

MYSTERIOUS MADGE S STERLING

BY JENNIFER FISHER

MADGE STERLING is the perfect chum—she’s got pluck, she’s full of adventure, and you’ll never lack for a good mystery if you hang with her! Madge is a teenage sleuth from Claymore, Michigan who spends her summers at her aunt and uncle Brady’s lodge at Loon Lake in Canada. She attends a school for girls in Claymore during the year. She is the creation of Mildred Wirt Benson who wrote the Madge Sterling breeder set of three books under the pseudonym of Ann Wirt. The titles were *The Missing Formula*, *The Deserted Yacht*, and *The Secret of the Sundial*.

The Madge Sterling series debuted in 1932 along with two other books of Mildred’s that were published that year: *Ruth Fielding and Her Double* under the pseudonym of Alice B. Emerson and *The Clue in the Diary* under the pseudonym of Carolyn Keene. At the time Mildred wrote the Madge Sterling breeder set, she had written 17 children’s books including six Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, five Ruth Fielding books, the four Ruth Darrow books, and two of the Doris Force books.

Ruth Fielding involved the motion picture industry and her Ruth Darrow books were related to flying mysteries. Though the Madge Sterling books were mysteries like the Doris Force books, Madge Sterling is more akin to the Nancy Drew series in style. Madge Sterling does not give the impression of a girl easily daunted. She has auburn hair. She is tanned a healthy mellow bronze at the beginning of her summer visit to Loon Lake in the first volume, *The Missing Formula*. She has blue eyes. Her uncle George Brady calls her “Chick-a-dee.” She’s a skillful boater and an expert with a canoe, loves the outdoors, swims like a fish, and has a talent for making friends. Her mother died when she was a baby and a short time later, her dad, Graham Sterling, went out west on a prospecting expedition and was never heard from again. Her uncle George and aunt Maude are like parents to her.

Both Madge and Nancy are young girls. Madge’s age is not mentioned in the series, yet she is still in school—perhaps her last year of schooling. Nancy Drew, however, is 16 and is not in school anymore which is not unusual for the time period. Madge and Nancy are both plucky girls and they enjoy mysteries and adventure. Madge and Nancy also both display a keen sense of social graces—they know to be proper and expect others to conform to proper behavior. Yet Madge departs from Nancy in that she reminds me a lot of George Fayne from the original text Nancy Drew 1932 books. Like George, Madge can be blunt and tactless when she wants to be and speak her mind. Often Nancy wanted to speak her mind yet held her tongue in cheek to avoid the consequences. A good example of this is in *The Missing Formula* when speaking of smarmy persistent Jake Curtis, Madge tells Ann Fairaday she should have told Jake to jump in the lake! George was always an outdoors type and tomboyish like Madge.

Madge is different from Nancy in that she does not have an attorney father who often involves her in mysteries or cases. Her mother, like Nancy’s, is deceased yet Madge’s father remains a mystery—one that weighs on Madge. Madge does not have a history of solving mysteries at the outset of the series but develops an interest in them as they present themselves over the course of the three-book series. Madge is not encouraged to involve herself in mysteries as Nancy was by Nancy’s more understanding and doting father.

One thing I always enjoyed about the original text Nancy Drew stories were the beginnings of Nancy and Ned’s relationship—the subtle yet flirtatious interaction. In the Madge Sterling series, Madge and a young

Canadian Ranger, Jack French, have an interesting relationship. They are obviously smitten with each other and the subtle flirtations throughout the series are enough to peak the reader's interest and fancy without being too overbearing.

A minor parallel is involved between the first Madge Sterling book, *The Missing Formula*, and the Nancy Drew book, *The Clue in the Diary*. Both books involve storylines surrounding inventors. In *The Missing Formula*, the inventor is deceased when the story begins and it is his missing formula that Madge searches for. In *The Clue in the Diary*, Nancy searches for the inventor who holds the key to a diary found at the scene of a mansion fire and the reason for the fire. Both of these books were published in the same year and despite the parallel are very different stories which stand well on their own.

