

75 Years of Mystery Unfolds, Part VI: A Mysterious History Revealed

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The Mystery Unfolds



Whether she was chasing after suspects, hunting down clues or solving the most baffling of mysteries, Nancy Drew was inspiring and simply quite fabulous to young girls who aspired to be like her. With the grace of a socialite mixed with the prowess of a tomboy, Nancy could chase suspects and climb ladders in fashionable frocks and heels and change a flat tire with the best of them.

For all the lost wills, missing heirs, haunted mansions and thrilling adventures Nancy was entangled with, a real life baffling mystery was brewing.

Behind the scenes of picture perfect Nancy Drewdom, existed a mystery ripe with secrecy, cover-ups, and courtroom drama. While it may appear that the many ghosts of “Carolyn Keene” still haunt the hallowed volumes of the Nancy Drew series, there are secrets behind the mystery that might never have been revealed--until now as the mystery unfolds.

A Syndicate Shrouded in Secrecy

Formed around 1905, the Stratemeyer Syndicate was a prolific fiction factory, churning out many books during its near eighty year existence. The creation of Edward Stratemeyer, the Syndicate was a mystery to those on the outside. Its inner workings known only to the Stratemeyer family and Stratemeyer’s capable assistant, Harriet Otis Smith.

A secretive gentleman, Stratemeyer gave few interviews and often gave vague answers. His life has been something of a mystery and myths have therefore come to surround this legendary literary figure.

Pseudonyms or “ghost names” became a staple of the Syndicate, further enshrouding the Syndicate in secrecy.

The Syndicate Ghost Caper

As prolific as Stratemeyer was, he had too many creative ideas for stories and not enough time to write them himself. The use of pseudonyms allowed Stratemeyer to institute a successful ghostwriter policy, whereby ghosts would write stories based upon his plot outlines, sign away rights to the story and the

pseudonym, and this allowed a high rate of output. After taking on ghostwriters, the Syndicate began churning out volumes and series at a more rapid pace.

This was a brilliant strategy in that the demands of children would be satisfied and the children would not know that Carolyn Keene was just a ghost, in reality several authors. This strategy succeeded, until the silence was broken...

The Case of the Controversial Ghost

Though not the first ghost of Carolyn Keene, Walter Karig stepped in during the Depression to write three volumes in the series, volumes 8 through 10. Not your typical ghost, Karig was a seasoned Navy man with a wry sense of humor. He also broke his silence—gasp—and wrote the Library of Congress stating that he was “Julia K. Duncan,” “James Cody Ferris,” and “Carolyn Keene.” Adamant about the writing he did for the Syndicate, he butted heads with the Syndicate when they heard from the Library of Congress. After hearing from Syndicate attorneys, Karig quieted down for a time.

In 1950, a publicity director for Rhinehart, in publicizing Karig’s latest book, let it be known that Karig was in fact Carolyn Keene. This caused a lot of publicity and a threat of legal action by the Syndicate, who rued the day they had ever hired Karig. Karig smoothed things over with a letter to his publisher “bitterly” disclaiming a desire to have been Carolyn Keene. This highly publicized outing caused another ghost to question the Syndicate, the original Carolyn Keene, Mildred A. Wirt, now Mildred Benson.

A Claim to Carolyn Keene

Mildred A. Wirt, an Iowa country girl, was asked to undertake writing Stratemeyer’s newly created Nancy Drew series in 1929. Giving Nancy a healthy dose of pluck and stubbornness, Nancy Drew was a breakout character at a time when girls’ series heroines were mostly “namby pamby.” A young writer at the age of twenty-four, Wirt ghosted the first three Nancy Drew books and signed away her rights to the stories and the pseudonym.

Though Wirt briefly outed herself as Carolyn Keene in local papers in Ohio and a few biographical author reference entries, she kept relatively mum about her famous pseudonym. While Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew series became a hit, selling very well during the Depression era when most series faltered and went out of print, Wirt quietly wrote under her own name and various pseudonyms—some for the Syndicate.

Upon seeing national news stories touting Karig as being Carolyn Keene, Wirt began to question whether she too might have some kind of claim to being Carolyn Keene.

