

Timothy Payne

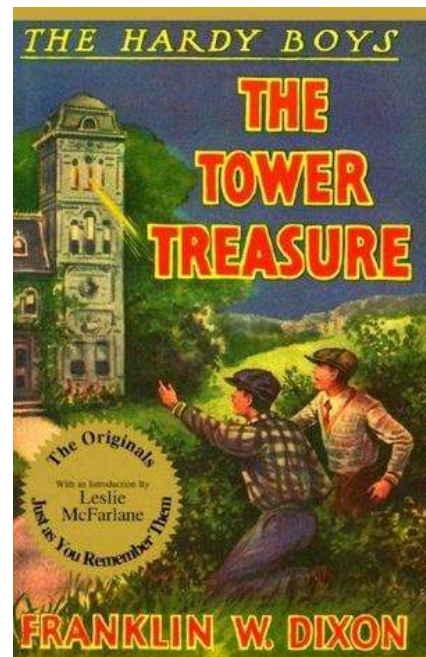
ENGL-3130-088

Dr. O'Donnell

April 25th, 2016

Edward Stratemeyer's Syndicate: How One Man's Capitalist Drive Introduced Wish  
Fulfillment, Feminism, and Ghostwriting to Children's Fiction

*Many of you are likely familiar with Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys, two long-running children's book series. Some of you may even remember the pseudonyms the books were published under, Carolyn Keene and Franklin W. Dixon, respectively. But how many of you have even heard the name Edward Stratemeyer, the original creator of both Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys, or his company, the Stratemeyer Syndicate, which changed the nature of children's*



*book publishing?*

### Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, and Me

It was 2004 and I was eight years old when my parents sat me and my three brothers-- Doni, the oldest at fourteen, Luke, my twin brother, Matthew, the youngest at four years old-- down and told us that they were getting a divorce. What they didn't tell me was that it would take two years to finalize the divorce, and in that two years there would be countless court dates, custody battles, and meetings with lawyers. During those two years, I sometimes felt like a toy being torn apart by two bickering children on a playground, sometimes like a bargaining chip to be traded and hoarded away, never like a child loved by his mother and father.

When I wasn't in a courtroom, my hair shellacked into 1950's perfection, my miniature suit neatly pressed, I hid in my bedroom, underneath my bed. That's where my books were, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Animorphs*, *Redwall*, but most importantly, *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*. I only had a few of each series. I had the first three *Nancy Drew* books: *The Secret of The Old Clock* (1930), *The Hidden Staircase* (1930), and *The Bungalow Mystery* (1930) (I was disappointed to find that a bungalow was a type of house, not a hairy, fire-breathing monster). I also had the first four of *The Hardy Boys* books: *The Tower Treasure* (1927), *The House on the Cliff* (1927), *The Secret of the Old Mill* (1927), and *The Missing Chums* (1927). These two book series offered me something no other book series did; they offered me wish fulfillment. The protagonists of these books were teenagers, far away from an eight year-old but still close enough to relate to, but they operated in the adult world. They had their own cars and

motorcycles, and they solved crimes that their detective fathers couldn't. Any adult who questioned them would be shown up by the cleverness of Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys.

I wanted to be like them, and I made a lot of plans to run away during the two years when my parents argued and fought. I would ride the rails of the train that thundered past my Mom's house in Bristol, Virginia every Thursday at 3:30pm. I would bring a change of clothes, a jar of peanut butter, five cans of tuna in water (tuna in oil was and is disgusting), a can opener, and 35 dollars that remained of the 50 dollars my grandmother had given me for Christmas. Of course *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys* would be my paper companions.

I never did hop on the train; I never even made it out the front door. I would always run back to my room, backpack full of supplies clutched in my hands, hot tears of embarrassment running down my face. *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys* were there for me, though, underneath my bed. And they always had promises of escape that I was neither brave nor foolish enough to take.

#### [A Brief Introduction to Edward Stratemeyer and the Early Period of the Stratemeyer Syndicate \(1906-1930\)](#)

Most of the information here, relating to Edward Stratemeyer and the Stratemeyer Syndicate, is pulled from Carol Billman's excellent book *The Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate: Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys and the Million Dollar Fiction Factory*. During the course of my research for this essay, I could not find a more well-researched and well-written treatment of this subject than Billman's book, published in 1986. In the 1980's she worked at the University of Pittsburgh as an English Professor specializing in Children's Literature (Gubar, Marah).

*Nancy Drew*, *The Hardy Boys*, and many other children's books series, are the product of Edward Stratemeyer and his publishing company, the Stratemeyer Syndicate. While Edward Stratemeyer was notoriously secretive about his personal life, according to Billman, he was born on October 4th, 1862, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to German immigrant parents, and founded the Stratemeyer Syndicate on 1906 (exact date unknown) in Manhattan, New York (street address unknown) (19, 21). During the early 20th century, Edward Stratemeyer and his company went against the traditionally moralistic children's writing of the time by publishing books that offered wish fulfillment to children. The *Nancy Drew* series, published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, introduced a pro-active female protagonist to children's fiction. Stratemeyer and his Syndicate also went against the traditional model of production for children's books, where one author wrote one book, by instead introducing a factory-like system of ghostwriters, writing novels from outlines produced by Edward Stratemeyer and others. In this essay, I will show that these innovations were the result of Edward Stratemeyer's capitalist drive for growth and profit.

