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The Riddle of the Revised Novels: Nancy Drew in the Depression and Cold War

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Generations of American girls have come of age reading Nancy Drew mystery stories. The first Drew books came out during the 1930s, in the thick of the Great Depression. The series' publishers revised them as the Cold War raged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. A careful study of what changed and what did not suggests that the revisions were designed to transform books whose attitudes were informed by the progressive early 1930s into stories that fit the very different tempo of the strait-laced 1950s and early 1960s. Such a study provides a vivid example of the ways in which American popular culture picks up on and reflects changes in the society at large. Moreover, Nancy Drew novels were aimed at impressionable young girls, who depended on such books for a picture of what the world was like and for help in finding their place in it. Thus, the books' role as barometers of societal change grows even more significant. To demonstrate how completely the Nancy Drews were designed and redesigned to reflect the prevailing cultural winds, it is necessary to compare and contrast the content of both editions of several of these novels with respect to how well they illustrate the broader social climate of their times.

This paper compares three representative Nancy Drew titles, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Hidden Staircase*, and *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, in their Depression and Cold War incarnations. All three books were first published in 1930. The revised versions of *The Old Clock* and *The Hidden Staircase* appeared in 1959, and that of *Lilac Inn* in 1961. This careful analysis found changes in everything from chapter length and titles to character names and plot elements. This author's thesis is that modifications were deliberately designed to evoke the puritanical atmosphere of the post-war period as opposed to the more liberal environment of the 1930s. In the later novels, Nancy loses much of her autonomy and she and the other characters are less likely to flout societal norms, while the narration concerns itself less with class distinctions among its characters and the books become 20 to 30 pages shorter.

Due to the process by which they are produced, Nancy Drew books have always been remarkably sensitive to changes in American society. The books are attributed to Carolyn Keene, yet Keene is not an actual author but a pen name for a succession of ghostwriters under the thumb of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, a corporation which churned out children's series books.1
Edward Stratemeyer, the early head of the syndicate, “devised plots and brief outlines for his stable of ghostwriters to turn into 200-page novels,” which were then sold to various publishing houses; his successors as head of the syndicate had even more control over the finished novels. This syndicate was in the business of creating novels that would sell. Authors submitted every stage of their books to the Syndicate, which revised them to heighten their appeal. For such a popularity-driven enterprise, the rationale was strong for rewriting the books to reflect changing tastes. Since all authors of individual books signed their rights to their work over to the syndicate, this was easy to accomplish. Furthermore, five or more people often had a hand in writing and editing Syndicate books. Thus, books-in-progress had many opportunities to be altered if someone involved in their production disapproved of one of their elements.

In their essay, “Translating Nancy Drew from Print to Film,” Diana Beeson and Bonnie Brennen explore some of the differences between the original and revised editions of one Nancy Drew title: The Hidden Staircase. This expanded study found much to support Beeson and Brennen’s conclusion that in the newer versions, “Nancy’s independent character is softened and . . . she relies much more heavily on others for help and guidance.”

Nancy’s autonomy is curtailed in these second editions. While the original Nancy traipsed all around her county alone in her roadster, the newer Nancy does her sleuthing with others. In the 1930 Hidden Staircase, Nancy goes to stay with two old women in their decaying mansion in hopes of discovering a thief. She conceals her plans, even keeping them a secret from her close friend Helen, a “natural born gossip” who cannot be trusted to maintain silence. In order to solve this mystery, she needs to find a passageway between this house and one behind it to explain how the villain could have gained access to the house. She sneaks into the second house by herself late at night to search for the hidden staircase. In the 1959 mystery, the women are Helen’s great-aunt and great-grandmother. Helen now has an excuse to go with Nancy to the mansion and accompany her when she finds the staircase (in broad daylight after obtaining permission to look through the house).

The transformation of Nancy from a self-sufficient and independent character to one who depends on the presence and aid of others is emblematic of a shift in the characteristics American society most valued in women. The year 1930 was at the tail end of an era symbolized by the flapper, a “liberated” woman who wore her hair short, worked outside the home in unprecedented numbers, and felt free to speak her own opinions. Popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s celebrated independent women. For example, female movie stars were depicted as “strong, autonomous, competent, and career oriented.”

