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You Go, Girl! Nancy Drew in the Girl Power Era

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Abstract: Since she sped onto the scene in her blue roadster in the 1930s, Nancy Drew has remained a staple of popular fiction about and aimed at girls and young women. Nancy has received regular updates across decades and media forms, prompting questions about the flexibility and persistence of her cultural politics. Published by Simon & Schuster, the Nancy Drew Files (1986-1997) and the Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys Super Mystery series (1988-1998) move the character of Nancy Drew into young adult serial romance fiction. The series' core characters and storytelling strategies demonstrate how Nancy Drew texts were made to fit within the postfeminist media sensibility of the '80s and '90s – most notably by introducing multiple romantic interests for Nancy. As an autonomous and agentive girl detective, Nancy Drew participates in and benefits from the era's discourse of girl power. Her romantic entanglements, sexual confidence, and attempts to balance the demands of her relationships with her desire to be a detective demonstrate how these series adapted the Nancy Drew character to the shifting terrain of postfeminist popular culture.

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In *Hit and Run Holiday* (1986), iconic teen sleuth Nancy Drew and her gal pals George and Bess meet up with a friend in Fort Lauderdale for some fun in the sun—only to watch in horror as their friend is run down by a car! Nancy gets on the culprit's trail, picking locks with the underwire from her bikini top and flirting with lifeguards for information. By the end of the book, she has uncovered a human trafficking operation masterminded by the local It-Girl entrepreneur and her team of hunky windsurfing instructors, *and* earned the

admiration of the undercover cop whose case she scooped. He does not seem to mind, since he would rather be kissing Nancy anyway; she shrugs off what such a passionate lip-lock might mean for her relationship with stalwart Ned Nickerson as a problem for another day—and another installment of the Nancy Drew Files.

Such crime-solving and love life-complicating events are typical for the series. In the 124 books released between 1986-1997, Nancy's adventures are updated for the cohort of readers devouring young adult series and serial fiction in the 1980s and 1990s. Nancy can also be found working—and flirting—with other best-selling teen sleuths the Hardy Boys, in the Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys Super Mystery series released between 1988 and 1998. Independent and purposeful, girl detective Nancy Drew participates in and benefits from the era's discourse of girl power: crime is the only part of her story wrapped up in each installment, emphasizing Nancy's can-do spirit and leaving her romantic entanglements enticingly open-ended. Both series' themes and storytelling strategies demonstrate how Nancy Drew participates in postfeminist pop culture of the 1980s and 1990s, especially by introducing multiple romantic interests for Nancy, who had until this point been romantically linked with Ned Nickerson. By investigating the overlapping narratives of sexual desire, choice, and having it all in the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery books, we can see how her stories resonate as "a compelling, if informal, American girlhood curriculum" for the 1980s and 1990s (Marshall 203). The ways in which Nancy Drew's narratives adapt to the rise of girl power media illustrate the popularity and persistence of Nancy Drew for triangulating American pop culture's articulations of gender, genre, and girlhood.

The Popularity of Nancy Drew, Girl Detective

Since her first appearance in 1930's *The Secret of the Old Clock*, Nancy Drew has thrilled young readers as "an unattainable but nonetheless persuasive exemplar of a girl" (Marshall 203). Part of the Stratemeyer Syndicate's enormous success in the 1920s and 1930s, this amateur sleuth was created to capitalize on the publisher's hit Hardy Boys series which launched in 1927; the Nancy Drew stories "easily topped the Syndicate's sales lists even though her novels were competing against longer-established series" (Geer 301; see also Nash). Ghostwritten by various authors under the pen name Carolyn Keene, core elements of Nancy's character remain consistent across the main set of 175 novels released between 1930 and 2003. Nancy is a brave, determined, and curious young white woman who "doesn't merely solve the mystery and bring the villains to justice; she *beats* them," leading many readers, critics, and scholars over the years to consider Nancy a key figure in girls' and women's media culture (Zacharias 1035; see also Heilbrun; Parry; Woolston).

