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## The Woman Behind the Curtain:

A Look at the Life of Mildred Benson, original author of the *Nancy Drew* series

*Mildred Benson, original author of the Nancy Drew mysteries, is largely unknown for her contribution to the series. But a look at Benson's life easily shows that she had a passionate personality worth remembering.*

### The Start of a Legacy

You know the books. You know their shiny yellow spines with the uniform blue type labeling and numbering each volume. Vintage paintings of a single smartly-dressed blonde girl adorn each cover, introducing the reader to a character who withstands the test of time: Nancy Drew, girl detective. The series is a staple on the shelves of libraries, bookstores, and the bedrooms of young girls everywhere. Nancy Drew is an iconic character, first introduced in 1930, who is still well-known and well-loved by young female readers today. With her spunk, wit, and charm, the girl detective solves mysteries and saves the day within about 180 pages. This sort of smart, independent female character is not uncommon in today's young adult literature, but in 1930, Nancy Drew was revolutionary. Much of her tenacity can be attributed to the original author of the *Nancy Drew* novels, Mildred Wirt Benson (1905-2002), who, with her mild-breaking attitude and ideas, was a bit of a revolutionary herself.

Benson was born Mildred Augustine on July 10, 1905 in Ladora, Iowa (Martin). Growing up in a small town, Benson had free range to explore and play. She did not care for girlish dolls, Melanie Rehak writes in *Girl Sleuth*, a biographical account of Nancy Drew and Mildred Benson, but preferred instead to borrow books from neighboring boys. After graduating from high school, Benson earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Iowa in 1925.



Mildred Benson at her desk at the Toledo Blade in 1995. (old.post-gazette.com)

Later, she returned to school and received a master's degree in journalism in 1927, the first woman at the school to do so. Benson used her new college degree to procure a ghostwriting job for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Edward Stratemeyer, head of the Syndicate, wrote outlines for the first three novels on a series about a girl detective, and Benson wrote them to life for \$125 apiece. In 1930, at age twenty-four, Benson published the very first *Nancy Drew* book under the pen name Carolyn Keene, a name that stuck with the series even as the authors changed (Boboltz).

### Drive and Passion

In the original books published in the thirties, Nancy Drew was a sixteen-year-old girl, who drove a blue roadster and has a penchant for solving mysteries. In an article from *The Huffington Post*, Sara Boboltz, an Associate Editor of Viral Content, writes that Nancy was "sarcastic, sometimes hot-headed. She carried a gun and ... she second-guessed herself, imperfect as anyone else, but could get herself out of dangerous scrapes alone, if need be." In the 1930's, Nancy's character was unusual. Her feistiness and do-it-yourself attitude was uncommon in comparison to the restrictive social standards established for young women of the time. Nancy's progressive character heavily mirrors Benson's own independent and somewhat rebellious personality. Melanie Rehak told *Slate* magazine that Benson "gave Nancy many of

the qualities we remember so fondly and fiercely, like her determination, her intelligence, her self-reliance, and her athleticism ... Stratemeyer hired Mildred because he wanted someone who could infuse Nancy with these things, and he could tell Mildred was a go-getter from the moment she answered his ad" (Visci).

Benson continued to defy expectations as her life progressed. Though she continued writing the *Nancy Drew* series, Benson also seized an opportunity to work in the field of journalism. In the 1940s, with many men away in World War II, newspapers began hiring women to take their places. Benson started working at the *Toledo Times* (later the *Toledo Blade*) as a court reporter. She was very passionate about the work, and when the female reporters were told they would likely lose their jobs as the men returned from war, Benson only worked harder in hopes of keeping her position. "In her determination to get a story, she became notorious for parking outside of councilmen's office doors. One such councilman was so desperate to avoid talking to her, the story goes, that he climbed out his office window rather than face her questions" (Visci). Though unorthodox, Benson's plan worked, and she continued to write for the *Toledo Blade* long after the war was finished.

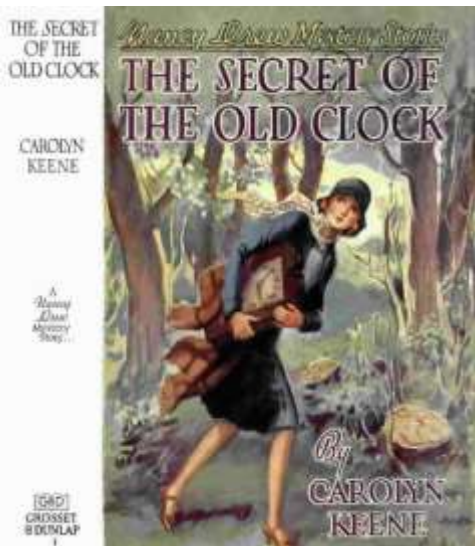
Mildred Wirt Benson's first husband, Asa Wirt, who worked for the Associated Press, died in 1947 (Martin). After Wirt's death, Benson struggled with her grief and opted to discontinue ghostwriting the *Nancy Drew* series (Boboltz). She married George Benson, the editor of the *Toledo Blade*, three years later (Martin). Following George Benson's death in 1959, Mildred Benson earned her pilot's license and subsequently began to write a weekly column about flying for the *Blade*. Even as Benson approached her fifties and sixties, her gutsy nature did not fade. She adventured to Central America several times, where she explored jungles, canoed down rivers, and witnessed the Mayan ruins (Boboltz). Age could not quell Benson's passions, wit, or wanderlust.

