Feminism in Adolescent Literature:  
A Literature Review of Nancy Drew

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ABSTRACT
Nancy Drew is a prominent figure in many adolescent girls' lives who has many admirable qualities. She excels in a typically male-dominated profession. She maintains healthy relationships with her friends and family – particularly with her father and boyfriend. Nancy is also a strong, independent woman. For these and other reasons, analysis of Nancy Drew stories, both old and new, reveals that Nancy Drew is a positive role model for young women.

There are few people in this country who have not heard of the teenage amateur detective Nancy Drew. Books about her adventures form a staple of adolescent literature for many girls and young women. Parents know there will be little of the offensive language and gore that is often found in books today. Rarely, however, do we consider what kind of effect Nancy Drew books will have on children's impressionable minds. I contend that there is little cause for concern with Nancy Drew. For almost seventy years, she has been a wonderful role model for girls. She is a strong, independent, and resourceful woman working in a male-dominated field and doing exceedingly well at it. Her sidekicks, Bess, George, Ned, and her father, aid her success. Through the years, Nancy has been changed and updated, but she still sends the same message: girls' actions are not limited by their gender.

Nancy Drew was created by Edward Stratemeyer, the founder of the Stratemeyer syndicate. In addition to Nancy Drew, this syndicate produced the Hardy Boys, the Dana Girls, and the Bobbsey Twins. In 1929, due to the enormous success of the Hardy Boys series, Stratemeyer decided to develop a version of this detective team to appeal to girls. Nancy Drew and her gang were born.

The first four Nancy Drew novels were outlined by Edward Stratemeyer. After his death, his daughter, Harriet S. Adams, continued this tradition. The outlines were given to various writers, who created the actual stories. After the books had been written, they often went through an editing process at the syndicate to refine them into the finished stories.

The original series numbering one through fifty-six were all written by the Stratemeyer syndicate. In the 1980s the syndicate experienced financial problems, and their publisher, Simon & Schuster, bought the company and all of the rights to the Nancy Drew and other novels (Powell 19-20). In 1986, a new series of Nancy Drew novels hit the bookshelves: The Nancy Drew Files. This series contained the same characters as the original books, but with an updated twist to them. Ned and Nancy became more emotionally and physically involved and Nancy's cases became more important. Nancy herself became a "typical teenager" of the 1980s and 1990s with acid washed jeans and a new sporty Mustang. The Nancy Drew Files quickly gained young readers' attentions, just as the original stories had done.

Nancy Drew, the strawberry blonde, blue-eyed girl, burst onto the detective scene in the book, The Secret of the Old Clock and has been righting the wrongs of the world ever since. Although her occupation and success have stayed the same, Nancy has changed in order to keep up with the times. In a few of the original stories she was sixteen years old, but she quickly aged to eighteen so that she could legally drive in all of the states (Billman 110). In addition, making her eighteen years old created an easy way to avoid the topic of school. Her car, which is a prominent part of her image, has changed from a roadster to a Mustang convertible, but two things never change: its color, which is always blue, and the fact that it is sporty. No comfortable Cadillac will do for Nancy, especially when she is chasing villains.

It is well known that Nancy is an amateur detective and therefore never takes money for the cases that she solves. However, she often accepts small gifts to remind her of the adventure. Due to the fact that she never accepts monetary compensation, one might wonder how she affords her comfortable lifestyle. That question is easily answered by introducing her father, Carson Drew. Carson is a world-renowned lawyer, who consequently has a rather healthy income. Nancy is free to do her detecting without worrying about money.
Carson may supply the income, but that is about all he supplies in the way of typical parental support. He often helps her on cases by doing some of the legwork, and he imposes no parental constraints on her. This makes Carson appear as more of a sidekick to Nancy. Her mother, it is revealed, died when Nancy was only three years of age. So the "smothering mother" role is eliminated, allowing Nancy even more independence. Hannah Gruen serves as a surrogate mother to Nancy, but because she is the housekeeper, her ability to control Nancy's movements is limited. Therefore the young sleuth is able to experience the joy of home cooked meals without the burden of an over-protective mother.

Nancy, unlike the Hardy Boys, does all of her detecting by herself. But she does have two faithful friends who usually help her on her cases. These two friends are Bess Marvin and Georgia, or George, Fayne. Bess and George are related but their similarities end there. George is a very athletic and independent young woman who rarely has any interest in the opposite sex. Bess, on the other hand, has a new boyfriend every case. Despite their differences, they combine forces to help Nancy get the job done. Ned Nickerson, Nancy's long-term boyfriend also joins in from time to time.

