

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT SERIES BOOKS by James Dawson

Series books have been popular with kids for a hundred years. We have all read or heard of Nancy Drew and the Hardy boys, but those two are just the tip of the iceberg. Series books are as popular with collectors as they have ever been and the interest is still growing. It seems like every kid read, traded and collected these books only to find out, years later, that their mothers had, just as attentively, thrown them out. Many collectors buy these books to attempt to capture a lost part of their youth, or to give them to their kids as wholesome reading.

Young readers still love them. I literally just had to stop writing that last sentence to sell a Nancy Drew #10 to a cute little girl who was “hooked” on them. That is quite an endorsement for a series that first appeared in 1930!

Series books first started in the mid 1800s. Starting in 1868, Horatio Alger Jr. wrote an extremely popular run of books all of which had pretty much the same plot. A ragged, penniless boy comes to the big city and 200 pages later is rich. He wrote about a hundred of these by the turn of the century. His books aren't considered series books because, instead of say dozens of books with different plots featuring the same characters, Alger's books had dozens of different boys caught up in the same plot line. But Alger's books set the stage and showed that the market for these type books was enormous.

Edward Stratemeyer started the series bonanza about 1900 with his Old Glory Series about the Spanish American war. In a few years, Stratemeyer literally couldn't write the books fast enough and formed a syndicate to produce them. At one point he had 19 different series books in the air. He would write an outline which was given to one of a number of writers who would then write the story. It's been said that he kept a room full of starving authors chained to their typewriters to crank these out while he prowled the aisles with a bullwhip, but that is certainly an exaggeration.

It wasn't long before others were writing and publishing series books, too, which were books targeted for every age and interest: stories about war, West Point, horses, dogs, canoeing, cowboys, nurses, motor boats, aeroplanes, baseball, football, scouting, naval cadets, space travel, young detectives and just about everything else to excite the imagination of young readers.

The Rover Boys, Tom Swift and the Bobbsey Twins books were very early and very popular. Beginning in 1910, the inventive Tom Swift made Tom Edison seem quite the dullard with his airship, photo telephone, electric rifle, magnetic silencer, television detector and other breakthroughs. Swift's companion Mr. Damon is remembered for such expressions as “Bless my corn plasters, Tom!”

Most of the child characters were frozen in time at a specific age and never grew up, but one circa 1900 girl's series about Elsie Dinsmore took her from childhood through a dozen books until she was a grandmother. Elsie was a very good child, almost too good. In one book she reprimanded her father for doing something so frivolous as playing the piano on Sunday. Elsie was quite a little saint and there is certainly something to be said for anything that has a positive influence on young minds, but an elderly customer who reread one of these books she loved as a child, now found Elsie a little bit of a pain. My apologies to readers of the Elsie Dinsmore series.

The identification of a series book is generally considered to be a run of titles centered on a certain character or characters usually in particular location. In their *A Collector's Guide To Hardcover Boys' Series Books* E. Christian Mattson and Thomas B. Davis list over 900 different series. When you consider that these 900+ series books then consist of anywhere from two or three to forty of fifty or more titles each, then it starts to get serious. And those are just the ones for boys! One collector tried to collect all the different hardcover series boys books printed after 1890, but died in the attempt.

Many people who love these stories are quite surprised when they find out that the "authors" of some of these books were not real people, but one or more members of Stratemeyer's stable. Carolyn Keene who wrote the Nancy Drew series and Victor Appleton who wrote the Tom Swift books did not exist. Victor Appleton even had a "son" Victor Appleton II who continued the series with the adventures of Tom Swift Jr. And so the son of a fictitious author wrote books about the son of a fictitious character. Ouch! my head hurts.

About 23 of the original 30 Drews were written by journalist Mildred Benson from plot outlines by Harriet Adams. She was paid a flat \$125 per story and she was happy to get it. Nancy Drew books have sold over 200 million copies in 17 languages and are still in print. if she had been paid a royalty, she probably would have ended up as wealthy as Richie Rich. *Farah's Guide* by David Farah is the ultimate source for dating the nearly 80 different Drew books, some of which appeared in as many as twenty different formats down through the years.

Early titles had a dust jacket, but by the '50s or '60s, the jacket was dropped in favor of a colorful printed hardback picture cover and by the '70s or '80s they were paperbacks. The jacket design changed through the years too. Early jackets had a picture on the front panel and advertising on the back panel, but the spine was plain with just the printed title and author information. Later design jackets are called wrap arounds because the picture on the front panel wrapped around the spine. Later editions are also numbered as to which volume it is in the series. This is very useful when trying to keep track of a series which has dozens and dozens of titles in it. Recent printings of Hardys and Drews have stories which have been modernized and "improved" which is another reason why many people want the old ones. Applewood Books has done a good job reprinting many of these books in their original hardback format with the original dust jackets and stories.

Many of the publishers of these books were not careful to mark their first editions, so it can be a little tricky to distinguish the various printings from each other. A general rule is that if the book has a dust jacket which has a list of the other volumes in the series and your volume is the last one on that list, then it's probably a first edition. You usually can't depend on the list of titles printed in the book itself, either on the title page or a fly leaf because those lists would not be kept up to date. Also, some of the books have to be identified by how many books are listed for some of the other series. The copyright date alone is not enough to date the book since it would not change for many years.

These books also provided kids with interesting role models, although I wouldn't want to ride with Tailspin Tommy or be cared for after we crashed by nurse Cherry Ames (flight nurse, boarding school nurse, army nurse, camp nurse, veteran's nurse) who couldn't seem to hold a steady job. What if she was one of those serial killer nurses

who kept ahead of authorities by changing jobs often? After my suspicious death while under her care, I am sure that the *Three Investigators* could use the *Hardy Boys Detective Handbook* to track her down before she could flee on the *Black Stallion* to rendezvous with *Tom Corbett Space Cadet*, escape to another planet and become Cherry Ames Space Nurse.

I recently attended a series book show and sale in Charlottesville, Va. It was impressive not only to see so many old standby titles in such nice condition, but also the high level of interest both the dealers and collectors have in their treasures. One point that was hotly debated was if one person provided the plot outline for a book and someone else wrote it- who should get the credit for authorship? Which was more important writing the plot or the actual story? Of course, it depends on how extensive the plot outline was in the first place, but likely it is not an "either or" question and the answer is that it should be considered a collaboration.

Although serious collectors want first editions which for rare titles can cost hundreds of dollars, other collectors just want the particular editions that they grew up with which may cost only a few dollars. Collectors hunt down missing titles to fill in gaps in their collections with just as much dedication as kids did decades ago. These books will certainly provide wholesome entertainment for generations of kids and adults for the next hundred years.

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