

# The Checkered Flag

*Last Product of Stratemeyer Syndicate is a Winner*

*The Wynn and Lonny Racing Series*

By David M. Baumann

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For copies of this astonishingly excellent series book fanzine  
and information on subscriptions (free—donation expected), contact:

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*2,712 words*

In September 2004 I was at a gathering of a dozen or so series book aficionados. During the gala, books were sold or traded, and a few were being given away. Jim Ogden handed me a copy of *Road Race of Champions*, by Eric Speed. It was the second entry of six in the Wynn and Lonny Racing Series. I had not heard of this series before, and had never seen any of the volumes in a used bookstore.

It was a pity, because it's a good series, and I'm grateful to Jim for his gift. It appeared 1975-1978. They are picture covers, of course, and sold for \$2.50—one of mine still has the price sticker on the cover. Since the Wynn and Lonnys were produced in the era when series book sales were in a decline, they must have had small print runs. Nevertheless, once I began looking for them the first five books were easy to find, and inexpensive.

Wynn Redford and Lonny Morris are eighteen-year-old North Carolina boys with a passion for auto racing. They are attractive figures, honest and hard working, and undaunted by misfortune, strong competition, vandalism, or malicious attack. In each book except the last, they enter several auto races. They don't win all of them, but they do win a few and always come out well. In between races, they build, design, rebuild, repair, and redesign their cars. In the course of their racing, they have adventures, solve mysteries, foil nefarious foes, and trump bad sports.

The author, Eric Speed (obviously a Stratemeyer house name), clearly knew his material. He was up on how cars run, how they're made, and what it takes to race them. He was familiar with racetracks around the country. Racing fans could delight in a world that was expertly described, but readers like myself who go to the market in their Toyota and know little more than how to put gas into the tank would not be left in the dust when they read these stories. The writing is at or near top quality in series book writing, all the more

impressive since these were produced in the mid-1970s—far into the television era and after most of the classic series books had run out of gas and sputtered to their last stop.

A tip from a friend led me to “Eric Speed”. There were two authors for the Wynn and Lonny Racing Series: Sylvia Wilkinson and Bill Fishburne, who are friends. I wrote to both of them and had responses within three or four days. Both were easy to reach and glad to talk about their connection with the series. Both provided telephone numbers and I had friendly conversations with them. Sylvia, it turns out, lives 35 miles from me in California. Both authors reported that mine was the first inquiry they’d ever had about the series. Sylvia is a writer and lifelong racing enthusiast. Bill has had a number of jobs but has never been far from racing.

Sylvia’s pleasant North Carolina drawl told me how Wynn and Lonny must have sounded—very warm and approachable. She said, “Actually I wrote 1, 2, 3 and 6. An old friend, Bill Fishburne, who used to write for *Car and Driver*, wrote 4 and 5 because I was too busy with my racing work.” The first time I called she was out and I left a message. When I reached her the next day, she said, “Sorry I missed your call. I was motorcycle riding yesterday...too pretty to stay inside.” (Whew! Sylvia is now 64 years old.)

Sylvia knows racing and auto mechanics thoroughly, and conveyed that knowledge well in her writing for juveniles. She is a long-time companion of a professional race driver, and for more than forty years has traveled around the world on racing business. She told me that during the introductory phone call she received about thirty years ago from Andrew Svenson of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, as they were talking a loud whine from an engine suddenly drowned out their conversation. It screeched in the background for several minutes while Svenson waited patiently on the line. When the whine finally died down, he said, “Wow! You’re really right on the scene, aren’t you?”

She wondered at first if the call were a practical joke played by one of her friends, but after being convinced it was genuine, she gladly accepted the offer to write a racing series for the Syndicate. Over the next year or two she had several visits with Svenson. She reported that Svenson was friendly and eager to help, in spite of being terminally ill with the bone cancer that eventually took his life in August 1975.

Sylvia is a woman of multiple interests and skills. In addition to a lifelong interest and participation in auto racing, she has been a tennis champion and has authored a good number of books, most of which are related to racing but also several novels. These do not exhaust her talents, as she is also an accomplished artist in oils and even had a television show dedicated to teaching viewers how to paint.