The Nancy Drew stories are rather difficult to classify in either the hard-boiled or whodunit genre. Kinsey Milhoun, the woman detective in Sue Grafton's series of mysteries, best exemplifies the hard-boiled genre, while Sherlock Holmes is the perfect example of a whodunit detective. The hard-boiled aspects of the Nancy Drew stories show Nancy's tough, independent characteristics and the whodunit aspect illustrates Nancy's superior intellect. Nancy embodies characteristics typical of both of these genres.

Nancy is often in danger, especially in The Nancy Drew Files where she is constantly being physically accosted. She follows the clues and does quite a bit of sleuthing to solve the mystery. Moreover, she is not above searching someone's room without their permission to find clues. All of these characteristics illustrate the hard-boiled genre.

On the other hand, the villain of the story is always caught in the end and the reader gets a clear sense of justice. In addition to that, once the criminal is captured, the order in place before the crime was committed is always restored. The social order is never questioned in any of the Nancy Drew books because the criminal is usually seen as a deviant person. In the final scene, the audience is often allowed to see inside the criminal's mind. This is accomplished by having Nancy ask questions to ascertain how the criminal justified such extreme actions. Usually this scene portrays the criminal as a person who is slightly mentally unbalanced and was pushed over the edge by a certain incident. The criminal then sought retribution in the form of the crime. The phrase, "If it hadn't been for you, Nancy Drew, I would have gotten away with it!" is a recurring one. The criminals usually believe they have done nothing wrong and the reader is assured that the person has been removed from society. All of the problems are worked out and everyone involved is content. Which is a prominent characteristic of the whodunit genre.

Nancy Drew has many characteristics that make her a positive role model for young people in general. For instance, Nancy never disobeys her father and never lies to him, unlike the Hardy Boys who tend to gloss over the more dangerous parts of their investigations. Nancy tells it as it is, probably because she knows Carson will not tell her to stop simply because the situation has become dangerous. She also has a good relationship with the police. Chief McGinnis is the reappearing police chief who is aware of Nancy's talents and often helps her out on cases by giving her vital information. Sometimes she returns the favor by nabbing the criminal that he cannot seem to catch. Another quality that makes Nancy a good role model is that she always honors her commitments no matter how dangerous or trivial. For instance, in The Bungalow Mystery, Nancy makes a date to go to a party with a friend, Don Cameron, but her mystery soon interferes with the date and she needs to leave town. Instead of simply breaking off the date she finds an alternate date for Don. She then calls him to make sure the new arrangements will be all right with him. Don says,

"Wow! A real mystery!" he remarked. "If I didn't know what sleuthing means to you, Nancy, I'd say you were just trying to brush me off ... Okay. If she's willing to go with me, I'll be glad to take her. But I'm sure sorry you can't make it. See you another time."

"Thanks, Don. I shan't forget this. Of course if Laura won't go, I'll keep the date. Bye now."

(Keene 85)

In this situation, it would have been completely acceptable for her to break the date, yet she goes out of her way to make sure that her commitment is honored. She takes the same approach to her cases; once she has accepted a case, she sees it through to the end.

In addition, she does not often break the law, except for the times when she breaks into someone's room to find clues for her current case. Nancy, especially in the original version, seldom speeds even when chasing villains. It was often noted in the early novels that Nancy was hard pressed to stay under the speed limit.

However, Nancy goes beyond being a role model for all to emulate. The majority of Nancy's characteristics show girls that they too can succeed in a male-dominated society. One of Nancy's most prominent
characteristics is her independence. She can always take care of herself, except for the monetary contributions made by her father. Even those contributions have become less obvious in the more recent series. As was mentioned before, Carson is often reduced to a sidekick to Nancy. As a sidekick, the audience no longer sees him as a threat to her independence.

Nancy’s car is an important symbol of her independence, especially in the original series. In 1929, it was not common for women to have their own cars to drive. Frances Fitzgerald commented on Nancy’s car in the May 1980 issue of Vogue magazine. She said,

Nancy’s car has almost mythical proportions, for, like some magical knightly steed, it will take her anywhere in the imaginary country of River Heights. It gives her total mobility, and while she is driving, a physical equality with men.

(Powell 66)

Giving Nancy a car means she does not have to rely on someone else to drive her around. She is free to go and do as she pleases. In fact she resents anyone that tries to drive her car, even her boyfriend Ned. In the Nancy Drew Files book Wicked for the Weekend, Nancy comments when her boyfriend wants to take the wheel of her Mustang.

“And did I say you could drive?” she asked him, grinning.

“I know this car is your baby,” Ned answered. “But I know the way to the hospital. It’ll be quicker if I drive. We haven’t got much time to get there.”

