

The Secret Case of the Nancy Drew  
Ghostwriter and Journalist

---

MISSING  
MILLIE  
BENSON

*By*  
Julie K. Rubini

BIOGRAPHIES FOR YOUNG READERS

Ohio University Press  
*Athens*

# Contents

	Author's Note	vii
The First Clue	Ghostwriter Reappears <i>The Case of the Missing Ghostwriter</i>	1
The Second Clue	Little Ladora Girl with Big Dreams <i>The Case of the Wandering Feet</i>	10
The Third Clue	College Days <i>The Case of the Hawkeye</i>	20
The Fourth Clue	Next Steps <i>The Case of the Developing Writer</i>	31
The Fifth Clue	New Name, New Character, New Beginning <i>The Case of the Ghostwriter</i>	39
The Sixth Clue	Nancy Drew <i>The Case of the Young Detective</i>	48
The Seventh Clue	Different Characters/Similar Lives <i>The Case of the Prolific Writer</i>	56
The Eighth Clue	Sad Loss & New Beginning <i>The Case of the Budding Journalist</i>	65

The Ninth Clue	Take Off! <i>The Case of the Flying Reporter</i>	74
The Final Clues	The Nancy Drew Conference, Recognition & Legacy <i>The Case of a Storied Life</i>	82
Extra Clues		
	Millie's Timeline	95
	Millie's Awards & Recognition	97
	Millie's Chronological List of Works	99
	Glossary	107
	Acknowledgments	109
	Notes	111
	Bibliography	119

