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Emma Hine

Secret Clubs and Schoolgirl Shamuses: Growing Up with *Trixie Belden*

I can only remember crying in the library once. I was sixteen and out of school for the summer, and my sister and I had walked the mile to our neighborhood branch to pick up some light reading. I remember turning straight to Juvenile Fiction, as always, finding the second row from the left and the third shelf from the top, and then stopping, confused. The books on my once-familiar shelf were new and bright; their colors bled from red to green to blue, nothing like the battered, cream-colored block of *Trixie Belden* mysteries for which I had been reaching since I was seven years old.

I didn't really think they were gone, at first. I was annoyed and a little possessive, imagining some second-grader, a younger version of me, cycling back to her house in the Texas heat with a backpack heavy with the whole set. I wandered over to the desk to ask, though, and the librarian thought for a moment before answering, "The *Trixie Belden* books? We threw them all away, sometime last week. Those books had gotten so old, they were falling apart."

That was when I cried.

My history with the *Trixie Belden* mysteries goes back to the late 1960s, when my mom, in elementary school then, would walk or bicycle to the same neighborhood library. There were only a handful of *Trixie Belden* adventures then (a second author would pick up the series in the 1970s), and the books themselves were an earlier edition than the ones I would read thirty years later, but they were in the same corner of the library. My mom says she spent several summers reading and rereading them, imagining she was best friends with thirteen-year-old Trixie and solving mysteries with her in upstate New York.

When I was little, my mom would occasionally tell me stories from her favorite childhood books. I had an image in my head of two girls, Trixie and her best friend Honey, drinking lemonade and eating chocolate cake by a lake in summer. I didn't start reading them, though, until the second grade, after I'd worked my way through some of *The Boxcar Children* and some *Nancy Drew*. I remember standing in the kids' section of the library with my mom and pointing up at the row of cream-colored hardbacks with "*Trixie Belden*" traced in black lettering down the spine. They were too high for me to reach, so my mom pulled the first one down for me, and that, I like to think, was the real beginning of my life with books.

I fell in love with Trixie Belden and her world. The books capture every little girl's favorite daydream, and the advertisement on the back of a 1954 edition sums it up perfectly: "Would you like to – solve mysteries? belong to a secret club? ride, swim, travel, go to parties with the best friends in the world? Then the wonderful adventures of Trixie Belden are written just for you. Don't miss a single one!" The books follow Trixie, a thirteen-year-old sleuth with two older brothers and a boisterous Irish Setter, her best friend Honey, a once-lonely millionaire's daughter just learning to have fun, and their other friends that make up their secret detective club, the Bob-Whites of the Glen. The friends wear matching club jackets, hang out in their clubhouse in the woods, ride Honey's horses, and save the little town of Sleepyside-on-the-Hudson from an astonishing number of thieves, counterfeiters, and con artists. I love these books for the absurdly wild adventures and the characters I know like family, but also for their often-childish cliché, their poorly-disguised life lessons for impressionable young readers, and the way the thirteen-year-old girls, with a lot of spunk and a good deal of luck, invariably come out on top.

Trixie Belden worked its way into many parts of my life over the years. My younger sisters read the books as well, and we talked about them often. I named my new cat "Trixie" in the second grade, and she slept on my pillow every night until she disappeared during my junior year

of high school; my family unanimously decided to name our next cat “Honey,” after Trixie Belden’s best friend. My vocabulary was full of 1950s phrases, and I was teased in elementary school for exclaiming “Jeepers!” instead of “Oh my god!” whenever something surprised me. I secretly thought of blue jeans as “dungarees” and imagined that all teenage girls wore full skirts and sweaters and bobbed their hair. I assumed that Trixie’s college fund, a respectable fifty-nine dollars in the early 1950s, would be sufficient for me in 2009.

I read these books steadily from the second grade onward. I’m an English major now, and my love for all kinds of literature began at this time, but the *Trixie Belden* books have always been special. They were out of print, so I never bought them, just checked them out from the library again and again. I loved those library editions dearly, with their brittle yellow pages and the watercolor illustrations on the front. My favorite thing about them was the smell; whenever I checked one out, I would stand in the library aisle, open it, and breathe deeply. I have yet to find a better-smelling book than those 1970s *Trixie Belden*’s; my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* smells too grassy, *Ivanhoe* too dusty, *All the Pretty Horses* too sweet.

This is why I was so upset when the librarian told me he had thrown them away. I didn’t just love the *Trixie Belden* stories, I loved the books themselves, the way they smelled and the dog-ear creases on every page and the wide cracks in the binding. I would have given the library all the money I had for those books. They were gone, though, and I realized I would have to start collecting them myself.

Around this time, Random House Publishing came out with a new edition of *Trixie Belden*. The new books are pink and blue, with crisp illustrations of a coy-looking Trixie in tight jeans, and they smell like glue. I bought the first book at a Barnes and Noble, but it felt completely wrong. I needed my *Trixie Belden* books to be lived-in, worn, to give me the same feeling of history and community that I felt when I stood in the same corner of the library that my mom had

stood in before me. I started making regular trips to Half-Price books, scanning the children's section shelves for the familiar binding, and occasionally I got lucky. As of today, I have nineteen copies of the cream-colored 1970s editions published by Golden Press, and I'm always on the lookout for more. These paperbacks have the covers I grew up with, and when I open them they smell almost as good as the hardback versions in the library.

I also started looking for *Trixie Belden* in antique booths. Central Texas is known for its antique fairs, and my family drives out to Fayette County once a year to spend an afternoon wandering over pastures covered in a labyrinth of cluttered tents. I never found any Golden Press books there, but I started finding older editions, the ones my mom remembers, and I started to love these covers just as much. I'm especially fond of the second-edition copy of *The Red Trailer Mystery* that I found: it's from 1954, and the spine is jagged and mostly peeled off. It was nestled on a bookshelf between a vintage coke bottle and a Mickey Mouse figurine in a crowded tent, and I bought it for five dollars and carried it proudly home.

Sad as I was to lose my library copies, I'm glad that I've begun to collect my own family of books. They came to me with stories – the inside flap of one reads “To my Beautiful Granddaughter Susie, from Granny, Merry Christmas, 1982,” and another “Barbara Dean, Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia” – and I've started to layer them with my own stories as well. There are hundreds of books in my house, only twenty-two of which are *Trixie Belden*, but these are the first books I ever really loved. I like to think that I'll always have them, that they are in a way the grandparents or predecessors of my other developing collections of beloved Iris Murdoch novels, Indian literature, and twentieth century poetry. And as long as I have them, I can pick one up and open it and *zoom* – I'm seven again, horse-crazy and anxious for adventure, and Trixie and Honey are galloping through the woods behind their houses, about to catch another thief.

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