

The Mystery of the Girl Detectives

Her History and Cultural Significance

By Valerie R. Marvin

"The first book we fall in love with shapes us every bit as much as the first person we fall in love with..."

Laura Miller

I fell in love for the first time on March 31, 1993. I was an awkward nine-year-old girl wearing thick glasses who preferred to spend my weekends tucked up in my room with a book held firmly in my hands. The scene was the library of Washington School, in Owosso. There I stood, before the tan metal shelves of the fiction section, my fingers hovering near the spines of the dirty, numbered covers, when I made my selection: *Trixie Belden and the Mystery of the Emeralds*, by Kathryn Kenny.

I had no idea, that day, what was beginning. I had never read any Trixie Belden books before, but unable to resist the draw of a yet-untapped series of mystery novels, I quickly selected one that seemed to have the components of a mystery I would enjoy: history, a secret passageway, and jewelry. I likely chatted with the librarian as she checked the novel out, happy to be in the presence of another book lover. I then retreated to one of the room's round tables and opened the book, the quiet murmurs of the room fading into the background as I met Trixie Belden, girl detective, for the first time.

Like many of you, I've found great pleasure in books from the time I can remember. Some of my earliest memories are thick with the voices of loved ones who held me in their arms and read to me every day, and every night. But I never fell in love until I met Trixie.

That love reached new heights one day when the school librarian, a sweet woman named Mary Hinds, pulled a stamp out of her desk drawer. It had been about a year since I'd first met Trixie, and in the months that followed, I had checked out *The Mystery of the Emeralds* a total of five times. Examining the card that bore no other names but mine during the period of a year, Mrs. Hinds smiled and, with a flourish, emblazoned one red word--discard--inside the front and back book leaves, explaining to me that the book was mine. Forever. I gaped back at her, silent at first, then stumbled my thanks before grasping the book tightly in my hands. I took it home, and read it again that weekend, as I have many times since.

Today I stand here before you, over twenty years older, and still in love with Trixie Belden. Over the years my love has grown to include other female detectives, including the titian-haired Nancy Drew, the red-cheeked Cherry Ames, the hometown hero Judy Bolton, and the much more mature Miss Marple, Kinsey Millhone, and Harriet Vane. Yet it is Trixie who still lives in my subconscious.

What is it, I've asked myself many times, about these books? Why do I, a thirty-something woman, still enjoy them? What hold do they have over me, and how can I explain it?

This is but one of the mysteries that I've set out to try and solve with this paper. Inspired by Trixie, Nancy, and their sister sleuths, I decided that it was time to do some sleuthing of my own. How did the girl detectives come to be? Who penned their stories? What cultural shifts and trends influenced them?

And why, after all these years, are they still spoken of with such love and esteem by women as eminent as former Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, former Secretary of State, U.S. Senator, and now Presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton, and United States Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor? This paper is an attempt to solve some of those mysteries.

Mystery #1 - What are the Girls Sleuth's Historical Origins?

Like all human creations, girl detectives are the product of culture, and the result of our shared societal history. After all, Nancy Drew could not drive her blue convertible if automakers had not put the world on wheels, and Trixie couldn't toss her clipped curls in indignation if it hadn't become socially acceptable for young women to wear their hair short! They are evidence of changing times, historical movements, and evolving roles for women and girls in society.

Before girl detective authors Carolyn Keene, Julie Campbell, Kathryn Kenny, Margaret Sutton, or Helen Wells could ever put their pen to paper or load ribbons into their typewriters, they, as women, and their readers, as young girls, first had to live in a world where literacy was the rule and not the exception. Fortunately for them and for us, American educational tradition has long advocated for a basic level of literacy, if for no other reason, than that parents and community leaders wanted their children to be able to read the Bible. Early American Protestants placed great emphasis on the individual reading and interpretation of God's word, with some sects arguing that women, as well as men, should be literate and able to approach the scriptures themselves.

Literacy and ciphering, the other cornerstone of early American education, were also taught to young children from the colonial period on as a way to equip the young for the careers that lay before them. European visitors to our country often commented on America's overall prosperity, and our large "middlin' sort." Here, children were not simply destined to work as laborers on the lord's estate. Instead, with the proper education and some capital outlay, hardworking lads and lasses could forge a better life through trade.

As society prospered and the American border advanced steadily westward, public education became increasingly available. Michigan, an early leader in this field, established a unique system for funding education based on the sale of land in section sixteen of each township. Profits from the sales were used to establish public schools that were required to be open at least three months a year, to *all* children. Michigan's first governor, Stevens T. Mason, prodded the legislature on the topic, calling "the effectuation of a perfect school system, open to all classes, as the surest basis of public happiness and prosperity."¹

A growing educational system helped bring about increased demand for printed materials outside of the traditional religious texts. Business met the challenge with new advances in both papermaking and printing throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Good quality paper made of rags, and lesser quality paper made of pulp (hence the term pulp fiction) combined with mechanized typesetting made possible the newspapers, magazines, chapbooks, and broadsides that suddenly began to

¹ Mason, Stevens T. . "Messages of the Governors." *Governor Mason's Speech to the Michigan House and Senate*. Michigan Capitol Building, Detroit. 1 Feb. 1836

flood the streets of major cities. Whereas people a generation before might have had access to only a Bible or school speller, they could now buy a weekly or even a daily newspaper packed with news, gossip, and serialized stories.

