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A Thrilling Ride:
Nancy Drew's Impact and Appeal as Immersive Fiction

Ashlinn Killeen

Tutor: Susan Zlotnick

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Mary Jo Murphy reported in *The New York Times* on the autobiographical coincidence of three female Supreme Court justices all sharing Nancy as a common literary heroine. Entitled “Nancy Drew and the 3 Black Robes,” Murphy noted that Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Sonia Sotomayor all cite Nancy as an early influence. Murphy, incredulous as to the books’ lack of literary merit, writes,

What stuck with these judicial women might be a harder case to crack. It’s easier to start with what it probably isn’t, and that’s the formulaic plots. In a world of Sue Graftons and C.S.I.’s, the novels are neither the most complex nor particularly probable affairs. (Murphy)

Murphy then concludes that the books’ attraction must be Nancy herself, the character at the center of these stories. Murphy’s quick dismissal of “the formulaic plots” shows just how automatically one can ignore the powerful force formulae carry despite (or because of) their predictability. In this paper I plan to examine and question that dismissal, offering that the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories enjoyed a successful reception with their audience of girls in the 1930s and onward due in part to the immersive quality of the formula and its series form. Likewise I will argue that whether the plots were “probable” or not was of little concern to the readers once they were immersed, mentally situated in the fictional space of the series.

The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories series remains among the top ten bestselling series of all time, at approximately 200 million books since 1929 (Associated Press). Often critical appraisal of the series’ significance focuses on Nancy as proto-feminist and the complex issue of the books’ authorship (Heilbrun 11-22). While Nancy as an icon and her authorship are both of interest, I am most intrigued by the affordable

immersive experience Nancy Drew offered an audience demographic who, in the 1930s, had not previously had books priced for their direct purchase. The books' series form, with its repetition of a familiar formula, created a reliably accessible fictional world and thus aided the reader's immersion. Thus the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories' form was as central to the series' impact and significance as its content, providing the audience with a novel and dependable entertainment experience.

I draw on the work of both Marie-Laure Ryan and Victor Nell in my discussion of immersion, a term for the process by which readers become mentally absorbed in a text to a degree that the fictional world forms a mental simulation and sensory perception of their own surroundings is muted. I will apply Ryan's and Nell's hypotheses regarding the mechanics of immersion to the texts, examining the multiple strategies employed by the series in order to increase their reader's involvement. In addition, I will review the research evidence that shows formula fiction makes up a large part of both children's and adults' pleasure reading. I will address the formulaic quality of the texts and that formula's repetition through a series as an essential component of the overall immersive strategy. I will also explain how the sheer breadth of narrative action in *River Heights* creates the sense of a broad world that Ryan believes is essential for a sense of spatial immersion. Finally I will address the notion that these stories are not "probable affairs" by applying Hilary P. Dannenberg's "Poetics of Coincidence" to the Nancy Drew series. We shall see how immersion can increase a reader's tolerance of coincidence, allowing the reader to value textual coincidence's unique rewards.

The series was produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, a group that distributed book outlines to ghost writers who completed manuscripts in a matter of weeks. The literary style differed from works written outside of the Syndicate's factory-like setting, sometimes embarrassingly so. Murphy asks,

Was the writing the lure? 'Hypers!' Nancy's girl sidekick George is always exclaiming. As for Nancy's dialog, 'she said, smiling' accompanies a lot of it. Jo March, Laura Ingalls, Pippi Longstocking and Madeline, plucky heroines all, benefited from better prose.
(Murphy)

Murphy is right that other books had "better prose" according to prevailing norms. In this paper, though, I will answer Murray's rhetorical question, "Was writing the lure?" in the positive. The simple style, the narrative focus that moves swiftly from one surprising discovery to the next, is not merely a pitiable byproduct of a highly commodified fiction but instead a central element in its success. The accessible simplicity of the books allowed for a more immediate immersion of young readers. Murphy begins her article with a portrait of the young O'Connor "sprawled comfortably on a couch at the Lazy B Ranch, nose deep in a Nancy Drew mystery, when her father summoned. Not *now*, Dad, little Sandra Day...pleaded, I'm just getting to the good part." It is this level of immersion, one that is not necessarily mediated by parental or academic guidance, where this study shall begin.

DEFINING IMMERSION AND ITS MECHANICS:
EVIDENCE FOR RIVER HEIGHTS AS MENTAL SIMULATION

And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1)

The understanding of immersion that most informs this paper is Marie-Laure Ryan's as put forward in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, in which she discusses the narratologic precedents for virtual reality. Ryan's definition of immersion applies to narrative across media. Her work draws on thinking from several fields, including the theories of psychologists Richard Gerrig and Victor Nell, possible world theory, childhood make believe, and mental simulations (Ryan 93-127). Nell's work defines "entrancement" (his term for a similar concept) against other altered states of consciousness, including hypnosis, "flow," and dreams, using physical metaphors of trapdoors, sinking, and getting lost (Nell "Psychology" 39-40). Ryan's description of the immersive process is likewise physical:

The frozen metaphors of language dramatize the reading experience as an adventure worthy of the most thrilling novel: the reader plunges under the sea (immersion), reaches a foreign land (transportation), is taken prisoner (being caught up in a story, being a *captured* audience), and loses contact with all other realities (being lost in a book). (Ryan 93)

Ryan describes a multistage process with particular mutual exclusivity between deeply imagining a fictional space and being alert to the sensory stimulation of one's surroundings. According to Ryan, qualities and results of immersion can take a variety of forms. Immersion can be spatial, with the reader feeling as though they are inside the fictional space, imagining vivid sensory details and orienting themselves

within a conceptual map of the world. Immersion can also be emotional, the simulation of social connections with characters. Temporal immersion operates by involving the reader in the timeline of the narrative to such a degree that they feel suspense even if the story's ending is familiar (Ryan 121). Certain attributes aid in increasing the likelihood of this state. In the case of film, for instance, a darkened theater will be more immersive than a brightly lit living room. Evaluating the immersive techniques used within a text can aid in understanding a work's popular appeal given that, according to Nell, immersion is often a reader's primary goal in reading for pleasure (Nell, *Lost* 225, Nell "Psychology" 46).

Readers have long had a visceral sense of the cognitive process involved. One of Nell's interview participants says, "You get the feeling you're not reading any more, you're not reading sentences, it's as if you are completely living inside the situation," (Nell, "Psychology" 42). Psychologists are beginning to understand how minds and texts meet in this imaginative act. In Nell's 1988 study, "The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure," he measured changes in participants' arousal levels during pleasure reading. These results seemed to confirm a distinct cognitive process was taking place (Nell, "Psychology" 36-39). Nell also reported finding musculofascial movements in readers that were associated with spatial orientation (Nell, "Psychology" 38). In 2007, Speer, Zacks, and Reynolds introduced more evidence through a neural imaging study. The researchers simulated fiction reading by flashing a story word by word to participants in an fMRI machine. They discovered brain activity that mimicked that associated with the physical activities described. For instance, when a character pulled a light switch, areas of the brain associated with

clasping motions were activated (Speer, Zacks, and Reynolds 449-455). This further indicates that readers create mental simulations vivid enough that fictional aspects described are experienced within the imagination.

Turning back to the image of Sandra Day O'Connor sprawled on the sofa while her father attempted to tear her away from the books, as well as the near archetypal image of a Nancy Drew reader compulsively turning pages as she reads by flashlight under her covers, the image of a Nancy Drew reader is a deeply absorbed one (Caprio 5, Greenberg 69, Parameswaran 78).

Literary Imagery as an Immersive Tool

Readers come to fiction with varying desires to read visual description and create images of setting and characters. Nell tested participants on their ability to maintain a visual mental image in order to solve problems. While there is evidence for a correlation between visual imaginative ability and an intense reading experience (Nell, "Psychology" 40), Nell's qualitative interview study reveals more complexity in regard to the benefits of sensory description in fiction. Participants proved to have varying levels of interest in textual imagery (Nell, "Psychology" 40). Of those who privilege the visual and pseudo-physicality of a fictional world, Ryan notes that "these mental geographies become home to the reader, and they may for some of us steal the show" (Ryan 121). In contrast, Nell's participants sometimes expressed the opposite opinion. He paraphrases an adolescent girl who argues that

Louis L'Amour is a great writer because he does not tell us that the hero is riding through a dense forest and then give descriptions of the birds flying from branch to branch and so on, but writes simply, 'Sackett was writing through the forest...' She goes on to explain that

with Westerns, because they are set in a landscape she has come to know well...and one does not need the author to do [imaging work] for you—indeed, if he or she does, it is unwelcome. (Nell, “Psychology” 45)

So it seems that there exists a threshold up to which point description is useful for individual readers and that past this point more description is superfluous or even has a negative effect as audience members become frustrated by trying to maintain complex images.

Neurological imaging of the act of fictional scene construction bears this out. Summerfield, Hassabis, and Maguire described objects one by one to participants in an fMRI machine, thereby slowing down the process of scene construction to measure the effect of each additional detail. The three areas of the brain activated in scene construction were the hippocampus, the inter-parietal sulcus, and the lateral prefrontal cortex. These same areas are also involved in memory, imagining future events, and spatial navigation. Activity increased with the introduction of the first three described details, but after that point activity plateaued. Interview participants confirmed that three details had been sufficient to adequately construct the scene (Summerfield, Hassabis, and Macguire 1501-1509). This early evidence may indicate the possible superfluity of excess textual detail in establishing an adequate setting.

