

Series Books Through the Lens of History

by David M. Baumann

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Books As Time Machines

It was more than half a century ago that I learned how to type. My parents had a Smith-Corona typewriter—manual, of course—that I used to write letters to my cousins. A few years later I took a “typing class” in junior high. Students were encouraged to practice “touch typing” and to aim for a high number of “words per minute”.

There were distinctive sounds associated with typing that I can still hear in my memory. I remember the firm and rapid tap of the keys, much more “solid” than the soft burr of computer “keyboarding”. A tiny bell rang to warn me that the end of the line was coming; I would finish the word or insert a hyphen, and then move the platen from left to right with a quick whirring ratchet of motion.

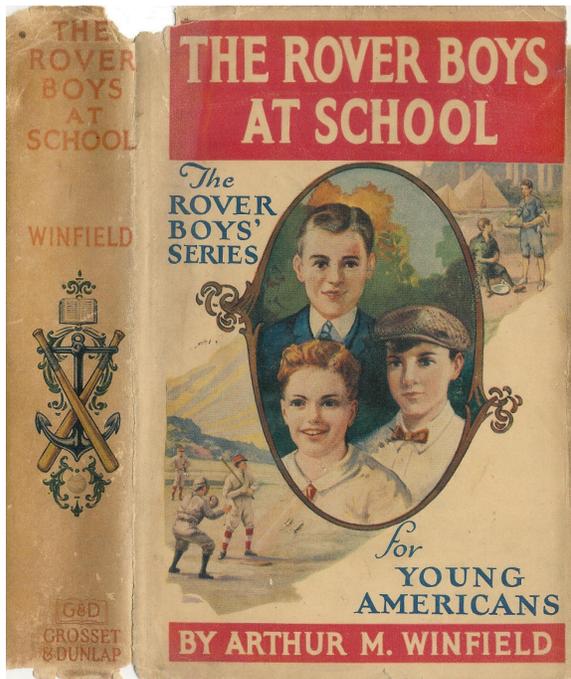
Frequently there was the sound of a sheet of paper being pulled out of the machine, either with a rip of frustration accompanied by an impatient crumple and toss, or a careful tug followed by setting the completed page aside; then another sheet was inserted with the roll of the platen until the paper was deftly positioned. Now and then I had to replace a spool of inked ribbon and clean the keys with an old toothbrush.

Musing on these nearly vanished sounds, I put myself in the place of the writers of our series books, nearly all of whom surely wrote with typewriters. It was not difficult to go back in time. Whether an author was creating the words of a story from an outline provided by the Stratemeyer Syndicate or tapping out his own story line, the words emerged from the mind of the author to appear on the page.

I could imagine the rapid staccato tattoo in Leslie McFarlane’s winter-bound cabin in Ontario, Canada in the late 1920s, bringing the Hardy Boys to life for the first time. The image of Hal Goodwin just twenty-some years later was easy to conjure, closing the door to his home office after dinner at his home in Maryland. The drumming of his typewriter came through the portal as Rick and Scotty packed for their trip to Tibet.

Cogitating along these lines brought back my often-considered notion of books as time machines, but now I wondered not only what the world had been like as it unfolded in the stories, but what it had been like for their authors. The world has changed dramatically in the more than a century since the beginning of series books.

When did series books begin? I suppose that the answer is arguable. Oliver Optic? Horatio Alger? In the late nineteenth century there was plenty of pulp fiction; there were “penny dreadfuls” and “dime novels”, and there were adventure stories in magazines and books—but if series books can be defined as a collection of books that feature the same characters having one adventure after another, each adventure in a separate volume, then it becomes easier to postulate a starting point.

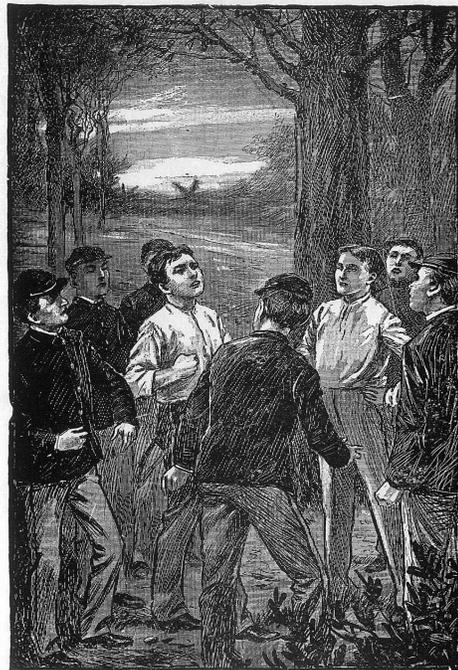


I am not alone in proposing that series books began with the publication of *The Rover Boys at School* in 1899. The Rover Boys series went on for thirty books that appeared over twenty-seven years. The author of the series, and therefore the originator of what we now call “series books”, was Edward Stratemeyer. The success of the Rover Boys and the whole concept of series books led the innovative entrepreneur to found the Stratemeyer Syndicate in 1905, and through that Syndicate use ghostwriters who wrote books for young people from outlines Stratemeyer produced. Although he paid his writers adequately for the time, Stratemeyer retained the rights

to all the books. He was able thereby to turn out and own the rights to far more books than he could have written himself, and all the profits were channeled to the Syndicate.

