Environmental Mortality, Boys' Adventure Series, and the "Mysteries" of Liquid Space

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> *It seemed to Frank that he never would stop sinking. The ocean was like a vast, bottomless grotto of black liquid in a mysterious world a million miles from the one in which he had been accustomed to living.* (145)
>
> —Franklin W. Dixon, *The Secret Warning*

For the protagonists of boys' adventures books, all journeys are fraught with peril. Whether traveling to a desert, a mysterious island, the remotest jungle, or even just one town over, the boy heroes of these books and their companions will suffer threat, injury, and the possibility of their own imminent demise in pursuit of their aims. Indeed, the palpable threat of death is a distinguishing characteristic of the boys' adventure series, and it is not uncommon for these books to focus on long stretches of narrative—sometimes lasting several chapters—where the characters struggle through circumstances with potentially fatal outcomes. In the text epigraphed at the start of this essay, *The Secret Warning*, the seventeenth adventure in the venerable Hardy Boys' series, Frank Hardy's air hose is cut right before he is set to descend into the ocean's depths, which would lead to certain death had it not been caught in the nick of time. Earlier in the book, Joe Hardy is trapped in an exploding building, and when his brother finds him, Frank believes a motionless Joe to be dead: "Was Joe alive? No, he couldn't be after that terrific explosion!" (Dixon 49). Joe was, of course, alive, as boy adventurers always survive these perilous encounters, but the juxtaposition of violence and destruction amidst certain survival—danger without danger, as it were—remains a key component of these books' narrative structures.

This violence is heightened in and by key physical settings, particularly in watery environments, spaces that are generally atopic to human existence. Liquid spaces inherently reflect what I have come to term environmental mortality. Environmental mortality signals that the environment itself, and not some factor within the environment, presents mortal possibilities for those who move within it. Dangerous environments can be rendered so by a wide variety of factors: by those who already exist within the territory (human or animal); by meteorological factors, including extreme heat or cold; by geographic factors (such as rugged terrain or steep mountain peaks); or by the lack of a factor necessary for human existence, including sustenance, water, or—especially in the case of liquid spaces—air. Liquid spaces may contain aspects of all of these conditions, but it is the lack of direct

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oxygen that is of most mortal concern. This renders the environment itself—the water that makes up liquid space—lethal to human existence. Siobhann Carroll, writing about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British maritime adventures, notes that liquid, atopic spaces "served as antagonistic spaces against which Britons 'tested' their technology and national character" (14). Indeed, the rich tradition of ocean-going literary adventures, from Homer's *Odyssey* to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* to Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* to Peter Benchley's *Jaws*, indicates the broadly antagonistic nature of the literary seascape, where liquid space becomes an environment where those humans who dare to traverse above or within it must be forced to confront their mortality and struggle for survival, only to emerge—if, indeed, they survive these experiences—as changed beings.

Yet boy adventurers[1] like the Hardy Boys frequently enter the murky depths of liquid space, and encounter the various dangers and terrors contained therein, only to emerge from their adventures wholly unchanged, both physically and metaphysically. Journeys into "antagonistic" liquid spaces, and very real confrontations with their own mortality, do not phase these characters at all. Indeed, their movement into such spaces not only results in little retrospection or concern over the (ultimately inevitable) conclusion to their existence, but these narratives seem to indicate that these boy adventurers come to understand these atopic spaces differently than their older peers. Unlike their adult counterparts, who are transformed by their time in liquid space, for boy adventurers, liquid space is simply another thing to conquer, another risk to manage. In many ways, the protagonists of these series render these liquid spaces as aspatial, as not-space, as something wholly different altogether, demonstrating a greater mastery of liquid space than the more experienced adults in their worlds. In this essay I will utilize several different series—including the Hardy Boys, Tom Swift, Jr., Danny Dunn, Rick Brant, and The Three Investigators—to explore the relationship between boy adventure series and atopic, liquid spaces, ultimately concluding that these boys have achieved something that adults seemingly have not—conquering liquid space and fears of their own mortality.[2]

Liquid Space and Environmental Mortality

In his foundational 1977 study *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan observes, "Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning" (136). Those environments that have enjoined some form of physical or metaphysical construction by humanity are places; those that have been generally "untouched" by humanity are spaces. Spaces are observable; they are generally knowable, in the sense that there is a potential for their transformation into place, but they are not yet *known*, and this is why they remain categorized as space. This is

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not to suggest that environments must be literally transformed in order to achieve configuration from space to place: a clearing in the woods may become a place when a house is built upon it, but it may also become a place if the space develops significance to a group of people through other means, such as acting as the site of a religious ceremony or even in the formation of an important memory. This memorialization of space into place can just as drastically impact an environment as its literal transformation; both processes signify that the space has now become vital to a subset of humanity, whether two people or two billion, and, as such, it is humanity that shapes the environment, that transforms space into place.

In order for space to transform into place, though, certain conditions must be met. Accessibility is one; a human presence is required in order for space to both be known and gain meaning.[3] In addition to accessibility, Tuan notes, "Permanence is an important element in the idea of place" (140). "Permanence"—the duration of the space as place for as long as it fulfills or serves its human purpose—is thus another key component of environmental transformation. I would posit that this suggests that liquid spaces, especially larger liquid spaces—oceans, seas, lakes, rivers—can never fully be transformed into place, can never be made wholly knowable to human beings, at least not in any stable or enduring manner, as the ephemeral nature of liquid itself renders permanence of place decidedly difficult to achieve. As Jake Phelan observes, "water problematizes…place" (2). Humans can build *into* water, through docks, wharfs, and piers; and humans can build *on* the water, creating oil platforms or artificial islands that can be anchored to the seabed. The water itself, though, remains unmappable and impermanent, and thus, to a degree, unknowable: "the 'deep' has an odd character, for nothing exists yet the sea is already there" (Phelan 7). An environment both full and empty, liquid space disallows our manipulations; one must build around, or over, or in, or even under liquid space, but the fluidic component of such spaces themselves render them impervious to human machination. There is, spatially, both something and nothing already there. Carl Schmitt, in his work *The Nomos of the Earth*, describes the relationship between terrestrial space and liquid space as "a balance of land and sea—in the *opposition* of two orders" (172-173, italics original). Schmitt bifurcates the environment, setting the divergent natures of land and sea in opposition to the other. Underscoring the legal status of the ocean during the apex of nineteenth century European colonialism, Schmitt observes, "The *sea* remained outside any specific state spatial order: it was neither state or colonial territory nor occupiable space" (172, italics original). Despite the legal slant of this statement, the negative contained herein in triplicate (the sea is neither state, nor territory, nor occupiable) holds firm in a much broader sense: a world of impermanent spaces, openly hostile to human habitation, liquid space rejects human attempts to know it and define it, at least in any permanent condition of being.