A Close Examination of Immersive Techniques within a Nancy Drew Passage

In my own reading experience I am one of those who Ryan describes as enjoying setting description as much as or more than plot, depending on the work. I relish detailed sensory descriptions. My memories of reading Nancy Drew are highly visual, and I expected to find long descriptive passages of pastoral Midwestern

picnics and dusty criminal hideouts. Instead I was surprised by the brevity of most visual detail. Ryan agrees that this is typical of powerfully remembered fictional landscapes. She argues that *Wuthering Heights* is actually composed of only a handful of details that repeat throughout the book (Ryan 127).

An economy of detail is at work in this extended scene from *Nancy's Mysterious Letter* (1932). Our heroine is between two stops on a clue-gathering mission. She has an ankle sprain that is becoming increasingly painful. The solution that is needed appears spontaneously, as is typical in the extended River Heights universe where Nancy resides. Some college boys on their way to the sledding hill insist on helping Nancy,

With a whoop the boys started off on a trot, easily dragging the long double-runner sled to which Nancy clung. The snow fell unceasingly, and it was an exhilarating ride...

It was nearly a mile tramp to the summit of the hill, down which other sledding parties were skimming with shouts of delight from the boys and cries of alarm from the girls as the bobs flew down at express-train speed. Nancy saw Helen flash by on a sled guided by Buck.

From the summit of the hill Ned pointed out the direction of the river, the wharf, and other quarters of the town, all of which were concealed by the blinding snow.

Then, with the coast clear, the boys piled on the sled. Sturdy feet pushed it along until it gained momentum on the decline. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, the long bob slid over the crisp snow. Soon everything was a blur before Nancy's eyes as the sled picked up speed. The snow struck her cheeks with the force of sharp gravel hurled by an unseen hand, and the runners sang like a bow continuously drawn over the A string of a violin.

At the foot of the hill the bob sped along for more than a hundred yards before it slid to a halt.

‘That was as thrilling as an airplane ride,’ Nancy cried...

‘On to the hotel, then,’ cried one of the students, who had been in the play the evening before. ‘Never let it be said that Emerson youth turned a fair lady out into the snow.’

So, with all the display of an Empress of old Russia being returned to her castle, Nancy was delivered to the hotel on the sled

pulled by half a dozen young men. She thanked each one individually.
(Keene, *Letter* 175-177)

Visual snapshots flow in quick succession throughout this excerpt. The boys whoop, the sled pulls forward, the snow falls as Helen “flashes by.” After a brief pause at the top of the mountain, we are again with Nancy on the sled as the scenery blurs (Keene, *Letter* 175). The style is not overly verbose, and certainly does not invite the reader to linger over an original turn of phrase. In my own reading I barely register the language as I build the images into a scene. The text’s simplicity is deceptive, as it invites the reader into a psychologically complex process. The simplicity of the vocabulary, images, and sentence structure may be especially effective for young readers still learning the process of constructing mental scenes.

In response to Summerfield, Hassabis, & Maguire’s study finding that three details were adequate to construct a mental image of a setting, Keith Oatley, author of *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (2011), encouraged followers of his blog to count descriptive details in scenes from their favorite books. While admittedly what counts as one detail is open to interpretation, the sledding scene seems to keep close to three or so details per setting. Beginning with a whoop, the sled, and the snow, the imagery is minimalist enough to satisfy the least image oriented readers, while allowing those of us with vivid visual imaginations to invent our own landscape based on the textual anchors provided.

Spatial Immersion and the Geographic World of aText

Ryan sees spatial immersion as a two part process. Readers construct portraits of space as discussed, but these individual spaces or nodes connect to a larger

conceptual map of the entire fictional cosmos that orients the reader (Ryan 123).

Certainly immersion is easier if one can orient themselves among the various loci in the story. As Ryan notes, some texts explicitly give the reader a mental map early on that they can then use to orient themselves throughout a story. She singles out Balzac as particularly gifted in this regard, writing,

[T]he narrator inspects the building in a systematic manner, approaching it from the street, examining the garden and facade, entering through the main door, and walking from room to room, as would a real estate agent or a prospective tenant. The reader ends up with a precise notion of the configuration of the building, all the way down to the floor plan. (Ryan 125)

The sledding scene is not this sort of meticulous catalog of details. However, Ned pointing out the river, the wharf, and the town from the top of the hill does not orient Nancy alone but grounds the reader as well. It does not limit the reader that they cannot know exactly where Ned points. As with imagery, less detail is sometimes better than overwhelming the audience with data. Ned's action functions as a signal to the reader to imagine their own map, which Ryan believes is often superimposed onto a stand-in location drawn from the reader's memory (Ryan 121). Long term readers of the series who are highly spatially immersed may also be peripherally aware of their conception of the characters location at Emerson campus, its relationship to River Heights, the fictional rivers that surround them, and other landmarks that take on a simulated gravity over the course of many books.

Beyond Ned's overt locating, the entire passage functions to intensify spatial immersion. Ryan explains that literary spaces, unlike fictional spaces in other media, such as painting or film, can only be explained in a linear fashion. Therefore, details

must be given in sequence, and a narrator must artfully justify the grand construction of a larger geography. Ryan writes,

Unable to provide a panoramic glance, the text sends its readers on a narrative trail through the textual world, guiding them from viewpoint to viewpoint and letting them discover one by one the salient features of the landscape. (Ryan 123)

Nancy's sledding is as linear as the narrative form. Her path creates a momentum along a linear trajectory, revealing a sense of expansive space to orient the reader exactly in the manner Ryan postulates. The rhythm of the prose is quick. All but one paragraph has two or less sentences. Rarely does the narrator's eye rest in one spot for long. Nancy visits several connected nodes, creating an opportunity for spatial immersion for the reader.

Overall, Nancy's sled ride does little to advance the otherwise breakneck pace of the book's plot. The scene is easily forgotten after the book is over, but that does not render the passage superfluous. The ghostwriter orients the reader with brief descriptions while swiftly moving the narrator's gaze towards the next setting. The fleeting vicarious enjoyment of Nancy's adventure is an immersive moment. This is in keeping with Nell's finding that some "ludic" readers (Nell's term for reader whose main goal is pleasure) privilege the temporal hedonic experience of reading by reading as quickly as possible and remembering as little as possible, so that they can enjoy their favorite books again (Nell "Psychology" 42). Nancy's enjoyment of a visceral, physical thrill ride mimics the reading experience that is the books' overall project: one that privileges an exciting, enjoyable reading experience for its own sake.

THE IMMERSIVE APPEAL OF NANCY AS SERIES AND FORMULA

When Shahrazad ceased speaking Dunyazad exclaimed, “O my own sister, by Allah in very sooth this is a right pleasant tale and a delectable; never was heard the like of it, but prithee tell me now another story to while away what yet remaineth of the waking hours of this our night.”

One Thousand and One Arabian Nights (Burton 150)

The Series Form

Series as a form presents a set of distinct rewards for youthful readers and escapist adults. The series form was also deeply relevant to Nancy’s commercial success with her young female audience. Nancy’s inception in 1930 coincided with a cultural moment in which young girls were newly regarded as consumers. Stratemeyer marketed these books directly to a young female audience and priced them accordingly, privileging their tastes over those of parents and librarians. The books are written simply, meaning new readers easily understood them. Stratemeyer’s commercial success was founded on the series form, with the understanding that children were more likely to buy books about familiar characters. Readers were able to revisit Nancy indefinitely as the series progressed through multiple textual settings. In turn her home town of River Heights became an ever expanding fictional universe. Nancy’s permanent youth only strengthened her allure for a young audience. Her intensely successful reception represented the crest of a wave of series literature marketed directly towards girls, and thus keenly interested in the reading goals and interests of this burgeoning female audience.

Series have long been considered a highly commercialized form of fiction that acquiesces to audience desires. The enticing prospect of being able to return anew to a beloved textual world is essential to series’ appeal and commercial viability. As

Hayward puts it, “Habit...is perhaps the most important factor in holding an audience” (Hayward 3). Ryan quotes Proust desperately grieving the endings of beloved books,

I would have wanted so much for these books to continue, and if that were impossible, to have other information on all those characters, to learn now something about their lives...beings who tomorrow would be but names on a forgotten page, in a book having no connection with life. (qtd. in Ryan 140)

Nancy’s readers never suffer this remorse. Her audience has substantial (if superficial) information on the characters and are always able, through the books, to discover what new adventure has crossed Nancy’s path. As the series published 175 books, most girls outgrew Nancy before they could catch up with all of her adventures. This security in ongoing enjoyment is highly appealing, as Proust’s wishes suggest. That this desire is answered by the Stratemeyer Syndicate is an indication of how the books function as a commodity in response to a market need, responding with swift, contracted book production.

Scholars of television and children’s literature have made distinctions between series and serial narratives, also conceiving them as separate from stand-alone works (Butler 37, Schmidt 164). In serials from Dickens to Harry Potter to *Lost*, overarching narratives progress from episode to episode. Characters and circumstances are expected to change over time. Actions have permanent repercussions and stakes are high. Series, on the other hand, are episodic, always returning to the status quo, without substantial character development or even aging. Less is at stake in the world of a series character, meaning the texts can feel safer as readers know the boundaries of the formula well. The table below makes distinctions between two poles of

literature, the stand alone work and the series work, as I conceive them. The implications of the serial form on a work are significant but outside of the scope of this paper. The binary represented in the table, between the stand alone and the series, is useful in thinking about how the series form might influence the substance of a text and how the intended audience might influence the choice of form. The table is intentionally simplified. Many individual works will reside on a continuum between attributes. By exaggerating the binary I hope to create a framework for more nuanced discussion.