In response to the disruption created by the Second World War and the ominous threat of nuclear war, women of the 1950s felt strong pressure to return to domesticity. Too much independence was seen as dangerous...
because "emancipated women outside the home might unleash the very forces that would result in a collapse of the one institution that seemed to offer protection: the home." 7 Some of the revised books that changed thus were published in the early 1960s. For most people, the 1960s are associated with resurgent feminism rather than domesticity, yet these books came out in the early part of the decade, before the feminist movement changed the roles of women. Also, because it takes a fair amount of time for a book to make it into print, a 1961 publishing date doesn’t accurately reflect in what year the book was written.

One manifestation of this new fear of female liberation was a novel emphasis on the need for healthy women to attach themselves to men. Love interests are completely irrelevant to the Nancy of the 1930s (she is concerned with every sort of mystery except the mystery of the opposite sex). Yet the later editions of two out of three of the novels in this study introduce young male characters for Nancy. Early in The Hidden Staircase, she goes on a date with a "red-haired, former high-school tennis champion." 8 The date does nothing whatsoever to advance the plot. One might suspect that the book’s authors included it to reassure its audience that Nancy, no matter what her prowess at solving mysteries, was still a typical American teenage girl who knew how to behave with typical teenage boys. The young man inserted into The Mystery at Lilac Inn plays a more prominent role in the plot, but serves the same purpose of assuring the reader of Nancy’s femininity. Army officer John McBride and Nancy flirt back and forth, and he accompanies her on some of her sleuthing expeditions. After being tricked by an impostor, he tells Nancy that he "much prefer[s] the real Nancy," who "blushe[s] at his compliment." 9 Upon leaving to search for a clue, Nancy assures some of her friends that "if John’s with me, I’ll be safe." 10

Nancy even looks different in the illustrations accompanying the different editions. One example involves the key scene from The Hidden Staircase in which Nancy finds the secret stairway connecting two houses. The picture from the 1930 book shows an older-looking Nancy than its later counterpart. In the original books Nancy usually wears adult fashions, such as the cloche hat in the Hidden Staircase picture. In the later editions, Nancy’s clothes are more girlish. If Nancy looks younger, it becomes harder to take her seriously. This change in dress reinforces the impression created by Nancy’s sudden interest in boys and wariness of going anywhere alone. She now embodies “an image of prolonged childhood." 11

Nancy’s decreased independence and return to more traditional ideals of femininity make up just one aspect, albeit a vital one, of a larger shift. Both Nancy and other characters are more reluctant to challenge the status quo in the 1950s revisions than in the originals. Nancy worries more as to whether the measures she undertakes to solve mysteries are within the letter of the law. Beeson and Brennen note that “whereas the original Nancy Drew frequently worked outside the law, the new Nancy is a law-abiding citizen." 12
While the 1930s books often portray Nancy as more competent than the local police and capable of solving mysteries that stump them, the later versions depict her as more of an auxiliary to the ever-present and ever-able police.

Changes in *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* epitomize the differences between the ways that the Depression Nancy and the Cold War Nancy interact with civil authority. In both versions of the story, Nancy recovers some stolen jewels for her friend Emily, who has just inherited them from her deceased parents. In the original 1930 book, Nancy solves the mystery alone, while the police are busy trying to frame the wrong suspect for the theft of the jewels. In fact, Nancy is pitted against the police. It’s up to her to see that justice is served and the real thief is caught before the police arrest Emily’s innocent guardian. In the 1961 edition, in contrast, Nancy wants to call the authorities in on the case from the start. Halfway through the story, Nancy’s father even counsels her to go against Emily’s wishes and tell the police information she had withheld from them.13

