

# UC Berkeley

## 2014 SURF Conference Proceedings

### Title

Soft Boiled Detectives: The Hardy Boys and the Rise of the American Teenager

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29t596p9>

### Author

Kraft, Alexander

### Publication Date

2015-02-15

Undergraduate

## Soft Boiled Detectives: The Hardy Boys and the Rise of the Teenager

Alexander Kraft | English | Session 2A

Mentor: Professor Kathleen Moran, American Studies

The existence of teenagers is so thoroughly ingrained into our social environment that it comes as a shock to many people to learn that the concept of the “teenager” is a new one in the twentieth century. You used to just be a child until you got a job, and then you were an adult. Teenagerhood qua teenagerhood has roots in a new “youth culture” whose emergence in the nineteen twenties is described by Paula Fass, but it reached its more or less modern shape by the mid nineteen fifties. And once it did, it took off. Think about youth subcultures. Think about young adult literature. The Brat Pack. Teenagers are culturally important, *and* they’re big business. They’ve been a multibillion dollar market since the 1940s. The Hardy Boys series of novels started cashing in on that business in 1927, and has run in one form or another until today. One could say that they have been portraying teenagers to teenagers for as long as there have been teenagers. The protagonists, Frank and Joe Hardy, are teenage detectives who solve mysteries in Bayport, a fictional and inexplicably crime-ridden town in New England, with some assistance from their friends. In my project, I’m reading the Hardy Boys novels from 1927 to 1958 as a cultural and literary history of the development of the “teenager” as a social class<sup>1</sup> throughout the twentieth century.

My research centers around three main questions that the Hardy Boys try to address: 1. The boundaries of the teenager class: who’s included and who’s not 2. Advocacy of teenager class affiliation, solidarity, and identification 3. Subversiveness vs conventionality--that is, the books’ changing posture toward their contemporary social order.

### Boundaries

Though the 1920s youth culture from which it evolved was a squarely middle-class white phenomenon, one way the teenager class consolidates power in the mid twentieth century is by expanding its membership to include some members of the working class and disempowered ethnic classes, or at least by appropriating certain of their cultural forms. The Hardy Boys anticipate this program of inclusion or cultural borrowing by including working class and ethnic youth in their peer group, or “chums”, emphasizing age and high school attendance as *the* criteria for membership. To see this happening, we can contrast the characters Tony Prito, one of the chums, and Rocco, the owner of a fruit stand. Tony and Rocco are both introduced in the same book, *The Tower Treasure*. They are both Italian immigrants (an ethnicity that was singled out for discrimination in the

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “social class” in its sociological sense, rather than its more familiar and narrower economic sense. A rough definition would be “a reified social grouping, membership in which influences identity formation and leads to common material interests.

1920s and wasn't considered "white" at the time); they both have accents; they both occupy similar economic positions. As depicted in the novels, the only objective distinction between them is age: Tony is the boys' schoolmate, and it is based on this that he is a member of the Teenage in-group. Although the narrator mentions that Tony has an accent, it is almost never rendered in dialogue, even in lines that directly reference his Italianness, viz.: "'If we were in Italy we could get the Black Hand to help,'" said Tony Prito." (Tower Treasure, 132). Rocco's dialect, on the other hand, is ludicrously over the

top. He's a comic figure, an object of derision: "'He no can do!' shrieked Rocco. 'My price is da low.' Then, angered, ... generally worked himself into a state of high indignation." (Tower Treasure, 134) We can likewise contrast their behavior, with Tony participating in pranking Rocco, versus Rocco hopping and screaming. Objectively, they are only separated by age, but they are portrayed very differently: Tony is in-group, Rocco is out-group. And importantly, though Tony's ethnicity is remarked upon in the early books, it is not sufficient to deny him membership in the teenage peer group.

