

The Parent Problem

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One of the appeals of series book heroes and heroines is that the juvenile reader, whose life is probably mundane and undistinguished, can project himself into a mystery or adventure by identifying with someone about his own age whose life is glamorous, fraught with danger, or otherwise exciting. If the reader is to enjoy these adventures and mysteries fully, this "someone" needs to be able to get out of the house in the middle of a moonless night; shadow a suspect into the disreputable side of town; go scuba diving; shoot guns; travel by airplane, speedboat, roadster, and perhaps even spacecraft; confront and capture ne'er do wells; prevail in fist fights; endure being tied up and left overnight; and engage in uncounted other bold pastimes and pursuits. To avoid setting a bad example, these escapades assuredly cannot be done in defiance of parental statutes, and most parents are not likely to give permission to an underage protagonist to go ahead and do all those things. It's a dilemma. It's the parent problem.

More often than not the author's solution has been to remove one or both parents from the scene so that the teen hero's independence is made possible and plausible. There are no parents to disobey, and no irresponsible parent to send a daughter or son indifferently into danger. Therefore there are many series in which parents are dead, missing, traveling, or otherwise out of the picture. In a few cases, it is the hero himself who travels, leaving family behind as he plunges into peril and adventure.

Because of the "parent problem", finding illustrations from series books in which a parent is included was darn hard. There are much more exciting scenes to set before the eyes of readers who want adventure than a heartwarming family scene. It's better to depict the hero or heroine aboard ship in a storm, crawling through high grass on a misty night, galloping on a horse through a snowstorm, held at gunpoint by a sneering thug, etc. A nice family photo doesn't have much appeal in comparison. I only found two such "family scenes" in my collection: the family picnic from the sixth book in the Bret King series, *The Secret of Fort Pioneer*; and a family discussion of the big mystery in Rick Brant's *Danger Below!* The other

illustrations in which a parent appears are action scenes in which the parent has a part. Probably the best known is the cover of Ken Holt's *The Clue of the Phantom Car*. And in this case Pop Allen is properly placed in the back seat. This illustration best portrays the "answer" to the "parent problem"—if they have to be there, they belong in the back seat.

Musing one day on this phenomenon in the series I have read or collected, I was moved to draw up a list of the kinds of family circumstances in which various heroes and heroines find themselves. After I had finished my list I was surprised by one datum that emerged, but I'll save that for last.

A quick sampling of series both well-known and obscure shows us a few expected patterns of "missing parents". The most obvious is the case when one parent or both are dead.

The Dead Parent(s)

The mother

Being the parent of a series book hero is clearly not a safe calling, especially mothers. If a hero's parent is dead, three times out of four it'll be the mother. Tom Slade¹ (the series began in 1915) enters the series book world with his mother dead and his father a pathetic alcoholic. Tom, the town hoodlum who has been responsible for much antisocial mischief, was "on his own" from an early age. But in the first book of the eponymous series, the new Boy Scout movement assumes a parental role, and a father figure in the person of rich philanthropist John Temple helps give hope and direction to the young man. *Shades of Li'l Orphan Annie*.

When we first meet Poppy Ott (the series began in 1926), we learn that his mother is dead and his father is a shiftless deadbeat. Under these tragic circumstances, Poppy assumes the responsibility for his own welfare and that of his father. "Poppy" is a nickname conferred upon him since he sells popcorn to provide his destitute father and himself with barely enough jack to care for themselves. Eventually the father is put on the straight path by his young son, and becomes an astute businessman who successfully runs a stilt factory that Poppy had founded.

Nancy Drew (1932) has her widowed father wrapped around her little finger. She occasionally seeks his advice, but Nancy is clearly independent of almost everybody, including her wimpish boyfriend Ned. The housekeeper Hannah Gruen has some influence but not much authority. The all-powerful, super-resourceful, and pseudo-humble Nancy does what she wants when she wants to do it. Her phenomenal success in everything she does is supremely aided by astounding

¹ See my article "Tom Slade, Four Series in One" in "The Mystery & Adventure Series Review", issue no. 33, published Spring 2000.

good fortune, evident in the remarkably high number of amazing coincidences that further her purposes.