Stand-alone narrative	Series narrative
Monogamous, marriage plot	Serially monogamous or virginal. Romance is not necessarily consummated or guaranteed
Finite	Infinite
Mortal	Immortal
Bildungsroman	Character development halted
Characters often move through life stages: childhood, adolescence, and parenthood	Aging ceases or is slowed
Strives for originality	Intentionally formulaic in order to maintain an implicit agreement between repeat readers and the publisher on which commercial reception is predicated
Before she is fully immersed, reader is consciously evaluating her experience of the text and learning how to read it	Trusted, familiar, and immediately immersive. Reader already “knows how” to read the text
Seeks conclusions, decisions. Uncertainties are resolved	Episodic resolution with reappearance of similar obstacles in consecutive episodes means resolution never feels final
Adult	Juvenile
Interested in authorial expression as well as critical reception	Publishers seek audience, rather than critical, approval
Motivated by status, esteem	Motivated by commercial success
Single authored	Multi-authored due to demand volume

During each episode of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, characters return to their starting point regardless of what extreme circumstances ensued during the previous tale. The only change to Nancy’s world is the growing collection of antiques

and jewelry, rewards for her successes, on her mantelpiece. This circular narrative action means that long term change or story arcs beyond a single episode are precluded. Nancy cannot enroll in college, get a job, break up with or marry Ned. This overall stasis is not necessarily a negative for Nancy's readership, as it runs counter to a narrowing of options that is a hallmark of stand-alone works and perhaps more relevant to adult reader's biographies. Nancy's permanent adolescence is notable when she is compared to children's heroines in serial works such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* books who learn, grow, and mature into mothers. Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor note that typically these bildungsroman serials enjoy better critical reception than their static series counterparts (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 217). Series characters do not change significantly. Of the characters in his highly formulaic, best-selling children's horror series, R.L. Stine says that "nobody learns and nobody grows. Mostly they're just running," (Jones qtd. in Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 217). Nancy likewise does not need to grow or change because she is already perfect. It is the criminal class, ultimately manageable, that temporarily disrupts this perfection. Her skills, be they horticulture, boating, or knowing how to fix a flat, exist before a crisis necessitates them. Librarians and parents who hope their children will witness and perhaps emulate a maturing character through fiction will be foiled by Nancy's flawlessness as her skills are learned "offstage" and precede their necessity. Nancy's success shows that serials' superiority over series is perhaps not a given for a younger age group

Publishers were not the only capitalists finding a new purchasing group in children at the turn of the century. Daniel Thomas Cook notes that the 1930s saw a significant rise in children's sections separate from adult sections in department stores, accompanied by layouts and service strategies that directly acknowledged the gaze and desires of a child consumer (Cook 152-160). Daniel A. Cohen found name brand beauty products and ad campaigns recreated in representative preadolescent girl's ephemera from the 1930s, implying a consumer literacy at much younger ages than had previously been suspected (Cohen 225, 239). The Syndicate and other series publishers enjoyed immense financial success seeking this emerging audience directly.

In addition to acknowledging children's tastes, the Syndicate ignored the tastes of adults. As West notes in her study of the tension between librarians and series, in the 1910s the federal government combatted the supposedly violent effects of dime novels on children by raising the postal rates for shipping them. Fifty cent series, modeled on the stories of explorers and inventors in some dime novels, gained a foothold in this climate. The new books were still cheap enough to be afforded by children and boasted color, illustrated dust jackets depicting adventurous heroes (West 138). A sense of personal ownership is indicated by the frequency with which young owners' names are found written in the books (Figure 1). These affordable books for children were pivotal to the Syndicate's success. This pattern of independent purchasing of series by children is also seen in current research. Series

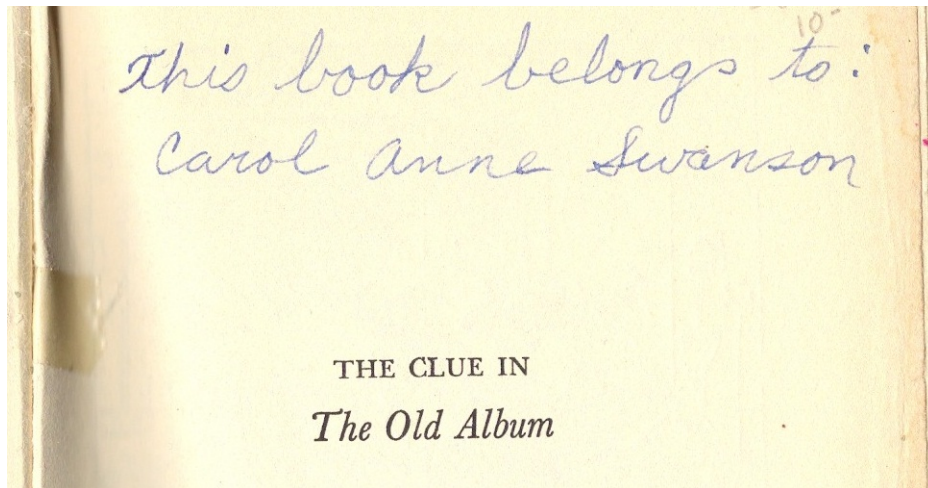


Figure 1. Typical owner's inscription, Carolyn Keene, *The Clue in the Old Album*, title page, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, c. 1952-1958, personal collection.

remain a powerful commercial force (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 216). Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor's 1996 interviews with elementary school students compared series to "recommended" (i.e., well-reviewed) books. Each interviewee selected one of each type of book that they had chosen and read independently, outside of assigned or classroom reading. Only 12% of children had purchased their recommended book rather than receiving or borrowing it, while 40% had purchased their series book with their own money (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 222). Formula series continue to depend on child, not adult support. There are marked differences between how marketers approach children directly in comparison to how they speak to parents and institutional authorities. Cook found advice in retail trade journals of the 1930s to speak to children as "adults," which in actuality only meant they were treated as individuals with their own opinions and agency (Cook 151). Dust jackets for Nancy Drew books boasted that her "[deep interest in mysteries] often involves her in some very dangerous and exciting situations," (Keene, *Album*, dust jacket). This emphasis on danger and excitement positions the books within a children's consuming space, as

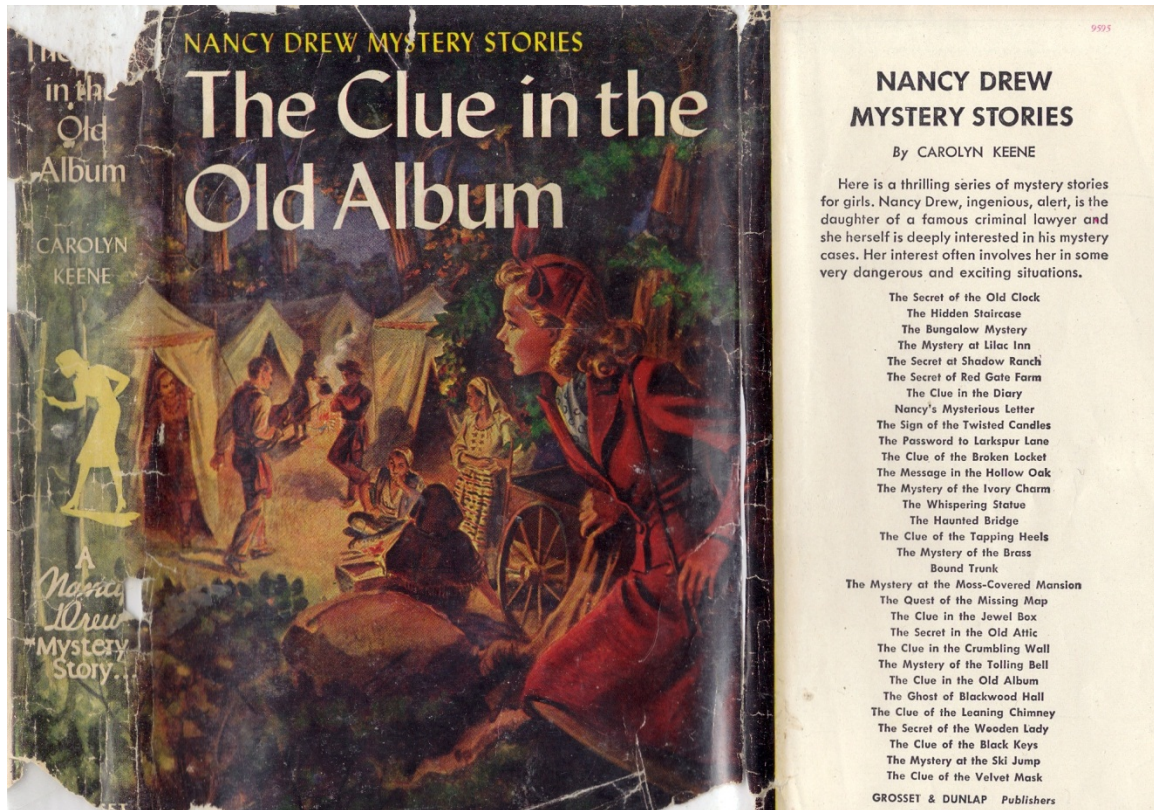


Figure 2. Dust jacket illustration by Russell H. Tandy from Carolyn Keene, *Clue in the Old Album*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1947.