A similar analysis applies to another of the chums, Slim Robinson. Slim is a working-class youth from a servant family, the son of a groundskeeper. Yet despite the economic gap between them, Slim is described as "one of their closest chums." (58) Slim can likewise be contrasted with the figure of "a servant [who] told them that their father had reached the house in the early hours of the morning" when the Hardys arrive home after adventuring. This "servant", who presumably lives or at least works in the Hardy household and with whom they must interact every day, is even more dehumanized than Rocco. Rocco at least has a name. Once again, we have this binary pair of characters who differ only in age, with one included and one excluded based on this criterion. Age solidarity even overrides what should be a central affiliation in the novels: the affiliation with law and order over criminality. In *The Secret of the Old Mill*, a counterfeiting gang includes a teenage boy. For all that teenagers in the Hardy Boys novels demand agency and responsibility for their own actions, Lester is, by dint of his age, understood to be an innocent victim of the gang and ally of the Hardys.

While the series anticipates the widening of youth culture beyond the white middle class however, it's important to note that the Hardy Boys' construction of the teenager class is not one of unqualified inclusivity. The novels aggressively exclude girls, for example. Fig. 1 is an ad for another boys' series that was printed in the back of many of the Hardy boys novels. Here, readers are addressed directly, and told that their place is within the Hardys' peer group, and that girls' places are without. Likewise, when Slim is forced to leave school, the chums are referred to as his "former friends" (110). Here, to leave school is to no longer qualify.

The Hardy Boys are drawing boundaries around a wide space, but they are boundaries nonetheless. The title of the fourth book in the series, *The Missing Chums*, reminds us to look closely at the white space of texts; potential chums who are missing from the peer group define it just as much as the chums who are present.