Now, one huge reason I like series books so keenly is that they present vignettes from other places and times, and the slices of life they present are of “common life” rather than what the newspapers, history books, essayists, politicians, and bureaucrats generated. Of course the common life that these books present is sweetened up and packaged with adventures and mysteries that no normal person would ever run across—at least with the frequency one finds in the pages of these books. Not only does that not bother me, it is part of the attraction.

In spite of the sweetening up, the real life of a culture surely affected what went into series



“FOUL FIGHTING EXPOSED.”

books, and as series books became popular I think they also affected the culture. Some series book names are definitely part of our culture even today. Most people, probably even many young people, would recognize the names Frank and Joe Hardy and Nancy Drew, and maybe even Tom Swift.

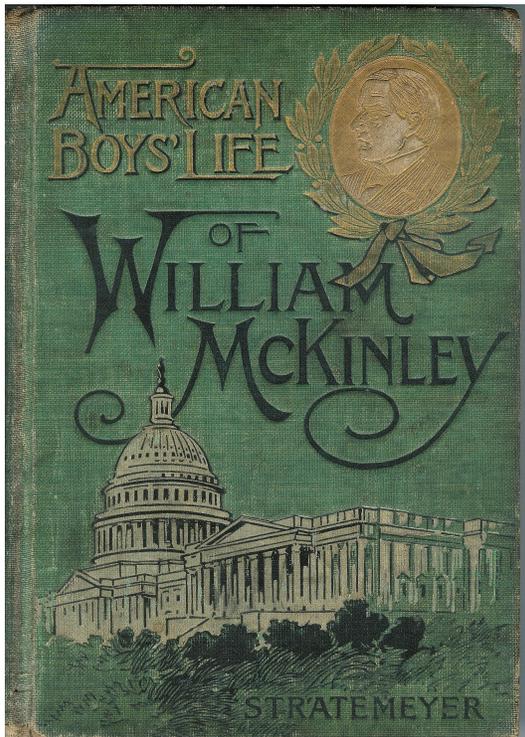
Let's take a brief look at how this phenomenon might work. A look at the chart in the center of this issue of *The Review* shows that there were two eras in which series books thrived.

The First Series Book Era: From 1899 to the Early 1940s

In the first era, series books had become common in the 1910s, and their popularity leaped upward in the 1920s. They both reflected and affected American life and culture. The first three or four decades of the twentieth century show a number of trends and innovations that were captured by series books. Here are a few of them:

Science and Technology

The turn of the twentieth century was a time of technological advancement and much optimism. President William McKinley, the 25th President of the United States, speaking at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, on September 5, 1901, said, "Modern inventions have brought into close relation widely separated peoples and made them better acquainted. Geographic and



political divisions will continue to exist, but distances have been effaced. ... The same important news is read, though in different languages, the same day in all Christendom. ... Every event of interest is immediately bulletined."

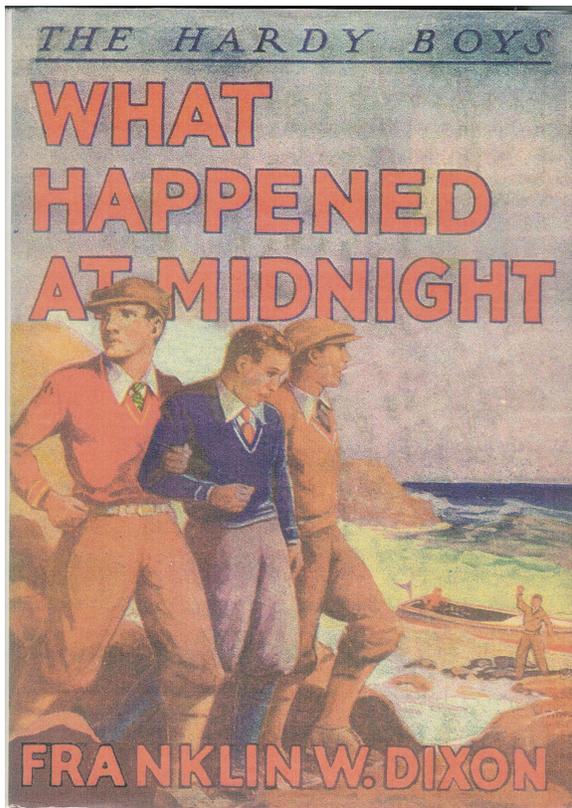
Interestingly, he was speaking of the telegraph—the earliest technology that made near-instantaneous communication possible over very long distances. Radio would not become widespread for another twenty years or so. He was rhapsodizing about sending words in Morse code through a pattern of short and long clicks transmitted via electric wires.