## THE FIRST CLUE

# GHOSTWRITER REAPPEARS

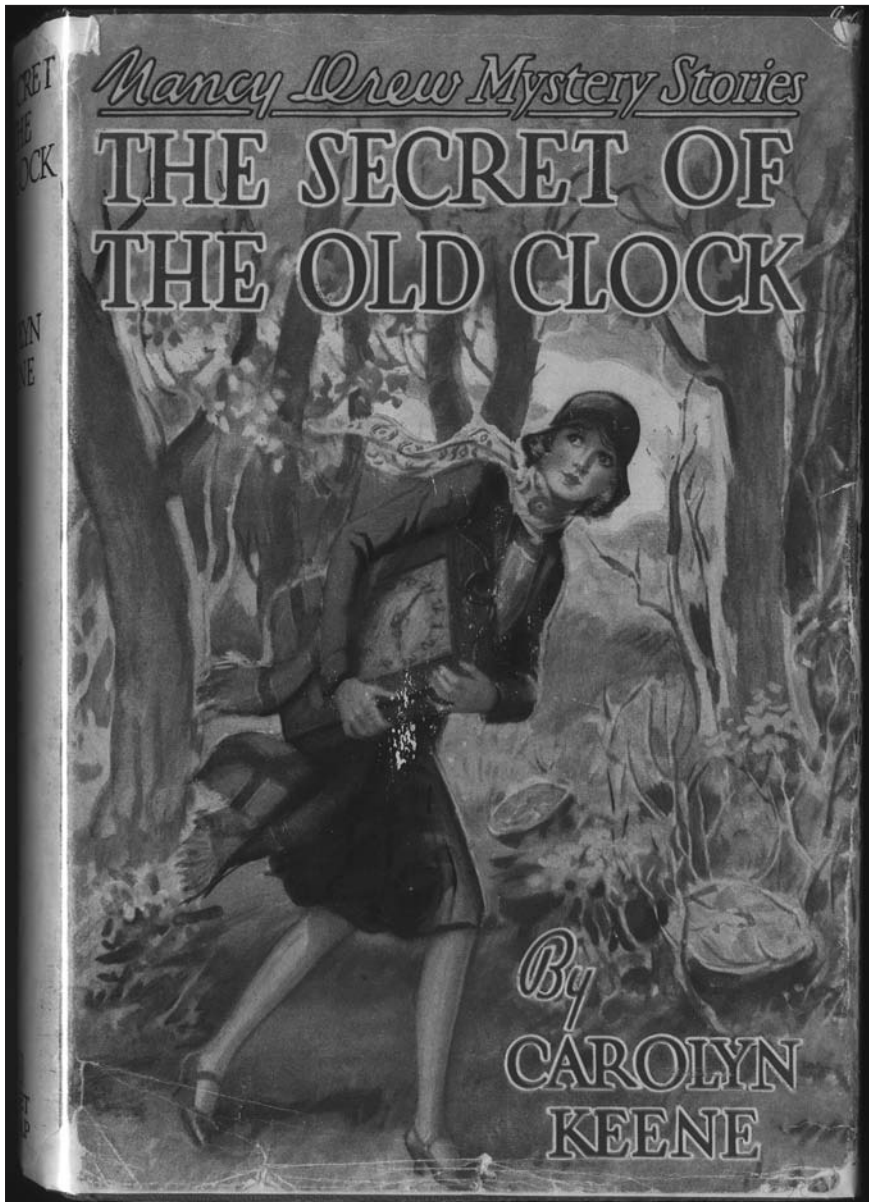
### The Case of the Missing Ghostwriter

FOR THE first fifty years of the series, readers of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, whether of the originals with the dusty blue cloth covers or the newer books with the bright yellow spines, knew that all those mysteries were written by Carolyn Keene. But who was she? No one had ever met this talented writer, seen a photograph of her face, or heard her voice on the radio. How could one of the most famous and beloved authors of suspenseful books for young people be such a mysterious figure herself?

This is where the plot thickens.

There is no Carolyn Keene. There never was.

BUT, like the adventurous girl detective Nancy Drew, the original writer of the series was always ready to take her readers on an exciting ride. And on May 27, 1980, she did just that—up the steps and into a



THE FIRST BOOK IN THE NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES,  
*THE SECRET OF THE OLD CLOCK*, 1930

*The Secret of the Old Clock*, Carolyn Keene, Grosset & Dunlap. Permission granted by Penguin Group (USA) LLC.

courtroom of the United States District Court in Manhattan, and into the pages of a real life mystery to be solved as a result of a court trial.

It was a complicated trial. It involved two publishers, the businesses that print books and make them available to readers.

Both companies were fighting over the rights to publish future Nancy Drew Mystery Stories. At the end of this trial, one of the companies would win those rights; the other company would lose.

One publisher, Grosset & Dunlap, was trying to convince the judge that it should be allowed to publish new Nancy Drew Mystery Stories. That company had been making Nancy Drew's adventures available to readers since their beginning in 1930, but it had recently lost the right to publish new ones.

The other publisher, Simon & Schuster, had been chosen by the Stratemeyer **Syndicate\***, the creator of the series, to publish those new Nancy Drew books. Simon & Schuster wanted the judge to decide that its company should retain the right to do so.

The Stratemeyer Syndicate was a book packaging business. The company matched writers up with books it was creating. Just as a newspaper assigns stories to writers, the Syndicate did with books. Once a writer had finished a story, the Syndicate would send the completed manuscript to a publisher. The publisher then printed the books and sold them to readers.

The Stratemeyer Syndicate and the publisher Grosset & Dunlap had been working together for almost seventy years. Then the two had parted ways over an issue they did not agree on. Grosset & Dunlap paid an amount of money, a **royalty**, to the Syndicate for every book purchased that the Syndicate had created. This meant for every Nancy Drew book that a young reader bought Grosset & Dunlap paid money to the Stratemeyer Syndicate.

Because the Nancy Drew books had always been popular, when their sales started to decline, the Syndicate blamed the publisher. Grosset & Dunlap, it felt, was not doing a good job promoting the books.

---

\*A word set in boldface type indicates the first appearance within the text of a term to be defined within the glossary.

Grosset & Dunlap disagreed.<sup>1</sup> So the Syndicate signed a contract with another publisher, Simon & Schuster.

Because Grosset & Dunlap was not happy with the Stratemeyer Syndicate's choice to use another publisher for the Nancy Drew books, the company filed a lawsuit to get those rights back. To strengthen its case, Grosset & Dunlap brought in a special witness.

