



A mystery solved! The mystery behind Nancy Drew and her creators is defined in Melanie Rehak's new book, *Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women who Created Her*. A revealing look at Stratemeyer Syndicate history, Rehak waxes nostalgically about the two women who had the most influence upon Nancy Drew: Mildred Wirt Benson and Harriet Stratemeyer Adams.

Focusing on these two pioneering women and feminist history, she traces Nancy, Mildred, and Harriet's footsteps through the decades and how each of them ultimately contributed to the popularity of America's favorite teen sleuth.

JF: Describe Nancy Drew in 5 words or less.

MR: Resourceful, glamorous, classy, intelligent and bold.

JF: What intrigued you in writing about Nancy Drew and her creators?

MR: Of course I've loved Nancy since I read about her adventures as a child, so a chance to learn more about the teen detective was really appealing. Finding out that there were real-life women behind her, whose lives were in some ways as ground-breaking as Nancy's, only made her more interesting to me. I was amazed to learn that behind her fictional intrepid spirit, true struggles with power and independence were lurking. Also, the fact that these books were brought out by an organization that was made completely of women fascinated me. Even now that's rare, but certainly in the 30s and 40s it was practically unheard of.

JF: Did you discover any interesting information that really stood out that most people wouldn't have a clue about in your research at the NYPL?

MR: Yes, I did. The participation of Edna Stratemeyer in the early days of the Syndicate has been mostly erased from the record, as has the critical role that Edward Stratemeyer's secretary, Harriet Otis Smith played. These two women really helped ensure that the series continued, just as much, if not more than Harriet Adams and Mildred Wirt. Harriet Otis Smith even thought up Bess and George, and certainly it would be impossible to imagine the series without them.

Though my book focuses on Harriet and Mildred, since their involvement with Nancy Drew was so much longer and more intense, I was really glad to be able to give credit to these other two women where they deserved it. Edna wrote a bunch of the

Nancy Drew outlines in the 1930s, something I don't think was ever known before.

JF: Why do you think the issue of authorship/ownership in the Nancy Drew series has become so controversial?

MR: Well, I think it's a combination of the fact that she's so popular, so iconic, and the hard truth that there has been a lot of money tied up with her over the decades. There's nothing like a combination of adoration and commercialism to make people want to lay claim to something that isn't necessarily all theirs.

JF: There appear to be some factions who take sides in giving credit to those who made Nancy Drew so popular over the years. While many of us including yourself believe that there is plenty of credit to go around to all involved, is there a resolution to this authorship/ownership controversy? In your research, did you come across something resolute that would resolve the controversy for reasonable people?

MR: I think the answer is really that there is no one person, and no "resolution" per say, other than that we have to recognize that the series, like all of Stratemeyer's series, was a group effort. It would be very hard to separate out the contributions of one person and say that they were the reason the books survived and have been so popular for so long. None of them would have been able to do it without all of the other people involved.

If there's one thing my research proved to me, it's that the company was a complicated organization and that all of its interlocking parts relied on all of the others ones to make it keep functioning. I would hope that reasonable people would be able to understand that concept. Very rarely in this world is there one person who's solely responsible for a successful enterprise, and that's certainly the case here.

JF: What do you want readers of your book to come away with most as they reflect upon the history of Nancy Drew?

MR: I think just a sense of how and why she's persisted, that it's always been a combination of her spirit and the sweep of women's rights in America. Nancy has always been the right girl for the moment, no matter what that moment was telling women about how they should behave. Because of that, women have always loved her, so no one wants to see her die out. It's really been the fans who have kept her alive long past the time when we might have expected her to die out and I think the powerful force of that group can't be overestimated, really.

JF: In your research, were you able to solve any mysteries?

MR: Yes! For example, we now know for certain that the Stratemeyer Syndicate was founded in 1905. There was a lot of question about that, but I read letters from Edward Stratemeyer in which he pinpoints it exactly. I also found a list saying who, exactly, had

written which outlines for the Nancy Drew series in the 1930s-Harriet or Edna, or Harriet Otis Smith, so that was fine. There's been so much confusion about who did what and who wrote what that it was really kind of a relief to just see it all laid out in black and white at last.

JF: What have you learned most from this writing experience?

MR: How enormous the Stratemeyer Syndicate archive at the NYPL is! But really, how important it is to research thoroughly, and how satisfying it is to get a solid answer about something. I also really enjoyed plunging back into the past through primary documents like letters and diaries. It made history come alive and it was very inspiring to try to make a cohesive story out of the documents I found-I felt I had to do a job that Edward Stratemeyer would have approved of (not to mention Mildred and Harriet!)

JF: Edna Stratemeyer is often overlooked in articles about Nancy Drew. Tell us a little about Edna and her relationship with Mildred Wirt Benson and her sister Harriet Stratemeyer Adams.

MR: Well, as I said above, she really was an equal partner in the Syndicate for about the first decade. She wrote outlines for all of the series the company was doing, and manned the office when Harriet was on vacation with her family. She got a lot of enjoyment out of it, I think and she was certainly just as involved as Harriet was, though we tend not to know that. Her relationship with Mildred was very cordial and later on she was a defender of Mildred when Harriet began to get frustrated. I got the sense that Edna understood better sometimes what Mildred was bringing to the Nancy Drew series, probably because she was less personally invested in Nancy's character than Harriet was.

Her relationship with Harriet, unfortunately, didn't wear very well. After she became a silent partner in 1942 she got very concerned with money and was always harping on Harriet about her business decisions. Publishing was changing a lot in those years and she didn't have a good grasp on what Harriet had to deal with, so she was just endlessly critical. I think this was very difficult for Harriet, who really loved her family and wanted to have good relations with Edna. It was heartbreaking reading their letters at certain points.

JF: Having been Edward Stratemeyer's capable assistant for a long time, why do you think Harriet Otis Smith left the Syndicate soon after his death? Was it really a question of logistics with the Syndicate offices being moved to New Jersey or was there more to it? Can you tell us a little more about Harriet Otis Smith and who she was?

MR: I think it's very hard to speculate on why Harriet Otis Smith left the company since we have no letter where she explains it. My sense of it has always been that she was

incredibly loyal to Edward and that they had a really special working relationship. She had, after all, been the person who built it up with him practically from the beginning, and she definitely had a bigger role than just "secretary." When she agreed to stay on temporarily after his death, she told Harriet and Edna it was because Edward was too generous to permit any other course of action.

I've always thought that once he was no longer around, the thrill of working for the company went away for her, and that maybe she used the excuse of the offices moving as a good way to make her exit. I suspect that to her it was just another company once its founder was gone, and though she stayed in touch with Harriet and Edna periodically over the years, she didn't seem to have any desire to really work for them. Beyond that, I don't know much about who she was. The Syndicate papers don't really offer any clues, as one would expect from a loyal employee who was very professional. Unlike Harriet and Edna, she didn't let her personal life affect her work at the office.

JF: What is your next project going to be about?

MR: I'm finishing up a book of poetry right now and working on some magazine articles, and then we'll see. Let's just say it's a bit of a mystery at the moment...