

WILL MARINO

Paradigm Shift, 2016
Wound paper dartboard, 24 x 24 x 3 in



PHOTO BY R.R. JONES

G. H. SMITH

Sleuthing

The seductive promises
of juvenile fiction

More often than might be regarded as psychologically sound, I find myself revisiting the Hardy Boys mysteries of my youth. The books themselves are short, never more than 180 pages or so, and since I've read them all so many times—both alone and with my daughter when she was growing up—it's impossible for me to lose my place. I can open any title and instantly know where I am, immediately keyed into the latest crisis the intrepid young detectives are grappling with.

This past week, I've burned through four of my favorites, including *The Clue in the Embers* and *The Secret of the Lost Tunnel*, and am now a quarter way through *The Mystery of the Spiral Staircase*, No. 45, which to be honest, I find a tad slow-paced.

Some of these books are better than others, and there's a reason for that. Their purported author, Franklin W. Dixon, was himself a fiction devised by Edward Stratemeyer, who had come up with the formulae for other hugely popular juvenile series, including Tom Swift, Nancy Drew, and the Bobbsey Twins. From the beginning, ghostwriters have been employed to flesh out Stratemeyer's outlines, something Stratemeyer only confessed to his own son toward the end of his life—though twenty of the first twenty-two books were supposedly written by Leslie McFarlane, an otherwise successful Canadian novelist and screenwriter, who was paid a flat \$125 fee per book and contractually

required to conceal his identity. (The rate was cut to \$100 at the outset of the Depression, then to \$75.) McFarlane himself referred to his protagonists as “The Hardy brats,” an appellation you'd expect his villains to readily embrace.

How devastated I would have been back then to learn that these stories, which meant so much to me for so long, had originated in the minds of multiple authors! How betrayed I would have felt to find no single human soul at the other end of the reader-writer conversation to which I had committed myself unreservedly. Revelation of such a breach of trust committed by the publishers, Grossett and Dunlap, would undoubtedly have caused me to abandon the series, and might well have crippled my love of reading in general at that crucial stage in its development.

Who can say how I would have reacted had I known the books would continue to be commissioned eighty-five years later, available in an MP3-compatible audio version, the structural format expanded to include Frank and Joe's first-person points of view?

Once again, better not to ask.

Perhaps not surprisingly, my favorites among the original titles feature haunted houses, ingenious contraptions invented by absent-minded professors, and glittering treasure, though most of all I commend the authors—however many there were—for their ability to capture in a handful of deft sketches the sensory splendor of summer, the delirious joy a boy experiences when the schoolhouse doors are thrown open and freedom abounds.

That said, there's so much glaringly wrong with these books, it's a wonder they ever made it into print. The gender and racial stereotypes are gut-wrenching. Chet Morton, the boys' best chum, who helps them solve their mysteries, is routinely chided for being fat and “liking food,” horrendously insensitive criticism he good-naturedly accepts as if it were nothing more than a quaint manifestation of the boys' affection.

Even the most forgiving reader will encounter stupendous inconsistencies, laughable coincidences: If Fenton Hardy, the boys' famous detective father, is in a coma, how does his doctor know he's suffered long-term memory loss? Half an hour after landing in New York, the boys fortuitously spot their prime suspect walking down a city street, or else overhear him plotting in the booth behind them in a randomly chosen restaurant.