Crime and Detective Literature for Young Readers

By Christopher Routledge

The category of crime and detective fiction for young readers is in many ways an artificial one. Children and young readers are not restricted to stories written specifically for them and anthologies of crime and detective fiction produced for younger readers often include a mix of stories, at least some of which were originally intended for adults. "Detective Stories" (1998), edited by Philip Pullman, is a case in point. Although the anthology overall is produced as a collection for young readers, it includes stories by Dashiell Hammett, Damon Runyon and Agatha Christie, all known as writers for adults, alongside an excerpt from Erich Kästner's 1929 detective novel for children, "Emil and the Detectives." While the market for crime and detective literature written specifically for young readers expanded rapidly in the early twentieth century, it has frequently overlapped with crime and detective writing for an adult audience. Crime and detective literature for children allows for different possibilities in detection and plotting, especially in cases where the detective is a child, or part of a group of children, but it shares common origins with the genre as a whole.

Most studies of children's literature, including Peter Hunt's "An Introduction to Children's Literature" (1994), identify a period in the mid-nineteenth-century in which children's literature began to move away from didacticism and moralising and towards entertainment and adventure. This took place in the 1840s, at much the same time as detective fiction for adults was beginning to gain popularity among readers in the fast-growing cities of Europe and the United States. Dennis Butts (1997) argues that in the 1840s adventure and fantasy stories began to take over from religious and moral tales as suitable material for children, partly as a form of escape from the turmoil and uncertainties of life in the early nineteenth-century, but also because attitudes towards children were changing:

"The emerging children's literature, with its growing tolerance of children's playful behaviour, its recognition of the importance of feelings as opposed to reliance upon reason and repression, and its relaxation of didacticism because it was less certain of dogmas, all reflect what was happening in the world beyond children's books. It is surely remarkable that, whereas fairy tales had to fight for recognition in the 1820s, no fewer than four different translations of Hans Andersen's stories for children should have been published in England in the year of 1846 alone. (Butts 1997: 159-160)."

Elements of mystery, crime, and detection have long been important features of stories enjoyed by young readers. Yet despite the element of play that seems inherent to solving mysteries, crime and detective literature written specifically for young readers was slower to develop than the adult form, perhaps because children's literacy in the major countries of Europe, and in the United States, did not become a general expectation until the late nineteenth century. Arguably the landmark moment in the emergence of detective fiction for children, at least in a widespread and popular sense, did not arrive until the appearance of the first 'Hardy Boys' story in 1927.
Crime and detective writing for children has frequently been omitted from the wider history of detective fiction. As Carol Billman points out in her book *The Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate* (1986) 'the mysteries read early in their lives by four generations of Americans haven't been brought into the picture that emerges of a lively and fertile period for American literature of detection after the turn of the century' (Billman, 1986: 11). Perhaps even more significantly, the importance of mystery and detection in stories for young readers has been seriously underestimated and underexplored. Indeed the connection between children, crime and detection can be traced in many stories outside of what might be considered crime and detective literature in its purest sense.

Crime and detective narratives for young readers frequently turn up where they are least expected, for example in Beatrix Potter's story of how Benjamin Bunny and his cousin Peter Rabbit successfully track down and rescue the Flopsy Bunnies, who have been kidnapped by Tommy Brock the badger. Fairy tales provide an even older source of criminal plotting in stories for children. In fairy tales children often find themselves the victims of unscrupulous parents, criminal strangers and threatening social situations. For example, Hansel and Gretel make a narrow escape from a witch who—like Tommy Brock and the baby rabbits—takes them captive and hopes to eat them. Most such stories have at their core an imperative to teach children not to be too trusting, but they are also in many cases coming of age tales in which the ability to solve mysteries or unravel puzzles leads to freedom. Hansel and Gretel of course outwit the witch and return home with her jewels to rescue their father from poverty.

Since the late twentieth century, crime and detective narratives have also been central to stories involving other kinds of mystery, such as in the ghost stories of Catherine Jinks and in the Harry Potter series. They are often used humorously, for example, by Australian writer Tim Winton, whose novel *The Bugalugs Bum Thief* (1991) tells the story of a boy who wakes up to find his bum has been stolen and proceeds to investigate the crime. Gritty and often disturbing realism has also become a feature of the genre. John Marsden's *Letters from the Inside* (1991) is about a girl who writes letters from her prison cell and befriends a girl on the outside with whom she develops a friendship based on fantasy and deceit.