For example, Kate Harper notes that "Nancy's identity as a girl is one of her most salient characteristics," because she offers readers the opportunity to see a young woman at the center of action-oriented narratives otherwise dominated by male characters at the time ("A Pretty Girl" 31). Not only is Nancy the protagonist, she is also the instigator with an uncommon level of control over her daily life, "allowed to engage in adventures of her own choosing, thereby proving to be active within the adult world of decision-making" (Woolston 175). These adventures rarely include romance; even with the introduction of paramour Ned Nickerson in 1932, "[y]oung men are largely peripheral in the series . . . sexuality appears to

be irrelevant to Nancy's identity" (Harper, *Out of Reach* 41-2). Instead, a "large part of Nancy Drew's appeal has been her overt physical action" as she takes on complex and frequently dangerous cases (Woolston 177; see also Mason). Moreover, Nancy always outsmarts the villains, and usually without adult assistance—she is an "authoritative, crime-solving machine" (Cornelius 14; see also Zacharias).

The Nancy Drew Files amplify Nancy's characterization as an "impossibly accomplished heroine" by placing her in intense situations with the potential for global repercussions should she fail (Nash 33). She is easily able to keep up with the Hardy Boys in the Super Mystery stories, and while the brothers are hampered by The Network, a "supersecret intelligence agency" for which they often work, Nancy's actions and choices are entirely her own; she is accountable only to herself (Keene, *Best* 7). An "ever-contemporary projection and fulfillment of the reader," Nancy Drew stories tell us about a young woman with freedom, self-determination, and adults who take her seriously—or ruefully wish they had (Zacharias 1028). Ilana Nash describes this as personhood and argues that "a dignified and autonomous identity [is] a crucial factor in the popularity of Nancy Drew" (27). Narrative ingredients past and present—like the mobility her sporty roadster provides; her father who rarely interferes because he knows Nancy can take care of herself; and her devoted boyfriend Ned who accepts the continual deferral of any formal commitment—demonstrate how Nancy's independence is an essential feature of her stories. "At no point is her behavior successfully constrained by others' definitions of her sex or her age," and so Nancy lives and works in a world that accords her significant and compelling personal sovereignty (Nash 47). The attention paid to Nancy's individual abilities and accomplishments means these series are able to easily adapt to shifting gender politics, and thus to update their "girlhood pedagogies" as cultural contexts demand (Marshall 203). The Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series are another opportunity to unpack pop culture representations of social norms for young women and learn more about what makes Nancy Drew appear as both timely and timeless.

Girls' Series Fiction

The longevity and popularity of the various Nancy Drew series offer multiple avenues for "examining girlhood itself as a socially constructed and specific identity" (Harper, *Out of Reach* 3). As Emily Hamilton-Honey (2013) explains, before the Stratemeyer Syndicate began publishing highly successful series aimed at girl readers, such fictions were already managing social norms and expectations for young women. Series like Elsie Dinsmore (1867-1905) and Little Women (1868-1886), for instance, "both reflect and encourage a cultural shift in beliefs about the role of young women in U.S. society" through their emphasis on participation in the various women's organizations active at the time, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (Hamilton-Honey 2). The Stratemeyer Syndicate popularized changes in how young adult series were produced, published, and promoted. Included in these changes was an incorporation of "the dynamic, action-filled plots of dime novels" into fiction targeted at young readers (Hamilton-Honey 5).

Stratemeyer's focus on genre-based storytelling—an approach that continues to structure successful young adult fiction decades later (Cart 40)—prompted "productive shifts in the trope of girlhood" as young women protagonists took up roles at the center of

action- and adventure-based serials (Harper 2; see also Hamilton-Honey). While sales of fiction series aimed at young adults lessened throughout the middle of the twentieth century, series and serial publishing played an important role in its resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s, driven by franchises like the bestselling Sweet Valley High, which approached narrative events both large and small with a soapy sensibility that emphasized the drama of interpersonal and romantic relationships (Carpan, *Sisters* 121). The success of such series in the 1980s (and onward) was "the most important publishing event of the decade," and "[t]een romance fiction had an impact on the survival of popular mystery series," directly shaping the structure of the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series when each debuted in 1986 and 1988 respectively (127; see also Pecora). In both sets of stories, the "conventions of the mysteries are a part of the romances—a mystery appears, Nancy is warned, Nancy is pursued, Nancy is attacked, Nancy triumphs, and deserving people win—but now there are also romantic interludes" (Pecora 62).

The Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series' successful mix of romance and mystery was enabled by another genre-based teen publishing trend of the time: thanks in part to the continued popularity of Lois Duncan's teen thrillers and the prolific output of authors like Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine, the readership of young adult horror stories grew enormously. As Carolyn Carpan points out, "in the 1990s, genre fiction began to cross boundaries, mixing elements and features of various genres together … [and] romance can be found in most literature written for young adults," resulting in the increased visibility of hybrid genres such as romantic suspense (*Rocked* xx). The Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series participate in this marketable blend of genres: in *Deadly Doubles* (1987), for instance, Nancy dismantles a transnational plot to violently dispatch leaders of an underground resistance to a dictatorial political regime in the fictional South American country of San Carlos, and in *Crime for Christmas* (1988), Nancy, Frank Hardy, and Joe Hardy safeguard a set of invaluable jewels from a renowned jewel thief, solve the kidnapping of the crown prince of a small French country, and disarm a series of bombs planted at a luxurious gala, saving the entire leadership of the United Nations. In these new additions to the Nancy Drew universe, "[g]irls are now offered an imaginative, more glamorous, world … [with p]lots set in exciting and exotic places … [of] marine biologists saving the planet or rock stars in danger or corporate fraud in the fashion world … The reader is enticed with glamour and danger" (Pecora 63).

With the launch of both the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series we see how "the publisher is clearly trying to market both Nancy Drew and teen romance together to compete with the many popular romance series" vying for readers' attention (Carpan, *Sisters* 126). Both series signal that they mix romance into the action through dramatic cover art. They display the trends dominating teen fiction iconography at the time, combining "bold, bright and colorful" with "dark and mysterious" (Carpan, *Rocked* 4). The cover of the Super Mystery *Tropic of Fear* (1992), for instance, depicts Nancy leaning over a panicked young woman, while Frank and Joe Hardy race away from an exploding volcano behind her. All three are clad in bold Hawaiian print, emphasizing the story's exotic setting. *Best of Enemies* (1991) is marketed with a similarly "dramatic and stimulating, 'fast and furious' book cover" as Nancy, Frank, and Joe are all shown mid-leap, launching themselves out of a cherry-red convertible before it plunges into the Mississippi River, with one of New Orleans's iconic riverboats bearing down on them (Yampbell 357). Such vivid scenes capture the heightened stakes of both series as Nancy Drew's stories "shift from crimes against property

to crimes against people, from jewel thefts to murder" to entice teen readers with such thrilling elements (Pecora 76).

This art also hints at the romantic tension between the covers. Many Super Mystery covers channel Nancy and Frank Hardy's forbidden feelings for each other, like *Dead on Arrival* (1995) which places their faces snugly together while in the background Frank boosts Nancy over a chain-link fence, and it is delightfully ambiguous as to whether his astonishment is at the danger of their situation or the closeness of her posterior. Nancy Drew Files' art also tells readers to expect romantic drama: in the foreground, a brightly-clad Nancy looks confidently at us, as a dark and dangerous vignette plays out in the background. In the middle, we almost always find a new hunk gazing at Nancy, a visual pattern which establishes Nancy as the center of the action as well the romantic intrigue. *Hit and Run Holiday* (1986), for example, features a beach-ready Nancy in a neon blue bathing suit with her sunglasses tossed to the top of her feathered hair, being watched intently by a shirtless, broad-shouldered blonde man. Behind and smaller than both figures, Nancy is tied to a pier and left to drown as the tide comes in; this layout suggests that the drama of even a near-death moment pales in comparison to the romantic potential of the blonde in tropical board shorts. Another brooding and shirtless man stares meaningfully at Nancy on the cover of *False Moves* (1987); like the masked and knife-wielding figure far in the background, he is focused solely on Nancy, whose sultry pose in a figure-hugging black leather skirt, red turtleneck, and tousled titian hair dominates the cover. "Intrigue, innuendo, and sensationalism create products that force the grabability factor" for teen readers and the visual formula of the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery covers tells audiences that the stories' excitement and danger is both action- *and* romance-related (Yampbell 358). It also clearly conveys that Nancy is a heroine in both genres, a protagonist who solves crimes and breaks hearts.