Bill, now 62, had a deep radio announcer voice. In fact, he *is* a radio announcer! He said, “I came into the Wynn and Lonny series thanks to my friendship with Sylvia Wilkinson, a well-known writer then and now. We were friends, and tended to have some common interests. One of those was sports car racing. I saw her at races through the years (1961-1976) and we had many friends in common.

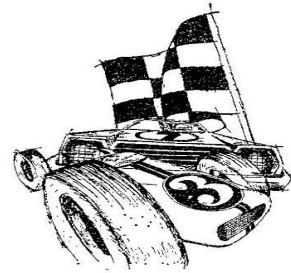
“One day I received a call either from Sylvia or from Andy Svenson. I don’t remember who, but I do recall the conversation: ‘Bill, have you ever written anything juvenile?’ I replied, ‘not since I left work today,’ referring to the things I wrote as a public relations representative at B. F. Goodrich.

“I hadn’t a clue as to who Andy Svenson was but a week or so later he offered me the opportunity to write a Wynn and Lonny book. All this, mind you, based on Sylvia’s recommendation. I wrote two books in the series. I had no further involvement with the project. I never met Andy, and understand he died in the late ’70s.

“I am a radio talk show host in Asheville, North Carolina, and sometimes I have the opportunity to do public speaking. I find it humorous that when I occasionally note I have written two children’s books, someone will inevitably look it up and say they can’t find any books listed under my name. I enjoy telling them, ‘Look under my other name: Eric Speed.’”

Being a series in the 1970s made it possible for Wynn and Lonny to feature an addition to boys’ books that would not have been possible in earlier series: girls. Wynn and Lonny are almost always accompanied by Nancy-Rae Eubanks and Ingrid (“Inky”) Larsson, both of whom are accomplished mechanics, motorcycle racers, and race drivers themselves. Sylvia said that Nancy-Rae was based on a real person. The girls are appealing characters and add much to the stories without hogging the attention. Bill reported that there was to be no romance. The boys and the girls are just friends.

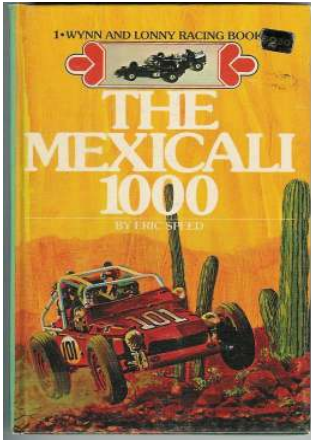
The Wynn and Lonny series does not contain any internal artwork unless you count the endpapers—a small abstract of a couple of racecars under a checkered flag.



The colorful covers portray striking scenes of auto racing. The first two books have seventeen chapters and the last four have eighteen. Sylvia said she could write a book in 36 days—a chapter a day with another day to revise it. “It was easy!” she said.

Bill took longer to write his two books, with a girlfriend to do the proofreading and final typing. He reported that the Stratemeyer fee at the time was \$2000—a big jump from the payment made in the early years of the century, though I imagine that the buying power was about the same. Sylvia and Bill said that they had to make the same agreement as all Stratemeyer authors—they could not tell anyone that they were “Eric Speed”, and they gave up all rights to royalties. As in all the Stratemeyer works, theirs was a “work for hire”.

Here are brief synopses of the six books:



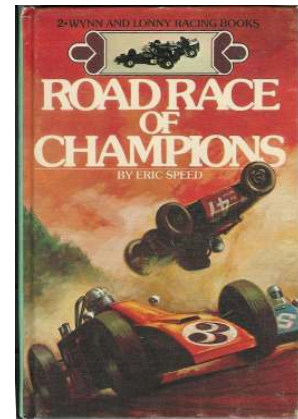
### 1. *The Mexicali 1000* (1975)

In the first offering of this series, Wynn and Lonny drive to California from their home state to enroll in a race school. Upon arrival they find they'd been tricked. They had sent in their registration money and driven across the country only to find that there was no such school. They land on their feet, however, by finding jobs in a drag shop. When they hear about the Mexicali 1000, a grueling off-road race in Baja California, they determine to enter. The excitement of the race not being enough for the story, they are also involved unwittingly in a war between rival smuggling gangs in Mexico as well as criminals from north of the border.

