

Nancy Drew Series Short Guide

Nancy Drew Series by Carolyn Keene

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Overview

Most young readers find Nancy's adventures interesting, entertaining, and exciting. In addition, many articles by adult Nancy Drew fans describe the positive qualities developed by reading these books: a sense of independence, poise in unusual social situations, persistence, initiative, and resourcefulness.

The series also emphasizes not only respect for elders and authority, but also the ability of a young woman to hold her own in the world of adults and men.

Other values portrayed are the worth of the individual, respect for others (especially those less fortunate, talented, or courageous), and humility despite one's accomplishments, fame, and talents. In short, the Nancy Drew series reinforces both the individual's self-confidence and traditional American values. Moreover, these books can awaken an interest in science and provide an introduction to unfamiliar places and cultures. Finally, the Nancy Drew series uses the English language effectively and correctly, thus encouraging readers in good language skills.

About the Author

Carolyn Keene was one of the pen names used by the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate, founded by Harriet Adams's father, Edward Stratemeyer.

Under that name Adams directed the writing of all the Nancy Drew books published between 1930 and 1982, as well as thirty-two books in the Dana Girls series. Adams also oversaw the writing of twenty-one volumes in the Tom Swift Jr. series, published under the pen name Victor Appleton II; fifteen volumes in the Barton Books for Girls series, published under the name May Hollis Barton; twenty volumes in the Hardy Boys series, published under the name Franklin W. Dixon; fifteen volumes in the Bobbsey Twins series, published under the name Laura Lee Hope; four volumes in the Linda Craig series, published under the name Ann Sheldon; and seven volumes in the Honey Bunch series, published under the name Helen Louise Thorndyke.

Harriet Stratemeyer Adams was born December 3, 1892, in Newark, New Jersey. She was the daughter of Edward and Magdalene Van Camp Stratemeyer.

In 1914 she graduated from Wellesley College with a major in English; religion, music, science, and archeology are among the other interests reflected in her books. In 1915 she married Russell Vroom Adams, and they were the parents of two daughters. Harriet Adams died on March 27, 1982, in Pottersville, New Jersey.

When her father died in 1930, Adams became senior partner of the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate, publisher of numerous series for young readers including the Rover Boys, the Hardy Boys, Tom Swift, Honey Bunch, and the Dana Girls. Although the idea of Nancy Drew originated with Edward Stratemeyer, Adams regarded Nancy almost as one of her children, writing or rewriting all of the seventy-one books published during her lifetime. Adams remained an active writer throughout her life, and her worldwide travel provided the locales for many of the Nancy Drew books.

These books are perennially popular.

By 1975 an estimated sixty million Nancy Drew books had been sold.

During the run of the "Hardy Boys/ Nancy Drew Mysteries" television series in the 1970s, combined sales for the two book series were sixteen million copies annually.

To date, the Nancy Drew series numbers about ninety volumes, and has served as the basis for such other works as the Nancy Drew Cookbook: Clues to Good Cooking (1973), The Nancy Drew Sleuth Book, and Nancy Drew Ghost Stories (1983). After Adams's death, the series was continued by Nancy Axelrad, with the assistance of Wendy Barish and Diane Arico. The Nancy Drew Files, a new series written by freelance writers using the Carolyn Keene name, numbers about forty books to date.

Setting

The Nancy Drew books are set in the town of River Heights, which in the 1930 edition of *The Secret of the Old Clock* was described as being in the Midwest. In subsequent books, however, River Heights seems to be located in the East, only a few hours' drive from New York City.

The lack of change in River Heights gives the books an essentially timeless quality. Nancy encounters modern problems such as the escape of refugees from Warsaw Pact countries, but enemy spies seem no more sinister than the local thieves of earlier books. In fact, Adams revised the entire series in 1959, removing language that might make the books dated or offensive.