As the Stratemeyer Syndicate began publishing books in 1906 and new issues of the company's two most famous series, *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*, are still being released, this essay is limited in scope to the earlier period of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, from 1906 to 1930. This is the period when Edward Stratemeyer founded his company to when he died, leaving it to his daughters, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams and Edna Stratemeyer (Billman 23).

### Wish-Fulfillment in Edward Stratemeyer and the Stratemeyer Syndicate's Books

Most children's books published in the 1900's may have had some action or adventure, but they always included an overt moral message (Billman 6). Edward Stratemeyer and his Syndicate went against this by focusing more on wish-fulfillment for their young readers. Why

did they do this? Edward Stratemeyer was aware that children, not just their parents, bought books. As such, in 1906, Stratemeyer lowered the prices of his books to 50 cents, rather than the traditional \$1.25 for a paperback book (Billman, 21). Stratemeyer believed that children would be most interested in books where the protagonist is a child, but operates in the adult world. "Stratemeyer's fiction depicted freewheeling youth who lived in the present and sported such contemporary items as motorboats, automobiles, motorcycles, or ... airplanes" (Billman 6). As Edward Stratemeyer wrote until his death in 1930, only his later books included these technological innovations. The competency and maturity in the main characters was what drew me to the books as well. What child wouldn't want to take charge in the adult world without having to go through all of that awkward growing up nonsense?

It should be noted that while there is not any sort of overt moralistic message within the Stratemeyer Syndicate's books, there were more covert moral underpinnings. The best example of this can be found in the protagonists of *The Hardy Boys* series, Frank and Joe Hardy. As Carole Kismaric, an author of fiction and non-fiction, and Marvin Heiferman, an author and art curator, put it in their book, *The Mysterious Case of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys*, "They are hardy boys, luckier and more clever than anyone around them." (107). Perhaps then a more covert message is within the Syndicate's books that industry and intelligence can lead to success. Carol Billman also points out that while the Stratemeyer Syndicate's books did not contain overt morals, they were certainly underpinned by the accepted morals of their day (6).

There was one book series published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate that did contain an incredibly overt moral and political message. *The White Ribbon Boys* were an adventuring pair of brothers written by Raymond Sperry J. and published by The Stratemeyer Syndicate from 1915-1916. Each book had an overt message supporting the then current Prohibition (anti-

alcohol) movement. However, the series sold poorly, and the series was cancelled after only two books had been published (Billman, 25). From this example it can be seen that the Stratemeyer Syndicate was not completely averse to overt moral messages in their books, but the primary goal of children's books was to make money.

### *Nancy Drew: Feminism for Fun and Profit*

In 1930, Edward Stratemeyer wrote the first three books in the *Nancy Drew* series (Billman 102). *Nancy Drew* introduced readers to a female teenage protagonist who solved crimes her detective father couldn't. While the Stratemeyer Syndicate had published children's books with female protagonists, they often followed the standard of women led children's books; that is, they focused on domestic issues involving the family and home, though they occasionally took place at school as well (Billman 12). In the *Nancy Drew* books, it is clear that Edward Stratemeyer did not limit his wish-fulfillment solely for his books marketed to boys, but for his books marketed towards girls as well. By writing a pro-active, capable female protagonist, Edward Stratemeyer introduced feminism to popular children's books.

What I find particularly interesting is that Edward Stratemeyer held to the traditional gender-roles of his time. He refused to let his daughters work for him, as he did not believe women belonged in an office. Ironically, they took over the Stratemeyer Syndicate when he died in 1930 (Billman 23).

Why then did Edward Stratemeyer write and publish the *Nancy Drew* series? Apparently, *Nancy Drew*, and several other female-led children's books, were created to capitalize on the growing women's movement that had emerged by the 1920's (Billman 6). This shows that

Stratemeyer may have had conservative views on gender roles, but he was primarily a capitalist intent on growing his company.

Reactions to the *Nancy Drew* book series were extremely varied. Carolyn Stewart Dryer, an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, and Nancy Tillman Romalov, a teacher and librarian of children's literature, offer a few of these viewpoints in their book *Rediscovering Nancy Drew*. They consider the *Nancy Drew* series to be "a landmark in feminism" (110). Romalov and Dryer conducted a series of interviews with older women who had read the books when they were young girls. As one interviewee (name withheld) said, "I enjoyed the books, and that pleasure came, I wish to assert, from the adventures of a sixteen year old girl who took events into her own hands" (112).

