

Why Series are Popular and What Makes Them Work?

BY RACHEL SEIGEL

The history of book series published specifically for children dates back to 1899 and the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Creator Edward Stratemeyer believed that there was a huge untapped market for children's books. To that point, most of the books that had been produced for children were primarily for moral instruction, and his aim was to create something that would be pure entertainment. He was one of the first people to understand a key factor in attracting kids to books: they wanted the thrill of feeling grown-up and they wanted a series of stories.

Beginning with the Rover Boys in 1899, Stratemeyer revolutionized the concept of series, churning out books quickly and creating a formula that was designed to maximize their popularity. In his early series, there had always been elements of mystery, but the immediate success of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, in 1927 and 1930 respectively, prompted him to specialize in children's mysteries. Over the years, both series have undergone revisions and updates to stay current with the times, but new books in both series continue to be published in traditional and graphic-novel format and have sold hundreds of millions of copies worldwide.

Today, it seems that you can hardly find children's /YA books that isn't advertised as first in a series or a trilogy. Publishers love a series. From a financial perspective, a series offers tremendous financial rewards. If they are projecting that the first book will be a hit with readers, they will attempt to lock in a multi-book deal to ensure that there will be more. In fact, according to statistics listed in *Publishers Marketplace*, Young Adult and Middle Grade series contracts are surpassed only by the contracts for Romance and Mystery & Crime genres. Series such as *Twilight*, *Hunger Games* and *Diary of Wimpy Kid* record sales surpassing many adult bestsellers, and the *Harry Potter* series has sold over 400 million copies worldwide. This fall, the final book in Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle* will be published with a print run of 2.5 million

copies — a number unheard of for a kids' book just a few years ago. A popular series can also turn to box office gold — fans eagerly flock to theatres to see the next installment of *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*.

What makes series fiction work?

There are a number of key factors that all of the most popular series have in common. The first is uniformity. When the series features a recurring character over many adventures, it's important that the cover design, page length, trim size and reading level be consistent in each volume. Take, for example, Frieda Wishinsky's *Canadian Flyer Adventures*. Matt and Emily travel back in time to different regions of Canada at different points in history with the help of an old red sled called "The Canadian Flyer." The format of the books and the reading level are consistent throughout the series, and they offer the familiarity that young readers need.

Series fiction also works best when there is momentum behind it, and releasing multiple books together can give it that added push. A prime example is *The Divided Realms* series by Maggie L. Wood. The first two books were previously published under different titles by Sumach Press but have been completely revamped by Lobster Press. The series is about a teenage girl who is transported to an enchanted realm, where she learns that she is actually a princess. She finds herself in the middle of a life-or-death chess match between two kingdoms, in which people are the game pieces. The first two books were simultaneously released in April, with Book 3 set for spring 2012, and a total of six books planned. When readers finish the first book of a series and have enjoyed it, they are eager for the next. If there is not another book immediately available or shortly to follow, their interest will wane, and the series will fizzle out.

A character or set of characters that are well written and interesting for readers also help make a series popular. Take, for



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example, Gordon Korman’s classic Macdonald Hall series, the first of which — *This Can’t Be Happening At Macdonald Hall* — has just been reissued by Scholastic Canada. The series follows the ongoing adventures of two trouble-making boys named Bruno and Boots, who share a room at the boarding school Macdonald Hall. The boys are constantly playing pranks on the school, the teachers and the students while under the watch of the strict headmaster Mr. Sturgeon, nicknamed “The Fish.” The book was an immediate success when it was first published in 1978 and struck a chord with kids. Troublemakers are always popular with kids, and Bruno and Boots’ antics are both interesting and fun to read about. While Bruno and Boots don’t have magical powers, they are real kids and the type of characters that readers both admire and want as friends.

In addition to great characters, strong world building is another feature of successful series. Take, for example, Shane Peacock’s *The Boy Sherlock Holmes* series. This series of four (the fifth book is due out from Tundra in October 2011) goes back to Sherlock’s beginnings when he was a boy growing up in Victorian-era London. The atmosphere is as dark and brooding as its protagonist, and immaculate historical details vividly bring this world to life. Holmes’s London is a gritty and dangerous place, and readers are immediately drawn in. The setting provides the framework on which the stories are set and it really becomes a focal point.

Arthur Slade’s *The Hunchback Assignments* series is another example of excellent characterization and world building. Categorized under the popular “steampunk” genre, the books take place in an alternative London in the Victorian Age, where science has stopped at the steam age. Drawing heavily from literary classics such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the author has created a world that captures the grittiness of the Victorian era while incorporating fantastical elements that enrich the story. The characters are likeable, the vil-

lains are unnerving, and the plots are complex and action-packed. Brilliant storytelling and incredible writing make it easy to see why this series has enjoyed so much critical and popular success.

This leads to the most important element, which is an interesting and sustainable story arc. The story arc is an extended or continuing storyline, spread out over multiple books. A good series is one continuous story, divided into several parts, that takes the reader on a journey. Whether it is three or thirteen books long, the story has to be compelling enough to make readers want to know what happens next.