That move revealed the trial's true mystery—who was the original writer of the series? That special witness. The former **ghostwriter**.

TEMPERATURES had been quite hot in New York City for the days leading up to the trial. Yet the key witness was as cool as she could be in her powder blue pantsuit.

She was a small woman in her seventies, barely five feet tall, with short, graying hair that reflected her age. Steely eyes with a hint of whimsy peered through her round glasses, which sat firmly on her prominent nose. Her small mouth turned up at the corners, as if she were holding on to a secret.

She was.

As she walked up the many stairs of the courthouse that day, perhaps the witness was thinking about how the secret that very few people knew was about to come out. Maybe she was thinking about the late Edward Stratemeyer, who had formed the Stratemeyer Syndicate in 1905.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Stratemeyer had asked her to write the first three Nancy Drew books after creating an outline, a writing guide, for her.

Maybe she was thinking that someone else was getting credit for her writing and she was ready to speak out about it.

The witness may have been thinking about many years before, when, as a young writer just out of college, she wrote her first Nancy Drew book. She had been happy to accept the flat fee, or one-time payment, for each book that she wrote for Mr. Stratemeyer even if it meant that her real name wouldn't appear on the book cover. Writing for the Stratemeyer Syndicate might open other doors for her, she might have thought.

Now, fifty years later, this former ghostwriter for the Stratemeyer Syndicate was to serve as a witness for this important trial.

The witness entered the courtroom. As she was still very active, despite her senior citizen status, the long walk up the aisle didn't bother her one bit. What probably caused her more concern were the questions that she would be asked. The expectation was that she would not be able to prove that she was the original writer of the Nancy Drew series, known only as Carolyn Keene.

Once her secret came out, her life could change.

EDWARD Stratemeyer had developed his plan for making books based on his own experiences as a ghostwriter for a publisher of **story papers**. Like his previous employer, Edward created the characters and the plot. He then developed an outline, and relied upon one of a variety of writers to pen each story. Several writers could be working on the same series, but none of them would ever be known as the author.

As a ghostwriter, Edward wrote stories using different names. These names are called **pseudonyms**. So, Edward created pseudonyms for the various series that he began to develop. One of these was the pseudonym of Carolyn Keene for the writers of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories.<sup>3</sup>

Edward died on May 10, 1930, just twelve days after the first three books in the Nancy Drew series were released to young readers. After his death, his daughters, Edna Stratemeyer and Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, took over the business.<sup>4</sup>

Harriet Stratemeyer Adams was eighty-seven years old at the time of the trial. She had contracted two years previously with Simon & Schuster to publish new books, including the Nancy Drew series, produced by the Syndicate. And, as a result, Grosset & Dunlap sued Gulf & Western, the **parent company** of Simon & Schuster. A portion of the trial involved figuring out who actually owned the Nancy Drew books. In order to solve that mystery, the judge needed to know the terms of the agreement between the individual who created the outlines, plots, and characters and the person who actually wrote the books.<sup>5</sup>

The former ghostwriter knew that she was an important witness for Grosset & Dunlap. Her testimony, what she said while in the witness



stand, could make a difference as to which company would continue to publish the beloved Nancy Drew books.

As she was introduced to the witness, Harriet said, “I thought that you were dead.”<sup>6</sup>

Harriet had not seen the former ghostwriter in years. And Harriet had reason to be concerned about the other woman’s appearance in court. For Harriet had publicly claimed that *she* had written all of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories.

ABOUT one month prior to the trial, fans of the Nancy Drew series were focused on something else. The literary world was about to pay tribute to the fiftieth anniversary of the release of the first Nancy Drew book. Harriet Stratemeyer Adams was enjoying the spotlight. She was being celebrated as the author of the series by *Time* magazine.<sup>7</sup> A mystery-theme party hosted by Simon & Schuster, complete with a cave entrance filled with prerecorded screams and party-favor flashlights, was thrown in Harriet’s honor.<sup>8</sup>

You can imagine Harriet’s surprise when this woman, contracted by her father to write the very first volumes of Nancy Drew some fifty years earlier, showed up at the trial.