Girl Power Media in the '80s and '90s

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Nancy Drew appeared in books, television, movies, and video games. With their "gendered readership, relatively low status as texts, cultural longevity and continuity, manifestations in a variety of 'spill over' texts, and the syndicate status of their production," Nancy Drew stories are, as Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh explain, "cumulative cultural texts" in dialogue with their past iterations as well as their present pop culture contexts (46-7). We can see what Nancy's stories accumulate via the varied responses to how the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series aligned Nancy with trends in teen serial fiction as well as other pop culture tropes shaping 80s and 90s media representations of young women. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh chronicle how Nancy Drew Files readers and critics bemoan "the 'new' Nancy, in all her incarnations, [as] a 'sell out' for the young girls who buy into an image of Nancy-the-clothes-horse, or Nancy-the-romantic-figure" (47). Yet other reviews laud the heroine as a "90s role model;" such seemingly polarized perceptions indicate the era's complex and often contradictory representations of young women (P.L. Brown 1D; see also Fitzgerald).

Feminist media studies scholars frequently discuss 80s and 90s pop culture texts for and/or about women as part of a postfeminist media sensibility. A critical term used both *at* the time and *about* the time, I invoke it here as a label that helps "examine what is distinctive

about [then-] contemporary articulations of gender in the media," to help contextualize the content and structure of the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series (Gill, "Postfeminist" 148; see also McRobbie, "Post-feminism"). In referring to it as a sensibility, Rosalind Gill encourages us to focus on postfeminist media as a set of ideologically loaded recurring representational elements, such as:

> the notion of femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. ("Postfeminist" 149)

Postfeminist pop culture texts put girls and women at the center of stories set in social worlds impacted by feminist politics, to address gendered experiences in education, careers both blue- and white-collar, and interpersonal and romantic relationships. With an increased insistence on young women as evidence of successful social change, postfeminist media texts frequently neoliberalize women's personal as well as professional obstacles by presenting them as the result of individual efforts and choices. In postfeminist media, women's lives are their own to shape and enjoy—both indebted to and divested from the broader structural and systemic challenges mounted by second wave feminism.

This postfeminist sensibility also manifests discursively as girl power. The "idea of girl power encapsulates the narrative of the successful young woman who is self-inventing, ambitious, and confident" (Harris 17), and is emblematized by outspoken pop stars like Madonna and the Spice Girls and hip-hop icons like Missy Elliot; the creation of the all-women music festival Lilith Fair; the women-fronted Riot Grrrl movement; the rise of women-led action-adventure television series like *Cagney & Lacey* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*; and the role of ambitious young women in hit movies like *Election* and *Flashdance*. "Girl power, with all its contradictions, was [also] a popular theme in girls' series books published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries," and Nancy's established history of action and adventure facilitates her transition to this pop culture context in which girl power narratives are widespread across media forms (Carpan, *Sisters* 138). She earns the label of role model in this era by "how tough and smart and adventurous she is," and descriptions of her "adventuresome, independent and free-spirited" character resonate with the rise of girl power as a popular trope within postfeminist media (P.L. Brown 1D). Looking at how the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series navigate (hetero)sexual and romantic choices and commitments highlights how "[g]irl power media culture represents a specific discursive moment in girls' cultural history and provides a contemporary example of how the promises of social movements are incorporated into hegemonic cultural production" (Zaslow 31). This set of Nancy Drew stories deploys her girlhood pedagogies to fit within the messaging of 1980s and 1990s media which celebrates particular kinds of action and agency as appropriate girl power.

Nancy's Romantic Entanglements

Nancy's romantic relationships may be less dangerous than her cases, but they are no less fraught. "While girls' series fiction may not seem like an obvious source of sexual information for young readers, such novels do contribute to the cultural discourse of girls' gender and sexual identities," and Nancy's heteronormative relationships generate significant drama in the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series (Gardner 246[1]). Longtime boyfriend Ned Nickerson is upgraded from "an accoutrement for Nancy—one of the many perquisites an attractive girl enjoys," to a sexy and problematic part of Nancy's life (Nash 38). Ned and Nancy oscillate between loving commitment and tense separations, as Nancy's wandering eye and her unapologetic prioritization of her cases create friction. The Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery stories use their serial structure to continually re-visit questions about young women's sexuality. Even with her romantic autonomy, Nancy's recurring angst about her relationship with Ned "highlight[s] the explicit and implicit lessons about gender and sexuality that make adolescent girlhood comprehensible in a particular cultural moment" (Marshall 210).