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This is not to say that humanity does not interact, traverse, or move in, within, and over liquid space. Liquid space has always held commercial and recreational interest for humanity, and the advent of functional technologies (watercraft, submersibles, diving gear) has enhanced the commercial and recreational potential of liquid spaces. Yet despite this potential, these spaces remain—well, *spaces*. We can map the ocean floor, but not the ocean itself—we can chart *terra firma*, but not all that is contained above it. The same might be said for the air as well as the sea; but human beings cannot move through air, not without the interference of technology, in the manner in which humans can move through water. On its own, a human body can float on, in, or even under the waves and exist (for a time) in space that is hundreds of feet (or more) from land—something that cannot be done in the air. Humans can *be* in liquid space—but, I would posit, humans cannot transform liquid space into place.

As such, these environments take on different characteristics when humans move above or even within them. Unknowable and untransformable, they remain atopias, which Carroll describes as "'real' natural regions falling within the theoretical scope of contemporary human mobility, which, because of their intangibility, inhospitality, or inaccessibility, cannot be converted into the locations of affective habitation known as 'place'" (6). Tuan has long noted that as much as humans define space and place, space and place can also define or alter those who travel or dwell within them. Yet liquid spaces are perhaps indicative of only half of that equation—they define and alter those humans who survive these antagonistic environments, but their slippery, unyielding natures resist the human desire to define them in turn. Surely Odysseus is transformed by his ordeal on the high seas, and Police Chief Martin Brody, the human protagonist of *Jaws*, is forever changed because of his direct encounters with the sea and the monsters that dwell within it. However, the sea, itself, remains unchanged. This is, perhaps, the nature of liquid space: resistant to permanence and definition, though it may permanently define those who spend too much time in its watery grasp.

This notion of movement into liquid space as thus dangerous but also transformative and definitory is a trope as old as literature itself. The ancient Sumerian tales of the great king Gilgamesh, the first extant work of epic literature, include the story of Utnapishtim, who is charged by the god Enki to build a giant ship that will survive a great flood. Only Utnapishtim, his family, and other selected villagers and their animals will survive. The flood, and the destruction it brings, shatters Utnapishtim, particularly when the waters finally recede and he views the carnage the water has wrought:

> Bodies lay like alewives dead
> And in the clay. I fell down
> On the ship's deck and wept. Why? Why did they
> Have to die! (*Gilgamesh* 78)

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The gods, pleased with what Utnapishtim has done, bless him:

> Before this you were just a man, but now
> You and your wife shall be like gods. (*Gilgamesh* 79)

In *Gilgamesh*, hardship in journeying through liquid space brings about personal change, in this case a literal metamorphosis. Despite this propensity for transformation, though, the adult hero of these watery adventures never emerges unscathed. Utnapishtim realizes this; despite this blessing from the gods, he remains a damaged being:

> I am downcast because of what I've seen.
> Not what I still have hope to yearn for.
> Lost youths restored to life,
> Lost children to their crying mothers,
> Lost wives, lost friends, lost hopes, lost homes. (*Gilgamesh* 79)

Utnapishtim concludes his lament by wishing, "I want to bring these back," knowing that he never can (*Gilgamesh* 79).

Gilgamesh establishes the common *topos* of journeys in/to the sea resulting in transformation accompanied by loss. Phelan argues that, in literature, the sea is most often thought to represent "the unknown, far off or deep down," but that, more precisely, it may be better described as a "break from the land" (Phelan 11, 9). He adds that the sea's "potential for deterritorilisation… [engenders] a process of becoming mediated through the fluidity of the sea" (17). Movement away from the familiar environs of the land triggers crises that are both mortal and existential. Surviving such journeys results in personal transformation, but always at a cost. Odysseus eventually arrives safely back in Ithaca, but only after a decade-long journey, ten additional years away from his family and home after the war. Santiago, the protagonist in *The Old Man and the Sea*, is nearly killed by his ordeal trying to land the marlin and fighting off the makos; though he returns to port with only the great fish's skeleton, exhausted and ill, his status in his village has been elevated, and Manolin, his hand, pledges to return to working with him.

Svend Erik Larsen notes that the sea "mark[s] the boundary of human culture" (174). He adds, "If water is infinitely changeable and limitless, then the sea persistently and uncontrollably transgresses its boundaries and thereby exposes the limits of human power and imagination" (172). In moving into liquid space, humans move out of their own sphere(s) of influence and control, establishing an optimal environ for ordeal and transformation. This marks liquid space as "a medium for cultural self-reflection" (Larsen 175). I would postulate that the main reason for this is the environmental mortality inherent to liquid space. One of the chief characteristics of liquid space is its alien nature and the generalized lack of experience humans have in and with such spaces. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the customary space/place for *homo sapiens* is the space/place of open air and *terra firma*: "It is evident that the peasant, even the

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sedentary peasant, participates fully in the space of the wind, the space of tactile and sonorous qualities" (481). Merely through the fact of human existence, people experience terrestrial spaces and places; simply *being* is enough to become familiar with terrestrial space. Liquid space, however, requires knowledge, training, and experience, and even then, there is an intrinsic hazard of dying when moving into liquid space. Children who grow up near water are taught to swim at an early age; boats contain life preservers and/or smaller craft in case of trouble. Movement into liquid space is fraught with mortal confrontations that necessitate preparation to avoid undesirable outcomes. A human being who learns to walk (something most humans do relatively naturally, on their own or with minimal assistance from others) can traverse the majority of terrestrial spaces, but a human being who cannot swim (which generally needs to be taught as a skill) will easily die in any liquid space.

