

The Great Madge Sterling Caper...Or how Nancy Drew might have been out-sleuthed by the mid-1930s

By Jennifer Fisher

"As Oil had it's Rockefeller, Literature had it's Stratemeyer..." proclaimed *Fortune* magazine in it's October 1934 issue in an article by Ayers Brinser in which Brinser revealed in the fact that Nancy Drew was going gangbusters and outselling the boys' series. 1934 was a pivotal year for Nancy Drew, one that could have gone in a completely different direction...

Nancy Drew endured the Great Depression while other series faltered or were cancelled, and she owes a lot of that success to Edward Stratemeyer and her original ghostwriter, Mildred Wirt Benson. It wasn't without intrigue though behind the scenes – and the very course of Nancy Drew's history could have been changed had things played out differently. But fate had something more in store for Nancy Drew even though insurmountable actions threatened her longevity.

To clue you in, let's hop in Nancy's trusty roadster and go back to the late 1920s. Stratemeyer had been itching to create and release a new girls' series and for several years he began tossing around ideas and reaching out to publishers. At the time, he'd hired a young Mildred Augustine who soon became Wirt and then much later Benson, to write for his faltering Ruth Fielding series after she answered an ad in the *Editor* that he ran looking for writers.

Before reaching out to Stratemeyer for work, Benson's writing career had begun much earlier. Growing up in rural Iowa and being a voracious reader, a young girl's next adventure in real life and in books often depended on her community. Benson borrowed every book she could in her small town and she even sampled her father's medical books. Trips to bigger cities yielded books at libraries. She yearned for adventure and began writing her own stories. She greatly enjoyed issues of *St. Nicholas* and found herself inspired by that style of writing. She began submitting stories to *St. Nicholas* and other magazines. Benson wrote in her autobiographical essay, *The Ghost of Ladora*, in the November 1973 issue of *Books at Iowa* - "Even as a child, a determination to write possessed me." And she proclaimed as a child to anyone who would listen, "When I grow up I'm going to be a GREAT writer."

Her first piece, *The Courtesy*, was published in 1919 in *St. Nicholas* when she was 13 and for that she won a Silver Badge. She got paid for her writing and she was hooked. Throughout her teen and college years, she wrote dozens of short stories, often of college girls, many involving swimming or diving, her favorite sports. Quite a few of her stories were published in *St. Nicholas* and she frequently noted years later that her style of writing was based in part on the old dramatic style in *St. Nicholas* and inspired by writers like Augusta Huiell Seaman whose early mystery writing appeared in there. At the University of Iowa, Benson worked on the yearbook and also the *Daily Iowan* newspaper. Some of her work was published in various Iowa papers too. Benson would soon become well versed in the old Stratemeyer style of writing as she began writing for Edward Stratemeyer's Stratemeyer Syndicate – beginning with Ruth Fielding and then most famously with the

Nancy Drew series. That formulaic Stratemeyer style, with melodrama and suspenseful cliffhangers would serve her well during her juvenile series writing career of over 30 years.

After graduating from the University of Iowa and taking a tour of Europe, she settled on New York City and met up with Stratemeyer, though he didn't have work for her at the time. Back in Iowa in the mid-1920s, she decided to get her Masters in Journalism and would go on to be the first person to get that degree as the program was brand new for students. Juggling her studies with writing became a challenge she met head on, when Stratemeyer asked her to pick up the pen as Alice Emerson and continue the Ruth Fielding series with *Great Scenario*. Though she struggled and fought Ruth Fielding as the pages flew through her old Underwood Typewriter, she soon began to find her stride and Stratemeyer coached her through it. Stratemeyer hired Benson because he found she wrote well of young girls and their adventures – as his ad in the *Editor* had requested. He had been looking for younger writers like Benson and Leslie McFarlane who also answered the same ad and soon became the ghostwriter for The Hardy Boys series among others he wrote for the Syndicate. The ad in the April 10, 1926 issue was geared toward youthful writers, “We are particularly anxious to get hold of the younger writers with fresh ideas in the treatment of stories for boys and girls.” After reading her second Ruth Fielding manuscript, *Cameron Hall*, Stratemeyer wrote in a July 26, 1927 letter to Benson that it was good and “I congratulate you on the improvement and trust that you will continue to get a grip on this sort of fiction.”

