



Who was Nancy Drew manipulating? What do Nancy Drew and Togo have in common? When did Nancy Drew break the law? Where was Nancy Drew when Bess needed defending? Why did Carson Drew spoil his daughter? How did Nancy Drew solve all of those mysteries and still remain a youthful eighteen? Renee Walker attempts to answer these questions and more in her satirical look at the Nancy Drew mysteries, *The Dark Side of River Heights*. I had the pleasure of meeting with Renee recently and talking with her about her book.

TL: What prompted you to write a book that looks at the “darker side” of Nancy Drew’s world?

RW: Last June, my husband’s grandfather passed away, and so we took a trip over to Arizona. At the time, I had an eight-month old daughter, and I was thinking that I needed to have something to read while she’s napping. I looked on the bookshelf and saw a bunch of Nancy Drews, and I thought, “Perfect!” They would be a good, light read, and it’s always been comforting for me to read Nancy Drew because every book always had a happy ending. However, as I was flying back from Arizona, little things kept on popping up while I was reading, and I thought, “Wouldn’t it be great to write a little expose about Nancy?” I mean, Nancy was always going after criminals and always bringing people to justice. But had anyone ever taken a second look at her actions? She stepped over the line from time to time, and no one seemed to say anything. I’m not trying to say that she didn’t do great things or that she wasn’t inspirational, because by all means, she’s a very great role model. But I wanted to see if there were common threads or common observations of the untold and the unflattering. “Let’s sleuth the sleuth,” so to speak. Nobody had ever taken a deep, dark look at Nancy. Let’s see what she skates by with. It is hilarious as an adult to get it into your mind that here’s pretty, little Nancy, doing everything wonderful, and then you think, “Oops, she broke the law!” It’s funny to see how she works in the real world. There are a lot of folks who think she’s perfect and unblemished, and I never really thought of her like that. I was always seeing these little hidden elements that were never really brought to light.

TL: How long did it take you to complete the work? To read all those books then write the book itself?

RW: It took me about 7 weeks to go through all 56 mysteries, and I used a lot of post-it notes. After I finished reading them, I wrote the book in 6 weeks. Now, mind you, this was during hurricane season. So some of these books I had never read before, such

as *The Ghost of Blackwood Hall*. And here I sat, no electricity, reading by flashlight. It was fabulous, with the thunder and lightning. So, I wrote my book in 6 weeks, commissioned the artwork, and self-published. About 5 weeks into my project, I went online to research a little bit more, when I came upon the Nancy Drew Sleuths. I also discovered it was the 75th anniversary this year. I toyed around with the idea of taking my book to an agent, and going the whole publication route. Then I realized how much it would take to go that route, how much time would be required, and I really wanted this to hit the market for the 75th anniversary because there's going to be hype, there's going to be articles, and I really wanted the book to be out this year, rather than to be slated for 2006. So I decided, let's just go the self-publication route and see how it goes.

TL: So, your book is based solely upon the yellow-spine series of Nancy Drew?

RW: I started reading Nancy when I was 8, and I remember I was really into her when I was 10. But my local library didn't have a lot of the books. When I started this last June, I went to Costco.com and bought the entire set of 56. I decided to go with the yellow spine Nancy Drew because they are more prevalent and in circulation. If someone were to pick up my book and then wanted to re-read the Nancy Drew series, more often than not they will have access to the yellow spine books. Unless you are a serious collector or have a grandmother who was a packrat, you're probably not going to have any of the original text books. I love Nancy, and I plan on passing all of my books on to my daughter.

TL: Chapter II – Nancy's Rap Sheet gives us a listing of all the actions Nancy has taken over the years that could be deemed crimes. Where did you research the laws regarding these crimes?

