NANCY DREW AND FEMALE DETECTIVES: FROM DARING AND DETERMINED SLEUTHS TO INFLUENTIAL AND VALUABLE CULTURAL ICONS

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NANCY DREW AND FEMALE DETECTIVES: FROM DARING AND DETERMINED SLEUTHS TO INFLUENTIAL AND VALUABLE CULTURAL ICONS

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ABSTRACT

The development and proliferation of both detective fiction and children’s literature in America from the 1930s through present day is historically relevant, culturally significant, and socially telling. In particular, Nancy Drew, from her emergence on the literary scene in 1930 to her more modern depiction in the Nancy Drew series books of today, represents a feminist hero and teenage icon for females of years ago and present day. While Nancy Drew exudes femininity and grace, she also demonstrates independence, daring, free-thinking, bravery, and outspokenness. As a groundbreaking personality in detective fiction for young people, Nancy has paved the way for other girl sleuths ranging from Trixie Belden and Judy Bolton to Enola Holmes and The Red Blazer Girls. Her intelligence, grace, spirit, and ingenuity inspire women sleuths, including Kinsey Millhone and Kay Scarpetta, and their respective authors in present-day fiction.

To examine and understand the influence of Nancy Drew as a seminal figure in detective fiction requires a close study of primary source material. From the original Nancy Drew series books to the contemporary Girl Detective stories, the literature demonstrates Nancy’s admirable character and illustrates her progression as a young, female sleuth over time. Additionally, books featuring The Red Blazer Girls, Enola Holmes, Gilda Joyce, Kinsey Millhone, and Kay Scarpetta are important for learning about other female detectives and appreciating Nancy Drew’s influence on authors and fictional characters.
Embodying independence, honesty, confidence, wit, sophistication, and bravery, Nancy Drew has been teaching young girls for almost eighty years the importance of intelligence, inner strength, and determination. She has paved the way for and influenced a variety of diverse female personalities in fiction for readers both young and old. Evolving over the decades, Nancy is not a static personality but rather one who changes to fit the times and appeal to modern interests. Nancy Drew is an enduring and ubiquitous character in detective fiction for youth whose impact and appeal can be seen in various forms of contemporary literature. Modern female crime writers have created adult women investigators whose persistence, determination, and courage are clearly shaped by Nancy Drew.
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INTRODUCTION

First developed in 1930 by American publisher, Edward Stratemeyer and his renowned Syndicate, the Nancy Drew Mystery Series provided, and indeed continues to offer, young readers fast-paced, high-action plots and memorable, influential characters. Originally created by two ambitious and imaginative women, Mildred Wirt Benson and Harriet Adams, Nancy’s determined and savvy personality was shaped and inspired by these two pioneering authors. The freedom Nancy enjoys, her compassionate, perceptive nature, and the love she garners from friends and family render her a unique, important, admired, and timeless girl detective. Embodying a combination of intelligence, wit, bravery, zest, and elegance, Nancy Drew represents a beloved and compelling seminal figure in the spheres of detective fiction and children’s literature in America, and her admirable traits have both inspired and influenced other smart and bold female sleuths throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Nancy Drew, the all-American teenage star of the mystery series, personifies a daring and outspoken girl detective different from the more typical females who had previously appeared in early twentieth century fiction for young people. American girls were ready for a refreshingly new and vibrant literary figure to whom they could look for inspiration and entertainment. While Nancy’s intelligence, freedom, resourcefulness, and bravery broke from the traditional norm of the dutiful and purely domestic female, this blonde-haired and blue-eyed sleuth also serves to uphold a number of the conservative ideologies prevalent during this time period in the United States. A likeable figure even for many 1930s traditionalists, Nancy can climb trees and fix cars, but she can also sew clothing and bake pies. She is a dutiful, domestically capable daughter and faithful friend. Typified by formulaic plots and tidy endings, the original Nancy Drew Mysteries quickly captured the hearts and imaginations of
young readers. Indeed, Nancy’s comfortable, white, middle-class lifestyle filled with a doting father, loyal friends, an attractive boyfriend, trendy clothing for her slim figure, and a fashionable car does offer an unattainable ideal to many impressionable girl fans. However, more important than her unrealistic and seemingly perfect lifestyle is the message Nancy sends to all girls, regardless of race, class, or religion, that they can be smart, outspoken, competitive, and daring while still remaining respected and loved by friends and family.

The original Nancy Drew series has endured throughout the decades among young girls and older women alike due to the positive core characteristics Nancy embodies coupled with the sense of nostalgia that re-reading the books provides. Over the decades, a number of Nancy Drew spin-offs have been published in an effort to appeal to a more modern and diverse readership. From The Nancy Drew Files of the 1980s to the Girl Detective series of present day, Nancy has morphed into a more typically self-conscious, albeit still enviable, teenager. While the original Nancy represents the most intelligent, strong-willed, courageous version of herself, more contemporary renditions still promote important values for young readers who are struggling to discover themselves in an increasingly shallow and materialistic world. Nancy Drew shows girls that taking charge and control of situations can be both valuable and empowering. Unfettered by marriage, schoolwork, chores, and dull obligations, the fresh-faced Nancy forever exists in a protected and predictable fantasy world. Girl readers, whether from broken homes or financially struggling families, can escape into this safe environment and, for a few hours, experience excitement and adventure vicariously through Nancy.

Due to Nancy’s popularity as a heroine and female sleuth, other American authors of the mid-twentieth century began creating fictional girl protagonists to serve as alternatives to Nancy. From the righteous and perceptive Judy Bolton to the playful and brave Trixie Belden,
Nancy Drew’s counterparts from decades ago also offered readers likeable characters who solve engaging mysteries. Part of Judy’s and Trixie’s appeal may result from their more realistic natures and typical lives that include school obligations, household chores, and family responsibilities. Despite Judy’s and Trixie’s affability and more relatable qualities, these young detectives have failed to endure over the decades, serve as heroines for young readers, and influence modern sleuths in the same way as Nancy Drew. Nancy was a groundbreaking girl investigator whose refreshing spunk and optimistic nature sticks with and impacts readers in unparalleled and unprecedented ways.

Breaking onto the American detective fiction scene in 1930, Nancy Drew paved the way for other girl and female literary sleuths to emerge over the decades and continue to the present day. Her intelligence and bravery have helped make being smart and courageous not only acceptable among girls and women, but also admirable and laudable. While many of Nancy’s teenage and adult contemporaries clearly struggle to exist, discover themselves, and succeed within increasingly complex and harsh worlds, they still persevere and triumph in their detective cases by using perception, cleverness, and resolve. Spunky and modern girl sleuths such as The Red Blazer Girls, Gilda Joyce, and Enola Holmes experience teenage angst and use technology familiar with today’s young readers. Even the present-day version of Nancy Drew in the Girl Detective series strives to promote Nancy’s core characteristics and personality traits within a more modern context. Despite the character and plot detail updates that have occurred over the years in the various Nancy Drew books and through different ghostwriters, the essence of Nancy’s personality and spirit have predominately remained intact. In addition to the hundreds of books that have been published, her lasting success and far-
reaching appeal can also been seen in the video games, board games, television shows, and movies that have emerged featuring this teen sleuth.

The wide array of modern female detectives in literature, some of whom include Kinsey Millhone, Bennie Rosato, Sharon McConne, and Kay Scarpetta, clearly depict personality traits and characteristics similar to, and also different from, Nancy Drew. Created by intelligent women authors, these sharp and gutsy sleuths, private investigators, and defenders of law are strong and independent figures who serve to inspire and entertain adult readers. Since Nancy Drew helped make being smart, outspoken, and feisty acceptable in females, today’s women detectives have been able to gain popularity and secure a dependable readership. Nancy’s vivacious spirit, passion for uncovering the truth, and intellectual prowess are timeless characteristics worthy of admiration and emulation. These traits can be seen in more mature sleuths from the edgy private investigator, Kinsey Millhone to the seemingly fearless medical examiner, Kay Scarpetta.

A seminal and influential figure both in young people’s literature and detective fiction, Nancy Drew serves as an important force in the socialization and development of emerging readers. Through Nancy’s gripping adventures, ranging from investigating missing jewels in East Africa to cracking a case of potential alien invaders, girl fans can experience exotic excitement and female success and independence as they spend time in Nancy’s fantasy world solving crimes alongside this girl sleuth. She transcends generations as children become women and introduce Nancy’s mysteries and lessons to their daughters. Nancy is an icon who has achieved worldwide recognition, and while the details of her action-packed mysteries may escape readers’ minds years later, Nancy’s essence as a spunky detective, faithful friend,
loving daughter, and independent girl have continued to endure and influence today’s modern females and fictional women detectives alike.
CHAPTER 1

THE BIRTH OF A DETECTIVE HEROINE: NANCY DREW’S EMERGENCE & APPEAL

Series books for girls in America during the early twentieth century sought to capture the interests and imaginations of adolescent readers through stories focusing on adventure, school, and entertainment. While the dime novels of the nineteenth century targeted boys’ escapades, juvenile fiction for girls emerged as a new kind of literature that demanded the portrayal of strong, captivating heroines. Capitalizing on a changing social climate after American women gained the right to vote in 1920 and the burgeoning golden age of both detective and juvenile fiction in the United States, the Stratemeyer Syndicate, a literary production factory first formed in the early twentieth century by second generation German immigrant Edward Stratemeyer, introduced the character of Nancy Drew as a new kind of female heroine for young readers. An expert in developing mysteries centered on mythic heroes and heroines to whom young readers could look and aspire as they tried to figure out their places in the world, Stratemeyer employed efficient production methods to create winning books featuring action-packed plots and diverse characters, many of whom have captured the hearts and influenced the spirits of American children throughout the decades. Beginning in 1930 when she first emerged on the literary scene, Nancy Drew was praised as a feminist model and criticized for embodying the opposite. Her actions, conversations, and assertions earned Nancy compliments for her independence and daring while also bringing criticisms for her adherence to white, middle class culture and mores. Nevertheless, despite the harsh judgments she has endured over the years, this original Nancy Drew was and still remains a strong, positive role model and heroine for young readers not only for her bravery, intelligence, humility, and morality but also for her ability
to contribute to an exciting fictional fantasy world into which girls can escape and develop a lasting love of reading and learning.

Established in New York around 1906, the Stratemeyer Syndicate was a literary empire profiting from the formulaic and popular children's novels developed in a mass-produced and efficient manner.¹ From Dorothy Dale introduced in 1908 as his first girls' series to the Kay Tracey series, the Hardy Boys, and the Bobbsey Twins, Edward Stratemeyer, the mastermind behind the Syndicate, created a number of child heroes who have endured through the ages. While the children's series fiction that first emerged in the 1830s served to promote and instill idealized Victorian values, series books for young readers of the early twentieth century functioned increasingly as entertainment centered on adventure, mystery, school, and adolescent life. The narratives evolved from being a purely didactic and moralizing force to a form of educational amusement. Devoid of murder and death, the series books depended on fast action, ranging from chases and assaults to kidnappings and traps, and the conflict between good and evil characters. The settings and characters remained general enough to appeal to a wide variety of readers spanning generations. Despite harrowing and turbulent adventures, the stories always resolve neatly at the end, with the heroes and heroines triumphing over the villains. Instrumental in the creation of likeable characters and engaging plots was the system Edward Stratemeyer developed to churn out successful books. Owning all copyrights to each work, Stratemeyer established the successful concept of devising an outline for each series book that was then given to a contracted writer who would turn the outline into a full

manuscript. This procedure remained the same regardless of the individual doing the actual writing. His decision to use ghostwriters and pseudonyms brought instant recognition to series of books, while the actual writers could be varied or replaced without the readers ever knowing the difference.

Dying at the age of sixty-seven just days after the first Nancy Drew was published in 1930, Edward Stratemeyer never lived to witness the popularity and success of this beloved American girl sleuth. After searching unsuccessfully for a buyer for the Syndicate, Harriet and Edna Stratemeyer, Edward Stratemeyer’s two daughters, decided to run the business themselves. Harriet, who always had a passion for using her intellect in a work environment, welcomed the opportunity to run her family’s syndicate. Growing up in an upper middle class household that stressed the importance of motherhood and child rearing while also recognizing the value of reading and personal intellect, Edna and Harriet proved worthy of inheriting their father’s company. As a child, Harriet in particular spent much of her time reading as a form of escapism and a means to experience the excitement that she lacked in her own life. Entering Wellesley College in the fall of 1910, Harriet’s feminist qualities surfaced as she showed an interest in the women’s suffrage movement and participated in activities of the Wellesley Equal Suffrage League. After graduating from Wellesley, Harriet’s father refused to allow her to accept a number of attractive job offers due to his desire to keep her under his own care. Mr. Stratemeyer eventually agreed that if

2. Ibid., 22.


4. Ibid., 59, 70.
Harriet was to work, she would work for him as a manuscript editor until her marriage in 1915.

Just as Harriet increasingly recognized the importance of women’s equality, so too did masses of American females emerge with a more focused sense of their rights as individuals and as workers at the end of World War I in 1918. Greater numbers of women began enrolling in college in the 1920s, and more females started coming into their own by exploring various modes of self-expression and liberation in areas such as makeup and fashion. From nickelodeons to radio, entertainment became increasingly popular, especially among younger people who were being recognized as an important consumer force. The social, intellectual, political, and cultural climate was ideal for the emergence of a smart, vibrant, valiant young female detective.

