# The Hardy Boys Short Guide

## The Hardy Boys by Franklin W. Dixon

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". 

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# Overview

The Hardy boys are active, inquisitive amateur detectives who become involved in all manner of local intrigue, involving thieves, kidnappers, counterfeiters, and thugs. They are always on a roller-coaster of danger, lurching from one precarious situation to another as they try to outwit criminals and solve mysteries.

Stratemeyer conceived of the series when he noticed how popular adult mystery stories had become in the 1920s. In a letter to Leslie McFarlane, he explained that "the growing boys of America might welcome similar fare." He was usually right in his predictions about what young customers would buy. To date, Hardy Boys books have sold over twenty-six million copies.

# About the Author

The Hardy Boys series, like most of the books produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, is a joint effort of in-house editors and ghost writers.

Behind the Hardy Boys, though, stood the figure of Edward Stratemeyer, who created the characters and devised an ingenious way to mass-produce and mass-distribute these inexpensive books for early adolescents. As ghost writer Leslie McFarlane said, Stratemeyer was "a Henry Ford of fiction for boys and girls." The series Stratemeyer originated has achieved an enduring place in the hearts and minds of millions of readers.

Edward Stratemeyer was born on October 4, 1862, in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

He received a high school education that was rounded out by private tutoring, and began writing stories in 1886 simply to pass the time while working in his brother's local tobacco store. One slow afternoon when few customers had come around, Stratemeyer started scrawling out a story on a piece of brown wrapping paper. He later submitted the story, entitled Golden Days, to a Philadelphia weekly for boys and received payment of seventy-five dollars. This humble beginning launched a highly successful publishing career.

Stratemeyer opened a stationery store in Newark but continued to write stories in his spare time, most of them modeled after the work of Horatio Alger, Jr., a popular nineteenth-century author.

Stratemeyer's tales, like Alger's, reflected a belief that anyone, even if they were extremely poor, could succeed in life through hard work and earnest endeavor.

Eventually, Stratemeyer's growing reputation as an author won him a position at the publishing house of Street & Smith as editor of a boys' weekly called Good News. The firm of Street & Smith, billed as the "Home of the Dime Novel," published the extremely popular Frank Merriwell and Nick Carter series for adolescent boys. Stratemeyer built up the circulation of Good News from a few thousand copies to over two hundred thousand copies. During this time, Stratemeyer turned out a book a week for the "Old Cap Collier Library" under the pen names of Jim Bowie and Nat Woods. He used the name Julia Edwards when the New York Weekly needed serials for women.

Stratemeyer married in 1891, and the following decade was a prosperous one for him. On May 1, 1898, Admiral George Dewey destroyed a Spanish fleet in Manilla Bay, and the country went wild with patriotic fervor. Stratemeyer revised an earlier story he had written about a young sailor on a battleship and sold it to a nearly bankrupt Boston publisher—Lothrop, Lee & Shepherd. The resulting story, With Dewey at Manilla, rescued the publishers from bankruptcy and gave Stratemeyer the chance to launch a series of his own—the Old Glory series. The following year he introduced the Rover Boys, a series that sold over five million copies between 1899 and 1930.

At the turn of the century, Stratemeyer left Street & Smith to establish his own publishing company, called the Stratemeyer Syndicate. In 1904, writing as Laura Lee Hope, he created the Bobbsey Twins books, which eventually sold over fifty million copies. In 1906 he introduced Tom Swift, basing the character of the boy inventor on Thomas Edison.

The Tom Swift books, written under the pen name of Victor Appleton, sold fifteen million copies.

About this time, Stratemeyer's scheme of "assembly-line" story production came into full fruition. He would develop characters and plot ideas, write chapterby-chapter outlines, and send these to ghost writers for further development.

The ghost writers, who used pen names, were paid about one hundred dollars per finished volume. They received no royalties, and their contracts forbade them from revealing their identities. In this way, Stratemeyer retained firm control of both style and content of the books.

Mass production enabled him to keep the costs of his books low so that his young audiences could afford them. In 1927 Stratemeyer, by now a millionaire, introduced his two most popular series—Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. These books remain favorites of young readers more than sixty years after their characters' inception. Stratemeyer died of pneumonia on October 4, 1930, leaving the direction of the syndicate to his two daughters.

Only one of Stratemeyer's ghost writers revealed his identity. In his book Ghost of the Hardy Boys (1976), Leslie McFarlane admitted to writing twenty books of the Hardy Boys series between 1927 and 1946 under the pen name of Franklin W. Dixon. Under other names, he wrote books for the Dick Fearless series, the Dana Girls, Nancy Drew, and others. In his memoir, McFarlane describes how the books were created and follows the success of the company through the Great Depression and the war years. Interestingly, McFarlane never met Stratemeyer face-to-face. The syndicate was structured to limit contact between the writers, editors, and publishers, and to eliminate stylistic distinctions between individual writers.

