



Willard Price

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Byline:

A look at the novels of **Willard Price**.

I want to take kids who have been bored to death by school books and give them something so interesting that they will change their minds about reading.'

The speaker: **Willard Price**

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The recipe: **Animals and adventures**

The publication of a Willard Price novel does not cause much of a stir in the literary pages of our posher newspapers. Nevertheless his books are read and bought by millions of children. Knight Books have just published **Tiger Adventure** (75p), the paperback of his thirteenth and most recent title. We thought a closer look at the man and his stories would be interesting.

Amazon Adventure (Cape) was published in 1951. Since then each new story of Hal and Roger Hunt, teenage animal collectors extraordinary, has been welcomed by eager fans.

Thirty years of writing for children, however, is only part of the Willard Price story. The first book was written when he was well over sixty and he had already packed into those years enough travel and incident for half a dozen average lives. He was born on an isolated farm in Ontario, Canada in 1887; but his career as journalist and writer has taken him and his wife Mary all over the world - into 144 countries he says - including six years living in Japan. An interest in natural history and exploration led to expeditions for the American Museum of Natural History and the National Geographical Society. He has been along the Amazon, the Congo and the Nile and his most recent round-the-world trip was only twelve years ago.

Are the books, then, autobiographical? `Sometimes... but in most cases they are pure imagination based on the habits of animals. It's animal behaviour I'm interested in.' Each story demands months of research. `I like to get all the scientific facts about the life of animals correct.'

Scientific accuracy, though, is probably not what makes the books so popular (though teachers may see it as a bonus). They are what they claim - Adventures with a capital A. Hal (19) and Roger (14) - each has aged only one year since the start of the series - are the sons of John Hunt, owner of an animal farm on Long Island, New York, and supplier of animals to the zoos of the world. The boys start each book with a shopping list of animals from dad and the adventures follow as a matter of course: man-eating leopards, runaway elephants, killer bees, wrongful arrest, attempted arson, yetis, avalanche - and those are only the ones in **Tiger Adventure** (a rather tame saga compared with the others). Dad, who appears in **Amazon Adventure** long enough to be shot by hostile Indians with a curare tipped arrow ('Keep paddling, but first pass the salt.' No, he's not eating chips - it's a cure for the poison. Amazing what you pick up in these

books!), is called home in Chapter 12. In the next book, **South Sea Adventure**, he announces, 'I'm afraid I'm getting too old for that sort of rough and tumble,' (No Willard Price, obviously) and thereafter stays traditionally out of the way.

According to Willard Price, 'It's very easy to kill an animal; to take one alive is a different proposition. It's very difficult and very dangerous.' Capturing the animals is certainly part of each adventure (not much easy stuff with tranquillizer darts for the Hunt boys) but in addition Hal and Roger are usually up against some sort of villainy. This linking plot is stronger in the earlier books - in **Tiger Adventure** it is hardly there at all.

All the books share the same qualities. Suspense is rapidly created and quickly relieved; incident follows incident at boredom-defying pace. Action is all. The characters are cardboard; nothing that happens to the boys - being swallowed by a whale, seeing a friend killed by an anaconda - affects them very much. They remain fearless, resourceful, honest and fun-loving; experts in survival and always ready to try something new to eat (broiled bat for breakfast in a Buddhist monastery in the latest book).

Willard Price admits to having a formula. 'To write in short sentences; not to string together a lot of ideas in one sentence so that the reader doesn't take in any of them. One idea to a sentence -this is necessary for young readers.' He could have included also short chapters which clearly help to keep the reader going.

Most of the books, cleverly, end with a trailer for the next adventure: 'And we should like to go on to tell how the two budding explorers got all (the adventure) they wanted and more during that fateful cruise among Pacific islands. But since there is no room for that story in these pages, the tale is told in another book, **South Sea Adventure**.' The books are all 'ripping yarns' and the slightly dated narrative style doesn't seem to deter the fans.

For the past few years, since he was badly injured in a car crash, Willard Price and his wife have lived in a retirement community in California. He has recovered well but cataracts threaten his sight and this bothers him: 'It makes research so slow and difficult.' He is ninety-three this year and working on **Arctic Adventure**, his fourteenth, set in Greenland.

Willard Price's gift is to write books that many 'kids (particularly boys) who hate all books' find readable. They are a starting point, an opportunity. If these books 'change children's minds about reading' it is our job to know what to offer next. But that is for another feature, in another issue.

Willard Price Adventures are published in hardback by Cape and in paperback by Knight Books.

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