The Madge Sterling series went no further than the breeder set. I really enjoyed reading this series. The books were shorter than many other series books at the time—at 15 chapters and around 120 pages. The pace of the stories moves quickly and each chapter ending is an appropriate cliffhanger. Mildred weaves a good story and uses the cliffhanger well—especially suspenseful in the last of the series, *The Secret of the Sundial*. The breeder set takes place over the course of a summer and into the next fall. At the end of the third book, there is a hint of a mystery and adventure to come the next summer at Loon Lake, but alas the series was not continued. As many breeder sets did, the series ended quickly leaving the reader wanting more. I recommend reading this series—you'll feel a little lonesome at the end of the ride wishing you could hop in uncle George's car for another adventure with Madge! You'll even be yearning to know what became of Madge and handsome Jack French!

Below are a synopsis of each volume and the main characters other than Madge and the Bradys.

THE MISSING FORMULA

Jack French – a handsome young ranger whose post is Lookout 48 at Loon Lake in Canada. Madge has learned a lot from Jack during her summers there. He's tall and built like an "All-American halfback", graceful, and has a richly tanned face and brown eyes.

Old Bill Ramey – man of all work about the lodge. Loves to spin yarns. Madge has always thought he was amusing. He has quite an imagination and loves to read melodramatic magazines. He does as little work as possible! It is said of him, "for every honest day of labor he does, Bill rests six!"

Anne Fairaday – a young girl who lives on Stewart Island in Loon Lake and whose father has recently passed away. Anne is a frail girl and rather pretty with straight dark hair. She is around 16 or 17 years of age.

Clyde Wendell – Mr. Fairaday's former lab assistant. Clyde has penetrating, dark, piercing eyes. There is something suspicious about him!

Jake Curtis – shrewd real estate developer. He is short, stout, wears ill-fitting somewhat soiled clothes, and has a hard shrewd face. He also holds a mortgage on Stewart Island and pesters Anne about being paid.

Mr. Brownell – from Alton Chemical company. Is interested in acquiring Mr. Fairaday's formula. He is a well-dressed elderly man who takes a fancy to fishing at the lake.

SYNOPSIS:

The story opens with a catchy foreboding warning, "You couldn't hire me to spend a night alone on Stewart Island!" The reader's curiosity is instantly piqued and one year for more immediately. It is mid-summer at Loon Lake in Canada where Madge's uncle George Brady and her aunt Maude Brady own the Brady Lodge. They all reside in Claymore, Michigan but the wilds of Canada come calling every summer for adventures at Loon Lake, fishing, boating, and a soon to be solved mystery. We soon come to find that Stewart Island is on Loon Lake and is the home of Anne Fairaday whose father has recently died. Mr. Fairaday was a noted chemist who came north for his health. Both he and Anne stayed on Stewart Island together in seclusion for the most part. Now that he has died, Madge plans to canoe out to the island with an invitation for Anne to stay at the Brady Lodge so she won't be by herself.

We have a hint of the beginnings of romance between Jack and Madge as Madge is thinking about him and how having just arrived to Loon Lake for the summer, he seems changed and more reserved with her than before in her previous three summers there. A storm suddenly rages, pouring rain on the lake and Madge must rescue Anne whose canoe has tipped over. Anne cannot swim so Madge manages to save her and they arrive, bedraggled, to Stewart Island. Anne cannot accept Madge's invitation to stay at the lodge for she must stay and search for her father's missing formula. The formula is for preventing rust on iron and steel. Anne's father did not leave much in the estate so it is imperative for Anne to find the formula. Madge wishes she could help, but must leave. She tells Anne to fly a white flag from her boat landing if she needs to talk or needs help.

After returning to the lodge and telling of the missing formula she is teased good-naturedly and she retorts, "Just wait!...Anne and I may show you a thing or two about formulas! If we find it, the laugh will be on you!" After a few days, Madge returns to Stewart Island to deliver a letter to Anne which turns out to be from Clyde Wendell, a former lab assistant of Mr. Fairaday's. He was a queer fellow and Anne had not liked him. Clyde will be coming to see Anne on important business. Mr. Fairaday had discharged him because he didn't think Clyde was honest and they disagreed over the formula. Madge is instantly suspicious of his intentions. He is rather ungentlemanly like in that when he arrives at the island, he won't even help Madge with his suitcases or row to the lodge. He claims Anne owes him back wages but her father had paid him extra upon discharge. He threatens to sue Anne within the week if he is not paid.