In these books, Ned is away at college, "a star athlete and a popular campus figure, with lots of friends and good grades" (Keene, *Cheating* 8). Nancy, meanwhile, is based in her hometown of River Heights and travels regularly to solve crime. Their romance is largely long distance, a narrative device that facilitates intense longing and frequent misunderstandings. Descriptions linger on Ned's physical qualities; Nancy is drawn to his "square jaw, generous mouth, and sparkling dark eyes" (110), and fantasizes about his body while they are apart: "She had been daydreaming about him so much lately—his wavy brown hair, his loving dark eyes, his strong, athletic body" (Keene, *False* 14). While their relationship is chaste (when visiting each other or travelling together they stay in separate rooms), their kisses leave Nancy awash in a frisson of sexual longing: "She felt his breath on her ear as he uttered those magic words. A ripple of delight slid up her spine … Before she knew it, their lips were meeting in another sizzling kiss. A bolt of glorious electricity went straight through Nancy" (Keene, *Suspect* 1, 4).

Such yearnings show how the girl power trope is used in the 1980s and 1990s to represent young women as empowered (hetero)sexual agents. Angela McRobbie contends that, "the young woman is now granted a prominence as a pleasure-seeking subject in possession of a healthy sexual appetite and identity" ("Top Girls?" 732). We see this not only in how the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series promote Nancy's breathless appreciation of Ned's muscular body and masterful kisses, but also in how she regularly eyeballs other young men she meets. In *Dangerous Games* (1989), for instance, she has a run-in with "two boys, wearing nothing but towels wrapped around their waists," and struggles to "[keep] her eyes firmly on [their] face[s]" (51), while in *The Cheating Heart* (1994) she cheekily comments on the body of one of Ned's fraternity brothers, goading him into a proud display for her benefit: "With a grin, Jerry rolled up his sloppy T-shirt and massaged the taut muscles of his tanned stomach" (4). Nancy's capacity for intense sexual attraction, and the relationship drama her feelings incite, is established in the series' first installment *Secrets Can Kill* (1986). She is immediately drawn to her undercover contact Daryl, and the "attraction between them crackled like electricity" (19). Their flirtation parallels the increasingly dangerous situations they encounter, leading to a steamy kiss after they narrowly escape from Nancy's exploding car:

> It wasn't Ned whose arms were holding her; it wasn't Ned whose lips she was feeling, nor Ned whose voice was murmuring her name. And hadn't she said

> just three days before that nobody could compete with Ned Nickerson? Well, maybe no one could in the long run. But at the moment – in the short run – Daryl Gray was doing a pretty good job of it. (54)

And during Ned and Nancy's brief break-up (discussed shortly), Nancy finds herself a handsome distraction named Brad, with whom she has a fling purely to satiate her physical desire:

> Gently, he pulled her into a long, spine-tingling kiss. Nancy shivered happily, giving Brad's muscular shoulders a squeeze. *That* was why she'd gotten involved with him. Brad Eastman was nothing compared to Ned, but there were certain times – and that was one of them – when none of that mattered. She let herself relax into his warm, thrilling kiss and forgot everything else. (Keene, *False* 58[2])

Her dalliances continue even after she and Ned reunite, like in the 1990 "Summer of Love" trilogy embedded in the larger Nancy Drew Files series. Across *Date with Deception, Portrait in Crime*, and *Deep Secrets* Nancy meets and seriously considers leaving Ned for Sasha Petrov, a charming young ballet dancer who ardently pursues her and whom she finds "very stirring" (Keene, *Date* 30). In this trilogy, Nancy, Bess, and George are spending the summer in the Hamptons with Nancy's Aunt Eloise while Ned remains at home working his summer job. Nancy encourages Sasha at first because she enjoys the attention, and then discourages him out of guilt. Yet as they spend the summer solving the Hamptons's many mysteries together her feelings for Sasha grow beyond infatuation; when Sasha confesses his love at the end of *Portrait in Crime*: "Nancy caught her breath. She knew he was going to kiss her then, but she couldn't rouse herself to stop him. She *wanted* him to!" (154).