Hence when a playful child dips her or his head underwater while swimming that child has entered into a state of extreme environmental mortality; in that moment, the environment in which the child currently exists is antithetical to being alive. Dunking one's head underwater while swimming is preconditioned on the ability to again rise above the water. Should a swimmer fail to perform that act, her or his life would end. Larsen marks this notion thusly: in liquid space, "We are brought face to face with ontological boundaries of the human species. A well in our backyard and the Pacific Ocean are of dramatically different dimensions. But throw a child in either of them and it will drown" (175). Thus the mere fact of being in or on a space that is antithetical to human existence indicates a distinct alteration to the manner in which humans should (and do) consider and approach these spaces. As Carroll observes, "To voyage too far or to stay too long in an atopia is considered hazardous" (6). She adds, "atopia is no place for dwelling" (73). Robert Harrison agrees; earth "is inscribable, [and] we can build upon its ground," but "the sea offers no such foothold for human worldhood" (4). Few spaces surely offer less "worldhood" than liquid space, but the caution here is more than simply a question of accessibility and impermanence. Liquid space can kill. Of course humanity must consider movement into such space differently than any other.

I should point out that liquid spaces are not the only environments that present a form of environmental mortality. Outer space works on the very same principle; spaces where environmental conditions are so extreme that humans cannot long abide within them, such as the Antarctic continent or intemperate deserts, likewise present a very real danger of environmental mortality. So it is perhaps unsurprising that these types of environments—outer space; the frozen climes of Antarctica; the burning heart of the Kalahari—are generally avoided by human beings, if they are even accessible in the first place. Recognizing the inherent environmental mortality such spaces present, humans do not move into such territories without extreme technological assistance, and then only after extensive

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training and support. After all, one simply cannot decide to "go" to outer space. And yet humanity moves in and out of liquid space—as threatening and adversative to human existence as outer space—all the time. We bathe in it; swim in it; wade through it; strive to live near it; travel in small craft over it. It fills us with wonder, beseeches us, calls to us. Few people would willingly travel to the South Pole, especially without necessary provisions, supplies, technology, and support; and yet we move into liquid space all the time, without, perhaps, a moment's thought about the environmental mortality we are placing ourselves in. It is this juxtaposition that makes liquid space unique as an environment; it will kill us, and we clamor to be in it.

In their consideration of the meaning of space, Ortwin Renn and Andreas Klinke assert,

> space is, first, a reference to a physical entity to which humans can relate. This could be a specific landscape or a point on a map. Space in this sense provides an objective anchor for all actors. Second, it refers to a construction of associations that various actors link to space and its dimensions. Space in this sense is a social or mental construct that determines the boundaries of what is seen as inside vs. outside, as reasonable vs. unreasonable or as normal vs. distorted. Space in the second sense interlinks diverse actors with similar mental models of reality, shapes their claims, structures the institutional means to process diverse inputs and determines to a large degree the individual and social capacity to cope with threats. (3)

In some very tangible ways, liquid space negates the physicality Renn and Klinke describe. Yes, cartographers label the oceans and seas and lakes and rivers on the maps they create, and we can plot the coordinates of a body of water in the same manner we do a point on land. Yet the coordinate point of water itself shifts, changes, transmutes; moment-to-moment, day-to-day, year-to-year, the water varies, moves, alters, and refreshes, its levels rising and falling with tides and droughts and floods, the banks and shores of its terrestrial boundaries constantly eroding and shifting from its own movements. As Larsen notes, "the sea turns this complexity into a vexatious paradox: we name it as if it were a delimited phenomenon—the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, the Red Sea, etc.—but at the same time we perceive it as untameable and borderless" (172). A person standing on a particular point of land could reasonably believe that, should she/he return to that same point of land the following day, everything would be largely as it was. To have it not be so—to be able to notice distinct change—would be outside of the ordinary. And yet that same person standing waist-deep in a river (note that one stands *in*, and not *on*, liquid space) could return the next day to find the river there, at perhaps the same depth as before, but the specific water itself—that which made up the space surrounding that person the day before—has all long gone.

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I realize that I may appear to be caviling over differences that seem trivial or even semantic. What specific water is present is probably irrelevant to the individual standing waist-deep in a river. Yet I think the distinction important, especially in our cultural perceptions of liquid space. When Tuan underscores "permanence" as a defining characteristic of place, he is emphasizing the physical nature of space/place itself. And it would be obtuse to suggest that liquid space lacks physicality. All liquid space—from the contents of a bathtub to the contents of the Pacific Ocean—is somehow contained. The flowing, slippery matter of liquid signifies that it must have physical barriers in order for the body of water to be maintained. A tub of water is a tub of water until the drain is pulled, at which point it is no longer a tub of water—it is just empty space. This containment is what creates the structures that allow for liquid space, which allows us to fish in creeks and swim in lakes and maneuver boats over ocean waves. And yet that which is contained *within* those physical boundaries are far from permanent structures. Unlike terrestrial land, which generally only transmutes after cataclysm or through deliberate human activity or after a tremendous passage of time, liquid space *changes* as a matter of routine; the flow of the water alters moment to moment based on wind and current and the position of the moon and the movement of those who travel within or upon it, whether human or animal.