So who was this mystery witness?

The trial’s attorneys were about to crack the case.

Mildred “Millie” Augustine Wirt Benson was her name.

*Millie* was the original ghostwriter of the well-loved series. She appeared in court to testify to this fact. Millie was there to shed light on the mystery of who had actually written the original Nancy Drew books. The children’s book writer was not only alive and well, but at seventy-four years old she had a quite a story to tell.

It had been over twenty years since Millie and the Stratemeyers had parted ways, but Millie felt it was time to set the record straight.

Millie, so much like the independent and no-nonsense character Nancy Drew, took the stand. She was shown a number of documents by the lawyer for Grosset & Dunlap. These included work releases signed by Millie that documented that she had agreed to write the

## THE STRATEMEYER SYNDICATE, GHOSTWRITERS, AND RIGHTS

EDWARD STRATEMEYER began his career as a writer. He became a very successful juvenile fiction author, especially of stories for boys. In 1893, he had forty-nine dime novels published! Many of these books were published by a company called Street & Smith.

While working for Street & Smith, Edward learned how the company employed ghostwriters to write under pseudonyms. The dime novels the authors were assigned to write featured characters developed and owned by Street & Smith.<sup>9</sup>

When Edward formed his own company in 1905, the Stratemeyer Syndicate, he used similar techniques to keep up with the demand for the various series he had created. He hired writers to follow the outlines he created for his books. These writers agreed to a flat fee for payment. They did not receive any royalties, or percentages based on book sales.<sup>10</sup>

The benefits to the arrangement for the Syndicate included control of the characters and storylines. Since one pseudonym was used for each series, one author's name was consistently attached to the series, even if the actual writer changed.

By signing a contract, a writer agreed not to use the Syndicate's pseudonym in any other way. The writer also knew that he or she would not receive any royalties—not only those based on a percentage of the book sales, but those from movie or merchandising sales, as well. The advantages for a writer under this agreement was the **lucrative** flat payment and the possibility of writing more stories for the Syndicate.



MILLIE AND HER BOOKS

*Toledo Blade* Historical File, © *The Blade*

books. Millie described how Edward Stratemeyer had provided her with an outline for each of the first three books.

Grosset & Dunlap liked this spunky young detective and ordered more books in the series.

And more Millie wrote, penning twenty-three of the first thirty books in the original Nancy Drew series.

After Millie's testimony for the plaintiff, it was Harriet's turn for the defense.

Even after being presented with the evidence otherwise, Harriet still insisted, "but I actually did all the writing."<sup>11</sup> She became so upset after her testimony that she fell out of the witness chair.<sup>12</sup>

The two-week trial ended. Grosset & Dunlap lost. The judge ruled that the Stratemeyer Syndicate had the right to choose which publisher would take Nancy Drew into the future—no matter who had created

or written about her in the past.<sup>13</sup> The Syndicate made its choice. Future Nancy Drew books would be published by Simon & Schuster.

And, as a result of the trial, the original writer of the Nancy Drew books was officially revealed.

That person was Millie Benson.

NANCY Drew stories always ended a chapter with a “holding point.” This is something that made you wonder and want to keep turning the pages, even though Mom had told you several times over it was past your bedtime.<sup>14</sup>

So here you go . . .

Where did this mysterious writer come from? Where had she been all these years? And why is it that, even after the trial confirmed her identity as the original writer of the Nancy Drew series, she was not publicly recognized until 1993?

Get your flashlights out. Let’s get on to solving the many mysteries of Millie.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**Pseudonyms:** Did you know that several famous female writers wrote under male pseudonyms? Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre* under the name Currer Bell and her sister Emily published *Wuthering Heights* under the name Ellis Bell. Millie wrote as both Don Palmer and Frank Bell.

Thank you for your interest in this Ohio University Press title.

This book is available for purchase [online at our website](#) or through other ebooks vendors.



**OHIO  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**