

Episode Eighteen: Nancy Drew #1 – The Secret of the Old Clock by Carolyn Keene

Brandon

Welcome to My Dog Ate My Book Report, a podcast where two weirdo thirtysomethings take turns introducing each other to a formative book from childhood the other has never read. I'm Brandon (he/him).

Wren

I'm Wren and I'm clearly very prepared for this, based on the long pause. Hi.

Brandon

Hi!

Wren

(They/he), I guess. I don't know. Pronouns are hard.

Brandon

And today we're doing...I like to think of it as kind of a sequel to one of our earlier episodes, because we're talking about the first Nancy Drew book, a series I picked up after reading a bunch of Hardy Boys books, and thinking the Hardys were kind of squares.

Wren

I had some expectations going into this, I will admit, and um...I have thoughts.

Brandon

Good! Well, good news: you're on a podcast!

Brandon

So we read the first Nancy Drew mystery, The Secret of the Old Clock by Carolyn Keene. Or is it?

Wren

You're not getting me with that, "Or is it?" Because I already know! It's the...hold on, hold on, hold on, it's the...we might be about to go into another one of the patent-pending Incredibly Accurate Wren Summaries. So the Hardy Boys, from my recollection, were written by a bunch of ghost writers. Not actually the name of the person on the cover, because it was part of a it's...called the Stretton Meyer syndicate.

Brandon

Close.

Wren

Which makes it sound like a crime boss organization. So Carolyn Keene, again, does not actually exist. That's just the the name for a bunch of different ghostwriters?

Brandon

Yep. Carolyn Keene is not now, nor has she ever been, a real person. Although if you, listener, are a person named Carolyn Keene, please let us know.

Wren

So what was the rationale behind naming the fake author? Were they just like, "Carolyn Keene sounds like the most generic-y Average Woman name?"

Brandon

I don't know. It's not you know, the name of the first author to write like some some long running book series that do you heavily use ghostwriters are credited to whoever started this series, who was a real person, right? So I don't know. I don't know why Carolyn Keene.

Wren

All right, well, we're getting ahead of ourselves. What's this book about?

Brandon

We are introduced to girl sleuth Nancy Drew, a - in this version - 18-year-old girl, daughter of a respected lawyer, Carson Drew, as she drives around on a perfectly normal day minding her own business and sees a moving van nearly kill a child. She pulls over to help and make sure everybody's okay and discovers that the family to whom the child belongs are in desperate straits financially because an inheritance they were expecting to receive from a deceased relative has not turned up. Indeed, there's some suspicion that the inheritance has been stolen, sort of, by a pompous family who took in this old guy, Josiah Crowley, in his last year or so of life and probably, as far as people say, just kind of like stuck him in a corner, and then just told everybody when he died, that he had left his entire fortune to them, because of all they did for him at the tail end of his life. Nancy thinks this sounds fishy, and gradually accumulates even more people who knew Josiah Crowley and who had a very good relationship with him and were told by him that he was going to leave them something in his will. And Nancy begins to look. She hears that Josiah Crowley, near the end of his life, said something about a clock having a secret, and so she goes looking for a clock. she goes to the top of the lake cottage, where she had learned that they had taken a mantel clock that belonged to Josiah and left it there. But when she gets there to investigate and try to like, I don't know, break in or something. It wasn't super clear what her plan was, I don't think...

Wren

it seemed like she was hoping to show up and...and be given a tour.

Brandon

Because it was like a lake cottage that was like for summer, and it wasn't summer, but there's a caretaker when the family's not there.

Wren

Yeah. That sort of action would seem really freaking weird to me, like going to somebody's house that they're not at and expecting to get a tour, but I've ever read any Jane Austen.

Brandon

Yeah, and the Tophams are just kind of arrogant. Seems just be really eager to show everybody how rich they were.

Wren

Yeah, well, they were bragging about it. They were like, well, if you really liked this old stuff, you should go to our really extra fancy lake house and go view our stuff there too. Woo-hoo-hoo!

Brandon

When Nancy arrives, she finds that the cabin is being ransacked by thieves, and she recognizes the van as the one that almost killed the child at the beginning of the book. And in a harrowing sequence of sneaking around and hiding and being found and being trapped and escaping and sneaking around and hiding some more, she not only is able to help bring those thieves to justice, but find Josiah Crowley's old clock, inside of which is indeed a new will that bequeaths sums of money to all of these down-on-their-luck folk, and very, very little to the Tophams who are awful.