Others saw the *Nancy Drew* series as destructive, as evidenced by this extremely sexist quote from G. Stanly Hall, who was considered an authority on adolescent psychology in the 1920's and 1930's, "The danger is very great that the modern schoolgirl will early in life acquire false views of it, will make excessive and impossible demands on it, which will cloud her life with discontent in the future" (Dryer 116). What G. Stanley Hall is saying is that girls shouldn't read the *Nancy Drew* series because they can't really expect to solve crimes or take their lives into their own hands.

### Ghostwriting in the Stratemeyer Syndicate

The books published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate not only went against the traditional morals expounded in children's books, but also in how they were produced. The Stratemeyer Syndicate originally started as a way to publish Stratemeyer's books. However, Stratemeyer soon realized that he could not keep up with demand on his own, and he could make more money by

writing outlines and guidelines of books and handing them off to other writers who would not be credited, then publishing the books under a pseudonym (Billman 21-22).

As Billman tells it, the process by which ghostwriters were hired and worked for the Stratemeyer Syndicate was extremely secretive. Ghostwriters would never know more than a few people in the company, and Edward Stratemeyer adjusted his schedule so that no two ghostwriters would ever meet. Ghostwriters would be paid 50 to 250 dollars per book, but no benefits or job security would ever be offered. Strict guidelines were also given to the writers along with the outline. A few of these guidelines were: first books should act as a building block for the series, make sure every page have action, and predictable plots sell well. These strict guidelines enforced by the company ensured a very productive outpouring of books. It reportedly took only 40 days from conception of an outline to being put on shelves. However, many critics harshly criticized these predictable books. Carol Billman, whom I have so heavily referenced, actually agrees with this assessment, saying “Many obviously lack any merit” (33).

Carol Billman’s words are harsh, but I slightly agree with her. In the course of my research for this essay, I reread my old *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys* books. I enjoyed them for the nostalgia trip, but as soon as I put one down I forgot what had happened. I didn’t know who the villain was or what they had done, or why Nancy Drew/The Hardy Boys needed to catch them, or how the villain was caught. But maybe I, and perhaps even Carol Billman, are looking at these books in the wrong way.

Reading it as an almost adult (I’m 20 years old) for entertainment, the Stratemeyer Syndicate’s books are light fare, but when I remember being eight years old I remember the comfort they brought me. I believe the predictable plots even made me appreciate them more, because I could rest assured knowing that Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys would always save



the day. And as is shown with Nancy Tillman Romalov and Carolyn Stewart Dryer's interviews with older women who read the books as children, others have enjoyed these books as well.

### What Did Edward Stratemeyer Do?



*Edward Stratemeyer in his home (1903)*

Edward Stratemeyer was seemingly out for profit. He founded his company, the Stratemeyer Syndicate, to publish his books so he could have a more direct hand in their manufacture. He stopped writing entire books and switched to writing outlines that were written by anonymous authors because he made more money that way. He went against his own ideas of appropriate behavior for women by writing and publishing the first three books of the Nancy Drew series, because he realized the untapped market the feminist movement had created. What did his desire for growth and profit produce? Hundreds of books, some

forgotten, after all who remembers *The Rover Boys*, *The X Bar X Boys*, or *Baseball Joe*? Some beloved by children and feminists, but hated by critics and sexists. Some still being made, like *Nancy Drew* and *The Hardy Boys*. Some of those books even helped a young boy survive the crushing weight of his parents' failing marriage.

## Works Cited

Billman, Carol. *The Secret of the Stratemeyer Syndicate: Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and the Million Dollar Fiction Factory*. New York, Ungar Publishing. 1986. Print.

This book really is very informative. I was originally using Deidre Johnson's book *Edward Stratemeyer and the Stratemeyer Syndicate*, in addition to Carol Billman's book, but Carol Billman always included so much more detail and information that I ended up not using Deidre Johnson at all.

Dyer, Carolyn Stewart, and Nancy Tillman Romalov. *Rediscovering Nancy Drew*. Iowa: University of Iowa, 1995. Print.

This book focused mostly as a retrospective of the *Nancy Drew* series. It includes an examination of the feminist themes within Nancy Drew, as well as its impact on readers and the children's book publishing industry.

Gubar, Marah and Anna Redcay. "Pitt Pioneers: or, How Our Faculty Helped Establish Children's Literature and Childhood Studies in the Academy." *Children's Literature Program*. University of Pittsburgh. 18 June, 2014. Web. 20 April. 2016.

This article is about the Children's Literature Program at the University of Pittsburgh which Carol Billman helped build.

Hieferman, Marvin, and Carole Kismaric. *The Mysterious Case of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys*. New York: Fireside Books, 1998. Print.

This books pretty interesting. It was definitely made to read for a commercial audience, rather than an academic one. I still like the quote though, "They are hardy boys, luckier and more clever than anyone around them." and I would use this book if I was writing an essay solely on the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*.