This speech was his last public address, as he was shot the next day and died eight days later. Of particular interest to the readers of this article, I found this quotation in a boys' book called *The Life of William McKinley* written by the aforementioned Edward Stratemeyer and published just a month after McKinley's assassination.

It was in this era that Thomas A. Edison became famous as an inventor. He gave the world the light bulb and moving pictures, just to name two of his hundreds of inventions. This was the age when Albert Einstein published his theories of how the universe worked. Jules Verne has been recognized as the first writer of what later came to be called “science fiction”, and H. G. Wells was not far behind. Their works first became popular in the late nineteenth century.

The Wright brothers flew the first heavier-than-air mechanical craft in 1903. Lindbergh flew to Paris in 1927 at the age of 25. Commercial airlines began: mail planes mostly in 1920s, passenger planes in 1930s. My grandmother celebrated her 100th birthday in 1999 and regaled the four generations of her descendants who had gathered for the occasion with stories of her youth before radio was commonplace.

Series books were quick to pick up on the public’s interest in these innovations.



Tom Swift, the boy inventor, was introduced to the world a hundred years ago this year. His books predicted the future more accurately than did those of Tom Swift, Jr. fifty years later. His inventions were grounded in genuine possibility, most of them realized in later years. Consider the “electric runabout”, the “diamond makers”, “giant searchlight”, “photo telephone”, “talking pictures”, and “house on wheels”, just to name a few. Tom Junior started well but then went on to the impossibilities of an “aquatomic tracker” and “repelatron”. (If someone actually invents these items, I’ll apologize.)

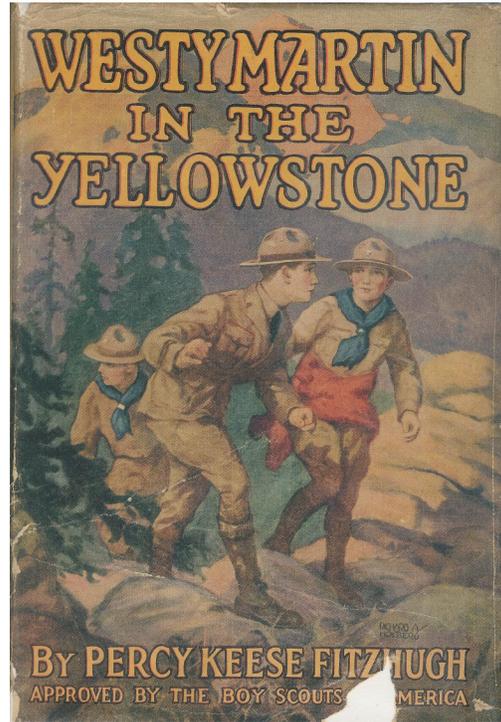
Even though the Hardy Boys were dedicated to solving mysteries rather than inventing, they also picked up on the interest in this technology and solved *The Great Airport Mystery* and *The Short Wave Mystery*, and the first

words of *What Happened at Midnight* are Chet Morton’s, “The invention of the age!”, by which he is referring to an automat, “the greatest boon ever conferred on the hungry lads of our fair city!” His exulting took place in 1931.

The Wilderness

Also in those years there was a fascination with the “great outdoors”. Yellowstone became the first national park in 1872 and the National Park System was launched in 1916. President Teddy Roosevelt (1901-1909) was a noted conservationist who set an example of self-immersion in the wilderness.

The Boy Scouts began in the United States in 1910, with an appeal to boys that they could learn how to survive in the wilderness. Series books were the primary means of attracting boys to the movement. Percy Keese Fitzhugh was tapped as the writer of Scouting books. (See my article on the Tom Slade series published in the Review, #33, Spring 2000.) Fitzhugh wrote nearly a hundred books for boys; most of them, and certainly all his earliest efforts, were set in forests, mountains, backwoods, alongside rivers, etc.



THE THUNDER CAME IN GREAT BOOMING CRASHES.
The X Bar X Boys at Rustlers' Gap. Frontispiece (Page 91)

It was an age of exploration. The North Pole was achieved in 1909 and the South Pole in 1911. The Don Sturdy books picked up this interest, building upon earlier series featuring characters with descriptive names like Dave Dashaway. The real life Richard Halliburton (see Fred's article in the Issue #34 of The Review, summer 1998) became immensely popular in the 1920s-1930s through his series of books that related his escapades of world travel.