Perhaps the most infamous serialized stories in the nineteenth century were the thrillers published in newspapers. These stories included many of the elements found in our girl detective books, including dark, skulking villains, female heroines, lost wills, missing fortunes, noble people in reduced circumstances, and babies switched at birth. Murder and thievery sold then, just as they do now.

Importantly for our purposes, this same period also saw the birth of family and women's magazines, containing everything from fashion tips to riddles, games, recipes, needlework patterns, advice columns, poems, essays, and fictional stories. For the first time, published materials were being created specifically for women.

For those with the money to purchase full volumes, books were available in increasing numbers, and no middle class Victorian parlor was complete without them. For those who didn't enjoy the expendable income required for books, but still wanted to read, libraries were increasingly available. Organized by associations, societies, and clubs, subscription and public libraries put books in the hands of voracious readers who could not afford their own books. Many of these institutions, including Lansing's own library, owe their births to members of nineteenth century women's clubs.

Technological advances in the home also helped promote reading. The widespread acceptance of gas lighting brought steady, consistent light to dark Victorian evenings. Whereas, we once went to bed with the sun, now we could stay up into the wee hours of the morning, enjoying a good page-turner.

The act of reading traditionally tethers one to a safe, warm, controlled climate. And as home was the place of the woman, who was now separated from her husband's business, she was well poised to read, and read a lot. In her book *Femininity to Feminism: Women and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, author Susan Robinsow Gorsky states that "Reading became the dominant form of entertainment as well as a way to enforce morality and family unity: each evening, families would gather into the famous reading circle with the latest newspapers, magazines, or novels."²

As guardian of family morality, Mother, now stereotyped as the Victorian Angel of the House, wished to improve herself for her husband, children, and her community. Gorsky writes that "The middle class had more money, time, and literacy than the lower classes, and more interest in education and advancement than the upper classes. Even in recreation, they sought the useful and uplifting as well as the entertaining. They connected moral and social improvement, ideas fostered by the American Puritan heritage and the English Evangelicals and Utilitarians. If reading for fun might injure rising and righteous members of the middle class, wholesome literature with a moral purpose could benefit them."³

² Gorsky, Susan Rubinow. *Femininity to Feminism: Women and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Twayne, 1992. Print. P 14.

³ Ibid.

To meet this need, late nineteenth century upper middle class women had a new tool at their disposal--a college education. Sadly, their colleges have sometimes been trivialized as pretentious finishing schools, where women went simply to better prepare themselves for marriage. Yet even the fact that homemaking was now being elevated to “domestic science,” shows, I believe, the increasing value placed on the role of women, both in their homes and out.

Wellesley College, today considered to be one of America’s most prestigious women’s colleges, was founded in 1870 for the purpose of providing a college education for smart, knowledge-hungry women. Its motto, *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare*, “Not to be ministered unto, but to minister,” captures this pairing of education and service perfectly.⁴ While none of our girl detectives ever attended college, Harriett Adams, Wellesley graduate and sometimes Nancy Drew author, stated frequently that she employed the school’s motto to inform Nancy’s character.⁵

Yet disputes about the purpose and effects of women’s education continued. “A girl who was educated beyond the level required for raising children would be discontented with her lot as a housewife,” argued some critics, according to author Peter Stoneley in *Consumerism and American Girls’ Literature*.⁶ Other critics went so far as to suggest that too much education would damage a woman’s physiology and even endanger her ability to bear children. Yet the truth remained that not only did women want education, many of them needed an education in order to launch a career.

Throughout history the professional fields open to women waxed and waned as trends and societal pressures morphed. Scholarly research shows that since at least the sixteenth century women in the English-speaking world have used their pens to support themselves and their families. When a woman fell on hard times, it was the world of fiction that often proved to be her material salvation, as female novelists were accepted and read dating back to at least the seventeenth century.⁷

In America, Louisa May Alcott stands out as our most famous example of a nineteenth century female author. Like many of her foremothers and her most famous character, Jo March, Alcott wrote to pay her bills. Many of you may recall the awkward scene in *Little Women* in which Jo receives a lecture from Professor Bhaer regarding her sensationalist stories. In his thick German accent he tells her that, “They are made pleasant to some, but I would more rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash.”⁸ Like Louisa, who herself switched from writing sensationalist pieces to gentle children’s novels, Jo burns her lurid tales and begins to publish more genteel writing for children.

The time was right for women to write for children. Conservative Victorian society, which split the world clearly into men’s and women’s spheres, placed childrearing firmly with the mother. It was thought that women were born to be mothers, and that they had a natural understanding of children that men lacked.

⁴ “Wellesley Facts.” *Wellesley College*. Trustees of Wellesley College. Web. 3 Dec. 2014.

⁵ Nash, Ilana. *American Sweethearts*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006. Print. P 43.

⁶ Stoneley, Peter. *Consumerism and American Girls’ Literature, 1860 - 1940*. Cambridge, UK; New York, USA: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print. P 71.

⁷ Spender, Dale. *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen*. London, New York: Pandora, 1986. Print.

⁸ Alcott, Louisa May. *Good Wives: Little Women, Part II*. New York: Penguin Group, 1869. Print. P 147.