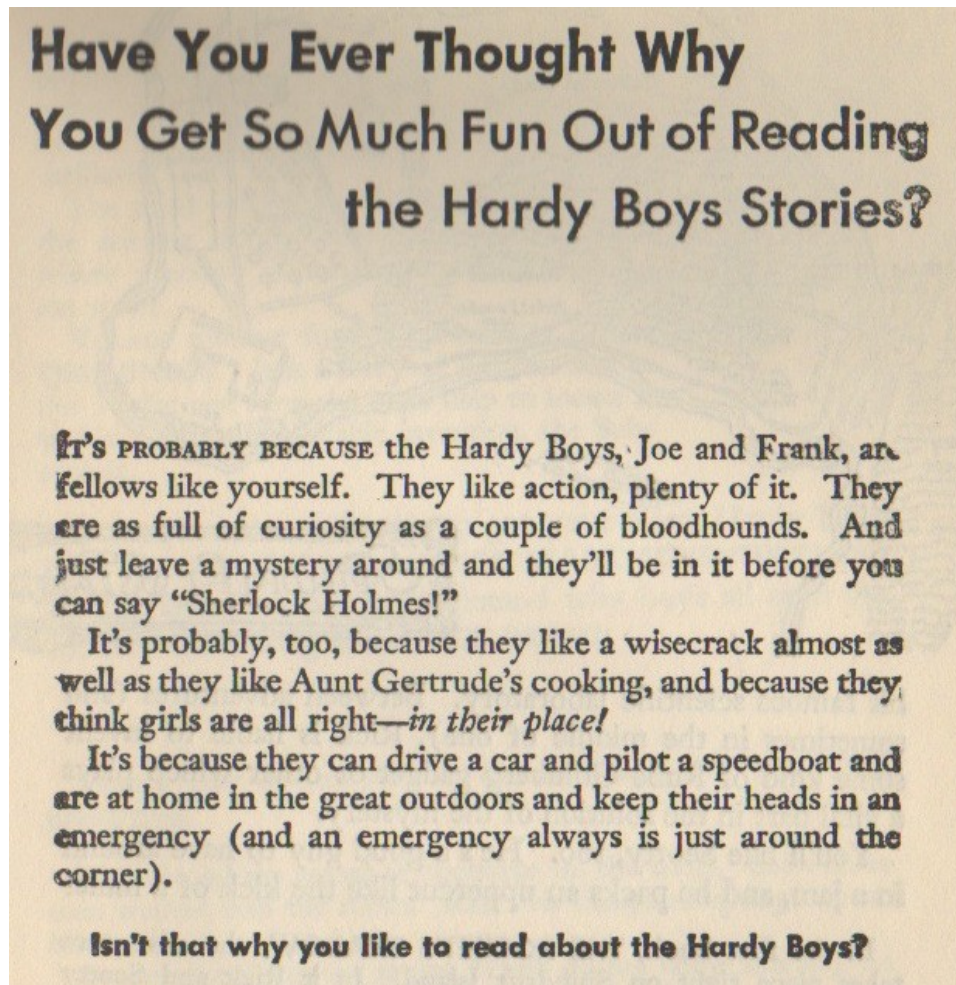


Figure 1: Advertisement printed in many editions

## Class Solidarity

Teenagerism is portrayed in the series as the most important class affiliation. The Hardy Boys novels aren't merely developing the *existence* of the teenager as a social class, they are also developing its importance. In a society where one can claim membership in a number of different groups: "Italians", "servants", "boat owners", "stamp collectors", for the Hardy Boys, "teenager" is the group affiliation that should most strongly inform one's own sense of personal identity. Let's look again to Tony Prito. By virtue of his age, Tony not only enjoys in-group status as a "chum", but participates as part of the gang in tormenting Rocco. Rocco's ethnicity makes him an outsider, a sanctioned target of harassment, but Tony's complicity in that harassment can be read as a sort of ritual renunciation of Italian solidarity in favor of Teenager solidarity.

Although Tony's ethnicity imbues his torment of Rocco with particular critical significance, the chums all share equal responsibility for planning and carrying out the

prank. It is not Tony's objective actions that single his participation in the prank out for closer analysis but rather the way his social position contextualizes those actions. In fact, the entire gang, Hardys included, are behaviorally indistinguishable from one another. With the exception of a very rare "oy" from Phil Cohen or grammatical tic from Tony Prito, there is such a pronounced lack of individualized characterization that in any given scene the names of the characters could really be shuffled at random without any jarring effect on even readers who are familiar with the characters. They are all effectively iterations of the same boy, an ur-teen who embodies all of the norms of teenagerhood in equal measure. The term "All-American Boy" takes on an eerie resonance in this; their personal identity has been subsumed entirely by their Teenager class affiliation.

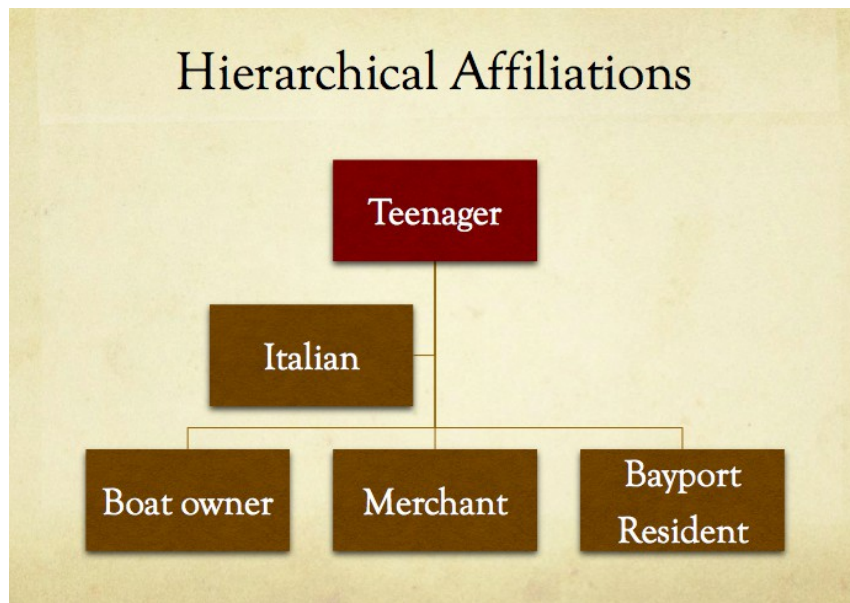


Figure 2: Individuals are members of many classes. When class interests conflict, one must take primacy.