The X Bar X Boys series (1926-1942) was rip-snortin' with adventure but also chock-full of the “purple prose” of the praise of the “wild west” with its limitless horizons, rocky peaks, and pristine forests.

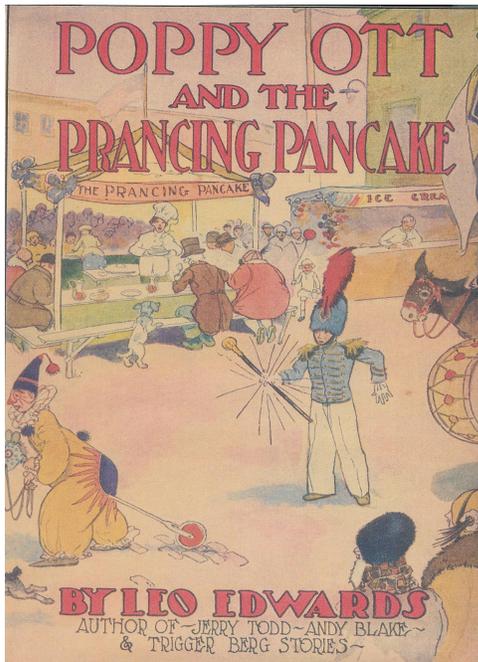
Simple and Solid America

American life in the first half of the twentieth century was generally conservative. The wealthy, at least, could send their children—boys, mostly, I suppose—to boarding or prep schools. The Rover Boys and the Mercer Boys (1929-1933) began their adventures in such places. Prohibition lasted from 1920 to 1933, part of a worldwide movement at the time, though little referenced in series books. I recall an obscure mention of illegal alcoholic beverages in *What Happened at Midnight*.

Small town life was picturesque and attractive even as, or because, the population began to shift to big cities. Automobiles shared the road with horses. Boys wore caps and ties even when they went out to play; they drove jalopies but also had barns and horses.



THE OLD GEEZER WAS FEEDING RAW LIVER TO THE BIGGEST TURTLE THAT I EVER SET EYES ON.
Poppy Ott and the Prancing Pancake. Frontispiece (Page 2)



Most popular series of the time reflected all of this. The Hardy Boys had a barn at the back of their home, and Chet Morton lived on a farm. The Mill Creek Irregulars (see my article in issue #41 of *The Review*, spring 2007), although written in the late 1950s to 1970, were set in the 1920s when the author had been a boy. The highly popular Jerry Todd, Poppy Ott, and related books by Leo Edwards were steeped in this atmosphere, and Capwell Wyckoff's books radiate the warmth of small town America with piquant skill.

Popular Fiction

Pulp fiction found a wide market from the 1920s to the 1950s—in books, magazines, radio serials, and movies. Science fiction, after the introduction by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, became widespread. Mysteries became increasingly popular, and a number of juvenile mystery series were launched. The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Judy Bolton, the Dana Girls were the most popular.

Adventure stories were not far behind mysteries for popularity. Hal Keen, one of the last series produced by Percy Keese Fitzhugh, was an accomplished escaper. The Barbara Ann series of the early 1930s is a worthy example of the genre. There were many others.



The First Demise

The stock market crashed in 1929, which ushered in the Great Depression of the 1930s. (A photograph of a street on “Black Friday” in October 1929 is to the left.) The fourth decade of the twentieth century is a sad tale of bank failures, bread lines, widespread unemployment, the dust bowl, and migration westward. As the chart shows, the economic collapse brought about the premature demise of many series. Only a few of the hardiest (pun intended) survived.

The Depression was followed by the Second World War. The economy picked up in many ways but there was still rationing of many necessities. Many series that continued were printed on

substandard paper. Some war-oriented series were brought to print in that era with tales of young soldiers and pilots, but I am not familiar with them. Some of the major series such as the Hardy Boys just ignored the war. Tom Swift, who had made huge contributions to the war effort in 1916-1918 (War Tank, etc.) came to an end when the Second World War began.

Margaret Sutton in her Judy Bolton series addressed the war issue in a clever fashion by having her hero serve in the FBI rather than in the armed forces. This encouraged patriotism (as was strongly expected by publishers and the public) without overly dating the books or having to introduce battlefield scenes.

At the end of the war, only a few series were still going, but the time was ripe for a resurgence of the genre.