And children now had more and more time to be children. As laws against child labor proliferated, an increasing number of children now went to school, played, and enjoyed a period of carefree youthfulness not available to their ancestors.

As a result, a new children's literature began to emerge. In the second half of the nineteenth century distinct boys and girls books became popular. Today many of these late nineteenth and early twentieth century girls books are considered classics, including such beloved titles as *Little Women*, *Daddy Long Legs*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and *Caddie Woodlawn*.

A close read of the girls and young women found in these books reveals many interesting points. First of all, many of them are tomboys who are loathe to spend their hours indoors sewing, cooking, cleaning, and keeping house. Many are orphans, missing one, if not both, of their parents. In short, they are outside of the traditional realm of family. These girls, for the time at least, seem to refute the very Victorian ideal of womanhood. Instead, they walk ridgepoles, scrape their knees climbing trees, and row boats with their brothers and male comrades. How very unladylike! But how very similar to our girl detective heroines, who explore dank underground passageways, perform great athletic feats, and face armed villains with no fear for themselves.

As these girls age, though, they all slowly began to conform to society's expectations for women. Memoirs written in this period by actual young women suggest that many were loathe to let their childhoods pass away, knowing that their freedoms would inevitably diminish over time. Yet such a change seemed inevitable, even in books. Indeed, Anne, Rebecca, Caddie, and even Jo March all eventually exchange their muddy boots and ripped pinafores for dancing slippers and womanly gowns.

The inevitable aging and maturing process even touched the first female formula fiction star, Elsie Dinsmore. Elsie's stories, though formulaic, mark another turn in children's literature. Whereas many novels of this period featured rebellious children in need of correction from adults, in the Elsie books it is the young girl who proves to be the moral example for the adults around her. "Yet the overriding fact of the novels is that Elsie is the clean winner in every contest between child and adult, even (or especially) when the adult is her parent. (Author Martha) Finley made high moral drama of parent-child relationships, with the child at the center, and ascendant. It was a giant step in the direction of romanticizing childhood," writes author Anne Scott MacLeod.⁹

The desire to right wrongs is not solely the domain of children's fiction, of course. At approximately the same time that children's fiction began to develop as its own genre, the modern mystery novel, often starring a primary detective, began to emerge as well. While at first glance there might be little relation between the two genres, as I began reading about the simultaneous development of both, I realized that they actually hold much in common.

⁹ MacLeod, Anne Scott. *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Athens: U of Georgia, 1994. Print.

“Every child is born a criminal,” Dr. G. Stanley Hall stated during a controversial speech given to a group of teachers in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ While his statement might sound odd to us at first, some of us may believe that every child is born with an inclination to sin and err. In fact, historically, it was not uncommon to see parents take their children to criminal trials and public punishments. If children knew that crime led to punishment, many parents argued, then they would work to combat their own sinful and criminal tendencies.¹¹

Combating crime was then, as it is now, a constant battle in communities large and small. As previously mentioned, crime served as the inspiration for popular reading, as well as theatre and music. Yet as interest in crime flourished, so did society’s desire to combat it. In 1829, the first modern English-speaking police force formed under the direction of Sir Robert Peel, for whom the so-called “bobbies” are named.¹² Up until that time most communities depended on a generalized “good citizen” policy in which people largely policed themselves and relied on their neighbors for assistance in preventing and punishing crime. In some ways, our girl detectives, who tend to work outside of the realm of established law enforcement, continue this long-established good citizen policy.

As the nineteenth century continued, new theories over the causes of crime emerged, influenced in part by social Darwinism. Italian scholar Cesar Lombroso went so far as to propose that those who committed crimes were evolutionary throwbacks to what he deemed to be lesser species.¹³ Criminals simply hadn’t evolved normally. Such theories helped propagate blatant racism by grouping criminals with people of color, immigrants, the physically disabled, and the mentally ill. Sadly, such stereotypes persisted in popular culture for decades. A comprehensive reading of Nancy, Trixie, Judy, and Cherry’s adventures reveals that nearly all of their villains are described as being dark and swarthy, scarred or deformed, and obviously foreign, with thick accents and poor English.

Yet despite the number of threatening characters that lurk in the pages of detective novels, mystery novels are considered to be a conservative genre, because good almost always triumphs over evil. The reader gets to have an adventure, dipping her toe into the criminal underworld, while knowing that in the end, wrongs will be righted and good will prevail. It makes for thrilling stuff--both in the massively popular penny dreadfuls of the nineteenth century, and still today, when crime novels and television shows garner huge followings. Author Michelle Ann Abate states in her book *Bloody Murder, The Homicide Tradition in Children’s Literature*, that “On one hand, Americans publically denounce crimes like murder, elect public officials based on their willingness to ‘get tough’ with offenders and support legislation to build more prisons and institute mandatory minimums for certain crimes. Meanwhile, on the other hand, those same individuals consume homicide themed films, books, and television shows with a seemingly insatiable appetite.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Abate, Michelle Ann. *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children's Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. Print. P 66.

¹¹ Ibid P 66.

¹² Johnson, Ben. "Sir Robert Peel." *Historic UK*. Historic UK, 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 9 Dec. 2014.