Skippy Dare's (1934) mother is dead, and his father is a down-and-out crook who's now trying to "go straight". Father and son are poor, outcast, alienates of society, bullied by cops and threatened and manipulated by crooks. This three-volume, surrealistic series reads almost like a noire "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds".

Tom Quest's (1947) mother is dead, and in the first couple of books his father is missing. Even after Tom's father is found and rescued, he does not appear very often. Tom's "father figure" is the redoubtable, inimitable, mountainous Gulliver. Gulliver is so overwhelming that he easily overshadows even Tom Quest.

Ken Holt's (1949) mother has been long dead when the first book opens, and Ken's father travels a lot. I can't think of a single instance in which Richard Holt rescues his son, although Ken rescues his father in the first book. (Hmmm... Do I see another pattern emerging? Motherless Poppy Ott, Skippy Dare, and Tom Quest also "rescue" their fathers. As do the Hardy Boys more than once.) Richard Holt makes an occasional appearance in the series, but even then he comes across as a guest living out of a suitcase. The reader knows that he will be off to Tegucigalpa or Phnom Penn or McMurdo Sound before the weekend. Poor Ken spent his childhood in boarding schools and now lives with the Allens, an intact, two-parent, loving family who are parental substitutes.

The father

Hal Keen (1931) has a rarely-seen widowed mother, but Hal, at nineteen, is old enough to be on his own. He is one of the "oldest" series book heroes. He was, perhaps, an experiment—a hero who in truth is old enough to be on his own, yet who also tries to appeal to juvenile readers.

Ted Wilford² (1951) has a mother who apparently visited a sperm bank to get her sons. Either that or Ted was found under a cabbage leaf or was brought by the stork. Ted's father is never mentioned at any time in the series—not as having died, fled, disappeared, been divorced, gone to prison, or been abducted by aliens. Curiously, there is no functional father substitute, unless it is the worthy editor of the newspaper for which Ted works, Christopher Dobson.

² See my article "A Dark Horse Series" in "The Mystery & Adventure Series Review", issue no. 39, published Summer 2006.

Both parents

Linda Craig (1962) and her brother Bob live on a ranch in or near the Mojave Desert in California. Their parents were killed in a car accident before the series begins, and they are now living with their grandparents. The grandparents are “youthful” and active, good parental substitutes. They combine the best of grandparents who indulge and even spoil their grandchildren with parents who discipline their children lovingly and do it well.

Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw, two of the Three Investigators³ (1964), come from intact families but the parents are rarely seen. When they are, they are always supportive without being intrusive. Jupiter Jones is an orphan who lives with an uncle and aunt. Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda are not cruel by any means, but they do not come across as loving. Jupiter lives in his head and does very well there, but he suffers from his lack of genuine, caring parents.

Phantom parents

Also common is the case when there is, or appears to be, an intact family, but the protagonist is nonetheless independent.

Don Sturdy’s (1925) mother evidently suffers from a severe neurotic affliction that keeps her immersed in relentless anxiety. Though she has a cameo appearance in the beginning of most of the books, her pitiable state makes it easy to understand Don’s wanderlust. Don’s father is little better since he can barely make up his mind and caters to his wife’s tragic, diagnosable pathology. It’s very sad, since in the first couple of books in this series we learn that Don’s parents and younger sister have turned up missing during a trip on the Amazon. At some point before the series began, then, his parents must have been brave and hardy travelers. Being lost in South America clearly unhinged them since, as soon as they are able to move, they flee to Egypt like scatterbrained escapees from an institution. When they are finally brought back home they never leave again. Parental influence over Don is really exercised by two admirable he-man uncles who serve as masculine role models without being rule-makers.