When the sixteen-year-old carefree and lighthearted Nancy Drew arrived on the literary scene in April 1930, America faced the worst economic depression in history. Free from rules, worries, and the pressure of marriage and responsibility, Nancy could serve to comfort many readers and remind them that happier days waited ahead.\(^5\) Priced at a rate young readers could afford, Nancy’s fast-paced adventure stories also allowed readers to escape from the misery of the Depression. As a testament to the series’ popularity, Macy’s Department Store sold six thousand Nancy Drew titles during the six-week Depression Christmas season of 1933.\(^6\) Nancy Drew, along with a number of Stratemeyer’s other fictional characters, “... offered readers a new kind of hero: the independent, ‘plucky’

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5. Ibid., 117.

adolescent..." She role as a young amateur investigator rather than a demure, subservient girl or housewife "... provided [readers] the promise of something beyond domesticity."^8

While Edward Stratemeyer wisely decided to use the pseudonym Carolyn Keene for the Nancy Drew mystery series, the actual ghostwriters who authored the original books are important to study in order to develop both an appreciation for the work that went into writing the mysteries as well as an understanding of plot and characterization. Mildred Wirt Benson, demonstrating her atypical female characteristics as early as childhood with her denouncement of sewing and dolls in favor of hobbies typically associated with boys, can be credited with writing significant portions of more than two dozen Nancy Drew mysteries.^9 After attending the University of Iowa, where she played many sports, worked on the school newspaper, and wrote short stories for various children's magazines, Benson went on to become the first woman to graduate from the Iowa School of Journalism in 1927. Wishing to learn about book writing before getting married and having a family, Benson, upon her graduation, responded to one of Edward Stratemeyer's magazine advertisements looking for children's series book authors. After hiring Benson to author the next work in the popular Ruth Fielding series, Stratemeyer was convinced that she would make the best author for the new Nancy Drew series.^10 Originally deciding to name


10. Ibid., 102.
this investigative heroine Stella Strong or Nan Drew, Stratemeyer submitted to the choice by his publishing company, Grosset & Dunlap, to call the girl Nancy Drew.\(^{11}\) As America’s growing infatuation with crime fiction flourished, Stratemeyer knew the time was ripe for a girl detective series that combined “...the beloved, old-fashioned adventure tradition with the heat generated by gritty tales of modern crime.”\(^{12}\)

Taking over the Syndicate after their father’s death, Harriet and Edna made their own revisions to Nancy’s character and to the business practices of the Syndicate. With the sisters now doing the manuscript editing, Nancy developed “a new patina of modesty” and became increasingly polite and dutiful, characteristics that were valued in Harriet’s and Edna’s own childhood lives. From fashion to friends, Harriet protected every aspect of Nancy’s development. In fact, she often criticized Benson’s work for using words that may have been too complicated for young readers and portraying Nancy as lacking respect for her elders. She and Edna exerted greater control over book plots and characterization as they spent more time writing outlines for their ghostwriters.\(^{13}\) As a result, Harriet instituted a lower fee for manuscript production. Benson refused to accept this fee and thus stopped writing for the Syndicate after drafting thirteen series books during a five-year period.

Another writer, Walter Karig, subsequently wrote three Nancy Drews mysteries, but, as his

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 113.


\(^{13}\) Rehak, *Girl Sleuth*, 143, 173, 181, and 174.
manuscripts required a great deal of editing, Edna and Harriet worked to convince Benson to return to the Syndicate.

However, Benson’s second stint at authoring the Nancy Drew narratives ended in the 1950s when Harriet developed a new method for writing manuscripts that entailed doing more work in the office. As a result, after drafting Nancy Drew number thirty, Benson stopped writing for the Syndicate, and Harriet took over the series books. It was also in the late 1950s that parent complaints about prejudice in the Syndicate series books increased, thus forcing publishing company Grosset & Dunlap to undertake a major revision and reissuing program in 1958 of the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series. The negative depictions of blacks, Jews, Irish, Italian, and other ethnic groups were seen as contributors to promoting prejudice in America. Harriet, who maintained tight control over Nancy’s character, shortened several texts, created less detailed characterizations, and even removed many of the ethnic personalities. Nancy’s age was changed from sixteen to eighteen, chums evolved into friends, and her blue car was updated from a roadster to a convertible. The books were now being printed in a new format, with the updated cover art appearing directly on the books’ yellow board covers. The revisions made to Nancy’s physical character and surroundings appealed to new generations of readers as they saw her clothing and car as fashionable accessories. In fact, the average age of readers had dropped due to girls’ increased sophistication.

15. Ibid., 247 and 248.
16. Ibid., 264.
feminist icon and a fashionable, intelligent idol to many pre-teen readers, many feel that Benson’s original Nancy was more vivacious, plucky, and outspoken and even increasingly vulnerable.

In the mid-twentieth century, the popularity of children’s books increased as families grew in size, and young people began buying books in record numbers. World War II had prompted more women to enter both blue and white collar jobs, and unconventional females like Rosie the Riveter became national symbols of strength and wartime courage. Thus, the position of Nancy Drew as a feminist hero achieved increasing relevance and importance to readers both young and old. The 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* further ignited feelings of female liberation as girls and women looked up to Nancy as a strong female not burdened by marriage or children. Rather, Nancy always knew how to act both eloquently and determinedly while confidently and bravely solving the diverse mysteries and problems with which she was confronted.

In 1984, Simon & Schuster finalized a complete purchase of the Stratemeyer Syndicate and gained total control over the series and Nancy’s character. Simon & Schuster thus launched several new Nancy Drew series, including the 1986 Nancy Drew Files, featuring updated and trendy characters designed to appeal to older readers. Other series initiated by this publishing company some of which will be explored in the next chapter of this thesis included the Nancy Drew Notebooks, Nancy Drew on Campus, and the Nancy Drew Girl Detective series.

From The Rover Boys to the Bobbsey Twins, the light-hearted and entertaining juvenile series created by the Stratemeyer Syndicate at the beginning of the twentieth century focused on fun-loving characters who lived in fantasy worlds free of punishments
and strife. While a number of Stratemeyer’s fictional personalities and stories failed to garner enduring popularity through the decades, other characters, most notably that of girl sleuth Nancy Drew, captured and continue to enchant the minds of young readers past and present. Clearly, fundamental elements of the original Nancy as a vibrant girl detective living in a safe and idealized world with seemingly perfect friends and a supportive father have and continue to remain attractive to pre-teen readers.

Characterized as a loving, pure, playful, and cooperative relationship devoid of antagonism and contention, Nancy’s interactions with her respected attorney father, Carson Drew, encourage Nancy’s freedom, confidence, creativity, and detective skills. Various behaviors between father and daughter often seem more like those of a husband and wife than a parent and child. Always taking a photograph of Nancy with him whenever he travels, the tall, dark, and handsome Carson adores Nancy as the only female currently in his life.17 During one particular mystery, Nancy shows her unique form of affection toward Carson when she “bent to kiss her father and patted him on the cheek.”18 Toward the beginning of another adventure, Nancy is found “. . . [patting] the top of the lawyer’s head.”19 These sorts of playful almost flirtatious back-and-forth interactions classify Nancy and Carson’s relationship, and perhaps even demonstrate Nancy’s ability to nurture her father in the absence of his wife, and her mother, who died several years earlier.


18. Ibid., 104.

In many of his actions, Carson does not represent an authoritative father figure and often seeks Nancy’s input before making a decision. For example, after determining that Nancy will accompany him to Boston to work on their latest mystery involving an ancient ship, he still looks for her approval by asking, “that all right with you, Nancy?” Nancy jumps at the opportunity to join her father and then proceeds to pack for both of them.\(^{20}\) The fact that a daughter packs clothing and supplies for her father is a bit of an odd scenario. Despite her ability to act mostly as she pleases, Nancy still places a lot of worth on her father’s consent and blessing. For example, in *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, Nancy phones Carson to ask if she is allowed to go skin diving as part of her sleuthing.\(^{21}\) This interaction with her father not only demonstrates Nancy’s close relationship with Carson but also proves relatable to young readers who need to seek parental permission frequently in their daily lives. Several other instances exist throughout the series where Nancy seeks Carson’s approval to engage in various sleuthing activities.\(^{22}\) However, because Carson’s “...code of justice was rigid and unyielding,” he usually supports Nancy’s work to restore order to society and bring down the evil and threatening characters.\(^{23}\)

Nancy’s relationship with her father proves enviable to many young readers for the fun and excitement that classify their familial bond and the role of perfect dad that Carson seems to embody. Relying on Carson’s sleuthing advice, Nancy maintains a close

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 15 and 19.


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 58.
connection with her father largely based on their shared love of detective work and intellectual pursuits. Carson often discusses his legal cases with Nancy "... because she grasped the issues so clearly and quickly."\(^{24}\) He provides his daughter with many helpful sleuthing tips, tells her to always be aware, and admonishes, "don't trust an informer too far."\(^{25}\) Depending on Carson's encouragement and suggestions, Nancy notes that she always calls her father when she gets stuck on a case.\(^{26}\) Additionally, Mr. Drew frequently validates Nancy's conjectures about her mysteries. In *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*, he laughs during a conversation with his daughter and says he thinks "Nancy's theories about the stolen letters were correct."\(^{27}\) He remarks with pride that "... I always give Nancy hard assignments and always with great confidence that she will come up with the right answers."\(^{28}\) Carson reveres Nancy for her ingenuity and perseverance and regales her with praise. She treats him with the proper respect a parental authority deserves and never displays insolence. Many times, Carson behaves more like a friend than a father and often playfully teases Nancy. After telling his daughter that he wishes he could accompany her to Ned's football game, Carson "... went for his coat and said he was going out to bowl with some friends."\(^{29}\) In some of Nancy's mysteries, such as *The Sign of the Twisted


\(^{25}\) Keene, *Mystery at Lilac Inn*, 129.


Candles, Carson acts as his daughter’s co-detective as the duo embark on thrilling adventures together.

Carson’s position as a revered and successful attorney allows him to provide Nancy with exciting opportunities, many of which prove crucial for her investigations. For example, while in Florida working on a new mystery, Nancy and her close friends Bess and George, who first appear in 1931 in The Secret of Shadow Ranch, receive special badges from Carson Drew for a moon shoot at the Kennedy Space Center.30 In other mysteries, certain individuals help Nancy because of her status as daughter of respected lawyer Carson Drew.

Motherless since the age of three, Nancy lacks an authoritative woman in her life who can enforce the stereotypical domestic role of females in society. Clearly, Carson maintains a rather loose form of parenting, allowing Nancy to come and go as she pleases, whether that be visiting her older boyfriend Ned at Emerson College or embarking across the country on a new adventure. While Hannah Gruen, the Drew’s dedicated, loyal, and caring housekeeper, functions as a kind of mother figure in that she expresses concern and guidance for Nancy, Hannah’s subservient status as housekeeper ultimately prevents her advice and criticisms from exerting any real authoritative value.31 Hannah, who has taken care of Nancy for over a decade, has a close and loving relationship with Nancy, and she

and the girl sleuth hold "... a deep affection for each other." 32 When Nancy finds herself puzzled on a particular case, she often talks "... over the situation with her understanding housekeeper." 33 Speaking to one of the evil characters in a particular story after he pushes Nancy, Hannah displays her concern for Nancy by passionately stating, "... don't you ever dare lay a finger on Nancy or any of the rest of us." 34 Hannah is able to provide Nancy with love but not the authoritative direction and influence that might stifle the sleuth's daring escapades.

In addition to the support and influence of her family members, Carson and Hannah, Nancy's ability to devote her entire life to sleuthing also results from an upper-middle class background filled with comfort and safety and devoid of school, homework, chores, and other responsibilities. Forever existing in a place between high school and college, Nancy resides with her father and housekeeper in a "handsome brick home, surrounded by a velvety green lawn." 35 River Heights, her small, mid-western town, is a safe-haven to which Nancy can always return both during and after her harrowing mystery cases. A place that seems to exist outside of both time and space, River Heights is described by Carol Billman as "... a playground, an isolated fantasy world made to order for Nancy's constant amusement." 36 River Heights functions as a comforting arena that protects Nancy from harm and disappointment and becomes a haven where Nancy never

33. Keene, Nancy's Mysterious Letter, 55.
34. Keene, Moss-Covered Mansion, 61.
35. Keene, Mystery at Lilac Inn, 25.
has to grow up. Nancy’s wealth gives her the luxury of traveling to various locations in her mysteries and removes all financial worry from her life. In one particular case, Nancy needs to make several long distance telephone calls as part of her sleuthing, and she notes that her “phone bill will be tremendous.”\textsuperscript{37} In another mystery, Carson decides to give Nancy an early surprise present, a new convertible, to aid in her detective case.\textsuperscript{38} If Nancy and her family were not as financially secure, much of her detective work would not be possible. Filipina-American scholar Melinda de Jesus notes that Nancy “epitomizes WASP privilege and its wealthy suburban lifestyle.”\textsuperscript{39} This privilege and wealth, however, creates a fictional world that provides many young readers with “... a vicarious experience denied to them in their real lives.”\textsuperscript{40}

When the stories underwent revisions in the 1950s to address racist images of non-whites, the primary solution seemed to be simply excluding other races from the texts. Young readers would have a difficult time developing positive perceptions of various kinds of individuals when only certain kinds of people appeared in the books. However, while girls of various ethnic backgrounds could not all see themselves physically in Nancy, they could certainly appreciate and emulate her admirable traits. Dinah Eng, a Chinese-American woman who was an avid Nancy reader as a child, notes that “... as an Asian

\textsuperscript{37} Keene, \textit{Nancy’s Mysterious Letter}, 56.

\textsuperscript{38} Keene, \textit{Password to Larkspur Lane}, 67.


American, [she] was taught to be on the quiet side, not to be assertive . . . . [She] probably assimilated some of her [Nancy's] independence as well."41 Clearly, Nancy’s positive characteristics and actions triumph over her white, middle-class appearance and lifestyle. These traits shine through in the mystery stories in part because of the lack of true detail toward Nancy’s character and inner thoughts. As Ilana Nash notes, “Nancy is drawn so sketchily that a great deal of room is left for readers’ identification with her, an important ingredient of the relationship between Nancy and her fans.”42 Nancy’s roughly depicted character represents “. . . a heroine just specific enough to be recognizable, but not so specific as to discourage a girl from projecting herself into the character.” Young girls throughout the decades can use their imaginations to create their own mythical versions of Nancy Drew.

