted that he had deceived his investors and then lost the money. Filled with shame and remorse, he has decided to take his own life. There is plenty of evidence in support of this event, including a coat found on the cliff with a further note explaining that its owner had weighted himself down with stones and thrown himself into the deep sea.



Yet Roy does not find the evidence completely convincing. There are also signs that Brackenbone may have been murdered by an insane squatter on the island who manifests homicidal violence toward anyone who steps onto the island that he claims is his own. Roy himself is a target for this violence more than once. The evidence mounts that this course is at least as likely as the suicide. The police and general opinion in Lakeport are torn between the two possibilities of suicide and murder—yet no body is found.

Gradually Roy comes to wonder about a third possibility: could Brackenbone have engineered and planned the whole thing and disappeared with the cash, and is lying low until the heat is off? Discoveries Roy makes point in that direction. Yet every piece of evidence can really support any of the three possibilities, and any guesswork that Roy makes is easily and logically countered by his father, who is also his confidant.

There is one bothersome feature. Just as the colored man Tony Tims was overlooked as a key witness in the previous book, so the colored servant who provides a vital clue to Roy is later undervalued by the cub reporter when that clue turns out to be not as obvious as he had hoped; Roy questions it scornfully solely "because of its source". Yet when Roy is at the end of his wits

trying to find out what direction to turn, he returns to the “old Negro” to see if there could be a morsel of additional information that will set him in the right direction.

The plotting is complex, the details are well thought out, the clues are carefully planted without tipping a hat in any clear direction, and the wordsmithing is first-rate. The danger scenes raise the reader’s heartrate when he peruses Roy’s exploration of the old house at night in a storm, when he is locked in a pitchdark room with a large rattlesnake, and when he is thirsty and hungry and long without sleep pursuing the “wild man” through the dense vegetation of Cliff Island. If the reader thinks, “Surely such-and-such has to be the answer,” the evidence turns against him, and reasonable doubt arises. When the resolution finally comes, it is exciting and satisfying.



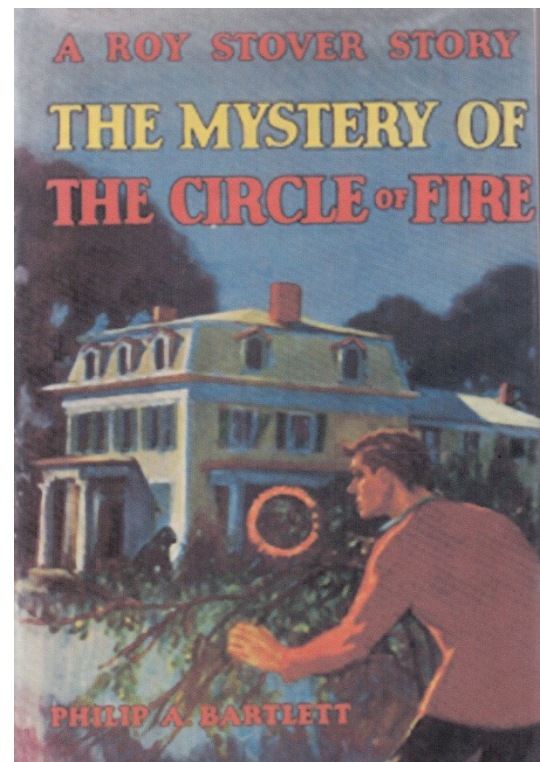
On the penultimate page of the story we read that “the only fly in the ointment was the reflection that such a triumph might never happen again.” Well, for Duffield, that was right, it wouldn’t happen again; this was his last Roy Stover mystery, but he’s got three superb triumphs to show for his efforts. However, there is one more Roy Stover mystery in the series, and for that one Walter Karig takes over the writing.

In 1934, four years after the previous book was published, *The Mystery of the Circle of Fire* appeared in print. This was the year after Karig’s last Nancy Drews were published. This fourth entry in the Roy Stover series has an admirable abandoned and reputedly haunted mansion; so far, so good. But it also has three gangsters of stereotypical gangsterish appearance who scatter money around while they inexplicably go out on the lake in a rented boat after dark in all weathers; a young woman suffering from aphasia (amnesia?) after being traumatized at the old mansion by an outré circle of fire than appeared in the front window of the place; a theatrical agent who interviews locals for a new and



upcoming acting scheme; a high school biology teacher who is discovered catching rats in the basement of the old mansion; uncanny voices that appear in odd places inside its basement; and (fasten your seat belt) a gorilla that runs loose in the woods adjacent to the old pile.

Edward Stratemeyer had died in the same year that the third Roy Stover tale appeared, and it is obvious that someone else has outlined this story. At first I suspected it was the same person who, some years later, would outline the Hardy Boys’ weird and loony episode called *The Disappearing Floor*—or perhaps someone of equal



talent. For a good portion of the book, the reader wonders if the story is about a crime, a puzzle over strange but non-criminal occurrences, or discovering the circumstances behind certain individuals' strange behaviors.

Now Walter Karig is a fine writer. He was given this odd outline with the charge to flesh it out into a publishable story, and he does a grand job of it. He has fun. There are several scenes that are decidedly and entertainingly comic; one can be confident that Karig has taken up this or that part of the bizarre outline and turned it into an engaging episode. He clearly recognizes that turning the outline into a good story is a challenge, and even presents Roy Stover himself musing about all the wackiness of the elements of the mystery and how they can possibly be related.

And then in the last few chapters, the disparate pieces slowly come together in a most admirable fashion; the "coming together" definitely caught me looking. What had seemed at first to be unskilled and random plotting begins to make sense with a series of "aha!" moments in which the reader says, "So *that's* what that was about!" There are a few plot glitches and contrived instances, but they are minor and don't get in the way. The final visit to the old mansion in which things get resolved is tense, logical, and gripping, and the dénouement is satisfying.

The closing paragraph touts the "next mystery" that Roy Stover is sure to get into, but if it ever happened, it was never written into a book. What ended the Roy Stover series? Poor sales? Economic struggles in the middle years of the Depression? I don't know. Maybe the very complexity that is a feature of this fine series worked against it. The contemporary mysteries that the Hardy Boys solved are nowhere near as tangled or psychologically involved as these four Roy Stovers, yet were much more popular. Whatever the cause, I'm glad that my friend sent them my way, and I'm glad to recommend them.

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