

Nancy Drew: Girl Detective, Nascent Feminist, and Family Therapist

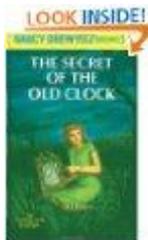
by Hope Burwell

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By July of 1969, when I met Nancy Drew for the first time, I had seen Peggy Fleming floating her way to the gold medal, and the Chicago Police Department fighting its way through the '68 Democratic convention. I had heard Richard Nixon promising to get us out of Vietnam and my parents promising to kill one another. I had read C.S. Lewis's [The Chronicles of Narnia](#) and the custody agreement that placed me permanently with my mother. I had slow-danced to "Hey Jude," marched in antiwar rallies and smoked my first joint. I was 12 years old.

It seems remarkable now, 25 years later, to describe that life, and for accuracy's sake to have to set it in Iowa. We 1990's citizens of the Midwest like to believe such a childhood is of recent vintage, or that it happens only in big cities on the coasts. But, in the late 1960s, students and pacifists, militants and doves, Black Power and Red Power and Flower Power moved in minibuses along the arteries of a heartland bubbling with campus foment. The daughter of a young woman getting her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa, the sister of two boys nearing draft age, the first kid on my block with divorced parents, I lived for a few years at the center of a number of revolutions. Until, at least, my parents looked up from their lives long enough to realize how I was living mine.

Then, they packed me up and put me on a plane for California--sent me into the most sheltered bosom of the family. Financially stable and happily married, with children a decade from draft vulnerability, Aunt Carol and Uncle Russ were the antithesis of my parents. That summer in the lap of luxury I had a chance to rest in an uncomplicated world. Come September I would rejoin my mother, who would by then have moved my older brothers to Canada in an act of protest and protection.



"Here," my Aunt Carol said one morning. I sat under a lime bush, watching my cousins practice at the ballet bar fastened to a plate-glass window overlooking the patio. The ethereal loveliness of innocence was just becoming visible to me then, and those cousins, in their snowy white leotards, waist-length hair knotted tightly on top their heads, seemed at that moment stunningly innocent. I hungered for that quality all the while it seemed absolutely unattainable. Into my hands Carol thrust a dusty-blue hardcover book. I looked up, into eyes that, for that moment, saw only me. "I started reading these when I was about your age," she said. "I've been saving them for your cousin Celeste, but they're yours while you're here. When you just can't stand feeling like an outsider one more minute, take one of these, and curl up someplace private. You'll like them, I promise."

It took real force of will not to snort with derision when I opened the book, turned to the glossy frontispiece, and saw what looked to me then like three middle-aged flappers in a drawing room with some old people and a clock. Nancy Drew? I had discarded Trixie Belden for [In Cold Blood](#) in the sixth grade. Was Aunt Carol serious? She moved quietly away, regal and serene, the beautiful dancer's feet she no longer used professionally turned slightly outward. Behind her oldest daughter, she took up her own position at the bar, and I watched the four of them move, like a breeze across a clover-laden meadow.

It wasn't conscious, that decision to trust, to accept from my aunt a kind of mothering my own mother often offered: the literary role model. I simply trusted that anyone who could participate in something as lovely as that exercise at the bar knew something I did not. So, I slid down onto my belly, knees snuggled in the dirt a gardener had loosened so carefully, and settled into my first Nancy Drew.

I went through Aunt Carol's girlhood collection of Nancy Drew mysteries in a matter of weeks. About two dozen books, I think, from [The Secret of the Old Clock](#) to [The Mystery of the Tolling Bell](#). It didn't bother me that the books were so old a whitish talcum covered my hands, dusted my

jeans. I chuckled at the wormholes smack in the middle of 30 or 40 pages, forcing me to read around them, to figure out my own syntactical mysteries. I read them in the open, curled on the couch in the living room, or on my belly under the trampoline in the yard with cousins bouncing and giggling overhead. But I also took Carol's advice, found someplace very private: a crawl space beneath the main hallway. It required a flashlight to read by, and the ability to get the trap door closed firmly over my head. When Carol found me there on a too-quiet afternoon, she brought an old car blanket, handed it down to me with a knowing smile, and disappeared. That reading binge has always been something of a mystery to me.

Those of us who worry about the images of women our culture provides girls are apt to worry a good deal about the physicality of those role models. Are they too thin, too busy, too unattainable? Funny, given that I've spent my share of time in such musing, that I don't even remember what Nancy Drew looked like. Blonde? Dark? I don't recall. I don't recall because Carolyn Keene's physical descriptions faded in the face of my absolute identification with the character. Whether she was pretty mattered not a whit to me at 12 (in fact, it was her friend, George, who described herself as plain and boyish, whose looks seemed intriguing and attainable to me). It didn't matter to me what Nancy Drew looked like because in my mind's eye, I was her. A whole constellation of other Nancy factors mattered much more to me then.

I wonder how many other girls have been healed by that multifaceted out-of-body experience? As Nancy we worked through Oedipal conflicts and much, much more. I wonder how many other bright girls found solace for the burden of a quick intellect in absolute identification with Nancy Drew, future partner in her father's law firm, whose plots revolved around the workings of her keen mind? (In the 1960s, "brainy" was one of the worst things one girl could say about another.) I wonder how many active adolescent bodies fortified their refusal to be bent into quiet ladies because Nancy, too, held onto the athleticism of childhood, moved her almost-woman's body in ways adults around us were quietly suggesting we stop moving ours. Even in the face of that subtle social pressure, we were brave: as Nancy, we taught swimming lessons, saved drowning friends, learned to fly an airplane, rode bicycles and horses, and--after we'd gotten our driver's licenses--were just as mobile and agile as any boy with a car.

She may not have been an intentional feminist, but she certainly provided for many of us an experience so palpable that later, in our teens, when someone said, "girls can't do that," we looked back startled, uncomprehending and unmodified, because we had, already, indeed done it.

But, for some reason, reading Nancy Drew put a stop to my craving for a world much more adult than was good for me, and I don't think Nancy's intellect, nor her physical ability alone, could have done that. I already knew that women could be smart and attractive and physically able--I had role models in my own life for that, not least of them my mother, a woman with a presence so powerful it made people very cautious and left them awed. My pantheon of female role models lacked neither intellect nor strength, but an example of a very particular kind of innocence. And, I think, it was Nancy's innocence that turned that summer into a real recuperation.

That Nancy Drew, like me, came from the Midwest, spent her days in a town surrounded by wide river valleys and lush cornfields, can't have hindered my immersion into the healing work of those books. Identifying with Carolyn Keene's earliest Nancy helped me work through being separated from my father, may have prevented my growing bitter and rebellious. And, that identification undoubtedly reinforced the feminist ideology with which this culture was beginning to rear its daughters. But most significant of all, in my own personal development, I think, is the image Nancy Drew presented of a girl both able and humble, both worldly and refined, both innocent and wise. In those hours, lounging around my wealthy aunt and uncle's house in Nancy Drew's company, I slowly found my way back to the innocence of childhood. My Aunt Carol, I suspect, had never heard the word *bibliotherapy*, but surely, the day she handed me that worm-eaten Nancy Drew, she understood its meaning.

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