¹³ Abate, Michelle Ann. *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children's Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. Print. P 95.

¹⁴ Abate, Michelle Ann. *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children's Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. Print. P 32.

Mystery #2 Who Created the Girl Sleuths?

Ironically, the birth of our most famous girl sleuth took place at the desk of a man, known to juvenile fiction historians as “Nancy Drew’s other father,” Edward Stratemeyer. As a young man he worked for a New York publishing operation called Street & Smith which produced formula, or factory, fiction. Many of the company’s books were inspired by true crimes. When a particularly lurid story appeared in the newspapers, company men would draft outlines for a novel centered on a similar plot. The actual text of the novel would then be created by one of a so-called stable of writers, who were under strict instructions not to deviate from their outlines. In a few years Edward worked himself into a fulltime job with the company.¹⁵

Using the lessons he learned at Street & Smith, Edward went on to found the famous Stratemeyer Syndicate, which operated in a similar fashion. Stratemeyer himself sat at the top of the pyramid, where he originated many series of familiar children’s books including the Rover Boys, the Automobile Girls, the Bobbsey Twins, the Hardy Boys, and our beloved Nancy Drew. He wrote the initial outlines of the books himself, which were then sent to a large pool of ghost writers, whose identities were kept strictly secret. When a writer completed a book, he or she sent it to Stratemeyer, who would pay the writer a flat rate in exchange for a signed agreement stating that the writer maintained no rights or claim to the work, and would never divulge his or her identity.

While it is easy today to criticize this sort of practice as demeaning to the writer, who is encouraged to write as much as possible, as quickly as possible, and then given absolutely no credit for his or her efforts, it’s important to remember that this period of American history coincides with the full flowering of the American Industrial Revolution, and the origin of the assembly line. If men like Ransom Olds and Henry Ford saw their workers as virtually interchangeable cogs in a machine, why should Edward Stratemeyer be any different? Stratemeyer never claimed to be a great artist. Like many of the auto barons, he was a good salesman, a clever originator, and a man who valued volume and profit.

Many of Stratemeyer’s contemporaries considered him little better than the grandmaster of a mass production enterprise that produced cheap novels with little or no value. Yet the youthful reading public adored him. “The Rover Boys broke out upon the country like measles,” one reporter wrote.¹⁶ While adults shunned his books and many libraries banned them from their shelves, children gobbled up Stratemeyer’s fictional sugar with an appetite that would not be satisfied. Perhaps part of his genius was in writing for children, who learn through repetition.

Though Stratemeyer spent much of his career writing for boys, he eventually came to see the monetary value in penning stories specifically for girls, launching series including the Automobile Girls and the Ruth Fielding books. Then, in 1929 he began work on a new character to be named either Stella Strong, Helen Hale, Diana Dare, Nan Nelson, or Nan Drew. Grosset and Dunlap, Stratemeyer’s publishers, suggested that her name should be Nancy.¹⁷

¹⁵ Rehak, Melanie. *Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2005. Print. Pp 9-12.

¹⁶ Ibid P 22.

¹⁷ Ibid P 114.

Though Stratemeyer created Nancy, he never lived to see her become a success, dying only a dozen days after her launch.¹⁸ Edward did originate the concepts for Nancy's first five adventures, including *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Hidden Staircase*, *The Bungalow Mystery*, *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, and *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*. To write the novels he approached a young woman with a degree in journalism who had already penned other books for girls under the Stratemeyer Syndicate, Mildred Augustine, who many would eventually come to consider the "true" Nancy Drew.¹⁹

Mildred Augustine, who later became first Mildred Wirt, and then Mildred Benson, wrote twenty-four of the first thirty Nancy Drew novels. Daring, fun-loving, smart, and an athlete who excelled at swimming and diving, Mildred was born the daughter of a small-town doctor in rural Ladora, Iowa, in 1905.²⁰ After graduating from high school early, she obtained first her undergraduate and then her master's degree in journalism from the University of Iowa, a publicly funded school that admitted both men women from the time of the school's inception in 1855.²¹

If Mildred represented Nancy's nerve and daring, her refinement in dress and flawless hostessing ability is the product of her other frequent author, Edward Stratemeyer's daughter Harriet. Born on July 10, 1905, Harriet enjoyed a bucolic childhood. She attended Wellesley, where she was active as a suffragist and a member of the media board, which carefully controlled any official news from the college. One night, when the college's original building caught on fire, she bravely ran into the burning building and helped rescue irreplaceable records in a move worthy of Nancy herself. Yet she was so naive regarding finances that an anecdote survives stating that she accidentally pasted her first paycheck in a scrapbook, thinking it only a nice souvenir. She readily admitted that her father never intended her to work, let alone take over the running of his company. Yet that's exactly what she did when her father died suddenly in 1930.

Stratemeyer's will indicated his company would be sold upon his death. In 1930, however, the Great Depression was already underway, and it seemed that no one had the desire, or the cash reserve, to purchase the company outright. Too ambitious to see the business fall into ruin, Harriet and her sister Edna decided to run the company until a buyer could be found. To do this they began writing outlines for Nancy Drew novels themselves, working with, and occasionally reprimanding, Mildred Wirt.