Benson would continue volumes in Stratemeyer's Ruth Fielding series and even submitted a plot idea at Stratemeyer's insistence. Benson's 25-chapter proposal was about the adventures of a heroine named Jean and her chum Marian, though it was ultimately rejected – he thought it a bit “wild.” In the letters back and forth between Benson and Stratemeyer that exist in the Stratemeyer Syndicate archives at the New York Public Library, you can get a good sense of how Stratemeyer guided Benson through her writing on the several Ruth Fielding manuscripts he oversaw. He always got to the point, but had a way of finessing his ghostwriters in how he critiqued them and admonished them and also how he praised them and appreciated their good writing. He wasn't a man to waste time on poor writers, he hired them because he saw something good in their writing that connected to his ideas and the stories and characters he created. He needed them to flesh out his outlines and relied on their skill to do so to his specifications and without too much tutoring overall. His relationship with Benson I would compare to a professor guiding a student or a mentor guiding his mentee. And Benson, very respectfully appreciated his effort in considering her work and giving her a chance to write for him. Things, however, would soon be different by 1930.

Now that you've been clued to what transpired in the latter half of the 1920s and how Benson came to write for Stratemeyer, it's time to follow the clues to Drew – Nancy Drew – for whom Benson and Stratemeyer are still so famously associated with 94 years later. And for that series, let's take a look at 1929. At this time, Stratemeyer had been working to get a new girls' series off and running. He'd made suggestions to various publishers and received no traction thus far. There's a letter in the NYPL from Stratemeyer to Barse & Hopkins from June of 1927 – going back to when Benson was first writing for Stratemeyer on Ruth Fielding. Stratemeyer spoke highly of Benson to Barse when he stated, “She writes particularly well of college girls and their doings, both in college and out, and I feel that

she could make a real success of this new line." By 1929, he hit pay dirt in getting publisher Grosset & Dunlap on board for the new series. He wrote to Grosset & Dunlap in July of 1929 and referred to Benson's work on Ruth Fielding as having made "the series more popular than ever." Stratemeyer noted that the line at the Syndicate was weak on single heroines – "not a single line in which a single character dominates the page." He insisted that "this author could do this line under my directions and do it well." And he was so right. Not only did Benson end up doing it well, but her characterization of Nancy Drew transformed Stratemeyer's conception into a trailblazing heroine of Sleuth-tacular proportions that the masses had been waiting for and Nancy Drew is still being published and reprinted all these years later.

That summer of 1929, Benson wrote a July 22 letter to Stratemeyer after receiving her check for *Ruth Fielding in Talking Pictures* and revealed that "For the next two weeks I plan to shake the Cleveland dust from my shoes and try to land a few snappy bass up in Canada." Stratemeyer followed up with Benson September 27 and let her know he succeeded in signing up the new girls' series and that it will be in the style of Ruth Fielding. He stated, "These will be bright, vigorous stories for older girls having to do with the solving of several mysteries. He also hoped she "got the bass you were after."

Things moved along very quickly for Nancy Drew and Benson. In an October 9 letter, Stratemeyer responded to Benson's agreement to write the Nancy Drew series and his response accompanied the outline for the first book. His instructions included how he wanted the tone of the books to be - "We would like these stories written very much in the manner of your 'Ruth Fielding' books, but with perhaps a little more of the girlish tone. But we do not want these stories to contain too much of purely social affairs, but rather quick action and with a strong holding point at the end of every chapter...With best regards and trusting that you will be able to give us a first story that will make all girls want to read more about Nancy Drew, I remain, Yours Truly."

First rate, Nancy Drew and her marvelous adventures were indeed, however by the end of the month the country was plunged into the Great Depression when the stock market crashed. This disaster would begin to affect Nancy Drew and the Syndicate in ways that could have proven disastrous...more on that in a moment. For now, let's focus on Benson, who was just 24 years old when she took on the task of assuming the role of one of the most infamous pen names in series book literature, Carolyn Keene. For several months from fall of 1929 through spring of 1930, letters flew back and forth between Stratemeyer and Benson as she began writing what would be the three-volume breeder set of *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Hidden Staircase*, and *The Bungalow Mystery*. She would spend around four months working on the first three books that would launch a series a century nearly now in the making. Working on outlines provided by Stratemeyer of several pages each, she fleshed out Nancy Drew into the bright up-to-date American teenager that he'd imagined and gave her a healthy dose of pluck and boldness. Nancy Drew's adventures were not at all "namby-pamby" as Benson would refer to other girls' series at the time. No, for Nancy Drew, her adventures involved thrilling high speed chases, tangling with robbers, sleuthing through secret passageways and hidden staircases, dealing with the dastardliest of villains and their evil doings, being locked up and left to starve, imprisoned while being bound, and even having to save her kidnapped father, Carson Drew. She drove at breathtaking speed, talked back to authority figures, and had

no qualms about packing heat. She even took evidence and kept it from the police in order to solve a mystery. Like Benson, she was a little rough and tumble, yet she was wrapped up in a pretty package thanks to illustrator Russell H. Tandy whose depiction of Nancy's sleuthing and shenanigans always found her dressed to the nines in the latest frocks and in delectable heels, even while climbing ladders and clambering through dark musty passageways.