Responding to a letter from Wirt to Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, daughter of Edward Stratemeyer, Harriet wrote that Wirt would have more of a claim to being Carolyn Keene as compared to Karig. However, she pointedly put Wirt’s

queries in place, flatly pronouncing such notions as not appropriate, given that the Syndicate was the legal owner of the stories and the pseudonyms.

The Fiction Factory Churns On

Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, her younger sister Edna Stratemeyer and their mother Magdalene were rocked by Stratemeyer's death, in May of 1930, just a couple of weeks after his most famous series, Nancy Drew, debuted. Stratemeyer's death put the Syndicate on shaky ground as Stratemeyer's daughters tried to find a buyer and Stratemeyer's assistant, Harriet Otis Smith was left with the business of getting out the current manuscripts to publishers.

Lacking a buyer, the sisters became determined to continue their father's legacy. Harriet and Edna took over the Syndicate and forged ahead in uncharted territory.

Having been used to working with Stratemeyer and Smith, Wirt had to get used to working with Stratemeyer's daughters. Edna worked more closely on the Nancy Drew series, plotting and editing. Eventually, Edna took a lesser role in the Syndicate's business, and Harriet began to have more of an influence over the Nancy Drew series as she began to plot, outline, and edit.

It was a tale of two Nancys. Wirt's more brazen Nancy Drew began to be toned down by Adams, whose Nancy was much more of a genteel and less flip heroine.

Plot outlines began to be more voluminous and chapter endings more delineated to the point that Wirt's creative input was slowly curtailed and writing the books became more tedious to her.

What was once a rather chatty business like relationship between these two pioneering women, soon became strained at best. Eventually, Wirt quit writing for the series and Adams soon took over herself, writing, editing, and plotting.

Then came the revisions. From 1959 to 1978, the first thirty-four books were revised including 23 of Wirt's books and 3 of Karig's. These books were either condensed or completely rewritten into all new stories. The contributions of Wirt, Karig, and a few other ghosts soon ceased to exist in original form, though the revisions kept quite a bit of the text and some sentences as written in the originals. As these ghostwriter's contributions were fading, soon more publicity began to appear about the "grandmotherly Carolyn Keene," adding a few more clues to what would become a complex mystery.

The Grandmotherly Ghost Mystery

Never one to speak much about her father, her family, or the inner workings of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, Adams strongly adhered to her father's legacy and his great wish to protect children's image of their favorite writers. They never revealed clues as to who Laura Lee Hope, Franklin W. Dixon, or Carolyn Keene were. Few articles appeared over the years.

After Karig's bold outing in national papers in 1950, the Syndicate became even more protective of their properties. In the 1960s, prolific Syndicate ghost, Howard Garis, died. Having been Laura Lee Hope and Victor Appleton among many others—these pseudonyms were mentioned in his obituary. Garis' son Roger, another Syndicate ghost as had been his mother Lilian and his sister, soon published *My Father was Uncle Wiggily*. This book further told of his family's involvement with the Stratemeyer Syndicate.

In an effort to counter this publicity and develop a public history for the Syndicate, Adams began to grant more interviews. Adams and her father were Carolyn Keene—she stated this with conviction. Crediting her father for writing the first three Nancy Drew books, Adams claimed to have written all the other Nancy Drew books. In later interviews, she claimed to have written them all. To her credit, she did have some claim to do so, having rewritten or contributed to the rewriting of the first thirty-four volumes that were revised.

In a telling moment in 1980, Adams testified in court about her role in the Stratemeyer Syndicate and the role of Wirt who was now on the record officially as having been the original Carolyn Keene. Adams admitted to Wirt's role in Syndicate history and refuted nothing.

A Case of Courtroom Drama

Considered to be a case of courtroom drama, Adams presence on that witness stand was somewhat of a puzzler.

Having said she thought Wirt was dead, both of these women, whose relationship had once been cordial and then strained, were thrown into the midst of a contract dispute between the two Nancy Drew publishers.