Nancy’s glowing personality and status as Carson Drew’s daughter allow her to have a friendly connection with River Heights police officer, Chief McGinnis, and this relationship allows Nancy to frequent police headquarters with important details regarding her latest cases. Quite comically, police chiefs often rely on Nancy’s ideas and insight and compliment her for her detective insight and praise her for “good thinking.”43 The authorities respect Nancy and allow her to engage in snooping and trespassing because they know she aims to restore order and promote good. Police officer Flynn lauds Nancy for her


42. Nash, American Sweethearts, 39.

43. Keene, The Triple Hoax, 33.
"nice job of deduction." In other situations, Nancy’s investigative skills surpass those of seasoned, trained police officers.

From swimming and first aid to auto-mechanics and motorboat repairs, Nancy has many talents that help in her sleuthing and possesses much knowledge on a diverse array of topics. She speaks Spanish and remarks lightheartedly to Bess and George that “you two should really learn the language. It isn’t difficult.” Nancy’s skills often prove better than her male counterparts; after adroitly maneuvering her car into a tight parking spot, “Ned admitted he could not have done a finer job.” She is a wealth of knowledge and often educates Bess, George, and her readers on various subjects. For example, when Nancy travels to Mexico in The Triple Hoax, she wisely proclaims, “one time, when there was a great polio epidemic all over the United States, doctors found there was not a single case of the disease in Mexico. Upon inquiry they learned that this was due to the daily use of peppers in the native diet.” After locating a pigeon carrying a cryptic message, Nancy responds to Hannah Gruen’s question about wondering how fast pigeons can fly by stating that she “read about some pigeons who raced from Mexico City to New York, averaging a mile a minute.”

44. Keene, Wooden Lady, 14.
45. Keene, The Triple Hoax, 53.
46. Keene, Nancy’s Mysterious Letter, 139.
48. Keene, Password to Larkspur Lane, 3.
Nancy’s knowledge imparts a certain understanding of particular events or phenomena upon the reader, which highlights the educational value of this series. For example, in the *Mystery of the Moss-Covered Mansion*, Nancy’s tour guide at the Kennedy Space Center explains about artificial satellites.\(^{49}\) In *The Secret of the Wooden Lady*, Nancy reads a book about shipbuilding and the purpose of figureheads on sea vessels.\(^{50}\) Nancy’s education demonstrates to readers that academic knowledge can be important in solving mysteries. After discovering that phosphorescent paint created a phantom-looking horse, Nancy remarks that she “learned in chemistry class that phosphorescent paint glows in the dark after it first has been exposed to light.”\(^{51}\) These pieces of knowledge “… alert young readers that it is a good thing to be curious and that there is more to life than banal everyday experiences.”\(^{52}\)

While she exhibits independent and outgoing characteristics, Nancy still maintains qualities that have been traditionally valued in females, thus making her relatable while still revolutionary for girls decades ago. For example, she is proficient at knitting and “makes scrumptious ones [cakes].”\(^{53}\) Although Hannah Gruen takes care of most of the household tasks, Nancy still has evenings where she assists with dinner by “[setting] the table and [preparing] a salad . . .”\(^{54}\) While on their way to Shadow Ranch in Phoenix,


\(^{50}\) Keene, *Wooden Lady*, 31.

\(^{51}\) Keene, *Shadow Ranch*, 152.

\(^{52}\) Kismaric and Heiferman, *Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys*, 98.


\(^{54}\) Keene, *Nancy’s Mysterious Letter*, 64.
Nancy, Bess, and George take time to “[comb] their hair and put on fresh lipstick.”\textsuperscript{55} After being caught in the rain and finding refuge in her friends’ house in \textit{The Secret of the Old Clock}, Nancy, always proper and well-groomed, is sure to locate an ironing board and press her wet clothes.\textsuperscript{56} Decorous and morally righteous, she is also described as a girl who attends church (a feature that Harriet Adams was keen to add).\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, from hidden passageways, spooky staircases, and ominous forests to foreboding inns, locked closets, and stormy weather, these mysteries contain Gothic, romantic elements to which many early twentieth century readers could relate. Whether solving cases involving diaries, charms, lockets, albums, or maps, Nancy’s investigations focus on “feminine” objects and themes. With an “outspoken manner,” Nancy taught girls to think for themselves while also acting like proper ladies.\textsuperscript{58} Embodying a balance of ruggedness and femininity, poise and assertiveness, Nancy is a paradox who does not have to choose between being a tomboy or a lady, and why should her young female readers have to choose? Nancy exists as a timeless role model in that she is “... a modern woman who figured out how to have it all. Nancy successfully juggled social life, romance and the problems of the world, and she looked pretty doing it.”\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Keene, \textit{Shadow Ranch}, 16.
\item Carolyn Keene, \textit{The Secret of the Old Clock} (1930; repr., New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1987), 41.
\item Keene, \textit{Nancy’s Mysterious Letter}, 21.
\item Keene, \textit{Twisted Candles}, 15.
\end{enumerate}
Still, Nancy’s lack of confinement to domestic situations was unique among girls of the mid-twentieth century, and therefore her freedom could be viewed as both inspiring and unrealistic. As Carol Billman states, “it is precisely because she [Nancy] is so far removed from the little qualms and the big frustrations and decisions facing real girls and women that she cannot be considered a helpful fictional model of successful womanhood.”60 Furthermore, many of Nancy’s actions and behaviors suggest those of a mature adult rather than a typically anxious teenager coming into her own. Nevertheless, this maturity promotes a positive and powerful view of adolescence. While Nancy’s unconventional life may not mirror the lives of most young women, her energetic and optimistic essence does indeed provide inspiration to her readers. To girls from the mid-twentieth century onward, Nancy’s personality “… inspires admiration not jealousy, because she’s been packaged with a split personality meant to spur young girls to independence while reminding them of some of their traditional female roles.”61 Nancy shows girls that they can very easily and naturally be bold, independent, outspoken, and successful while still accepted and admired by family and friends.

Some of Nancy Drew’s contemporary critics claim that the theme of empowerment that Nancy sends her young female readers “is subtly undercut by the novels’ insistence on adherence to traditionally ‘feminine’ manners and appearances.”62

60. Billman, Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, 119.

61. Kismaric and Heiferman, Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys, 44.

Indeed, the customarily feminine traits Nancy exhibits allowed the more conservative generation of the mid-twentieth century to read, accept, and appreciate her stories. Melinda de Jesus, a Filipina author, reflects on her childhood reading of Nancy Drew and notes that these mystery stories “...are employed to inculcate a desire for American culture and whiteness.” She argues that Nancy Drew functions as a form of American cultural imperialism through this young sleuth’s power to make girls want to be like her as she presents “...WASP culture and values as ‘normative.’” De Jesus states that Nancy trained her “...to look for the wrong kind of criminal . . . . the true villain is Nancy herself.”

Admittedly, Nancy’s thin frame, blonde hair, fair skin, and overall attractive appearance may send the message to impressionable young readers that they must look like Nancy in order to be appreciated and loved. However, more important than the possibility of interpreting Nancy’s looks and lifestyle as upholding white, middle class superiority are the strong, independent characteristics that this girl sleuth embodies and fearlessly exhibits. Heroines such as Nancy “should be known not for details of appearance or manner but for bold action.”

Bravery, intelligence, determination, wit, compassion, and perseverance are traits that girls from any ethnic background can admire, adopt, and embrace. These strong qualities combined with Nancy’s overall sketchy characterization allow young readers to


64. Billman, Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, 113.
use Nancy as "...a mannequin that they can dress in their own fantasies." While readers may not always remember specific plot details from Nancy's tumultuous adventures, the girl sleuth's demeanor as a brave, generous, determined teen remain. As Ned notes, "you really keep trying—that's what I like about you, Nancy." As a female, Nancy encounters adversity in her sleuthing and meets characters who make disparaging remarks, such as "you're a girl... What can you do?" Still, Nancy does not let these comments discourage her and remains happily and resolutely dedicated to her work.

Nancy's lack of bravado and her non-threatening nature made her likable to her first readers in the 1930s and still renders her endearing to today's fans. Described as attractive yet not beautiful, this girl sleuth comes across as unpretentious and modest rather than glamorous and haughty. Nancy does not like accepting rewards for her work but rather participates in solving mysteries for the fun of it and for the ultimate end goal of restoring order and helping people who have been unfairly wronged. As Ned playfully notes at the end of one of Nancy's cases, "If I were to give Nancy the reward she'd like best, I'd hand her another mystery to solve." Despite being called "a remarkable sleuth," Nancy does not become egotistic but rather simply brushes off any compliments she


66. Keene, Wooden Lady, 84.

67. Keene, Moss-Covered Mansion, 83.

68. Keene, Password to Larkspur Lane, 175.
receives. Her humble nature may be seen as a traditionally valued female trait. After being praised for her sleuthing talents, Nancy responds that she has “... solved some mysteries, I'll admit, and I enjoy it, but I'm sure there are many other girls who could do the same.”

Upon completing a perfect dive into a lake with her friends watching, Nancy proclaims that her flawless execution was “just luck.” While Nancy was a revolutionary girl for her independence and determination, she still exhibits traits that appealed and were familiar to the general mid-twentieth century population. Evidently, despite her audacity and break from classic gender roles, Nancy could be seen as supporting conservative American values in many respects.

From amazing escapes to international travels, the Nancy Drew stories contain many unrealistic and incredulous elements, and it is precisely this fantasy environment that attracts and compels young readers. Frequently engaging in adventures that are clearly unattainable exploits for most growing readers, Nancy, Bess, and George partake in activities such as flying to Mexico on a whim to catch a group of swindlers in The Triple Hoax and venturing to France in The Mystery of the 99 Steps. Sparse with highly descriptive elements and imagery, these fast-paced, action-packed stories allow the reader to fill in the details and create the atmosphere within his or her imagination. From narrowly escaping rolling logs and falling rocks, Nancy frequently encounters perilous, near death situations. Hannah Gruen tells Nancy that she is “... like a cat with nine lives,

69. Keene, Shadow Ranch, 111.

70. Keene, Nancy's Mysterious Letter, 155.

71. Keene, Password to Larkspur Lane, 98.
the way you so often just miss being injured." 72 Constantly on the move, she remains
dedicated to her cases and recognizes that she "... must take risks when solving a
mystery." 73 Some critics may see these risks as selfish and senseless, for Nancy always
needs stimulation and "... courts danger in a way that can only be described as an
addiction to excitement and violence." 74 Despite the severity of these dangerous
encounters, the girl detective emerges unharmed and triumphant, for, as Nancy herself
notes, she is "... just a tough old sleuth." 75 Indeed, much of the action in these books
revolves around coincidences, many of which are hard to believe. For girls of the 1930s,
Nancy Drew and her incredulous exploits offered an escape from an economically
depressed and tedious reality. As Carolyn Carpan notes, "the focus on missing wills, lost
heirs, and stolen jewels were appealing to girls who had little money and few luxury
items." 76 Regardless of the tumult that may occur in readers' own lives, Nancy's fantasy
world provided excitement, adventure, and safety all within a couple hundred pages of text.
Pre-teens of today can travel alongside Nancy in her automobile on all her fast-paced
adventures before they even have driver's licenses themselves.

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74. Betsy Caprio, The Mystery of Nancy Drew: Girl Sleuth on the Couch (California: Source
Publications, 1992), 53.
75. Carolyn Keene, The Clue of the Broken Locket (1934; repr., New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1993),
74.
76. Carolyn Carpan, Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths: Girls' Series Books in America (Lanham,
Nancy’s dedicated friends and comrades on her detective adventures, Bess and George, serve to highlight Nancy’s intelligence and bravery, represent the male and female sides of Nancy’s personality, and also arguably function as more realistic, relatable characters for young readers. An “... athletic girl [who] had taken lessons in judo,” George stands in contrast to her cousin, Bess, who is feminine and often frightened in uncertain situations. Bess is frequently teased for being chubby, and George often pokes fun at this cousin for having a “forty-inch waist.” As Bobby Ann Mason notes, Bess and George “... are recognizable only by their loyalty and as mirrors of Nancy’s two halves, demonstrating the extreme options open to females – tomboy and fluff-head.” Despite their differences, the cousins remain close friends with Nancy and often provide important assistance during her investigations. Bess and George function as more relatable characters, allowing young readers to envision themselves, if not as Nancy, than as one of her friends. Nancy is able to overlook their personality “flaws” or shortcomings and remain their close pal. At times, Bess uses her pretty looks to gain sympathy or support in their detective work. Embodying a meek and emotional personality, Bess is not reluctant to accept male protection. This fearful and timid demeanor offers a good contrast to Nancy’s bravery, and her comments frequently promote Nancy’s knowledge, dedication, and moxie. For example, Bess remarks that Nancy is “... so good at keeping [her] mind on two things at once that half your brain was playing tennis and the other half conjuring

77. Keene, The Triple Hoax, 150 and 110.

up something.” When the trio of young sleuths find themselves in the midst of hunting for a treasure at Shadow Ranch in Arizona, the comment “‘You mean it’s [the treasure] in a green bottle?’ Bess asked incredulously” is the perfect remark to feature Nancy’s astute answer that “more likely the bottle contains directions to it.” George notes proudly that “...it [takes] more than an old grizzle-faced stranger to frighten Nancy Drew.” Still, although Bess and George provide Nancy with praise, assistance, and companionship, Nancy frequently likes engaging in sleuthing activities alone, as her “…best thinking hours seem to be late at night or early in the morning.” Her decision to be solitary in aspects of her detective work comforts young readers who also enjoy or have an inclination for being by themselves.

Despite Nancy’s dedication to sleuthing, she never takes her cases so seriously that she is not able to laugh and enjoy time with family and friends. This lighthearted feeling that pervades these mysteries and characters provides readers with a sense of assurance regardless of a particular situation’s intensity. For example, after becoming wet in a river while searching for clues to the Shadow Ranch treasure, “The girls [Bess, George, and Nancy] looked at one another. Despite the situation, they could not repress giggles. All were drenched and mud-spattered, with water streaming from their hair.”