At the start of the twentieth century crime and detection, and boys' ability to solve mysteries, was an important feature of Baden Powell's scouting handbook *Scouting for Boys* (1908). Baden Powell made detection into a practical and stimulating activity. Famously Powell's handbook gives instructions about what to do on finding a dead body and emphasises the need to collect clues and make detailed notes before the body is moved. Troy Boone, in 'The Juvenile Detective and Social Class' (2001) notes that Scouting for Boys encourages boys to read mystery stories as a way of sharpening their observational skills:

> The handbook suggests that, if the British boy's play area does not happen to be littered with corpses, such observational skills can be instilled in young people by directing their reading habits. The lists of recommended books with which each chapter of Scouting for Boys concludes have done much to incorporate adult detective fiction—particularly the works of Doyle—into the juvenile canon. (Boone, 2001: 52)

Boone's essay goes on to make the point that for Baden Powell an important reason for honing observational skills was to be able to identify members of different social classes and judge 'character'. His scouts, like Sherlock Holmes's young band of 'Baker Street Irregulars', could be relied upon to observe, analyse, and judge people and situations and then to report back on their findings. Baden Powell's reading lists reflect the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century crime and detective fiction was dominated by the Sherlock Holmes stories, and by adult mysteries in general, but the history of crime and detective fiction for young readers follows one step behind the timeline of the adult genre, emerging late in the nineteenth century and expanding rapidly in the twentieth. Where it diverges from the adult form, however, is in its interest in children and childhood as agents of detection and of solving mysteries.

**Victorian Beginnings**

The development of crime and detective fiction for children has its roots in depictions of children and childhood in the Victorian novel. When in *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1838) Fagin's pickpockets go out on the London streets to prey on wealthy adults, they do so in the knowledge that as children they are less likely to be suspected or even noticed by their victims. Peter Coveney, in his early study *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature* (1957) describes Dickens's child characters as...
symbolic of the struggle between innocence and evil: ‘The child became for him the symbol of sensitive feeling anywhere in a society maddened with the pursuit of material progress’ (Coveney 1957: 74). He suggests that this version of childhood became an important literary legacy. It is certainly significant in the development of one of the central tropes of children’s crime and detective fiction, in which child detectives are often underestimated, or go unnoticed by adults intent on committing crime.

For Mark Twain, whose adult novel Tom Sawyer, Detective (1896) satirises detective fiction and its readership, the earnestness of the ‘Great Detective’ is no match for the innocent perceptiveness of the child. The short novel features Twain’s most famous child protagonists, Huck Finn, the narrator, and his pal, Tom Sawyer. Twain’s earlier books, in particular The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) have enjoyed a ‘cross-over’ appeal, between the adult world of the serious novel and the ‘childish’ adventure story. But in order to avoid such ambiguity—and presumably to reassure his adult audience that the book was for them—Twain made explicit comments stating that Tom Sawyer, Detective had been written with adult readers in mind. Much of the book’s satire is at the expense of the hugely popular genre of detective fiction and its readers, for whom the ‘great detective’ in the form of C. Auguste Dupin, or Sherlock Holmes, was practically infallible. As Huck puts it,

> “It was always nuts for Tom Sawyer—a mystery was. If you’d lay out a mystery and a pie before me and him, you wouldn’t have to say take your choice; it was a thing that would regulate itself. Because in my nature I have always run to pie, whilst in his nature he has always run to mystery. People are made different.” (Twain [1896] 2001: 122).

By equating an interest in mysteries with an interest in pies Twain reduces the detective’s craft to a basic urge. The satire, of course, lies in Twain’s ongoing joke that the ‘childlike’ Huck turns out to have more wisdom, and more innate understanding, than the apparently more refined, better educated, more grown-up Tom.

This device is revived by Anthony Horowitz in his Diamond Brothers series, which includes the Dashiell Hammett parody The Falcon’s Malteser (1986) and several other novels whose titles borrow from classic adult crime and detective fiction and film, for example South by South East (1991) and The French Confection (2003). The series features Herbert Simple, known as Tim Diamond, a comically incompetent private detective, who is assisted by his much cleverer younger brother Nick, who is the one who does most of the detecting. As with Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, it is the more childlike of the pair who turns out to be most perceptive and, in particular, less driven by preconceived ideas of how a detective ought to behave.