contemporary librarians favored more innocent tales (West 138). Nancy's cover artwork similarly emphasizes dynamic scenes in which she is poised just at the boundary of a criminal space, discovering secrets and just barely hidden from risk. For the 1947 cover image for *The Clue in the Old Album*, for instance, Nancy is peering out from a circle of trees surrounding a gypsy encampment, peering towards the tents and fires (Figure 2. Keene, *Album*, cover). Inside this particular edition are what's known as the "digger" endpapers by collectors—a navy and white depiction of Nancy, again hidden behind a tree in the darkness, observing a man burying something in a moonlit yard (Figure 3. Keene, *Album*, endpaper). The visual appeal



Figure 3. “Digger” endpapers for the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, between 1952-1958, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, illustrator unknown.

of these images to children’s interests coincides with Cook’s findings on new marketing speaking directly a child consumer who resists being treated as an innocent (Cook 151). Within these texts Nancy’s independence is often depicted in terms of consumption. Nancy picking out the correct outfit for an Emerson football game or buying a lavish feast for a poorer family are figured as a part of her skill and independence. In selecting her outfit for the big game, Nancy demonstrates both her decisiveness and discernment through shopping decisions. She tells the salesperson,

“I’d like to see a sport hat...Something in the Emerson colors that I can wear with a raccoon coat.”

...Nancy at once rejected all the hats in solid orange, after surveying herself in one.

“I look like a pumpkin dressed up,” she laughed. “They are too bright.”

Finally she decided upon a snug fitting felt of a deep rusty brown, which bore on one side a cluster of pheasant feathers. (Keene, *Letter* 100-101)

Through her purchasing decisions Nancy demonstrates her aesthetic superiority. Her rejection of what the sales girl initially offers brings her in line with children who are making their own choices in fiction. As Cook theorizes, Nancy and her readers' independence are predicated on their consumer identities.

This child-centered marketing proved successful. In a 1920 study of eleven to fourteen year old girls in Baltimore, Wheeler found that series fiction made up for half of their reading (Wheeler 481-501 qtd. in Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 217). Just six years later in an American Library Association study of 36,000 children, an astonishing 98% named a Stratemeyer Syndicate book as their favorite (Moran and Steinfirst 113-117 qtd. in Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 217). In Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor's study, 44% of children preferred a chosen series book over a recommended book, a lower proportion than at the height of series' popularity, but still a significant amount. As Cook notes, within a capitalist society a child's foray into independent consumption is necessarily a part of individuation and agency (Cook 161). The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories are shot through with gestures appealing to children's reading goals and the evidence suggests they were successful.

The Syndicate cultivated their audience in part by appealing to children's desire for immersion within exciting, heroic adventures. One of the immersive qualities unique to series is the reduction in effort required by the reader. Nell notes that immersive reading is paradoxically perceived as effortless and marked by measurable physiological arousal. He attributes this counterintuitive result to the

automatic quality of reading, which allows a reader to be deeply excited by a book, creating increased arousal, while still feeling that the process by which that excitement was achieved as easy, even relaxing (Nell, *Lost* 77-78). Here Nancy's simple prose is an asset. Ryan, discussing Nell, differentiates reading in which one is "aware of the performance of the author" as necessarily distinct from full immersion, given that attention is split between these two ways of receiving a text (Ryan 98). Janice Radway describes her own subjective experience, recalling a dislocation from the fictional world during interpretive reading (Radway 3-4). For this reason, Ryan sees the advantages of popular, formulaic, "light" fiction to immersion to be a given (Ryan 97). Readers are more certain of what to expect from the formula and therefore are in a less evaluative mode. Works of high literary complexity accompanied by meanings that must be teased out to be fully appreciated challenge immersion, while the opposite is also true. Audiences are less likely to analyze texts that do not invite analysis.

In a similar vein, unfamiliarity with material can be disruptive to immersion. Again, the Nancy Drew series has an advantage as, after one reads the first book, the stability of the formula allows the reader to have reasonable expectations about what the next text holds. During the course of a book, familiarity increases and thus so can immersion. Ryan admits that she often has a harder time getting through the first fifty pages of a book than the last fifty for this reason. During the beginning of a book she describes learning how to read it, constructing mental maps, images, and characters (Ryan 167). Readers perform significant world building at the beginning of a work, setting the stage for the actions to follow. We also, I would argue, figure out how to

read the narrator—their reliability, sarcasm, sincerity—and how to navigate the narrative structure. During the last fifty pages, Ryan says, we are “harvesting the fruit of this labor,” (Ryan 167). If this is true one can imagine the immersive benefits. Nancy Drew’s world is familiar, with a cast of characters, settings and props appearing consistently, and a formula that strictly delineates narrative boundaries. For most readers of Nancy Drew, the majority of the series will function as fluidly as Ryan’s last fifty pages.

Nancy’s fictional actions themselves build into a collected memory that helps create the space for a reader to be immersed in. J. Hillis Miller argues,

A novel is a figurative mapping. The story traces out diachronically the movement of the characters from house to house and from time to time, as the crisscross of their relationships gradually creates an imaginary space. . . . The houses, roads, and walls stand not so much for the individual characters as for the dynamic field of relations among them. (qtd. in Ryan 123)

The Nancy Drew series is able to achieve this network of memory spun into a conceptual world to a greater extent than the typical novel if only through the sheer volume of stories, and therefore settings and actions, available to the reader. In this way each story read adds to a memory that is accessed and reactivated during each new story. The idea of this expansive world that exists outside of what is seen through the “window” of the text is, Ryan argues, central to immersion (Ryan 186). Ryan acknowledges that this puts her at odds with Saussurian linguistics and an insistence that language meaning is arbitrary and refers back to itself (Ryan 91-92). A fictional world, as Ryan conceives it, exists in the readers mind outside of language and beyond the scope of the text (Ryan 186). She ventures that we must imagine that the text refers to a larger imagined world, that objects have weight, that characters have a

life outside of what we witness (Ryan 90). Gary D. Schmidt uses L. Frank Baum's Oz stories to illustrate how series are especially able to achieve this. He explains that Baum frames his stories by explaining that the tales are mere updates of an ongoing world (Schmidt 163). The expansive world is a part of series' definition.

Nancy, due to her series form, subverts the ubiquity of the marriage plot in a manner crafted specifically for the young audience. As noted, due to her form Nancy cannot age or marry. Melanie Rehak points out that the sales figures for another Stratemeyer Syndicate girls' series dropped off precipitously after the main character became engaged (Rehak 94). Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, heir to her father's Syndicate, would echo the same sentiment in a list of guidelines, "Must appeal to children. This excludes love element, adult hardships. Marrying off Nancy Drew disastrous," (Rehak 94). Adams' concerns reveal an increasing move towards pure series and away from the serial in direct response to audience desire. Why is Harriet Stratemeyer Adams so confident of her audience's rejection of a married Nancy? As noted, other series followed their characters through marriage and motherhood. Maternal mortality remained a concern in the beginning of the twentieth century, a fact that haunts the Nancy Drew series through Nancy's deceased mother ("Achievements in Public Health, 1900-1999" 849). That Nancy's mother has died is not normally mentioned by the characters but instead perfunctorily by the narrator during an introductory passage included in each book, as a way to inform the reader that Nancy runs the household for her father. In *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*, the narrator tells us that,

Left motherless when a mere child, Nancy had developed into a self-reliant, keen-thinking girl, and although not yet of legal age her father

often said she was a more helpful partner to him in his work than any man he could pick from the legal talent of the county. (Keene, *Letter* 15)

That Nancy's mother's death is followed by a list of her achievements creates an aura of causation. Although the passage for a brief moment suggests Nancy as a pitiable orphan with the "mere child" phrase, the narrator moves with strange speed into a list of the accomplishments that, the juxtaposition suggests, are a result of her being raised without a mother. In the absence of another woman, Nancy can ascend to a higher position in the household and beyond it into the world of professional men. The books attribute Nancy's independence, problem solving, and leadership to her role as woman of the house. Nancy has little parental supervision as Carson Drew often is working late on important cases. Her absent parents both allow and necessitate her independence. In this way maternal absence affords freedom, implying through omission an association between mothers and conscripted action. The mother figure is reduced to and replaced by a housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, problematizing claims for Nancy Drew as a feminist text.

Nancy's paused development keeps her within adolescence, itself a still developing concept in the 1930s. Nancy creates a model of a teenager for children to aspire to and emulate just as adolescence comes into existence (Boesky 185). Children often read books depicting characters slightly older than themselves and their consumer behavior is similarly aspirational (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 221, Cook 157). The new concept of an adolescent meant there was an intermediary stage to aspire to. While Nancy is far from childish she is also not fully adult, and certainly not soon to be married off like her friend Helen, who is eventually written out of the

series. This was a new liminal space, a boundary between childhood and adulthood that readers and characters could reside in via series fiction. Continuing Nancy's story into adulthood would have meant either the compulsory heterosexuality of marriage and family or a deliberate, conspicuous subversion of the marriage plot. The series form allows Nancy and her creators to delay such a transformation permanently, just as the episodic series, unlike the forward moving serial, pauses Nancy at the junction between girlhood freedom and adult capabilities. This narrative movement, seemingly conservative in the straightforward sense of minimizing change, is in fact somewhat subversive in that Nancy's wifedom and motherhood are avoided in favor of her amateur detecting career. This narrative stasis was, based on Harriet Stratemeyer Adams's own writings recounted earlier, a deliberate device meant to please the young audience.