When in France investigating The Mystery of the 99 Steps, “Nancy was eager to pursue her

79. Keene, Moss-Covered Mansion, 45.
80. Keene, Shadow Ranch, 57.
81. Keene, Wooden Lady, 33.
83. Keene, Shadow Ranch, 73.
sleuthing, but she went sightseeing with her friends and had lunch aboard a pleasure boat on the River Seine. Similarly, no matter how in depth or urgent the mystery, Nancy and friends always find time for relaxing over meals and snacks. The reader can readily imagine herself as a member of Nancy’s circle of friends participating in normal, everyday activities.

In addition to giggles and ice cream sundaes, the imaginative sleuthing adventures in which Nancy, Bess, and George participate contain an element of trust toward strangers. When the trio becomes involved in a search for a missing heiress, they enter a strange guesthouse where the suspected culprit lives and speak candidly with the owner of the guesthouse, a woman they do not know. Part of this ability to trust is due to the friendliness and helpfulness that almost every character exhibits, with the exception of the criminals and culprits. Furthermore, Nancy, ever assertive and fearless, does not show anxiety or intimidation in the presence of adults. Young readers must view these innocent and unsuspecting relationships within the context of Nancy’s fantasy world.

Nancy’s well-established abilities as a young sleuth are highlighted when Mrs. Gruen remarks that she “can see why you’re [Nancy] a good detective . . . . If you don’t find hidden gold under one stone, you turn up another.” Refusing to be intimidated, she prevails over threatening and conniving men, and her ability to stand strong and confident in the face of evil provides reassurance and confidence to young readers who are coming

84. Keene, 99 Steps, 77.
85. Keene, Nancy’s Mysterious Letter, 80.
86. Ibid., 58.
into their own and trying to make sense of the world and their purposes. Nancy knows that small details can prove to be valuable clues and relies on logic and deduction to crack cases. Her perceptiveness combined with this ability to pick up on such minor details, such as the warmth of coffee to know that certain individuals must have just been in the vicinity, help make her such a proficient detective. 87 Attentive and quick-thinking, Nancy has "keen ears," a trained eye, and a skilled memory. 88 Her seemingly effortless detective skills cause "Bess and George [to marvel] at Nancy’s intuition," even though undeniably Nancy’s unfailing ability to solve cases represents a combination of both skill and luck. 89 Shrewd and logical, "she knew that guilty people often play the part of aggrieved persons, trying to cover up the truth." 90

Persistent in her questioning and methodical in her thinking, Nancy’s sleuthing often puts her in perilous and unpredictable situations in which she must use her mettle and intellect to emerge triumphant. In many cases, Nancy finds that she “was worried but did not speak her thoughts aloud.” Nancy frequently pursues dangerous questions at times when Bess and George have shied away. Both practical and logical, this girl sleuth knows that in order to solve a mystery she needs to have “constructive evidence.” 91 Quite comically, Nancy frequently both rationalizes and bargains with suspects and criminals in order to achieve her investigative goals.

87. Keene, Shadow Ranch, 68.
88. Keene, Twisted Candles, 111.
89. Keene, 99 Steps, 146.
90. Keene, Moss-Covered Mansion, 63.
91. Ibid., 49 and 116.
Representing the triumph of good over evil and the restoration of justice, the mysteries that Nancy solves requires the girl sleuth to help selflessly and tirelessly afflicted or wronged characters. She brings order, peace, and nuclear family unity back to disrupted environments and selflessly serves the helpless victims of the world. While Nancy certainly does not like criminals, she reflects spiritedly to herself that “. . . if there were no swindlers, there would be fewer mysteries to solve!”  

In one mystery, Nancy happily reflects on her accomplishment of “making a prisoner turn over a new leaf . . .”  

The themes and mysteries prove that “. . . there’s never a reason to lie, cheat, or play dirty, because in a world where all plots lead to happy endings, where all troubles are resolved, nothing’s ever as bad as it seems.”  

While events certainly do not always end happily in real life, the Nancy Drew books teach young readers to remain true to themselves and their convictions. Still, the justice Nancy seeks to restore can be argued by some critics to uphold white middle-class values. The mysteries she solves reassure “. . . her growing audiences that deviance comes not from the middle classes, but from its margins.”  

Some critics view Nancy’s too perfect image as representing an unattainable ideal that may prove harmful to young readers. Scholar and therapist Betsy Caprio notes that Nancy “. . . rarely asks for help, or admits she is wrong, or apologizes for anything – as these behaviors would reveal weakness.” Caprio goes on to observe that Nancy’s actions

and attitudes promote the unhealthy idea that "'good girls – and boys – have only good feelings.'”96 For example, after being made fun of for working as a girl detective, Nancy’s “... face flushed with anger...”97 Although she may be feeling angry on the inside, she does not show this negative emotion. Nancy, Bess, and George “... have no troubling feelings besides curiosity and, occasionally, fear. They never get angry at one another. Nancy never misses her boyfriend, Ned...”98 Although the original books authored by Mildred Writ Benson show Nancy as “... a non-conformist, a girl who expressed her feelings, who got angry, scared, and upset,” the revised versions that are most popularly read today represent a constantly upbeat Nancy.99 Serving as an unwavering cheerleader, Nancy tries to keep victims’ spirits up with optimistic comments such as, “we’re going to solve this whole mystery soon, I’m sure of it. Please don’t worry.” She also helps Bess feel more confident when she remarks, “you’ve helped me solve so many mysteries, Bess, you could take over this one alone!”100 Constantly collected and in control, Nancy, despite the danger of a particular situation, “... doesn’t get the creeps, as any real girl would. Instead, she proceeds logically [to solve the problem]...”101

96. Caprio, Girl Sleuth on the Couch, 51 and 57.
97. Keene, Crooked Banister, 55.
100. Keene, Crooked Banister, 122 and 136.
While a world that lacks true emotion may be unrealistic and unhealthy, the carefree, fun, and predictable atmosphere of these mystery stories represents their appeal. Amy Benfer reflects on the jealousy she felt toward Nancy as a child, for the girl sleuth’s “. . . saccharine perfection made [Benfer] want to put a tack on the seat of her roadster.” Nancy boasts an endless wardrobe, limitless funds to travel wherever her cases demand, and a speedy metabolism to keep her thin despite constant meals, snacks, and teas. While some readers may indeed harbor a sense of jealousy toward Nancy’s perfection and constant cheer, it is difficult to deny the positive influences that Nancy’s determination, modesty, and courage can have on these same readers.

Nancy’s special friend, Ned, rarely referred to as a boyfriend, is “tall, handsome, and athletic-looking, with wavy dark hair, a ready smile, and brown eyes.” He serves as an accessory for Nancy and frequently marvels about her ability to seek out and attract mysteries. Caring about the girl sleuth and her safety, Ned is “. . . ever faithful, obedient, affectionate, and secondary in status.” Despite their mutual affection, a romantic connection between the couple is not suggested as their interactions prove mostly platonic. At the beginning of a school football game, instead of giving her boyfriend a kiss, Nancy “. . . patted his arm and wished him all kinds of good luck.” Since romantic attraction between Ned and Nancy is not suggested, Nancy avoids the predicament of marriage, a


103. Keene, Nancy’s Mysterious Letter, 106.


105. Keene, Nancy’s Mysterious Letter, 121.
bond that would call into question her role as an independent, free-spirited female. While Ned may offer hints about marriage, Nancy’s dedication toward sleuthing and personal freedom prevents her boyfriend’s suggestions of a future union together from sticking. In *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, Nancy’s friend Helen declares that she and Nancy are “to be Emily’s [a family friend’s] bridesmaids.”106 Readers know that while Nancy may happily serve as a bridesmaid many times, she will never become fettered by marriage and play the role of a dutiful and subservient housewife. She even playfully remarks that “my steady partner is going to be mystery!”107 Clearly holding the upper hand in her relationship with Ned, Nancy once asks Ned for a favor, to which the latter dutifully responds, “anything you say, Nancy.”108

From the moment the smart and attractive Nancy Drew entered the American literary scene in 1930 as a result of Edward Stratemeyer’s creativity and business acumen, she quickly became a heroine and source of escapism for young readers. While many parents and educators dismissed Stratemeyer’s books as valueless and tawdry, their ability to inspire readers’ imagination, offer an escape into an action-packed fantasy world, and foster a fondness for literature is important and enduring. The original Nancy Drew, developed under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene by Mildred Writ Benson and further refined by Harriet Adams, represents a positive socializing force in the development of young people who are struggling to find both meaning and purpose in this world. With her

107. Ibid., 180
independence, optimism, energy, compassion, and intelligence, Nancy has and “... still teaches girls that it’s OK to be smarter than anyone else around, that success is the appropriate reward for being an independent, curious risk-taker who knows when to persevere and when to ask for help.”109 While the original Nancy Drew books undeniably do not include a set of diverse characters with various social, racial, and financial backgrounds, certain values, attributes, and traits that Nancy embodies prove more important and influential than the stories’ settings or descriptions. To young readers today, Nancy represents a strong and welcome role model for modern girls who are flooded with images of cheap and morally empty icons. For older women who grew up with Nancy, rereading these light mysteries offers a new understanding and nostalgic appreciation for overlooked details and allows for their transportation back to a world without peer pressure and pervasive social evils. The mysteries provide fast-paced action and repeated cliffhangers while also affording the comfort of predictability and neat resolutions regardless of the number of harrowing events that occur. Even though girls are bound to move on to more challenging novels with more complex plots, Nancy’s influence, as an intrepid detective, outspoken girl, and likeable character, remains with her readers. As Carol Billman states, “Whatever literature of life experiences readers graduate to, Nancy does seem to be in American girls’ bloodstream; and as part of their larger reading and developmental pattern.”110


110. Billman, Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, 120.
CHAPTER 2

A DIFFERENT KIND OF GIRL SLEUTH: NANCY DREW ALTERNATIVES & RENDITIONS

While the revolutionary, bold, and original character of Nancy Drew represents a female amateur detective first revered by many girl readers beginning in 1930, other young people in mid-twentieth century America sought compelling alternatives to this seemingly flawless girl sleuth. Authors Margaret Sutton and Julie Campbell respectively developed the characters of Judy Bolton and Trixie Belden, two young sleuths who share Nancy Drew’s determination and investigative intelligence but diverge from Nancy’s seeming perfection and carefree lifestyle. While Judy’s and Trixie’s mysteries and relationships may prove more relatable and realistic to readers, and indeed offer many positive messages and themes, these girl detectives have failed to endure over time. Nancy, however, has remained a popular literary heroine across generations due to the fantasy world she inhabits combined with her ability to inspire readers through unwavering determination, boundless courage, and bold savvy. She has also evolved, as a young woman and as a detective, in order to remain appealing and captivating to her girl readership. Simon & Schuster, who took over the publishing of the Nancy Drew series beginning in the 1980s, introduced a number of spinoff series over the years that have included more contemporary elements and subjects. While some readers may argue that the modern Nancy of the past several decades through the present day is a less admirable and endearing heroine for young girls than the original Nancy from 1930, her essential and commendable traits, ranging from intelligence, confidence, and courage to persistence, forthrightness, and daring, have remained constant throughout the books.
Entering the world of girl-sleuthing in 1932, fifteen year-old Judy Bolton was created by author Margaret Sutton as a Nancy Drew alternative who also captured the imaginations of young readers in ways both similar to and different from Nancy. Growing up in a middle-class area of Pennsylvania, Judy solves mysteries centered upon family, friends, and school, topics to which young readers can easily relate. A high school student herself when the series first begins, Judy fulfills the roles of daughter, sister, wife, and friend throughout the narratives and displays determination, bravery, and intelligence within a more realistic environment than the fantasy world of the original Nancy.

Unlike Nancy Drew, who remains eighteen years old throughout the series, the gray-eyed and red-haired Judy Bolton evolves from an early teen to a married woman who works as a secretary in her husband’s office. While Nancy enjoys complete freedom to focus on solving mysteries, Judy must follow certain societal expectations, such as attending school and then reporting to work, which shape the cases she solves. In contrast to the doting Carson Drew who provides Nancy with everything she needs and even acts as her crime-solving partner, Judy has an involved mother and father who act as true parental figures. Her father, who affectionately refers to his daughter as “... Judy girl,” works as the town doctor and her brother, Horace, is a local newspaper reporter. Although “down in her heart, Judy had a very real affection for her brother,” she also argues with him at times, and these sibling tensions also ring true for many of Judy’s young readers. Nancy, in contrast, is an


only child who fails to experience a sibling dynamic in which bickering occurs and compromise becomes a necessity. While Dr. Bolton does not spoil his daughter, he does love her greatly and looks at her “... with a proud light in his eyes ...” Just as Nancy admires Carson, so too does Judy respect and look up to her father and, when faced with difficult situations, often wonders, “what would her father do?” Judy does not have the luxury of a personal car, and reflects that “it would be nice if she had a car of her own, now that Peter [her husband] had taught her how to drive. But she had to admit that she still felt safer with him at the wheel.” Not only does Nancy drive a fancy blue convertible, but also she would probably never admit to a man teaching her how to drive and helping her feel safe. The fact that Judy solves mysteries independently and without the same privileges as Nancy renders her an admirable, relatable, and likeable girl sleuth.

Both involved in mysteries taking place in various parts of the country and centered upon similar themes such as missing wills or haunted attics, Judy and Nancy encounter physical danger and other peril on their sleuthing adventures. While Nancy seems to seek out mysteries and adventure, Judy remarks that “Peter says I attract mysteries and I’m afraid I do.” Judy is perceptive and can recall seemingly minor details about important characters and events. Just as Nancy’s detective skills earn her admiration from law enforcement, so

4. Sutton, Vanishing Shadow, 32.
5. Sutton, Patchwork Quilt, 110.
too does Judy’s intelligence and determination prove noteworthy to police officials. The police value Judy’s thoughts and theories, for “Judy’s ideas had helped him [the police chief] trap wanted criminals before.”