Tom Sawyer, Detective may have been intended for adult readers, but its positioning of a child in the role of detective suggests an understanding of the social role of children and the possibilities offered by their simultaneous existence in the adult world and their invisibility to it. Although at the time there was almost no crime and detective fiction written specifically for young readers, a fact that made the idea of a child detective seem all the more ridiculous in Twain’s story, examples such as the Baker Street Irregulars tell us a great deal about the role of children as detectives and the possibilities they offered to later writers. First appearing in the very earliest Sherlock Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, the ‘Irregulars’ are a gang of street children recruited by Holmes to follow a hansom cab. Just as in later detective stories written specifically for young readers, the Irregulars have an advantage in that they are invisible to the adults at the centre of the plot:

> “There’s more work to be got out of one of those little beggars than out of a dozen of the force,” Holmes remarked. “The mere sight of an official-looking person seals men’s lips. These youngsters, however, go everywhere and hear everything. They are as sharp as needles too; all they want is organisation.” (Conan Doyle, [1887] 2001: 52)

From Kästner’s young hero in Emil and the Detectives, to the Famous Five, to the ‘pesky kids’ in the Hanna-Barbera animated cartoon Scooby Doo, the invisibility and presumed innocence of young people gives them privileged access to criminal proceedings. Building on a Dickensian sense of childhood as a time of innocence and compassion in a brutal adult world of industry and modernisation, crime and detective literature for young readers emerged at the start of the twentieth century, offering narratives in which children engaged on their own terms with the adult world.

In the mid-twentieth century, writers such as Eric Kästner, Enid Blyton, Julie Cambell Tatham (creator of the Trixie Belden series) and the Stratemeyer Syndicate (responsible for the Bobbsey Twins, the Hardy Boys, and Nancy Drew) made criminal investigations a staple of children’s literature. The burgeoning of adult crime fiction in the years between World War 1 and
World War 2 was matched by a similar outpouring of crime and detective fiction specifically written for younger readers, and often presented in new formats, such as comic books. By the time Blyton began work on her long-running Famous Five series in England in the 1940s the genre was already well established and very diverse.

The Stratemeyer Syndicate

One of the most influential figures in the development of a market for crime and detective stories for children was the American writer Edward Stratemeyer. Stratemeyer was a prolific author in his own right, publishing around 150 books of his own under several pseudonyms. But more importantly, as the creative force behind the ‘Stratemeyer Syndicate’, he presided over a novel-writing team that developed many of the best-known children’s detective fiction series. He began his career writing for dime magazines in the closing years of the nineteenth century and created his first important series for young readers, ‘The Rover Boys’, in 1899. The Rover Boys series features three brothers whose adventures take place in and around a military boarding school. They uncover conspiracies and solve mysteries, often standing up to authoritarian adults in the process. Stratemeyer is believed to have written the entire series himself and it laid the foundation for his more famous syndicated series, based around characters such as The Bobbsey Twins, Tom Swift, Nancy Drew, and The Hardy Boys.

Throughout the early years of the twentieth century Stratemeyer and his team of ghostwriters produced adventure stories and mysteries, but although these tales often had a detective element, the emphasis was generally on sensation and adventure rather than detection itself. That began to change in the 1920s. Writing under the pseudonym of Chester K. Steele, Stratemeyer produced six novels in the adult Mansion of Mystery series, which ran between 1911 and 1928. The success of this series indicated to Stratemeyer the commercial potential of crime and mystery stories. By then the Stratemeyer Syndicate dominated children’s series publishing in the United States. To build on the success of the Mansion of Mystery, Stratemeyer proposed a new detective series to his publisher Grossett and Dunlap, arguing that detective stories were just as interesting to boys as to adults. In 1927, with the release of the first Hardy Boys book, the Stratemeyer Syndicate began to focus its energies on detective stories and within a few years its list had been trimmed to cater to the demands of this new, lucrative market.

Stratemeyer did careful market research and his books sold in the millions; his syndicate soon had a near monopoly on children’s series fiction in the United States. As Marilyn S. Greenwald points out, Stratemeyer made sure to incorporate current trends, such movie-going, into his series and kept them up to date with current technologies (Greenwald 2004: 1). Among the most popular aspects of the Hardy Boys as characters were their freedom to travel and the vehicles and technologies they were able to use. These were updated as the series developed and while the three boys themselves never made it beyond adolescence, the gadgets they used changed with the times. They started out with nothing more sophisticated than a microscope and an ink pad for taking fingerprints, but by the 1970s they were solving cases using complex electronic surveillance devices.