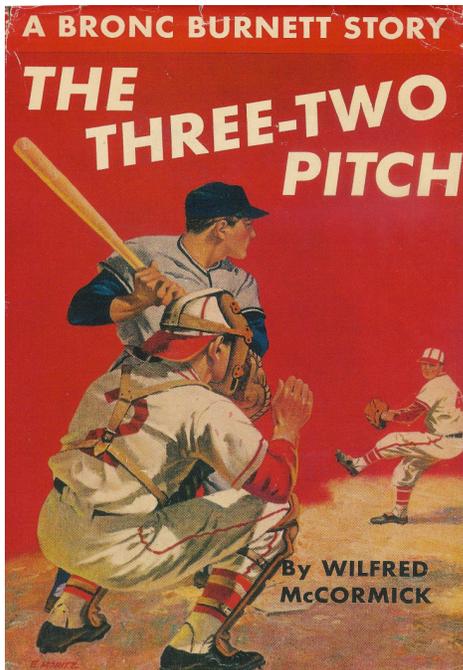
The Second Series Book Era: From the Late 1940s to the Late 1960s

At the LaCrosse conference on series books held in Wisconsin in June 1984, in a presentation titled, “Social Values in Series Books”, the author of the Rick Brant series, Hal Goodwin, reflected on the era in which he grew up¹.

“Times have changed. If you’ll forgive me, I’d like to point out *how much* times have changed. ... We were before television, before penicillin, polio shots, antibiotics, and Frisbees; before frozen food; nylon, Dacron, Xerox; ... we were before radar, fluorescent lights, credit cards, ballpoint pens. For us, timesharing



Policewomen confront four female bathers for disobeying an edict banning abbreviated attire at Balboa Beach, California, 1922.



meant togetherness, not computers. A chip was a piece of wood. Hardware meant hardware, and software wasn’t even a word. ... We were before Leonard Bernstein, yogurt, Ann Landers, plastics, hairdryers, the 40-hour-work week, and the minimum wage. We got married first and then lived together; how quaint can you be? In our time closets were for clothes, not for coming out of... Bunnies were small rabbits. Rabbits were not Volkswagens. We were before Grandma Moses and Frank Sinatra and cup-sizing for bras.”

Though times indeed have changed, the years after the Second World War was a good time for a revival of series books. Although they retained many of the values of the previous era, they were also firmly ensconced in their time. Many new series began and their popularity quickly became widespread. Wartime rationing had ended, soldiers had come home, got married, and began to produce the generation that

¹ Track #8, 5:48-7:47

came to be called “baby boomers”; the Great Depression was history, and television was not yet a major player.

As the chart shows, the “golden era” of series books began with a well, bang. Series books exploded in the late 1940s and early '50s. New series were generated for the baby boomers, the first American generation to grow up with abundance. Sports series like Bronc Burnett, Chip Hilton, and Frenchy Beaumont came out, pushing good sportsmanship and good clean living while still remaining fiercely competitive.

Mystery and adventure series of very high quality got started: Roger Baxter, Rick Brant, Ken Holt, Tom Quest were new names for American youth to become acquainted with.

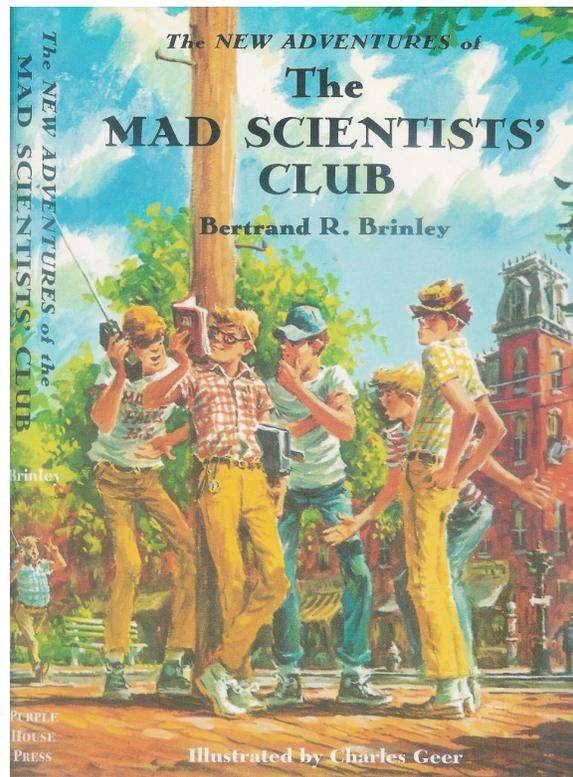
Space series were a new genre, with Tom Corbett and Dig Allen and others entertaining the youth of the Space Age. The 36-volume Winston science fiction series (1952-1961) was extremely popular. Tom Swift Jr. was launched just twelve years after his father's series had ended with a whimper, and had the distinction of being the longest lasting of the classic series of that generation, its last book coming out three years after Rick Brant had bit the dust.

After the Second World War

In a few of the series there is clear reference to recent wartime history. Cherry Ames is one of the few series to have been born during the war and then survive into the next generation. In Rick Brant, readers learn early in the first volume that Scotty is an ex-marine who served heroically in the south Pacific (where author Hal Goodwin had served himself). In the fourth Rick, *100 Fathoms Under*, published only two years after the end of the war, the Japanese character Hashimo is presented as a deceptive, contemptible villain. A few other series mention military personnel who have recently returned home but these are minor scenes.