Nancy Drew was an instant hit. Copies of the \$.50 novels flew off the shelves, even during the depths of the Depression. They brought escapism and adventure to the millions of girls who purchased and borrowed them. Much has been written about the sense of calm and certainty evoked in the Drew books, in which hidden fortunes are found for the genteel poor, and good names are justly restored. What a tonic this must have been to little girls who saw their once successful fathers forced to stand in bread lines.

Like Nancy, Harriet was little touched by the Depression. Mildred Wirt, however, often struggled to support herself and her ill husband. Mildred wrote dozens of other books under both her own name and

¹⁸ Ibid P 109.

¹⁹ Ibid P 114.

²⁰ Ibid P 33.

²¹ Ibid P 75.

other pen names. She eventually launched a career as a journalist during World War II when she was hired, she would say, only because all of the men on staff were gone.

Mildred, too, fell under the spell of a good story. Mildred recounted an episode once that while writing *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*, her favorite Nancy Drew adventure, “she had become so engrossed in the plot as she hammered away on her typewriter that a can of condensed milk she had boiling on the stove for a caramelized dessert was left too long and exploded onto the ceiling. There, she recalled, ‘it splattered a huge blob of dark brown goo on the white wallpaper above my head. As a result of this mishap, we moved to a better apartment.’”²²

Mildred’s life, in some ways, mirrored Nancy’s. In the 1940s and 1950s Mildred worked as a courthouse reporter for various Toledo newspapers. Headlines like “Death Order Is Mandatory In Girl Killing”²³ serve as a reminder that Mildred herself worked to understand the minds of criminals. She also pursued her own exotic mysteries as she explored Mayan temples as a hobby, chronicling her work in articles with titles such as “New Treasure Found in Lost City of Mayas”²⁴ and “Copan: Ghost City of Stone”²⁵.

Mildred’s last Nancy Drew adventure was *The Clue in the Velvet Mask*, published in 1953. After this book, she was never offered another contract by Harriet, who poised herself to take over the series. While many Nancy devotees prefer Mildred’s writing to Harriet’s, she herself did not always enjoy being so closely identified with the girl sleuth. Mildred’s ambition was always to be a journalist. She readily admitted that she began writing for Stratemeyer only when another job did not materialize. She had a love/hate relationship with her most famous character. Though she would fight to gain recognition for her role in authoring many of Nancy’s most popular titles, she would eventually tell a New York Times reporter that “I’m so sick of Nancy Drew that I could vomit.”²⁶

Today, just as there were two women who authored Nancy, there are, arguably two Nancies. The first is the Nancy of Mildred’s original novels. She is feisty, impetuous, brave, and occasionally rather foolhardy. She takes chances and occasionally bends, or even breaks, the law herself. She has a temper, has enemies, and questions herself frequently. In short, she is both heroine and human.

The second Nancy, written by Harriet, pales by comparison. She is always right, always honest, and always kind. She has no flaws and is good at everything, from pottery to ballet and bareback stunt riding. While it is easy to admire her, she never seems quite real.

Officially, of course, there is only one Nancy. As the series grew, though, and times changed, Nancy’s novels began to draw criticism for their negative portrayal of racial minorities, who always spoke in dialect and were sometimes portrayed as drunk and simple-minded. Others complained that the books

²² Ibid P 141.

²³ Benson, Mildred. "Death Order Is Mandatory in Girl Killing." *The Toledo Times* 13 Jan. 1955. Print.

²⁴ Benson, Mildred. "New Treasure Found in Lost City of Mayas." *The Blade*. Print.

²⁵ Benson, Mildred. "Copan: Ghost City of Stone." *The Blade Sunday Magazine* 8 May 1966. Print.

²⁶ Martin, Douglas. "Mildred Benson Is Dead at 96; Wrote 23 Nancy Drew Books." *The New York Times* 30 May 2002. Web.

were becoming dated. In response to growing criticism, publisher Grosset and Dunlap instituted a serious rewrite of the first thirty-four Nancy Drew books in 1958.

Unfortunately, though the project did address many of the negative stereotypes found in the original novels, it also wreaked havoc on their plots. In the original novels, most of the plots are well-paced and consistent. The stories build slowly, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. In contrast the rewritten books crash along at breakneck speed, delivering formulaic and often repetitive crises at the end of each and every chapter.

When I began this paper, I resolved to read all of the books in each of the four series described in this paper, in the order of their original publication. (If you're wondering, I came very close to succeeding.) The experiment proved to be an interesting one, as I'd never read the books chronologically before. I also resolved to find and read as many of the original novels as possible, and compare them with the updated books.

The contrast could not have been more obvious from the beginning. Ever a traditionalist at heart, I took to the old Nancy novels with enthusiasm. The Nancy portrayed in them was exciting. She carried a gun, which she occasionally used when a stray wild animal was poised to attack. She broke speed limits, argued with the police, and rescued her father from life-threatening danger. She is brave. She is a little wild. She outruns and out thinks all of the men around her. She is exactly the woman that we have all wanted, at one time or another, to be.

Mystery #3 Who Are the Other Girl Sleuths?

Though Nancy Drew remains to this day the Grande Dame of the girl detectives, she is far from the only female juvenile detective phenomena. Mid twentieth century American culture is full of girl detectives who went to work solving mysteries and righting the wrongs of the world. A who's who of the genre includes not only Cherry Ames, Trixie Belden, and Judy Bolton, who I will discuss, but also such names as flight stewardess Vicki Barr, crime-solving sisters the Dana Girls, newspaper reporters Penny Parker and Beverly Gray, model turned secretary Connie Blair, and high school student Kay Tracey.