In the revised books, Nancy is careful to avoid even the appearance of breaking the law. In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, she gives the police marshal a ride back to town after orchestrating the arrest of some robbers. As the marshal starts toward her car, Nancy remembers that she had rescued the heirloom timepiece of the title from the thieves before helping the police track them down and placed it in her car so she could look for the will she suspects is inside it. In the 1930 story, she simply moves the clock before the policeman can see where it came from. She has no moral qualms about deceiving the policeman, but fears that, if he sees that she is in possession of stolen goods, he will take the clock back before she has time to solve the mystery.14 In the 1959 version, it never occurs to her not to show the policeman the clock and return it. She tells herself immediately that she’ll “just have to ‘fess up... and take the consequences!”15

The cynical view of the police displayed in the early mysteries is in line with the distrust of government and authority that many felt in the early years of the Depression. Millions had been plunged into poverty by forces about which they knew nothing, and the government was turning a blind eye rather than helping them cope. Negative stereotypes of civil authority were finding their way into popular entertainment of all stripes. One historian notes that in gangster films of the early 1930s, “government had appeared... as inept and, on the state level... as oppressive and evil.”16

With the Cold War era’s focus on conformity and civic obedience, readers would likely have been jarred or even alarmed by literature that did not pay enough heed to these values. Worries about nuclear threats kept postwar Americans submerged in a climate of fear. According to one historian, people “actually talked about living in an ‘age of anxiety.’ They saw themselves living in an age of crisis.”17 Americans of the 1950s so needed to be comforted by the idea of authority figures protecting them from the menace of Communism that they flocked to buy books such as *The FBI Story*, an
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authorized history of the FBI that became the second-best-selling nonfiction book of 1957.\(^8\)

Such concerns sometimes appear explicitly in the revised Nancy Drew. In the 1961 *Lilac Inn*, John McBride’s mission is to find out who is stealing Army engineering tools and selling them to an “enemy agent.” When Nancy catches the jewel thieves, John discovers that they are the ones involved in this nefarious plan. For her help in apprehending these traitors, Nancy is “honored at a colorful Army ceremony.”\(^9\) Thus her sleuthing is linked to upholding the safety of the nation.

The postwar stories show much less preoccupation with social class than do the ones of the 1930s. Kathleen Chamberlain notes that class distinctions within Nancy’s world “became less overt as the series developed.”\(^10\) In the earlier books, “Nancy has a certain amount of *noblesse oblige* [and] is gracious and charitable in all social encounters.”\(^11\) She is quite at home taking formal dinners with genteel old ladies and attending parties filled with “distinguished-looking men and women.”\(^12\)

Readers are also constantly reminded of Nancy’s high social standing. In the original *Secret of the Old Clock*, Nancy tries to gain access to the home of the Tophams, the social-climbing villains of the story, by selling them tickets to a charity ball. Mrs. Topham allows her to come in only when she remembers that “Carson Drew and his daughter were cordially welcomed in River Heights homes which merely tolerated the Tophams or, in a few cases, barred them.”\(^13\) While the Tophams still long to break into River Heights’ best social circles in the 1959 story, Mrs. Topham now lets Nancy in upon realizing that buying tickets to the ball would allow her to mingle with high society. The social standing of Nancy herself does not come into play at all.

Depression-era readers enjoyed escaping to a world of privilege, while more uniformly prosperous readers of the Cold War had less motivation to view reading about the affluent as vicarious pleasure. Entertainment of the 1930s was marked by detailed evocations of wealthy or exotic lifestyles; people picking up a book or going to see a movie wanted to forget their troubles by becoming absorbed in a world far removed from them. “From all directions and times,” says historian of the Depression Gary Dean Best, “authors sought escapist themes to meet the needs of the 1930s.”\(^14\)

In the postwar era, on the other hand, “riches were becoming more evenly distributed.” More than twice as many people enjoyed incomes in the highest economic brackets as in 1929, but this larger group of rich people brought in proportionally less of the total national income.\(^15\) The greatest anxiety of the 1950s and early 1960s was not financial but national security.

