

SOME OF OUR FAVOURITE AUTHORS

This month: A Tribute to RONALD FLEMING

by Dennis L. Bird

Of all the Amalgamated Press's writers of stories for schoolgirls, Ronald Fleming was one of the most durable and dramatically effective. Born in the early years of this century, he wrote his first story for the Schoolgirls' Own Library in 1926 ("The Secret of Study 11"), and his last in 1963 ("Sign of the Hawk").

Like all the A.P. men, he wrote under several pseudonyms, two of them using his own initials and one including his own surname: Rhoda Fleming. That was the pen-name he used in 1930 in the short-lived "School Days" weekly, and in other pre-war papers, and as late as 1951 ("The Girl Ghost of Falcon Castle") in the "Girls' Crystal".

It was as "Renee Frazer" that he began and ended his career. At first he wrote the obligatory school stories, but between 1927 and 1933 he created a light-hearted character called "Sunny" who adventured in the South Seas and elsewhere. As "Jean Emerson" he wrote of "A Spoilt Girl's Folly" in the "Schoolgirls' Own" in 1934. And then, in October 1935, the A.P. launched the paper with which he was to be principally associated ever after - the "Girls' Crystal". Less concerned with boarding schools than the other papers were, it was aimed partly at the older girl who had left school and taken a job.

Ronald Fleming was invited to contribute a weekly detective story to the new paper, and adventurously he decided to have a male hero - tall, debonair, perhaps a little like Dorothy L. Sayers' famous Lord Peter Wimsey. Thus Noel Raymond was born, and was to survive until 1951.



Illustration by J. Pariss? (*Girls' Crystal*, June 18, 1938)

Stewart Pride (later editor of the revived "School Friend") tells me that the pseudonym "Peter Langley" was chosen "because the main character was a man. Presumably it was felt that a woman could not write about a male detective." Noel Raymond developed over the years from the foppish man-about-town of 1935 into the steely, resolute investigator of the war years, and finally to the rather cosy "Nunky" of the 1950s, when he had taken his young niece June Gaynor into partnership.

Fleming himself matured as a writer. Apart from a somewhat frivolous series about "The Madcap Form Mistress" (written as "Jean Vernon" for the "G.C." in 1936), he produced a succession of strongly dramatic serials as "Renee Frazer". Usually there was an intriguing mystery involved ("The Girl Who Searched in Secret", 1937; "The Boy Who Kept Paddy Guessing", 1939).

It is this element of surprise which marks Fleming out from almost all his contemporaries. In the weekly Noel Raymond stories, the villain was generally the unexpected person. Several suspects would be introduced, and then - in the best tradition of the classic 1930s detective novel - the culprit was the least likely. Mostly it was a man; on the rare occasions when there was a feminine miscreant, Fleming would give some discreet signal during the story - he would refer to her as a "young woman" instead of "girl", or would consistently use her full name instead of just "Jean" or "Sylvia".

It is perhaps not too difficult in a short story of some 6,000 words to keep up the suspense and uncertainty about the villain's identity. It is much harder to sustain the mystery in a serial of some 15 episodes (say, 90,000 words). "Renee Frazer" did this brilliantly in "The Spectre Marred Their Friendship" ("G.C.", 1938), in which Jean Stirling is befriended by two young men, one of whom is her secret enemy. The solution is cunningly withheld until almost the last instalment.

What was Ronald Fleming like as a man? Mrs. Constance M. White - herself a writer of girls' fiction - knew him during the war, in 1944. She sought his help over one of her stories. "Trying to show me how I could improve it, he walked up and down the room, waving his hands and arms like an actor. Tall," (he was over 6 ft) "with crinkly brown hair and piercing eyes, he could well have been one."

Stewart Pride corroborates this. He writes: "Ronnie came regularly to the office to plot about four instalments at a time. He lived the stuff, sometimes prowling round the room, acting out different characters."

To heighten the drama of the narratives, good illustrations were essential. The A.P. could call on a number of talented artists, most of them anonymous. The first Noel Raymond illustrator was not a success; his characters were too hysterical, in unnatural poses. But in 1937 the ideal artist appeared (his name may have been J. Pariss). He drew for two "Renee Frazer" serials ("The Boy Who Mystified Marion" and "Her Cavalier of the Caves"), and then in January 1938 he took over Noel Raymond, and - with a few interruptions - drew him in masterly fashion until November 1948.

"Renee Frazer" also needed other illustrators, and for some of those stories ("The Girl Who Searched in Secret", 1937; "The Boy Who Threatened Her Holiday Quest", 1940, and others) the task was entrusted to C. Percival, who had very successfully depicted the girl detective Valerie Drew over a number of years.



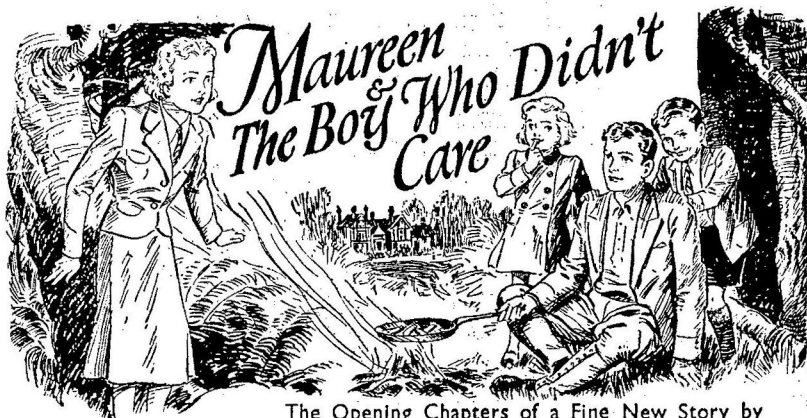
Illustrated by J. Pariss? (*Girls' Crystal* 1937)

In 1942 there was something of a crisis for A.P.: Ronald Fleming, one of their most important authors, was called up for service in the Royal Air Force. The solution, so far as the Noel Raymond stories were concerned, was for past episodes to be re-written in the office, with changed names and places but identical plots. Later, from December 1942, the weekly stories were straight reprints from the past. Even these stopped in March 1944, and there was no more of Noel until April 1945, when "Peter Langley" returned.

Noel and June continued sporadically until 1951. Two years before their demise, Fleming had experimented with another male protagonist, "Colin Forrest - That Amazing New Master." This took the author back to the school stories of his beginnings, but he was never at his best there. Soon he was again ranging wider, to Mexico, to the Rocky Mountains. His last three stories, specially written for the Schoolgirls' Own Library in 1962 & 1963, went back into history to the French Revolution - "Mam'selle X", "Mam'selle Pimpernel", and "Sign of the Hawk".

Ronald Fleming wrote nearly 500 Noel Raymond stories as "Peter Langley", and more than 60 serials under other names. He also wrote for some of the boys' papers, and in the 1960s made the difficult transition from the written word to picture stories when the "Girls' Crystal" became a strip-cartoon

paper in March 1953. Altogether he must have made a memorable impact on young minds over a period of 40 years, for his tales were well plotted



The Opening Chapters of a Fine New Story by

RENEE FRAZER

Illustrated by C. Percival (*Girls' Crystal Serials* 1939-40)

(admittedly, far-fetched at times), with realistic characters and that essential narrative momentum which continually makes the reader ask "I wonder what happens next?" Therein lies the secret of all good fiction.
