The BiblioFiles: Trenton Lee Stewart

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. My guest is Trenton Lee Stewart, author of The Mysterious Benedict Society series.

When the words, "Are you a gifted child looking for special opportunities?" appears in an advertisement in the local paper, orphan Reynie Muldoon is intrigued. While Reynie might look like an average 11-year-old, his mind is definitely anything but average.

The advertisement leads Reynie to a baffling series of unusual tests, and even more unusual children-- Sticky Washington, a nervous, bespectacled quiz show champion, with an astounding photographic memory; Kate Wetherall, an effusive, athletic prodigy armed with a red bucket; and Constance Contraire, a grumpy, willful girl with a knack for creating insulting poetry and a notorious need for naps. The children soon learn about a nefarious top-secret world, headquartered in their very own town, headed by Ledroptha Curtain, an evil genius, and protected by an elite set of deadly, though oddly charming, henchmen called the Ten Men.

Over the course of the three books, the children travel around the globe and navigate through the underworld of their hometown to undo Mr. Curtain's terrible plans for world domination through an ominous machine called The Whisperer. It's difficult to say which is more enjoyable in this series, the action or the camaraderie. The amazing riddles, puzzles, twists, turns, pursuits, narrow escapes, and brushes with danger make this book unlike any other.

But the relationship between Reynie, Sticky, Kate, and Constance, as they use their separate talents, strengths, and weaknesses to work as a team is incredible, and goes to show that you don't need superpowers to be a true hero. You just need to be true to your friends and true to yourself.

The Mysterious Benedict Society and The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Prisoner's Dilemma were both New York Times best sellers. The first book in the series won the E.B. White Read Aloud award, and was listed as an ALA Notable Book. The paperback version of the third book is due out this month, as is the box set of all three books.

Trenton Lee Stewart joins us from Arkansas. Mr. Stewart, welcome to BiblioFiles.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Thank you.

DR. DANA: Something unusual happened to me when I finished the first book in the series. I started wondering exactly who you were. Usually the bio in the back is enough to satisfy my
curiosity, but not this time. I had a million questions about you. Who is this person? How did he create these puzzles? Was he like any of these kids when he was growing up? Is he a genius? Rather than ask you intense, personal questions about yourself, however, may I instead ask what pieces of your past you brought to the creation of this book?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Sure. Well, I was for several years a child. And I did include children in the book as the heroes-- beyond that, not a lot. Certainly a love of books, I think, comes out in all these books. There are books everywhere. And libraries are mentioned in all three of these books. I've always loved books, always loved libraries, which seem to me to be treasures, but beyond that, not a lot.

I mean, I identify with some of the children. Certain aspects of their characters I identify with. Reynie, for example, is a very curious kid, with a sense of humor, and I think I was similar in that way, but I was not as clever as Reynie. I didn't have any of the gifts that the children have, really. I had a good memory, but nothing like Sticky's. And I wanted to be acrobatic like Kate, but I wasn't acrobatic like Kate. So if I brought anything, really, it was probably a lot of wishful thinking.

DR. DANA: I have read plenty of espionage books, books about puzzles, and books about kids working together as a team against the bad guys. But there's something about your books that makes them different from all the others. Has anyone ever expressed this to you?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Similar things have been expressed to me. I think one of the things that get some mad attention called to it, a lot, is the absence of the usual sorts of spy gadgetry you see in books of espionage these days, which was intentional on my part. Certainly there's The Whisperer, which is a sort of science-fiction influenced device, and Mr. Curtain's henchman. They're the Ten Men, or the Recruiters, as they're called in the first book. They have weapons that are sort of out of an old James Bond film, maybe.

But for the most part, the kids don't use radios, or computers, or anything like that when they go on their missions. And a lot of that was because I'm lazy, and didn't want to research sophisticated spy technology. But mostly it was a tip of the hat from me to the books that I loved when I was young, and the books I've read back in the late '70s, early '80s that were like this book, in the sense that they were adventures of some sort. They were already kind of old books themselves. They'd been around a while. So I think I was influenced by old-fashioned books, and so I think my book has a sort of old-fashioned feel in some ways.