Wren

The clock only had a diary in it.

Brandon

Oh, wait, you're right.

Wren

With a key to a safe deposit box.

Brandon

Diary with a key to a safe deposit box that had the will in it, you're right. I was skipping some steps.

Wren

So you've got some content warnings for us?

Brandon

As with the Hardy Boys, the rich aren't being eaten. They are present but not being eaten.

Wren

Although some of them are being punished.

Brandon

Yeah, some of them do meet a fate of sorts. Comeuppance, you might say. There is a bit of time where Nancy is like trapped in a closet where the thieves have left her basically to starve or whatever, so if you find that kind of thing uncomfortable, there's some of that. And if you read editions of a certain vintage, there's some pretty heavy racist stuff. I did not, and I doubt you did unless you went out of your way to find an older copy.

Wren

No, but I was definitely really curious if this was like the Hardy Boys edited down.

Brandon

Yep, sure was. And so we can talk about some of those changes. We both read, I presume, the most current edition.

Wren

Yeah, I got this cute little yellow hardcover. [Wren taps on the cover.] Ooh, some Nancy Drew ASMR. Which looks old, but it's not old enough to have been the pre-edit.

Brandon

That yellow cover was actually introduced, I think, with the revision, I believe. With or very soon after. The additions prior to that didn't have that yellow cover, didn't have that illustration.

Wren

The inside cover says 1987, 1959, and 1930.

Brandon

Yep, that checks out. So yeah, that's the story. I don't think that I actually read this one. We're cheating a little bit on this episode, because normally our criteria is that one of us has to have read the book and the other doesn't. But the trouble I encounter is that, while I owned a bunch of Hardy Boys books and specifically remember acquiring them in numerical order and reading them in numerical order, Nancy Drew I never owned any of. I found that my elementary school library had a bunch of Nancy Drew and a bunch of Hardy Boys, and so I started at some point in like third or fourth grade, probably, to check out Nancy Drew books, which I ended up liking better than the Hardy Boys books. But I didn't check them out with any real rhyme or reason as far as numbers, and they were an older edition that did not have numbers at least prominently displayed. So I just kind of read ones whose title sounded compelling to me and I have no recollection of which ones they were.

Wren

That makes sense.

Brandon

So I'm almost certain that I never read this one, but I looked at it whole list of them to see like if any of them really, really rung a bell, and the titles are pretty formulaic, so a lot of them I was like, "That does sound kinda like a thing I might have read, but so do these other twenty." So we just started at the beginning.

Wren

What do you think drew younger you to Nancy Drew versus the Hardy Boys?

Brandon

I liked Nancy better than the Hardys.

Wren

That seems pretty valid. I have thoughts.

Brandon

Yeah. So even when I was a kid, the thing about the Hardy Boys that I didn't love when I was reading them the first time, and that I found was still a problem when we revisited the series earlier in the podcast, was that even after reading a bunch of the books, I could not remember anything about which one was Frank and which one was Joe, and anything about their characteristics. You know, they're just so interchangeable. And when you read up the first book, and they're kind of interchangeable, and you're like, I'm not really sure which is which still, but whatever. That's one thing. But when you're like, 10 books deep or whatever, and you're like, "I still can't tell you anything specific about Frank versus Joe." Besides like, which one is older.

Wren

Hey, I can't even tell you that.

Brandon

I think it's Frank. I might not put money on that, but I think it's Frank. Yeah. So Nancy, I just found was a much better protagonist. That was basically it as far as that was concerned. I don't remember why I picked one up in the first place at the library, because like I said, I think I think they also had just a ton of Hardy Boys, so I easily could have checked out Hardy Boys books that I didn't have. Because there were dozens. These books were on a couple long bookshelves in my school library just chock full of Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys. But for whatever reason, I decided to try Nancy Drew and I ended up liking her better. And so I just kept reading Nancy Drew. I think I didn't read any more Hardy Boys, after I discovered Nancy Drew.

Wren

So having the perspective of only ever reading the first Hardy Boys, and now the first Nancy Drew, just comparing and contrasting them based on their first books: I agree with you. Nancy just seems like a nicer person. Her adventure was about helping people. And she very much was insistent about not being rewarded for her actions, where the Hardy Boys were just, you know, super going after things for the reward specifically.

Brandon

And bonus objective helping their friend's dad, but like the reward was the most important thing.