Detectiving manifests in the Hardy Boys as a formalization of existing teenage practices. It is an intentional activity whose pursuit demands and justifies the activities teens already value: socializing, mobility, exploration, and mischief. In the early novels, Frank and Joe were always paid for their efforts—and paid extraordinarily well, I might add. In this way, teenage pursuits are positioned as profitable not in as much as they prepare young men for a profitable adulthood, but immediately in and of themselves. This further reinforces the primacy of teenagerhood as an identity category: growing out of teenagerhood isn't a prerequisite to economic self-sufficiency. And in the eternal narrative present of the novels, it isn't even presented as an inevitability. It's interesting to note here that prior to the Hardy Boys, most of the protagonists of the series books produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate did age, in some cases having children who carried on their adventures. But the Hardys do not. In the ninth installment, *The Great Airport Mystery*, the boys are shown graduating high school, but by the next book they're back and it's never mentioned again. As a group affiliation, teenagerhood in the Hardy Boys is available, desirable, and viable as an *alternative* to adulthood.

### Subversion/Conventionality

The first Hardy Boys novels are deeply subversive and hostile to the status quo, while Ramsey Scott for instance has described the later 1950s era installments as “fetishizing squareness” in their almost desperate defense of conventionality. My research suggests that this is a *function of the series’ success* at developing and strengthening the teenager class: the early novels needed to attack social stability to make room for a new powerful teenager class, but once that power was achieved, it was in teens’ best interests to *maintain* a social order in which they already held high position. My research in this area focuses on the changing role of police as avatars of the status quo in the novels; the first installments portray them as hostile, incompetent “obstructors of justice” (Connely), while in later installments they are allies.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, psychologist G. Stanley Hall articulated an influential view of adolescence: that it is a liminal state in individual development, intrinsically marked by crisis. In 1928, a year after the Hardy Boys began their run, anthropologist Margaret Mead asked whether that crisis and difficulty “was due to being adolescent or to being adolescent in America” (6). The Hardy Boys challenge Hall’s view of adolescence as a liminal, changing state, instead postulating a stable class identity that exists independently of any individual member. But even more than that, they enter a dialogue with Mead in challenging the negative valuation of adolescence: For Frank and Joe Hardy, teenagerhood is not a state of crisis or a sort of temporary insanity. It is stable, self-sufficient, and good!

The opportunities for future research are broad. The original run, including revisions, is over twelve thousand pages of text. As my research progresses, I will interrogate in detail the gender dynamics in the texts and investigate the Hardy Boys’ formative role in the development of the hard-boiled detective genre. Very little scholarship has focused on these texts, but they stand as a trove of information about twentieth century popular culture.

## Bibliography

- Billman, Carol. 1986. *The Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate: Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and the Million Dollar Fiction Factory*. Ungar New York.
- Connelly, Mark. 2008. *The Hardy Boys Mysteries, 1927-1979: A Cultural and Literary History*. McFarland.
- Cornelius, Michael G. 2010. *The Boy Detectives: Essays on the Hardy Boys and Others*. McFarland.
- Dixon, Franklin W. 1927. *The Tower Treasure*. Grosset and Dunlap.
- 1927. *The Secret of the Old Mill*. Grosset and Dunlap.
- Donnelly, Caitlin. 2008. "'That's Just Like a Boy': A Content Analysis of Masculinities in Hardy Boys Mystery Stories, 1927-1932". University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Fass, Paula S. 1977. *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s: American Youth in the 1920s*. Oxford University Press.
- Hall, Granville Stanley. 1916. *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. Vol. 2. D. Appleton.
- Mead, Margaret. 2001. *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*. Harper Collins.
- Ziff, Larzer. 2012. *All-American Boy*. University of Texas Press.