Stratemeyer's direction of her work on the breeder set can be evidenced by the letters in the NYPL which show a thoughtfulness in his editing and critique of her work. He gave her directions and guided her to redo things that needed a little more tidying up and at the same time he praised her for what he felt was good work. When it came time to work on a fourth volume *The Mystery at Lilac Inn* and a fifth, *The Secret at Shadow Ranch*, he even asked her opinions on the setting for *Shadow Ranch* and was interested in her input. Benson suggested the far west, rather than the Midwest, and so it became the far west for the mystery. The relationship of mentor and mentee was most respectful, and Benson appreciated the direction and advice. The difference in many ways in Stratemeyer's handling of his ghostwriters and the way things would become soon after, was rather stark at times. Stratemeyer commanded respect from his writers and they were loyal to him. The situation wasn't always the same where his daughters were concerned.

The Nancy Drew series debuted on April 28, 1930 and nearly two weeks later, Stratemeyer passed away due to pneumonia. This was a pivotal time during the Depression. Publishing had been taking a hit and some series had faltered and gone out of print. With Stratemeyer's death, came the daunting task of picking up the pieces, not only for the family but also for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. The Stratemeyer family owes a huge debt to Stratemeyer's capable assistant, Harriet Otis Smith, who dealt with publishers lobbying their concerns on the backlog of books and existing series still being published. She handled the correspondence with the ghostwriters, asking them to continue on at the request of the publishers and she got to work on outlines and manuscripts. The outline for the fifth Nancy Drew, *The Secret at Shadow Ranch*, had to be completed and she filled that out and likely created the popular characters of Nancy Drew's chums, Bess Marvin and George Fayne. The business of creating series books continued on, not without its hiccups, but as smoothly as it could thanks to Smith.

At the same time, Stratemeyer's daughters Harriet Stratemeyer Adams and Edna Camilla Stratemeyer Squier were left to handle the business and its hopeful sale. That didn't come to pass, however, as the possibility of finding a buyer during the Depression was rather slim. They did not take Stratemeyer fan Wallace Palmer's offer to purchase their father's company seriously. So, they turned to themselves and carried on. This was rather incredible at the time, for two women to go into business like this, running a company in the more male-dominated publishing industry. They had some big shoes to fill, and they made a success of it for over 50 years after Stratemeyer passed. However, they were not their father and some of their difficulties that were to come soon after he died, caused issues with several prolific ghostwriters including Benson. The sisters were helped by Smith for a few months until they relocated the Syndicate offices to New Jersey and then they were left to their own devices without Smith's guidance. Smith did a good job of preparing them, but the sisters were wading into territory they were not that familiar with overall. After all, their father had not included them very much in his business because

he really didn't entertain a future for them working or having careers – he was rather Victorian-minded. They certainly blossomed in the face of adversity; however, they were not trained writers nor editors. Thankfully Harriet had a little experience editing some manuscripts for her father from time to time. There were things that Stratemeyer did which kept his ghostwriters happy. He had a way with words and was sure to praise them even when having to critique them. He also gave them yearly bonuses which helped the writers out. Even though the flat fees they were paid were equivalent at the time to several months of pay, times were getting tough during the Depression. I think the sisters expected the same acquiesces and respect given to their father, without the thought of earning it themselves. In spite of the Depression, though, Nancy Drew kept ginning along, doing very well by the mid-1930s. Regardless of sales, there was some internal trouble brewing behind the scenes of Mysteryville that could have nearly caused Nancy Drew's demise—or at least could have changed the course of this series in a drastic way.

But first, let's reflect on Benson's writing career up to this point which included dozens of short stories and articles, newspaper articles, the Ruth Fielding series, and Nancy Drew's debut. There was also Benson's own book series, Ruth Darrow, an aviation series that consisted of four volumes published in 1930 and 1931 at first by Barse & Company and then later reprinted by Grosset & Dunlap. The Stratemeyer sisters even took notice, seeing a blurb in a 1930 issue of *Editors Weekly*, and wished her much success with it. Just like Stratemeyer, the Ruth Darrow series showed Benson's ability to capitalize on the popular culture and events of the day including women's aviation. Ruth Darrow was inspired by Ruth Elder, the aviatrix and actress, born just three years before Benson in 1902. Elder's daring exploits as a pilot and her plan to be the first woman to attempt a transatlantic flight made her the "Miss America of Aviation." In 1929, Elder took part in the Women's Air Derby which began in California and ended in Cleveland, OH – right where Benson was living at the time. There was much fanfare in Cleveland celebrating the derby and the inspiration hit home for Benson, who would go on to be a pilot herself several decades later. With her own successful series – and well paid at \$200 a book – Benson was beginning to come into her own. Previously, she had been paid \$125 a volume for the Ruth Fielding and the Nancy Drew series.