For more than 75 years, Grosset & Dunlap had been publishing series books for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Popular were its Hardy Boys, Tom Swift Jr., Nancy Drew, Bobbsey Twins, and Dana Girls series. Unsatisfied with royalty payments, Adams switched publishers to Simon & Schuster, who had been courting the Syndicate. Adams and her Syndicate partners were ready to forge ahead into the publishing world of mass-market paperbacks.

Grosset & Dunlap sued both Simon & Schuster and the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Shocked and very disheartened by this lawsuit, Adams tried to focus on her work and carried on the business of mystery solving.

The publicity for Nancy Drew's 50th Birthday and the lawsuit were making headlines nationally. Hammering away on her typewriter, miles away in Toledo, Ohio, Wirt was suddenly slapped with stories by editors, colleagues, family, and friends who had thought she was Carolyn Keene once upon a time. Feeling her integrity and honesty were called into question and that the truth should be told, Wirt decided to set the record straight.

A chance to testify on Grosset & Dunlap's behalf as to her involvement with the Nancy Drew series and the ghostwriting process, Wirt put aside her reservations and dislike of publicity, and broke her silence in a big way.

While on the witness stand, Wirt's credibility was questioned, but she staunchly stuck to her story about her writing for the Syndicate and her desire

that the record be set straight. Finally, Wirt was given public recognition for her earlier contributions to the Nancy Drew series.

The Ghostwriter Saga Continues: A Legacy Forgotten

Though Wirt's history with the Syndicate was a matter of public record after the trial, few people knew of her existence and little was reported about her testimony. Shortly thereafter, the case was decided in Simon & Schuster and the Stratemeyer Syndicate's favor, holding that the Syndicate was the copyright owner of their literary properties and that Simon & Schuster could continue to publish new volumes in the series. In the long run with perhaps the best end of the deal, Grosset & Dunlap was given reprint rights to continue to publish what scholars and collectors term the "classic Nancy Drew" books—the first fifty-six which have neither gone out of print nor out of popularity.

For fans and scholars who had for nearly twenty years been trying to piece together the history of the Syndicate and out Wirt as being Carolyn Keene, the courtroom drama was but a minor victory. More would soon unfold.

In the meantime, her health in decline, Adams looked to the future after the trial verdict, writing for the series she adored and making plans for its future and that of a new Dana Girls series. Alas, these plans never came to fruition after she passed away in 1982.

In the wave of publicity surrounding Adams' death, the record was never less straight as it had been before the trial.

Within two short years, the remaining Syndicate partners sold the Syndicate to Simon & Schuster. The Syndicate closed its doors seventy-nine years after forming and a publishing legacy was soon to be forgotten by many over the course of the next twenty years.

The Original "Carolyn Keene" Found

Widespread national media stories had been touting Adams for nearly two decades as being the "grandmotherly Carolyn Keene." When an undergraduate secretary at the University of Iowa began organizing the university's alumni files, she discovered that the first Masters of Journalism graduate in 1927 was none other than Wirt—who had a few ghosts in the closet.

Being Carolyn Keene, this famous graduate had never been recognized by the university. Planning to get Wirt into the university's hall of fame led to the idea for a Nancy Drew Conference.

"Roadsters" full of would-be gumshoes flocked to Iowa City in 1993 for the first ever large-scale conference devoted to Nancy Drew. Major publicity ensued and Wirt, now outed from relative obscurity, became ABC TV's Person of the Week.

The tide began to shift, and the Stratemeyer legacy became buried in the past. Since 1993 and most prolifically after Wirt's death in 2002, there has been an ongoing struggle of balance between the Stratemeyer family's legacy and the outing of prominent Syndicate ghostwriters by fans and scholars. Questions of

authorship remain and the mystery of the ghost of Carolyn Keene gets murkier as the plot thickens...

A Legacy's Mysterious Beginnings

Before the plot became ripe with behind the scenes mysteries, Nancy Drew was but a mere thought, a mere proposal in the hands of Edward Stratemeyer. A moderately successful gumshoe series in The Hardy Boys spurned the genius for a female counterpart.

Ideas brewing, pen to paper, Edward Stratemeyer conceived a few ideas and a proposal for a new series to publisher, Grosset & Dunlap. However, Nancy Drew might never have been when Stella Strong stepped into the picture...