Although both Nancy and Judy are independent and tenacious sleuths, Judy focuses more on the importance of family relationships and happiness. In contrast, Nancy maintains a very superficial connection with most of the characters she encounters, for she “... seems to live for solving mysteries rather than participating in family life.” While Nancy lives with her father and housekeeper, Judy, at least during her unmarried life, resides with her parents, brother, and cat. Judy comes from a middle class family and has a deeper concern for and identification with the lower classes. Her doctor father works with many poor patients, which contributes to Judy’s acknowledgement that “people were all just people to her and whether they were rich or poor, fortunate or unfortunate, she always thought of them as having the same feelings that she had.” When investigating counterfeit money given to her by a flower peddler, Judy states, “I only hope that poor old peddler isn’t involved... He had such a kind, honest face.” This strong sense of social responsibility shows through Judy’s friendships and dedication to restoring families. Judy can relate to people with hardships, for after her town of Roulsville, Pennsylvania, is damaged by a serious flood, she and her family must relocate to a poorer area. As her husband Peter notes,

7. Ibid., 180.


“...while we certainly do have our share of the good things of life, we’re not exactly wealthy.”¹¹ In The Clue of the Stone Lantern, Judy works hard to reunite a young missing girl with her biological parents. Judy’s moral convictions and values guide her actions and work, and she frequently expresses or thinks such sentiments as “you didn’t join a gang of hoodlums just because you couldn’t beat them.”¹² Since “...the knowledge that she was doing right gave her courage,” Judy perseveres through frightening and dangerous situations as she tries to accomplish her goals.¹³ Nancy’s mysteries involving hidden staircases, stolen jewels, missing wills, or haunted attics have more of a gothic, romanticized, and upper-middle class feeling.

With more than half of the Judy Bolton series taking place after the girl sleuth marries lawyer turned FBI agent, Peter Dobbs, these books send young female readers the message that a life of detection, professional work, and independence can take place within a meaningful, loving marriage and amidst adult responsibilities. Judy manages to balance, yet definitely finds tension between, a female’s traditional and non-traditional roles. At age fifteen, she observes the lack of opportunities many girls face, lamenting “sometimes I wish I were a boy.”¹⁴ Furthermore, since Peter works as an FBI agent, Judy must balance mystery-solving with remaining far enough removed from her husband’s secret tasks and loyal to his professional pursuits, since “not for anything would Judy hurt his reputation.”¹⁵ Still, sometimes Judy becomes too embroiled in Peter’s detective work, causing Peter to tell

¹¹. Ibid., 102.


¹³. Ibid., 136.

¹⁴. Sutton, Vanishing Shadow, 53.

¹⁵. Sutton, Watchword, 80.
her that "maybe you aren’t the Bureau’s idea of what a good wife should be, but you’re mine”16 Despite her traits of boldness, courage, and determination, characteristics that may not have been valued in mid-twentieth century females, Judy’s husband still loves her unconditionally.

While Nancy appears seemingly perfect to readers, Judy has flaws that may serve to make her a more relatable and believable character. She becomes fearful and nervous in certain situations and feels helpless at times and speaks in “a shaky voice.”17 However, Judy is still a resolute and proficient sleuth, and her inquisitive nature shows when she declares, “nothing can cure me of wanting to find out things . . . .” Judy proves admirable in that she “. . . [doesn’t] believe in violence when strategy works just as well.” Peter cherishes his wife and calls her a “. . . fearless girl . . . .” The bond between Judy and Peter proves more substantive and healthy than the relationship between Nancy and her boyfriend Ned. After Judy catches a thief and sustains a minor head injury in the process, Peter remarks with concern, “but this is the last time, absolutely the last time, that you go off anywhere chasing crooks without me to protect you.”18 Judy indulges Peter’s concern whereas Nancy would likely defend herself. Peter and Judy often go sleuthing together since Peter made a “. . . promise that they would be a team.”19 Unlike the obedient and uninteresting Ned, Peter has unique insights and makes substantive comments. Judy and Peter complement each other, both in detection and in marriage. Peter adores Judy and

16. Ibid., 118.
offers her praise such as when he proudly states, “... my young wife has an uncanny habit of delving into things she doesn’t understand and coming up with the right answers.” Judy loves flattery since “of all the praise in the world, Peter’s was the sweetest.” He and Judy seem to share a very normal marriage; Judy cooks dinner for her husband, and Peter calls his wife loving names, such as “Angel.” Undeniably, Judy represents a young female detective who demonstrates a positive portrayal of marriage, friendships, and family life; however, the fantasy world of Nancy Drew has ultimately proven more compelling and attractive to many readers over time. As the first literary girl detective to demonstrate proudly confidence, perseverance, intelligence, and resourcefulness, characteristics frequently viewed as unconventional in females, Nancy shows readers that they can be smart, adventurous, popular, and happy while still embodying integrity, honesty, and kindness.

Debuting in 1948 as a product of author Judy Campbell, feisty and energetic Trixie Belden serves as another girl sleuth counterpart to the more proper and perfect Nancy Drew. Trixie, whose name conjures images of a rambunctious and fiery personality, is thirteen or fourteen years old throughout the thirty-nine mystery series books. After Julie Campbell authored the first six mysteries, subsequent stories were created by a number of different authors under the pseudonym of Kathryn Kenny. Although Trixie Belden shares commonalities with Nancy Drew, Trixie is a tomboy whose less sophisticated and more


playful sleuthing adventures offer an alternative to Nancy’s formidable and mature investigative escapades.

Blonde, curly-haired, and freckle-faced, Trixie, once described as a “. . . pretty little spitfire,” looks and acts more like a tomboy than the sophisticated and serious Nancy Drew. Trixie lives in the New York country town of Sleepyside with her father, a banker, and mother, a dutiful homemaker and caregiver, right next door to her wealthy best friend and detective partner, Honey Wheeler. Less sophisticated and graceful than Nancy, both girls wear playsuits and “. . . boyish sport shirts, patched blue jeans, and scuffed moccasins.” They make jokes and sing songs during their adventures and engage in activities with a carefree and lighthearted spirit.

While the mysteries Nancy works on solving primarily revolve around traditionally feminine or gothic themes including stolen jewels, hidden passageways, and missing wills, the sleuthing in which Trixie becomes involved centers upon less romantic and more rustic elements. From abducted sheep to stolen trailers, Trixie’s cases are filled with a refreshing sense of adventure and playfulness. Additionally, since Trixie attends school, her detective work must be done within the limits of her academic obligations. The evil characters in these mysteries “. . . are much more likely to lock Trixie in a remote closet than they are to provide a physical threat.” Trixie, her brother Mart, and Honey form a closely-knit


detective group called The Bob-Whites of the Glen whose purpose is “. . . to do worthwhile things for other people.” Quickly expanding to include two friends, Diana and Dan, their group even has a clubhouse and a secret whistle. The Bob-Whites show a strong sense of camaraderie and “. . . promised to one another to always report [their] whereabouts.” Comrades in play and sleuthing, Trixie and Honey plan to form their own detective agency after graduating from college. While Nancy always garners respect and admiration, in part due to her relationship with her revered attorney father, Trixie and her sleuthing friends realize that “most grownups don’t take us seriously till they know of the good work we’ve done . . .”

Growing up on Crabapple Farm, Trixie’s family life and economic background also differ from Nancy’s home environment and comfortable financial status. With a mother, father, and three brothers named Bobby, Brian, and Mart who enjoy teasing her, Trixie comes from a more a traditional family to which a larger number of girls of the mid-twentieth century could relate. Mrs. Belden, an enforcer of rules, manners, and chores, gives Trixie household responsibilities and renders punishments when obligations are not met. Although she “hated housework,” Trixie values hard work and financial savings and recognizes her role within the family structure. She engages in a wide range of chores, and “her father paid her five dollars a week for helping her mother with the housework and


the garden; and when Mrs. Belden was busy, Trixie had to keep an eye on mischievous Bobby.” Trixie, a less than perfect student who often struggles in school, has educational obligations that Nancy Drew never experienced. Unlike the motherless Nancy, Trixie must obtain her mother’s approval and permission before engaging in certain adventures and activities. At one point, Mrs. Belden tells her daughter that she cannot “... go up to Honey’s this afternoon until you’ve gathered the eggs and fed the chickens.”

Clearly, the importance of a traditional family structure proves significant in the Trixie Belden mysteries. Trixie’s best friend, neighbor, and mystery-solving partner, Honey Wheeler, is Trixie’s age and comes from a background of wealth and sophistication. An only child until her parents adopt a boy named Jim, Honey often expresses her jealousy of Trixie’s more modest life and the close relationship Trixie has with her parents and brothers. The contrast of social classes shows that “... wealth, while it may solve problems, does not provide happiness; the comfort of family does.” Certainly, this message is a positive one for impressionable readers. While Trixie interacts with her mother and father on a daily basis and eats meals in the company of her family, “Honey and Jim rarely saw their parents because they traveled so much.” In contrast, Trixie’s home on Crabapple Farm “... was a happy place, full of noise and laughter. Honey thought of it as her second home...”


From her functional clothing to her less sophisticated conversations, Trixie shuns femininity, for she has "... no intention of becoming a lady ..." Trixie's brother, Brian, comments on his sister's lack of feminine qualities by remarking that she "... must have been frightened by a darning needle in the cradle." Trixie openly states that she loathes shopping. Despite her aversion to lady-like fashion and mannerisms, Trixie still possesses nurturing characteristics and displays a soothing kindness especially to her young brother, Bobby. After their family dog, Reddy, is hit by a car, "Trixie knelt down and wrapped her arms around the terrified little boy [Bobby]." While both Nancy and Trixie are outspoken girls, Trixie rarely holds back her feelings and often admits to talking before thinking. One time, Trixie remembers to contemplate her words before speaking and "... [gives] herself a mental pat on the back ..." She displays firm and overt confidence in her abilities and "... was always quick to defend herself and her [sleuthing] methods."

Although Trixie's upbringing, family life, and circle of friends may differ from Nancy Drew's, Trixie and Nancy do share many important and admirable characteristics ranging from independence and curiosity to determination and dedication. Similar to Nancy's affinity for stumbling upon cases, Trixie has a "... seemingly uncanny ability to attract mysteries wherever she went." Brave and bold, Trixie unabashedly speaks her mind. When her brother Brian orders Trixie, Honey, and Diana to help prepare dinner, Trixie responds with, "you can't order me around like that, Brian Belden ..." Trixie is driven and outspoken, noting that "... girls can be just as smart as boys, and there's no

34. Kenny, *Happy Valley Mystery*, 44.
reason why women detectives shouldn’t be even better than men.” Analogous to Nancy, Trixie also demonstrates a certain level of modesty and humility; she does not want people to worry about her and does not crave attention. As Honey notes, the last thing in the world you’d ever be is a show-off.” Trixie later remarks, “I’m not big and noble and you know it.”

This fiery girl sleuth is also not the only person in the spotlight, and many times Honey’s older brother, Jim, takes charge in perilous situations. Feeling a special sense of camaraderie with the rest of her club members, Trixie is not afraid to admit, “I don’t know what I’d ever do without any of the Bob-Whites.” Any money that the detective club receives from solving cases is put into the Bob-White fund for use toward a worthy cause. While Nancy would simply turn down rewards, Trixie’s decision to donate any money earned through mystery-solving demonstrates a heightened sense of social awareness present in these books.

Partly as a result of coincidence and partly due to the girls’ sleuthing skills, Nancy and Trixie emerge triumphant from all of their mysteries. Inquisitive and thoughtful, Trixie asks important questions, both out loud and to herself, as she works through a problem. Both Nancy and Trixie also impress law enforcement with their detective skills. Trixie “...seemed to have a second sense that had often helped confused law officers solve puzzling cases.” After traveling to Missouri and solving a particularly perplexing case

35. Campbell, Gatehouse Mystery, 37.
involving an evil gang and stolen papers, Trixie and the Bob-Whites gain a police chief’s respect when he admits that he must “. . . give your agency credit that is due.”

Nancy’s and Trixie’s friends serve to highlight both girls’ intelligence and detective skills. More timid than Trixie, Honey notes that “you’ve [Trixie] got more nerve than I have . . . .” Dedicated to her friend, Honey defends Trixie, especially when Mart and Brian tease Trixie. Additionally, Nancy and Trixie always miraculously manage to survive dangerous situations. Just as Nancy functions as an unwavering cheerleader, Trixie is optimistic and encouraging and helps allay Honey’s fears. When investigating a mystery involving missing sheep, Trixie keeps her club members positive by stating, “we’ve been in worse mix-ups than this . . . and we’ve gotten out of them. This will turn out all right, too.” Trixie combines kindness and care with persistence and a “level-headed” outlook.

Similar to Nancy and other adept female investigators, Trixie understands the importance of obtaining evidence before making a claim. When looking into a case involving stolen trailers, Trixie counters Honey’s quick judgment by stating, “Let’s come back some other time when the van is hidden here. If we see trailer equipment inside it then we’ll have proof.” Still, Trixie admits that “sometimes you have to make clues, not just stumble on them the way we usually do.”

37. Kenny, Mystery on the Mississippi, 58, 10, and 246.
38. Campbell, Red Trailer Mystery, 27.
40. Kenny, Red Trailer Mystery, 43 and 73.
41. Kenny, Velvet Gown, 117.
Some scholars argue that Trixie signifies a more realistic young female sleuth due to “... the fact that a girl who is neither particularly privileged nor particularly superior can nonetheless—through constant reliance on, and attention to, family—produce and sustain a happy, complex world and community for herself.”\(^{42}\) Unlike Nancy, Trixie does not appear a perfect friend, girl, daughter, and sleuth; she admits to having weaknesses. For example, after reflecting upon a dangerous situation in a previous mystery, Trixie says that she “... was almost a goner till all of you showed up to save me. Bob-Whites always show up when one of our members is in danger. That’s usually me.”\(^{43}\) The reader cannot easily imagine Nancy needing saving from her friends. From singing and sledding to skiing and skating, Trixie participates in normal, everyday, unpretentious childhood activities. She faces believable challenges ranging from brotherly taunting to school-related difficulties. These more realistic elements, however, fail to provide the same sense of escapism that Nancy’s mysteries offer. As Nancy Drew’s enduring popularity became increasingly evident in the late twentieth century, a new publishing company that acquired the series recognized the need to ensure Nancy’s success as a girl sleuth through the implementation of fresh and creative characters and themes.