While it is safe to say that Nancy's following has always been the largest, spirited fan communities do battle to this day defending their own favorite girl detectives. Three of the most popular are Judy Bolton, Cherry Ames, and Trixie Belden.

JUDY BOLTON

Judy Bolton is the second major girl detective to appear on the scene in the 1930s. Series creator Margaret Sutton wrote Judy's first adventure in 1930, though the series did not officially debut until two years later. Sutton penned all thirty-eight books in the series, and is believed to be the only juvenile mystery author to do so.²⁷

²⁷ White, Jennifer. "The Judy Bolton Mystery Stories by Margaret Sutton." *Vintage Series Books for Girls...and a Few for Boys*. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

Unlike her fellow authors who never aged their detectives, Sutton chronicled many years of Judy's life in her novels. At the beginning of the series Judy is a young high school student who solves mysteries with her schoolmates. Throughout the series Judy grows older. She graduates, works as a secretary, gets engaged, marries her childhood friend, and, for a brief period, fosters a young girl named Roberta. Along the way she experiences great joy and devastating loss, including the death of her beloved grandparents.

Judy fans disagree on whether or not it was wise for Sutton to age Judy. Numerous articles state that Sutton fought her publishers, Grosset and Dunlap, on this issue. Why would a young girl, the publisher argued, want to read mysteries involving a married woman with responsibilities when they could idolize a comparably carefree teenage detective with no real obligations? Though Sutton prevailed for many years, the series was canceled in 1967 due to declining sales.²⁸

Sutton's novels are also unique in that they focus on Judy's struggles with moral questions that entangle her most intimate friends and family members. In *The Name on the Bracelet* she struggles with whether or not she should reveal that her friend's daughter is in fact not biologically hers, and was accidentally switched in the maternity hospital. Instead of simply obsessing over the lost baby, Judy spends a great deal of time worrying about the potential repercussions this may have for her friend's marriage and long-term happiness. Is it better to preserve her friend's innocence, or reveal the truth and risk her friend's peaceful home?

Judy's own family becomes the subject of her sleuthing in *The Clue in the Patchwork Quilt*. While plots involving long-lost family members are not unusual in children's fiction, the twist in this novel is that the girl in question may be the child of a forbidden marriage involving Judy's long-dead aunt. Her mother is greatly distressed by this possibility, and Judy experiences profound grief over her decision to bring the issue to a head. The novel also suggests that Judy's grandparents, who didn't approve of their daughter's marriage, may have known about the child but rejected her based on her parentage.

Realistic Judy also sheds many tears over her relationships with two young men: Peter Dobbs, who she eventually marries, and Arthur Farrington-Pett, a wealthy young man who admires Judy immensely. In the beginning of *The Riddle of the Double Ring* Judy accepts Arthur's proposal of marriage, only to spend the rest of the book realizing that she made a terrible mistake, as she does not truly love him. Worse, her friend Lorraine, who genuinely cares for Arthur, suddenly disappears, leaving Judy wondering if she has lost both a friend and her chance for happiness. Her distress grows even greater when she learns that her childhood playmate and friend Peter Dobbs does love her, but now believes himself spurned.

While it is difficult to argue that the Judy Bolton novels are dark, they certainly contain a greater degree of personal risk than is found in other contemporaneous girl detective series. As an adult reading the books for the first time, I found myself attracted to Judy's personal moral struggles. Yet I suspect that these very adult struggles ultimately spelled the end of a series penned ostensibly for children.

CHERRY AMES

²⁸ White, Jennifer. "The Judy Bolton Mystery Stories by Margaret Sutton." *Vintage Series Books for Girls...and a Few for Boys*. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

Our third girl detective to break onto the scene is the least likely to refer to herself as such. Unlike her sister sleuths, Cherry, whose birth name is Charity, did not begin her career solving mysteries. Instead, she enters the first book in the series, *Cherry Ames, Student Nurse*, as a fresh-faced eighteen-year-old girl about to enter nursing school.

Helen Wells's Cherry Ames novels are unique in that they are originally set during World War II, a real world event. Unlike her fictional sister heroines, who remain largely isolated and removed from current events taking place during their years of publication, Cherry was aware of and frightened by the war. In fact, after training for three years at Spencer Hospital School of Nursing, Cherry's entire nursing school graduating class decides in one dramatically patriotic scene to enlist in the Nurses Training Corps together. Once in the army, Cherry works as a flight nurse based first in first England and then the Philippine Islands.

In keeping with these real world events, actual time passes and the war wages on during the first several Ames novels. Their publication dates are sandwiched tightly together. Interestingly, Wells was not able to work the end of the war into the books, creating a significant gap for the reader, as Cherry is still happily enlisted and nursing in war-torn Europe at the end of book five, whereas book six, *Cherry Ames, Veterans Nurse*, finds her back stateside, concerned for the scores of wounded veterans now under her care. Perhaps such spasmodic pacing issues are what kept other girl detective authors from tying their characters to real world events.