The 1950s: An Age of Innocence

After the suffering and deprivation of the Depression and the costliness of the war, it may seem surprising that the subsequent years were as upbeat as they were. Or maybe that makes complete sense.



The 1950s were similar to the time fifty years earlier: an age of optimism and advances in technology for the masses. It was a “can do” era, a “push button” era. The nation was still generally conservative, noted for what later generations were to call “family values”. The rampant racism of the era was not challenged until later, and the always-present poverty and abuse within families was just not mainstream news.



Divorce was rare. There were societal roles for mothers and fathers, men and women. Men, especially fathers, were quiet, strong, reserved. Mothers cooked and entertained and ran the home, although some had jobs, and not just taking in laundry or running shops, either.

There was the Cold War, Sputnik, the Space Race, the advent of popular television featuring westerns, comedies, children’s shows like the Mickey Mouse Club and Howdy Doody—in black and white, of course. Disneyland opened in 1955, as did the first franchised McDonald’s.



Small town America made a comeback in series books, with The Mad Scientists Club, Brains Benton, Ted Wilford, and others replacing Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott. One can easily imagine these lads completely at home in Andy Griffith's Mayberry. Even Tom Swift Jr. lived in a "small town". The endpapers to his series show the thoughtful inventor surrounded by scientific paraphernalia, looking out a window and doubtless dreaming of the future. This seems to me the quintessential image of 1950s youth.



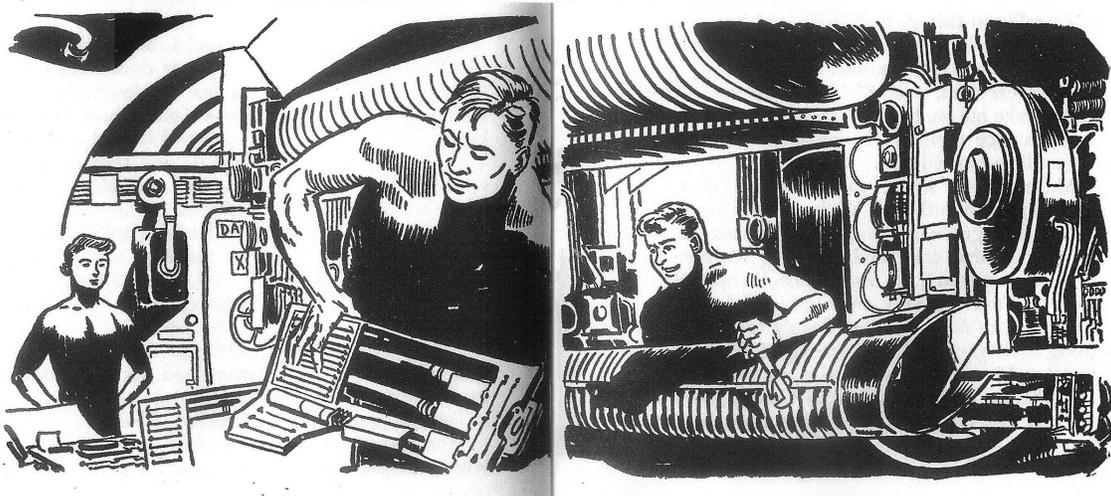
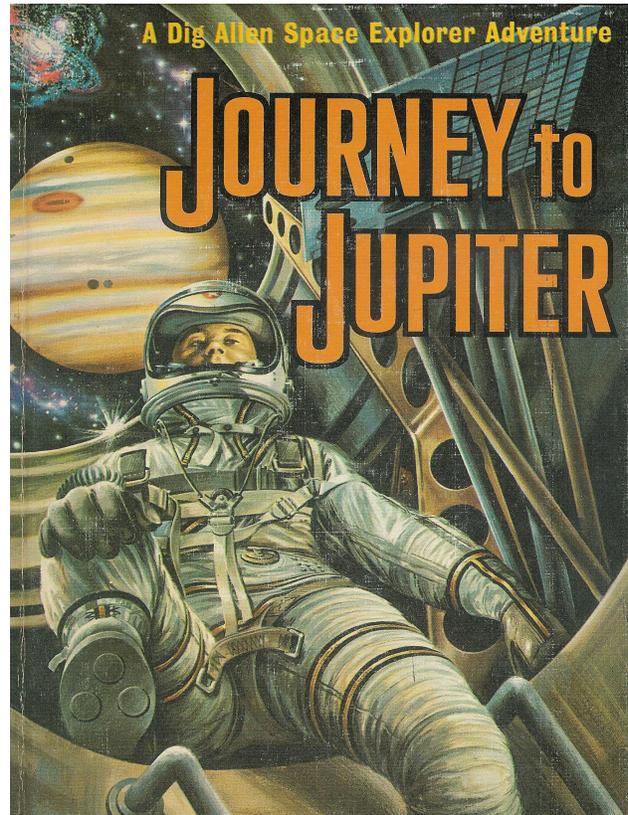
The 1960s: The Space Race and The Cold War