“Oh, but be careful,” she said, tossing him the keys. “It’s so overcast, it looks like the sky’s about to open up. And I didn’t notice any streetlights on the roads up here.”

(Keene 85)

Only after Nancy gives Ned a lecture on driving does she allow him to drive her car anywhere.

Along with Nancy’s independence comes her resourcefulness. She does not depend on anyone else for help. She always comes up with a way to save herself and others from situations that appear hopeless. It is a rare occasion when Nancy gets into a situation that she cannot get out of single-handedly. In those rare instances she relies on help from one of her faithful sidekicks. In every book there is at least one episode where Nancy is in a perilous situation that she must find a way to survive. Somehow she always manages to save herself. One such situation was in The Bungalow Mystery, where Nancy had been knocked unconscious and woke up to find the villain tying her wrists together. She had to find a way to get out of the situation quickly. “An idea suddenly came to Nancy. She remembered a detective that had called on her father a few months before had told her how it was possible to hold one’s hands while being bound so as to slip the bonds later” (Keene 125). Of course this technique worked and Nancy was soon freed from the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles.

Ropes are often a problem for the girl detective. She has been tied up more times than one can count and has found an equal number of ways to escape. For instance, in the book Hot Pursuit, Nancy uses barnacles to cut through her ropes so that she can swim to safety (Keene 140). No matter how many times Nancy proves she can get herself out of a tough situation, the criminal always tries to put her back into one. Tie her down and she cuts the ropes, lock her up and she picks the lock, drug her and she recovers in no time. One could see this as an analogy to some men’s attempts to keep women subservient. Nancy never allows anyone to keep her down. This is a strong message: Never allow someone else to limit your mobility or your options.

A characteristic that goes hand in hand with her resourcefulness is the fact that Nancy is very courageous. She receives threats that would terrify most people. Even more significant than Nancy’s independence, resourcefulness, and courage is the fact that she is engaged in a typically male profession. Today it is more acceptable for women to be detectives, but when Nancy began her career in 1929, it was practically unheard of. In the early days she met quite a bit of resistance because of her chosen occupation, especially from men. The criminals did not see her as a threat because of her gender, and the police thought she was sticking her nose in places it did not belong. However, as her reputation grew, so did her credibility. The police detectives eventually came to rely on her to help them solve cases. In the Nancy Drew Files book Circle of Evil, Nancy comes up against a police detective who refuses to allow Nancy to help. He soon learns the error of his ways when she catches the criminal before he does. Nancy repeatedly proves she can succeed in a traditionally male profession; this is a lesson which is very valuable to the young readers of these books.

The Nancy Drew Files and the original Nancy Drew books differ in a number of ways. For instance, Nancy has become a world-renowned detective, unlike in the beginning when it was her father that everyone knew. In addition to being better known, the kinds of cases
that she solves have become more important. In the original series, Nancy usually caught jewel thieves or reunited family members. In *The Nancy Drew Files*, she is more likely to be chasing murderers or breaking up smuggling rings. No longer is she relegated to the cases that the police will not concern themselves with. She now handles the kinds of cases that the Hardy Boys solved in their series. The cases that she solves have also become more physical. She gets beaten up more often in *The Nancy Drew Files*, and now knows martial arts. These newer, more physical and important cases are also more suspenseful. Originally the reader always knew who the criminal was well before the end of the book. In the new series the reader has to hang on until the last chapter to find out.

All of these changes have come about to make sure that Nancy Drew is still just as much of a role model now as she was in the early days. In 1929, having her drive her own car and be a detective was enough because it was not the norm. Today women have made so many advances that this is no longer enough. As Mildred A. Wirt Benson said about Nancy, “Today that kind of woman is common, but then it was a new concept” (Brown). She has to be tougher, better, and must handle more important cases to communicate her original message to the girls of this generation.

Nancy has changed in a few ways that could be seen as detracting from her status as a role model. She has become more concerned with her appearance in the recent books. Along this line, Bess who was once described as a chubby young woman, has lost weight and become boy crazy. George has also transcended her boyish nickname and tomboy qualities and became more involved with men. Ned and Nancy’s relationship has also become more involved. Just looking at these characteristics, one might think that Nancy has become just another typical teenager. But it is important to note that the original series was published with eight, nine, and ten year old girls in mind. *The Nancy Drew Files* are aimed at girls who are eleven, twelve, and thirteen. Girls of this age are more concerned with romance and their appearance than younger girls. Perhaps the books were changed to keep the readers’ interest, not to make Nancy less of a role model for young women.