Nancy eventually chooses Ned, because "[l]osing Ned would be like cutting her own heart in two" (Keene, *Deep* 117). Yet the ongoing sexual tension between Nancy and Sasha in the "Summer of Love" trilogy, as well as her trysts with other men in numerous other Nancy Drew Files stories, highlights how "the girl of girl power culture also feels she has a right to enjoy her own sexuality, to revel in the desire she elicits" (Zaslow 4). In this trilogy, like in every other Nancy Drew Files and Super Mystery installment, Nancy competently solves the crimes at hand while romantic issues between her and Ned persist. Seriality operates as an opportunity for Nancy to keep feeling sexual desire, as well as for her to re-make the right romantic choice; she both embraces her burgeoning sexuality by exploring connections with multiple men, and ends up with "Old Reliable" Ned every time (Keene, *Smile* 69).

Nancy as a Choosy Sexual Subject

The drama of Nancy's flings and her decision to remain in a relationship with Ned are negotiations of postfeminist media's preoccupation with young women's agency and bodily autonomy in their romantic relationships. Such representations participate in the wider rhetoric of choice that appears across much of the media output aimed at young women in the 1980s and 1990s. Young adult series fiction like The Baby-Sitters Club and Sweet Valley High emphasize young women's individual capacity to make important choices about their

careers, their friendships, and their sexual and romantic relationships. Elspeth Probyn labels this *choiceoisie*: a "discursive configuration that articulates both the cultural texts of the moment as well as the social experiences which these public representations seek to delineate" (281). In doing so, she argues that the ways in which "young girls are portrayed as having a number of choices to make" is both a representational strategy and an articulation of gendered social norms (288).

In the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series, this choiceoisie extends to Nancy's management of the many young men who find her attractive. Her capacity to use her sexuality on her own terms is typified by how she deploys it throughout investigations, as a device for extracting information or evading attention. This illustrates what Probyn identifies as choiceoisie's referentiality, for "images of choiceoisie conjure up, cite, and refer to other deeply ingrained images of women in popular culture" as a way of making choices feel compelling and meaningful (285). For Nancy Drew in the 1980s and 1990s, this includes tropes from the era's popular action heroine stories (J. Brown). Rising to prominence in in texts like the *Aliens* franchise and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which put women at the center of the sorts of high-octane adventures typically led by male characters, the action heroine is a "tough, self-reliant, and sexy adventuress" (J. Brown, *Dangerous Curves* 5). Jeffrey Brown argues that this figure profoundly shapes pop culture perceptions about women's roles within the action-adventure genre—specifically, how young women are often "representationally overburdened as sex objects" in these narratives (J. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells* 19).

By purposefully foregrounding her sexual desirability, Nancy uses it as a tool to further her investigations. She becomes a sexual subject, "endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy" (Gill, "Postfeminist" 152). We see this, for instance, in *Hit and Run Holiday*. Nancy deliberately leverages her knowledge that she is an attractive and charming young woman to try and squeeze information out of a local lifeguard:

> In front of her was a lifeguard's chair, and sitting in that chair was a handsome, bronze-skinned, dark-haired boy in a small black bathing suit … Nancy hoped nobody was drowning at the moment, because the guy sure wouldn't be any help – he couldn't take his eyes off her … Tossing her hair back, Nancy curved her lips in a slow smile and walked over to the lifeguard's chair.
> "Hi, there," the lifeguard said when she reached him.
> "Hello … This is my first day in Lauderdale. Got any suggestions about how I should spend my time?"
> The lifeguard raised his eyebrows. "Most people come here for the sun and the water," he said … "Isn't that what you came for?"
> "Well, sure," Nancy told him. "Sun, surf, and… new friends, right?" (36-7)

While the lifeguard has no helpful information to share, Nancy is undeterred; hunting for suspects in a seaside party town, she is surrounded by young (heterosexual) men eager to meet sexually available women. She projects a confidence in her desirability throughout *Hit and Run Holiday*, like signing up for private windsurfing lessons, flirting with the instructor and pretending to be enthralled by his long-winded explanations: "It was all very interesting,

Nancy thought, but it wasn't the information she was after. If Dirk really wanted to turn Nancy on, he'd tell her what he knew about Kim" (45-6).