There's a clipping that Benson kept from an old *Cleveland Plain Dealer* newspaper. The aged copy has Benson's writing on it in blue ink noting the paper and date. The picture of a very short-bobbed Benson showcased the style for women like her at the time. The article by Ida M. Gurwell references all her short story work and the books she'd been writing – noting the three Stratemeyer Series – Ruth Fielding, Nancy Drew, and Doris Force, the latter which she'd begun writing in 1931. The article referred to them as series under "nom de plumes." The article also highlights the Ruth Darrow series. Benson is quoted about her writing as saying, "My start as a writer of 'thrillers' dates back only five years, when I became associated with the Stratemeyer Syndicate..." Benson mentions she has just completed a single volume in a mystery series for girls called *The Gimmel Ring* and for boys, *Pirate Brig*. It also mentions her working on an aviation series for Penn Publishing Co. *Gimmel Ring* was finally published as *The Twin Ring Mystery* in 1935 and *Pirate Brig* in 1950. The aviation series for Penn likely was the volume, *Sky Racers* or perhaps *Courageous Wings*, both published in 1935 and 1937 respectively.

Benson was asked about her writing method for juveniles. She gave praise to Stratemeyer for his talent for "startling sales in juvenile publications; he also had a way of getting punch into the very first paragraphs and carrying it through. There was action every minute." Gurwell ends the piece with high praise for Benson when she states, "Mrs. Wirt tactfully combines what children want with what they need. There is artistry here. Perhaps this is why, even in 1931, publishers are taking her books as fast as she can write them."

As you can see, Benson was hard at work in 1931 and she wasn't letting the Depression interfere – yet – with her writing. By the spring of 1931, Benson was ghosting volume six in the Nancy Drew series, *The Secret of Red Gate Farm*, Edna Stratemeyer's first attempt at a Nancy Drew outline. July saw the plot for *The Clue in the Diary* arrive and Benson got to work on what would be her last Nancy Drew book for several years. In this story, Nancy Drew tangles with villain Foxy Felix, a man who swindles patents out of inventors.

September 1931 would become Nancy Drew's "stock market crash." Quietly, the Stratemeyer sisters had already been writing to other ghostwriters for a couple of months with bad news. Now it was Benson's turn to receive such a letter. A September 10 letter from Harriet Stratemeyer Adams to Benson referenced Benson writing two more Doris Force titles and mentions the next Nancy Drew book. Harriet notes that "Of course the Doris Force series is still so new that one cannot tell as yet how the books will be received by the buying public, but because of this uncertainty, and because of the great drop in sales as shown by our July statements from publishers, we are going to ask you to take a reduction on these manuscripts of twenty-five dollars each---in other words, we will pay one hundred dollars for each story."

The Stratemeyer sisters were hopeful that business would eventually take an upward turn and they would all be able to return to the former "standard of payment." They hoped that Benson would be willing to "carry on with us" during this time, noting "We enjoy working with you." In other words, they didn't want to make changes on the series and have to hire new writers who might require a lot of training.

Quickly replying, Benson's September 14 letter notes that she is sorry to hear that business has not been as good as before. "I have always tried to cooperate in every way possible, but I feel that I cannot take less than one hundred and twenty-five dollars for each manuscript—an average of about one-fourth cent a word. At the time I started to work for the Syndicate, about five years ago, I believe, I accepted this rate, for at that time I had not had a great deal of experience in book writing." She noted she'd never requested a raise although her work had improved over time. She also pointed out the bonuses that Stratemeyer had sent his writers, which had stopped under the sisters, and she mentioned this because those bonuses had helped writers like her. "As the rate now stands I am receiving less than I did when I first became associated with the Syndicate." She further went on to add that she had for some time been writing Syndicate manuscripts for less than half paid to her by other publishers for her own work. She also handily let slip that she was currently negotiating two new series at an increased price. "My association with the Stratemeyer Syndicate has always been very pleasant and I hope that we may continue our relations. I shall be glad to attempt the new volumes if the old price stands, but in fairness to myself cannot accept a lower rate."

Benson after dealing with the transitional period from Stratemeyer to his daughters who were not as well versed in handling the ghostwriters, and who had come into her own as a writer thanks to Stratemeyer's tutelage and her own merit and talent, was taking a stand against what she perceived was an injustice to her. This caused some stress for the Stratemeyer sisters who didn't want any delays or interruptions with the flow of work. Harriet replied on September 16 and tried to clear up some things by telling Benson that they didn't intend the fee to be permanent – just temporary – “Owing to the depression, which is showing up in the decreased sales of the juvenile books, we felt justified in asking this reduction.” She hopes that in the future sales will pick up and therefore bonuses again. “Our proposal in no way meant to infer that any writing has been inferior----as a matter of fact, we have noticed a distinct improvement, and for this reason we should dislike making any shifts in the series which you have been working on. We have felt that by supplying you with longer and more complete outlines, your time in finishing a story could be less, and that this could compensate you for the reduced price offered.” She noted that they have met with cooperation on the part of their other authors “and hope that you will be willing to reconsider our offer and continue to work along with us without interruption.”

