

## 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

**M**ore 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.



The plots are full of holes, though I wonder if the author didn't make them that way on purpose, affording his adolescent readers the option of discovering these flaws for themselves, allowing them to feel a momentary superiority while polishing their own budding gumshoe skills at the metafictional level.

I find it endearing that eighteen-year-old Frank and his seventeen-year-old brother, Joe, manage to solve all sixty-six of their challenging cases in a single, seemingly endless summer. No one dies in a Hardy Boys adventure, though they may come frighteningly close a half dozen times in any given episode. Indeed, the brothers are routinely conked on the head, half-drowned by unscrupulous frogmen, bound and gagged in some damp cavern, basement, or secret chamber.

Though they live on a modest, tree-lined street in the fictional Eastern Seaboard town of Bayport, the boys have everything a boy would want: a fully equipped crime lab, a sporty convertible, matching motorcycles, a state-of-the-art darkroom, and a super-fast speedboat.

Held up to the mirror of modern life, these tales describe an era of innocence implausible even for the late fifties and early sixties in which they were penned. The boys are never seen kissing or even holding hands with their steady dates, Callie and Iola. Parties are wholesome affairs: pie à la mode and soda pop the biggest thrills in town.

No one curses. Even when the crooks are eventually rounded up and hauled away, their anger is muted by the dictates of good taste and a begrudging note of admiration. "I gotta hand it to you young snoops," the unmasked villain might confess while his cohorts cultivate the hangdog expressions they'll soon be wearing in prison.

There's something more than mere escapism at work here. Call it time travel, reconciliation bordering on resurrection. When I read these books, I can feel the mosquitoes of mid-July nibbling away at my flesh and smell the tangy aroma of barbecued bread sizzling atop the brick oven my father built in the front yard of our summer cabin in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I find myself swimming with the other kids in the redwood-shaded reservoir that served our neighborhood, jumping off the dock into the greenish, murky water that stank of frogs and pond scum, watching skeeter bugs scurrying across the surface, trying without success to determine how they were so easily able to walk on water.

I admit there's something compulsive, if not pathological, about the way I pore over these books geared for boys, ages ten to fourteen, the way I follow their dubious and threadbare plots late into the night much the way I did back when I was a boy. No doubt I'm regressing, recoiling from the problems and frustrations of the present day, clutching these slender volumes to my chest much in the way a has-been quarterback might caress a faded jersey from the glory days.

If you'll indulge the pun, it's possible that my fascination with these books is the product of nothing more than a case of arrested development. Evidence abounds to support this conclusion, though if these books have taught me anything, it's that the real solution to a mystery is never as simple as it first appears.

Perhaps I've been looking for something in these tales that was never there in the first place, the seductive promises of immortality and rectitude that only juvenile fiction can afford us. The boys and their chums will never grow up. Terrorists will never threaten their schools, churches, and playgrounds. The elms on their tree-lined street will never become diseased and need to be chopped down. Theirs is a world in which, regardless of the odds, justice will unflaggingly prevail. Death, depression, desperation have no chance of triumphing. As close as five pages from the end of any of these adventures, regardless of how hopeless the boys' circumstances may appear, one knows to a certainty that everything will turn out fine.

Who among us wouldn't sell his or her soul to live in a world like that? You can bet the forces of evil and their cronies are lurking in the shadows, plotting their next big caper, pleased as punch to offer us that deal.

**G. H. Smith's** fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, the *Café Review*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, the *Criterion*, and elsewhere. His essay "Ordinary Blessings" was anthologized in *Fathering Daughters: Reflections by Men* (Beacon Press). He divides his time between the southern hemisphere and Victoria, Canada.

## WILL MARINO

*Extraordinary Rendition*, 2008

Cut paper dartboard, 9 x 6 x 2 in



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