Her ability to separate the appearance of being "up for it" from actual sexual interest is strategic and self-managed (Gill, "From Sexual Objectification" 103). She actively becomes a sexual subject, suggestively bantering her way down the beach:

> Nancy swallowed a bite of cheese, wiped her mouth, and raised her can of soda. That was all it took. In two seconds, the boy was sitting next to her. "Hi there," he said with a grin. "How you doing?" …
> Nancy reached into her straw shoulder bag and took out the photo. "Here she is. Her name's Rosita."
> "Pretty," Mike said, barely glancing at the picture. "But not as pretty as you … Now, what are you and I going to do for fun tonight?" Mike scooted even closer to Nancy and bent his head down as if he were going to kiss her. At the last second, Nancy ducked under his arms and left him sitting alone in the booth. Her plans for the night just didn't include Mike. … Unfortunately, Fort Lauderdale was full of Mikes, looking to have fun. Some were nice, some came on a little too strong, a few actually took her questions seriously. All of them were interested in Nancy, and none of them had seen Rosita. (62-4)

Shortly after Nancy despairs of ever making headway, one of the young men she meets has just enough information to help. Nancy's "sexual knowledge and practice" are what get the job done (Gill, "Postfeminist" 151).

The rightness of Nancy's choice is also underscored by times when she is less enthused about playing the vamp but persists regardless in pursuit of the truth. In *Recipe for Murder* (1988), for example, Nancy and Ned are attending an exclusive cooking school hosted by skilled chefs who keep falling victim to debilitating and suspicious accidents. When the debonair replacement Chef Jacques Bonet makes his interest in Nancy clear, Nancy is pleased about the potential benefits to her investigation:

> Ned growled in Nancy's ear, "I'm liking that guy less and less."
> "Shhh," Nancy said. "I might need some information out of him."
> "He's interested in a whole lot more than information from you."
> Nancy looked up at him, smiling. "Well, I'm spoken for. But can *you* hold it together? I don't want to blow this." (35)

Even more than an exercise of her bodily autonomy, sexual subjectification is also evidence of Nancy's skills as a sleuth. For Nancy, "actively choos[ing] to objectify" herself is a professional expediency (Gill, "From Sexual Objectification" 104). She maintains her agency even – and especially – in the face of Chef Jacques' unpleasant advances:

> Jacques regarded her thoughtfully. "Have dinner with me and I won't tell Paul I caught you in his office." … Nancy wasn't sure what to do. Still, the evening might not be a total waste if she played her cards right … [At dinner] Jacques regarded Nancy with faint amusement. "Why do I get the feeling you accepted my dinner invitation just to pump me for information?" he asked.

> Nancy managed to hang onto her poise. "Sorry. Just a bad habit of mine, I guess." She was glad when the check was paid and the valet was retrieving the car. But when she felt Jacques's fingers smooth lightly over her bare arm, she had to force herself not to jerk away. (81, 83-4)

Nancy is not romantically interested in *these* men, unlike Daryl, Brad, Sasha, and, of course Ned, confirming for readers that her sexual self-presentation in these stories is her own choice. Her strategic flirtations and suggestive conversations also allude to the familiar role of "sexual distraction" to which women are routinely relegated in the era's action-adventure stories (J. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells* 99). For Nancy, however, it is an exchange: young men get the titillating pleasure of her presence, while she gets more fodder for her investigation.

When Nancy's sexual subjectification does function as a distraction, it is solely to her own advantage. For example, in *Wings of Fear* (1987) Nancy is nearly discovered lurking near one of her suspects, and decides to hide in plain sight—in the arms of one of the new friends she has made in her investigation:

> Nancy glanced up. Grant Sweeney was starting to turn her way. Impulsively, Nancy threw her arms around Paul and gave him a big kiss. Several long seconds passed before Nancy dared shoot a glance over Paul's shoulder. But when she did, Grant was gone.
> "Whew. That was close! Thanks for covering for me," Nancy said, picking up her purse.
> Paul was looking at her in total bemusement. He blinked rapidly several times. For once in his life, he seemed to have absolutely nothing to say.
> "Look, I've got to go," Nancy said hurriedly. "I'll—I'll explain later. And thanks again."
> "Does this mean you might accept my offer of a date?" he asked, but Nancy just smiled as she sidled past him and out of the restaurant. (121)