And yet, what Harriet said was not entirely true. Harriet, banking on the fact that Benson and other ghostwriters, who by nature of their arrangements with the Syndicate didn't know each other and couldn't confer amongst themselves, would have no idea how other ghostwriters had been responding to the pay cuts. While some like Hardy Boys ghostwriter Leslie McFarlane stayed on board enduring the pay cuts, as they needed the money to support their families, there were other ghostwriters who refused the pay cuts and who also noted the lack of bonuses being paid by the Stratemeyer sisters in contrast to their father's pattern of regular supportive bonuses. These prolific ghostwriters including Elizabeth M. Duffield Ward (Ruth Fielding, Billie Bradley, Outdoor Girls, Blythe Girls, Kay Tracey, etc.) and John W. Duffield (Ted Scott, Radio Boys, Don Sturdy, etc.) who refused and declined further work. Pretty soon after and certainly by 1933, they even lost their most prolific ghostwriter Howard Garis (Infamous as Uncle Wiggily, Tom Swift Sr, Bobbsey Twins, Baseball Joe, etc.). After having had other ghostwriters decline the pay cuts, the sisters failed to make their case to Benson, who was very stubborn when it came to her work and what she felt like she was worth.

Benson's quick reply to Harriet on September 21 gave not an inch when she emphasized, “I am indeed sorry that I am unable to alter my decision in regard to accepting \$100.00 per volume for the work I have been doing for you. I have enjoyed my association with the syndicate and view with regret the prospect of its interruption. I realize what difficult times we are passing through and would have been willing to accept some reduction were not the amount paid already as low as I feel I could accept with justice to myself.”

Benson further notes, that since her last reply to Harriet that she's “signed for a new girls' series and have other work in prospect.” Benson adds that she had worked in time for Syndicate work “but unless I hear from you soon I must fill up this vacancy.” She doesn't close the door completely on working again for the Syndicate when she adds, “I trust that the future will produce happier circumstances which will permit a resumption of our relations” and she wishes continued success to the Stratemeyer Syndicate.

This series that Benson alludes to having signed, is the Madge Sterling Series and we'll dive into that series momentarily. First, we need to clue you into how things transpired after Benson's refusal to take a pay cut. Harriet, forced to carry on without Benson, replied on September 28 to express disappointment. "Of course, we were disappointed that you felt you were unable to accede to our request in regard to the writing of certain books, but we are really delighted to hear that you are making out so well with your own stories." They don't want to hold up her own work as Harriet adds, "we thought it best to write you that we have been able to place the writing of the Doris Force books with someone else. As the Nancy Drew story would not have to be decided upon immediately we are reserving our decision in this matter. If we should decide that we would like you to do it we will communicate with you at a later date." Harriet wished her success on her new series. Also stubborn, Harriet wasn't budging either.

Benson, with the Syndicate's best wishes on her new series, replied on October 3 and noted, "If you decide that you want me to do the new Nancy Drew book and notify me early in November, I shall be glad to write it for you. The plot looks extremely interesting." Benson was clearly hoping they would change their mind on the price.

Edna, who left the dealing with Benson on the pay cuts to her sister Harriet, found Benson to be difficult. Edna wasn't a trained writer or editor and had to come into her own on the job as time went on. Harriet communicated with Edna about Benson's refusal to take a pay cut and Edna replied back in September 1931, "Dear Hat: Received letter from you enclosing Mrs. Wirt's tale of woe. Of course she is getting a swell head and doesn't choose to take less. Well, I think if your letter to her doesn't make her change her mind we better consider Mr. Karig." It was clear and has been so in statements by Benson over the years, that at the time Benson thought the sisters were out of their league and much preferred working for their father. Edna worked most closely with Benson throughout the 1930s on most of the Nancy Drew Books Benson wrote. It's important to note that the Stratemeyer sisters lived and worked in different social classes from writers like Benson. After all, Harriet was a Wellesley girl. For Stratemeyer's daughters, the Depression hardly changed their lives in the sense that it devastated others for the sisters had money and even though they owned and ran their own company, they didn't have to work to make a living. For writers like Benson, work was necessary to survive the Depression years. Expecting everyone to just fall in line with the pay cuts, having discontinued bonuses their father had given his loyal ghostwriters for years and Edna's flippancy regarding Benson's "tale of woe" and comments about her "swell head" showed how out of touch the sisters were with their ghostwriters. This is not the way that their father would have handled or treated his ghostwriters, who were handpicked like Benson for Stratemeyer knew their talents and knew they could bring his creations to life.