Sylvia told me that she intended to call the book *The Baja 1000* after an actual event, but organizers of the real race wouldn't permit the use of their name. She said, "Apparently they preferred to hang on to control over their name than get free advertising to juveniles, many of whom were likely up-and-coming racing and mechanic hopefuls." Added to the knowledge that she goes motorcycle racing in her sixties, this observation was one among several that grew my admiration for Ms. Wilkinson!

### 2. *Road Race of Champions* (1975)

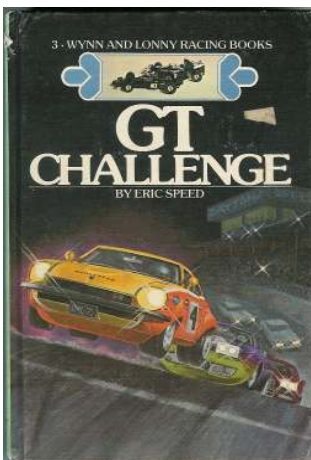
In this book, Wynn and Lonny build their own Formula Vee racer and set out on the circuit of competition racing in the South. Puzzling car trouble that shouldn't be there and problems with sponsorship due to unscrupulous competition add mystery to the excitement of the races. Lots of details about auto mechanics and racing make this story believable, informative, and exciting. It is eminently satisfying when the bad guys get their comeuppance, truth outs, and justice prevails. It doesn't happen often enough in real life.



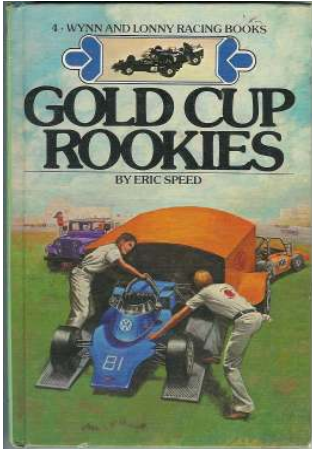
### 3. *GT Challenge* (1976)

In the third volume, the boys get a good buy on a Datsun (there's a name out of the past) 260Z to enter the higher echelon GT competition, but find out that their remarkable bargain was only possible because the car had been stolen. Their sponsor, auto parts designer and engineer Jeff Kuralt, makes good on the deal by buying the car from its real owner, who then joins the boys for a season to help prepare the car for racing. Along the way they search for a swindler who's taking paid orders illegally for a new device that Jeff has invented but not yet patented. The lads are befriended by a racer who's also a famous television actor, and who is opposed by unscrupulous opponents to the point of attempted murder. Lots of good

adventure and tense moments in this book.



#### 4. *Gold Cup Rookies* (1976)



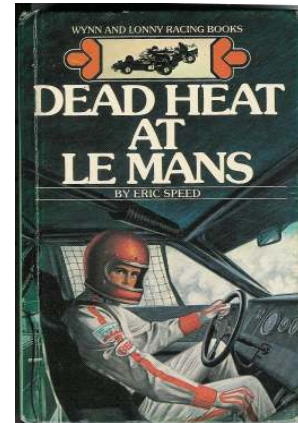
Beginning with this volume, Sylvia being otherwise occupied, Bill Fishburne took over the writing of the series. Bill said that he wrote *Gold Cup Rookies* using most of an outline provided by Andrew Svenson. In this entry, the lads continue their racing adventures, gaining expertise in driving and mechanical ingenuity. Once again they upgrade their car and therefore qualify for more demanding races. They face several enemies who sabotage their vehicle at night and put them in dire danger on the track. There is also espionage and plenty of downright bad sportsmanship and dirty dealing. The action is non-stop. Curiously, some of the bad guys are identified but never publicly branded or punished—not typical in series book, but all too common in real life.