It may seem inconsequential that the matter contained within the terrestrial enclosures that formulate bodies of water exist within a perpetual state of transmutation and flux. After all, is it not the f/act of containment itself that is important here? It is containment that creates the physical confines of liquid space; it is containment that allows for liquid space to exist in the first place. Is the construct of the matter contained within such terrestrial borders truly of any import? If liquid space has a kind of physicality contained within its construct, then it must also be noted that the obverse is likewise true, that liquid space *lacks* physicality because it lacks the permanence required to truly achieve a physical constancy. Thus liquid space is both present and not present, physical and not physical, conceptual but not constructible. This is why, as Larsen notes, "water as a natural element carries a host of complex meanings that are absorbed in the cultural semantics of the sea" (172). Phelan notes that liquid space has been traditionally viewed as "empty space," and that perception of emptiness, of the sea as a "blank environment," stems from its impermanence and transmutability (1). This is why water has long been a metaphor for humanity's impermanence, and why the relationship between humanity and liquid space has, at best, remained an uneasy one. If space is both a physical entity and a metaphysical construct, then certainly an essential component of the metaphysical construct of liquid space is the received sense of danger upon descending into it. There is, perhaps, a duality at work here: amusement and caution, delight and dread, a juxtaposition of fun and fear. And yet those two emotions are hardly as foreign to one another as they may appear; after

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all, "fun and fear" could very easily describe the ethos of the boys' adventure book itself, where the hero protagonists pursue thrilling escapades that leave them exhilarated and confronting their own possible demises. This combination of emotive effect is certainly indicated when these characters move into liquid spaces.[4] In boys' adventure books, this sensation is often imbued with a sense of both wonder and foreboding. A scuba-diving Joe Hardy experiences disquiet and awe as he moves from land, to boat, to the surface of the water, and finally descends into the depths below for the very first time: "His pulse beat high as the waters closed over his head. As he sank, he forgot gradually his uneasiness in the wonders of this mysterious world of liquid" (Dixon 127). Danny Dunn has a very similar experience:

> The sunlight was not yet cut off. It made the water bright and clear as crystal, and twinkled upon millions of tiny floating specks, like starry dust, only they were alive—microscopic plants and animals. The sky was now a shining but hazy mirror. There was no feeling of movement; it was only by seeing the fish or plants move past that they could judge they were descending. There was almost no sound in the ship except for the hum of electric motors and the clicking of the pressure recorder. In this quiet they moved steadily forward and downward, and the water slowly darkened about them. (77)

In the passage above, words like "bright" and "clear" are soon replaced by "darkened," foreshadowing the inherent dangers of liquid spaces. When Danny remarks that the oceanic environment around him is "pretty," his boon companion Joe agrees, but adds, "Yes, and it makes me nervous too… Suppose something goes wrong, and we can't get back up?" (78).

This dual sense of appreciation and apprehension marks movement into liquid space, movement away from familiar terrestrial realms into an alien and inhospitable world. Jean Hillier observes that liquid space is "haptic space," and describes water as "a space of waves—ocean waves, sound waves, light waves—a space of movement, change and becoming; a space of precepts and affects. A space of sensation" (140, 132). Hillier notes that the means through which humans perceive liquid space differs from how humans perceive terrestrial space, with less emphasis on the eyes and ears (which are not as useful when either scanning over the water or under the water) and a stronger focus on the sense of touch. Humans certainly utilize their tactile senses to interact with the terrestrial environments they encounter, but generally as a secondary or even tertiary resource, with most information about our environments deriving from observable (visual, auditory) or olfactory sensory function. The importance of observation diminishes in and especially under the water, and this shift in sensory input increases both the human sense of awe at the environment as well as the perceived sense of danger that accompanies it.[5] As Phelan observes, "At sea the body is no longer central to perception" (3).

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Carroll, citing the ancient Greek geographer Strabo, notes "the ocean's figuration as a space antithetical to land; indeed, as the negative space that [as Strabo observed] 'gives the earth its outline and its shape'" (76). She adds, "As spaces presumed to lie at or beyond the fringes of everyday life, atopias dialectically construct the inhabited places of home and community, providing a contrast to the familiarity, stability, and security implied by idealized sites of dwelling" (6). As Nedra Reynolds observes, "Space is usually described or represented by making comparisons with familiar objects or ideas" (13). Thus liquid spaces are cast in opposition to terrestrial spaces; ocean versus earth; underwater versus *terra firma*; and dangerous, unfamiliar and away-space versus safe, familiar homespace (Carroll's "familiarity, stability, and security"). Danny Dunn's friend is made nervous by entering liquid space because of its utter unfamiliarity, by how different such space is compared to what he has previously experienced. Joe realizes that in existing underwater—even for a relatively short period of time—he must confront his own (environmental) mortality, since those spatial aspects he has come to rely upon for comfort and security—the primacy of his observable senses; his ability to naturally traverse or navigate the area; even oxygen—were largely left behind when the group entered liquid space.

Physically, metaphysically, culturally—liquid space contains all of the preconditions to push humanity out of any perspective zone of comfort. In it, humanity is, quite literally, out of its element. It is no wonder that the adult protagonists of sea-faring works find their lives transformed—with penalty—through their time at sea, if they survive such narratives at all. And yet, boy adventurers do not regard watery environments through the same set of cultural and physical lenses. Their journeys in liquid space—though filled with all of the dangerous conditions their adult counterparts experience—result in neither transformation nor consequences. This is because boy adventurers do not view liquid space in the same manner as adults. In fact, in a very palpable way, boy adventurers do not view liquid space as space at all, but as something quite different altogether.

