Familiarity with characters and situations enhances a child's reading and understanding of a story, argues Victor Watson, which is why series fiction, often neglected by reviewers and despised by teachers and parents as being a lightweight option, is so popular with children themselves. Watson urges adults to listen to what children say about reading since it is from their observations that it is possible to get a feel for why they read and especially why they so enjoy reading series fiction. But it's not this thesis alone, though it's an interesting one, that makes this book such a valuable resource and such an interesting study. To underpin his argument, Watson includes a number of critical readings of series. Through these he identifies both the particular qualities of each series as well as the general features of all series writing. Watson's range of examples is wide. He sets Arthur Ransome squarely within his period explaining, for example, that the omission of writing anything remotely touching on adolescent sexuality was a cultural truism and not limited to Ransome alone. His reading of the Ransome novels provides illuminating insights into how Ransome changed what he was doing in the different titles as well as illustrating what he was saying through different characters and how he was saying it. He also uses Ransome's writing as an illustration of the overall place of the adventure novel at the time. Alongside, and not at all as a pejoratively viewed counterbalance, he includes popular series by Malcolm Saville and Enid Blyton, with a convincing explanation of why for so many children Blyton was the key author in turning them into readers, despite being despised by adult critics and, ultimately, giving adventure fiction a bad name. Watson's readings of Mary Norton's 'The Borrowers' series are particularly rich -- though here his arguments about what children say about them are insubstantial as the books lack much currency among today's readers. He expands from what he describes as the 'minimalist reading' of the stories with its emphasis on the completeness of the tiny world by understanding the more complex and subtle undercurrents of what Norton's stories are saying about human states of mind and social structures. Other series such as Gene Kemp's 'Cricklepit' novels which he cites as an example of how well authenticity and first person child narrative can be achieved, the fantasies of Lucy Boston's 'Greene Knowe' stories and Susan Cooper's 'Dark is Rising' quintet are also all given serious and enthusiastic attention. But nowhere is Watson more enthusiastic or attentive than for Antonia Forest's 'Marlow' novels. Firmly rooted in both the school story and family story tradition, Watson argues that the Marlow novels have been unjustly overlooked. Through copious quotation he illustrates what Antonia Forest achieved in her series and even though with much
qualification and a certain amount of self-mockery, gives them some claims to comparison with Jane Austen. In fact, where Watson could have scored mileage for Antonia Forest is in what may easily be seen as her influence on J K Rowling. Though mostly a family of boys where the Marlows are girls, the Weasleys bear a close resemblance and the stories contain parallels of school/family life. Instead, surprisingly for a book published at the end of 2000, the 'Harry Potter' novels, the children's book series which will effortlessly achieve the very thing that Watson is so cogently arguing for, is given only a few passing references. Though apparently limited by its title, Reading Series Fiction provides not only good arguments for reconsidering this neglected area of children's reading but also a thought provoking view of how children read in general and therefore what effect different kinds of writing and story telling may have on them.

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