

Manifestations of Crime and Justice in Nancy Drew Books

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**Abstract**

The character Nancy Drew is a young American sleuth. Nancy is a blonde-haired and blue-eyed eighteen-year-old who fights bad guys and always solves the mystery in the end. The books of the same name, authored by the pseudonym Carolyn Keene, details the young woman's experience as she is solving mysteries in her hometown.

This research paper examines Nancy Drew books in terms of the crimes committed in the book, how these crimes are solved, and how the crime-doers are dealt with. It also examines representations of police and other aspects of the criminal justice system. It is hypothesized that most crimes depicted in these books are property crimes. It is also hypothesized that Nancy will be solving these mysteries and crimes with the help of family and friends. Finally, the police will arrest these offenders, after Nancy reveals the issue of course. It is also hypothesized that the police will be depicted in a positive light, being shown as helpful and competent. This was accomplished through a content analysis of three Nancy Drew Books: *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Hidden Staircase*, and *The Mystery at the Lilac Inn*. It is found that the majority of crimes shown in these books are property crimes. Also, Nancy solves the crimes in the books, sometimes with the help of the police. The offenders are always arrested at the end of the story. The police are depicted as competent and willing to help, but some characters express reservations about requesting their help. Interesting future research could examine how these characters' reservations reflect police attitudes in America when the books were released.

## Introduction and Background

The purpose of this research paper is to determine how crime and justice manifest themselves in the Nancy Drew detective books. Are these crimes mostly property crimes or violent crimes? Are they solved by Nancy Drew, the police, or a combination of both? Also, how are police depicted in these books? Are they competent and able to make arrests? Or are they untrustworthy and rude?

First, it is important to understand where these books came from. Nancy Drew was first thought up in September 1929, just one month before the start of the Great Depression. Mildred Augustine Wirt was a young author who Edward Stratemeyer, writer of children's fiction and publisher, hired and was assisting him in expanding his stories. Not to mention, Wirt was the first woman to earn a master's degree in journalism from the University of Iowa. Stratemeyer wrote the publishers in September 1929 saying "at present our line is weak on girl books with a single heroine...this author could do this line under my direction and do it well," (Rehak, 2005).

Edward Stratemeyer sent the Grosset & Dunlap publishers descriptions of the first five books following a girl detective, first being named Stella Strong before the final name of Nancy Drew. The publishers loved the plots and by October 1st, 1929, Mildred was contacted to write the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories by Carolyn Keene. However, the stock market crashed on October 24th, 1929, and women's place in the home and workforce began to be questioned.

While America is coping with the Great Depression, Nancy Drew comes into the picture in April 1930. Her writing from the start makes it clear that "she knew how to keep her head above water in any kind of situation. Even the Great Depression would prove to be no match for her," (Rehak, 2005). For a very long time society told girls to be passive and respectful but in comes Nancy who "bends convention and acts out every girl's fantasies of power," and

“blossoms in a man’s world without giving up the perks of being a girl and frees her and her readers from a prison of gender expectations,” (Kismarc and Heirferman, 1998). Is it any wonder that these books became popular? In a country that is wrought with the Great Depression, girls could use Nancy Drew’s books to escape from the horrors of real life. They might not be able to challenge the gender expectations placed on them, but they could live vicariously through Nancy doing just that. They could help solve the mysteries facing Nancy and experience crime and crime solving in a way they probably never would. These books would stay popular for generations to come, with mothers exposing their girls to the world of Nancy Drew and the cycle continuing today.

Next, it is important to understand how these books are structured. The traditional narrative is something that occurs in crime media. It has been studied by Rafter in movies and television shows, and this paper will extend these narratives to written works. The traditional narrative explains a clear picture of who the hero is and who the villain is. It also always ends in good defeating evil. The viewer gets to follow alongside the hero as they get to the bottom of the mystery and put the bad guy away in the end. This narrative is often seen in the Nancy Drew books as they “offer opportunities to participate virtuously in the pursuit of justice, often at the side of a charismatic and capable hero,” (Rafter, 2000). These books allow a reader to follow Nancy through her journey of sorting through clues and following leads, giving the reader the sense that they are solving the mystery with her, explained by Rafter as being pleasurable because readers “not only identify the meanings of clues but identify with someone who is abnormally intelligent, self-possessed, confident, and successful,” (Rafter, 2000). She always solves the mystery and puts the wrong-doer in their place in the end.