Boy Adventurers Under the Waves

The protagonists of boy adventurer books are always confronting their mortality. Indeed, the very label of "adventurer" implies the potentiality of danger. Characters like Frank and Joe Hardy, The Three Investigators, Tom Swift, Danny Dunn, and others of their ilk are frequently confronted with physically perilous situations, with threats equally posed by villainous antagonist figures as well as natural impediments (whether environmental or animal). These adventurous hazards, however, are not entered into accidentally or as the by-products of social activity or journeys undertaken; these characters *choose* risk, choose to act as they

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do, in order to right wrongs, promote justice, and restore (what is for them) an optimized status quo. Robert Von der Osten, writing on the Tom Swift series, labels these boy adventurer characters "rational hero[es]" and notes, "The [rational] hero remains calm in difficult situations (controlling his emotional responses), analyzes the problem, finds creative solutions, assumes a leadership role, accepts necessary risks, and acts as the situation requires—physically if necessary" (270). In many instances these boys act in this manner because they believe no one else will do so. In the Rick Brant "Science-Adventure" book *Danger Below!*, Rick and his companions go to great lengths to prove that a ship that sank two miles offshore was sabotaged. At the end of the book, when Rick testifies in a preliminary court hearing against the criminals responsible for sinking the ship, the state prosecutor asks Rick, "Wasn't it unusual for two young men to show so much determination in getting evidence on an act of sabotage that didn't concern them directly?" (Blaine 177). He might also have inquired as to why Rick put himself and his friends into such grave danger as well, since as they investigated the shipwreck they endured the sinking of their boat, stranding them two miles out to sea; being surrounded by sharks as the villains chum the waters above them; being forced to dive more than 1300 feet below sea level to get the evidence they needed; and even wrestling with a giant lobster, only to prove that a commercial vessel not connected to Rick or his companions in any capacity was feloniously sunk by its captain. It undeniably may seem less-than-"rational" for Rick to take on such risk, when the reward was little more than the satisfaction of a job well done.

Of course, the need for boy detective figures to solve mysteries, even at the risk to their own selves, is a compulsion that cannot be easily suppressed. In an earlier work on these characters, I argued, "Boy sleuth books create characters that reflect the best in boys of their time: hard-working, socially conscious, justice-oriented young men who work to right wrongs, restore order, and maintain civil peace in their hometowns and abroad… [These characters are] designed to uphold the status quo and confirm patriarchal American values" (7). The act of detection for boy sleuths is not only an assertion of their sense of self, it *affirms* their sense of self, drives it, and, indeed, acts as the foundational cornerstone upon which their entire identity is constructed. While in some ways these characters uphold the status quo because they will soon be masters of that status quo, boy sleuths—which are a common, dominant subset of the boy adventurers—generally do not act merely with just the end result in mind. The process of solving the mystery, or finding the treasure, or perfecting the invention, is just as important as the result. This is why these characters embrace risk, even when it may seem prudent to do otherwise.

Ocean-going adventure narratives expose this risk perhaps more than any of the other narratives in these series, in large part because of the environmental mortality the characters must face. *The Secret Warning* opens with Frank, Joe, and their chum Chet Morton meeting a deep-sea diver named Roland Perry, who tells

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the boys a tale of a dive that left him trapped underwater, severely injured, and convalescing for months in the hospital. Chet's reaction to the diver's yarn is perhaps a normal one: "I think I'll leave diving off my list of sports!" (Dixon 5). Frank and Joe, however, find themselves intrigued by the diver's tale. Later, after another stirring tale of oceanic adventure, Frank has a more visceral reaction:

> Frank felt cold chills run up and down his spine. Here was something that thrilled him as nothing else had ever done, something of the spirit of men who brave the unknown terrors of the deep. Perry was one of them. At the moment Frank admired the diver more than anyone else in the wide world. (Dixon 97)

It seems that Frank's awe and admiration may override his better senses, causing him to take unnecessary risks in his desire to emulate the older man. As Renn and Klinke observe, however, risk is generally approached with great clarity: "Risk evaluations in general rely on causal associations and moral judgements about the desirability of anticipated consequences" (13). Jonathan Everts agrees: "When a risk is 'selected'…it needs to be assessed, categorised and subsequently managed" (83). "Selected" is a key term here, in that boy adventurers take on risk not for the thrill of it (or, perhaps, not *just* for the thrill of it), but rather because undertaking risk is frequently the best means to resolve whatever conflict threatens society in the first place in these narratives: "Dealing with complex, uncertain and ambiguous outcomes often leads to the emergence of social conflict relating to both epistemological as well as moral issues" (Renn and Klinke 2). Boy adventurers are not risk actors but risk managers, and by deftly managing risk, they "manage" society at large as well.

"Managing" risk, then, is another means through which boy adventurers assert their identities. After his first-ever dive, Joe Hardy says to his brother, "It'll be the most thrilling experience you'll ever have had. I think I'd rather be a diver than a detective—almost!" (Dixon 130). It is tempting to suggest what excites Joe here is the "thrill" of diving—but that would be wholly accurate. It is not the "thrill" of diving, but the management of risk in liquid space that attracts him. As he describes the dive to his brother, Joe indicates a possible transition of his own identity status, a shift from boy detective to boy diver. Frank's earlier "thrill" as he listened to Perry tell stories of his own dives also signals possible identity shifts; admiring the "spirit" of these divers, he weighs his own sense of self in measure against the older man's. Both boys do so not because they are inherently thrill-seekers, but because they are inherently risk managers, and environmentally mortal liquid spaces present copious risk to be managed.