Research evidence confirms that children are highly engaged in series texts. In Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor's interview study, when participants were allowed to speak freely about their chosen books 72% described their engagement with their series selection, whereas for the "recommended" book that number was a still substantial 60% (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 219). The language used to describe the children's reading experiences is remarkably similar to adult accounts of immersion. The researchers summarized the interviews, saying the children had "lived the lives of their characters and 'been there' as the events unfolded," (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 219). One child quoted from another study said, "It's just when you're reading you're in some other world, well, not really physically but you imagine you are. Sometimes I feel like I am the person going on dates, having

loads of fun,” (Christian-Smith qtd. in Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 219). The interview participants describe an immersive experience, revealing that series can reward youthful readers with this sensation as easily or more so than the stand-alone counterparts. The study also suggests that immersion is one of the most memorable aspects of these children’s independent reading. The consistency of this immersive experience increases the possibility that it will be selected repeatedly.

The connection between series and infinite youth goes back as far as one of the earliest known serials, *One Thousand and One Nights*. As Byatt notes, this approach towards survival through repetition was present at series’ inception, connecting the infinite text to the grasp at immortality that literature promises:

The ‘frame story,’ the tale of the angry king Shahriyar who avenged his first wife’s adultery by marrying virgins and beheading them the morning after their defloration, is a deeply satisfying image of the relations between life, death, and storytelling. The wise Scheherazade saves her own life, and those of the remaining virgins of the kingdom, by telling the king (and her sister Dunyazad) a thousand and one interwoven stories, which are always unfinished at dawn—so deferring the execution daily—and enchanting. (Byatt 10-11)

Like Scheherezade, if in slightly less epic fashion, Nancy has cheated her narrative end by always telling one more story.

The Formula

The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)

C.S. Lewis (19)

Formula fiction is closely associated with immersion in part due to reasons already discussed, like familiarity and reduced effort. Series as understood by Schmidt or Butler are necessarily formulaic. Schmidt explains,

To say that these books are formulaic—and here I do not necessarily mean to scorn—is to say what is at the very heart of what this form demands. It is also to say that these books work very hard at meeting reader expectations, at not projecting outside of the confines of plot situations which would unsettle a reader's assumptions about the world of these books. (Schmidt 165)

Schmidt softens the blow of calling series formulaic, normally considered a negative quality for literature, by expressing how loyal series are to audience expectations, giving this steadfastness a nobility not normally ascribed to formula fiction.

According to Ryan's and Nell's beliefs about immersivity in terms of effort and familiarity, it makes sense that formula fiction fulfills this purpose so easily, and because of this it is often a fiction employed in escapism. Nell states that, "the primary vehicle for ludic reading is *formulaic fiction*—that is long, continuous texts of moderate difficulty and high predictability," (Nell, "Psychology" 20). Formulae are associated with specific immersive techniques which will be outlined in this section, as well as an agreement between publishers and audiences as to what a particular formula will entail. Formula has been decried due to its predictability as "trash" literature by librarians and readers alike, but temporal immersion itself makes predictability less of an issue, creating suspense despite the form. We also find that formula are able to cater to children's sometimes narrow reading goals, and that themes that adults may see as simple repetition in fact respond to very specific audience needs. Certainly the Nancy Drew stories are among the most highly formulaic texts available.

A small catalog of repeating narrative elements follows, illustrating Nancy Drew's intense formulaity. Oftentimes the setting is one outside of Nancy's hometown of River Heights, be it the seaside, ski slope, or a ranch or farm. As Boesky notes, these settings often carry the aura of bucolic nostalgia (Boesky 190). Each Nancy Drew story begins with a mystery confronting the heroine. An innocent, helpless victim is introduced, inciting Nancy's sympathies. This person may turn out to have obscured origins they are not aware of, often hidden affluent relatives. Nancy will sense immediately from their comportment that they are of better stuff than their lowly origins would suggest. Likewise, suspicious folk are immediately sussed out by Nancy through a mix of phrenology, morphology, gut instinct, classism, and racism. The mystery itself never involves murder, but instead fraud, counterfeiting, wrongful inheritance, stolen property or patents, often by a criminal gang working in concert. Nancy is threatened and sabotaged by her suspect. She travels to find further clues, and often the return trip is jeopardized by inclement weather, car trouble, or damaged roads. Nancy's driving is narrated with an intense level of detail. Adventures are punctuated with nourishing meals and picnics made by the housekeeper, Hannah Gruen. Nancy inevitably ends up in tight spots at the hands of criminals, but she escapes or is rescued by her friends just in time. Together these elements create a unique and reliable rhythm to the stories. Nancy's world is defined by its consistent repetition.

Nancy's formula functions as a guarantee to the audience of what types of actions will occur within the text. Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, heir to the Syndicate and erstwhile ghostwriter, believed that maintaining the books' formula was essential

for the series' long term viability (Rehak 235-237). Stories were meticulously outlined to fall within the formula, to the point where the Syndicate maintained that writers could not in good conscience call themselves "authors," given that they merely "filled in" gaps between mandated plot points (Boesky 197-198). While some will decry Adam's stranglehold on the ghost writers' creativity, it is to Adams that we owe Nancy's consistency, and it is to this fundamental predictability, as much as her initial uniqueness, that kept her young audience loyal. Like the series form, formula heightens immersion for the reader. It does so by allowing the reader to immediately sink into this predictable world rather than try to figure out what genre and formula rules the book is following and how it should be read.

This predictability was highly marketable. Raymond Chandler, an American author of "hard-boiled" detective fiction who began writing in 1932, attempted to explain the power of formula and genre fiction, and its extreme popularity, when he stated, "The average detective story is probably no worse than the average novel, but you never see the average novel. It doesn't get published." (Chandler). Not only do readers of formulaic works find them dependable, publishers likewise find a consistency in their success, making them a safe bet for all parties. Genre fiction's extreme marketability may mean a greater variance in perceived literary quality, but this also indicates the power of a formula in satisfying audience members. If a genre audience is willing to purchase and read an average detective story that tells us that the formula itself creates a powerful incentive. In the case of Nancy Drew, the Stratemeyer Syndicate controlled the quality of the books, guaranteeing for the reader a level of continuity, even if these requirements also prevented individual ghost

writers from stretching the formula in new directions. Chandler's comments attempt to defend genre fiction against the negative critical evaluation that necessarily accompanies predictability.

Interestingly, it is often readers of formula fiction who identify it as "trash." Nell discovered that on average his research participants believed 42.6% of what they read would be considered trash by "a suitably austere representative of elite culture." This left Nell to question how readers held these two ideas at once—that they had "good taste" and that most of what they read was not generally considered worthwhile (Nell, "Psychology" 21). In any case, this means formula fiction fans are fully aware of a lack of literary merit but seek these works out anyway. Ryan puts it succinctly, saying, "aesthetic value cannot be reduced to immersive power," though Nell might go so far so to say they were inversely related (Ryan 95). We can become immersed in literature whether it is particularly well written or not. In her summary of Nell's framework, Ryan says that one necessarily "loses sight of...the aesthetic quality of the author's performance" during immersion, that this is in fact a major part of the definition of immersion (Ryan 98). Or, as Nell's study participant says of immersion, "You're not reading sentences," (Nell "Psychology" 290). During immersion, language—and any accompanying linguistic creativity—falls away, and thus to some extent authorial skill or lack thereof is rendered invisible.

One theory as to the disconnect between preference and merit rests in a more generalized cultural rejection of pleasure. Nell asked over one hundred college students to rank thirty-three passages for reading enjoyment and perceived literary merit. He found that ratings of enjoyment and literary merit were inversely related,

again indicating a strange discord between students' favored reading and their opinion of it (Nell, "Psychology" 30). Nell interpreted this as a byproduct of the Protestant work ethic as understood by Max Weber (Nell, "Psychology" 20). Books that were pleasurable were thought to be bad because pleasure is considered bad by internalized Protestant beliefs. According to the same logic, books that are not fun to read must necessarily be good.

Alternatively, study participants could be sophisticated enough to appreciate the difference between literary virtuosity and their own subjective pleasure. Indeed, Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor's young interview participants picked the "recommended" book over the series book more often when asked what they would recommend for their class to read as a group, understanding that their own enjoyment might not be universal (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 221). In this way the enjoyment of formula fiction points to a savvy audience, aware of their personal, private tastes of their own favorite genre works versus mainstream bestsellers' community approval and the even broader appreciation of canonical works.

Nonetheless, children's literature has long bared the larger burden of improving its audience. Children's pleasure reading gets collapsed with academic learning, with school librarians' curation, and with a concern over readers' skill and values. Charges against series by librarians in the 1930s focused on "bad" writing, fears that children would believe in fate and instant gratification, and the sense that all of the "occupational" books (pilots, drivers, inventors, detectives, explorers, etc.) were preventing children from enjoying the innocence of their childhood (West 138). The librarians' concerns were reasonable. In fact, their concerns over racism and that

the depiction of romance might lead girls to expect rescue from a suitor and therefore encourage passivity are impressively radical given their historical context.