RW: I looked up the state statutes for Illinois. I also have a friend who has her master's in criminal law, so I gave her the scenarios and asked her what laws would Nancy have broken, if any. She gave me great feedback. I even went to my mailman with regard to *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*. In that book, Nancy supposedly broke the law by inviting Ira Nixon into her home. So an investigative aide to the postmaster general came back to her, accusing her of breaking the law by inviting the postman into her home. When Nancy said she would talk to her father who is a lawyer, the aide backed off. So I quizzed my mailman one day while he was delivering my mail. The two questions I posed were: if I were to invite a mailman into my home, is that breaking the law, and everyone knows it's a felony if you steal somebody's mail, but what is that crime called? I had tried 1-800-ASK-USPS, and they didn't have the answer for me. My mailman asked his supervisor, and he came back to me with all the information. He said it is not a crime to invite a mail person into your home, but it is a crime for the mail person to come in and not have his mailbag right with him, because that's part of the oath and the mailman's ethics. So, Nancy did not break the law in that case. He also told me that it is called "mail theft" if you were to take someone's mail. So, now my husband jokes every time the mailman comes. He says perhaps the mailman doesn't

believe my cover of “writing a book” and thinks I was just hinting around at him with a little invite to come in for tea.

TL: Another great chapter was Chapter XVII – Time Flies When You’re Having Fun. Did you plan on doing that before you started reading the series or did that come after the fact?

RW: I thought about it afterwards. I was about half-way through the project, when I thought, how am I going to lay it out? I had the inspiration to do twenty chapters, just like the yellow spine series. And with twenty chapters, some of them I love and some of them I didn’t really love. But the timeline was one of the chapters that I really loved. Honestly, I thought this one would appeal to the true Nancy Drew fans. I think that with every piece of work, there needs to be something concrete. There needs to be something valuable. That’s one of my favorite chapters and I’m glad you picked up on it. In other interviews, depending on how into Nancy the writer is or isn’t, they will go to that chapter or they won’t. It’s a litmus test. I thought true fans would look at that chapter and say, “That’s interesting!” So, in looking at the time line, by the 56th book, she’d be 37, still living at home, still having Hannah do her wash, still having her Dad give her money, and still able to keep Ned on a leash for that long! How to figure out the time frame was not easy, and I thought how interesting it was that nearly every mystery was set in the spring or summer. I had to go by the illustrations sometimes, or weave it in-between the Emerson school year. But when you were able to nail down the Emerson school year, then it was easier to determine. I even looked at things such as whether it was orange harvest season or if there were pear blossoms in an orchard, such as with *Spider Sapphire*. I knew that it was during Emerson’s school season, but was it fall or spring? Those darned pear blossoms are in bloom, so therefore it must be spring!

TL: You mention in your book that Nancy manipulated her father at times. Do you see him as being her limitless supply of money? Do you think he’s that good of an attorney that he’d be able to support her rather expensive sleuthing?

RW: He’s that good of an attorney. Honestly. Part of my research was doing currency conversion. So I would have to look at the book I was quoting from, look at the year of publication, and go to a currency converter to figure out what’s what. He was giving her new cars, which cost a full year’s salary for the average person. The trips very often were charged to the Drew Law Firm. *The Secret of the Golden Pavilion* is a good example. Even Hannah got to go on that trip. It was incredibly expensive back then, to fly from Illinois to Hawaii with a whole troop of people. I think he was very well off, as he was always on the road, always busy. Looking behind the scenes, I felt sorry for Nancy. She doesn’t have a mother, and she didn’t have any siblings to turn to. She has Hannah of course, and that’s super. But she saw her father only when he was in town, and while they would have supper or go to services, they never really talked. It was always about the task at hand, very business oriented. I kind of felt a little bit sad about that. Poor Nancy. Maybe she stays so ultra-busy, solving mysteries, to mask

some of that pain in her life. I know a lot of Type A people that do that. They keep themselves so busy so they don't have to think about what's really going on in their world.

TL: In your opinion, after all of the observations you made from your reading of the series, what is Nancy's appeal?

RW: She's pure excitement. Wherever she goes, that's where the action is. I think that's why people still pick her up and read her despite how perfect she seems. I think that's why Bess and George are always putting whatever they have on their schedule to the side whenever Nancy calls up and asks if they are ready to rock-n-roll. They never have lives of their own. Very rarely are they not able to attend her invitations. Nancy is the gal. She is the one with the plan. She saves her father from kidnapping, she saves her boyfriend from kidnapping, and she is an international traveler. She's out solving mysteries any time of year. She is the one who is really in charge, in control. Even with the police. Every time she approaches Chief McGinnis with a clue, he gives her a pat on the back and says, "Good work, Nancy! If you need any assistance, let me know!"