Social Sensitivity

Nancy Drew mysteries consistently emphasize traditional American values, but the early books in the series reflect the social insensitivity of the time when they were written. There is much talk about manners and breeding, and a maid is described as "willing but somewhat stupid." Likewise, in *The Secret of the Old Clock*, racial stereotyping is seen in the treatment of Jeff Tucker, the black caretaker at the Tophams' cabin, who is portrayed as a somewhat comic figure easily fooled by the robber gang. Likewise, *The Mystery of the Brass Bound Trunk* contains some examples of American chauvinism: the maid in Buenos Aires is described as "simple-minded"; Nancy and her friends exchange their money for "native coins"; and Mrs. Purdy, an Argentine, is an appropriate chaperon because she "speaks her native tongue so beautifully." Offensive references of this kind were eliminated, however, in the 1959 revision of the series.



Literary Qualities

The Nancy Drew series' greatest strength is its use of varied and exotic settings. Because of the limited possibilities for unusual criminal activity in a town the size of River Heights, Nancy ends up on cases in places like New York, Brazil, Austria, and Greece. Even when the locale is a small town in the United States, the characters are likely to be involved in scientific experimentation or in some unusual occupation such as china-making. In each case the narrative provides enough background information to make the setting or the occupation interesting.

Although conventional, the plots are exciting and filled with fast-paced action. In the opening pages of the book, the problem is described, and Nancy's client is introduced. Tension builds as Nancy follows the successive clues to discover the identity of the criminals or the location of a missing item. At the book's conclusion the mystery is solved, and the criminals apprehended.

Throughout, the reader remains totally involved in the action.

The weakest point in a Nancy Drew book is the excessive use of coincidence.

Nancy always manages to be in the right place or to meet the right people to discover the information needed to solve the mystery.

Generally, the characters are not fully individualized. Sometimes Nancy's client or even one of the criminals is given one distinctive personality trait; but usually the client will be confused or fearful, and the criminal will be surly or devious. Nancy herself is a multifaceted character, but from the beginning she possesses so many talents and so much knowledge that change in her attitudes is virtually impossible. Because she is so clever and resourceful, some critics consider her less than believable. If Nancy Drew and her adventures are considered as fantasy, however, she still may be representative of the American teen-ager's idealized selfimage.



Themes and Characters

'As in most detective stories, the central theme of the Nancy Drew mysteries is the struggle between good and evil, honesty and criminality, justice and injustice. In addition, these books consistently emphasize humility, selfreliance, the necessity of following one's conscience, respect for legitimate authority, and consideration for those less fortunate. Snobbish, stingy, cowardly, or dishonest behavior is treated as intolerable.

Throughout the series, the main character is Nancy Drew, who in the first book (1930) is described as sixteen years old, although in 1953 her age changed to eighteen. Nancy is extremely attractive, with "intelligent blue eyes," golden blond (later reddish blond and finally titian) hair, a "slender" figure, clear complexion, and a pretty face.

Typically she considers others before herself, and her chief concern is the welfare of the innocent. From the earliest book she possesses intuition, initiative, independence, courage, persistence, tact, and a real delight in mysteries and their solution. In the very early books Nancy seems slightly tomboyish, but she is always somewhat interested in clothes, and gradually she comes to represent a balance between her ladylike friend Bess and the tomboyish George.

In all the mysteries Nancy relies to some extent upon the advice and assistance of her father, Carson Drew, who is described as a tall, handsome, muscular, and active-looking man of middle age with alert blue eyes like those of his daughter. A widower since Nancy was three years old, Mr. Drew is a "well-todo" and "well-known lawyer who often handled criminal cases," and his varied professional contacts frequently provide the information and support Nancy needs to resolve her cases.

Another member of the Drew household is Mrs. Hannah Gruen, who has been the Drews' housekeeper since the death of Nancy's mother and is considered one of the family. In the earliest books Hannah seems relatively unimportant, but eventually this kindly, efficient, plump, and motherly woman not only worries about Nancy and cautions her to be careful, but even helps her solve some of her cases.