Wren

Yeah. I also found that Nancy was more proactive and did more of her own adventure than the Hardy Boys did. The Hardy Boys relied on their father to do a lot of legwork. And Nancy...Nancy also has a nepotism situation. Her father is not a famous detective, but he is a famous lawyer, so she did rely on him for legal things. But not to go do all the legwork for her, which which was refreshing.

Brandon

Yeah, she checked in with him periodically to like ask questions, or you know, to ask, like, if there is another will, would it be legal, right. Like could it challenge the one that the Tophams have put forth that says that everything is left to them. And I kind of got the vibe also...Fenton Hardy did not look down on Frank and Joe, but I got the vibe that Carson Drew respected Nancy in a way that wasn't exactly true of Fenton Hardy and the Hardy Boys.

Wren

Well, their relationships were very different. Fenton Hardy, just like, you know, pat his boys on the head and go off and go do a bunch of stuff without like, explaining what he was doing. And then he would come back and be like, "oh, yeah, and this guy died; here's some information." Nancy Drew was more actively like discussing the case and stuff with her father, so there was actually more interactions between them in a, you know, meaningful way.

Brandon

She never like went to get her dad before she went on a big effort to do a thing.

Wren

But she also neglected to tell her father and other people where she was going on some of these situations, which ended up putting her in like way more dangerous situations than the Hardy Boys ever really got into in their book. You know, I was just...I was not expecting that. I was expecting - especially you know, after like a third of the book - and I kind of had this whole situation pegged as like, oh, okay, the girl detective is going to be like a nurturing sort of like soft case. A lot of reading and that sort of thing because she's the girl one and so it's got to be gentle. And she's also got to be, you know, really humble and not think too highly of her own skills and not do anything risky. Except that was absolutely not what happened. She was incredibly risky, went off and did really dangerous, like, snooping things that put her in a lot of danger. And also, she was tailing the bad guys that were driving off with the clock she needed, and instead of waiting for the police and doing things really by the book, like the way the Hardy Boys might...when the thieves park to go eat food, she broke into their truck and stole the clock back out. Which is the sort of thing I feel like you want your hero to do. But often in media, because they're so afraid of showing people doing things that are not super legal (for a good cause, though), they don't have that happen. But in this one it was just like, fuck it, I'm gonna break into this truck and make off with the clock. It's fine.

Brandon

Once the police do come - because she had previously reported the break-in and the theft of all of the stuff from the cabin to the police, but they couldn't really do much about it right because they didn't know where they've gone - when she does link that up with the police and the police are taking the guys in and everything, she is like, "I'm not going to tell her that I have the clock in my car."

Wren

So I was ultimately just way more on board with the, "Yeah, Nancy Drew is just way better than the Hardy Boys." Because she's ballsier, smarter, more independent, you know, is still...is still a rich kid. Because, you know, part of our critique in episode four of the Hardy Boys is that they were just like rich

kids. Just nepotism babies. They had every resource they could possibly want at their disposal. And Nancy also has just like a ton of resources at her disposal. She's got her own car, which you know, for the time period that this was in, meant you were rich. A lot of the characters that she's trying to help in this story are adults without their own cars. So there's that.

Brandon

She doesn't have her own gymnasium, at least.

Brandon

The Hardys seem to have this big campus of like...detectiving. And it's a little less clear how nice the Drew household is. It's clearly nice. They've got a housekeeper. Carson Drew is a successful lawyer, so we can assume that he's making good money. But we're not given a glimpse of Nancy having a whole subcomplex to herself or something. But she does have a car and that's good. No motorcycles, although this one did also start with a traffic accident.

Wren

That is true.

Wren

So yeah, I found her way more engaging than the Hardys. I also did make a note. I feel like, I don't know, maybe they were trying to backpedal just a smidge about Nancy's slightly legally gray circumstances about breaking into certain situations, but there was a sentence in there: "Nancy drove as rapidly as the law permitted." Like, let's just slide that in there so that we know that Nancy is still technically following all of the law here. She's sort of like, you know, almost breaking the law a few times. Let's just make sure parents don't get mad at us and put it in that she's totally not speeding here.

Brandon

I did think the first half started to drag because it felt a bit repetitive, because the first half of the book is basically Nancy running into like three different sets of people who all had some sort of relationship with Josiah Crowley and were down on their luck and had expected explicitly to get left something in the will, or had some relationship with Josiah that made Nancy feel that he probably would have left them something, because Josiah Crowley...we never meet him because he's dead months before the story begins, but he seemed like a pretty good dude. Like, he seemed like a rich dude who would help out his less fortunate cousins and family members and stuff and people who did him right, he would help them out. And this book was published in 1930, so like the cusp of the Depression. But the latter half was actually pretty harrowing, cat and mouse and getting locked in the closet for a bit and everything. That was actually pretty solid.

