

# 75 Years of Mystery Unfolds, Part IV: Nancy Drew at the Movies

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“Duped again!” Poor “Ted” Nickerson, always at the mercy of scheming Nancy Drew in the 1930s Warner Brothers Nancy Drew movies. Fans of the Nancy Drew mysteries may have felt “duped” as the movies were quite a departure from the Nancy Drew books upon which they were loosely based.

B comedies at best, the four Nancy Drew movies, *Nancy Drew...Detective*, *Nancy Drew, Reporter*, *Nancy Drew, Troubleshooter* and *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, were an amusing portrayal of the life and times of crime and detection in River Heights. The basic premise of each movie was that something mysterious happened and Nancy got involved. Nancy drug Ted into her sleuthing schemes—often bribing or manipulating him. Carson Drew told Nancy to stay out of it. Captain Tweedy did not take Nancy very seriously. Nancy and Ted got involved in a daring plot regardless of Carson’s orders to stay out of it, and they ended up getting caught. In the end, Carson Drew and the police rushed to Nancy and Ted’s rescue.

Actress Bonita Granville’s Nancy Drew was a more ditzzy heroine who used her feminine wiles to manipulate and scheme others into helping her solve mysteries. Usually it was Ted, played by Frankie Thomas, who ended up being Nancy’s partner in sleuthing. In *Detective*, Ted had to dress up as a nurse to help Nancy sneak into a sanitarium. Other ruses that Nancy talked Ted into included posing as a reporter and then pretending to be boxer One-Round Loogan in *Reporter*.

Ted did more than his fair share of the work and often ended up in trouble due to it. In *Hidden Staircase*, Nancy made Ted, who worked for an ice company at the time, write a fake suicide note for which he got arrested at the movie’s end. Ted borrowed a gun from his uncle so Nancy could run a test, and left a note with it, “Pest, I’ve gone to work. Don’t bother me today on account of I was docked for stalling around with you yesterday. P.S. Don’t blow your head off.”

Not to be put off by this note, Nancy pretended to be a “Mrs. Brown” ordering ice and had Ted deliver it into rural location. She used the ruse to get Ted to fire the gun. He said, “Someday I’m going to be psychoanalyzed to find out why I’m such a dope.” Ted fired the gun and discovered the sign he hit said no shooting, sirens were heard and Nancy drove off leaving Ted to get in trouble. Later, Nancy threatened to turn Ted into his employer for goofing off on the job so he’d help her do some investigating and he ended up having to spend the night in the Turnbull mansion to take a picture of the “ghost.” In the night, the “ghost” stole Ted’s clothes so he had to dress up in women’s clothing and got arrested.

Ted was the classic comedy straight man to Nancy Drew. A clumsy character, Ted fell over ladder causing a pigeon to escape, fell over containers causing Nancy to

lose sight of a suspect and ran from a goon at a sanitarium and fell over in *Detective*. In *Trouble Shooter*, Ted ran to see about a nearby fire—right through lattice work off a porch and later got caught up in a rope and then fell on his head when Nancy cut through rope. As boxer One-Round Loogan, he flailed around the boxing ring and ended up knocked out in *Reporter*. In *Hidden Staircase*, Ted fell down hill running with his pants down and later while trying to stop Nancy from breaking into the Turnbull mansion, he fell through a window and said, “I’m going to give myself up.”

While Ted was busy playing a role in Nancy’s schemes, Nancy was hard at work trying to “show them!” Always patronized by Captain Tweedy, who often called her a “little girl” she dramatically recoiled in *Detective* when told to “go back to kindergarten and play with your dolly.”

Always wanting to prove to the adults in her life she could save the day, she busied herself trying to run the show and find the clues to solve the current mystery.

Affectionately referred to by Carson Drew as “Miss Sherlock”, Nancy planned to go to law school one day, noting “I think every intelligent woman should have a career.”

Often promising Carson Drew to stay out of an investigation, she would cross her fingers at the same time and then go behind Carson’s back. She walked a fine line between investigating criminals and becoming one herself. She was at her worst in *Hidden Staircase* when she made Ted write a fake suicide note so there would not be a murder investigation, took a bullet from the crime scene which was evidence, drugged the Turnbull sisters so she and Ted could sleuth around the Turnbull mansion, and sent Carson Drew out of town using a fake telegram.

Easily frightened, Nancy was your typical female heroine of the time—somewhat ditzzy, a bad driver, relied on the help of other males, and always had to be rescued in the end. 1930s movie Nancy was a sharp contrast to the plucky independent Nancy of the books who often got herself into jams but used her wits to get out of a precarious situation. While the bolder Nancy in the books went on to solve mysteries for 75 years, the more genteel and dramatically feminine Nancy of the Warner Brothers movies only lasted 4 movies from 1938 to 1939. Only the fourth and last movie, *Hidden Staircase*, had the best critical reviews. Bonita Granville left Warner Brothers and was never replaced by another actress and plans for future movies fell through.

Due out sometime in the near future, a new Nancy Drew movie will appear on the scene from Warner Brothers—a more modern Nancy Drew. One can only ponder how this new take on Nancy Drew will be regarded by legions of fans who rather like their formulaic Nancy Drew the way she has always been—tried and true.

*(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/thesleuth.html](http://www.nancydrewsleuth.com/thesleuth.html)) and *The Whispered Watchword*. Look for part 5 in the April 2005 issue of *The Whispered Watchword* and part 6 in the April issue of *The Sleuth*.)