DR. DANA: Can you name a few of those old books that you read?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Sure. Well, the ones that stayed with me and made me want to write a similar sort of book years later, they were all big adventures with mysterious elements and small odds-are-against-them sorts of heroes. So certainly The Chronicles of Narnia, starting with The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe-- kids going into a strange place, and having to remember important information and seek out solutions to things as they went on a quest in a strange land.
And then The Hobbit, for sure, I read several times as a kid. So there we have a small main character, a small hero, again, going on a quest in unknown lands, and the odds are against its success. So The Hobbit and The Chronicles of Narnia, Watership Down, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH. And I guess less so—I often forget to mention these, but of course the books that I’ve written owe some debt to the Encyclopedia Brown books.

Dr. Dana: Oh, yeah.

Trenton Lee Stewart: You have some characters that have similarities to my characters, only their talents have been redistributed. And in the Encyclopedia Brown books, at least in my experience, they were always like comic strips. Nobody ever changed at all. The situation was always the same, story to story. And I was trying to write a fully fleshed out adventure, yes, but a story about real characters who do change and grow, and so on. So certainly I was very much drawn to the Encyclopedia books. And they had some influence, but I was trying to write something different with the Mysterious Benedict Society books, too.

Dr. Dana: Did you ever read anything by John Bellairs? He wrote The House with a Clock in its Walls and The Curse of the Blue Figurine?

Trenton Lee Stewart: I haven't, though I heard mention of him since I wrote these books, which is true of a number of books I wasn't familiar with, especially in the context of telling me that I was clearly influenced by certain books. But I have to privately laugh knowing that I haven't read those books, like The Westing Game, and From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, and those and a few others that I've read since I wrote these books. But I was unfortunate enough not to be familiar with them when I was a kid.

Dr. Dana: I'm wondering if you might be willing to read a passage that demonstrates how the different characters in your books solve a puzzle with their various kinds of smarts.

Trenton Lee Stewart: I would be glad to.

Dr. Dana: I'll introduce this passage by saying that Reynie has already undergone a series of tests that morning, and now finds himself continuing to be tested, but he's joined by other children who successfully finished the other test sessions. So here they are, once again confronted by another test. And the only other thing I will add is that Milligan is the adult who is leading them through portions of these tests.

Trenton Lee Stewart: “Soon Milligan came back and announced that it was Reynie's turn. He gave no hint about what had happened to Sticky.

‘See you on the other side,’ said Kate. ‘Wherever that is.’

Reynie took a deep breath and went in, the door closing behind him. He found himself in an empty room. On the opposite wall, above another closed door, hung a large sign that read: CROSS THE ROOM WITHOUT SETTING FOOT ON A BLUE OR BLACK SQUARE.
Reynie looked down. On the cement floor just inside the door, where he now stood, was a large red circle. On the other side of the room, by the opposite door, was another red circle. Between these circles the floor resembled a giant checkerboard, with alternating rectangles of blue, black, and yellow. Reynie studied the pattern. There was far more blue and black than yellow. So much more, in fact, that he soon realized it would be impossible to cross the room without stepping on blue or black. The yellow parts were so widely scattered that he doubted even a kangaroo could hop from one to the other. He looked at the sign again, and after a moment's consideration, he laughed and shook his head. Then he strode confidently across the room, into the other red circle, and out the far door.

Sticky and Milligan stood waiting for him beyond the door. They had been watching him secretly through tiny holes in the wall. Sticky looked confused and started to ask Reynie something, but Milligan shushed him. ‘You boys can watch, but you must be quiet,’ he said. He went away to tell Kate it was her turn.