Wren

I agree with you that her meeting a ton of people that all needed help, just in a row, was a little tedious. However, in an anthropological sort of way, I found the way that she was going about that very interesting. Just because it was a huge throwback to a time where she doesn't know where somebody lives, so she's just gonna drive down the road she's pretty sure they live on and see if she can find them. There's no internet. She's all like, well, "I know they live over there, so I'm just gonna drive

around and look at mailboxes and see if their name is on any of these mailboxes, and I'll find their house." And I just found that so fascinating. So I was like, wow, yeah, there's just no way of finding people. That's wild.

Brandon

And like when later on when she was trying to figure out where the thieves have gone, she just drives around, keeping an eye out for places that one could stash a van. It's just some good solid legwork. You know, she does take some time to be devious in there a little bit, which I thought was also good. She's better at that than the Hardys were. Because like the Hardys, when they wanted to divert Oscar Smuff, were like, "we should set fire to something." Which worked, but as a plan, not very elegant. Just "let's do some arson."

Wren

I will say, you bringing that up reminds me that there is no Oscar Smuff equivalent. There's no sort of like foil. I guess there's the two bratty rich girls, but they were not Oscar Smuff level.

Brandon

Yeah, no, they were just they were just there.

Wren

Nancy Drew, I feel like, needs an Oscar Smuff. Honestly, maybe Nancy Drew's Oscar Smuff might just be like one of the Hardy Boys.

Brandon

They do eventually crossover, but it's many years after this. The book has...I was gonna say fewer characters, but that's not strictly true. She meets a lot more people who have some stake in the case, because by the end, there's like six or seven people who are the rightful beneficiaries of something from Josiah, plus the four Tophams who aren't, plus the three thieves, et cetera. She does have less of a, like, relevant cast around her. She doesn't have a Chet. She will, but she doesn't yet. She's just constantly talking to herself, which I found kind of charming. And for a while I was like, this is probably just her thinking things. And it's formatted like it's dialogue, because sometimes that's what books do. You know, that's one of those things, that it seems like nobody agrees what you should do with type. If it's a thought some people are like, well, it's like dialogue, so it's in quotations. And it's just like, "There might be a clue!" Nancy thought, and that's a notice of thought. And some people are like, you italicize it, but there's no quotations. And some people are like, you don't do anything to it. It's not talk. So it's not quotations. So for a while, I thought she was just thinking to herself, but then there were times when the verb used was like murmured or gasped or shouted. Nancy just sometimes find something when she is totally alone goes, "Yes! I wonder if the will could be in there?"

Wren

You're right. I just opened it up to a random page and I, more critically examined line: "A vague suspicion that had been forming in the back of Nancy's mind now came into startling focus. 'Those men may not be movers!' she burst out." So she's just yelling to herself.

Brandon

I highlighted that also.

Wren

You are so right. I didn't notice that.

Brandon

Yeah, some verbs are like you can kind of go either way, like mused is used a lot. I think you can go either way with the word mused. But burst out is unambiguous. Now that I'm looking at my notes, because that happened when she was checking around the top and cabin after the thieves had left. She starts to think about reporting to the police. Then I've highlighted the sentence: "She looked about for a phone, but there was none." And that just kind of made me sit back and think about how the world has changed. In the less than a century since this adventure transpired. Kids reading this book now it'd be like, "What? What? What? Why didn't she just...does she not have a signal? Did her phone fall on the lake when that boat stopped working?"

Wren

Speaking of the boat, there was this section, sort of middle ish, where Nancy really wanted to go investigate the lake house of the rich jerks. But her friends just kept making her do activities. And so she got, like, sidetracked for two days, going off and having fun with her friends because they just wouldn't let her be alone to go do her investigation. Gosh, she feels really relatable right now. She's just like, "I want to go off and investigate. And these people are all making me be social."

Brandon

"I have to play badminton now, but all I can think about is that will!" she burst out on the court.

Wren

I don't have as strong a sense as I had after the Hardy Boys that...I just have all these like conflicting thoughts of, what is this book trying to say about rich people? But I feel like there's crappy rich people in both books. But there's also really like good, scrappy, I don't know, virtuous, middle class to rich people. I can't tell if the people writing this are making some sort of like value judgment about generational wealth versus ,like, people who pull themselves up by their bootstraps or something. Except, I don't know, the Hardy Boys are all nepotism brats, so...

