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Today's Paper

TODAY'S PAPER

ENTERTAINMENT

Nancy Drew's new assignment

The heroine detective is back in a new book series, 74 years after her debut

By REBECCA CALDWELL

Wednesday, February 11, 2004 - Page R1

It's the Case of the Mysteriously Enduring Appeal of Girl Detectives.

Seventy-four years after she collared her first criminal, 18-year-old amateur sleuth Nancy Drew and her friends Bess and George, and boyfriend Ned Nickerson, are back on the trail in the small yet amazingly crime-filled town of River Heights in a whole new series of books, coming out in March from a Simon & Schuster imprint. Meanwhile, Random House is in the middle of re-releasing the first 12 novels featuring Trixie Belden, the sassier if perhaps less classier and less well-known incarnation of Nancy Drew that first appeared in 1948, featuring 13-year-old tomboy Trixie and her poor-little-rich-girl pal Honey Wheeler as they solve crimes in between riding horses and struggling with math homework in Sleepyside, N.Y.

The secret of Nancy's, and Trixie's, original success isn't too hard to piece together: They were the only significant girl gumshoes in town. After the First World War, writers such as Erle Stanley Gardner and Dashiell Hammett were pushing American detective fiction aimed at adults to the peak of its golden age, but the youth market was dominated by Horatio Alger adventure knockoffs. Nancy Drew was the invention of publisher Edward Stratemeyer, whose writing mill, The Stratemeyer Syndicate, had already captured young minds with Tom Swift, The Hardy Boys and The Bobbsey Twins serials.

When the first Nancy Drew book, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, appeared in 1930, there was nothing else like it on the market. Its impact on popular culture was immediate.

"The girls were ripe for a change in literature," said Mildred Wirt Benson in an interview with Salon in 1999. Benson, who died in 2002 at the age of 96, made her living as a newspaper columnist, but she also wrote a reported 25 of the first 30 books. All of the Nancy Drew books are published under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene.

"They were way overdue for a good, entertaining story that broke away from the old style of writing. I think Nancy was the character the girls were waiting for. They were just waiting for someone to verbalize it," Benson said.

Nancy Drew and other Stratemeyer products often outraged educators who considered the

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writing formulaic and brimming with mind-numbing stereotypes and repetition. In 1964, one Waterloo, Ont., librarian made the front page of The Globe and Mail when she remarked, "They are so poorly written it is a shame to warp a child's appreciation of reading with them." But with her spirit, smarts and determination, and of course, her ability to solve serious crimes from theft to kidnapping, Nancy is today often considered a feminist iconoclast (even if her visual image as pencil-skirt-wearing fifties housewife-in-training also persists, thanks to the striking book covers by Rudi Nappi). After all, they instructed a generation of women with gutsy, can-do know-how, captured in Jennifer Worick's tongue-in-cheek *Nancy Drew's Guide to Life*, which quotes useful pieces of survival information directly from the books, such as: "Moxie and a good sense of balance are essential when crawling on a roof." It may sound facetious, but a possibly apocryphal story holds that an 11-year-old kidnap victim in Minnesota managed to escape from the trunk of a car using knowledge gleaned from reading Nancy Drew books.

Demand for the titian-haired adventuress was so great, Nancy Drew would go on to solve more than 350 mysteries, star in four movies, two television series, and spin off into a number of additional book series.

There are more than 200 million Nancy Drew books appearing in 17 different languages.



The original stories are still in print -- albeit slightly revised to remove some of the politically incorrect overtones -- and Publishers Weekly recently reported that *The Secret of the Old Clock* sold 150,000 copies in 2002. Today, kids can even play Nancy Drew computer games while wearing togs from the Nancy Drew clothing line, which includes T-shirts, yoga pants and handbags (perfect accessories to crime reading).

"One of the reasons she's still culturally significant is that, however the stories change, most of them managed to retain the sense of adventure and autonomy that Nancy has," says Prof. Carolyn Dyer, the co-editor of *Rediscovering Nancy Drew*.

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Dyer teaches at the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Iowa where she led a Nancy Drew conference in 1993 to honour one of their most famous alumni: Mildred Wirt Benson, who earned a master's degree in journalism from the school in 1927 -- the first person, male or female, to do so.

"Today they're typically read by 8- to 10-year-olds who can sense the pleasure of driving your own car and making your own decisions and influencing adults," Dyer said. "Even now it's kind of an unusual experience for girls -- to have something where a girl is doing something, or is an agent, as the feminist scholars might say."

Dyer points out that scholars are divided on whether or not Nancy is a progressive heroine.

Some object to her being hopelessly white and middle-class, while others search for the real meaning between her relationship with pal Georgia, who sported a boyish haircut and preferred to be called George.

Interestingly, Benson, herself a female pioneer, never intended Nancy to become an early advocate of girl power, even though she recalled receiving countless letters from her fans thanking her for creating an inspiring role model.

"I don't align her with the feminist movement at all. That was never in my mind. She was an individual, from start to finish. She was never a person to promote any kind of movement. She was just a person who believed in her own freedom," Benson has said.

Feminist or not, Nancy's getting a lot more freedom in the sense that she gets to tell her own story: The new mysteries are told in first person, a refreshing change from the old series' third person.

The first book, *Without a Trace*, has her on the trail of a missing Fabergé egg. Later books have a sporty Nancy hunting for missing funds from a charity bike race; trying to find a young woman who has been kidnapped to influence a local election; and thwarting a smuggling ring she discovers while taking flying lessons.

Her tools of the trade have been updated to reflect the 21st century. Nancy's cellphone keeps her in constant communication with her friends, and she's as likely to surf the Internet as well as trail someone physically in the pursuit of information.

And tellingly, her titian hair is now called strawberry blond -- the better to register with an

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audience more familiar with wild punkish hair colours than the subtle shades of art history.

Dyer, who says she read the books for about a year in her own childhood, is a little surprised that there's a new Nancy Drew, pointing that both of the spinoff series -- one featuring an eight-year-old Nancy solving her first crimes and the other a college-student Nancy coping with contemporary issues such as abortion and sexual harassment -- didn't seem to achieve the same impact as the original books did.

"There are so many opportunities for kids now, and their time is tied up in lessons and teams, that they don't seem to have time they need to fill up or the leisure to read in that way unless that's their passion," she says.

"There are so many other influences that fulfill them. My students say they've read Nancy Drew, but they say they were nowhere nearly as influenced by her as musicians or other celebrities."

Conquering today's readers may prove to be Nancy's toughest assignment ever.

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