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Girl Sleuth and the Fountain of Youth; At 75, Nancy Drew Continues to Enchant Readers -- and Now Academics, Too

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Abstract (Abstract): The exhibit -- "Nancy Drew and Friends: Girls' Series Books Rediscovered," which runs through the end of the year -- features highlights from a large and colorful collection of books: the adventures of Jane the airline stewardess; Honey Bunch the traveler; Sue Barton, a student nurse. [Ann L. Hudak] originally planned to shed light on some of these lesser-known, shorter-lived heroines. But the titian-haired girl sleuth "sort of took over," she said.

Created in 1929 by publishing mogul Edward Stratemeyer, Nancy Drew began as one of a virtual empire of children's series books written according to a careful formula. The intrepid heroes and heroines were often orphaned. Free to roam the world, they faced villains who were bullies, social climbers or foreigners. Their adventures were spun out in chapters designed to keep readers riveted with cliffhanger endings.

Stratemeyer sketched out the plots for the motherless girl detective and paid Iowa journalist Mildred Wirt Benson to turn out the first books under the pen name Carolyn Keene for \$125 a title. Other ghostwriters would follow over the years, but Carolyn Keene remains the author of Nancy Drew to this day.

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Full text: She came along in 1930 when girls needed a new kind of heroine, a perfectly groomed teenage sleuth at the wheel of a blue roadster -- unflappable and brave in the face of a modern world full of dangers and mysteries.

Seventy five years later, befitting her good bones and sterling character, Nancy Drew wears her age lightly. Dressed casually in slacks these days, she drives a hybrid and carries a cell phone. And at this point, practically a genre unto herself, she tells her own stories.

"Let me fill you in," she confides to a new generation of girls, who like their mothers and grandmothers before them are reading Nancy Drew.

"She speaks in the first person," said Ann L. Hudak, an assistant curator at the University of Maryland library, standing amid a new exhibit she organized at Hornbake Library on the College Park campus.

The exhibit -- "Nancy Drew and Friends: Girls' Series Books Rediscovered," which runs through the end of the year -- features highlights from a large and colorful collection of books: the adventures of Jane the airline stewardess; Honey Bunch the traveler; Sue Barton, a student nurse. Hudak originally planned to shed light on some of these lesser-known, shorter-lived heroines. But the titian-haired girl sleuth "sort of took over," she said. "I discovered the star power of Nancy Drew."

It is this kind of mass appeal that has, after all these years, also won Nancy Drew a measure of academic acceptance.

Although once spurned by scholars and librarians as mere popular fiction, Nancy Drew mysteries are now receiving serious analysis in journals and academic conferences, said University of Maryland librarian Eric Lindquist, who has organized an Oct. 7 symposium at the library.

"Literally millions of people have read Nancy Drew," he said. The symposium, "Reading Nancy Drew," is expected to draw academics and authors together to discuss the girl detective's place in the history of publishing, literature and women's lives.

"She was banned from many libraries," Lindquist said. But with a smile for the girl detective, he added, her books have come "in the back door."

It's notable that as Nancy Drew has sold 80 million books over the years -- and in recent times, graphic novels and interactive computer games as well -- she has stayed level-headed and good-hearted.

"In spite of the changes in her clothing and slang, the things we have always loved about her remain," said Melanie Rehak, the author of the new book "Girl Sleuth: Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her" and a scheduled speaker at the symposium. "She's brave, smart, kind and very independent."

Her doting father, the successful lawyer Carson Drew, continues to turn a blind eye to the risks of her after-school detective work.

Her tireless gal pals Bess and George have remained at her side, as has her long-suffering boyfriend, Ned, who waited 50 years for their first kiss.

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Through Keene, Nancy Drew lives on in River Heights, a home town unidentifiable on any map, in a time that feels familiar in a nonspecific sort of way.

"She encounters broad versions of what we all deal with in life," Rehak said. "Good, evil, bad weather, wonderful picnics."

She endures, taking life one mystery at a time.

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