Parental presence for Frank and Joe Hardy (1927) consists of a habitually near-cipher of a nevertheless kindly mother and a father who is often absent. The “peppery” maiden aunt Gertrude tries to lay down rules in a haphazard and inconsistent fashion, but has no real authority. Passive-aggressive Laura Hardy sends her sons off to face indescribable danger with a brave smile and a few sandwiches, some cake, and milk, and then worries until everyone is home safe.

³ See my article “The Three Investigators” in “The Mystery & Adventure Series Review”, issue no. 40, published 2007.

The Mercer Boys (1929) come from intact families, but except for the first few chapters of the first book, the parents don't appear. The boys are resident in college or traveling on their own. Boarding schools or "prep" school stories were common in series books of the early twentieth century and thereby nicely solved the parent problem, but from the 1920s forward prep schools fell out of favor and that ploy was no longer used.

Connie Blair (1948) has a normal family and a twin sister, but Connie spends most of her time living away from home. She resides with her aunt. She is also a little older than most series book heroines and is able to work and travel on her own. The aunt's apartment provides a safe, family setting without being constraining. Mom, Dad, and sister are never far away but they can't interfere either.

Tom Stetson (1948) only appears in three books, all of them set in South America where Tom is under the tutelage of an uncle. The three stories all take place in a single summer. Tom's family is mentioned but never seen. If his parents knew what he experienced, however, and what his uncle led him into, they'd chain their son to the front porch until he was about forty.

Steve Grendon and Sim Jones, who styled themselves the "Mill Creek Irregulars"⁴ (1958), have parents but they are a mixed bag. Steve's dad is usually reading the paper, saying nothing while his wife harangues their son. When he's finally had enough of his wife's vinegar tongue, he slams his hand down with his famous two words, "That's enough!" And then he goes back to reading the paper. Sim's dad is an asthmatic with a quirky sense of humor that shows that he cares about his son but which also keeps him at a distance; Sim's mother is rarely mentioned but seems to be a good sort when we see her. The "parental" influence comes from Steve's grandfather, a fine, old-fashioned gent in the best sense of the term, rife with wisdom. Truly, he is one of the best "parental influences" in the series book world, if not all of literature.

Sandy Steele (1959) is customarily in the company of a family friend, hired guide, or employer. He's not quite old enough to be completely on his own but when he's on his adventures he owes very little obedience to anyone either. Or maybe to put it better, the adults treat him with respect as if he were able to be a responsible person, and so he is.

Biff Brewster (1960) has an intact family, but after appearing on one page early in the first book, Biff's mother and sister are hardly ever heard from again. Biff's

⁴ See my article "1920s Wisconsin: The Mill Creek Irregulars" in "The Mystery & Adventure Series Review", issue no. 41, published 2007.

father is sometimes a part of an adventure but Biff himself is usually on his own or under the care of an uncle, adult friend, or other parental substitute.

The Mad Scientists Club (1961) is comprised of too many boys to track down individually, but they probably all come from normal families; the families just don't play much of a part in the stories. All the adventures but one posthumously-published novel that pleads "somebody *please* edit me" take place on the Club members' home turf. The stories are set in the time when small towns were safe and kids could enjoy all-day and even overnight adventures without having to provide too many explanations or receive too many warnings. These are the halcyon days of "Leave it to Beaver", "Father Knows Best", "Andy of Mayberry", and "Ozzie and Harriet".

The Canadian Brad Forrest (1964) probably has an intact family, but we don't hear much about his mother. Brad is one of those heroes like Biff Brewster, Sandy Steele, and Don Sturdy who travel to a different exciting locale in each book in the company of an adult not a parent—usually an uncle or a friend of the family. Brad's father is occasionally present but usually sends Brad off to do some task which is, or turns out to be, incredibly dangerous.

Wynn Redford and Lonny Morris⁵ (1975) are eighteen and pretty independent. Lonny is described as "the only son of a poor farmer", but little other than that is told of their families. However, Nancy Rae, one of the girls involved in this series, is being raised by a widowed father who's doing his best to bring up a frustrating, independent tomboy of a daughter.