This handwringing over children's reading comes, however, with an assumption that children's reading should be carefully managed by adults. This impulse relegates children to a literary space similar to the adult approved public spaces Cook says children are increasingly confined to. He writes, "Adult power works to structure a child's spatial opportunities as well as children's strategies in negotiating with adults about their boundaries and limitations...as the 'street' has increasingly become a site coded as 'dangerous', inhabited by various sorts of 'derelicts' and 'deviants' and thus pre-eminently an adult space unsafe for children," (Cook 149-150). Control over children's reading selections functions also as a confining impulse. Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor, though, found much higher levels of engagement with books that children had selected independently. While Nancy is lauded as demonstrating a decisive, independent female role model, her accessibility and bypass of institutional structures meant that these books were girls' own, and the act of procuring the texts themselves mimicked Nancy's freedom of movement.

In the debate over the merit of series, there is even a strange infantilization of adult readers by the librarians as well. When a 1929 librarian's list of series books "not to be circulated" ended up in the hands of Ernest F. Ayres, a Boise, Idaho bookseller, he brought the issue to the *Wilson Bulletin*. In a published letter he asked, "Is it any place of any librarians, holding a position as trustee of public funds, to tell men and women who enjoyed these books when they were young, that their children should not be allowed to read the same tales?" (Ayres qtd. in West 139). Note here

the bookseller, himself a participant in books' commodification, emphasizes "enjoyment" with no mention of children's betterment or deterioration through reading. He also sees librarians' work as a market good purchased by the public in what he thinks should be a straightforward transaction. Librarians responded by denouncing parents' ability to discern quality literature, saying any parents who would allow their children to read series were "below average in education," (Mitchell qtd. in West 139). In rejecting Ayer's argument, librarians reject the book as mere commodity and again see it as a part of educational projects. Here we see literary taste being equated with class and even personal merit. If immersive reading is often the most pleasurable and authentic reading reward for many, as Nell suspects, the fallout of such dismissals means that pleasurable reading is pathologized and shamed, even equated with lower classes.

In any case, Nancy's creators did not suffer embarrassment over their work in formula and genre fiction. Nancy Drew books are not Newberry Award Winners. Mildred Wert Benson, author of the majority of the first thirty manuscripts (though by no means even the only ghost writer working at that time) remembers writing the first books in four to six weeks while working a full time job and caring for her children and invalid husband. She never reread them and insisted she did not reflect on them generally (Romalov 84). Edward Stratemeyer, founder of the Stratemeyer Syndicate that produced the series, outlined the original character and the first three plots, setting the tone for what was to follow. Melanie Rehak, in her thorough research of the Stratemeyer archives at the New York Public Library, discovers Stratemeyer was exclusively interested in the opinions of his young audience. He welcomed comments

and questions from the boys in his neighborhood. He wrote to one of his editors, “Don’t take the heart out of a fellow when he is straining every nerve to the utmost to make every boy in these United States his warm friend,” (Rehak 13). Stratemeyer rejects a broad concern for adult critiques. Again, we find the way that children’s consumer status allows their goals to be catered to in a new way, as Cook posits. Rehak gives us a portrait of a creator focused on his audience.

Formula’s predictability offers safety for readers with very specific reading goals, including escape and avoidance. In discovering the reading purposes of most compulsive readers in his study, Nell found that their habits were often as much about the subject matter they were avoiding as what they were drawn towards. One reader described fiction consumption at levels that implied little time for anything else (13 hour workdays, reading 25 books a month, and watching six movies every weekend) (Nell, “Psychology” 42). Another reader expresses awe that others are able to tolerate a life that is not dominated by compulsive consumption of narrative, saying, “I can’t imagine how people keep themselves busy fishing and so on every weekend in a little world 60 miles around their homes...If I had to be occupied *with myself* all day I’d go mad,” (Nell, “Psychology” 43, emphasis mine). Nell hypothesizes that this use of narrative to block out awareness of the self is connected with a desire to block out “negative toned current concerns”—inner thoughts of guilt, anxiety, and regret that are unpleasant to the degree that the individual feels they must immerse to escape (Nell, “Psychology” 41). One heartbreakingly restrained admission hints at a painful mental life, and confirms the interviewee’s impulse to become numb as a driving force in reading. He says,

Reading removes me for a considerable time from the petty and seemingly unrewarding irritations of living: I did not choose to be born, and cannot say (in all honesty) that I get 100% enjoyment from life. So, for the few hours a day I read 'trash,' I escape the cares of those around me, as well as escaping my own cares and dissatisfactions. This is a selfish attitude... (Nell, "Psychology" 43)

Readers who read with escape in mind must necessarily choose books that do not bring up the very subjects they are trying to avoid (Nell, "Psychology" 41). Formula fiction creates a safer set of boundaries around one's reading experience. One withdrawn adolescent girl avoided romances, saying, "A love story is so near real life," (Nell, "Psychology" 43). Thus, formula fiction and its predictable subject matter allow both for more immediate immersion that these avoidant readers seek and shut out real life concerns more effectively.

How does this connect to children's reading of series? Avoidant and compulsive readers are a subset of adults, and certainly children read with a variety of goals in mind. Yet, through this extreme example of compulsive adults, we find clues to formula fiction's appeal children as an equally demanding audience. Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor find that some child readers have a narrow reading focus as well. A girl who is not particularly confident socially dislikes the Sweet Valley High series because it features "popular" characters similar to the girls she avoids in her real life (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 224). The researchers also comment that critics complain about the homogeneity of series such as *The Baby-Sitter's Club*, saying, "[The series] pays little attention to the complex aspects of contemporary society such as AIDS, child abuse, drug addiction, or marital infidelity that have received increasing attention in contemporary recommended literature for children," (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 218). When one considers the teenage girl who would

rather avoid romance plots and the young girl who is avoiding reading about more popular children, or Adam's earlier assertion that "adult concerns" for Nancy would be "disastrous," it is unlikely that avoidant child readers would savor emotionally intense subject matter such as child abuse and drug addiction (Rehak 94). Even among the interviewees who sought out novel fictional frontiers, rather than seek out gritty subject matter they gravitated towards characters who competently solved straightforward problems and were in social, occupational, or fantasy worlds that they aspired to. The interviewees stated that favorite reading subjects, including "horses, gymnastics, hockey, or sleep-overs." More exotic literary interests included, "knights fighting battles...mysteries, and young teenagers having their first romances." The most difficult subjects mentioned were, "divorce...bullies, [and] problems with friends," (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 221). It seems that individual who turn to books for specific, favorite subject matter could be well served by formulaic series.

Formula's predictability was claimed by one interview study participant as a positive, explaining that it created a sense of social safety. One girl who would soon be entering junior high enjoyed reading books about teenagers as a way to prepare. She had finished a book about a group of girls who try out for cheerleading together and all make it onto the squad, saying she liked books where "it sounds like you'll definitely make it." She admitted to the interviewer that the ending had not been realistic, but she enjoyed continuing to read the series. The researchers imagined that seeing the uncertainty of the upcoming social world of junior high through the safe, formulaic window of a series text was helpful for this reader (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 221). For her, junior high is a serious upcoming concern, deserving of fictional

attention, though she prefers to bolster herself rather than look towards more “realistic” plots. Note that the reader is fully aware of the texts’ idealized quality and actively chooses that representation.

Likewise students discussed characters’ competent independence at problem solving. One boy discusses his favorite detective, “He never tells anyone else what he was going to do. He just says, ‘I’ve got an idea. Wait for me. If I’m not back in an hour or something, then just tell the police.’ And he goes and does something,” (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 220). This was a recurring theme amongst interview participants, and one particularly resonant to the appeal of the Nancy Drew series. Nancy usually goes it alone at some point near the climax of the mission, often illogically so. At the end of *Clue in the Old Diary*, Nancy, already on an all-night stake out of a ruined mansion that she only told her father about through a handwritten note left at the house, Nancy hears an intruder after Bess and George have fallen asleep. Nancy leaves the other girls sleeping to pursue the unknown figure and is physically attacked (Keene, *Diary* 179-181). This pointed independence is particularly salient for readers at a developmental period when independent versus sanctioned actions on the part of children are such a potent issue.

Due to Nancy’s normally good sense, these continued impulsive forays into the dark after criminals stand out as a fundamental enticement that the books will stretch logic and character consistency in order to achieve in each episode. Cook describes public space as increasingly loaded with an image of violence and danger for children, and the parental reaction to restrict children’s freedom of movement and monitor their activities (Cook 149-150). Boesky recounts a different but similar

anxiety in the 1930s, in this case one more concerned with criminal influence than the specter of victimization or abduction (Boesky 185). Decisions to “go it alone” are taboo for young kids whose whereabouts and activity are closely monitored as spaces outside of adult sanction become increasingly charged. Children enjoy the literary fantasy of minimized parental supervision and ultimate competence in navigating this demonized frontier. Nancy retains control within the anarchic territories, purposefully and confidently entering this transgressive space. This foray into an adult world echoes the 1930s librarians’ biggest complaint about the books—that they pushed children into early fantasies of adulthood when they should remain innocent (West 138). The very act of series reading, then, becomes an act of “going it alone,” no longer asking for permission or recommendations as to what to read, acting on one’s own instinct (like Nancy) and selecting one’s own book. Even if the children readers cannot share Nancy’s command over her landscape, they are free to select their own books. Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor attributed the higher than normal levels of engagement for readers in their study as due to the fact that children had been given the freedom to choose (Greenlee, Monson, and Taylor 219-220), implying that agency in selection may also be a powerful immersive tool.