Brandon

I had a similar note where, between this book and the first Hardy Boys book, which both deal with a sum left behind by a deceased rich person, and who gets that sum, it definitely seems like the messaging in general is that inherited wealth is non-virtuous.

Wren

Unless you've done something. All of this inherited wealth in this story was, at least with the rightful will, given to people who earned it by being really nice to this guy, basically.

Brandon

I did crunch some numbers. The amounts that they're left were not small amounts, but they weren't you're-rich-now amounts.

Wren

Each person got like \$10,000.

Brandon

Mm-hm. So they concluded that the total inheritance after taxes was \$100,000. Each of the various households that Nancy had met, all of which were at least two people, got \$10,000.

Wren

Well, no, like the sisters got \$10,000 apiece. They got \$20,000 total.

Wren

Yeah, like one of them was this lady who was all injured and she couldn't feed herself. The other ones were these sisters who owned a farm and one of them really wanted to go be a famous opera singer, but she couldn't afford classes with the Maestro and that sort of thing. There was a lot of stuff in there about who was worth getting this money. So my note that I wrote down was, and this was at the very beginning, I kind of was a slightly eye rolling until I realized I actually did like Nancy, but I wrote: "Yet another rich kid! I'm starting to blame these books for the whole meritorious rich kid fallacy dot dot dot..." I was a little judgy at the very beginning.

Brandon

And the other ones got \$10,000...so \$100,000 in 1930, the total inheritance, would be around \$2 million today. So it's not a small amount. \$10,000, therefore, is like \$200,000 equivalent. Which is not bad, although some of them have like serious medical issues they haven't been able to afford and stuff. So even then, there's still this element where like, a lot of that money is going to go immediately to bettering their lives in ways that have been needed for a while.

Brandon

That's not unfair. If you look into any like criticism about Nancy Drew - and the Hardy Boys, this is true of the Hardy Boys as well - critique of both series does often focus on the fact that they are very privileged individuals who are often kind of swooping in to help people who are non-privileged, whether it's because of their economic class, or their race, or whatever. And mostly the books don't like critically evaluate those situations. The book does not have any meditation on how Nancy's status gives her a leg up doing things to help these people who are not from the kind of economic background that she is, or who are incapable of doing the things that a capitalist society requires of them to be able to afford basic necessities because capitalism is awful. It's a thing that is worth keeping in mind whenever you're reading one of these books, because it's a core element of the entire setup that isn't generally reflected upon by the books themselves. They seem to be okay with the notion of people with wealth if they are good people contributing things. The Tophams, conversely, who are trying to hijack the entire inheritance...we're not entirely sure how they treated Josiah, but it probably wasn't great. They probably took advantage of his failing health, and possibly failing faculties, to keep him from being able to manage his estate. We find out that Richard Topham, the father, he's just gotten trashed in the stock

market. The little that we see of him, he's just characterized as being like just awful at business. We could unpack how arbitrary it is to gauge somebody by how good they are at the stock market, but fundamentally, they are trying to like get this inheritance because they are so far in debt that they need it to dig out of this hole. Meanwhile, the rest of the family, Mrs. Topham and the two sisters, are just these absolute pompous jerks to everybody and think they're better than everybody. And at the end of the book, one of the most rewarding things I found was that we learned that the sisters had to go get jobs. They were too good for jobs. And now they have to because they only got left \$5,000 - well, their dad only got left \$5,000 in the will, and that wasn't anywhere near enough to pay off all the debt.

Wren

Which is still, based on the math you gave us earlier...he's still got \$100,000.

Brandon

Yeah, you know, they're this family who had this inherited wealth. They owned a really nice house in River Heights, and also a summer cabin on the lake that they could afford to own but not use for large portions of the year. And none of them worked, and they just went around town looking down on everybody. They couldn't maintain that lifestyle with \$5,000. They probably couldn't even pay off all of Richard's debts, I think. But they're clearly characterized as people who might legally have some legal right to wealth, but don't morally have a right to wealth, if that makes sense. There's definitely something extremely capitalistic about the entire sort of moral compass going on in these books, to be sure, but there's that at least, if you're going to be wealthy, at least go solve mysteries for people. So do you want to talk some about the background of this book?

Wren

Yes, I want to I want to learn all of the weird crap you've probably uncovered.