TL: What was probably the most interesting fact you found while doing the research for this book?

RW: I have a few facts that I found interesting. To try and pin down one specific "fact" would be rather difficult. The time line was fun to write, and another fun chapter was "Only an Amateur" because I spoke with the folks in Boston to try to determine if the Paul Revere bell in *The Mystery of the Tolling Bell* did exist. I found that if it did, it would weigh about 200 pounds and would run \$25,000! Talking with the mailman was also fun. I think that any time that I was able to take my sleuthing outside of the context of the surreal, perfect little world of Nancy Drew and bring it to today's real-life individuals to get some hard facts, that was fun. It made it real. It gave a modern spin to it. There are a few of those sprinkled throughout the book. But I wouldn't say that there is just one pertinent fact. Just any time I was able to fit Nancy-land into current views and prices of things for today, it made it more real. That part was exciting for me. That part was fun.

TL: What would you say to the real die-hard fans who feel you have totally destroyed Nancy's image? Have you had any real harsh comments about the book?

RW: Frankly, it's gotten really good response from some people and some really negative response from other people. They either really love it, or they really hate it. And that's okay, because if I were here saying, "I wrote a book called I LOVE NANCY DREW," then you wouldn't be here talking with me right now. People want something different, something new. This is a fun twist, looking at the untold, the dark side of Nancy and the gang. I wanted to make it controversial to get people intrigued enough to pick the books back up again. That's my goal. Satire is defined as a literary work in which human vice or folly is attacked through irony, derision, or wit. I don't think people

will look at it and say, “It’s a comical book.” They may come away and say, “Wow, she really pooh-poohs everything that Nancy did.” But if you’ve ever thought, even just once or twice during the years while you’ve been reading her books, “Wow, Nancy Drew is such a little goody two-shoes.” Then, you can read this book and say, “See, she really isn’t so perfect.” I would also say that part of my response would also be “Buyer Beware.” I tried to make it clear from the title what the book is about. *The Dark Side of River Heights*. Observations of the Untold and the Unflattering. If I’m of the mindset where I don’t want my heroine downcast at all, I’d have to stop and think as to whether I’d want to buy this book or not. There are those who feel that everything published with “Nancy Drew” in it should somehow be censored and be more upbeat. But in certain exceptions, such as allowances for parody and satire, you are allowed to take your opinions and express them more critically. I simply called it out very factually from the series. Was Nancy honest all the time? Was Nancy a good friend all the time? Did she and Ned have a faithful, consistent relationship throughout all the books? A lot of people have brought up these topics before, and a lot of the hard-core fans will down play it saying they don’t know what they are talking about. I’ve tried to be very detailed, using many examples from many books. I’m trying to get out the idea that no one is perfect – not even your heroine. To me, I think that’s what makes her more likable. She’s not really so untouchable. She’s not really that perfect. She really does make mistakes. It’s just that people don’t call her out on it. That’s why she is that much more enduring to me. She’s not perfect. She does step outside the lines.

TL: What do you ultimately want people to get out of the book?

RW: Stretch your perspective. So often people will say, “Oh, yeah, I’ve read that mystery.” But have you really? Stop and pick it up again and re-read it with a different intent. Some people don’t want to do that, and I admire them for that, and I appreciate them for it. But I’m just having fun with the mysteries. Very often people don’t even realize that a different perspective exists when they are reading the series. And that’s one of my goals. To really take it out of the box and really sort of re-think everything. For example, let’s take a look at Togo. What did Togo think of everything that was going on in the Drew household? All of these eavesdroppers, people dropping off bombs in the mailboxes. It’s no wonder he was a high-strung terrier! There was a lot going on in the household. So, in everything that I did, I tried to look behind the scenes. Obviously everything is written on a level for an 8 – 12 year old, but if you look underneath and ask yourself – what was Togo thinking? What was Bess thinking? I mean, she was constantly being harassed by George. Yes, George was family so she had to put up with a certain amount of abuse, but why didn’t her friend Nancy ever speak up? My hope is that the premise of my book will intrigue people enough to pick the Nancy Drew mysteries back up again, the series back up again, and get into it. Don’t just go get it for your daughters and your granddaughters, but pick it up and read it for yourselves. Stretch your perspective and read it with a whole new intent!