Through the Nancy Drew books’ formula and its recurring attractive themes, immersion for young children whose interests were treated as consumers with their own agency and tastes. The accusation that formula fiction is merely a commercial concern disguises the fact that these books are successful because of the consistency with which they meet their audiences needs.

LETTING A GIRL WIN:
GENDER, COINCIDENCE, AND THE AURA OF “GOOD LUCK” IN NANCY DREW

No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.

Ronald Knox's Decalogue, 1929 (14)

One of the most frequent criticisms of the Nancy Drew formula is their plots' reliance on implausible coincidence. Coincidence drives plot forward in Nancy Drew stories to the near exclusion of mystery solving devices like deduction. In Murphy's previously cited article about the Supreme Court Justices, one of her complaints was that the stories were not “particularly probable affairs,” (Murphy). However, as Mason notes, “[F]or readers the longing to solve a mystery is also a desire for a real coincidence,” (Mason 10). I intend to show that if a reader is truly immersed, they are then able to experience textual coincidences as miraculous rather than experiencing them as plotting shortcuts designed by an author. In the Nancy Drew series specifically, they help to create a sense of a world that conspires to help our heroine succeed. In this way coincidence is a part of the tone that creates a familiar, atmospheric world, in turn enhancing immersion. Coincidence also mediates textual contradictions between Nancy's traditional femininity and her transgressive passion for mysteries. The books' unlikely accidents help preserve a sort of unassuming passivity that the Nancy Drew books prize to an almost absurd degree. The effect of coincidence describes the power of immersion—that through it we can experience designed events within a text as miracles of chance.

In her “Poetics of Coincidence,” Hilary P. Dannenberg describes two layers of her subject: the fictional layer, in which characters experience the coincidence within their universe as miraculous, and the extra-textual layer, in which the sense of

coincidence evaporates as the accident is realized to be designed (400 Dannenberg).

Citing Ryan's concept of immersion, Dannenberg asserts that if the reader is sufficiently immersed in the story she will not seek explanation for the coincidence outside of the textual world (i.e. authorial design) but will be interested in how the textual world accounts for and explains the unusual events (Dannenberg 414).

Likewise, immersion is the avenue by which readers can vicariously enjoy a character's experience of coincidence, something Dannenberg considers to be a powerful theme throughout the history of narrative (Dannenberg 415, 420, 423).

The most obvious attribute of Nancy's implausibility is the sheer proliferation of unlikely accidents. Entire mysteries are predicated upon the most unlikely of chance encounters. Clues pursue Nancy as often as she pursues them. Messages intended for others are instead delivered to her, including misdirected letters and carrier pigeons descending from the sky (Keene, *Letter 4*, Keene, *Password 1*). Suspicious activities and crises intercept her path. In *The Clue in the Diary* (1932), Nancy, Bess, and George are driving home from the fair when they witness a house suddenly burst into flames just as they pass by and decide to go investigate (Keene, *Diary 7*). When Nancy later runs to escape the smoke she finds shelter in a doghouse where she happens upon the tale's titular diary (Keene, *Diary 14-15*). Whenever she breaks from the mystery for a social activity, her fun is often interrupted by another clue, as in the baseball game in *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm* (1936) or the football game in *Nancy's Mysterious Letter* (Keene, *Charm 38*, *Letter 138*). Never actually looking for clues with the magnifying glass featured on the dust jackets, Nancy is instead bombarded with information through chance. She exists in a universe in

which every detail glows with significance. In *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*, the man who stole the mail bag turns out to be engaged to marry the missing heiress from a second mystery, and they both happen to be in town for the football game Nancy is going to. Marion Hutchison, the wealthy girl the heiress used to nanny, is also coincidentally in town. In this way Nancy's mysteries conspire to be solvable.

These strokes of luck are rarely ever remarked upon with incredulity. At the end of *The Clue in the Diary*, Nancy's unlikely plan to stake out the mansion weeks after it has burned down leads to the criminal's capture. She says, "I have a hunch he'll return to the ruins... We may waste our time, but I have a feeling—can't explain it—that we'll catch him near the burned house," (Keene, *Diary* 171- 172). Nancy, of course, turns out to be correct. Carson and Ned then happen to arrive with perfect timing just as Nancy has been attacked. In recounting the unlikely scene, Nancy merely asks, "How in the world did you get here at the psychological moment?" Ned and Carson give no other explanation than getting her note, and no one remarks further on their amazing timing except to say, "Lucky you did, too" (Keene, *Diary* 183-184). No one even asks Nancy how she guessed to stake out the ruined mansion weeks after the explosion, her suspect having hidden in the woods scavenging nuts and berries the entire time apparently. Characters' blasé attitude about the thrilling circumstances creates a sense that for them the exceptional is commonplace. This tone of relaxed confidence in the face of unbelievable good fortune is a hallmark of the series' atmosphere.

Coincidence has been explained within texts in various ways throughout literary history. Dickens and Elliot used coincidence to emphasize worlds made up of

social connections (Dannenberg 401). Dannenberg discusses how coincidence functions as much more than a plot shortcut in Dickens' works:

Like so many minor coincidental encounters in the novel, this coincidental meeting has no major role in the narrative but functions collectively with many others to integrate the novel's teeming cast of characters, parallel events and locations. Such ad hoc coincidences form structurally vital nodal points in the narrative, where characters come together and are progressively knitted together. (Dannenberg 420)

So coincidence can be used to create a tone of connectedness, reducing the urban or modern anonymity. The Nancy Drew books use this type of coincidence often, as when Ned and Nancy continue to run into each other, sometimes literally, again and again after their first meeting in *The Clue in the Diary* (Keene, *Diary* 70). Nancy or Ned could just as easily call one another to meet and the plots would be largely the same. By using coincidence, the text is able to achieve a sense of surprise and excitement about this new relationship. This unnecessary proliferation of coincidence is not a rushed effect of sloppy plotting but a significant textual theme in and of itself. Coincidence for its own sake within this story is a celebration of its charmed cast of characters.

Dannenberg believes that when we find coincidence within a realist text, we have located a holdover from pre-realist literature. She connects kinship reunions to a long history of fiction reaching back to antiquity (Dannenberg 403, 406). She writes,

Far from being an altogether different genre that can be defined through its reaction against romance, the modern novel from the eighteenth century onward, viewed in the light of the coincidence plot, can be seen to be repeatedly giving way to the influence of romance. (Dannenberg 431)

I believe that coincidence functions similarly within Nancy Drew. While Golden Age mysteries have trained us to expect cerebral, logical mysteries, Nancy's coincidences dodge causal explanation. Instead they infuse her with a sort of magic, the "softly antirealistic world" Dannenberg argues coincidence can create.

Coincidence is used less gracefully to paper over the contradictions within Nancy's character. Nancy's longing for mystery and adventure is fundamental to her personality according to the texts. Yet, perhaps due to gender norms, the texts often rely on coincidence to initiate and advance mysteries given their firm insistence. A passive language introduces Nancy's detecting history in an introductory chapter,

The girl had *never considered herself as an amateur detective* yet in a way such a role had been *forced* upon her. [Emphasis mine.] Her first 'case' had developed when her father, Carson Drew, a famous criminal lawyer, had been too busy to investigate the strange actions of the Topsham family. (*Charm* 12-13)

The phrase "never considered herself an amateur detective" comes across as bashful given what we know of her ultimate prowess. Nancy has not sought this work. It is "forced upon her." This idea of a hand me down case makes it sound as if Nancy is getting whatever scraps of mystery are left over when Carson has had all he can handle, again contradicting Nancy's own power, skill, and local fame beyond the shadow cast by her father. The narrator assures us that Nancy did not purposefully usurp a masculine role. In *The Password to Larkspur Lane*, Carson Drew says, "You attract mystery like nectar in a flower attracts a bee, Nancy," perfectly encapsulating this image of feminine receptivity (Keene, *Larkspur* 10). Nancy's passivity in encountering mysteries necessarily means she's leaving it partly up to chance. This is odd given that, as we shall see, she is actually desperate for the excitement a mystery

provides her. Coincidence masks the contradictions within Nancy's personality by allowing the implausible.

Bizarre coincidences allow Nancy to break laws she otherwise could not, allowing the reader to have her curiosity satisfied while preserving Nancy's correct behavior. In *The Mysterious Letter*. Nancy has chanced upon mail collected at a suspect's residence, potential clues she leaves unopened. We are told,

Mr. Nickerson's driving was not of the best. The car swayed and slipped in the packed snow, and the letters went hurtling from Nancy's lap in all directions. Some of them, so soaked that their flaps became loosened, and others that were cut by the sled runners fell open and each shed its creased dollar bill and folded sheet of note paper.

Nancy began picking them up.

"I'll never in the world get them into their right envelopes," she thought, "but I guess that makes no difference."

