

'It's Locked!': Nancy Drew and the Case of Literary Canonization

Traditionally, literary canon refers to the rules of classifying literature, emphasizing works in relation to time periods or settings as the most important representations of that study (Sanders). For example, medieval literature is upheld by titles like *Beowulf* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* while, in the 20th century, James Joyce's *Dubliners* or Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* stand out in English curriculum, unchanging as examples of literary classics. Although the canonization of literature is up for debate, where what is "the 'best' or 'most important' or 'most representative'" continues to be disputed, its existence cannot be denied: "Until a literature has a 'canon' . . . it has not risen to the level of sophistication at which it can be studied seriously by scholars" (Sanders). Thus, the canonical literature in the detective fiction genre sits at an interesting stage of development: not only is the genre itself not necessarily considered part of literary canon, but then works and authors who fall under detective fiction question if they should be taken into account. Critics of maintaining canonical purity argue that mystery does not constitute an important enough feature of literature to be examined; however, if that were the case, names like Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie would not be as known as they are today, famed for their brilliant detectives, compelling mysteries, and intricate storytelling. In the same vein, fictional sleuth Nancy Drew is at a crossroads in literature: on one side, her character has become a cultural icon, as familiar in mystery as Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, but at the same time, Nancy Drew is malleable and takes the shape of the times, reconstituted with every new author that takes over her story under the pseudonym Caroline Keene. Nancy Drew stands to argue whether notoriety should contribute to literary canonization or if canonization should even be considered in a work's validity, exploring the pivotal girl sleuth in her quest to be respected in literature.

In 1930, Nancy Drew was introduced in her first title *The Secret of the Old Clock*. Published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate and authored by Carolyn Keene, its immediate success began the *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* series, with *The Hidden Staircase*, *The Bungalow Mystery*, and *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* furthering its popularity. Yet, Nancy Drew was not the first detective to come from the Stratemeyer Syndicate; editor Edward Stratemeyer was also behind the creation of *The Rover Boys*, *The Bobbsey Twins*, and (probably most well-known in association to Nancy Drew) *The Hardy Boys* series, classified as young adult fiction with strokes of mystery. As a literary and publishing expert, Stratemeyer wanted to take advantage of both genders of readers, where studies showed girls just as interested in books as boys, and while handsome amateur detectives Frank and Joe Hardy of *The Hardy Boys* increased female attention, Stratemeyer determined to popularize a girl sleuth. In the introduction to *Nancy Drew and Her Sister Sleuths: Essays on the Fiction of Girl Detectives*, titled "The Mystery of the Moll Dick," Michael G. Cornelius explains the radical design of the female detective: "The girl sleuth is fearless but cautious; she is intelligent but undereducated; she is bold but decorous; she is physical yet cerebral; she is unbound yet always contained. . . . The girl sleuth is impossibly feminine, perfectly appointed and impeccably dressed, yet she is also downright feminist, barging through barriers that her adult female counterparts would not get through for decades to come" (Cornelius 2). The invention of the "moll dick," "literally [meaning] 'girl boy'" (2), introduced Nancy Drew as a unique entity, able to appeal to boys for the adventure and to girls for the female lead—and even able to go beyond its young adult fiction grouping and attract adult readers, where Nancy Drew showed that "'girls [could] be just as smart as boys, and there [was] no reason why women detectives shouldn't be even better than men'" (qtd. in Cornelius 1). Specifically, Nancy Drew was ahead of her time, utilizing masculine and feminine characteristics

to create a cultural phenomenon, "her independence, her puissance, her sense of justice, her fearlessness" becoming "largely unique to the girl sleuth character," revolutionized by how Nancy Drew was so relatable (Cornelius 2-3).

At the beginning, Stratemeyer Syndicate created Nancy Drew to expand its reader demographic. However, unintentionally, Nancy Drew evolved into a feminist icon before feminism had even become a recognized component in literature, let alone young adult or detective fiction. According to Cornelius, when she first appeared in 1930, "perhaps . . . critics lacked the feminist terminology so apt for describing Nancy," but she was indeed a "prelude to feminism," an "amalgamation of the qualities perceived to be finest in both boys and girls" with "this ability to inhabit and succeed in realms traditionally ascribed to men" that resulted in a "potent combination of will, desire, intelligence, and a healthy dash of fearlessness" (3).

Although she was not necessarily presented as such, Nancy Drew did subtly accentuate the power of being female by directing more attention to sleuthing rather than to her gender, focusing more on her ability to succeed rather than how she could succeed better than others—specifically men. As Cornelius points out, "We're supposed to recognize the gender and age transgressions—perhaps even the gender contradictions—inherent in the very idea of a *girl* detective," acknowledging her individuality, yet Nancy Drew simultaneously remains palatable, "[managing] the almost impossible feat of being wholesomely feminine—glamorous, gracious, stylish, tactful—while also proving herself strong, resourceful, and bold" (qtd. in Cornelius 1, 3).

Arguably, the complex repertoire that makes such a flawless portrayal has cemented Nancy Drew as a timeless figure, for readers of young adult fiction to detective fiction; she avoids controversy by not blatantly questioning any status quo of society yet dismantles stereotypes as she brilliantly cracks cases and saves the day, admired as a woman but especially so as a

detective. Thus, the biggest "mystery of the moll dick—the debutante detective, the paradox in pumps, the 'girl boy' who solves crimes and sells millions and millions of books" is simply how she has not garnered more scholarly attention, unforgettable as a character but rarely explored beyond her characterization (Cornelius 5).