After Simon & Schuster completely took over the Nancy Drew series books in 1984, the new publishing company started to modernize Nancy and her mysteries to keep up with the cultural times and readers’ interests. From driving a new blue mustang convertible to

\(^{42}\) Zani, “Puzzles, Paternity and Privilege,” 149.

\(^{43}\) Kenny, Mystery on the Mississippi, 72.
texting and using a cell phone, Nancy evolves into a modern detective whose hobbies, conversations, and mysteries prove more relatable to contemporary girl readers.

The Nancy Drew Files, first debuting in 1986 and lasting until 1997, are composed of 124 books geared toward older readers and focused on fitness, fashion, romance, dating, and crime. Beginning with this new series, Nancy proves much more self-conscious, particularly in her increasingly central relationship with boyfriend Ned Nickerson. While Bess had always been more feminine than Nancy and George in the original series, the books now highlight the fact that “meeting guys would always be the curvy, blue-eyed girl’s number one priority.”44 Now described as Nancy’s boyfriend, Ned occupies much of the girl sleuth’s thoughts, and she frequently worries about pleasing him. She even proclaims “I love you, [Ned] Nickerson!”45 In contrast to the original, highly independent Nancy who was primarily all-consuming by her cases, this new Nancy derives much of her self-worth from Ned. In *Two Points to Murder*, Nancy suspects one of Ned’s college friends as the person playing harmful pranks on Ned’s school basketball team. Ned becomes angry and breaks up with Nancy at the end of the mystery. The book concludes with Nancy in tears and wondering if “... being a detective was making it difficult for her to trust people.”46 As opposed to the original series books that focus primarily on adventure and detection, The Nancy Drew Files are increasingly devoted to romance and teen relationships. Nancy has a heightened awareness of young men, and in one of her mysteries taking place in Tahiti, she


marvels at the attractiveness of a chief detective and found herself “... struck by how dashing he looked in his khaki uniform and white cap.” In addition to a more apparent attraction to the opposite sex, Nancy also sports more modern, less conservative apparel. For example, on summer vacation, the girl sleuth can be found lounging in a “... neon green two-piece bathing suit.” These changes in themes and characters were instituted with the hope of appealing to a changing teen and pre-teen audience.

Nancy still demonstrates a sense of modesty and decorum and at times “... [feels] her own temper rising, and she had to struggle to keep it in check.” The girl sleuth also experiences “... cheeks [that] flush with embarrassment” when she receives praise for her detective work. Seemingly fearless on the outside, Nancy shows her enduring determination and resolve by assuring Ned “I’m fine” after falling over the guardrail of a bridge. Nancy remains optimistic and cheerful and frequently provides not only other characters, but also herself, with positive words of encouragement. During a particularly perilous situation, Nancy tells herself, “if you don’t pull yourself together, you’ll never get out of here.” She also relies on her friends, Bess and George, to help with her cases and thinks to herself that she “... could always count on Bess and George. They were the greatest!” Nancy continues to maintain a close relationship with law enforcement, particularly River Heights Police Chief McGinnis who notes that, “Nancy’s no novice.

47. Keene, Trouble in Tahiti, 53.
49. Keene, Trouble in Tahiti, 92.
51. Keene, Poison Pen, 114, 123, and 96.
She's helped me on a lot of cases." After Nancy helps solve a case involving a missing child, an investigator even praises the girl sleuth by telling her, "... if you ever want to join the FBI, call me. I'll give you a great recommendation."^52

While the characters and themes may have been updated in The Nancy Drew Files, the white, middle-class nature of the original series also largely prevails in these new books. One African-American Nancy Drew fan, Njeri Fuller, reflects on the Nancy Drew books that appeared in the 1990s by commenting that she "... was disappointed to find the same formulas [as in the original books]. There are no African Americans, there are no Asians, no Latinos in the new books."^53 Still, just as in the original Nancy Drew series books, readers must try to see through characters' homogenous exteriors and focus on the laudable traits of intelligence, loyalty, courage, and determination that Nancy, and sometimes Bess and George, embody. Additionally, for many ethnically diverse girl and women readers, Nancy's position as a strong, resourceful, and admirable female may trump the girl detective's racial background.

In 2004, Simon & Schuster began publishing the Nancy Drew Girl Detective series and introduced the most modern version of Nancy to date. Told in a new first person point of view, these contemporary mysteries offer a closer and more intimate look into Nancy's thoughts and fears. While this narrative style might better connect the reader with Nancy, this format also relies less on the reader to make her own deductions and interpretations. In contrast to the unfailingly self-assured Nancy of the original series, the contemporary

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^52. Keene, Squeeze Play, 53 and 145.

version of the girl sleuth proves less confident and more anxious in her behaviors and interactions with other characters. As Kathleen Chamberlain notes, “Nancy is still more or less perfect, although to some extent a more human dimension has crept in.” She does not have all the answers or prove an infinite source of knowledge about all topics, admitting “I’m a total dunce about cars.”

From language to fashion, modern-day Nancy has been updated to keep up with the times and appeal to the interests of today’s readers. No longer wearing smart jumpers and demure dresses, Nancy now dons “low-rise brown pants” and frequently paints on eye shadow or lip gloss. George can be found wearing similarly updated and looser attire that may consist of “... a red cotton camisole that skimmed the top of her jeans.” The conservative and proper dialogue and descriptions contained in the original Nancy Drew series is replaced by slang and less formal words including “whatever,” “weird,” and “cool.” The quaint and lighthearted language made the original Nancy likeable and endearing. Use of more conventional words such as “certainly” are replaced by more colloquial phrases such as “no problem.” Polite discourse is superseded by fresh banter as pop culture references are weaved into the plotlines. Originally known for being proper and modest, Nancy becomes more edgy and, when a storeowner annoys her, she “… was also tempted


to throw it [a typewriter case] at her [the storeowner].”\textsuperscript{58} Nancy, Bess, and George even have an enemy in this new series, Deirdre Shannon, with whom they are “... about as compatible as fire and water.”\textsuperscript{59} While Nancy’s relationship with Ned does not receive as much focus in the Girl Detective series as in The Nancy Drew Files, boys, romance, and dating still play a role in the stories in order to appeal to the interests and anxieties of modern girl readers. For example, although Ned may not have a central part in all of the mysteries, Nancy notes that she and her college boyfriend recently started “... a new tradition: Friday date night” in order to remain closer together.\textsuperscript{60} The original Nancy would not have had time for such activities.

In contrast to the earlier stories that focused on lost wills or stolen family jewels, the Girl Detective series deal with mysteries ranging from sabotaged day spas and alien hoaxes to smashed zucchini and shattered weddings. The addition of cell phones, the Internet, and instant messaging puts a new spin on mystery-solving and allows Nancy to engage in detective work in an increasingly efficient and contemporary manner. This technology also opens up new avenues for crimes. In one particular mystery, \textit{Model Crime}, the young victim is harassed by a culprit through text messaging.

The modern series books often state plainly what readers of the original books had to deduce on their own. For example, George still remains athletic and adventurous while


Bess is girly and timid; Nancy notes that she falls "... somewhere in the middle of the two of them." In the earlier books, the reader had to figure out on her own by studying Nancy's actions, behaviors, and comments that she represents a combination of George's male and Bess's female traits. Perhaps part of this subtlety in the original books was due to the thoughtful writing styles of Nancy Drew's original authors who put such care into her character development. Nancy sometimes irks the police chief who wants to take over her detective work because the girl sleuth "... make[s] him look bad by solving crimes before he does."61 Furthermore, even with Simon & Schuster's attempt to modernize the books in terms of characters and themes, the "... stories often take place in the spaces of the rich or almost rich, such as posh schools, riding stables, and fitness spas."62

Despite the change in language and themes, the essence of the main characters remains intact. Carson Drew is still "... one of the toughest, most highly respected, and successful lawyers in town."63 Nancy expresses the concern she knows her father has for her by telling the reader that "he likes to check in with me ... especially when I'm trying to solve a mystery and he's worried I might be in some kind of trouble."64 The girl sleuth respects her father, and while he does provide her with freedom and little luxuries, she is grateful to him and does not act like a spoiled teenager.


63. Keene, Secret of the Spa, 6.

64. Keene, Troubled Waters, 5.
Blessed with a natural instinct for nabbing villains, Nancy has innate detective skills and notes that, "when I’m on the trail of something suspicious, I sometimes get a weird, tingly sort of feeling in my gut that leads me to a breakthrough or a clue." She shows herself as a confident and proficient sleuth who relies on facts and never "... [rules] out anyone until [she] could actually clear them with interviews and enough clues pointing to another suspect." Frequently carrying a notebook and pen at the ready so that she may handle any mystery or clue that comes her way, modern Nancy also proves just as capable as, if not more so than, police detectives. At one point, Nancy comically notes that “Chief McGinnis of the River Heights Police Department might not be the sharpest tack on the bulletin board ...” Maintaining her modesty in the face of praise, Nancy tells the readers, “I’m pretty observant about most things, but I don’t always notice when a guy shows interest in me that way. Call it a blind spot.” She also remarks that “it was embarrassing to be praised in public.”

Still relying on Bess and George for help with her cases, Nancy says that she and her friends are “a team.” Nancy acknowledges that Bess and George are often vital to her mystery-solving and reflects “if I was going to solve this, I needed their help.”

65. Keene, Secret of the Spa, 42.
66. Keene, Riverboat Ruse, 75.
68. Keene, Without a Trace, 97.
69. Keene, Creative Crime, 152.
70. Keene, Squeeze Play, 30.
71. Keene, Secret of the Spa, 103.
the countless meals and teas the girls have in the original series, the new Nancy admits that she, Bess, and George are "... food obsessed" and often discuss their cases over pancakes or ice cream sundaes. The trio knows how to have fun, yet Nancy understands that play and parties are not "... just about having a good time. I had work to do."

While Judy Bolton and Trixie Belden represent compelling and attractive alternatives to the original Nancy Drew, these girl investigators have failed to garner Nancy's enduring popularity and lasting appeal. A pioneering icon in the genre of detective fiction and children's literature, Nancy is the girl sleuth who first captured the hearts of her readers through the companionship and adventure she unfailingly provides. Nancy's demure but confident demeanor and refined but bold personality are unique characteristics that offer inspiration to many young girls. Teaching girls that they can be intelligent, outspoken, and confident while still earning the love and respect of family and friends, Nancy proves an unparalleled literary heroine transcending generational boundaries. Her personality has inspired contemporary authors to create similarly strong and independent young, female detectives. These modern-day investigators, who are involved in mysteries geared toward pre-teen audiences and more mature readers alike, share many core qualities with Nancy Drew but also diverge from this revolutionary girl sleuth in important and noteworthy ways.

72. Keene, Troubled Waters, 2.

73. Keene, Without a Trace, 78.
CHAPTER 3
FROM SPUNKY TO SENSIBLE: NANCY DREW’S CONTEMPORARIES

The unrelenting determination, admirable inner strength, and honed detective skills that Nancy Drew first exhibited in 1930 have been adapted and adopted to fit contemporary girl and women investigators. From The Red Blazer Girls to Enola Holmes and Gilda Joyce, young female sleuths in the twenty-first century may be edgier and more acerbic than the original, proper Nancy Drew; however, these modern girl detectives embody many of the same qualities and traits that render Nancy a likeable character and valuable role model for impressionable readers. Similarly, young women investigators such as Kinsey Millhone and Kay Scarpetta represent progressions of Nancy’s resolute adolescent persona as they work to solve mysteries and help bring about justice within a harsh, yet realistic, world. Contemporary female sleuths in literature, whether they are spunky young girls or shrewd grown women, have been significantly influenced by, yet differ in important ways from, Nancy. Intelligent, adroit, perceptive, brave, and driven, today’s detectives share many core characteristics with Nancy Drew; however, they function within increasingly dangerous and unpredictable environments filled with destructive criminals, formidable foes, and complex puzzles.

Developed in 2009 by Michael Beil, The Red Blazer Girls series focuses on four precocious twelve year-old girl sleuths attending private school in New York City. Rebecca, Margaret, Sophie, and Leigh Ann comprise The Red Blazer Girls, their own make-believe detective agency named after the color of their school uniforms. A diverse group of seventh grade friends, Rebecca is Asian and Sophia has a French chef for a father. From their love of learning and sharing of knowledge to their proficiency at puzzle-solving, The
Red Blazer Girls function as positive role models for impressionable young readers. Sophie, the main character who narrates the stories, states that she loves books and is "absolutely obsessed with them." Although this modern band of girl sleuths talk about Seinfeld, SparkNotes, cute boys, and macchiato coffee drinks, their intelligence in areas ranging from math to English helps them solve their first complex mystery involving a hidden precious ring. As the girls work to crack a series of puzzles that will lead them to a special gift, a jeweled ring, that a grandfather left his granddaughter, they engage the reader in their learning and problem-solving. The reader, along with Rebecca, Margaret, Sophie, and Leigh Ann, uncovers information and discovers facts about topics such as church architecture and the Pythagorean Theorem. Similar to Nancy Drew, the adventurous Red Blazer girls are not shy about using their intelligence and resourcefulness to solve mysteries. Just as Nancy has experience outsmarting her elders, so too do these girls show their mature logic and quick-thinking skills. As one example, in the end of The Ring of Rocamadour, the Blazers dupe and expose the dishonest church deacon, Mr. Winterbottom, who was trying to foil the girls' plans and obtain the valuable ring for himself. The girls are adventure-seeking, smart, and determined, and Sophie, similar to Nancy, has a habit of "...always [trusting her] instincts."

The Red Blazer Girl mysteries feature dialogue, themes, and activities to which more modern-day young female readers can relate. Growing nervous around a boy she likes named Raphael, Sophie experiences the anxiety that is familiar to many adolescent girls.


Proficient at sending “IMs” and text messages on their cell phones, the young sleuths and today’s teens share many of the same tech amenities and modern interests. From family problems to middle school tests and quizzes, The Red Blazer Girls must tackle real issues. They all have chores and household responsibilities; Sophie’s mother frequently reminds her daughter of obligations that slow down her sleuthing adventures.