Luckily for the sisters, however, there was Walter Karig. Karig served in World War I and was a journalist – often the typical MO of some Syndicate ghostwriter hires. Syndicate savior of the moment, he had been writing the Perry Pierce books for the Syndicate and so he was asked to write the next two Doris Force books. Then, he got a nice windfall in landing the Nancy Drew series, after Benson's pay cut stand. Unlike Benson, Karig was willing to be paid what they offered. Karig though, would prove to be a loose cannon that the Syndicate would end up having problems with. For one thing, I don't think his sense of humor always translated well to the sisters and boy did he have a wry sense of

humor. His letters in the NYPL are pretty entertaining. More so, it was his flapping of the gums regarding being Carolyn Keene to various publishers and the press and most noticeably to the Library of Congress and the copyright office that caused a lot of drama over the next several years. By 1950 when a press release noted he was Carolyn Keene, Harriet rued the day they'd ever hired Karig and she also took every opportunity when asked about him by anyone who discovered he was Carolyn Keene over the years to relegate him to some kind of jokester pretending to be Carolyn Keene. In January 1965, Harriet wrote a reply letter to Robert Moore regarding a newspaper clipping that mentioned Karig as Carolyn Keene. Here's what she infamously had to say about Karig whose first work for the Syndicate was a Bobbsey Twins playlet, he wrote the final two volumes in the Doris Force series, Nancy Drew volumes 8-10, volumes 2-4 in the Perry Pierce series, an X Bar X Boys book, *Branding the Wild Herd*, and the last Roy Stover book, *Circle of Fire* - "Mr. Karig never was Carolyn Keene. He once did a little work for the Syndicate. Because he had been a pilot in the war I asked him to help write an airplane scene in an early Nancy Drew book and after that he was always kidding me about his being Carolyn Keene. But when he began to make this claim in public, I took him to task, only to receive very supercilious answers. As for proof of my authorship of the books, Mr. Karig has been dead for many years!" Karig kidded her about being Carolyn Keene? That's rather inventive. Harriet's comment about Karig being dead for many years is reminiscent of her statement to Benson at the 1980 trial between the Nancy Drew publishers and the Syndicate in district court in New York City when she blurted out to Benson, "I thought you were dead." Perhaps she was taking the "ghost" part of "ghostwriter" too literally.

With the Nancy Drew series saved at a pivotal moment with Karig stepping in and his writing being good enough to carry on with Nancy Drew's continuity mostly intact, Nancy survived without Benson, but not for long. Karig's writing required more editing and work than had Benson's apparently. The Depression had made quick work of series like Doris Force and longer running series like The Blythe Girls and they among others ceased being published. The Depression also took its toll on writers like Benson who agreed to write another Ruth Fielding for the Stratemeyer sisters, *Greatest Triumph*, and she was offered \$100 which was more than they'd been paying other ghostwriters during this time, in order to entice her back into the fold. She was a good writer and they needed her as much as she needed them. Benson wrote to Edna in August of 1932 after thinking over the offer to write another Ruth Fielding and stated, "I have been taking this under consideration, and, providing arrangements can be made with you so that this does not interfere with my regular work, I am willing to do the book at your price." Still proud and stubborn, she references her regular work, but acquiesces on the price and doing another Ruth Fielding.

Even though Karig was carrying on as Carolyn Keene during this time period, it wasn't the same as having Benson do the work and Harriet couldn't help but point out in a September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1932 letter upon receipt of the finished Ruth Fielding manuscript, "We trust that you are doing well with your own books. It was unfortunate, wasn't it, that Barse and Company had to close up? We hope that the books you had with them will do well with another publisher."

By November of 1933, Edna writes to Benson about the last Ruth Fielding which they persuaded the publisher to agree to, *Crowning Victory*. "We are asking you to take a reduction, as we have asked our other authors, and do this manuscript for the sum of \$75.00. We should like you to undertake this book very much, and regret we must ask you to finish the series at this figure, but the way things stand we cannot afford to pay more." By 1933, even Benson was agreeable. The Depression had worn everyone down and work, was work.

It's time to back track to 1931, so grab your magnifying glass! Benson had just refused to take a pay cut over Nancy Drew and made a stand in fairness to herself and her writing ability. Enter Madge Sterling, Benson's answer to Nancy Drew, her own series which Goldsmith agreed to publish at \$100 a volume which was good pay for the size of these stories, much shorter at 15 chapters and thinner than the average 25-chapter Nancy Drew book.