Notably, it is not Nancy Drew that prevents scholars from taking her seriously as an icon in literature but the machinations behind Nancy Drew's creation. Although enormously popular and free from censure, the Stratemeyer Syndicate that published Nancy Drew, in addition to other young adult detective fiction series, was not so lucky. In "The Nancy Drew *Mythtery* Stories," James D. Keeline examines the history of the syndicate, beginning with authorial controversy: founder Henry Stratemeyer, Edward's father, fought several battles with publication companies to retain rights to his works in the late 1800s, becoming familiar with the gap between publishers and authors from an early age (Keeline 16-7). As a result, Stratemeyer Syndicate was born as a mediator between publishers and authors, noted most often as a literary agency, and openly encouraged the use of author pseudonyms to increase publication rates. Keeline spells out this curious business process:

Under the syndicate, [Stratemeyer] would . . . enter into an agreement with a publisher first to buy a series and select the initial titles from a list he provided. . . . With this contract in hand, he would then define characters and create outlines for stories. These brief outlines were turned over to ghostwriters who expanded them into book-length manuscripts in three to six weeks. For their work, the writers were paid between \$75 and \$250, depending on the length of the piece and the writer's skill. Upon payment, the writers signed a release certifying that the work was original and based on Stratemeyer's outlines. It also transferred all

rights for the story to Stratemeyer and required the writer to promise not to use the pen name for his or her own work. (19-20)

At first, the syndicate's arrangement appeared to work smoothly, creating the quintessential pseudonym Carolyn Keene as the author for the Nancy Drew series. Since 1930, Carolyn Keene has always been credited as Nancy Drew's author, even when the Stratemeyer Syndicate transferred from Grosset & Dunlap to Simon & Schuster for supplemental publishing in 1982. However, the impartial transactions that occurred behind the literary scene started to wear thin and inspire questions, especially as Nancy Drew gained popularity and readers wanted to learn more about her author; Keeline points out, "As descriptions of the syndicate began to appear in publications, the complex operations had to be simplified for the public. This led to a number of syndicate myths and other statements that were taken out of context," where the people behind the Stratemeyer Syndicate came off as mysterious as the stories they published (20). This intrigue was further exacerbated when writers started to come forward, claiming to be the *real* Carolyn Keene, and media attention expounded on claims that the syndicate had used exploitation or bullying to create the all-American girl sleuth. At the peak of Nancy Drew's popularity in the mid-1900s, the Stratemeyer Syndicate was suddenly under fire, where the public demanded to know why the syndicate controlled its publishing process, works, and ghostwriters so secretively.

Ultimately, it is the controversies that surround Nancy Drew's background and story of creation, not her character specifically, that have arguably resulted in her lack of scholarly attention. As studied in "Originator, Writer, Editor, Hack: Carolyn Keene and Changing Definitions of Authorship" by Linda K. Karell, Nancy Drew's malleability in her various portrayals over time has been construed as undependability in research, accused of being anti-

literature (Karell 38). Even though "Carolyn Keene is one of the world's most recognized and beloved 'authors,'" Nancy Drew is rejected from literary canon, whether of young adult fiction or detective fiction, due to being without consistent authorship (33). According to Karell, "Authorship is an insistently contradictory concept and a vexed practice; it is pulled between a (surprisingly recent) cultural definition that posits an individual genius behind the text and the functional reality of multiple, collaborative production," and this is critical with Nancy Drew, "where differing and often opposing versions of authorship are in play" and used against the character's validity (34). The Stratemeyer Syndicate's conception was based on avoiding conflicts between publisher and author, leading to "[revisions] and [updates] from [Nancy Drew's] 1930 debut . . . over the next (nearly) four decades," but it is her character's accessibility to change—even when staying strong as a cultural icon—that inspires "both praise and criticism: was she a crucial role model of female independence and self-confidence or was she a sexless daddy's girl who successfully maintained white privilege and the economic status quo?" (34). Questions like that regarding Nancy Drew's characterization keep her under scrutiny as scholars argue that her depiction all depends on who is writing her and when she is being written. Even today, "still [facing] pressures to appear traditionally 'literary,' which is to say appearing both traditionally original and the product of a single masterful author," Nancy Drew's authorship cannot be trusted long enough to form legitimate and plentiful literary analyses that would include her in the literary canon of detective fiction (36).

Yet, as Karell states, "Insisting on an author for a text arbitrarily limits the meanings of that text," where "the pleasure—and multiplicity—of a text is always located in the reader and his or her performance of reading the text" (35-6). Again, the genuine Nancy Drew mystery "may be the Mystery of the Appeal of Nancy Drew herself, and of her phenomenal attraction for

successive generations of American girls"—and why scholars and critics have not yet caught on to her lasting fervor, keeping her locked away as to not reach the stringency of canonization (qtd. in Karell 34). Regardless of her origins with the Stratemeyer Syndicate, its business practices, its use of pseudonyms and the infamous Carolyn Keene, Nancy Drew lives on as a prominent figure of literature, inviting readers without bounds; her presence and influence can be seen in young adult fiction to detective fiction, with male and female readers, from early adolescents to reminiscing adults, and she has even moved beyond the printed word, showcased in television to feature films to fully-interactive computer games. Ultimately, Nancy Drew's notoriety may not contribute to her validity, especially when considering the traditional rules of literary canonization, but it is clear that she does not require traditional approval to be read, respected, and loved, ever sleuthing as America's favorite female detective.

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