More cutting edge than Nancy Drew, the girls demonstrate sharpness and wit that comes from living on the fast-paced Upper East Side of Manhattan. Sophie notes that Margaret, the smartest in the group, is “...way smarter than that old Nancy Drew.” To which Rebecca concurs, “it’s not even close. She could take Nancy Drew with half her brain tied behind her back.” Nancy lives in the Midwest, but, as Margaret notes, “we’re city girls—we’ve got street smarts and all that.”

The proliferation of the Internet affords the girls a new avenue for conducting research on their cases and puzzles. After discovering a mysterious letter, the girls do “a quick online search” to find out tricks, including laundry detergent and a cotton ball dipped in ammonia, to reveal a possible hidden message. The savvy girls’ witty exchanges often include making light of older detectives, like Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes. When Margaret solves one of the puzzles, she tells Sophie that she reached the answer because she “...observed, Dr. Watson.”

Clearly, The Red Blazer girls exhibit contemporary savvy and wit much different from Nancy Drew’s innocence and gentility.

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3. Beil, Ring of Rocamadour, 199 and 41.


5. Beil, Ring of Rocamadour, 120.
Fourteen year-old Enola Holmes, another precocious and sly investigator who is the product of author Nancy Springer and lives in late nineteenth-century England, is a London-based detective and younger sister of the famous Sherlock Holmes. With a father who died when she was four and a mother who recently disappeared from her life, Enola shuns upper class society and escapes to the city of London to lead a secret life away from her older brothers, Sherlock and Mycroft, in order to pursue her “... life’s calling, to be a finder of the lost.” Enola maintains communication with her mother through ciphers that appear in local newspapers and draws inspiration and strength from her mother’s words and advice, including “‘you will do very well on your own, Enola.’” The wide array of convincing disguises and fake names Enola employs to remain discreet and to aid her in detective work are important for hiding and avoiding her siblings who wish her to become a proper lady. As the young sleuth notes, Mycroft and Sherlock “... wanted to take charge of me and transform me, via singing lessons and similar vapours, into an ornament for genteel society.”

Through her bold actions and assertive remarks, Enola proves herself an independent girl sleuth who will not let anyone else determine her future. She comes from the upper class and divulges that “while not titled by birth, certainly not one to be presented at court, I was a squire’s daughter, and as such, a member of the gentry...” Despite her status,

Enola bravely shuns femininity in a desire to lead a life of her own choosing. Although her brothers, Mycroft and Sherlock, want her to marry, Enola "... planned to have no husband. ..." She tells Sherlock, "the greatest harm I could possibly suffer would be to lose my liberty, to be forced into a conventional life of domestic duties and matrimony." Enola thrives on adventure and action and "... could not be corseted, either literally or figuratively, into any conventional feminine mould..." Strong-willed and boyish, Enola detests typically feminine clothing and decides that skirts hinder her ability to run by denying her "... the proper pumping action of my arms." When she does wear lady-like clothing such as a corset, she does so "... in order to conceal such items as my dagger..."

During her work as a finder of the lost, Enola demonstrates persistent and successful detective skills. Admitting that she is "... perhaps a bit of a monomaniac, driven always to quest, venture, search, seek, find," this British girl sleuth often outwits Sherlock and beats him to important clues. She routinely carries a pencil and paper, either to make sketches related to her mysteries or to take notes. Determined to solve her cases, Enola shrewdly bargains with Sherlock in order to obtain information concerning her cases and firmly tells her brother that she will provide him with certain details if he will divulge his knowledge.

10. Springer, Bizarre Bouquets, 72.
13. Springer, Bizarre Bouquets, 68
first. Similar to Nancy Drew, Enola maintains her composure in perilous situations. During one adventure, Enola falls from a tree but “. . . retained sufficient presence of mind to utter only a squeak . . .”\textsuperscript{16} Still, Enola does show cracks in confidence, a typically feminine characteristic, which may make her more relatable to readers. When searching for a missing Dr. Watson, Enola anxiously thinks to herself, “. . . I could not seem to find confidence in my own mental ability. What if I were overlooking something? What if I were mistaken?”\textsuperscript{17}

A final modern girl detective for young readers worth noting is the bold and sassy “psychic investigator,” Gilda Joyce, developed by author Jennifer Allison. Living in Michigan with her hard-working mother and older brother, thirteen-year-old Gilda lost her father to cancer but still talks to him daily and asks for advice during her investigations. Gilda views herself as “. . . brilliant, sultry, rough-edged—a psychic detective who managed to combine high fashion with the hard-boiled demeanor of a seasoned police officer.”\textsuperscript{18} Mrs. Joyce tries to keep her daughter in line and behaving appropriately by saying things like, “I don’t like your tone, Gilda Joyce” and “Please be considerate of others, Gilda.”\textsuperscript{19} With a doting father, Nancy Drew, of course, rarely had to answer to parental authority.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Springer, \textit{Peculiar Fan}, 105 and 88.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Springer, \textit{Bizarre Bouquets}, 147.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Jennifer Allison, \textit{Gilda Joyce: Psychic Investigator} (New York: Dutton Children’s Books, 2005), 143.
\end{itemize}
Similar to the contemporary Nancy who provides herself with motivational words of encouragement, Gilda also speaks positively. When investigating a case involving a ghost of her cousin’s dead aunt, the young detective tells herself to “get a grip . . . You’re on your own now, so toughen up and stop being a baby.” While she may be sassier than Nancy, Gilda still demonstrates similar determination and an optimistic spirit.

Gilda faces daunting situations with zest and aplomb, for “Gilda had a kind of brash courage; she was brave.” Nevertheless, she still exhibits breaks in confidence and questions her abilities as an investigator. During her first case, “. . . she felt a wave of self-doubt. What if she didn’t yet have the skills needed to handle a real psychic investigation?” Although she tries to appear fearless, Gilda has real anxieties that include boys, social situations, and homesickness.

Always toting a reporter’s notebook on investigative missions, Gilda’s sleuthing adventures have a more playful, child-like feeling than Nancy’s. Gilda is a very humorous and eccentric character who admits to learning a few facts about murders and mysteries “. . . on an episode of America’s Most Wanted.”\(^20\) Akin to any good detective, Gilda enjoys dressing up in disguises that frequently include makeup, wigs, and fishnet stockings. The whole concept of Gilda calling herself a psychic investigator who can communicate with ghosts through a Ouija board is quite comical and clearly juvenile. She diligently studies her beloved Psychic’s Handbook and uses the book as a reference when working on her mysteries.\(^21\) The quirky and precocious girl boasts that “. . . being a psychic investigator

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20. Ibid., 84, 115, 254 and 159.

isn’t my only career. I’ll probably also write a couple best-selling novels and direct some Broadway hits . . . .”22

While the majority of today’s mysteries featuring girl detectives may be geared toward young readers, Maeve Liffey is an adolescent sleuth who appears in adult novels and frequently tries to become involved in her father, Jack Liffey’s, investigations. Primarily focused on locating missing children, Jack and his adored daughter, Maeve, live in modern-day Los Angeles. Author Jack Shannon uses edgy writing to convey the cruelty, desolation, and depressed economic realities of this west coast metropolis. A harsh and fragmented city, Los Angeles is much different from the idyllic, predictable, and safe world in which Nancy Drew lives. Maeve loves “her father to death” and maintains a close relationship with him since he and Maeve’s mother are separated.23 Similar to Nancy, Maeve idolizes her father and, like him, is driven to improve the world through investigative work. She shows empathy toward the homeless and personally understands the cruelty of her environment, for she found herself involved in a gang at a younger age. Once, Maeve even “. . . witnessed her father shot down by a thug standing over him.” While the optimistic Nancy displays confidence and demonstrates optimism for the life ahead of her, Maeve’s future remains uncertain.

The differences between Maeve’s world and Nancy Drew’s hometown of River Heights are clear and sometimes directly referenced in the text. For example, when Maeve ventures into The Nickel, or Skid Row, to find Conor, a boy who had gone missing, they both find themselves held captive by a couple of evil men. Maeve reflects sarcastically on

22. Ibid., 220.

the situation by stating that she "... did read a Nancy Drew once. It was pretty sappy and her boyfriend showed up to save her. Not going to happen, is it?" Through this statement, Maeve acknowledges the unrealistic nature of Nancy's world and maybe even longs to be a part of her carefree and seemingly flawless life. Through the character of Maeve, the reader gains a look into the harsh, unpredictable, and dangerous worlds in which many of today's youth must struggle to exist and thrive. Adult female investigators in contemporary mysteries also function within cruel and unjust societies that challenge their intelligence, inner strength, and professional skills.

An edgy and intelligent contemporary private investigator, Kinsey Millhone works on many dangerous and tricky mysteries and demonstrates her bravery, quick-thinking, determination, and forthrightness. Sue Grafton, "... often hailed as an innovator of the Tough Gal Private Eye...," introduced the gutsy Kinsey Millhone in her renowned alphabet series. From "A" is for Alibi to "U" is for Undertow, Kinsey narrates the texts in first person and shows herself as a rebellious thrill seeker driven to crack even the most obscure cases. Kinsey's initial emergence on the literary scene in 1982 was significant due to her status as female within the hardboiled detective genre, a class of fiction traditionally dominated by male figures. Just as Nancy Drew was one of the first female characters to break onto the detective fiction scene for young girls, so too does Kinsey Millhone represent one of the initial women to enter the predominately sexist world of hardboiled, adult detection. Nancy has inspired young girls to be independent, free-thinking, and intelligent,

24. Ibid., 172 and 145.

and Kinsey empowers her adult women readers to embrace their femininity in a male-dominated world.

Raised in a middle-class environment, Kinsey’s parents died in a car accident when she was five, and thereafter she was raised by her aunt.26 Growing up, she and her aunt “always lived in mobile homes”27 As a result of her unconventional upbringing, she “…never had a role model for this female stuff” and grew up as a self-sufficient “social oaf.”28 In her early thirties when the books begin, Kinsey has already gone through the police academy but soon abandons this career in favor of the freedom of private investigating. Married and divorced twice, Kinsey enjoys being alone and independent and reflects, “I like being single. I like being by myself. I find solitude healing and I have a dozen ways to feel amused.”29 Identifiable with readers who may be alone themselves, “…Kinsey’s delight in her single state serves to endorse the status of growing numbers of single women.”30 She is candid about her solitary lifestyle and puts up a guard to protect herself from the heartache that becoming close to someone may bring, noting, “I’m not that good at relationships. Get close to someone and the next thing you know, you’ve given them the power to wound, betray, irritate, abandon, or bore you senseless.”31 Still, Kinsey maintains special connections with and soft spots for both her landlord, Henry, and local

29. Ibid., 80.
30. Walton, “‘E’ is for En/Gendering,” 107.
restaurant owner, Rosie. When Henry critiques her actions, Kinsey remarks to her landlord, "you're disapproving of my behavior. It tears me up."32 This hardened toughness is typical in hardboiled fiction, and while Nancy certainly shows determination and courage in her mysteries, Kinsey's resilience is more extreme as she is forced to function within a cruel, unpredictable adult world. Nevertheless, one may imagine an innocent teenage Nancy perhaps maturing and developing into a strong-willed and successful private investigator who understands the reality of a cold world beyond River Heights.

Unlike the elegant and put together Nancy Drew, Kinsey exudes less femininity and is more concerned with solving her present mystery than looking pretty while cracking cases. Kinsey's clothes are practical and her "... standard outfit consists of boots or tennis shoes, form-fitting jeans, and a tank top or a turtleneck..." She admits that she "...never could guess right when it came to clothes."33 Inattentive to her physical appearance, Kinsey notes that she "...[takes] a pair of nail scissors to my own unruly mop about every six weeks..."34 These actions support the idea that "...a powerful element of the Kinsey Millhane series is that what the heroine looks like is relatively unimportant—unlike the traditional 'woman's story' in which female beauty triggers the plotline."35 In addition to a lack of attention to fashion, Kinsey also lacks cooking skills, another typical indicator of

33. Grafton, Evidence, 39 and 66.
34. Grafton, Malice, 4.
female domesticity. Kinsey admits to having a “penchant for junk food.” Part of Kinsey’s increasingly edgy personality may be attributed to her proclivity for an urban lifestyle. Unlike Nancy who lives in the Midwestern town of River Heights, Kinsey admits to being “a city girl at heart.” A “. . . wild thing [who] . . . ditched school [and] . . . hung out with some low-life dudes . . . ,” Kinsey was a self-proclaimed misfit in high school and always seemed to have an inclination to rebel against rules and order.

Realizing that she works in a man’s world, Kinsey acts very guardedly when interacting with men and maintains an emotionally strong appearance. Although Kinsey works in modern times, it still surprises some people with whom she interacts “. . . to think about a girl detective.” Kinsey must work harder than her male counterparts to prove her skills and remain confident, forthright, and outspoken. She candidly notes, “all this talk about women being nurturing is crap. We’re being sold a bill of goods so we can be kept in line by men.” Independent and self-sufficient, Kinsey doesn’t “. . . ordinarily call on men. [She has] been schooled in the notion that a woman, these days, saves herself . . . .” Consequently, she is not interested in marriage because she is not fond of the idea of giving someone else the right to make demands.

40. Ibid., 83.
Kinsey boasts well-developed investigative and interrogation skills that aid her sleuthing work. Noting that “the basic characteristics of any good investigator are a plodding nature and infinite patience,” Kinsey certainly remains persistent and composed throughout a variety of perilous and frustrating situations. During one of her mysteries, this determination becomes especially apparent when an important character she is interrogating notes, “God, you [Kinsey] are so persistent.” Asking hard questions and possessing a keen attention to detail, Kinsey states that, “I love information. Sometimes I feel like an archaeologist, digging for facts, uncovering data with my wits and a pen.” She takes care to collect important case details before forming a hypothesis and is always wary of reaching hasty conclusions. Thorough and persistent in her investigating, Kinsey notes that “there’s no place in a P.I.’s life for impatience, faintheartedness, or sloppiness.” Similar to Nancy, Kinsey also becomes involved in many precarious situations and finds herself repeatedly escaping death by narrow margins. The private investigator thrives off dangerous activities, once noting that “it’s fun to horse around with danger.” While Nancy has a blue convertible that provides both freedom and transportation, Kinsey relies on her VW to take her from place to place throughout her investigations. Kinsey keeps her car packed with an “overnight case . . . for God knows what emergency.”