Moments later they saw Kate step boldly into Room 7-B. After reading the sign, she studied the floor, considering whether she might manage to leap from yellow to yellow. At last she shook her head, rejecting the idea. Next she looked from one door to the other, gauging the distance. Then, taking the length of rope from her bucket, she fashioned a loop at the end, and with one expert throw lassoed the doorknob at the far side of the room. Fastening the other end to the doorknob behind her, she pulled the rope tight, knotted it securely, and climbed up. ‘Now, if I only had that paddle,’ she said aloud to herself as she walked along the rope, ‘I could hold it out in front of me for balance.’

Indeed, a paddle might have helped, for halfway across the room she nearly fell (the boys caught their breath), but after wobbling back and forth and wheeling her arms around, she recovered. After a few more careful steps, she hopped down into the other red circle.

‘Wow!’ Sticky whispered. ‘She did it!’

But before Kate could join the boys, Milligan appeared and took her back to the starting point to try again, this time without her rope, which he informed her would be returned upon completion of the test.

‘That's hardly fair,’ Sticky whispered. ‘Nobody told her she couldn't use a rope.’

Kate, meanwhile, was removing all the items from her bucket, and stuffing them into her pockets. When she finished, her pockets bulging ridiculously, she unscrewed the handle from her bucket, and tucked it threw her belt. Then she was ready. Kicking the bucket onto its side, she hopped onto it and began rolling it forward with her feet, like a circus bear balancing on a ball. Rolling first this way, and then that, she zigzagged across the room to the other red circle.

Reynie and Sticky looked at each other in awe. Who was this girl?

Yet once again, as Kate reattached the bucket handle and emptied her pockets, Milligan entered the room. He returned her to the starting circle, this time taking away her bucket and tools, which
she handed over with evident reluctance. She recovered quickly, however. Before Milligan had
even closed the door behind him, Kate shrugged and cracked her knuckles, flattened her palms
against the cement, and lifted her feet into the air above her. And this was how she crossed the
room, walking on her hands, not once setting foot upon the floor.

‘Never mind,’ said Milligan when she opened the door. He handed her bucket back. ‘You pass.’

‘What I don't understand,’ Sticky was saying to Reynie as they followed Milligan down a dark
stairway, ‘is how you passed that test. I'm glad, of course, but I don't see how you did it. I
crossed on my hands and knees so my feet didn't touch any blue or black squares, and Kate did
her acrobat tricks, but you just walked right across the room. You were stepping on dark squares
left and right.’

They had reached the bottom of the stairs now. Milligan ushered the children into a damp, dimly
lit underground passage, where centipedes twisted away at their approach and other slithery
creatures they heard but didn't see retreated into the shadows. By this gloomy route, he was
leading them to what he had called their “final testing place,” which struck Reynie as having a
particularly ominous sound.

‘Just walked right across?’ said Kate. ‘Reynie, how did you get away with that?’

‘It was another trick. Those weren't squares on the floor-- they were rectangles. Their sides
weren't all the same length.’

‘Gosh, that's true,’ Kate reflected.

Sticky slapped his forehead. ‘I got my pants dirty for nothing? I crawled across the floor like a
baby for nothing? I'm so stupid! I can't believe they're letting me go on.’

‘You're hardly stupid,’ Reynie said. ‘You're here, aren't you?”

DR. DANA: Thank you. Was it hard to come up with all the different puzzles?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Yes and no. Some of them were hard for me. Many of them came
with me to the project itself. I mean, I had ideas for puzzles and riddles, and so on, that I wasn't
putting to any practical use. They were just floating around in my brain. And it was some of
these that got me interested in maybe putting together into a children's adventure book of this
type. So those were really just the product of a day-dreaming mind that is inclined to think about
constructing mazes with secrets to them, and so on, instead of being more productive.

But then after I had packed all those things into the book, I needed more. So then I had to apply
myself, and actually think about the way that those work, which is what interests me most--
riddles and visual riddles, as opposed to actual codes and problem solving.