On Mr. Fairaday's deathbed, he tried to tell Anne something and all he wrote was "written in secret..." He kept calling the name, "Kim." He was obsessed with the idea that someone wanted to steal his formula so it was likely to be well-hidden. It may be written in a secret code as Mr. Fairaday was in the service and worked with codes.

Jake Curtis is after Anne to sell the house. Jake has the reputation of being the shrewdest real estate shark. He wants to turn Anne's home into a summer hotel. The worst part is that he holds a first mortgage on the property and it is due next month. Anne and Madge have a run in with him in town and he reminds Anne that payment for the mortgage will be due soon. To further complicate things, Mr. Brownell of Alton Chemical Company arrives insisting upon seeing the formula as he is interested in acquiring it. A burglary takes place on the island as silverware is taken, the library is ransacked, and Mr. Fairaday's lab is in disarray.

Madge ends up staying at the island with Anne and discovers the missing silverware hidden in a hollow log—stolen in order to frighten Anne away from the island or by someone after the formula. Upon returning from a fishing expedition, they see a light from someone lurking on the island but are too late to catch the

mysterious visitor. In the end, Jack helps Madge rescue the missing formula from the thieving hands of one of the suspects.

The next book notice as the mystery comes to a close involves an invitation for Madge to voyage on the luxurious Burnett Yacht at Cheltham Bay. Jack tells Madge he'll miss her when she goes to Cheltham Bay and tells her to think of him while she is away and not to be too surprised if she sees him. The Missing Formula ends as "He took her hand and together they went down to the lake to watch the moon rise over the spruce ridges."

THE DESERTED YACHT

Enid Burnett – Madge's special chum. Her mom is deceased. An only child, yet she is not spoiled and is cheerful and friendly.

Frank Burnett – Enid's father. He is a noted sportsman and collector of antiques.

Rex Stewart – a friend of Enid's who has known and admired Enid for many years. Son of a prominent local lawyer. He is a pilot, makes friends easily, and goes to college. Not handsome but his eyes are friendly and he is likeable. He pilots an amphibian plane.

Jack French – appears near the end. See description above.

SYNOPSIS:

Madge arrives in Cheltham Bay to spend a vacation with Enid Burnett and her father Frank on their yacht The Flora, but no one arrives to pick Madge up at the train station. Madge approaches a foreign man whose eyes bore into her at the wharf. This man had been gazing out at The Flora when she approached him. He refuses to take her because of a bad omen but is finally persuaded and then he strands her out on the yacht which appears to be deserted. Madge discovers Mr. Burnett's stateroom to be in a shambles. She searches the cabin for clues and sees money and an expensive watch were not taken. After hearing a scraping sound in the closet, she discovers her friend Enid lying bound and gagged on the floor. Mr. Burnett has been kidnaped!

A friend of Enid's, Rex Stewart, shows up in his amphibian plane and takes them to report the kidnaping to the police. In the past few months, Mr. Burnett had not been acting like himself and it was as if he was afraid of something. Madge doesn't think this is any ordinary case of kidnaping!

Enid and Madge have an early awakening when a prowler boards the yacht but gets away before they can catch him. The next day they discover a note from the kidnapers. Enid is to deliver the Zudi Drum Bowl on midnight to a white birch at Cedar Point to save her father. The Zudi Drum Bowl is a cherished trophy and was used in former times by a primitive tribe of Indian natives. Mr. Burnett purchased it on a trip to India.

Madge and Rex go with Enid to her home by way of Rex's plane and find the Burnett house has been ransacked. Returning with the bowl, Enid plans to meet the kidnapers by herself to save her father and will not listen to reason. Madge and Rex are worried it is a trap. Madge and Rex come up with a scheme to follow Enid and help out in what becomes an exciting conclusion to the mystery.

At the psychological moment, Jack French rides into Madge's life once again to her rescue. After a two-week vacation aboard the Burnett's yacht, Madge is sad to see Jack leave for Canada but she herself will soon be back in Claymore. An exciting mystery will soon be waiting for her we are told. As this mystery comes to a close, the phonograph is playing a dance tune and Jack claims Madge for a dance. He whispers in her ear in reference to summer memories, "Don't think for one minute that you can pack me away in moth balls and lavender. I'm like those big mosquitoes we have at Loon Lake—I'll pester you 'till the end of time!"