Unsurprisingly, the environmental mortality intrinsic to ocean-going adventure narratives ensure that such tales are rife with risk. In *The Secret Warning*, Frank attempts the frantic rescue of another diver—on his first ever deep-sea dive—because no one else, not even the far more experienced divers on the surface,

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are in position or even willing to do so. Frank is repeatedly told by the experts on the surface to abandon his risky rescue and save himself, but he ignores them. After several brushes with death, Frank (with assistance from a late-arriving Perry) does rescue the man. Danny Dunn and his companions are trapped on the ocean floor, almost two miles from the surface, yet not only does Danny's ingenuity save the day, his group recovers a priceless lost artifact and returns it to the local community from whence it originated. Rick Brant and his friends prove that the captain of the vessel he is diving attempted to commit insurance fraud. In *The Secret of Shark Reef*, diving into a sunken submarine allows The Three Investigators the opportunity to right an old wrong and restore a family to honor. Time and again boy adventurers risk movement into liquid space in order to save lives, restore families, solve mysteries, and reinvest in the status quo.

In each narrative the boys encounter multiple water-bound perils. As a result of equipment failure, Danny Dunn, Frank Hardy, and Tom Swift are all cut off far below the surface without oxygen. In *The Secret of Shark Reef*, a hurricane threatens the group while they are stranded on an off-shore oil platform: "Silently, Pete and Jupiter looked out at the great storm and wondered if they would survive the night" (Arden 423). There are myriad encounters with dangerous animals. Frank and Joe are attacked by an octopus. Danny Dunn's submersible is physically threatened by both a large shark and an eighty-foot giant squid. Rick and his companions encounter a giant lobster and are put in great danger when the villains spread chum over their diving area, causing aggressive blue sharks to gather in large numbers. And, unsurprisingly, The Three Investigators encounters sharks at Shark Reef:

> Then they saw the second shark!
>
> Larger than the first, the grey shark appeared above the submarine at the same moment the diver reached the top deck. Shark and diver swam straight at each other! (Arden 443)

Each moment, each danger, each animal encounter represents a true physical threat. Of course, the protagonists of these works are used to such threats—they face them in every adventure. Still, when mortality is combined with environmental mortality, in the fatal embrace of liquid space, it would seem that these perilous encounters would finally force boy adventurers to confront something more significant than ferocious beasts, wild tempests, or villainous antagonistic spaces—their own mortality.

(Not) Confronting Mortality

In *Tom Swift and His Deep-Sea Hydrodome*, the eponymous protagonist of the series, stranded at the bottom of the ocean, pauses for a moment to reflect while he waits for either rescue or death: "As the minutes dragged by, the young inventor thought ruefully of the many times when he had come face to face with death"

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(Appleton 11). This type of reflection would seem to suggest that Tom's encounter with his own mortality is apt to change him. And yet, rescued a few paragraphs later, Tom resumes his activities as if nothing happened. Over the course of *Tom Swift and His Deep-Sea Hydrodome*, Tom is knocked unconscious twice (and almost so a third time); suffers the bends, radiation sickness, and gas poisoning; and is threatened with a (literal) "atomic" Armageddon. Still, the very real possibility of death does not deter him. Tom charges ahead, regardless of the risks it presents to himself, or even to others, in order to achieve his aims.

The traditional view regarding the human confrontation with one's own mortality is that such encounters are, as Hillier notes, full of "transformative potential," and that realizing, and perhaps even facing, the inherent fact of our own demises renders us more appreciative of life: "our mortality seems integral to our lives standing for something, at least in one important sense of that phrase" (137, Beglin 2011). Indeed, David Beglin argues that human mortality is a defining quality of human existence:

> mortality brings with it a certain sort of significance that is inherent in the very activity of committing oneself to projects and values: because we're mortal, our lives can stand for something; our commitments accrue a certain symbolic value. Of course, our mortality only plays this role because of the finitude it introduces into our lives. (2021)

Beglin suggests that our sense of our own finiteness gives meaning to our lives, to our choices, and to our identities. Moments of danger, then, where mortality is confronted, should (after the fact) serve to heighten not only our awareness of our lives' inevitable conclusion, but enhance our appreciation of our own existence as well. Movement into atopic liquid spaces should intensify this sensation, as the environmental mortality of such spaces in and of itself broaches the subject of death. Carroll notes that, for the adult heroes of nineteenth-century maritime adventures, liquid space "becomes a menacing shadow… Its presence is asserted only in moments of disorder" (72-73). These "moments of disorder" ultimately lead to the moments of transformation that Hillier discusses—should the adult characters in these works survive these moments. At the end of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Professor Pierre Aronnax, the narrator, observes,

> If his [Captain Nemo's] destiny be strange, it is also sublime. Have I not understood it myself? Have I not lived ten months of this unnatural life? And to the question asked by Ecclesiastes three thousand years ago, "That which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?" two men alone of all now living have the right to give an answer: Captain Nemo and myself. (ch. 47)

In this passage Aronnax references a hard-earned deeper wisdom, one bound in sacred overtones and wrested from ten months surviving in liquid space, all indicating that his adventures on the *Nautilus* have indeed changed the man and

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reinforcing the "transformation-through-loss" narrative common to sea-going literatures.

All of this suggests the double nature of transformation in these narratives—the transformative power in confronting one's mortality and the transformative aftereffect from confronting liquid space. The same should thus be true for boy adventurers, since in both adult and juvenile narrative structures liquid space is something to overcome and survive. Yet while their adult counterparts are compelled to take on the risk of liquid space in order to achieve commercial or military aims, boy adventurers act as oceanic risk managers of their own volition, and do so not for lucre or power, but to restore society, a loftier and altogether more altruistic end. As Carroll observes, "the ocean is assumed to corrode social order" (82). Boy adventurers are the solution to such social decay. In diving into the depths of liquid space and seeking and solving its mysteries, the protagonist heroes of these series reverse the corrosive effects of liquid space and thus restore social order. They succeed where adults fail.