This narrative explains how Nancy Drew's stories are organized. Nancy gets put onto a mystery and a reader gets to experience the whole mystery with her. They see the start of the mystery, all the clues and twists she experiences, then get to put together the pieces as she does, finally ending in the "bad guy" getting what they deserve (which is usually some jail time). This narrative explained by Rafter shows why these stories are so successful. An ordinary person gets to follow a detective in her work, something most people do not get to do in their lives. Crime and crime solving are alluring to people and being able to follow a capable and charismatic character as they solve a crime is enticing. Nancy Drew is that outlet for some people.

Most people do not have direct contact with the criminal justice system, aside from maybe being pulled over. Therefore, many people get their opinions on crime from media, meaning news media and written or visual entertainment media. Since media is the main way that people get to engage with the criminal justice system, it is important to understand how the system is depicted. These depictions might be the only thing people have to go off of when forming opinions about the actors in the criminal justice system and the system in general so having a positive depiction is important for community relations. For example, Nancy Drew's books might be the first thing a person reads about that has police in them. Their entire opinion of the police may revolve around the way the police were shown in the book. In order to maintain good community relations with the police, it is probably in the best interest of the author and the police that these depictions are positive in nature. Additionally, it is important to understand the audience these books appeal to. These books are targeted toward younger teen girls. These books also came out during the Great Depression when women's roles in society were changing. In comes Nancy Drew, a likable 18-year-old who was independent, knew how to carry herself while still maintaining feminist ideals, and didn't depend on a man to help her

through these situations. For a young girl, Nancy was a role model of how to be independent while still upholding the ideals of how to be a woman in society. It also exposed young readers to a career they may never have considered for themselves. Jobs in the criminal justice field were (and still are) dominated by white men. If these young girls saw a detective in real life, it was likely a man. So in reading Nancy Drew, a new world of opportunities emerge and young girls get to imagine themselves doing a job they never could have imagined. Due to these things, it is important to research aspects of the Nancy Drew books to be able to understand how a young person's perception of the criminal justice system may be formed.

## **Methods**

The research done in this paper included a content analysis of three Nancy Drew books. It is important to note that there are fifty-six original Nancy Drew books and to date, there are over 600 other titles in the Nancy Drew collection. Due to this incredible abundance of titles, this study was narrowed down to three books. This study examines the first book in the series (*The Secret of the Old Clock*), the second book (*The Hidden Staircase*), and the fourth book (*The Mystery at the Lilac Inn*). These books were selected due to availability to the researcher and the likelihood of availability to others.

Research for this paper was done through a content analysis. This involved identifying and analyzing themes in each book. The themes and questions being examined were:

- What crime is occurring in the book?
- Who solved the crime and how did they do it?
- How was the offender then dealt with?
  - How are police depicted?

It is important to note that crimes observed in this study were put into a property or violent category. Property crimes included theft, trespassing, and breaking and entering. Violent crime was any crime that resulted in injury and was further defined as actions that could have resulted in injury to the victim but was avoided.

There are various outcomes expected from this content analysis. First, it is expected that most crimes being committed and investigated in these books will be property crimes. These crimes will be solved by Nancy, with help from her friends, family, and the police. Also, The offenders will be arrested by the police, after Nancy exposes them. Finally, police will be depicted in a positive light. They will be seen as competent and helpful resources. To relate to Rafter's traditional narrative, Nancy and the police are defined as the "good guys." Nancy is known to be the "good guy" right from the start of the books. Readers are not left to question if she is good and moral, they are told immediately. Since Nancy always expresses faith in the police, even if others doubt, readers also understand the police as the "good guys." Therefore, according to the narrative, they will always win in the end and defeat the "bad guys." This meaning Nancy will be solving the crimes and offenders will be arrested by the police.

## **Results**

What crime is occurring?

In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, three instances of crime occur. First, Nancy happens upon a family who had just been stolen from by men pretending to buy old furniture from them and stealing more in the process. As Nancy is investigating the location of the old clock for her own mystery, she happens upon the same band of men pretending to be movers. In this instance, they are stealing items from a summer home while no one is there. They also lock Nancy in a closet to

keep her from interfering. In this book, there are two instances of property crimes and one violent crime.