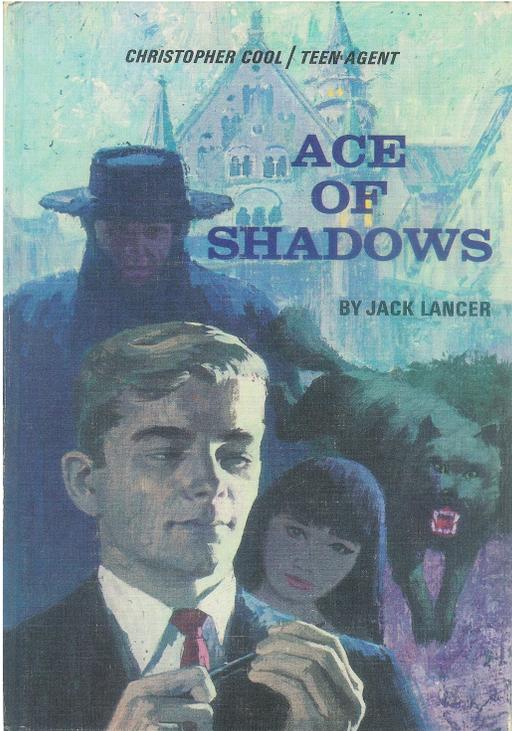
One could classify the Tom Swift Jr. series (1954-1971) as science fiction without too much stretching. This series, written in the years of the space race and the cold war, is most definitely a product of its time. Young Tom's adversaries, the Brungarians, are clearly eastern European iron curtain types that readers of the books would not have any difficulty morphing into Soviets.

It has been pointed out more than once that the bad guys in *Assignment in Space With Rip Foster* (also known as *Rip Foster Rides the Gray Planet*) are identified as the Consolidation of People's Governments or "Consops", but commonly known as "Connies." This book first appeared in 1952. Again, readers of that era need no more than a gram or two of imagination to hear this word as "Commies," the slang term for Communists.

In the early 1960s, the Biff Brewster series took note of the cold war, especially in its particularly strong entry *Mystery of the Chinese Ring*.

The popularity of James Bond was not lost to the publishers of series books, who produced the Christopher Cool series in the late 1960s. I find it odd and amusing that Christopher Cool wears a suit and tie to show how "cool" and "grown up" he is, and how serious his business; a tie was standard dress for young men half a century earlier, but definitely not the youth of the 1960s. The cover of *Ace of Shadows*, the fourth book in the series, is modeled after James Bond—even with a girl, and the teenage hero looking dashing and suave in the face of danger. One may assume that his clove cigarette and Shirley Temple are just out of sight.





business move if the children of the 1960s were to read the books. I read the original text Hardy Boys in the 1950s when I was a preteen and found them dated and quaint, but this added to my enjoyment of the books. Admittedly, though, I was a nerdish bookworm.

The mainstream juveniles who were not far behind me in age had shorter attention spans than their forebears, they didn't read as much, and their vocabulary was unsophisticated. Series books had to compete with television and an overall shift in society's values. The stories were dumbed down, modernized, and shortened. The plots were far more action filled and the charm and descriptions and homeliness of the classic stories were thrown out. Artwork was cheapened or eliminated altogether.

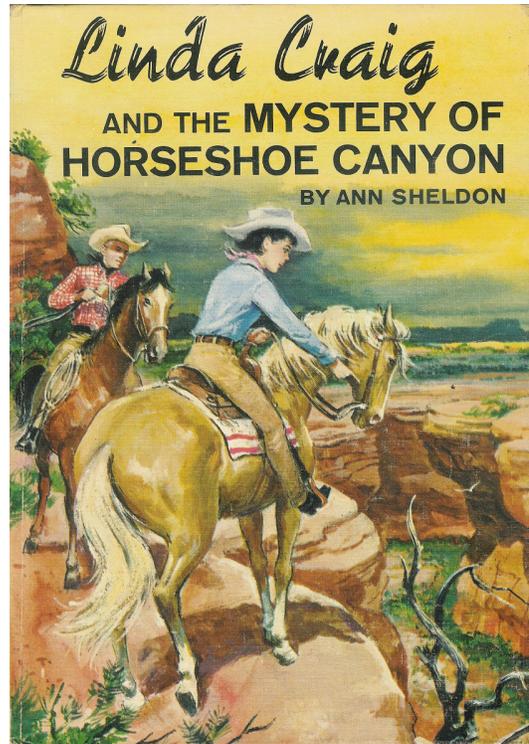
Perhaps this shows the influence of the culture on series books more than anything else. The appeal to wholesomeness, being "wide awake", and the practice of virtue were sacrificed to the demand for

The West

Although the 1950s and '60s were noted for scientific endeavor and the space race, Westerns were the rage on television, and there were a few series dedicated to the western theme: Linda Craig, Bret King, and the books by Troy Nesbit, to name a few. Whitman Publishing produced a number of volumes that were spin-offs of television shows like Cheyenne and Fury.