## Nancy Loses Her Spunk

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Benson's iconic character, Nancy Drew. After Benson left the Stratemeyer Syndicate, Nancy's character underwent heavy revisions. In the years since Benson began work with the company, Edward Stratemeyer dies, leaving the company to his daughters, Harriet Adams and Edna Squier. The sisters made changes to Benson's original novels, including the addition of

several characters, including Bess and George, Nancy's best friends, and Ned Nickerson, her casual boyfriend. The editors also made the books shorter, cutting them down from 210 pages to 18- pages (Boboltz). But the changes did not end there.

Starting in 1950 and lasting well into the 1970s, Harriet Adams worked with writers to revise and rewrite the first thirty-four books in the *Nancy Drew* series. The intent of this cleanup was



to modernize the books by editing

*Original cover of the first Nancy Drew novel, published in 1930. (series-books.com)*

out dated language and

racial stereotypes. Both of those goals were admirable, but in the revision process, not only did the books lose the negative material, but Nancy's character also lost quite a bit of the signature spunk and resilience bequeathed to her by Benson. "Original Nancy was a little more 'rough and tumble' ... compared with cool, straight-laced Revised Nancy. She became an 18-year-old with a blue convertible instead of a 16-year-old with a blue roadster. Revised Nancy played by the rule" (Boboltz).

In the revised books, Nancy loses some of her independence. Her boyfriend, Ned Nickerson, becomes less of the guy Nancy occasionally goes on dates with, and more of a heroic type, who swoops in and gets Nancy out of a jam (Boboltz). Nancy's dependence on Ned takes away her Benson-like self-reliance. As Nancy loses her independence, she becomes less of a revolutionary character and more of a

run-of-the-mill damsel in distress. “Other small details, such as losing a pump in the river muck after narrowly dodging a runaway truck with her father, who helps pull it out, show her to be a less self-sufficient young woman” (Boboltz).

The revised versions also give Nancy less opinionated comments and better manners than her 1930’s counterpart, as well as referencing her attractive outward appearance more often than the originals (Boboltz). In an interview with *Salon* magazine in 1999, Benson spoke about Nancy’s revisions: “[Harriet] made her into a traditional sort of heroine. More of a house type ... And in her day, that’s what I had specifically gotten away from. She was ahead of her time. She was not typical. She is what the girls were ready for and aspiring for, but had not achieved” (Visci). The edits sacrifice the more diverse, interesting parts of Nancy’s personality in the name of civility.

Mildred Wirt Benson, on the other hand, refused to leave behind her boldness in exchange for fitting in. In her career, Benson wrote over 120 children’s books, including the *Penny Parker* series, which she openly preferred to *Nancy Drew*. Alongside that, she also continued working at the *Toledo Blade* until her death in 2002 at age ninety-six. Benson’s coworker at the *Blade* Tahree Lane, said, “She was a real force to be reckoned with ... And she was one of those rare, enviable writers who can write in her own voice” (Slate). Benson’s voice still echoes today in the *Nancy Drew* novels, even in their altered state, that inspires young girls to be a little bolder and remind old-time Nancy fans to hold on to their adventurous side.

### Lasting Effects of the Girl Sleuth

Somewhere in the middle of old fans and new, I find myself still captivated with the girl detective. When I was twelve, a little older than most Nancy Drew inductees, I discovered a love for Nancy Drew and her sleuthing. I read only a quarter of the 120 yellow hardbacks, supplementing them with newer Nancy stories written in the 1990’s, but they have held an esteemed spot in my list of

favorite series ever since. Back then, I like the novelty of outdated slang terms, like “groovy” and “neat.” I liked being immersed in a different time period, and I liked the fact that a girl saved the day at the end of the book.

Now, having learned about Mildred Benson, I have a new appreciation for Nancy as a revolutionary female character. I may not have experienced 1930’s Nancy Drew, but I am glad that she existed in a time when girls had few independent, smart, and confident female role models. Even in the altered state that today’s girls experience the books, Nancy Drew is still a noteworthy heroine, who promotes the idea that girls can be just as heroic as boys.

Mildred Wirt Benson lent the best parts of her personality to the iconic girl sleuth, Nancy Drew. She created a character who contested the idea that women could not be strong or smart or independent. Benson’s bold and brilliant life is a testament to the resilience, the wit, and the tenacity that she gave to Nancy Drew, a character who, in turn, instilled those traits in the hearts of thousands of girls beginning in the 1930’s and continuing to the present.

#### Contributor’s Note

Scottie Garber is an English major at East Tennessee State University. She enjoys reading and writing short stories, and went through a mystery novel phase in seventh grade that she never quite grew out of.

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