

By George! Blyton's Famous Five have an Indian leader

Sixtysix years after British author Enid Blyton unveiled her Famous Five series before adoring children the world over, the fictional adventurers have been updated for a new generation and with a new leader - Jo, an Anglo-Indian.

Revived by Disney as television cartoons and books, the members of the new Famous Five are children of the original five created in 1942 - team leader Julian, Dick, George, Anne and the dog Timmy.

In the new version, Jo - short for Jyoti - is the team leader. She is the daughter of George, short for Georgina Kirrin, the tomboy of the original series. George, who has been interpreted as a lesbian by an irreverent generation in recent years, evidently had an Indian spouse.

George is still around, and makes a guest appearance in the first adventure - as plant-loving Aunt George.

Former team leader Julian, who was the oldest of the pack, and very clever and many pre-adolescent girls' dream boy, has fathered Max - who is 13, tall and loves adventure sports.

Anne - who was the youngest and very girlish member of the original team - went on to become a successful California art dealer and produced Allie, described as a shopping- and texting-mad girl who shares her mother's dislike of dangerous adventures.

Dick was the thoughtful joker of the pack. His son Dylan is a bespectacled laptop-toting 11-year-old who follows the Japanese stock market.

Timmy the dog remains Timmy the dog - to the relief, perhaps, of generations of Blyton fans.

The first adventure in the new series sees the Famous Five on the trail of smugglers in the moors of Devon in southwest England. According to published accounts, the villain is a phoney environmentalist running a pirate DVD racket. He has embedded bootleg DVDs with subliminal messages that brainwash children into craving Fudge Fries candy.

Opinion is divided on the reincarnation of the Famous Five, who originally figure in 22 adventure books.

Jeff Norton of Chorion, which owns the rights to all Blyton books, described the new Famous Five as 'smart, cool and hip kids' who are also a bit like their parents - 'they use their resourcefulness and survival skills to bring down the bad guys.'

But Vivienne Endecott of the Enid Blyton Society said she was 'wary,' adding: 'Anybody can write about four children and a dog, and my concern is that modern kids ... will think that the Famous Five is all about gadgets and multiculturalism.'

The fiercest opponents of the makeover may prove to be the legions of Enid Blyton fans who have been brought up on a steady diet of the original adventures series for decades - an astounding 400 million Blyton books have been sold worldwide.

Sanchita Basu, a 19-year-old university student who has devoured Enid Blytons since the age of five, said although it was good to see 'some diversity,' the new characters seemed to be the product of an American marketing exercise.

'You really don't need to update the Famous Five. The tales are timeless and modern enough. You've got George, who is way of ahead of her times, and refuses to be buckled down.

'To me it just looks like the Americans are trying to cash in. With Enid Blyton, you really don't need to appeal to a particular audience segments. They appeal to everyone - boys as well as girls, and adults,' said Basu, who is studying English literature at the University of East Anglia.

She recalled that there was an attempt to update Blyton's Malory Towers series some years ago, with plans to introduce teenage 'snogging' - British slang for cuddling and kissing - into the much-loved books about girls in a residential school.

'And recently Disney turned (the American adventure heroin) Nancy Drew into a walking talking Barbie in a film version,' she fumed. 'The very thought that Dick could give birth to a budding stock marketer... And George was never going to get married!'

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