Kelley Armstrong’s paranormal Young Adult novels are an excellent example of a series with a strong story arc. The books revolve around the Edison Group — a team of supernatural scientists who perform genetic experiments on children — but are divided into trilogies, each focussing on a different set of characters. The first trilogy, *The Darkest Powers* series, features a group of teens who are the product of these experiments, and whose supernatural abilities have only just begun to manifest themselves. Told that they are “mentally ill” and sent to a group home, the teens quickly realize that they are in danger and set out to find a way to escape. Each book ends on a cliff-hanger with lots of loose threads, and the stories are filled with lots of mystery and suspense to keep readers interested in what happens next. The second trilogy, *Darkness Rising*, begins with *The Gathering* (published in April 2011 by Doubleday Canada) and is set in the same world as *The Darkest Powers* books but features a new set of characters. The first trilogy is designed to be read in order, but one can read *The Gathering* without having read the others. Eventually, both sets of characters will converge, prompting readers to go back and read the previous volumes.

What Is Missing From Canadian Series?

Canada has a talented and growing field of authors writing for children, but while Canadian publishers have the right idea in publishing series, diversity is still missing from the majority of our books. Canada’s population has become increasingly diverse, and yet there are few contemporary series that feature characters who reflect this multiculturalism. Where are the characters like Bruno and Boots who are funny and entertaining and happen to be of a different race?

There is a widely believed perception that teen boys don’t read. Unfortunately, this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If books aren’t written for this audience, how can we expect to keep them



reading? Not all boys want to read genre fiction, but there is a surprising lack of contemporary fiction aimed specifically at boys. One author who does write for boys is Ted Staunton, creator of the Hope Springs series. The three books in this series follow the trials and tribulations of Sam Foster — a hapless but endearing teenage boy from sixth grade through high school. Boys in particular enjoy humour, and this is a rare-example of a teen-oriented series that is both realistic and laugh-out-loud funny.

Why Buy a Series?

Series fiction often gets a bad reputation, and despite its popular appeal to children, has long been considered trash by librarians and parents alike. There is an assumption that series books are formulaic, poorly written and without any substance or literary value, and there has always been a debate on “quality” literature vs. popular series fiction. In recent years, however, quality and popularity have begun to overlap, demonstrating that these kinds of books can be as well written and award worthy as their stand-alone counterparts.

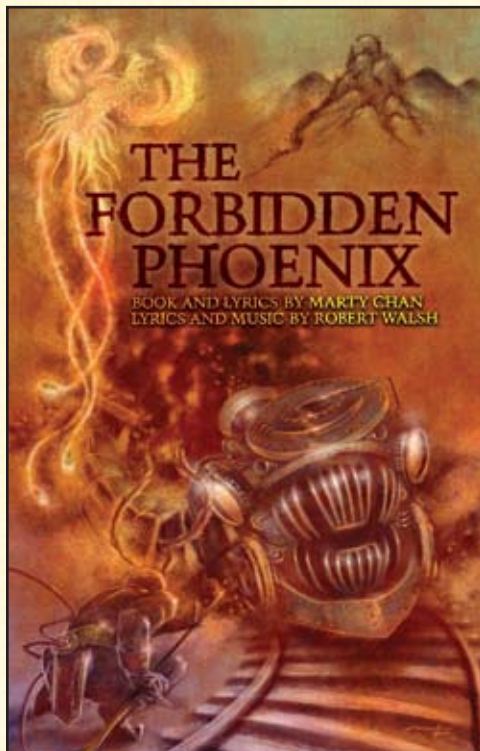
Series fiction also plays a crucial role in building literacy skills in children. Simple paragraphs, a singular plot and non-challenging language make them ideal for struggling readers, as they require little effort to decode the text. Learning to read, as with any other skill, happens in stages, and a series is an excellent stepping stone to higher reading. Like a familiar friend or a stuffed toy, there is also something comfortable and secure about revisiting favourite characters. They represent a known entity and are a safe choice. When children discover a hero they can relate to, such as Harry Potter or Percy Jackson, they are riveted by their every action, and as they get

to know them, they will keep coming back for more books, eager to find out what happens next. Reluctant or struggling readers are more likely to lose themselves in something familiar, rather than take a chance on something that might prove too difficult.

Regardless of which side of the debate of “quality” vs “popular” you fall on, there is one important thing to keep in mind: the highest quality literature in the world can fail to spark a child’s imagination, but if you can get him /her hooked on a series, a reluctant or an apathetic reader can become an avid one, and what could be better than that? 🐼

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THE FORBIDDEN PHOENIX

BOOK AND LYRICS BY MARTY CHAN, LYRICS AND MUSIC BY ROBERT WALSH
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY DEREK MAH

Sun Wukong’s goal is simple: to feed his son Laoson. Known to his people as the Monkey King, Sun Wukong leaves his home with a promise to return one day and feed the drought-ravaged city of Jung Guo. His path, however, becomes a test of strength, agility, and character as he comes face to face with mysterious, enchanting, and heartless creatures.

“The Forbidden Phoenix is a spectacular East-meets-West musical that is by no means just for kids.”

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