Born on October 25, 1902, in Carleton Place, Ontario, McFarlane worked as a journalist before signing on with the syndicate as a ghost writer in 1926. After World War II, he worked for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a scriptwriter. During a fifteen-year stint with the National Film Board of Canada as a director of documentary films, he saw one of his scripts—a short subject called "Herring Hunt"—nominated for an Academy Award in 1953. His film "Royal Journey" won a 1951 British Film Academy Award. McFarlane was story editor for CBC Television during the last days of his career and died on Septembers, 1977, in Whitby, Ontario.

# Setting

The Hardy boys live in a small city called Bayport on the Atlantic coast. The local inlet of the ocean is called Barmet Bay. No state is specified, nor any particular region; Bayport might be in New England or one of the Middle Atlantic states. Typically, their adventures can take the brothers almost anywhere there is a mystery to be solved.

# Social Sensitivity

Although the brothers get knocked out now and then, nothing ever gets bloody in the Hardy Boys series, and no one ever is murdered. The criminals pursued are not Mafia kingpins or other major underworld figures. No drugs are involved. No one, not even a villain, smokes or drinks alcohol, and no one uses profanity. Readers would be hardpressed to find anything morally offensive in these books.

There is, however, a certain air of snobbery implicit in the characterizations. The Hardy brothers are affluent members of Bayport society. They own motorcycles, a roadster, and—from the third book onward—their own motorboat, the Sleuth. They never seem to lack money, and after solving mysteries, are generally rewarded—a gift of a thousand dollars is usual. They and the other heroes of Stratemeyer's series, as their names suggest, are of wealthy AngloSaxon stock. A character such as Tony Prito might be a chum of the Hardys, but would never be the subject of his own series.

In the earliest books of the series, when a member of a minority group appeared, he was stereotyped or made humorous. These older volumes of the Hardy Boys have since been revised to eliminate offensive passages, and more recent volumes display a degree of sensitivity lacking in the earlier works. In her book The Girl Sleuth (1975), critic and fiction writer Bobbie Ann Mason studies the Nancy Drew books and other series targeted at female readers. What she says of the social outlook in these books is equally true of the Hardy Boys: implications of racism and snobbery "were an inherent part of the original series—because they were an inherent part of the society they mirrored."

# Literary Qualities

Series books have never been wholeheartedly approved of by educators and specialists in young adult literature. In 1914 Franklin K. Mathiews, chief librarian of the Boy Scouts of America, launched an all-out campaign against the Stratemeyer Syndicate. He charged that series books "blew out" young boys' brains "by overstimulation, debauch and vitiate, as brain and body are debauched by strong drink." To counter the influence of Stratemeyer's books, Mathiews sponsored a series of his own, Tom Slade, featuring Boy Scouts as heroes. The Tom Slade series sold more than three million copies and produced several spinoffs. In the long run, however, Stratemeyer's heroes proved to have the greater appeal, and Mathiews's books gradually disappeared. But the syndicate's products were actually improved as a result of this so-called "Great Book War." They became less rough, better researched, better plotted, and—if possible—even more wholesome.

By most literary standards, however, the Hardy Boys books are simple fare, and experts on children's literature find little to praise. Yet the books have survived along with the recognized classics of young adult literature. The explanation is probably simple. An adult who reads and enjoys the latest best seller might not try to defend its literary merit but instead say that the book is a "good read." For young people, the Hardy Boys books are simply enjoyable, escapist reading. The series also serves as excellent practice material for young people trying to improve their reading ability.

Even critics who disparage the Hardy Boys have to admit that the stories are expertly plotted, with action that starts to unfold on page one. For example, the first book in the series, Tower Treasure (1927), opens with the brothers riding their motorcycles along a cliff road out of Bayport. A speeding car bears down on them and nearly forces them over the cliff into the water below. Almost every chapter of every book ends hanging in suspense, as in this scene from Night of the Werewolf (1979): Frank lifted out the package to examine it. Suddenly he held it toward his ear as if to listen to it. "It's ticking!" he announced tersely.

"Leaping lizards!" Joe gasped. "It must be a bomb!"

Comic relief is provided by the minor characters. Chet Morton is always eating or looking for something to eat.

The esteemed members of Bayport's police force—Chief Collig, Detective Smuff, and Constable Riley—are a bumbling crew. Perhaps the finest comic creation in the series is Aunt Gertrude, a spinster who would "bawl out" God himself if he somehow displeased her.

