

75 Years of Mystery Unfolds, Part IX: A Tribute to the Original “Carolyn Keene” ©2005 By Jennifer Fisher



An Iowa country girl, Mildred Wirt Benson was born in 1905 in small town Ladora, Iowa. She grew up an independent spirit, with freedom and aspirations that a lot of women did not have during those times. Benson was an avid reader and was encouraged by her family to further her education. Benson loved to write and was only 12 when her first published story, *The Courtesy*, appeared in *St. Nicholas* magazine in 1919—it won a silver badge. Many short stories later which helped pay her way through the University of Iowa, then State University of Iowa, she went on to be the first student and woman to receive a Masters in Journalism from the university.

While she was getting her Masters degree, she began to write for Edward Stratemeyer’s Stratemeyer Syndicate, starting out with volumes in the *Ruth Fielding* series. In 1929, Stratemeyer wrote to ask her about undertaking a new series about a heroine, Nancy Drew, who liked to solve mysteries. Benson relished the idea of starting fresh with a new series. Being independent minded and adventurous herself, Benson gave Nancy Drew these qualities and then some. Nancy Drew debuted at time when nearly 10 years after women earned the Constitutional right to vote, girls were ready for a new type of heroine—one that was not so domesticated or as namby-pamby as many current series book heroines were.



Though she wrote over 130 children’s books and many short stories, Benson had an extensive career in journalism. In 1944, during World War II, Benson went to work for *The Toledo Times*, a newspaper in Toledo, Ohio. Forever worried that her job might be taken away when the men came back from the war, she threw herself into her reporting and could bring in stories hot off of the presses with the best of them. She continued to work for the *Times* and later *The Toledo Blade*, for 58 more years and was still hard at work the day she passed away at age 96 on May 28, 2002.

Her work was her life, her life her work. Dedicated, loyal, and forthright, she always aspired to do more and live life to its fullest.

Her most famous legacy was the lifelong impact that the Nancy Drew series had on girls and boys growing up. Nancy Drew was a character that inspired girls to do more in life—if Nancy Drew could do it, so could they. In many ways, Nancy Drew was the kind of girl that Benson herself aspired to be. Benson ceased to write for the Nancy Drew series in 1953. Perhaps inspired, she too began to crave more adventure. Numerous trips to Central America exploring archaeological sites with natives and learning to fly far and wide were exciting times for Benson. Some ponder whether Benson was like Nancy Drew or perhaps Nancy Drew like Benson. Ultimately, both the real life persona and the fictional muse left an empowering impact on generations of women.