Intact, healthy, two-parent families

What surprised me after I had drawn up my list was how many exceptions there were to the "absent parent" rule, even among the popular series. There is a generous number of healthy, two-parent families in the series book world where the entire family is prominent in the stories. As I drew up a list of all those I could think of, its length and variety surprised me. I would have guessed that there were far fewer than these.

Jerry Todd (1923) comes from an extremely loving family, with perhaps the best father-son relationship in series bookdom. Here is small town America in the 1920s. Safe, mostly without overbearing government regulation, woods and river nearby, everything within walking distance. Students and fathers come home for lunch.

⁵ See my article "The Wynn & Lonny Racing Series" in "The Mystery & Adventure Series Review", issue no. 38, published July 2005.

Roy and Teddy Manley, better known as the X Bar X Boys (1926), come from another solid two-parent family with excellent familial relationships all around. Younger sister Belle Ada adds a lot to the stories. Dad is a sure-fire, sure-shot ranching cowboy who exercises authority the way it ought to be exercised—never shaming anyone, always on the mark, and intending to upbuild whomever he talks to, whether it's an employee or a son or daughter. Mom is spunky, beautiful, and self-confident. She does a heckuva lot more than make sandwiches for the men to put into the saddlebags, and Dad and Mom are genuinely loving and respectful to each other. Because of this, Roy and Teddy have a good relationship as brothers and are given plenty of freedom and responsibility without ever having to have a parent die or fade into the background.

Similarly, Rick Brant (1947) has a younger sister, Barby, with mother and father. Rick's best friend, Scotty, however is orphan. They don't live in a ranch house like the X Bar X boys, but they do have family-type meals with all the scientists gathered around. As the stories unfold there's not too much emphasis on the Brant family, but (except for Mrs. Brant's first name) none of the family members is invisible. We see 'em all at one time or another, in good measure.

Frenchy Beaumont (1953) likewise comes from an intact family—with SIX younger sisters (!!). The girls are frequently named but never interfere. The family does put up with a loafer-moocher of an uncle, but he provides a palette full of color with his eccentricity that almost makes up for his leeching off of his hard-working brother.

Tom Swift, Jr. (1954) and his sister Sandy come from a normal family. Well, normal, I suppose, for a family that owns a humungous corporation; is internationally known; is no doubt on a first-name basis with every corporate CEO, elected politician, and head of any law-enforcement agency; and whose eighteen-year-old son is a genius of the kind that can solve perpetual motion and square the circle with a little sweat with one long night's work. And some spicy rattlesnake soup at 2:00 a.m. from Chow Winkler.

Brains Benton (1959) and Jimmy Carson come from intact families. Brains is an only child and Jimmy has an older sister. Here is another attractive view of small town America. Bicycles are sufficient for getting around. Brains has a lot of independence but Jimmy's parents have some rules. The rules, however, are not unreasonable, and would have been easy for juvenile readers of the time to identify with.

Bret King (1960) and his family are very like the X Bar X Boys. Maybe ranch life is good for families, marriages, and children. A great place to grow into strapping manhood. The feel is almost chivalrous, which ain't bad.

As I did my research, I recognized some common patterns to series book families and parents, just as in real life there are such patterns. Of course, there are plenty of other series, some I own but did not mention in this article, other popular series that I haven't collected, and no doubt many others I don't even know about. Juvenile readers of the time and the collectors of today can enjoy these series and to one degree or another identify with the heroes and their families. Readers and collectors would, of course, come from a spectrum of experience: abused or neglected juveniles as well as those from really fine families and a lot from somewhere in between. In the series book world there will be a family somewhere we will identify with or an ideal that we wish we could have had. It's all good.

In my opinion, the person who gets the lead prize for being the most awful, repugnant parent is Steve Grendon's mother in the Mill Creek Irregulars. The very best "substitute" parent is Steve's grandfather in the same series. It's fascinating that the wonderful grandfather is the father of that same awful mother. The best father is Mr. Todd, father of Jerry. And the grand prize for the best series book family of all (though there are some good runners-up) goes to the Manleys in the X Bar X Boys series.

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