The Writing on the Wall

The second series book era was glorious but short-lived. The near ideal conditions for the revival of series books lasted less than fifteen years. The Stratemeyer Syndicate began to rewrite its leading series at the end of the 1950s. The move has been deplored by the real fans ever since, and for good reason, but it must be grudgingly admitted that it was a sage



instant gratification. Very few young people today can enjoy the classic series since such enjoyment requires skills and competences that are no longer mainstream.

The Last Whimper

If the Rover Boys was the first series, what was the last? Brains Benton (1959-1961) has been described as “the last of the best” (See Don Holbrook’s article in issue #17 of *The Review*, summer 1986). Wynn and Lonny (1975-1978) was the last Stratemeyer series. (See my article in issue #38 of *The Review*, July 2005.) The article on *The Three Investigators* (43 volumes, 1964-1987) that Seth Smolinske and I wrote (see issue #40 of *The Review*, spring 2007) suggests that that series could be considered the last since its final book is closest to our time, though the quality of the series had been fading for years before it finally shut down. I refuse to count the *Three Investigators Find-Your Fate* books, the *Hardy Boys Casefiles*, etc.

The article on the *Three Investigators* closed with the suggestion that a movie might be in the works. The *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* were portrayed in movies, but the rumors of movie deals for *Rick Brant*, *Tom Swift*, etc. came to nothing. However, I am glad to report that thus far two movies have been made of *Three Investigator* books, and they’re not half-bad. You won’t find them in the United States, however, except that Disney showed them on television in March 2010.

This shows that there is still some life in the old genre yet, but though there will always be stories of adventure and mystery, I think it’s a safe wager that never again will books that feature such stories be the primary appeal to the young. (See my article “*Series Books, Yesterday, Today, and Yet To Come*”, published in *The Review* #38, July 2005.) The culture has moved on. Series books are history.

Dates of death of primary series book authors

This list shows that most of the authors who once tapped out our favorite stories on old typewriters have died. There was a smattering of departures through the 1970s, then the pace picked up beginning in the 1980s, only tapering off in the mid-2000s. These folks made history, and we owe them a lot.

5/10/1930	Edward Stratemeyer [founder]
9/28/1944	Edward Edson Lee [Jerry Todd, Poppy Ott, etc.]
7/5/1950	Percy Keese Fitzhugh [Scouting books, Hal Keen, etc.]
1/10/1953	Capwell Wyckoff [Mercer Boys, Mystery Hunters, etc.]
9/4/1962	Fran Striker [Lone Ranger, Tom Quest]
11/6/1962	Howard Garis [Tom Swift]
5/2/1969	Robert Arthur [Three Investigators]
7/4/1971	August Derleth [Mill Creek Irregulars]
9/6/1977	Leslie McFarlane [Hardy Boys]
3/27/1982	Harriet Stratemeyer Adams [father's successor]
3/18/1983	Norvin Pallas [Ted Wilford]
4/2/1985	Squire Omar Barker [Bret King]
12/6/1985	Walter Gibson [Biff Brewster]
2/10/1986	Helen Wells [Cherry Ames, Vicki Barr, etc.]
2/18/1990	Harold Goodwin [Rick Brant]
4/1/1990	Charles Spain Verral [Brains Benton]
7/5/1990	Joseph Greene [Dig Allen]
3/19/1994	James Duncan Lawrence [Tom Swift, Jr.]
5/27/1994	Mary Virginia Carey [Three Investigators]
10/20/1994	Bertrand Brinley [The Mad Scientists Club]
4/30/1995	Franklin Folsom [Troy Nesbit books]
7/7/1999	Julie Tatham [Cherry Ames, Vicki Barr, Trixie Belden, etc.]
12/16/1999	Beryl Epstein [Roger Baxter, Ken Holt, etc.]
1/31/2000	Sam Epstein [Roger Baxter, Ken Holt, etc.]
6/21/2001	Margaret Sutton [Judy Bolton]
5/28/2002	Mildred Wirt Benson [Nancy Drew, etc.]
8/20/2005	Dennis Lynds [Three Investigators]
9/27/2006	Peter Harkins [Rick Brant, Biff Brewster]