Today, many historians and juvenile fiction aficionados argue that Wells's creation of Cherry was an attempt to inspire young women to train and serve as nurses. And, of course, when the series began in 1942, no one knew when and how the war would end. If the original readers of the books were indeed 8-12 years old, it becomes quickly evident that absolutely none of the targeted audience would have been old enough to fulfill such an ambition during the war. However, it would be interesting to know how many young readers would go on to serve as nurses in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts

Cherry's initial career in war nursing presented a problem to author Wells, who was, by then, well into a successful series. In peacetime, though, the books risked losing their focus. In an attempt to maintain both herself and her character, Wells shifted the focus of the books to Cherry's sleuthing. Initially, her pacing is halting and awkward, leaving readers wondering if they are truly detective novels. An abrupt shift in this pattern occurs in *Cherry Ames, Cruise Nurse*, the ninth title in the series. Though published under the name of Helen Wells, *Cruise Nurse* is the work of Julie Tatham Campbell, originator of the Trixie Belden novels. Tatham took over the Ames books in 1948, the same year she began first published Trixie's adventures.²⁹ Under Tatham the books became true mysteries. Her successful model was maintained by Wells, who eventually resumed her authorship of the series.

The real value in Cherry's stories, in my opinion, is that throughout the books she is proud to be a professional woman. She comments often on her love of nursing, highly recommending it to other young and ambitious women. She believes that there is no higher calling for a woman--including marriage.

²⁹ White, Jennifer. "The Cherry Ames Nurse Stories." *Vintage Series Books for Girls....and a Few for Boys*. 1 Jan. 2003. Web. 11 Jan. 2015.

While Cherry admires her mother and loves her home, she never expresses a desire to exchange her nurse's cap for a homemaker's apron.

Wells even goes so far as to include a proposal of marriage to Cherry by an attractive young doctor in nearly every novel. My personal favorite takes place in *Cherry Ames, Veterans' Nurse*, when handsome pilot Wade Cooper makes a weekend visit to Cherry's home. From the onset Wade is focused on proposing to Cherry, who is clearly not interested. Throughout a very humorous chapter, Cherry sets out to prove to him that they are not ready for marriage. In order to do this she determined to force him to undergo "...the most horrible test she could think of. She took him shopping."³⁰ Hijinks ensue when Cherry lectures Wade about how he'll need to learn to eat his vegetables in order to be a good example for their children--a comment that causes his face to blanch. The climax occurs the next day when Cherry and Wade decide to take a Sunday afternoon canoe trip, during which their boat capsizes and Cherry has to save Wade, who can't swim. His male pride doesn't handle this well, and once his feet are back on dry ground, he declares "I wouldn't marry you now for anything!" Cherry, laughing, replies, "Nobody asked you, sir."³¹

It was Cherry, I believe, who had a real impact on girls who desired to be working women. Troll the internet or speak to nurses of the Baby Boomer generation, and you'll find many women who, inspired by Cherry, decided on a career in nursing.

TRIXIE BELDEN

Our fourth girl detective, who I already introduced earlier, is the saucy, bright, occasionally self-conscious Trixie Belden. It is the characters and the companionship, most Trixie aficionados argue, that makes this series different. The novels feature not just Trixie Belden, who plays the role of lead detective, but a group of seven friends who live in rural New York and call themselves the Bob-Whites of the Glen. Together they attend school, travel across the country, and solve mysteries.

Fourteen-year-old Trixie, christened for her great aunt Beatrix, is the third child born to Helen and Peter Belden. She is not a perfect heroine, and she has plenty of faults and struggles. She hates dusting, washing dishes, math, crying, dresses, and her freckles. She is happiest when she's wearing old blue jeans and riding a horse, swimming, or exploring something dangerous. She is loyal to a fault, loving her family and friends with abandon. She has a genuine desire to improve the world in which she lives, and is often drawn into her mysteries due to her desire to help others.

In the first book of the series, *The Secret of the Mansion*, Trixie forms a friendship with her new neighbor, Madeline "Honey" Wheeler and runaway Jim Frayne. Together the three find the missing fortune left to Jim by his eccentric great-uncle. In subsequent novels they are joined in their adventures by Trixie's brothers, Brian and Mart, neighbor Diana Lynch, and reformed bad-boy and one-time suspect, Dan Mangan.

³⁰ Wells, Helen. "Wade Comes To Town." *Cherry Ames, Veteran's Nurse*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946. 151. Print.

³¹ Wells, Helen. "Wade Comes To Town." *Cherry Ames, Veteran's Nurse*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946. 162. Print.

Each character in the series is unique. Honey is sweet, feminine, and unfailingly polite. Jim, who Trixie privately refers to as “the most wonderful boy in the world,” is a stubborn red-head who enjoys spending time outside. Brian, the eldest Belden, is calm and level-headed. Mart, just eleven months older than Trixie, enjoys goading his sister and displaying his prowess for large words. Diana is shy and a bit shallow, while Dan is daring and slightly dangerous. As individuals they all have strengths and weaknesses. But in forming the Bob-White of the Glen, buoyed by their friends, each of the awkward teenagers gains new confidence.