In *The Hidden Staircase*, seven instances of crime occur. The first instance is a burglary that occurred during the night before Nancy arrived. Additionally, the women that these items were stolen from also mention that they have heard “untraceable music, thumps and creaking noises at night, and have seen eerie, indescribable shadows on the wall,” (Keene, 1930b). The next instance of crime occurs to Nancy and her father while they are checking out the progress of a new bridge in town. As they are near the abutments of the bridge, a large truck comes barreling down the side of the hill directly toward them. While Nancy and her father escape the fate of this truck, it is going to be classified as a violent crime for the sake of this paper, despite no physical injury occurring. After this, Nancy visits the women again and learns that a pearl necklace has been stolen from them again. The next instance happens on two separate occasions. Nancy is in the women’s house and music begins playing, despite everyone who should be in the house being in the same room and no one leaving a music player on. This random music playing happens twice, and later we learn that someone enters the house through a hidden staircase (hence the book title). Finally, we learn that Nancy’s father is missing and Nancy tracks down the taxi driver who was supposed to bring her father home. She learns that her father was drugged in the taxi and then kidnapped. This book has five instances of property crime and two instances of violent crime.

In *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, fourteen instances of crime occur. The first crime in the book is the theft of the finest lilac tree near the entrance of the Lilac Inn. Then, someone breaks into the Drew house through the back door, makes a mess of the second floor, and steals a picture of Nancy and Nancy’s charge plate to Burk’s Department Store. This thief charged Nancy’s charge



plate \$2,000 at Burk's and impersonated Nancy so well that the store manager truly believed she was the one who made those charges. Next, as Nancy is on the way to the Lilac Inn, she is run off the road by a red panel truck and forced into a ditch. The next crime occurs at the Inn when a large number of diamonds were stolen from the Inn's owner. The following crime that occurs is when the gardener realizes that "several shovels, rakes, some wire and small parts" (Keene, 1930c) were taken from the shed. The next two instances of crime occur almost simultaneously. First, Nancy's friend Helen was stuck on the head and blacked out. After she is found and recovering, there is a "loud *booo-oo-m!*" (Keene, 1930c) from the directions of the cabins, and the cabin Nancy and Helen are staying in is lit on fire. The next crime that is discussed is the fact that the owner of the Inn's aunt Hazel is being blackmailed by an employee. Following this, Nancy is trying to find someone when she sees the red panel truck that previously tried to run her off the road. While she is in her car after finding the truck, a large rock is thrown toward her open window, where it misses her but causes a dent in her door. To add to the unfortunate happenings to her car, Nancy's car goes missing from the Inn's lot and is found in a cornfield across the way with the keys in the ignition. Next, Nancy finds herself in a similar situation to Helen earlier, except this time she is bound at the mouth and taken into a shack. Nancy has moved around for a while with her multiple captors and she comes face to face with her impersonator from Burk's, who also admits to committing all the other crimes in the book. The last crime mentioned is when the police find Nancy and her captors and her impersonator tries one last time to get away with pretending to be Nancy to the police. This book contained ten instances of property crime and four instances of violent crime.

Who solved the crime and how did they do it?

In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, Nancy is the one who solves the crime. Nancy first alerts the burglars to the police with a simple description. After being held by the burglars and knowing their faces, she alerts the police to this crime and even helps them follow the robber's trail, where she is right there when they are caught and is able to identify them.

In *The Hidden Staircase*, a combination of Nancy and the police solve the crimes. Nancy solely finds the man who was breaking into the house to cause issues. Nancy also tracks down leads about her father's disappearance. With the help of the police, they find the perpetrators and her father.

In *The Mystery at the Lilac Inn*, Nancy is the one who solves the crime. She follows the leads that end up with her getting captured but when the police find her, she is with all of the offenders and exposes them for their crimes to the police. She also manages to find the missing diamonds in the loot from the captors.

How was the offender dealt with?

In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, after Nancy alerts the police of the burglars, she tracks them down with the police. She is asked to identify the men and the furniture which the trooper says is good enough to arrest them.

In *The Hidden Staircase*, Nancy helps the police locate her father and figure out who did this. In the end, Nathan Gomber was captured on a neighboring property and he admitted to all charges. The group of men who captured Nancy's father was also located and arrested.

In *The Mystery at the Lilac Inn*, the police locate where the captors have taken Nancy and arrest them. When the one offender mentions something about the next time they'll really get Nancy, the Chief arresting them sternly tells them that there will be no next time.

How are police depicted?

In *The Secret of the Old Clock*, police are depicted as being open and willing to help. They follow Nancy's direction on multiple occasions when she tells them that she saw the van going this way and that the thieves were probably heading in the direction of a big city and even ask her advice. When they finally catch up to the thieves, the police ask her to identify the men and some of the furniture in the truck. In the end, they are able to make an arrest, showing competency.