Brandon

Well, I will briefly recount the Stratemeyer Syndicate situation, but if you want a fuller discussion of that, I suggest you go back and check out episode number four, where we read the first Hardy Boys book and talked about book packaging and the Stratemeyer Syndicate in greater detail. Edward Stratemeyer was a guy who started to write adventure novels aimed at young adults at a time when the notion that there was a genre of story written for kids, or for young adults for juveniles, that just wasn't a concept at the time. There were children's books, and then there were just books, and at some point people started to read books instead of children's books and that was that. So he saw a opening in the market and started to do these things and it worked out pretty well. And so he set up the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which was a company that was a book packaging company, which means that it would basically farm out the making of a book to ghostwriter and artist, and then after having made the book in its entirety, they would try to sell it to a publisher. And that is what happened with the Hardy Boys that were very successful, with Stratemeyer coming up with the idea and the outlines for the early stories, but he did not write any of those himself. He did write books himself, but by this point, he was creatively in charge in a way but was not writing the books anymore. The Hardy Boys were immediately pretty successful when they started to get published in 1927, and so it did not take very long for Stratemeyer to immediately be like, well, what if we did one for girls? And so immediately began conceiving of and

shopping around the female counterpart for the Hardy Boys - a counterpart who went through various names like Stella Strong, and Diana Drew and Diana Dare and Nan Nelson...

Wren

Nan? Ugh.

Wren

Oh like...like housewife-y?

Brandon

...and Helen Hale and Nan Drew is what publisher Grosset Dunlap kind of liked, but were like, we think she should just go by Nancy, which I assume was what Nan was short for anyway. They were like, "Can we just call her Nancy instead?" And so that's why we have Nancy Drew. As we touched on earlier, though, Carolyn Keene is not a real person. So that is not who wrote the books either. Many, many ghostwriters have written Nancy Drew books over the years, but this one, as well as the majority of the first thirty, was written by author, journalist and adventurer Mildred Wirt Benson. She had done some ghostwriting for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. She, in Stratemeyer's eyes, had managed to revive a series called the Ruth Fielding series that was struggling in sales, and she wrote one and it sold really well compared to the previous ones in this series. By the time Stratemeyer started to develop Nancy Drew, he was specifically doing so with Benson in mind as the author. So she came on and ghostwrote this book and many of the other early ones and was mostly the one creatively responsible for things like Nancy's characterization. Stratemeyer would continue to supply outlines and stuff for the stories. Apparently, the original pitch had Nancy being pretty cookie cutter as a heroine was concerned, but Benson was very dedicated to her not being that, to her being proactive and independent and clever, able to use her wits and logic in a way that was rare for female characters at the time, certainly, and still even now. So that element was from Benson. She continued to ghostwrite for quite some time for this and other Stratemeyer things, including after Edward Stratemeyer himself died not long after this book came out, at which point his daughters basically took over his duties. One of his daughters Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, also wrote a bunch of Nancy Drew eventually, and was the person who was making the outlines. We talked about this in the Hardy Boys episode as well. But in 1959, the syndicate looked at their backlog of highly successful, long-running series, and recognized a few things. One, that some of the older ones were paced the way that they thought would sell best at the time, so they revised them from 25 chapters down to 20, which happened with both the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books, the first big chunk. So we read the revision. I found a site that broke down a lot of the changes, and in this case, plotwise not a lot changes. Some things are moved along quite a bit more. Like, the story doesn't begin with Nancy seeing the little girl, Judy, almost get run over and then like pulling off the road and stumbling into the mystery for this reason. It seemed like we took a chapter to kind of establish who she was, and then she like heard about the will situation from her father or one of her father's business associates or something...it just kind of took longer to get places. Another thing they did with Nancy Drew in particular, sadly, is they made her less spunky. She was even more of an independent against-type sort in the original version of the novels. Benson much later would grant that she felt that she didn't really like the changes to Nancy's character because it made her much more of like, as she said, "a house type."

Brandon

I think that's what she was getting at, yeah. She was just pulled back into like, having more of, I guess, a balance between sort of the independence and stuff and like cool cultural value is about what a good girl is supposed to be, right?

Wren

There's a picture on 121, which really does not match what had happened in the story thus far. It's Nancy walking into the police office, wearing a like a '50s housewife dress and demure little gloves with her hair all perfect. But just before she had been trying to like pry her way out of the closet, and the description said, like Nancy's hands were bruised and bleeding. And I'm like, This is not how she walks into that police office. She does not look like a perfect '50s housewife. She looks like she's been all screwed up, banging her way out of a closet.