Everts writes, "risk…inform[s] us how to understand the uncertainty of the future" (84). Confronting one's mortality should both assure the future (we know that, inevitably, we will all die) while also highlighting the importance of the present and the remaining time we have, changing, potentially, one's approach to how one lives. Yet this is not the case for boy adventurers. Frequent encounters with the possibility of death, especially in liquid spaces, do not alter their views of this life or how they should live it. They only affirm it. In many ways, this is because boy adventurer characters are remarkably present-minded and present-oriented. Part of the reason for this is the generic nature of series books themselves. The characters frequently remain utterly static, frozen in one place in time, never advancing in their chronological or psychosocial development. As I noted in an earlier work on boy sleuths, "This is all reflective of the flat subjectivity that hallmarks a true [boy] detective; most boy sleuths never alter from this identity, and thus never change" (7-8). There is little need to peer forward in time when even the near future is likely to never come. And yet this "present-thinking" mentality is also reflective of something more ingrained in the identity structure of the boy adventurer himself:

> boy sleuths emerge from a protected cocoon of childhood on the verge of fully fledged American male adulthood… All of them achieve, through the act of detection, a level of social responsibility and privilege that is usually attained only through the successful completion of adolescence without having to actually traverse the dangerous and discomfiting waters of transitional youth. For most subjectivities, complications, whether internal or external, create character growth. Yet boy detectives avoid complications in favor of plain conflict. Heralding only an unadorned "man versus man" sensibility of narrative structure allows a boy sleuth series to craft figures that are fully formed only through that very conflict in the first place. This

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> creates figures with enormous and unique privilege… Yet rather than elect to exercise their privilege for their own gains, boy sleuths choose to work for law and order, embodying a man's role (usually better than the fully fledged male adult law enforcement officials in the series) while still navigating a boy's world. (Cornelius 14)

There is little purpose to be forward-thinking or future concerned when the present offers such privilege. Introspection and future-thinking are activities relegated to those who must worry about the consequences of their actions. Boy adventurers are the composite of their actions, and as such remain firmly anchored in the here and now, restoring the social order corroded by darker elements (including liquid space) around them. Their only concern for the future is in wondering when their next case, their next cause, or their next conflict will arise.

This present-minded mentality subtly but powerfully adjusts the manner in which these characters deal with their environments in general, and liquid space particularly. In *Tom Swift and His Deep-Sea Hydrodome*, for example, Tom has discovered a large deposit of helium hidden deep beneath the ocean floor. Tom quickly realizes the potential the discovery has to advance the United States' space-flight program exponentially. There is only one problem: how to create and sustain a mining operation deep beneath the ocean's surface, in a space acutely hostile to human existence.

Tom's solution is an invention he labels a "repelatron." Using his repelatron, Tom creates an underwater hydrodome—a vast area (large enough to contain and sustain an entire mining colony, including sleeping quarters for the workers, a cafeteria, an infirmary, etc.) of underwater space made *void* of all liquid. The repelatron works as its name suggests; by repelling the water away from the area, Tom creates terrestrial, permanent place where once there had been only liquid space. Von der Osten writes, "In the Swift series, nature is either viewed as a hostile environment to be overcome (often exotic and hostile jungles or impossible environments such as the Arctic, volcanoes, space) or a resource" (275). This is true even of liquid space, and Tom's method of overcoming the risks inherent to such space is to negate the existence of the space itself. Using technology, Tom transforms liquid space into place—something adults seem incapable of achieving.

Though Tom's methodology here is somewhat extreme, it demonstrates the perspective of these books that nature—and, by extension, environments in general—are not truly places or spaces, but rather, simply another risk to be managed and conquered. By negating liquid space, Tom creates an *aspatial* environment. He negates space and place, renders it as not an environment with the potential to shape human lives, but rather crafts it as an obstacle to be overcome or a risk to be managed. Though the helium mining operation far beneath the waves resembles terrestrial space, it is not accessible to others on land, nor is it sustainable without the advent of Tom's technology. Joanna Russ characterizes technology as "a

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rational, systematic, taught, learned, and replicable way of materially controlling the material world, or parts of it" (35). Here Tom literally controls the material world that he himself has created; single-handedly, he has wrought permanence and place from untenable, untamable liquid space. Tom's hydrodome, the world he has created, is just that—his creation, a thing, and ultimately neither space nor place. It is an extension of his intellect and will—an extension of Tom himself—and he banks the lives of dozens and dozens of men on his own surety that his invention will not fail.

Fred Erisman writes that, for the protagonists of boy adventure series, "technology is something that *can* be, and *must* be, mastered" (24). Tom Swift is certainly evident of that. Yet the same is true in the other series as well. Frank and Joe Hardy and Rick Brant demonstrate their mastery of deep-sea diving technology, even though all three are only making their first dives. It is Danny Dunn's mastery that ultimately allows him to navigate his expedition's lost submersible safely back to the surface. When Danny and his companions are trapped 9400 feet below the surface, with no hope of rescue, the group's expedition leader, Dr. Grimes, quickly gives up: "We're doomed" (Williams and Abrashkin 103). Rejecting the panicked response of the older male, Danny (whose exact age is never given in the series, but who is likely around twelve to thirteen years old) instead takes his cue from his mentor, Professor Bullfinch, who, despite having no plan to save the group, determines to continue his research, even in the face of confronting his own mortality. As Danny says, "I'm going to try and act like a real scientist—like the Professor. He isn't afraid of anything, and neither am I" (Williams and Abrashkin 136). Unlike the panicked adult, Danny ignores the liquid space around and above him, rejecting the spatial concern and rendering it powerless in the moment. Instead, Danny focuses on the task at hand, and his skill and knowledge soon saves the day. Yet even more than demonstrating technological mastery, though, Danny, Tom Swift, and all of the protagonists of these series demonstrate their ability to consociate technology—as something to be "mastered"—with/to space. Technology is simply the means through which these boy adventurers assert their sense of self over these wild, liquid domains. Untamable, unknowable spaces in boys' adventure series are simply more risks to be managed and conquered by the protagonists of these books. While they do not always render these spaces knowable—as Tom does with his repelatron—their aim is generally not to "know" these spaces. It is merely to neuter them, and to achieve that aim, they must ultimately cause them to be something less than space.