42. Grafton, Alibi, 33-34.


44. Grafton, Evidence, 84.

45. Grafton, Burglar, 34.

46. Grafton, Corpse, 153.

47. Grafton, Alibi, 6.
detective, Nancy, who engages in sleuthing largely for entertainment, Kinsey has “a living to earn.”\textsuperscript{48} Still, the occupation Kinsey has chosen proves satisfying for her, as she divulges that “private investigation is my whole life. It is why I get up in the morning and what puts me to bed at night. Most of the time I’m alone, but why not? I’m not unhappy and I’m not discontent.”\textsuperscript{49}

Not only is Kinsey’s world different from Nancy’s safe and predictable environment in River Heights, but this adult private investigator has a more realistic outlook life. At one time, Kinsey believed in the credibility of the justice system and that “... the bad guys would all go to jail, thus making it safe for the rest of us to carry on. After a while, I realized how naïve I was.”\textsuperscript{50} The cruelty Kinsey experiences and witnesses in her work harden her somewhat against nurturing and family life. She admits that a gruesome homicide investigation at age twenty-six ruined any desire she had for motherhood.\textsuperscript{51} Kinsey is also concerned about restoring justice to those who have been wronged, and she “... find[s] it intensely satisfying when the process finally works as it should.” Someone who is a “law-and-order type” herself, Kinsey may display elements of rebelliousness and nonconformity; however, she rarely becomes involved in serious trouble.\textsuperscript{52} She confides in the reader that “I got sent to the principal’s office once in first grade for passing notes in

\textsuperscript{48} Grafton, \textit{Malice}, 79.

\textsuperscript{49} Grafton, \textit{Alibi}, 233.

\textsuperscript{50} Grafton, \textit{Burglar}, 1.

\textsuperscript{51} Grafton, \textit{Alibi}, 143.

\textsuperscript{52} Grafton, \textit{Malice}, 165 and 196.
class and I've never recovered from the horror of it. I was guilty as charged, but I'd never been in trouble in my life."

Despite her developed skills as a detective, Kinsey still has moments of uncertainty that help make her a realistic and sympathetic character. Kinsey fears failure, remarking that "one of these days I'm going to fail and I don't like the thought." She struggles with her personality and gaining acceptance from others in her life. Starting at a young age, Kinsey showed "... the ability to adapt, the resilience, the refusal to conform." She notes that "these were qualities I still harbored, though perhaps to my detriment. Society values cooperation over independence, obedience over individuality, and niceness above all else." Kinsey seems to have two sides, and as she states "on the one hand, I was a true law-and-order type... On the other hand, I'd been known to lie through my teeth... I was split down the middle, my good angel sitting on one shoulder, Lucifer perched on the other." Although she exudes confidence and fearlessness on the outside, Kinsey internally harbors realistic concerns and anxieties. Adult detectives in contemporary fiction demonstrate increased levels of contemplation and reflection throughout their investigations.

Debuting in 1990, the Kay Scarpetta books authored by Patricia Cornwell draw heavily on forensic evidence in often gruesome and violent murder investigations. Kay, as the chief medical examiner for Virginia, holds a position never before assumed by a

53. Grafton, Burglar, 190.
54. Grafton, Malice, 48.
55. Grafton, Outlaw, 30 and 287.
woman.\textsuperscript{56} Honest, savy, intelligent, and hard-working, blue-eyed and ash blonde-haired Kay is about forty years old, divorced, and without children. Possessing both a medical and law degree, Kay proves herself an intellectually and emotionally strong woman who proudly displays her professional and educational experience and medical and legal knowledge. She uses her developed skills to ask important questions and search for key evidence surrounding various mysteries and cases. An important character in one of Kay’s investigations notes that she does not “... form opinions lightly ... [or] jump to conclusions or believe something just because you wish to.”\textsuperscript{57} Nancy Drew, of course, also values the importance of interrogating suspects, collecting clues, and analyzing evidence. Also like Nancy Drew, Kay does not seem to age through the Scarpetta series books.

Similar to Kinsey Millhone, Kay has a hard time keeping a lasting, romantic relationship due to her need for excitement, dedication to her work, and desire to have her own way. As one of Kay’s colleagues notes, “... you are driven compared to anyone, and most people can’t figure you out. You don’t exactly walk around with your heart on your sleeve. In fact, you can come across as someone who don’t [sic] have feelings.”\textsuperscript{58} Conversely, Nancy Drew has Ned Nickerson as a steady boyfriend in spite of her frequent flippant and unemotional treatment toward him. If Nancy lived in Kinsey’s world, she would probably have a more difficult time balancing such an involved, demanding career with a boyfriend.

\textsuperscript{56} Patricia Cornwell, \textit{All That Remains} (New York: Pocket Star Books, 1992), 54.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 435.

\textsuperscript{58} Patricia Cornwell, \textit{Cruel & Unusual} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993), 211.
Working in a field predominately filled with men, Kay encounters adversity and discrimination in her daily life that she faces with strength and resolve. When her co-detective Pete Marino is mistaken for a doctor, Marino states that "... between the two of us I look like the doctor" to which Kay replies, "that's because you look like a man."\(^59\) When a trial attorney dismissively refers to her as "Mrs. Scarpetta," Kay calmly yet assertively says, "I would first like to explain to the jury that I am a medical doctor with a law degree ... . Therefore, I would appreciate being addressed as Dr. Scarpetta instead of Mrs. Scarpetta."\(^60\) Kay quickly learns that the world can be dark and cruel, and even if one criminal is captured and brought to justice, more evil people who cause death and destruction will always exist. Evil and death directly impact Kay in very personal and immediate ways. At the end of Post-Mortem, the first Scarpetta mystery, Kay finds herself attacked in her home by a strangler, thus demonstrating modern-day detectives' close relationship with danger and death.

While both Nancy and Kay are dedicated to the ethics of their work, Kay's sense of morality stands out more because it exists within a harsher and crueler world. As chief medical examiner, Kay must deal with gruesome cases that include stranglings, molestations, and murders. She recognizes the harsh reality of the "... savage world in which we live" and works to uphold justice.\(^61\) No longer innocent and idealistic, Kay comes to the conclusion that although she has "... always wanted things to be easy ... they almost

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60. Ibid., 132.

never are.” During one particular investigation involving a young murdered couple, Kay notes she will need to release the manner of death to the couple’s families because they “. . . are entitled to that by Code.”62 Kay endures countless dangerous situations in pursuit of the truth and in fact notes that she “. . . spend[s] my every waking moment picking up the pieces of the lives destroyed by evil people.”63 Less focused on embezzlement, hidden treasures, and disguises, the mysteries that Kay and other contemporary female detectives solve are increasingly centered on murder, infidelity, kidnappings, and theft, real-life tragedies and events. In River Heights, “. . . crooks always give in to determined girls,” but in today’s urban areas, justice does not always prevail.64

Unlike Nancy Drew who exudes femininity and elegance, Kay, similar to Kinsey Millhone, does not spend time concerned with her physical appearance and manners. Embodying characteristics not typically associated with females, Kay possesses “. . . the body and sensibilities of a woman with the power and drive of a man . . . .”65 Kay’s lack of traditionally female qualities aggravates her mother who questions Kay’s sexual identity and lambastes her for not having children. She frowns upon Kay’s work dedication and tells her that she “. . . should have been a man . . . . All work and ambition. It’s not natural for a woman.”66 Kay’s sister notes that “. . . you work harder than anyone I’ve ever met.”67

63. Cornwell, Cruel & Unusual, 301.
64. Billman, Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, 119.
65. Cornwell, The Body Farm, 257.
Despite her lack of traditionally feminine traits, Kay does enjoy connecting with her Italian roots through cooking. She notes that “cooking was an indulgence I didn’t have time for most days . . .”68 Many modern female investigators must choose between domesticity and a life dedicated to a demanding career; however, Kay finds some time to demonstrate her love of cooking and nurturing through food.

Inspired by the determined, smart, energetic, and affable character of Nancy Drew, contemporary female detectives, whether early adolescent girls or grown women, exhibit important and admirable traits similar to and also different from Nancy. From New York and the United Kingdom to California and Virginia, the harsh and uncertain big city environments in which today’s female investigators work contrast sharply with the safe and predictable world of Nancy Drew. Consequently, today’s sleuths, whether they are The Red Blazer Girls or Kinsey Millhone, must function and interact with others in ways that allow them to solve their puzzles and mysteries and oftentimes also earn a living. Nevertheless, Nancy’s perseverance, intelligence, and bravery are laudable traits that all appear within modern investigators who have helped carry on Nancy’s legacy by making women accepted and admired members of the detective fiction genre. Twenty-first century readers may more readily relate to these sleuths over Nancy Drew because they can increasingly identify with the worlds of characters such as Gilda Joyce and Kay Scarpetta and the realistic anxieties that these sleuths feel. The female protagonists who appear in modern detective literature serve as examples of strong, intelligent, and self-sufficient girls and women who overcome external adversity and internal doubt to prove their determination, fortitude, and bravery.

68. Cornwell, Post-Mortem, 163.
Clearly, this courage and prowess, although often embodied in different forms and to various degrees, may be traced back to the proper and peppy, blonde-haired and blue-eyed Nancy Drew.
CONCLUSION

Quickly gaining popularity among young readers in the 1930s, Nancy Drew has evolved and grown over the decades from a proper and gracious teen sleuth into a sophisticated and fashionable modern detective. For girls in mid twentieth-century America, Nancy represented a fresh and likeable fictional icon different from the more subservient and traditional female literary figures of years past. Although other young, fictional investigators, including Judy Bolton and Trixie Belden, emerged during this time, these sleuths failed to garner the same widespread appeal and enduring fame. While a number of ghostwriters have had a hand in contributing to Nancy Drew’s development over the years, Mildred Writ Benson and Harriet Adams, her two initial women creators who wrote under the pseudonym of Carolyn Keene, set the important foundation for Nancy’s lasting reputation as an intelligent, daring, determined, brave, outspoken, resourceful, compassionate, and fashionable detective. Forever existing as a fresh-faced adolescent, Nancy does not have to worry about school, work, relationships, or the future. Her world is both relatable and unconventional, allowing readers to find elements of themselves in various characters and themes and to escape into an imaginary and comforting environment filled with adventure, scandal, and camaraderie. Not only has Nancy Drew evolved over the years to fit the times more appropriately, but also she functions as a catalyst for other women mystery writers of today who are developing their own strong and savvy female investigators.

From 1930 through 2011, Nancy Drew has starred in numerous different detective books for young readers from the original mystery series to the more contemporary Nancy Drew Files and Girl Detective books. Although revisions and spinoffs may alter certain
elements of Nancy’s character and the stories’ plots, her fundamental personality and
laudable traits largely remain. This timeless and world-renowned sleuth pervades various
forms of modern media, from books, the Internet, and board games to movies, “apps,” and
video games. Nancy’s spirit and independence are so strongly and consistently depicted in
the series books that devoted readers can count on her tenacity and fortitude to prevail over
the evil and recklessness of criminals and villains. She is an independent and honest leader
who uses wit, persistence, and ingenuity to survive any situation, emerge triumphant, and
bring justice to the guilty offenders.

As one of the first fictional female detectives to embody these admirable traits so
fully and convincingly, Nancy has inspired and influenced girl and women sleuths in the
twenty-first century. Nancy’s essence has spiraled through generations of fictional
investigators and into today’s spunky and tech-savvy girl sleuths, such as The Red Blazer
Girls and Gilda Joyce, and mature female detectives alike, including Kinsey Millhone and
Kay Scarpetta. From private investigators, lawyers, and medical examiners to forensic
analysts and FBI agents, Nancy has paved the way for and influenced a variety of diverse,
strong female personalities in fiction. These present-day women detectives, however, have
a definite hardboiled edge that the pure and innocent Nancy Drew lacked. The shrewd and
streetwise characteristics of modern detectives add new dimensions and twists to
contemporary mystery stories and appeal to adult readers. Adapting and evolving over time,
Nancy Drew is not a static, one-dimensional figure. She has grown into a teenager who not
only wears fashionable clothing, uses popular slang, and drives a trendy car but also
maintains strong, wholesome values, a zest for life, and a freshness of spirit. Investigating
crimes ranging from stolen jewels to lost wills, Nancy’s detective work does not involve the
same tawdriness and sleaze that contemporary female sleuths must face. She represents solid and timeless values, and the mysteries she solves as an amateur detective highlight these ideals. While the plots may be formulaic and predictable, Nancy herself continues to garner admiration and adoration from loyal readers.

With positive role models such as Nancy Drew and The Red Blazer Girls, today’s young people can find hope and inspiration in smart, wholesome, and compassionate female sleuths. Readers can imagine themselves as the adventurous and affable Nancy, interacting with her circle of friends and relishing the love and admiration of a doting father. In a world filled with cheap and morally vapid teen icons, girls and parents can rely on Nancy and her contemporaries to provide impressionable young readers of any race or culture with consistently constructive models for behavior. Nancy shows determination and grace; she can roll up her sleeves and get dirty and then look graceful in a pretty party dress. As society has become increasingly complex and cynical over the decades, modern technology including Facebook, texting, and Twitter has added additional dimensions to today’s mysteries for readers both young and old. Although the world may become more difficult to navigate over the years, girls and women can rely on the steadfast and stalwart Nancy Drew to provide direction and inspiration for leading meaningful lives filled with purpose, adventure, compassion, and spirit. She has provided girls with the encouragement to act as curious, inquisitive, respectful, confident, and empowered individuals. A seminal figure in the detective fiction arena, Nancy is an enduring American cultural icon who has enabled other women authors to flourish today as they create similarly feisty, determined, steadfast, and admirable female characters.
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