

75 Years of Mystery Unfolds: Part 2

The Case of the Cliffhanger Conundrum

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Nancy Drew cliffhangers were the proverbial hook—readers were instantly caught up in Nancy’s world, eager to turn the page, wondering *What would Nancy Drew do?* Nancy Drew mysteries were real page turners—a legacy that Edward Stratemeyer helped foster by repeatedly using this literary device in his stories—a device which ghostwriters like Mildred Wirt Benson and Walter Karig used with such flair.

Early cliffhangers from the 1930s were intensely melodramatic and suspenseful, imploring us to journey onward with Nancy to the climactic end. By the 1970s, cliffhangers were much less descriptive, choppy and more action-oriented cliffhangers were packed into each book. The 1970s cliffhangers had a Scooby Doo-esque quality, lacking in high melodrama with a comedic quality at times. Nonetheless, though page turners, these cliffhangers were much less evocative of suspense at its best when compared to the earlier volumes in the series.

In the 1930s, Nancy was locked in a closet and left “to starve” (*The Secret of the Old Clock*, p. 132), Nathan Gombet, whose “face was convulsed with rage,” was poised to strike Nancy (*The Hidden Staircase*, p. 7), Nancy and her chums were “hopelessly lost” in the mountains in *The Secret at Shadow Ranch* (p. 134), Nancy boldly confronted villain Felix Raybolt after dark at the scene of the crime and demanded “What are you doing here?” (*The Clue in the Diary*, p. 179), villain Frank Semitt “with a snarl” intended to topple the ladder Nancy swayed on at the tower window in *The Sign of the Twisted Candles* (p. 204), and Nancy screamed “frantically” to stop a mother at the edge of a cliff from doing the unthinkable. (*The Clue of the Broken Locket*, p. 209). Melodrama in the 1930s included warding off blows from vile villains, being imprisoned in old mansions and bungalows, racing from villains to save the day, bound and gagged at the will of captors, turbulently at the peril of the sea, lakes, storms, and other exciting foibles.

1970’s cliffhangers, however, involved a lot of assailant rocks thrown with artful precision, many instances of being knocked unconscious, phone threats and warnings to quit snooping, kidnappings, animal and reptile attacks, near hit and run drivers, and being chloroformed. In reading the volumes from this decade, one finds a surreal Scooby Doo influence with ghostly villains warning “Ghosts own Sevanee Lake. Go away while there is time!” (*The Invisible Intruder*, p. 17), a “green sorcerer” intones, “I am the sorcerer.” “Return to your cabin at once!” (*The Secret of Mirror Bay*, p. 36), and after Ned and Nancy’s canoe capsizes, Ned is dragged to shore “by giant arms” like an octopus. (*The Invisible Intruder*, p. 85) Nancy is often kidnapped. “Taking great leaps, he carried the helpless girl away from the Thurston farm!” (by Merv Marvel in *The Mystery of the Double Jinx*, p. 170) and in the Nevada desert, Nancy “felt herself being dragged away” “before she could resist.” (*The Secret of the Forgotten City*, p. 141)

Comparing and contrasting the two styles of cliffhangers from the 1930s to the 1970s illustrates the difference in tone and appeal. In *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm* (1936), when Nancy, Bess, and George had their fortunes read by Rai as they waited

for a train, “The monotonous voice of the man from India ended in a choked gasp, while Bess and George suddenly uttered a terrified scream. From the lower branches of the tree a huge jungle snake had dropped directly on the unsuspecting Nancy, wrapping its powerful coils about her in a venomous grip of death.” (p. 8) In *The Secret of the Forgotten City* (1975), Nancy and her chums are in a car in the Nevada desert when George cries out,

“ ‘Nancy, there’s a snake beside you’ George made a lunge for the reptile just as its fangs were ready to strike her friend.” (p. 161)

The Password to Larkspur Lane (1933) lends a heightened sense of peril with this cliffhanger occurring as Nancy was caught sleuthing and ended up imprisoned in a basement: “ ‘This is more than I bargained for’ she muttered. Suddenly the ladder was jerked up, breaking into pieces from the dampness, as it was pulled to the surface. The lid clanged over the opening, cutting short the triumphant laugh of Adam Thorne and the deriding sneer of Miss Tyson.” (p. 201-202) In *Mystery of Crocodile Island* (1978), in a seemingly much less perilous scene, Bess, George, and Nancy are taken to the “Cosgrove’s” home and “when the three friends tried to get together before joining the Cosgroves downstairs, they found that they had been locked in!” (p. 17)

_____ Comparing two ghostly cliffhangers in *The Haunted Bridge* (1937) and *Mystery of the Glowing Eye* (1974) reveals a striking difference in writing style. In *Haunted Bridge*, Nancy, Bess, and George were investigating a haunted bridge and they spied what appeared to be its ghost. “From far down in the ravine, seemingly near the old haunted bridge, there issued a fearful cry which was like no human sound. Tortured and weird, it rose to a labored crescendo and then, as if heavy with remorse for some dreadful sin, it faded away in a lingering wail into the dim recesses of the black forest.” (p. 41) Nancy, Bess, and George were investigating a museum in *Glowing Eye* when the lights went out. “The room was in complete darkness, but in a moment a reddish light began to appear high on the rear wall. Seconds later it became a fiery, glowing eye!” (p. 27)

Whether your favorite type of Nancy Drew cliffhanger is the melodramatic Hollywood movie style of the 1930s or the less dramatic thrown together Scooby Doo style of the 1970s, each lends its own flair and sense of place in the 75 year history of the series.

(*75 Years of Mystery Unfolds* is a continuing series of articles dedicated to the 75 year history of the Nancy Drew series, running during 2005 in *The Sleuth* (www.nancydrewsleuth.com/theseleuth.html) and *The Whispered Watchword*. Look for part 3 in the February 2005 issue of *The Sleuth*.)