



The 'anti-Nancy Drew' is back in business Trixie Belden juvenile mystery books re-released

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Girl sleuth Trixie Belden was the anti-Nancy Drew from the post-World War II 1940s to the glitzy 1980s, when her adventure books vanished from bookstores.

Out of print since 1986, the Beatrix "Trixie" Belden books are back. Through the power of time travel and literary license, Trixie's still a not-quite-pretty 13-year-old with a freckled nose she frequently pokes in other folks' business.

Publisher Random House is re-releasing the first six Trixie tales by series creator Julie Campbell Tatham (1908-1999). The first two of the 39 adventures, "The Secret of the Mansion" and "The Red Trailer Mystery," were published again in June. No. 3, "The Gatehouse Mystery," hit bookstores Tuesday. More books may follow if sales are strong.

Random House senior editor Jennifer Dussling is behind the comeback of Trixie, who starred in one of history's most successful juvenile mystery series. At 33, Dussling admits she read the books even after she'd surpassed the typical 9-14 age range of Trixie readers.

"I have books 1-34 at home. ... I know Trixie well," said Dussling.

For years, Dussling scanned the scores of Trixie tribute Web sites and saw one common clamor: "When is Trixie coming back?"

Trixie's gone through a handful of publishing houses, at least eight writers under the name of "Kathryn Kenny" and multiple cover designs.

A mid-1970s Trixie fan club newsletter proclaimed that the club had more than 24,000 members, and

many of those fans are now adults eager to introduce Trixie to a new generation.

Dussling compares Trixie's charm to that of Jo in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women": a strong girl with flaws, among them streaks of stubbornness and impetuosity.

In the days before girlpower and women's soccer heroes, Trixie was the girl I wanted to be. She recovered stolen trailers, runaways, jeweled necklaces while volunteering as a candy striper and organizing antique auctions for charity. Mischevious Trixie thwarted con men and pickpockets in her upstate New York hometown, Sleepyside-on-the-Hudson, and worldwide. She even had a brush with "Bigfoot."

Trixie Belden was no glamour-puss Nancy Drew. Nancy drove her own little car in the 1930s when everyone else was suffering during the Depression. Trixie's parents initially couldn't afford to send her to camp, and if she wanted that horse, she had to scrimp for it herself.

Lori Montgomery of Moores Hill, Ind., is one of those fans who would pick Trixie over Nancy any day.

"I read Nancy Drew as a preteen, and she just didn't do anything for me," said Montgomery. "I think it's because Trixie appealed to me because I could relate to her more. Trixie's lifestyle was more like mine. She was more down-to-earth. Nancy was too sophisticated for me."

The 32-year-old mother started a Trixie Web site (www.geocities.com/Heartland/Shores/6423/GWP2.htm) in 1999; her Web site includes a sample of fan fiction, in which Montgomery imagines Trixie meeting Barry Manilow at Radio City Music Hall. Her 9-year-old daughter is currently reading "The Secret of the Mansion."

Trixie was also definitely not kin to Jessica and Elizabeth, the blonde California twins in the gazillion "Sweet Valley High" books whose popularity boomed as Trixie's waned. Elizabeth -- the nicer, brainier foil for devilish Jessica -- was often depicted wearing sweaters the approximate hue of Pepto-Bismol. Trixie Belden famously once said she would never wear pink.

"She's more than willing to bob for apples," said Dussling, "because she doesn't care about messing up her hair."

A tomboy down to her unpolished toes, Trixie was the product of kinder, gentler times. "The Secret of the Mansion" was published in 1948. Early Trixie playthings included paper dolls.

So, in 2003, Trixie can be forgiven for being enticed by a \$5-per-week-allowance in "The Red Trailer Mystery." Her exclamations of wonder or fear included the tame "Gleeps!" "Jeepers!" and "Jinkies!" Even during her worst scrapes, the villains Trixie encountered would never utter a curse.

Though the books are full of now-humorous 1950s gender roles, Trixie was, Dussling asserted, a teenage

precursor for feminists.

"Re-reading, you realize how advanced she is," said Dussling. "Her brothers tell her, 'Oh, Trixie, you have to do the curtains for the clubhouse while we shingle the roof.' And she'd say that wasn't right. She really told her brothers what to do."

Decades later, fans aren't turned off by the dated language and plots.

Susan Bruch of Atlanta is now 31. When she was 11, she read her first Trixie book -- No. 13, "Mystery on Cobbett's Island." She's even made a "pilgrimage" to Tatham's home in Ossing, N.Y.

Bruch said, "The re-release is exciting!" She continued, "Although the cover appears to be 'modern' and the story is being sold as a 'period' piece, the owner of a local bookstore told me that they had to make a modern cover [for] it to appeal to today's readers."

Therein lies the rub. Whether it's Nancy Drew (whom Trixieites love to hate), Harry Potter or Trixie, readers always fuss when their dear characters go through changes. Though Dussling retained original black-and-white drawings inside the books, Trixie got a cover makeover courtesy of artist Michael Koelsch. Loyalists flocked to message boards to weigh in on Trixie's updated look.

They carped about the apparent lack of freckles, opined that her hair's too long and not curly enough. On the "Mansion" cover, her mouth is open; that's a smidge sexy for wholesome Trixie. And the biggest (and perhaps unforgivable) mistake ... Trixie's wearing pink.

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