She slipped the letters into the torn wrappers, but to make sure that some of them would not have two of the dollar bills inside she unfolded the note paper. Her eyes glanced over the writing without curiosity, for Nancy had been taught that mail is a personal thing and unless specific permission is given, it is to be left strictly unread by anyone but the addressee. (Keene *Diary* 167)

Here several factors contribute to Nancy chancing upon the letters' contents and the eventual solution to the mystery. The car is sliding in the snow, causing the letters to fall from Nancy's lap. The envelopes are damp and their glue is loosening, as earlier they fell in the snow in a runaway sledding accident. At that point the paper was also sliced improbably. Now their contents are falling out and it is for this reason alone that Nancy ultimately ends up reading her suspect's mail. This passage awkwardly retains an image of Nancy as so prim and straight-laced that she is practically quoting postal laws until she finally has probable cause to take a peek inside the letters. The same narrative mechanics take place when, in *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm*, Nancy says of the run down house she and her cousins have discovered, "I'd love to

explore it but of course we have no right. We're really trespassing as it is," (Keene *Charm* 44). Conveniently a child she is caring for runs inside soon after she says this. The text awkwardly suppresses an eagerness to get inside the letters and inside the house through these unlikely accidents which would be unnecessary if Nancy was more of a vigilante. The inserted coincidence sidesteps these issues. Using coincidence to thrust Nancy towards her clues avoids a level of assertiveness that might disrupt her otherwise acceptable female behavior.

A more extreme image of Nancy's contained passion for mystery occurs in *The Clue in the Diary*. Rain and road conditions mean Carson wants Nancy to remain home, while she secretly thinks with chains she could probably make it to interview a suspect several towns over. Alone and frustrated, Nancy cries out, "Oh if this rain doesn't stop soon I'll do something desperate!...I'm so provoked I could chew nails," (Keene *Diary* 120). This image is a surprisingly violent one for Nancy, and hints at the depth of her true need for mystery. Trying to distract herself, she cleans the attic, plays piano, and sews before finally saying, "I can't stay in this house another instant!...Inactivity is driving me wild!" (Keene *Diary* 122). This desperation runs in strong contrast to the image of Nancy as a receptive flower. Earlier, out hunting for this same suspect, Nancy is about to enter an abandoned shed out in the woods that she believes may be his hideout. What one might expect to be a terrifying prospect of encountering a dangerous individual thrills Nancy:

"I hear some one moving!" George whispered tensely. "Some one is hiding in there!"

Nancy thought she had heard the sound, too, and instantly it flashed through her mind that Joe Swenson was inside the shack. A little chill of excitement raced over her," (Keene, *Diary* 103-104).

Although the “little chill of excitement” could be taken as the same fear the other girls express in the scene, the phrase does not connote terror. Nancy feels “excitement” and not dread, implying that a part of her relishes the threat of a confrontation. How does the text resolve this image of frustrated passion with the image of a flower that attracts mysteries? Would Nancy ever “do something desperate,” as she threatens? Fortuitous accidents are placed throughout the text to assure we never find out, and thus the contradiction in Nancy’s character is never fully exposed.

One exceptional acknowledgement and redemption of coincidence within the books was written by a ghostwriter, Walter Karig, who wrote three books while Benson refused to work at reduced Depression era rates (Rehak 188). Perhaps Karig, like some critics, found the heavy handed coincidence in the outlines awkward and this impelled him to explain the strange luck Nancy possesses. Upon reuniting with his daughter, Carson remarks,

"I thought you came up here to see a football game... Instead, you seem to have been working overtime as a sleuth."

"It's all just good luck," Nancy smiled.

"But one must be keen to recognize good luck when it happens," Mr. Drew declared. "Everybody in the world has good luck, but few can recognize it...Enjoy yourself, Nancy dear, and more 'good luck' to you." (*Letter* 185-186)

Karig allows Carson to gracefully reconcile and explain the implausible plotting in a way that feels authentic to the series as a whole. Here we have some explanation of how Nancy's luck, will, and optimism combine to inform her success. Looking more carefully at the long-shots Nancy pursues rewards the reader with a deepened insight into the series’ awareness of coincidence. What appears as the good luck of correct

“hunches” could as easily be interpreted as Nancy’s determination in achieving her goals no matter how unlikely they may seem. The passage implies that deliberate efforts made towards an unlikely result will be rewarded. The type of luck Carson explains here seems distinct from the times when coincidence functions to keep Nancy within the confines of safe, female propriety, and from the instances when it is used for its own sake as a serendipitous, connecting force.

An example of Nancy’s “good luck” as the result of dogged pursuit of a hunch against all odds occurs at an Emerson football game. Nancy overhears details that may help her mystery:

The man finally edged his way to the young woman’s side and Nancy, without purposely eavesdropping, heard “New York” and “Thanksgiving” mentioned before the resumption of the game claimed her full attention.

“If she is wealthy and from New York she may know the Hutchinsons,” flashed through Nancy’s mind. “I must ask her before we leave.” (Keene, *Letter* 129)

Nancy’s thinks her pursuit of Miss Hutchinson following the Emerson football game may seem absurd, even socially embarrassing, but she chooses to move forward with her plan anyway. She asks the woman,

“Please excuse me...but I was told you are from New York. This may sound silly, because I know how many millions of people live in New York, but do you by any chance know a family named Hutchinson?”

The young woman looked surprised.

“I—why, that is *my* name!”

Nancy could scarcely refrain from exclaiming her surprise, but checked herself.

“I have a very special reason for asking,” Nancy said. “It concerns the welfare of a person who is missing. Are you related to Thomas J. Hutchinson?”

The girl looked at Nancy quizzically.

“He is my father,” she said. (*Letter* 130)

Nancy's outrageous hope only seems unlikely until she succeeds and it ceases to. Carson Drew's words ring true: "Everyone in the world has good luck, but few can recognize it." Nancy's action towards optimistic goals is valued within the text.

Why do readers accept the proliferation of chance instead of demanding that Nancy directly deduce the mystery's solution? Ultimately, some texts refuse to offer any explanation for their coincidences. Perhaps silence better preserves a sense of mystery around strange chance occurrences. Dannenberg explains,

Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* is notable because...it shows no sense of obligation about offering an explanation for its use of coincidence. The novel's comic exuberance leads its characters to unabashedly celebrate the narrative device...[T]he novel challenges the reader to accept the Dickensian universe on its own terms and not as a copy of the real world. The comic, softly antirealistic world of *Martin Chuzzlewit* does not attempt to justify coincidence but does assert its right to its own fictional laws of space and time. (Dannenberg 428)

It is in this spirit that Nancy Drew can deny those who would disallow her improbable outcomes. The Syndicate, the ghostwriters, and the readers also assert their "right" to create and enjoy the stories' coincidences. Dannenberg's description of a "softly antirealistic world" applies rather seamlessly to *River Heights*. The successful celebration of kismet creates a tone that, Dannenberg states, is enjoyable to readers.

Coincidence operates in several ways and for multiple purposes within the Nancy Drew series. Immersion allows Nancy's readers to experience all the pleasure and freedom coincidence creates within the text. If immersion did not allow Nancy's audience to experience both her socially acceptable restraint in seeking out adventures while also thrilling at what the girl hero is then thrust into, the spell would be broken. Readers would not be able to experience a historically implausible world

in which Nancy traverses a narrow space where coincidence, conservative femininity, and heroic actions meet. Immersion allows Nancy's readers to accept a world precariously constructed through unlikely accidents. The coincidences then enhance immersion by creating a familiar wondrous atmosphere that contributes to the sense of text as world.

CONCLUSION

Despite my desire to redeem the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories as an immersive literature responding to the needs of a young audience, immersion is not a neutral activity. Given immersion's incompatibility with a critical mindset, privileged assumptions can more easily go unexamined. Nancy's representations of race, class, and gender were considered problematic even by critics in their own era.

Assumptions about who is inherently "good" or deserving and a myth of a natural criminal class were likely internalized by the audience. The independence of choice that the series books of the 1930s offered was one entirely bound up with an adoption of a consumer identity. Pleasure reading's desirability does not excuse the books' implicit exclusion of as many girls as were included. Indeed, the independence Nancy claims is often through her rejection of other girls, including the highly feminized Bess and Nancy's dead, silenced mother.

Despite their flaws, through the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories girls in the 1930s and onward enjoyed a fast paced, simple, affordable, and immersive entertainment experience created just for them. These stories gave a sense of competence and independent adventure. Nancy's approach towards feminism was not simply her heroics in the face of criminals, but that her audience experiences this via immersion. The stories create an immersion that seeks the approval of their intended girl audience rather than abiding by adult standards. Due to the number of texts, Nancy Drew is not just a single volume remembered, but often represents an entire season or year of a child's reading life. As Ryan says, "[O]ne of the most beneficial features of the theory of mental simulation is that it enables us to reason from

premises that we normally hold to be false, and to gain more tolerance for the thinking processes of people we fundamentally disagree with,” (Ryan 111). Ryan points here towards immersion’s ability to change our values or even concepts of possible realities. Girls were arguably able, through immersion, to inhabit the psyche of a kind of female hero that did not yet exist in reality. The books’ willingness to be implausible and improbable then becomes their strongest force. Through Nancy, girls experienced the vicarious respect of adults and confident problem solving. The audience did not merely “read about” Nancy. Instead they were at her elbow or behind her eyes, potentially for lengths of time allowed only through the series form, in turn able to form a substantial part of childhood biography. Nancy’s world was not realistic or probable, but through immersion she expanded the conceivable possibilities for a generation of girl readers.

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