Assisting Nancy with most of her cases are her closest friends, Bess Marvin and George Fayne. The conventional, ladylike member of the trio, Bess is described as "blond-haired, blue-eyed, and pretty though slightly overweight." Bess loves food and frequently interrupts Nancy's pursuit of clues to remind her that it is mealtime. Of the three friends, "mildmannered" Bess is the most likely to be frightened in dangerous situations, but she manages to overcome her fear in order to help her friends.

George, Bess's cousin, is her opposite in appearance and personality. George is described as a slender, athletic-looking girl with short dark-brown hair. In contrast to Bess's frilly dresses, George wears a tailored white blouse and brown gabardine skirt with matching jacket.



Outspoken and impulsive, George sometimes rushes into dangerous situations without the caution and forethought displayed by Nancy; nevertheless, George possesses the strength and cleverness to be a valuable ally.

Almost as helpful as Bess and George is Ned Nickerson, Nancy's friend and frequent date. The star quarterback at Emerson College, Ned is described as tall with brown hair and eyes. Although he is obviously very fond of Nancy, Ned rarely shows any jealousy; in fact, he accepts a role in the background, although in one of the later books he does suggest that he hopes to marry Nancy after graduation. He is always willing to help Nancy resolve her cases, but initially his role seems to be to run errands and provide the physical strength sometimes needed. In the later books Ned seems to enjoy "sleuthing," and he demonstrates increased perceptiveness and resourcefulness.

Adaptations

In the 1930s, William Clemens directed four movies, starring Bonita Granville, that were loosely based on the Nancy Drew series: *Nancy Drew, Detective* (1938), *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* (1939), *Nancy Drew, Reporter* (1939), and *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* (1939). None of these are particularly notable productions. From 1977 to 1978, the Nancy Drew character appeared in the "Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries" series that aired on ABC-TV. At first, Pamela Sue Martin played Nancy Drew; in 1978 Janet Louise Johnson took over the role.



Topics for Discussion

1. Solving Nancy Drew's cases requires finding and interpreting clues, and frequently Nancy is led to those clues by a combination of intuition and good luck.

In each instance, how important is Nancy's skill in deduction? How important is coincidence?

2. In each of her cases Nancy works with adults, as well as people of her own age. What types of relationships does she develop with adults such as her father, her clients, the police chief, and the housekeeper? What similarities and differences can be seen in these relationships?

3. Many readers wish they could be like Nancy Drew or at least have a friend like her. Which of Nancy's personal characteristics would make her most valuable as a friend? Which characteristics would the reader most envy or want to imitate?

4. Nancy seems to possess whatever talent is required to solve the mystery at hand: among other talents, she is a skillful musician, an expert horsewoman, a gifted artist, and an excellent driver. Some critics suggest that these talents make her seem more like every young girl's fantasy and less like an actual person. Is Nancy Drew a believable character, or is she too good to be true?

5. Some women who read Nancy Drew stories when they were younger insist that Nancy Drew was an early example of the increasing independence of women and young people. In dealing with the various male characters in the books, how dependent or independent does Nancy seem? How do the personalities of the individual men affect their relationships with Nancy? Is Nancy a thoroughly modern teen-ager?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Nancy Drew mysteries were originally written over a period of more than fifty years. During that time there were changes in public attitudes toward violence. Are these changes reflected in the kinds of cases Nancy solves and the amount of violence she encounters?
2. How do Nancy's behavior and attitudes change over the course of the series? Do these changes indicate any important changes in Nancy's character or personality?
3. Bess and George are important assistants in most of Nancy's cases. What does each girl add to the stories? Does the fact that they are described as cousins suggest that there are some subtle similarities between the two? In what ways is Nancy like each of her friends? In what ways is she different?
4. Ned Nickerson also appears in most of the Nancy Drew mysteries. Are his personality and attitudes different in different books? What emotions does Nancy seem to feel toward him? Are these emotions different in different books?
5. Many of Nancy's adventures take place in settings that are unfamiliar to the average reader. Research some of these locales and evaluate the novels' descriptions.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996