Brandon

I have a suspicion. I'm not positive when all the illustrations were done, but that illustration, cause I know the one you're talking about, would have to have been after the revision. You want to know why?

Wren

Because of her outfit is clearly a '50s dress?

Brandon

No. I mean, yes. That illustration also shows the Tophams' caretaker, Jeff Tucker, who in the illustration is white.

Wren

Oh. Oh, no. Oh, no! Was he like...an...? Okay, you keep...go ahead.

Brandon

One of the other things that the revisions to both Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew did was backpedal on some very poorly aged, even by 1959 standards, racial stereotyping. And in this book, that mainly meant that they took Jeff Tucker, who was originally a black character, who was characterized about as stereotypically as you could manage. I did find some text of the way his dialogue was written, and I will not repeat it, but you can imagine. And whereas in this version of the book, in the revision version of the book, the fee is like, forced him into a shed or something to like, just get him out of the way while they ransacked the house, in the original version, they tricked him into getting drunk. So that is gone in this version.

Wren

Yeah. Why couldn't they have kept him as a black guy, but just have him get stuck into a shed?

Brandon

That's a fair question. And that's another point of like, consistent criticism of both Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, along with the class stuff, is that many of them did contain some pretty racist stuff in them.

And when the publisher, when the when the owner of the books, decided that that was not a good look, they erased people of color, instead of making them non-stereotypes.

Wren

Yeah, it really feels like they just super undiversified the books in the name of like, "Oh, well, that was problematic. But I don't know how to write a black person, that's not problematic, so I'm just gonna not have black people exist!"

Brandon

That seems to be kind of what happened. You can find some thoughts about this from people much better versed in these topics than I am that can talk through some of the situation with these series and the way that, while the revision did get rid of a lot of just super racist stuff, they also kind of made this world an extremely white world, rather than a world that is populated by a diverse group of people who are all well-written rounded characters, and not stereotypes of whatever ethnicity they happen to be.

Wren

Coming at this book, after having read the book that we read for episode 15, really is a...I don't know. It's just quite a contrast, because they...sure, with the revision this book takes place like nebulously in the '60s, but it's based on the bones of a book that was written in the '30s, and so if you think about like this taking place in the '30s, versus [Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry] also being in the '30s, like, that was all just the same time period. So you've got, you know, that area with the sharecroppers and then this area with all the rich white people, and just how different their worlds are.

Brandon

And in the original text, apparently, the scene with the police does play out quite a bit differently, because whereas in the revision text, Jeff Tucker, who again is now an older white man, is listened to for what he's able to provide about the theft to the police. Apparently in the original text, while he did go to the police station with Nancy, he was pretty consistently just kind of like sidelined. They just did not care to hear what he had to say, and I think Nancy scolds him for letting the theft happen. So the way that you tell the texts, the editions up to the revision, up to the late '50s, were in a blue canvas or fabric, rather, cover. I'm pretty sure that the ones I read were pre-revision, because I remember them being a fabric cover. I thought they were green, but everything I saw said they were blue and that there weren't any green ones. But also like I said, I don't remember which ones I read. I may have read ones that were so late that like the racist elements were not there in the first place because they knew better I guess. But if you do find, you know, an older copy of this book that has a fabric cover instead of that yellow-spined hardback, be aware. The other easy way to tell, like I said, is the revision took the books from 25 chapters down to 20. So you can pretty quickly assess how many chapters are in this book. If it's 25, be aware. I did see that it looked like the original versions of at least the first few books had been republished once in maybe the early '90s in a controversial move by some company that seems to think it was valuable to do so, I guess, for some reason. Generally, if you're buying a new copy, if you're buying a copy that was printed anytime since like the mid-80s, it's going to be the revision version.

Wren

There's really just like so much to say about like, yeah, the revision seemed like they were doing something good, but also erasing. It's just so annoying.

Brandon

It's a very mixed bag.

Wren

They need...they need the level of revision that The Cricket in Times Square had, acknowledging that the parts with the Chinese immigrants were incredibly racist, but then just rewriting them so they're still Chinese immigrants, but they're regular people, not stereotypes.

