

75 Years of Mystery Unfolds, Part X: A Tribute to Harriet “Hattie”
Stratemeyer Adams ©2005 by Jennifer Fisher



“Oh, I would have loved to be a teenage detective and solved all mysteries,” Harriet Stratemeyer Adams waxed nostalgically. Though this children’s mystery writer was never a detective in her teen years, she certainly was one particular teen sleuth at heart—her beloved Nancy Drew.

Growing up in the somewhat stern yet fanciful “story-book” home of her father and series book mogul, Edward Stratemeyer, Harriet’s upper-middle class upbringing brought her stability and some freedom in which she blossomed from a tomboy to a vivacious Wellesley girl (class of 1914.) At Wellesley she busied herself in activities ranging from sports, the Wellesley Equal Suffrage League and the Wellesley Press Board. She was a college correspondent for papers including *The Boston Globe* and *The Newark Evening News* as she majored in music and English composition.

Frustrated upon graduation in 1914 at having to turn down job offers thanks to her father’s desire that she not work, Harriet persuaded Edward to let her work for him. Though relegated to working from home briefly before marriage, she experienced a small taste of Edward’s world among such Stratemeyer classics as Dramatic Ruth Fielding’s Hollywood adventures and the bubbly Bobbsey Twins on the go as she edited manuscripts.

Married in 1915 to a childhood neighbor whom she teased mercifully, Russell Vroom Adams, Harriet dedicated herself to Russell and having a family of her own. She and Russell were graced with four children and Harriet was a devoted mother as she focused on family and charitable endeavors until tragedy brought her life to a standstill.

Edward Stratemeyer’s brainchild, Nancy Drew, was his last major creation. The first three books: *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Hidden Staircase*, and *The Bungalow Mystery* had debuted on April 28, 1930 with a fourth volume on the way. Sadly, he would pass away May 10, 1930 never to fully realize his legacy and the impact of his many books and series on millions of children.

A proud family, the Stratemeyers came together to make decisions that would ultimately set their lives on a course in uncharted territory. Haste was of the essence

as Harriet and her younger sister Edna tried to find a buyer for the Syndicate. Publishers were in need of promised volumes so Edward's astute assistant Harriet Otis Smith handled immediate needs. Timing, however, was not on the sisters' side as depressed conditions would not yield a buyer and their endeavor to sell quickly was futile. By July 1930, Harriet and a more hesitant Edna took over the Syndicate and became CEOs at a time when this was practically unheard of—especially in the publishing industry.

“I think my father would be absolutely amazed at what's happened. I doubt that he thought anyone would carry on,” Harriet reflected years later. For the time being, Harriet and Edna rose to the occasion among their mostly male colleagues and honored their father's legacy and Syndicate traditions while continuing to forge a legacy of their own.

Building upon a solid foundation that their father had firmly set in place, Edna and Harriet began learning the business side of the Syndicate while studying their father's books and outlines and keeping current ghostwriters employed and publishers satisfied. Edna tried her hand at outlines and helped Harriet conceive of new series including Doris Force, Kay Tracey, and the Dana Girls. Together the two sisters conceived of plots, wrote outlines that ghostwriters filled in, and edited final manuscripts among other business matters all the while enduring the passing of their mother Lenna in 1935 and the tragic loss of Harriet's first son, Sunny, in a pilot training accident in 1942. When Edna moved to Florida in 1942 she became a “silent” partner leaving Harriet to manage the business by herself on a daily basis.

By the late 1940s, Harriet had come into her own as head of her company while balancing career and domestic life with the support of her family. Having withstood the depression and the second world war, Harriet found herself and the Syndicate at odds with long time publisher Grosset and Dunlap who was becoming more corporate minded. Amid tensions on both sides, Grosset and Dunlap offered Harriet an opportunity to give up the creation process of plot to outline to finished manuscript and allow the publisher to handle this aspect in the future—a move to gain further control over various Syndicate series.

Never one to be intimidated, Harriet responded, “Rightly or wrongly, I have had a feeling for some time that the new Etat Major of Grosset and Dunlap does not have the same feeling for my heroes and heroines as the former paterfamilias. It worries me to see a growing hysteria to meet printers' and mail order house demands to a point where all laughter and enjoyment is taken out of conferences.” Of course, she refused their offer. Between troubles with Grosset and Dunlap and manuscript difficulties with ghost writers, by 1952 Harriet made a bold decision to take the writing of Syndicate manuscripts in-house rather than continuing to farm them out. Harriet took over the writing of the Nancy Drew series and kept a watchful eye on Nancy Drew for years to come.