Conclusion

A quick glance at the titles of boys' adventurer books suggests the primacy of space and place in the narrative construction of these texts. The Hardy Boys solve

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mysteries at Devil's Paw, on Skull Mountain, in Wildcat Swamp, and on Vampire Trail; in a jungle pyramid, a hidden harbor, and a haunted fort; on Cabin Island and Shore Road; and at the old mill and a house on a cliff, to name but a few of the locations that populate the titles of that series. And they are certainly not the only ones: in addition to Shark Reef, The Three Investigators investigate Skeleton Island and Death Trap Mine; Rick Brant explores the caves of fear and a lost city; and Danny Dunn visits a desert island and a fossil cave in addition to the ocean floor.[6] Yet our traditional understandings of space and place—as environments that impact us as much as we shape and alter them—are meaningless in the pages of boy adventurer books. Boy adventurers do not see space/place so much as risk and conflict to be managed, both for the greater good and to affirm their own identities. *Where* they are in this world is generally meaningless—it is only what happens there that is important to them.

This is true even within the environmentally mortal realms of liquid space. At one point during *The Secret Warning*, Frank and Joe visit a man named Captain Hornblow. Captain Hornblow was a sailor on the *Katawa*, the sunken vessel the Hardys are exploring, when it sank beneath the waves. Ominously, when he learns of the boys' mission, he foretells danger: "Death! That's the secret! Death to the man who dives for the *Katawa*! No man shall touch her, and live through it. There—that is my secret. If you tell it, you too shall die!" (Dixon 106). Perhaps no man could reach the *Katawa* and live to tell her secrets. Yet for two adventuresome boys, such acts are a matter of daily routine. One could argue that boy adventurers confront their mortality on such a frequent basis that the act of confrontation itself has been rendered meaningless to them. Beglin does worry that a lack of perspective on such matters may make life itself hollow: "Particularly, the worry is that we would lose one especially crucial way we relate to our worlds, one especially central sort of significance that our values and projects can have. Given the centrality of this significance, it is unclear our lives could remain meaningful without it" (2026). For boy adventurers, however, it is the management of such risks, and the enactment of such conflict, that gives their lives meaning. This is not to say that they are unrepentant thrill-seekers who defy death merely to feel alive. In many ways, the opposite is true: these characters seek out these mortal realms in order to preserve others—including trained professionals, like the deep-sea divers in *The Secret Warning*—from having to confront their own mortalities. This is not because they are better divers than the professionals, or that they understand the mysteries of liquid space better than those individuals who have spent their lives in such realms. No, it is simply because boy adventurers possess a unique talent for turning space into no-space. Liquid space holds no terrors for them—at least no more than any other sort of hostile environment—because the conflicts, risks, and struggles inherent to liquid space are the very building blocks upon which boy adventurers build their own sense of self. There is no self-analysis or introspection for these

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characters deep beneath the waves; ultimately, in the end, the only mysteries liquid space holds for them are they kind they like to solve.

Notes

1. I am using the term "boys' adventure novels" here to broadly cover the gamut of mid-twentieth-century boys' series books that focused on largely upper-middle class male youths enjoying "extraordinary" adventures. This would include mystery-focused series like The Hardy Boys, The Three Investigators, and Biff Brewster; science-adventure series like Tom Swift, Jr. and Rick Brant; and related subgenres of boys' adventure books (such as the Christopher Cool, TEEN/Teen Spy series). It would not include the rarer boys' series that focused more on domestic or school life, such as the Chip Hilton Sport Story series.
2. The Hardy Boys series (1927-present), published under the house pseudonym of Franklin W. Dixon and created by Edward Stratemeyer, spans numerous different series and is currently still in production. Tom Swift (1910-2022), another Stratemeyer creation and printed under the house name of Victor Appleton, has been produced in six series, though later characters are sometimes the descendants of earlier figures. Danny Dunn (1956-1977) was the eponymous hero of a seventeen-volume science/adventure series created by Raymond Abrashkin and Jay Williams; after Abrashkin died in 1960, Williams continued to give him authorial credit on the remaining books. Rick Brant (1947-1968, with the twenty-fourth and final volume published in 1990) was published under the name John Blaine, a pseudonym for Harold L. Goodwin and Peter J. Hawkins (who co-wrote the first three volumes with Goodwin); like Danny Dunn, the Rick Brant series has a science-adventure focus. The Three Investigators books (original series 1964-1987, with an additional series published between 1989-1990) were created by Robert Arthur and sustained by several authors after his death in 1969.
3. In an increasingly digital world, accessibility is not limited to just physical presence, of course, though a digital footprint implies that at some point there was a (physical) human presence that initiated the spatial conversion.
4. This is perhaps especially apt because, in these books, the characters can rarely do anything without calamity ensuing. Even a harmless-seeming drive in the country or picnic with friends will result in some mishap or misadventure, often with violent and injurious results.
5. This is not to suggest the visual sense is unimportant in liquid space; indeed, the opposite is true, though the field of vision may be restricted by necessary equipment. But it must also be noted that visual perception can be limited and distorted underwater; that accurate sight is dependent upon technology (such as

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goggles); and that the strangeness of the environment itself may itself impact the manner in which sensory information is understood and analyzed by the mind.

6. Again, to cite only a few examples from each series. Interestingly, Tom Swift, Jr., is something of an exception here, since the titles in the Tom Swift series generally focus on Tom's latest invention (*Tom Swift and His Flying Lab*, *Tom Swift and His Rocket Ship*), though there are exceptions to this: *Tom Swift in the Caves of Nuclear Fire*, *Tom Swift and the Captive Planetoid*.

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