Another implication of the expansion of the middle class after the war meant that many people reading Nancy Drew in the 1950s had newly come to prosperity and thus could not relate to the original series’ preoccupations with social standing and good breeding. The original books “were written to appeal to girls very similar to the character herself; young women of privi-
Before the war, fewer young women could afford significant education, and, with the advent of the Depression, few could even afford books. Thus, the market for Nancy Drews consisted of those who had escaped the Depression enough to have disposable income and those in poverty who valued reading enough to buy books with what little money they had. Even those who read for escape were likely to be once-affluent young ladies who relished nostalgic evocations of the world they had lived in before financial hardship struck.

The revised books are shorter, with less exposition and tightened action. The books shrink from an average of 210 pages to roughly 180. They now "move[d] forward at breakneck pace and ha[d] much less description." This change reflects how television had shortened readers' attention spans and accustomed them to more action. The advent of TV had cut sharply into the popularity of such older forms of entertainment as movies and magazines. In one 6-month period in 1954, newsstand circulation of the once-popular magazine *Life* took a 21-percent dive. In order to maintain their popularity, Nancy Drew books would have to become friendlier to television-watchers. Thus the Stratemeyer Syndicate streamlined the stories and made them more active so they would better hold readers' interests.

Closely related to this shortening of the stories is the simplification of their vocabulary. While shorter, the later versions also included many more illustrations. Most printings of the 1930s books featured only one illustration as a frontispiece, yet the revised books contained five or six more sprinkled throughout the text. The less sophisticated language and larger number of pictures likely made reading less of a strain for those used to finding their entertainment on television.

Besides playing to a reading public which had cut its teeth on early television, the shortened and simplified books reinforced the changes in the series' value system. Much of the material cut out of the later books relates Nancy's adventures during climactic moments when she discovers key elements of whichever mystery she happens to be solving. In the original books, many passages are devoted to describing exactly how much danger Nancy is facing. Also, Nancy usually tries many solutions before she finds what meets with success. In the original *Hidden Staircase*, Nancy spends 15 pages and two chapters worth of action in the house searching for the panel that leads to the hidden staircase, pushing frantically on panel after panel, all the while trying to avoid being discovered by the servant present in the house. In the 1959 version, she and Helen spend roughly three pages in pursuit of the opening to the stairway before they happen to notice a strange-looking knob that, when turned, leads to the passageway.

The trimming of these scenes downplays Nancy's daring and perseverance as well as the danger she faces. Without the trial-and-error, blind luck appears to play a much larger part in Nancy's eventual successes. Thus Nancy is not as threateningly self-sufficient as she was in the earlier books.
Since the readers of the 1950s feared for their lives on a regular basis, cliffhangers in which Nancy’s life appeared to be endangered would hit a bit too close to home. Diana Beeson theorizes that Americans of this era “saw total annihilation of all life as a real and imminent possibility and it’s likely they sought escape in popular literature where characters were not similarly imperiled, individually or collectively.”

Clearly, this analysis demonstrates that these books reflect the seismic shifts in American society between the Depression and the Cold War. The changes in the series and in Nancy herself illustrate the sensitivity of American popular culture to shifts in the broader fabric of society. This process is at work even now. The later 1960s revolutionized the ways that we view women and figures of authority, making the Nancy Drew books of the Cold War era seem unappealingly dated to a contemporary public. Yet Applewood Press has introduced faithful facsimilies of the original 1930s books, which have found a steady market with young women readers in the 1990s. It is truly ironic that the feisty and independent 1930s Nancy seems more modern and more in tune with 1990s sensibilities than the docile revised Nancy of the postwar era.

The changes described above helped Nancy Drew books retain their place throughout the Cold War as one of the top-selling series of books aimed at young girls. Series of juvenile novels have littered bookstores since before Nancy’s advent in 1930. Most of them did not bother to adapt to the changing tastes of their audience and subsequently disappeared. Nancy Drew did, and she is still the “number-one-selling teen sleuth,” poking around old houses and searching for stolen jewels into the new millennium.

Endnotes

3. Dyer and Romalov, 37.
4. Diana Beeson and Bonnie Brennen, “Translating Nancy Drew from Print to Film,” in Dyer and Romalov, 194.
23. Keene, Old Clock, 1930, 97.
25. Whitfield, 70.
27. Chamberlain, 3.
32. Lapin, 68.