Aunt Gertrude compensates in part for the somewhat pallid figures of the other women in the series.

# Themes and Characters

Older brother Frank Hardy is darkhaired; his brother Joe is blond. Their father, Fenton Hardy, has an international reputation as a master detective, but has decided to set up his office in rural Bayport. He and his sons collaborate on some cases, and he occasionally makes deductions which would do credit to Sherlock Holmes. Their mother, Laura Hardy, rarely enters the plot; her role is purely domestic.

The Hardy boys' chums are all cleancut. Chet Morton is a chubby young man whose dominant trait is a constant desire to eat. Biff Hooper is a muscular athlete who is good with his fists.

Another close friend is Tony Prito, who was included, McFarlane has suggested, so that ethnic minorities would not feel neglected. Chefs sister, lola Morton, is Joe's steady girlfriend, and Callie Shaw is Frank's. Stratemeyer established a rule that these relationships should "not go beyond the borders of wholesome friendship and discreet mutual esteem."

# Adaptations

In the 1970s the Hardy Boys were featured in a popular television series.

Parker Stevenson played Frank and Shaun Cassidy played Joe. The program alternated with a Nancy Drew series starring Pamela Sue Martin as Nancy.

The programs followed the format of the original books quite closely but added touches such as popular music to make them more appealing to modern teens.

# Topics for Discussion

1. The Hardy Boys series first appeared in 1927. Why do you think these books still appeal to modern readers?

2. Are Frank and Joe Hardy similar to "average" boys? How are they different?

3. Discuss Aunt Gertrude's role in the Hardy household.

4. Many events in the Hardy Boys stories take place in abandoned houses or caves. What do these settings contribute to the atmosphere and plot of the books?

5. The brothers are high school students, but they are only occasionally seen in school. Is there a reason for this?

6. Two years after the Hardy Boys was launched as a series, the United States began to experience the hardships of the Great Depression. Can you find any evidences of or references to the Depression in those books published between 1929 and 1940?

7. When Leslie McFarlane says that the Hardy Boys were contrived for "wish fulfillment," what does he mean? Is the series unique in that respect?

8. What role do women play in this series? Is Aunt Gertrude an exception to the general pattern?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Stratemeyer's favorite among the many series he produced was the Rover Boys. The series was discontinued in 1930, but copies of the books are still available in some public libraries. Compare this series with the Hardy Boys.

How do the two series compare in regard to characterization and plot structure?

2. Compare the Hardy Boys series to the more recent genre of teen-age problem novels. The formula for this type of novel can be seen in Emily Neville's It's Like This, Cat (1963), in which a teenager tries to deal with alienation from parents, or Paul Zindel's I Never Loved Your Mind (1970), about a runaway girl.

3. Leslie McFarlane says that the crimes solved by the Hardy brothers all involve offenses against property and that this is quite in keeping with their position as young middle-class people.

Is this accurate?

4. Nancy Drew and the Hardys are probably the most famous detectives in juvenile fiction. How similar are their methods of detection and the mysteries they solve? Is it significant that Nancy Drew always turns down rewards for solving mysteries, while the Hardy Boys always accept them?

5. Find copies of the original Hardy books and compare them to the later revised editions. McFarlane believes that along with passages of racism and snobbery, much of the flavor and humor of the originals has been removed. Do you agree?

# For Further Reference

Egoff, Sheila A. Thursday's Child: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children's Literature. Chicago: American Library Association, 1981. Egoff traces the history of children's literature since World War II.

McFarlane, Leslie. Ghost of the Hardy Boys. New York: Methuen/Two Continents Publications, 1976. In this autobiography, McFarlane describes the earlier Hardy Boys books and provides a survey of other writing for children earlier in this century.

Macleod, Anne Scott. "An End of Innocence: The Transformation of Childhood in Twentieth Century Children's Literature." In Opening Texts: Psychoanalysis and the Culture of the Child. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985. Macleod concludes that the child in contemporary children's literature is no longer idealized, nor is childhood seen as a time of innocence.

Mason, Bobbie Ann. The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1975. This study of formula fiction for girls says much that is equally relevant for boys' series such as the Hardy Boys.

Mathiews, Franklin K. "Blowing Out the Boys' Brains." Outlook (November 18, 1914): 652-654. The opening attack in 'The Great Book War," this article charged that the "overstimulating effects" of the books of the Stratemeyer Syndicate were addictive.

Vandergrift, Kay E. Child and Story: The Literary Connection. New York: NealSchuman, 1980. Dr. Vandergrift wishes children to cultivate "educated imaginations" but is more tolerant of series books than are most educators.

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