A lot of it came instinctively to me, but once I had to come up with new ones on demand for the
story, then I really needed to pay attention to their structure, and the way they deliver their
impact, and so on. So that required some more work. And, of course, in this book and subsequent books, I have lots of things that I had tried to make work, and didn't work, and I had to discard them. But some things, once I started thinking about what the situation needed, they sort of swam up to the surface and seemed to fit.

DR. DANA: I just want to point out to our listeners that daydreaming is productive. See?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: That's right. Sticky even says as much in the third book. I guess I hadn't thought about it until just now, but he was making an aggressive defense for people like his creator. He made some comments about the salubrious effects of daydreaming on mental health.

DR. DANA: I'm wondering which child you get asked about the most.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: I get asked about all of them a lot. I suppose I probably get asked most about Constance and Kate, maybe because Sticky and Reynie seem to occupy the middle, in terms of personalities. Sticky's very timid, but by that same virtue, he's not grabbing the reader's attention and shaking the reader by the lapels. And Reynie's a very middle-of-the-road kind of person. He's got a good sense of humor, and he's somewhat mild-mannered and friendly, and so on, whereas Constance is extreme in her stubbornness and her crankiness. And Kate is extreme in her exuberance and her very obvious attention-grabbing red bucket strapped to her hip. So maybe that.

Again, I do get asked about all of them. A lot of kids seem to identify very specifically with different characters. And they will usually tell me so if they feel like they're most like Sticky or Reynie or Kate or Constance-- Constance less so than the others. I think fewer people are eager to connect themselves in some way with the very cranky, stubborn character. But many people still do, if they're being honest, I guess.

And I think Kate, at least if it's evidenced by the letters I receive, and the buckets that I see at readings, sometimes, she really inspires some fierce loyalty. I think a lot of girls really feel like they associate with Kate. So I've been sent photographs of girls with their bucket and their striped shirts and their ponytails, and I've been told about a lot of similar costumes. And certainly a number of girls have shown up at readings dressed as Kate. So that's been obviously a lot of fun for me to see.

DR. DANA: Do they have anything in their buckets?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Several of them have meticulously assembled all the things that Kate has, though some haven't been able to. And sometimes they just have mock instruments, so instead of an actual really powerful magnet, they have a horseshoe magnet, but it's a toy magnet, and that sort of thing. A lot of times they're not full size. They're small flashlights instead of full flashlights, and so on.
But no one ever said that Kate's bucket was entirely practical and reproducible in the real world, sort of like Oscar the Grouch's trash can. He manages to put a bunch of things in there that might not actually fit in real life.

DR. DANA: I'd like to ask you about the bad guys. Mr. Curtain is an evil genius out to do harm to humanity, but a lot of his dirty work is done by an elite set of guards. In the first book, they're called the Recruiters. In the next two books, they're called the Ten Men. Could you describe them, and tell us how you invented them?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Sure. They are very elegantly dressed, smiling men. They wear expensive strong cologne, probably too much of it. But they make the impression upon somebody of being genial, friendly, successful elegant people who are warm and welcoming. But the fact is that they work for Mr. Curtain. And in the first book, their main job is to abduct children against their will and take them to Mr. Curtain's Institute. In the second and third books, they perform various feats for him.

So that's how they look. And in the second and third books, they carry briefcases. But they would blend in in a crowd of successful, well-dressed businessmen, and not be pulled aside for carrying large weaponry on the street, or whatever.

But inside their briefcases, they have lots of business supplies and notebooks and clipboards, and that sort of thing that wouldn't seem too out of keeping with something that a businessman might carry about with him in his briefcase. But all of them are capable of doing harm. They're all capable of being used as weapons, from staple removers to their neckties, which is how they get the nickname the Ten Men. They supposedly have ten different ways of hurting you.

How did I come up with them, you asked me. It started as a joke. I had a lot of jokes in my first book. And I made fun of just anything that came to hand, so everything from the media to certain kinds of education, you name it.

