

WHAT MAKES FOR A FAVORITE BOOK?

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Every fan of series books has particular series and particular single titles that he or she describes as a “favorite”; if you’re a series book aficionado at all, there are surely some you prefer to others. There are some that are nearly everyone’s favorites for reasons that are obvious: they are well written. But as I think about it, somehow that description doesn’t quite cover all the factors. Anyone who wishes to delve a little deeper has to ponder the question of what makes for a favorite book, or series?

When I answer this question I have to think about what I like in a series book—what makes one better than another. Probably what I look for is pretty much what most people look for:

First, the plot has to be exciting and fairly believable. The author has to show enough respect for the reader not to provide trash. The premise of the story must be good. When the Hardy Boys look for a hidden treasure “in the tower” it’s good; it engages the readers, who follow Frank and Joe along the trail of locating the treasure that we know must exist. But finding costumed pirates (*Twisted Claw*) in the middle of the ocean whose brotherhood is marked by branding the fingers of their lackeys and which is governed by a “king” is, well, not so good. Maybe children of the era in which that book was written would find it engaging, but it’s not a plot that will provide more than shallow thrills.

The number of coincidences will be very small. Coincidences do happen in real life, so putting one or two in a book is okay, but not as a normal plot device, especially when it wouldn’t take much effort to avoid one. Similarly, depending on “hunches” is usually lazy writing; in too many series books, the protagonist has a “hunch” that leads him or her forward in solving the mystery. That is insulting to the reader; let the detective do the detective work; that’s why we bought the book.

Of course, sometimes a hunch is okay. People do have hunches in real life, but they’re not something that just “comes” like a random idea—a real hunch is an insight that comes when unconscious mental processes support conscious reasoning. That kind of hunch is in the same category as what happens when one “sleeps on it” or tries to think of something that’s elusive but will “come to you” later. If a series book writer wants to use a “hunch”, let it be this kind of thing.

The characters must be well developed and not just two-dimensional. Over-perfection removes a character from believability and, at best, sets up an unachievable standard. A character with a flaw, like Mary Louise Gay’s occasional lapses of judgment or Steve

Grendon's (Mill Creek series) once-in-a-while boneheaded decisions add verisimilitude as well as entertainment.

Characters, usually supportive characters and not the protagonists, can be known for certain distinctive attributes (Chow Winkler's loud shirts, Aunt Gertrude's dictatorial style, etc.) as long as that's not all we know about them. Seeing a lot more to Chet and Aunt Gertrude in *The Yellow Feather Mystery*, for example, was a great plus in that story. The use of dialect can add a lot to a story if it is skillfully done; it's part of adding characterization. Sometimes people aver that the use of dialect is racist, but I disagree strongly. (For more on that topic, see the article I wrote in issue #43 of the Review, November 2008).

The writing must be good quality, with good use of vocabulary, skillfully-done descriptions that evoke a setting (like the opening paragraph of *The Mystery of Cabin Island*), and conversations that are believable and make sense. In older books, the sense of history or "quaintness" should not interfere with enjoying the story today. I like a lot of "local color" and scenes that evoke the pleasures of life of several decades ago, such as the Hardy Boys' walk through farmland and woods to get to Willow River for a Saturday afternoon of fun in *The Secret of the Old Mill* and their conversation with Amos Grice at the little store in *The Mystery of Cabin Island*, etc. I think that the mysteries by Capwell Wyckoff are at the top of the list of series that present this feature consistently well.

Even the best series books can have flaws, of course. Most fans of the Hardy Boys put *The Mystery of Cabin Island* at the top of their list of favorite Hardy adventures; but even in that compellingly atmospheric and well told story, why didn't John Sparewell just write to Elroy Jefferson from his deathbed, or have his lawyer do it, and tell him where the stamps were hidden? Sparewell's nephew, Hanleigh, made numerous fruitless trips to the island trying to locate the stamps and take them for himself, and spent a lot of money doing it, when all he had to do was knock the chimney down. He had enough information to know that the stamp collection was hidden somewhere inside it.

These attributes of a good story are pretty obvious. But there is also another factor that is hard to define but which will still cause a fan to select a book as a favorite, or think that somebody else is crazy for having a favorite that he himself thinks is a dud. Maybe you can call it the nostalgia factor. Sometimes people like a certain book just because it was important to them at a special time in their life—reading it while being home sick from school for several days, treasuring it because it was given by a beloved family members or friend, or something like that. Emotional attachment can maybe override some of the more objective factors in deciding whether a book is entertaining or not. Sometimes the best answer to why someone likes a certain book is just, "because".