In *The Hidden Staircase*, characters are less trustworthy of the police. When Nancy is first told about the jewelry that goes missing and asks if they have gone to the police, she is told they came to the conclusion that most of what they saw had natural explanations and the rest was explained by imagination. Later, after they are stolen from again, Nancy suggests the police again and the older of the women shakes her head no, maybe she had just misplaced the necklace. When music is played with no explanation, Nancy suggests the police yet again and she is told no again, that “the police will only laugh at us,” (Keene, 1930b) but eventually agrees with some convincing. After contacting the police, a detective is sent to the premises and wanders the grounds to protect them. This detective is timely in his responses when Helen calls for help and thorough when patrolling the grounds. Finally, the police help Nancy in locating her dad who was kidnapped. When they have a suspect in custody, the police even ask Nancy to go in and talk to him because she is a “very persuasive young lady” (Keene, 1930b) and may be able to get info that the police were not able to. She agrees to talk to them and is even allowed to talk to them on her own. This is an interesting plot point, seeing as this would never happen in

today's policing. In this book, characters were shown to be wary of police help for fear of being perceived negatively.

In *Mystery at Lilac Inn*, there is a mix of characters wanting to trust the police and not wanting to talk to them. When the Drew house is broken into, the housekeeper tells Nancy about it before she calls the police. When Nancy is at Burk's Department Store trying to say that she wasn't the one who purchased from them, an officer tells the store manager that Nancy's word is solid and supports her claims. After Nancy is run off the road, a Lieutenant comes upon her and tells her that if he finds the driver of that truck, he would bring them to court. When the diamonds go missing at the Inn, Nancy tells the owner to call the police and is immediately met with resistance for fear of the publicity it would mean for the Inn. Again, after another crime occurs and someone suggests the police, the owner still says no to the suggestion of the police. Nancy reaches out to the police on multiple occasions about the impersonator and about the time bomb found in her cabin and is always told that they are still working on it and will do all they can. When Nancy is taken from the Inn and her father calls the police about her disappearance, he is told "Everyone, including the State Police, are out looking for her," (Keene, 1930c). This book showed mixed feelings about the police in terms of reaching out to them but the police were always willing and ready to help when they did.

## **Discussion**

First, it is important to note that for the purpose of this research, crimes classified in this paper as violent may not have resulted in an injury. In this paper, crimes were classified as violent if they resulted in bodily injury or had the intent of bodily injury. Second, it is also important to note that most crimes occurring in the books often coincide with the mystery. In

book two, jewelry was being stolen and record players were turned on mysteriously. What the women Nancy was helping thought was a ghost, was actually a man entering the house and causing this chaos. Therefore, the mystery often devolves into crime in the end. The first book is an exception of this where the crime and the mystery happen to occur side-by-side but never truly overlap. The mystery Nancy is trying to solve is the location of a later will written by a man who passed. She finds this will in an old clock that burglars were taking, the same men that stole from the family she visits in the beginning. Therefore, in this book, the crime and the mystery are connected, but not one and the same as the other books examined.

From the three books, there were twenty-four observed instances of crime. Seventeen of these crimes were classified as property crimes, with theft being the most common occurrence. However, when violent crime did happen, it was rather serious. There are multiple times where characters could have been killed by the actions of the offenders, like the car rolling down the hill or the cabin explosion. Kidnapping is the most common violent crime that occurs. The first book read has the least amount of crimes observed with a total of three. The third book read had the most amount of crimes observed with a total of fourteen, doubling the amount that was seen in the second book read.

One of the most interesting findings was characters not trusting the police. It was assumed that characters would be open to police help but it was shown in two of the three books that some characters were not. In the second book, the older women think a ghost is messing with them so when Nancy suggests the police, the women don't want the officers to laugh at them for thinking its a ghost. In the third book, Nancy is helping the owner's of an inn and the owner doesn't want the police's help for the fear of negative publicity before the inn even opens. Even still, Nancy always advocates for police help. When they say no, she still brings up the

option the next time they experience a crime. This shows that Nancy is really trustworthy of the police and have faith in their ability to solve crimes. Nancy is usually the one who find out who the offender is and how they are doing it, but the police are always there to make an arrest. The ability of the police to continue to make arrests in these cases shows their competency. The police are also always ready and willing to help characters, so long as they are open to that help.