The Hardy Boys series is among the most popular children’s series of all time, but it was not popular with everyone. Although Joe, Frank, and Chet were clean-living boys, the books in which they appeared were considered by many parents, teachers, and librarians, to have a damaging effect on the minds of their young readers. Where Baden Powell could legitimately argue that deduction and detection were useful skills to acquire, the Hardy Boys series, featuring three boys who had already acquired them, came under attack for being formulaic and badly written. Yet despite these accurate criticisms the books sold well; they were updated and revised several times and adapted for television.

Arriving at the end of the 1920s and surviving through the difficult Depression years, the Hardy Boys offered their fans a fantasy of freedom, autonomy, and a life that took advantage of every technology the modern world had to offer. They were forward-looking and optimistic in a period of gloom and austerity. In Europe, Stratemeyer’s Hardy boys were matched at least in these attributes by Tintin, who first appeared in 1929 in a supplement to the Belgian newspaper Le Vingtième Siècle. Tintin is a young newspaper reporter who together with his dog Snowy and a cast of colourful characters, embarks on adventures that involve pursuing criminals around the world and, eventually, into space.

Tintin is ostensibly a reporter, but his assignments inevitably lead to the detection of crime. As a detective Tintin matches the Hardy Boys’ ‘soft-boiled’ approach, combining traditional sleuthing with adventure and action. What makes Tintin different, however, is the level of character development. Unlike the Hardy Boys who are in many ways ciphers required only for
purposes of plot, Tintin is fully realised. Other characters, including the alcoholic Captain Haddock and the incompetent detectives Thompson and Thompson, are similarly well formed, even when their presence is just for comic effect. Tintin’s creator Hergé (Georges Remi) was a careful researcher and the stories he wrote were informative, often political, and frequently propagandist. But as Charles Moore argues in ‘A tribute to the most famous Belgian’ (2007), Hergé himself took a ‘humane’ approach. Moore attributes this to the writer’s time in the Scouts as a boy: ‘His values were humane, with a certain simplicity that came from the Scout movement that had brightened his dull Belgian childhood.’ Seen in this light, Tintin’s detective exploits might appear to have a direct line back to Baden Powell’s instructions about observation and careful note taking.

A Golden Age

As for an older readership, the 1920s and 1930s marked the golden age in crime and detective writing for young readers. The rise of the comic book opened up new ways of telling stories and tapped a new audience interested not only in fast-moving plotting, but atmospheric illustration and crackling dialogue. Tintin’s American counterparts were comic book heroes such as Batman and Superman. DC (Detective Comics) and, towards the end of the 1930s, Marvel grew out of the American dime novel industry in which Edward Stratemeyer began his career. But whereas Stratemeyer’s syndicate followed a path that ran parallel to the adult detective stories that appeared in magazines such as *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*, comic book heroes moved away from the quasi-realism of the hard-boiled novel into the realm of fantasy. During the Depression years the moral force and physical power of Superman had obvious attractions. Less obvious perhaps was Batman, for whom creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger took inspiration directly from the pulp detective novels of the time. In the violent early stories Batman (the alter-ego of millionaire Bruce Wayne) is on a personal crusade to avenge the murder of his mother, pursuing grotesque arch-criminals through the dark streets of Gotham City.

While the ‘softboiled’ mysteries of the Hardy Boys, the heroic characters of DC and Marvel comics, and the practical courage of Tintin drew on conventional male interests and fantasies, Nancy Drew was the dominant female detective character of the 1930s. The Nancy Drew series began in 1930 with *The Secret of the Old Clock*, a story written for the Stratemeyer Syndicate under the Carolyn Keene pseudonym by Mildred Wirt. Nancy Drew offered female readers a version of girlhood that blended conventional femininity with practicality, physical resilience, and overwhelming competence. The mysteries Nancy investigates are closer to home and more domestic than those of the Hardy Boys, but even so she takes risks. She is often bound and gagged and locked up, for example.

In *The Girl Sleuth* (1995) Bobbie Ann Mason argues that Nancy Drew is in many ways unrealistic, able to withstand extreme physical punishment while retaining her sunny disposition and positive attitude. As Ilana Nash points out in her essay on Nancy Drew in the *St James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (2002) Nancy Drew is ‘the golden mean between extremes’. She is boyish enough to take physical risks, but girlish enough to enjoy dressing up; she is adult enough to be treated as an equal by her father, but child-like enough to be rescued and protected when necessary. The Nancy Drew series, while often mocked for the perfection and infallibility of its main character, became a formative influence on many children. Although her independence was curbed somewhat in later books and television adaptations, the Nancy Drew stories and their plucky heroine have since been explored in terms of their nascent feminist influence in the years between the wars.

