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Introduction to Series Books

by Lillian Heil

A few days ago I talked to a primary grade teacher who wanted to look at books she might order for her class. She wanted to find a place in the library where she could look at books from many companies so that she could tell which ones were actually easy enough for her beginners to read. Her comment was that written descriptions of books often promised that children could read them, but when the books arrived they were too hard. Her dream was to see them all lined up by company so that she could compare them and order the group that fit her needs. The difficulty with her desire is that nonfiction books (unless they were all on the same topic) would not be catalogued together on the shelf. The fiction books by different authors would not be together either.

Her request reminded me of some of the advantages that series books have for parents, teachers and children. They usually are cheaper than individual trade books, and can be ordered easily as a whole series. After reading one or two of a series, both children and adults feel confident that they know what the books are like and can order or buy more without reading each one. The fiction books tend to be on an easy reading level, have lots of action and seem to aim at "dreams about what life might be" instead of exploring real life, (Phyllis Bixler and Lucieu Agosta "Formula Fiction and Children's Literature," Children's Literature in Education, Summer 1984, p. 64) and thus have great general appeal.

The conversation also made me realize that the focus of our reviews have a more general purpose than the specific goal of the teacher to whom I spoke. She was looking for books with a controlled vocabulary with the aim of teaching children reading skills, but the content of the books was a secondary consideration. We focus primarily on content in terms of literary quality and appeal to the interests of children and young adults. We also try to give some general guidelines about the age level for whom the book would be appropriate. In fictional books we are trying to evaluate how well written the stories are (containing some kind of depth of character, plot, language, etc.) and how well the books are illustrated (variety of media, style, and formal properties of aesthetics). In nonfiction we are looking at accuracy, good use of language and a high level of excitement or curiosity communicated about the given topic.
Over the past two years we've been receiving quite a number of series books from publishers. Early in the school year we decided to devote an issue to reviews of series books because we wanted our readers to take a serious look at the quality of their content—both fiction and nonfiction.

Series books are not a new phenomenon in the publishing world. Stratemeyer's "book machine" started in 1886 and resulted in a corporation that produced Tom Swift, Nancy Drew, The Rover Boys, The Bobbsey Twins and many others, some of which are still going strong. ("Edward Stratemeyer and His Book Machine" by Arthur Prager, Saturday Review, July 10, 1971, pp. 15-17, 52-53.) Sutherland and Arbuthnot give the Bobbs-Merrill Childhood books the credit for launching the biography fever in 1932 with both children and adults. (Children and Books by Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot, Fifth Edition. Scott Foresman, p. 409.) One of the most well known of the biographical series are the Landmark Books and since one of our reviewers has been collecting and reading them for years, we have asked him to write an article about this particular series.

Following Mr. Clark's article, there are a variety of reviews of both fiction and nonfiction series, plus a few individual book and play reviews. We also need to remind you that this is the last issue for 1984-85. If you wish to renew your subscription for next year, fill out the subscription form included at the end of this issue.