The Bobbsey Twins Meet Neo

by Sarah Voss

Musty from water-damage, the book drew my attention at the garage-sale, where I bought it for fifty cents. I spent my childhood with eyes glued to the pages of this series. Now, years later, I was curious why.

At home I read again adventures of the Bobbsey twins. They were at the Snow Lodge. I remembered they frequented the Seashore and other places, but that's all I remembered. It was as though I were reading about them for the first time.

Surprise! There were *two* sets of Bobbsey twins. Bert/Nan were nine; Flossie/Freddie, five. How did I forget such basic facts? Conveniently, however, while Bert was preparing to save sis and her friends from some runaway horses, author Laura Lee Hope took "just a moment to tell my new readers something about the characters of this story, and the books that have gone before in the series."

I took a moment to glance at the front page, discovering that, although I'd first read the Bobbsey books in the early 1950s, they were written long before. This one, anyway. *The Bobbsey Twins at the Snow Lodge* was copyrighted in 1913. That was a relief! Now I knew why Bert was throwing snow balls to divert horses instead of turning a car key.

My garage-sale find must have been a later edition because its title page included a reassuring note: "This book, while produced under wartime conditions, in full compliance with government regulations for the conservation of paper and other essential materials, is *Complete and Unabridged.*" Or maybe that meant World War I? Wars run together as you grow older.

There were more surprises. The Bobbseys lived in Lakeport, an "Eastern city." The twins' parents were a stay-at-home mom (well, no surprise there) and a prosperous lumber-merchant father (also unsurprising, considering the times). Mr. And Mrs. Bobbsey were invariantly happy, tolerant, and wise, which *did* surprise me – almost as much as the fact that they went by their Mr. And Mrs. titles. How quaint!

An "almost" baby-boomer raised on an "Eastern" family farm, I, too, remember carefully using such appellations. Now I have to override my computer to print "And" minus the capitalization. Things change.

Mr. And Mrs. Bobbsey had two black servants who pretty much did all the work, although Mrs. Bobbsey helped prepare Christmas dinner right before the family went for a spur-of-the-moment vacation to the Snow Lodge. The servants went too, though I wonder what kind of a holiday it was for them. No matter. Handyman Sam and "fat cook" Dinah (no titles for servants) laughed frequently and spoke a fake dialect ("Oh now yo' hab done it!") which people of my age/background sometimes can recognize as "stereotypical."

What amazed me most, however, was how children have changed over the years. In the Bobbsey-twin era, nine-year-olds were braver and more adventurous than they are today. Unattended, they guided homemade boats across vast lakes and wandered about in perilous weather conditions that my grandchildren will never encounter, not alone anyway. The Bobbsey twins played with different kinds of toys, too – ones requiring great imagination, like dining room chairs rearranged to become firehouses or circus cages. Why, I used to do that! I used to spend hours scissoring entire families and household goods out of the Sears catalogue. The families I created were all happy, prosperous, and white, just like the Bobbsey family. Surprise!

Moreover, the Bobbsey parents taught their twins to be kind, considerate, truthful,

modest, courteous little people, although that didn't mean they couldn't stand up against the one reoccurring bully in their lives. Bullies weren't bashed or feared; they were properly corrected. Such perfect role-models! Still, well-meaning (if rare) parents today monitor television watching so that their children aren't exposed to offensive language, explicit sex, nudity, child abusers, terrorists, war, newscasters and other bullies. Plus, now there is "Neo."

Neo is our latest model. Kind, considerate, truthful, modest, and courteous, Neo is also unafraid to take on the bully Agent Smiths, those horrid AI manipulators who threaten us ordinary mortals with the prison of a universal computer simulation known as *The Matrix*. Neo is SuperBert, fighting dozens of seemingly invincible Smiths all at once. Neo is Master Gymnast, performing physical stunts no ordinary soul could achieve, but which today's average child usually emulates. In the sequel to *The Matrix ReLoaded*, Neo will undoubtedly persuade humankind more systematically.

Beware! Some academicians and even ordinary movie-goers actually suggest that if something like the Matrix hasn't already happened, it soon will. We'll live in/as computer simulations. We're puppets in some grand alien-intelligence play, condemned to think we're real when we aren't. It's discomforting. Who wants to be a mere illusion?

Ostensibly, the Bobbsey twins and Neo are worlds apart. The Bobbsey twins seem so innocent by comparison. Yet it scares me that not only do they coexist, but the Bobbsey twins and Neo actually meet in me. I lived the Bobbsey twins. Now I live Neo's world. Both reside in the cells of one brain, which, so far as I know, isn't dead yet. I find myself wanting to sentimentalize the twins and deny Neo. The world of the twins might have been flawed, but at least it was real.

Unfortunately, it seems the Bobbsey twins weren't so real after all. Laura Lee Hope never existed – only Edward Stratemayer, an entrepreneur who wrote the first of the series and hired ghostwriters to author the rest. Later, an equally clever publisher revamped the series (removed the stereotypes), adding new volumes, which is how, in 1975, *The Bobbsey Twins* came to be *in a TV Mystery Show* and *on the Sun-Moon Cruise.*

How do I (who until recently didn't realize I could purchase brand new, updated versions of the Bobbsey tales) know all these facts about my favorite childhood book series? I did a Google search, of course. Like everybody else. But I'd rather not examine that fact too closely. Google may be just another illusion, and then where will I be?