Nancy is not the only role model that comes from these books. Her sidekicks, Bess Marvin and George Fayne also send a strong message to young girls. This is because they also assume the role of detectives in many of Nancy’s cases. Unlike Nancy, neither one of the girls has a serious boyfriend. This is rather convenient for Bess because she always finds a new guy while she’s on the case with Nancy. However, each new love interest lasts only one case, allowing Bess the freedom of a single girl with the companionship of many men. It is ironic because one typically thinks of a male in that sort of situation, not a female.

George, on the other hand, is quite the opposite of Bess. Although she sometimes finds new men in the stories, she is generally not overly concerned with them. She is very athletic and tomboyish. While Nancy often solves cases without Bess, she rarely does so without George. There is little the three friends cannot do together. As Nancy said in *The Clue in the Diary*, “‘Calm your nerves. Three capable, muscular, brainy girls such as we shouldn’t need any help!’” (Powell 97)

Although Nancy is a tough, independent woman, she does have healthy relationships with men in the stories. The two most important men in her life are her father and Ned Nickerson. These relationships have been in place since the beginning, but neither man has tried to limit Nancy’s freedom. When Nancy first appeared in 1929, this type of relationship was not typical. At that time it was common for men to be more controlling of women, but this never happened in River Heights.

Carson Drew, the world-renowned lawyer, has always been very supportive of his daughter’s amateur career. Often he gives her the cases that she works on and helps her in any way he can. He learned early on that trying to restrain Nancy would be an exercise in futility simply because she was determined to do what she wants. “Carson realized it was best not to argue with Nancy when she had a particular goal in mind, even if his own instincts advised caution: ‘You’re a peach, Father. You let me do anything I like,’ chimed Nancy in *The Clue of the Broken Locket*” (Powell 71). Carson Drew is the perfect father for a girl like Nancy, much as Ned Nickerson is the perfect boyfriend.

Ned came onto the scene early in the original edition of the Nancy Drew series and has stuck around ever since. He and Nancy have had their ups and downs, but they always manage to make it work in the end. Ned is obviously in love with Nancy and sometimes you almost have to feel sorry for him because he always plays second fiddle to her latest case. He often mentions that he wishes that they could spend more time together but he never pressures her to make his dream become a reality. Much like her father, he is always supportive of her no matter what she does. If she needs to be rescued then count on Ned to come and save the day. He seems content to, in essence, wait by the phone for Nancy to call.

Nancy can always depend on Ned to do whatever she needs done. In the book *Nancy’s Mysterious Letter*, he shows how dependable he truly is when he said, “If you want me to dress in feathers and war paint and play the Scotch bagpipes up and down the Main Street, I’ll do it without asking why” (Powell 71). That kind of faithfulness is difficult to find in anyone, but count on Nancy to find it. He attends Emerson College, so he is not always around to help Nancy out with her cases. When he does help, however, it is obvious that Nancy is the brains behind the operation.
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Although she is in a relationship with Ned, it is obvious that she is not tied down. The fact that he is usually away at college helps. When she wants him around, he can be there - otherwise he stays at school. In at least two of The Nancy Drew Files, Nancy has kissed men other than Ned. One gets the feeling that although she loves Ned, she loves her freedom more and will not jeopardize it. In fact, Ned once broached the subject of marriage and Nancy turned him down. Still Ned hangs around waiting for his few minutes now and again with the famous girl detective. He is never too pushy, and never tries to pressure Nancy into a physical relationship. In fact a physical relationship does not truly exist between Ned and Nancy, other than the occasional kiss. He pays for dates, he opens doors, he openly admits that Nancy can best him at almost anything she puts her mind to. He helps out when she asks and is easy to dispose of when he is not needed.

Nancy is a strong woman who seems to be able to control the most out-of-control situations. She is a leader in relationships with those around her. Even her adversaries become admirers. Although it is evident that no one could ever be Nancy Drew, many women would benefit by emulating some of her qualities. Nancy Drew began challenging societal expectations in 1929 simply by becoming an amateur detective. Today she continues to do so by pursuing increasingly dangerous and physical cases. Nancy does things that many people would gladly step aside and allow others to do for them, and she does these things with the grace and skill that we have come to expect from her.

REFERENCES


Jodi L. McEndarfer is a junior majoring in Secondary Education with a concentration in social studies and a minor in science. She became interested in the topic of Nancy Drew as a role model through an Honors course she was enrolled in last spring, H400, Detective Literature. While the Nancy Drew novels were not among the detective stories that were read and discussed in the course, Jodi realized that many of the concepts she learned could be applied to her favorite childhood detective, Nancy Drew. After re-reading a few Nancy Drew novels, she realized that Nancy Drew was more than a detective; she was also a role model for children, especially young girls.