Benson, writing as "Ann Wirt," had an opportunity to create a new series of her own, The Madge Sterling Series. She referenced writing this series in those 1931 refusal letters to the Stratemeyer sisters where she noted she was in the process of selling the series. You probably never realized that Madge Sterling was either born out of conflict between Benson and the sisters or became a badge of honor of sorts in Benson's attempt to further come into her own as an author in her own right, not just a ghostwriter for the Stratemeyer Syndicate and for pay she felt was a justice to herself and her talents. It doesn't take much to read between the lines from all the 1931 refusal letters back and forth between Benson and the Stratemeyer sisters to see that Benson had been using Madge Sterling as a bargaining chip of sorts, hoping that at hearing of her work on other series which were getting picked up by publishers, that the sisters would be more willing to negotiate with her rather than let her refusal stand and at the very least, would not want to lose a valuable talented writer such as Benson.

If you've never heard of Madge Sterling or have never read the books, I wrote a very in-depth article about the series in the July/August 2011 and the September/October 2011 issues of *The Sleuth*. The series, published in 1932, was a three-volume breeder consisting of *The Missing Formula*, *The Deserted Yacht*, and *The Secret of the Sundial*. Madge was a teenage sleuth from Claymore, Michigan who spends her summers at her aunt and uncle Brady's lodge at Loon Lake in Canada. Recall, that trip to Canada mentioned earlier in which Benson wrote to Stratemeyer hoping to catch a snappy bass? I think that trip and other similar ones inspired the setting of Loon Lake in Canada in this series. There's an old photo of Benson with her first husband, Asa Wirt, during the heyday of their relationship before his health took a downturn, possibly from this trip or a similar one with lots of fish and a very happy Benson! My friend and colleague Geoffrey S. Lapin who discovered and helped to out Benson to the collecting community and beyond, corresponded with me last summer about Madge Sterling and wondered about her connections to Canada and our conversation got me to thinking about Madge Sterling and the timing of that series during Benson's hiatus as Carolyn Keene. Also, I pondered the similarities between Nancy Drew and Madge Sterling at that time period during 1932.

At the time she was working on the Madge Sterling books, Benson had 17 books under her belt. The Madge Sterling series was most similar to the Nancy Drew series in style.

Madge does not give the impression of a girl easily daunted. 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. Where Madge departs from Nancy Drew is that she reminds me a lot of Nancy's chum George Fayne from the original text Nancy Drew books. Like George, Madge can be blunt and tactless when she wants to be and speak her mind. 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 *Missing Formula*, the inventor is deceased when the story begins, and it is his missing formula that Madge searches for. In *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 1932 and despite the parallels are very different stories which stand well on their own. Both the Madge Sterling series and the Nancy Drew series were quickly paced and were full of the typical cliffhangers and that old Stratemeyer and *St. Nicholas* melodrama style that so inspired Benson.

Lapin writes in *The Ghost of Nancy Drew for Books at Iowa* in the April 1989 issue about Madge Sterling and notes, "The hiatus from the work for Adams had permitted Wirt's visiting various publishing houses to sell her independent work." Benson would later in life reveal that she couldn't sell her own work to Grosset & Dunlap for they were aware of her association with the Stratemeyer Syndicate and out of deference to the Syndicate didn't pick up her writing which was unfortunately because they were one of the bigger publishers with a lot of clout and great distribution and who hired wonderful artists like Russell H. Tandy to illustrate their series so beautifully. Benson was relegated to publishers like Barse & Company (though her Ruth Darrow books did end up getting acquired by Grosset & Dunlap), who went bankrupt during the Depression and smaller publishers like Goldsmith and Cupples & Leon whose management and distribution were no comparison to Grosset & Dunlap. As good as the Madge Sterling books were, however, the series went no further than the breeder set and probably was a casualty of the Depression and poor distribution and advertising. This turn of events had to have been a blow to Benson considering the timing and her stand on taking a pay cut with the Syndicate and the wear and tear of the Depression on everyone involved. I'm sure that Benson was banking on this series leading to more volumes and other opportunities, after all, Benson likely wondered at that time, what did she need Nancy Drew and the Syndicate for? Fate, had other ideas, however and even pride and stubbornness gave way by 1934.

A pivotal return by Nancy Drew's original Carolyn Keene was clearly fated as both the Stratemeyer sisters and Benson needed each other to carry on. A March 24, 1934 letter from Edna to Benson asked her if she could do the next Nancy Drew book, *The Clue of the Broken Locket*. "We are wondering whether you have any time in which you might write the next volume in the NANCY DREW series." The letter was not short on praise for Benson's last Ruth Fielding and they trusted that Benson could arrange her own writings so she could do the new Nancy Drew conveniently "and that we will not lose contact with you." However, pay was even less than before when Benson took her stand. Edna noted, "We will pay \$85.00 for this story. Trusting to hear favorably from you at once..."