THE SECRET OF THE SUNDIAL

Jane Allen – homely, outspoken, made enemies easily yet a loyal friend of Madge's. Straight black hair, somewhat muddy complexion, slender figure often ridiculed yet she takes it in fun.

Edna Raynard – the opposite of Jane, pretty as a picture, plump, took life as she found it.

Enid Burnett – Madge's special chum from out of state to attend school. She is permitted an unusual amount of freedom yet quite unspoiled. She likes school and her studies.

Cara Wayne – she's pledging the Skull and Crossbones secret society and ends up helping Madge sleuth around and solve the mystery.

Hilda Grandale –Town woman who knows just about everything about everyone!

Agatha Swenster – middle-aged white-haired woman. Very warm and friendly personality. She is the last of the Swenster line, having been estranged from her adopted son.

Mysterious Digger – I'll let the reader decipher this one!

SYNOPSIS:

This is my favorite of the three books. The whole setting of the secret society, autumn, and the spooky old Swenster Mansion with a missing family heirloom provide a nice background to the mystery in this book. It is early September on Friday the 13th as the book begins and two figures, grotesque in long white sheets, are making their way to the Brady house in secrecy for a meeting of a secret society. There is an initiation about to take place. In the attic of the Brady house, a club room is set up. Robed figures are waiting for Cara Wayne to arrive. Madge is president of the Skull and Crossbones, an exclusive secret society.

The girls are all school chums at the Everett School for Girls in Claymore, Michigan. Madge tells the other girls that she has a hell raiser planned for the initiation. Cara arrives somewhat frightened and giggling nervously. She must go to the basement alone. Squeals of fright and crashing noises waft up from the basement as Cara goes through several initiation rites in the dark—a tub of water, a packing box, the feel of quivery liver. When Cara is through, she is drenched but cheerful and the initiation continues in the attic. Cara promises to keep the night's events a secret and she must obey any illustrious member of the society all the next week. As her last test of courage, she must go to the old boarded up Swenster Mansion and bring back a token. The old Swenster place has been closed for years. Cara is not too happy about her task and shows up later in a fright and swears never to go near the Swenster place again! She has seen a ghost digging with a shovel. The chums all get a good laugh but Madge begins to wonder what is going on at the Swenster place and thus begins the mystery.

Madge and Cara begin to investigate the mansion and the areas in the garden that have been dug up near a nice quaint sundial. Someone is looking for something. They soon find out the history of the Swenster Mansion from a local resident, Hilda Grandale, who knows just about everything about the town. At one time, the Swenster place was 'the' house of Claymore. There were two sisters, Florence and Rose. The Swenster pearls were to be handed down to the eldest daughter—Florence—but their father favored Rose and left the pearls to her in his will. There was a falling out between the sisters. Soon after Florence passed away and Rose lived for years in the mansion alone and one day married. Her daughter was named Agatha and she is the last of the Swenster line. Agatha lived in Claymore with her adopted son until about eight years before. Her son had turned out badly and did something to turn Agatha against him. Something happened to make Agatha board up the mansion and leave town.

Madge and Cara do some late-night investigating and spy on the mysterious man who is digging in the garden but must leave before he is through digging—he nearly catches them spying and a nicely suspenseful chapter cliffhanger is woven skillfully into the story by Mildred. Soon after, Agatha returns to town and reopens the mansion to get everything for sale at a public auction. Madge and Cara help her out and get a chance to do some sleuthing. Agatha is sad to have to sell but is in terrible need of money. The old family pearls apparently were hidden by Florence so that Rose couldn't have them so the search is on for the missing pearls. Will Madge find them before the mysterious digging "ghost" does?

There is no appearance of Jack in this volume, however, Madge is on cloud nine after receiving a letter from Jack. Madge invites all her chums to come to Canada the next summer: "The girls all laughed for as they sat in the cozy drawing room before the crackling fire, summer seemed a long way off and Canada too far distant to even imagine. Yet, the germ had taken root, and the next year was to see them all in the north woods with Madge fulfilling her pledge."

Whether it's a search for a missing formula in Canada, yachting in Cheltham Bay on the search for kidnapers, or a mysterious sundial's secret in Claymore, you will find yourself enthusiastically enjoying Madge Sterling and her adventures!