More important in this regard, however, is the girl detective Judy Bolton, created by Margaret Sutton, who single-handedly developed the series between 1932 and 1967. Judy Bolton is generally regarded as a more believable character than Nancy Drew, whose perfection and wealthy background made her less interesting to many readers. Beginning at age 15, over the course of the series Judy Bolton grows up and gets married yet continues to solve mysteries. Margaret Sutton’s 38 Judy Bolton books have been praised for their writing, their plotting, and their sensitivity to social issues such as race and class; these are features that distinguish them from the formulaic stories of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, their main competitors. In the 1960s the Judy Bolton novels were second only to the syndicate’s Nancy Drew series in sales and enjoyed huge popularity and influence. The adult mystery writer Marcia Muller has stated on several occasions that her interest in mystery stories began with Judy Bolton.

The success of the comic books in drawing young American readers away from more conventional novels after World War 2...
drove American publishers to commission stories that were increasingly fast-paced and cheap to produce. One of the series that emerged from this atmosphere featured yet another girl detective, Trixie Belden. First appearing in 1948 in the story *The Secret of the Mansion*, Trixie Belden was created by Julie Campbell Tatham and developed in direct opposition to Nancy Drew. Unlike Nancy Drew, Trixie Belden is decidedly childlike and vulnerable in her abilities and attitude.

In Germany, Erich Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives*, published in 1929, was also part of the explosion in crime and detective writing for children in the late 1920s and 1930s. Kästner's book also explores the relationship between adulthood and childhood. Emil’s solo journey to Berlin, during which he is robbed while sleeping on the train, leads to a hunt for the thief and finally his arrest. In ‘Children’s Detective Fiction and the “Perfect Crime” of Adulthood’ (2001) I argue that Kästner’s story turns on the blurring of boundaries between child and adult, detective and criminal. Like Nancy Drew and many other protagonists of crime and detective fiction written for children, Emil is a child whose detective role requires that he behaves in an adult, rational way; the thief, on the other hand, slips from an adult discourse into a childish one when he commits his crime. The capture of the thief by Emil and the crowd of other children can be seen, however, as a premonition of the end of his own childhood and his complicity in its destruction. Many child detectives exist on the cusp of slipping over into the adult world of responsibility and rationality, yet they remain childlike; the process of detection is an exploration of their own identities as children. Emphasising his childishness, having pursued a criminal through the streets of Berlin and marshalled a crowd of children to his cause, Emil is rewarded with cream cakes.

By the late 1930s crime and detection had become a dominant force in children’s publishing and had even moved beyond series that were explicitly driven by detection and ‘sleuthing’. Broader adventure-based stories, such as those in Captain W.E. Johns’ Biggles series, featuring the World War I flying ace Biggles, are in many cases essentially detective stories masquerading as more general adventure stories. After World War 2 Biggles even joins the British police force, fighting criminals in the air as part of Scotland Yard’s newly-formed Special Air Police division. For other series writers crime and detective fiction became a plot structure on which to build one-off episodes. For example Richmal Crompton’s long-running ‘Just William’ series contains several stories in which the hero William Brown tries to be a detective, most explicitly in ‘The Great Detective’, a story that appears in *William Again* (1923).

Britain’s answer to the success of Nancy Drew and Judy Bolton came with the publication in 1942 of Enid Blyton’s first Famous Five story, *Five on a Treasure Island*. Blyton was a prolific author of many distinct series, but the Famous Five, and to a lesser extent the Secret Seven books are among the best known of all children’s crime and detective stories. The Famous Five consist of brothers Julian and Dick, their sister Anne and cousin Georgina, known as George, and her dog, Timmy. Like other child detectives the Five are given an unusual degree of freedom from adult supervision; they go on camping and hiking trips and explore ruined castles and other mysterious locations, solving mysteries and apprehending criminals.

Blyton has often been mocked for the idealised version of childhood she describes in the Famous Five books. But as in many other stories of their type, the world of Blyton’s child detective is in sharp contrast with the chaos and fracture of the world of adults, offering its inhabitants an extraordinary amount of autonomy and an unusual degree of cooperation far removed from adult interference. Emil Tischbein is raised by his single mother, Nancy Drew by her single father, and in Blyton’s mystery stories adults are largely detached from the lives of their offspring. George’s father, the absent-minded Uncle Quentin, is usually ignorant or disbelieving of the children’s adventures, while the parents of Julian, Dick, and Anne take holidays without them.