As mentioned, the traditional narrative was used to examine this paper. This narrative provides a clear picture of the good guys and the bad guys, where the good always wins in the end. From the beginning of the books, readers know that Nancy is the good hero they are going to be following. At the beginning of the first book, Nancy is driving down a road when a young girl loses her balance on the side of a bridge and falls. Nancy stops on the side of the road to check if the girl is okay and brings her home to her aunts. While talking to these aunts, she learns about a missing inheritance and stolen items from the people who just bought furniture from them. Nancy promises to help them with these situations, thus starting her mystery. Due to Nancy's trust in the police and their willingness to help her through her mysteries, readers associate the police with Nancy and therefore the police become part of the "good guys." The only time readers are allowed to question if they are good is when characters are reluctant for police help, but even then, Nancy is right there to say that the police are good and will help if they ask for it. Additionally, in every book examined, the offenders ended up getting found out by Nancy and arrested by the police. This allows for the good always defeating evil aspect that is crucial to the traditional narrative. Finally, these books serve as a guilty pleasure for ordinary people. Most people don't stumble upon a mystery when bringing a young girl back to her aunts' house therefore these books allow people to indulge in a secret world they don't get to experience.

The findings that property crimes were more prevalent in these books reflects that of modern day. A Pew Research Center article written in 2020 discusses FBI crime statistics in 2019. These statistics show that theft is the most common property crime that occurred (Gramlich, 2020), something that is reflected in observing the crimes in these books. While crimes in the 1930s were likely different from crimes nowadays, it is interesting to see that the books reflect modern day trends in crime. As mentioned earlier, media is the way most people interact with crime and the criminal justice system. If crimes in the books were heavily skewed towards violent crimes, it may warp the reader's perception that most crimes in real life are also violent crimes. These books also show cops as capable defenders who are able to put bad guys away. For a young person who may not have any experience with the police, this depiction of police as efficient law enforcers may carry into their real life understandings of the police. Having media that shows police in a positive light allows for young people to trust the police before they even interact with them. Having positive associations with the police can help foster good community relations which make policing easier for the police and the community.

## **Conclusion**

The Nancy Drew books have been popular for many generations. They serve as a sort of “gender escape” for readers of the series. As mentioned before, Nancy “blossoms in a man’s world without giving up the perks of being a girl and frees her and her readers from a prison of gender expectations,” (Kismarc and Heirferman, 1998). When the series was released, its readers were in the middle of the worst economic downturn in U.S. history. When reading these books, young girls could escape their life in the Great Depression and live vicariously through the story of a capable young hero. The traditional narrative also explains the success of these stories. The

traditional narrative shows a clear picture of who is good and who is evil, such as Nancy and the offenders in her mysteries respectively. In the end, we see that Nancy always solves the mystery and crime and the offenders are always arrested, which in the traditional narrative is good defeating evil. The traditional narrative also explains that these stories can serve as an escape. These narratives have a guilty pleasure aspect, as people are naturally curious about crimes and mystery but don't often get to explore that curiosity. The Nancy Drew books allow readers to escape into a world of curiosity.

Property crimes are most prevalent in the books. Seventeen instances of crime out of the twenty-four total crimes were property crimes, theft being the most common. Crimes are solved by Nancy and the police help her with this most times. Offenders are always arrested in the end, showing that the police are competent and able to make arrests. Police are always willing to assist in the crime-solving, as long as the characters are willing to accept their help. In two of the three books, there were some characters who did not want the police's help, which was an unexpected finding. However, when the police do get involved, they are able to make arrests and do their job well.

As mentioned, there is a rather large array of books in the Nancy Drew collection. It is impractical for one person to be able to examine all of the books, but it would bring about interesting findings for further research. Further research could also examine actual police attitudes in the 1930s to see if this is representative of the attitudes seen by characters in this study.

There are many tangible implications to the way crime and police are depicted in these books. Crimes in the books reflect crime statistics in the real world where property crimes are most prevalent, with theft being number one. This allows readers to apply their understanding of



what crimes happen most in real life. Also, readers experience a positive association with the police which they can also apply to their own life. Seeing police as capable in the books allows readers to think of the police as capable in their life too, fostering trust between the community and the police. These books also allow the reader to imagine themselves as a capable and independent sleuth. Seeing Nancy Drew be successful allows them to believe that they could do this too. This can lead to empowering young women to pursue careers they may never have considered. The real life implications of these books are numerous and are important for policing and empowering young women to follow their dreams of becoming a real life Nancy Drew.

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