A March 26 reply from Benson surely brought relief to the Stratemeyer sisters after a 3 year long stand on Nancy Drew. Benson agreed to write the new Nancy Drew but asked to be sent only the last two Karig volumes – *The Sign of the Twisted Candles* and *The Password to Larkspur Lane*, because she already had *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*. It's interesting that Benson had the first of Karig's Nancy Drews – no doubt she was rather curious at how Nancy Drew continued on and purchased this one to check out her "rival" ghostwriter whom by 1950 she would discover was that rascally "jokester" Walter Karig. Benson rounded out her favorable reply by revealing that "I have always been rather partial to 'Nancy' and it will seem quite like old times to be writing about her again." By April, Benson was sent the outline for *Broken Locket* with instructions and admonishments on the line filling and page counts. Plus, the missing Karig volumes arrived to clue Benson in on what Nancy Drew had been up to while Benson and Madge Sterling had been snappy-bass-fishing in Canada. Speaking of Canada, Leslie McFarlane scored a new series during Benson's hiatus in the form of the Dana Girls, under the pen name Carolyn Keene – a series the Stratemeyer sisters invented and that most likely would have gone to Benson, had she not taken a stand on the Nancy Drew pay cuts. Written to be similar to the Nancy Drew series, Benson would go on to write for that series when McFarlane had had enough of the Dana sisters as he did not enjoy writing that series.

But had Benson not come back to writing Nancy Drew and gone on to write volumes 11-25 and then 30, then what? With Karig not working out too well and without Benson, how might Nancy Drew have fared from 1934 onward? It's been said many times, the writing of those 1930s and early 1940s Nancy Drew books were by far the best and they certainly set the foundation for all of Nancy Drew's future successes. Ghostwriters to come, though good, didn't hold the same candle to Benson's work. The course of Nancy Drew's history could have been drastically changed so early on and during such a pivotal time during the Depression without a real-life Nancy Drew writing it. The independence, boldness, spunk, zest for adventure, smart mouth and brashness of the 1930s Nancy Drew were all Benson. And thus, as you reflect on Nancy Drew's 94<sup>th</sup> this year and her upcoming 95<sup>th</sup> next year, think about the history behind the mystery and about those who created Nancy Drew and made such a wonderful success of her and appreciate that even in hard times, even with pride and stubbornness on all sides, that some successes and associations are just meant to be and that fate has a wonderful way of working itself out.

Benson would go on to write for another twenty years sum total for the Stratemeyer Syndicate and write and publish many of her own books and series – 135 published books in total by the end of the 1950s. She was for many years during the 1930s one of the most prolific ghostwriters for the Syndicate for its ongoing girls' series as well as writing most of the girls' series and lists for other publishers like Cupples & Leon under her own name and various pseudonyms she used. She became a journalist in the 1940s full time and worked for decades as a reporter and columnist in Toledo, Ohio. She took up adventures she had only written and dreamed about in the 1960s and beyond when she became a pilot and archaeological adventurer. In the end, when it was all said and done, even the Madge Sterling vs. Nancy Drew episode in her long writing career is just one of the many mysteries behind the scenes of Nancy Drew's world that is so relevant to Nancy Drew fans today. The resounding lessons of this time period still resonate with us now - don't give up on your

dreams, stand up for yourselves, but also be willing to make sacrifices and survive when life throws you curveballs. In the end, it's all so very worth it.

-----

Fisher is currently writing a biography of Mildred Wirt Benson, whose real-life Nancy Drew exploits make for an exciting read. [www.nancydrewsleuth.com/mildredwirtbenson.html](http://www.nancydrewsleuth.com/mildredwirtbenson.html)

#### Bibliography:

- "The Stratemeyer Syndicate" advertisement in the *Editor*, April 10, 1926

-Ida M. Gurwell, "Chats with Cleveland Writers: Mildred Augustine Wirt," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, n.d. (1931).

-Numerous letters in the Stratemeyer Syndicate archives at the NYPL covering the period of the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s between Benson and Edward Stratemeyer, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams and Edna Camilla Stratemeyer.

-Ayers Brinser, "For It Was Indeed He," *Fortune*, April 1934.

-Mildred Wirt Benson, "The Ghost of Ladora," *Books at Iowa* 19 (November 1973).

-Geoffrey S. Lapin, "The Ghost of Nancy Drew," *Books at Iowa* 50 (April 1989).

-Jennifer Fisher, "Mysterious Madge Sterling" in parts 1 and 2 in the July/August 2011 & September/October 2011 issues of *The Sleuth*