The characters are the creation of Julie Campbell Tatham, who wrote the first six books, which were published between 1948 and 1958. At this time Tatham, who published this series under her maiden name of Campbell, turned the series over to Whitman Publishing, who assigned the series to a variety of ghostwriters who wrote under the pen name of Kathryn Kenny.

Trixie fans believe there to be at least seven women and one man who penned the remainder of the Trixie Belden series, which grew to include thirty-nine titles.³² One of the authors gently poked fun at the practice of ghostwriting in *The Mystery of the Ghostly Galleon*, in which Trixie and Mart meet a young man who ends up being the author of both of their favorite mystery series, written under two pen names. There’s a very funny scene in this story where Trixie watches him throwing a dummy over a small cliff so that he can “see” what this particular crime might look like in order to better describe it in his books.

The Trixie Belden books, which were written for a slightly younger audience than our other girl detectives, are full of safe, close-to-home adventures. The Bob-Whites are typically motivated to take on a mystery by their desire to strengthen their community and make the world a better place. Nearly every book includes both a mystery and some sort of project in which they raise money for a charity, provide assistance to someone who is elderly, or help a single mother and her children get back on their feet.

Forgiveness is an important theme in the Belden books. Many of the so-called criminals in the series are little more than wayward teens who turn to petty crime because they are homeless, orphaned, and poor. In many ways the Bob-Whites main function is to help these struggling souls understand that the path they are on will only lead to destruction. Instead, they urge them to reform and find a place in society.

The Bob-Whites are a team. Trixie, to her credit, relies on her friends and brothers, and is not afraid to share the credit for solving her mysteries with them. In nearly every novel there is a climactic scene near the end in which she attempts to resolve a crisis on her own, and, while her deduction is always right, she almost always needs the help of another Bob-White to close the deal.

Another point in favor of the Belden books is that the camaraderie of the Bob-Whites, and their genuine affection for one another, which draws the reader in and instills in them a sense of belonging. Much ink has been spilled over the years by critics of juvenile literature regarding every child’s desire to find his or her place in the world. As growing youth, we all experienced difficult periods during which we felt isolated. The Bob-Whites share this insecurity with us, and ultimately provide a warm circle of friends in

³² Johns, Jenni. "Kathryn Kenny." *Trixie Belden*. 2001. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

which we can take refuge.

Mystery #4 Why Do They Resonate So With Their Readers?

Over the last two years, as I've read and reread the adventures of Nancy, Judy, Cherry, and Trixie, I found myself thinking a great deal about the influence that these brave and intelligent characters had on us in our youth. Is it an exaggeration to say that these fictional characters helped shape a future supreme court justice, a governor, or possibly a president?

I believe that a well-told story can change us, and linger in our souls long after the covers of the book are closed. A story's power can deepen with time as we revisit those familiar words on the page.

As I turned the pages again of *The Mystery of the Emeralds* in preparation for this paper, I found myself laughing and smiling at what I discovered now, over two decades after my first meeting with Trixie. In many ways the story is, of course, the same. But my reading of it has changed. I now know what Mart--the walking dictionary and resident brainiac--is actually saying when he drops his multi-syllabic quips. I hunt for clues to the sweet affections that the club members have for one another. I shudder slightly when I read of Mrs. Belden's summer canning projects, realizing that I am now closer to being the age of Trixie's mother than I am of my girlhood hero!

I can see my younger self there, the clues sprinkled about plainly for those looking. In Trixie I see my own insecurities about my appearance. In her quick temper and hasty words I hear things that I should not have said.

I also find my adult self in the novels. In *The Mystery of the Emeralds*, Trixie spends a great deal of time visiting old houses and studying their histories. She goes hunting for clues in a small family graveyard and visits a mausoleum. She deciphers the spidery handwriting of long forgotten letters, and conducts what a professional historian might term oral histories. She even works with the president of the local historical society--a busy, self-determined woman who wears large hats--to obtain architectural plans for an old house in order to better understand the secrets it holds.

Sound familiar?

The girl detectives of the mid 20th century taught millions of girls that we could solve the world's mysteries. We could be anyone, and do anything. We could drive cars too fast, we could catch criminals, we could restore priceless heirlooms to the downtrodden, we could offer orphans a home, and we could reunite separated families. We could right the wrongs of the world through hard work and determination. We could seize command of the situation and bring about a successful resolution. And we could do it by being **smart**.

The girl detectives also remind us that we can take different paths as we solve the mysteries that life gives us. There was, and is, no one-size-fits-all path for intelligent girls and women. Some of us are like Nancy--the self-confident leader, the woman who out-thinks and out-reasons everyone around her. Others are like Judy--the girl who seeks to better the lives of her friends and family while fighting personal moral

battles. Or perhaps some of us prefer to be more like Cherry, and focus on our careers, using our talents to bring order and healing to a scared world.

As for me....well, I'm happy to be a Trixie. I like my puzzles and my challenges as much as any girl, but I know that I cannot do it alone. I am lucky enough to be the wife of a nature-loving, red-haired man (whom I jokingly call my own Jim Frayne). Though an only child, I count among my closest friends a dear cousin, who has shared in many of my adventures. I am also richly blessed with a tight support system of close friends who bandage me up when I fall down, and join me as I sleuth out historical mysteries in libraries, archives, and old buildings across the country.

And of course, like Trixie, I count myself fortunate to be the member of a wonderful club.

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