David Rudd suggests in ‘Five Have a Gender-ful Time: Blyton, Sexism, and the Infamous Five’ (1995) that the world of the Five is one of power negotiations in which the children struggle with adulthood. As Rudd notes, ‘in relationships [George] comes up against Julian, often described as “almost grown-up,” and patriarchy in general.’ (Rudd, 1995: 4). Georgina, a girl who claims the boyish ‘George’ as her name, is more than a match for the boys in many of their adventures and, like Nancy Drew among others, makes detection an element of her own self-definition. Her ambiguous place in the power structure of the Five–Anne more clearly fits the submissive feminine stereotype–reflects the more general significance of the urge to self-definition in children’s detective fiction. In Blyton’s stories the opposition between the worlds of child and adult is expressed in terms of the expected social roles of men and women in mid-twentieth century England. George’s struggle to be accepted on the masculine terms of Julian and Dick is paralleled by Julian’s own personal ambiguity in relation to adulthood. Julian is
This ambiguity in the role of the child detective is perhaps what identifies crime and detective literature for young readers as more than a simple adaptation of the adult form. While detective stories almost by definition must deal in uncertainties, mistaken identities and ambiguity, for child detectives the process of detection is more than an unravelling of clues. Many child detectives, including Horowitz’s young spy Alex Rider, and Eoin Colfer’s Artemis Fowl, are orphans, or in some other way abandoned by or separated from their adult carers. Iconoclastic detectives such as Sherlock Holmes, whose whole identity is defined by his rational method and his commitment to the science of deduction, is not personally challenged by the act of detecting itself. For many child detectives however the pursuit of criminals also involves the exploration of their relationships with adults, with their understanding of the world, and with their own identities.

The Famous Five, Secret Seven, and Trixie Belden, whose group of friends, known as the Bob-Whites, solve mysteries with her, take the responsibility for detection away from a single ‘great detective’ familiar in the adult genre, and make it a participatory and collective activity. As in Emil and the Detectives, these groups are inclusive in the sense that they present to young readers the possibility of sharing the detectives’ challenges and successes. More importantly, the child detectives are able to operate in groups without being noticed by adults. One of Australia’s most successful children’s writers, Len Evers, made his name with *The Racketty Street Gang* (1962) in the 1960s, while Elizabeth Honey’s Stella Street series similarly involves a group of children. Since the 1990s Robert Swindells’ Outfit series has explored this idea directly. The Outfit is a group of children who investigate kidnappings and other mysterious events on the explicit understanding that adults think they are ‘just a bunch of kids’.

Writers of crime and detective literature for young readers have often endeavoured to involve their readers in their narratives. In the 1960s Donald J. Sobol’s Encyclopedia Brown series became well-known for the way it encouraged its young readers to solve the mysteries investigated by the knowledgeable boy detective. With his own detective agency, and charging 25 cents a day plus expenses, Leroy ‘Encyclopedia’ Brown explores a common theme in playground life: how to deal with the ‘Meany Gang’. But Sobol’s books go further in engaging their readers than conventional mystery stories, following the model of the classical Ellery Queen mystery and offering the solution on the final page of each book, but only after readers have been given the chance to come up with a solution themselves. Since the late 1980s the development of computer gaming has allowed still deeper interaction between author and audience. The popular Tintin comic book series was among the earliest children’s detective fiction series to be translated in this way as far back as the late 1980s. In the twenty-first century children’s crime and detective stories have been at the forefront of developments in online storytelling and interactivity. For example Charlie Higson, whose Young Bond series, written since 2005, builds on the success of Ian Fleming’s adult spy novels and movie franchise, has been involved in developing the plot of a game to accompany his novels.

While many of these developments are aiming to tighten the connection between successful book series and their creators by building brand loyalty, they are also exploring the margins between the printed book and the wider media. Child detectives such as the Famous Five and Nancy Drew have always investigated mysteries as a form of play and writers have long tried to include their young readers in the adventures of their detective characters. The Internet has allowed authors, publishers, and readers to engage in an ongoing conversation about their characters through fan fiction as well as officially sanctioned online activity. A defining characteristic of child detectives is that they engage with the world in ways not usually possible for children and solve mysteries in ways not possible for adults. It is appropriate then that crime and detective literature for young readers is at the forefront of developments in making literary narrative a participatory and ‘two-way’ experience.

By Christopher Routledge

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