And so at this Institute that Mr. Curtain runs as a sort of front for an evil operation, he needs children. And so in real life, there are people called recruiters who will go out and try to get commitments from top students to come to their particular institutes. And they would be the sort who would be friendly, gregarious, welcoming sorts of people. And I just made a play on that, and called these men Recruiters, though instead of actually sort of gently urging people come to their Institute, in the end, they shoot out little wires that shock you from their watches, and knock you unconscious, and stuff you in a bag.

So it started as that sort of joke. I wanted there to be some menacing types that the kids would have to confront. And so that's how the Recruiters are born. And at the end of the first book, it's noted that they mostly managed to escape. So it made sense, then, there is no longer an Institute in the second and third book, and so their duties and their names shift away from Recruiters to just Ten Men.
DR. DANA: Mr. Benedict, the children's benevolent benefactor, has a guard named Milligan. And it's often Milligan who fights the Ten Men. Can you tell us about Milligan? And I should add that this question is in no way biased because he's one of my favorite characters.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Well, I'm glad you like him. I'm really fond of Milligan myself. He, in the first book, appears to the children before they ever meet Mr. Benedict in conjunction with these tests, as you mentioned earlier. And what they've noticed most about him is that he's very sad. And he won't explain why, and he won't give his full name. He says his name is Milligan, and that's all.

And over the course of the book, you learn why he's so sad. And it actually ends up mattering in the plot, the mystery that must be solved by these kids about what's going on at the Institute.

But he is like a super spy. He is an unbelievably talented guard for Mr. Benedict and a secret operative for Mr. Benedict, and serves as a bodyguard for the children in certain key situations. So he's incredibly fast. He's incredibly handy with his weapon of choice, which is a tranquilizer gun that shoots tranquilizer darts. But his background is a bit of a mystery in the first book. And then his origins come to light over the course of the series.

DR. DANA: Yeah, I guess Milligan has all the answers. That's why I like him so much.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Well, you know, it certainly would be great to have those skills, but it's worth remembering that he fails at key moments in almost all the books, and the kids have to turn around and save him back. So he manages to save them, but usually only at great expense to his physical well-being. So he's not so perfect that he can take care of the kids in all circumstances without suffering some sort of harm.

DR. DANA: Right. I think the thing I like about these books, too, is that nobody is perfect. You need to rely on each other. And you don't see that often. You see these really smart kids who can handle anything. This is much more realistic, but it's not realistic in a way that's dull, if that's a good way of describing it.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Yeah, well, thank you. I tend to find characters who lack vulnerability dull. For instance, as a kid I much preferred Spider-Man to Superman, namely because he-- well not just namely, but at least in one respect was because he had lots of vulnerabilities. He seemed like a normal person, as you're saying. And Superman seemed capable of doing anything, and he didn't seem very vulnerable much of the time. So unless somebody happened to show up with a piece of Kryptonite, you didn't really worry about whether or not he was going to be OK.

And I am much more interested in characters who at any moment could drop the ball and have something bad happen to them because they made a mistake, or because they aren't perfect. And certainly the adults really needed to be highly gifted and skilled in what they did-- also definitely flawed and vulnerable, because I wanted these books to be about children who solve all the big problems.
So it's good to have adults there for a variety of reasons. But at the end of the day, it's the kids who more often than not have to save the day and not the adults. I didn't want the adults to step in and tidy everything up.

DR. DANA: The paperback version of the third book, The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Prisoner's Dilemma, is due out this month, as is the box set for all three books. My question is does the box set come in a red bucket?

TRENTON LEE STEWART: It should. But maybe there was some sort of stumbling block in marketing and production when it came to packaging books in a bucket. But my understanding is that is not how they intend to proceed.

DR. DANA: You could put the box set in your bucket.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Why shouldn't you? And it is yet another purpose the bucket can serve.

DR. DANA: Trenton Lee Stewart, thank you for coming on The BiblioFiles.

TRENTON LEE STEWART: Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure.

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