Brandon

Yeah, so that's Nancy Drew. Mildred Wirt Benson sounds like a super interesting person. She wrote over 130 books. Many of them were ghostwritten for the Stratemeyer Syndicate for various series, but she did some stuff under her own name as well, including a series called the Penny Parker books, which she says were essentially like, just the superior version of Nancy Drew because she had creative control over them and can do could do the things that Stratemeyer wouldn't allow her to do with Nancy Drew. She also was a journalist her entire life up until she died in 2002, and went on adventures and jeeped through jungles and visited archaeological sites and got her pilot's license. She did a lot of stuff. There is a book I'm going to try and check out that I found referenced a bit in my research but didn't get a hold of a copy of it itself before this recording, called Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her by Melanie Rehak, R-E-H-A-K. Sounds like it could be a pretty interesting read. Nancy herself has of course gone on to be iconic in her own way. She has been adapted into six feature films, three television series and another four TV pilots that didn't get picked up, comic books and, most iconically - don't worry if you're a Nancy Drew fan, I'm aware they exist - the 33 video games by Her Interactive. They announced that they're working on another one in April 2023, a few months prior to this recording. I have not played any of them, but they are well-regarded. And there's 33 of them. Nancy is also cited by many prominent women, including three Supreme Court Justices - Sandra Day O'Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor all cite Nancy Drew as like an influence on them. Nancy's kind of a big deal actually. I think I'm out of things. Revisiting, quote unquote, this was fun. Even knowing that the revision Nancy is watered down a bit, I can definitely tell what made me like this series better than the Hardy Boys.

Wren

Yeah, hearing that she was more spunky in the originals makes me incredibly curious.

Brandon

Oh, and there's um - I managed to not say how many Nancy Drew books there are. There's 175 books in the main series, plus many spinoff series in the same way that Hardy Boys had with various ones that have different titles for the series, but are, you know, other adventures, all still attributed to Carolyn Keene, even though that makes it look like she has been writing Nancy Drew consistently for the last 94 years.

Wren

I forgot to mention: not that long after we did the Hardy Boys episode, I was watching a live stream that my friend Jordana does, where she digs up sort of like old pieces of children's television media and just shows snippets of just like weird old stuff. And she showed parts of a Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew crossover series where they went to frickin Transylvania and it was ridiculous. I've now seen some Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys media.

Brandon

Yeah, that series was from the '70s. I don't remember how long it was on - a few seasons? - where it was the Hardy Boys Nancy Drew mysteries and they were just teaming up all the time.

Wren

Older Hardy boy looked like Han Solo, younger Hardy boy looked like a rabbit.

Brandon

Yeah, and they did eventually crossover in text as well. There is a at least one series of like team-up mysteries. I think I'm at three peaches on this book. If the first half was a bit more engaging for me it would it would get at least another half peach.

Wren

Three feels right. Three feels right for where I'm at too.

Brandon

I quite liked the latter half of the book. I thought it really got going and moved and was kind of harrowing and just her being locked in the closet and her hiding after breaking into the truck and the thieves almost walking in on her like continuing to break into the truck. There's good stuff there for sure. I might check out the second book, The Hidden Staircase, because that's Benson's favorite, apparently. Definitely want to maybe look up if I can get a hold of some of these Penny Parker mysteries or something; I would like to maybe read some of what Mildred Wirt Benson wrote without the you know, handcuffs of the Stratemeyer Syndicate requiring her to fit a an outline in a in a business model. So what are we read next time?

Wren

Oh, boy. Something that I might regret. Actually, no, I probably won't regret it. I know that there's a lot of problematic stuff in the book series, but I think that it starts later. We are going to be reading Little House in the Big Woods. It is the first book in the Little House on the Prairie series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, who has...there's a lot a lot to say about it. I read the books pretty religiously as a child because, I know you'll be shocked to hear, that I like hearing about people building houses and surviving in the woods. I'm gonna see how it reads now that I know a lot of the background information about it that I've learned in the past few years.

Brandon

Indeed!

Wren

Indeed is correct.

Brandon

My Dog Ate My Book Report is hosted and produced by Wren and Brandon and edited by Derrick Valen and Daisy McNamara.

Wren

The music used in this podcast was licensed by Epidemic Sound. The transcripts were generated-ish by Otter.ai, but fixed up by us. And our icon image was illustrated by Cindy Lau

Brandon

I think it's impressive that an otter can write at all, you know? Have a question or comment for the team?

Wren

Like where's the otter?

Brandon

Like where's the otter? It's not our otter. We just get some of its time.

Wren

You can find us on our website which links to all of our socials at dogatemybookreport.blubrry.net or by emailing at dogatemybookreport@gmail.com.

Brandon

We'd be super excited to know what books you loved growing up. Especially if you have some favorite Nancy Drew books, let us know if there's certain ones in the series that you think are extra worth checking out.

Wren

Thanks for listening!