Though the Syndicate's relationship with Grosset and Dunlap continued until 1979, the years in between were full of constant wrangling over what Harriet conceived and what Grosset and Dunlap ultimately wanted. At the instigation of Grosset and Dunlap, Harriet and her staff embarked upon a revision of volumes in the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series—a process that helped to bring Nancy Drew into the modern era. While battles were often lost over illustrations or non-Syndicate series advertising on Syndicate books, Harriet never backed down over her vision of what Syndicate series should be like. When a manuscript was edited beyond her agreement, she took an editor at Grosset and Dunlap to task, “I want to remind you that Grosset and Dunlap does not purchase these manuscripts and therefore does not have the right to change them without the author's approval. It grieves me to say this, Anne, but until I have your assurance that the Syndicate sees and okays the final version of a story, there will be no more manuscripts from this office.”

Though her business relationship with her editors continued as new volumes were churned out, there were constant struggles as editor and colleague Anne Hagan continued to be a thorn in Harriet's side. “Your sleuthing for mistakes is excellent but there are entirely too many editor's choices rather than author's,” Harriet noted. “I thought we had come to an understanding on this subject some time ago, but apparently it has slipped your mind.” Again, she lamented, “I feel you overstepped your position in trying to revamp Nancy's character. She is not all those dreadful things you accuse her of and in many instances you have actually wanted to make her negative. And don't forget, every Shakesperian tragedy has plenty of humor in it!” She was beside herself in writing, “You must have known I would not take your vitriolic editing of *The Glowing Eye* without comments.” Harriet did not find the following comments to be “top-quality editing”: “Ned is doltish”, “McGinnis sounds like a dumb cop.”, “This is icky”, “Nancy sounds like a nasty female.” She pondered, “Anne, are your remarks intended to mend story holes or do you get some sadistic fun out of downgrading and offending me? It will take me a long time to live down the remark, ‘Nancy sounds like a nasty female.’”

Of all the series the Syndicate produced under Harriet's effective management and authorship, Nancy Drew was her favorite and in later years she affectionately referred to Nancy as her fictional daughter—who she firmly believed would have gone to Wellesley College if Nancy had ever decided to seek higher education. Harriet lived by the Wellesley motto *Non Ministrari Sed Ministrare*—Not to be ministered unto but to minister. She wrote, “Nancy, Frank and Joe Hardy and all their friends are outstanding examples of this.”

It was Harriet's desire to keep Syndicate books educational and safe for kids. “None of the characters have love affairs or get pregnant or take dope,” she noted. Ultimately she believed that “children ages eight to thirteen don't care one whit about social problems. They want to be entertained...They will have time to cry and worry later. Let them be children.” She wrote in *TV Guide*, “The stories are clean and wholesome but filled with hair-raising adventures and mysteries that tax the ingenuity rather than the muscle of the heroes or heroines and their friends.”

Harriet was dedicated to her work as one former Syndicate partner notes, “I enjoyed working with Harriet. Although she was very focused on her work, very disciplined, she always made time for others. She was interested in people and in children especially. She was a wonderful listener.” While Harriet kept alive the Nancy Drew series we all know and love through her years of dedicated service to children’s literature, sadly things were never the same for many upon her passing in 1982 at the age of 89. While Nancy Drew has endured into present day in various incarnations including college co-ed, romance infused teen, a third grader, and now tells her mystery yarns in first person, many feel that the true spirit of Nancy Drew may have died with Harriet if not upon the close of the family’s Syndicate doors in 1984 when it was sold to current publisher Simon and Schuster

Though she longed nostalgically to have been a teen sleuth like Nancy Drew, certainly Harriet’s life embodied the spirit of Nancy Drew—graciousness under fire, kindness and the utmost generosity to others in need, and never ever giving up or giving in, no matter how baffling or taxing the situation. As Nancy Drew celebrates her 75th anniversary, Harriet’s legacy is one that should never be forgotten as we ride into the mysterious future of all things Drew.