As a side note, there is an admirable blow against racism in this story. One cameo figure is Fred Anthony, a black race driver who makes his living as a radio announcer. He comes into a race after his listeners decide to sponsor him and his radio station puts up major funding. During the race, he performs a life-saving heroic act after another racecar crashes and bursts into flame. His deed is the most heroic of any in the entire series, though there are others that come close. Fred comes across as a compellingly attractive yet very humble character.

#### 5. *Dead Heat at Le Mans* (1977)

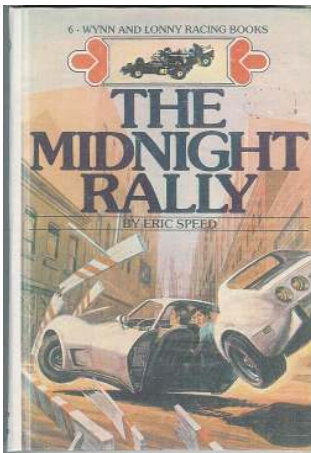
Bill said, “A few months or a year after *Gold Cup Rookies*, whatever the time frame was, Andy was sick with cancer and asked me for an outline for another book. I created *Dead Heat at Le Mans* and finished it in about four months.” This book, then, is completely the creation of its author.

In this second offering by Bill Fishburne, the lads are sponsored by Nova, a corporation trying to develop synthetic oil. Their raw material is cellulose from trees, but the company is hoping eventually to be able to use “mesquite plants from Texas, corn stalks from Indiana, and cotton plants from Louisiana.” Their sponsor adds, “If we could produce a good synthetic oil, we wouldn’t have to worry about the Mideast so much.” (Was this book really published as long ago as 1977? Did any of our current oil company executives ever read it?)



Wynn and Lonny use the synthetic oil in various races throughout North America as they prepare for the arduous 24-hour race in France at Le Mans. The story is action-packed with sabotage, threats, attempted murder, and even the kidnapping of a team member to force them out of the race. The motive for these reprehensible activities is a puzzle, but it all comes together at the end. I thought that this book suffered from the constriction of being held to no more

than 180 pages. This is a fine tale that could have really let loose if the author had been granted the old page count of 215.



#### 6. *The Midnight Rally* (1978)

With this final book in the Wynn and Lonny Racing series, the primary author climbs back into the driver's seat. It becomes evident in the first chapter that Sylvia not only knows racing but also Hollywood filmmaking. In this story, all four of the young people are hired by a film company to do stunt driving for a comedic movie called "Midnight Rally" in which various car drivers and motorcyclists engage in a breakneck race across the country, wreaking havoc as they go. The story is similar to that in the actual movie "Gumball Rally" that came out in 1976.

There are a lot of excitement and action in the book. In addition, there is a long-time unsolved mystery whose gradual unraveling makes this one fine story. At the end of the tale the boys receive a substantial financial reward. "Wowee!" Lonny cried out. "That's enough to put down on a new car for the next racing season!" Whatever that racing season held would not be revealed to readers of the Wynn and Lonny Racing Series, for with those words the series, and the Stratemeyer Syndicate productions, came to an end.

*The Midnight Rally* is the last book the Syndicate put out before its demise in 1984, when the whole kit and caboodle was sold to Simon & Schuster. It is unusual in that the copyright was claimed by The Stratemeyer Syndicate. Almost all the Grosset & Dunlap books I own are copyrighted under the G&D name, although there are some exceptions. Ken Holt was copyrighted by Bruce Campbell, and the Tom Corbett series was copyrighted by Rockhill Radio, but no other book I own is openly claimed by The Stratemeyer Syndicate. The veil of secrecy that lasted about seventy years finally came off in the last book.

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Although the first five books are easy to find and very inexpensive, the last is utterly elusive. It took me six months to find a copy, but I was delighted when I could finally complete the lineup by setting it on my shelf beside its predecessors. With *The Midnight Rally*, the Stratemeyer Syndicate crosses the finish line as the checkered flag waves. After dumbing down so many of their best offerings in the 1960s, I'm glad the Syndicate ended well.