Scenes "organized around sexual confidence and autonomy" are further amplified by the attention both the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series pay to Nancy's clothing (Gill, "From Sexual Objectification" 103). Frequent shopping sprees and lavish descriptions of Nancy's outfits are foundational elements of Nancy Drew stories in the 1980s and 1990s, and part of how "[t]he body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending)" (Gill, "Postfeminist 149). Scenes of Nancy out shopping with her besties Bess and George are regularly used to open each installment, like in the second paragraph of *Buried Secrets* (1987): "Eighteen-year-old Nancy Drew stuck her credit card back in her wallet, shook her reddish blond hair back out of her blue eyes, and looked around the River Heights shopping mall. Nancy *was* famous for her detective work, but at the moment she was more interested in new clothes than a new case" (1).

Choiceoisie also contextualizes Nancy's wardrobe and is evident in how Nancy deliberately tailors her outfits to her circumstances. In *Tall, Dark and Deadly* (1991) Nancy gets ready to go for pizza: "She chose black slacks and a bright blue angora sweater that highlighted her eyes. Silver earrings and just a hint of blusher completed the picture, she decided, looking in the mirror" (73). A date night with Ned in *High Risk* (1991) requires its

own shopping trip, with Bess finding the perfect dress: "Bess had made a great choice, she realized. The soft color brought out the pink in her cheeks and her blue eyes looked even brighter by contrast. The skirt wasn't *that* short, she decided, and it made her legs appear even longer" (3). And even being in a desperate hurry to find Ned at his college campus does not absolve her of looking good: "Nancy dressed quickly in jeans, a teal sweater, and a pair of flat-heeled boots. She found her coat and purse in the closet and practically threw herself down the stairs" (Keene, *Don't* 49).

In postfeminist media texts, nearly "every aspect of life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination" (Gill, "Postfeminist" 153). Outfit choices are thus another way of articulating young women's agency with their romantic goals. We often see Nancy put her outfits together in full anticipation of young men's appraising eyes:

> Nancy studied herself in the mirror. She liked what she saw. The tight jeans looked great on her long, slim legs and the green sweater complemented her strawberry-blond hair . . . "Right now," she said to her two friends, "the hardest part of this case is deciding what to wear."
> "That outfit, definitely," Bess said . . . "You'll make the guys absolutely drool." (Keene, *Secrets Can Kill* 2-3)

Such representations of choice recur throughout the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series to reinforce Nancy's bodily sovereignty; Nancy is "the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power" to entice secrets out of witnesses and stay one step ahead of suspects (Gill, "From Sexual Objectification" 103). In these ways, Nancy is able to set the terms for how her work becomes sexualized.

Can Nancy Have It All?

Nancy also determines how her personal and professional lives intersect. "Many teen romance novels taught a generation of teenage girls that they could have it all … Teen romance fiction was training girls to become superwomen," and we see this in how Nancy attempts to balance her love life with her love of sleuthing (Carpan, *Sisters* 123). Part of what makes Sasha a legitimate contender for Nancy's heart, for instance, is his enthusiasm for solving mysteries alongside her. He tells her, "Solving mysteries is a lot of fun, but it can be deadly serious too … Just like being with you" (Keene, *Portrait* 154). This distinguishes him from Nancy's other flings like hunky Brad (who was "probably the type of who peeked at the last page of a mystery novel to find out who did it, instead of fitting the clues together himself" [Keene *False* 57])—and even from Ned. Nancy's sleuthing is a serial source of conflict between her and Ned. In *Murder on Ice* (1986), "Ned was trying to be good-natured, but [Nancy] got the message. He was tired of playing second fiddle to every mystery that came along … But how could she sit still if there really might be a murderer at the lodge?" (32). Her sleuthing derails yet another vacation in *The Black Widow* (1988):

> Iced fruit drinks had already arrived when Nancy joined him. "Ned," she began a little nervously, "This isn't exactly going to be one big party."
> Ned's grin vanished. "Nancy—you're not on a *case!*"

> "Don't be annoyed, Ned," Nancy pleaded. "There's something really strange happening on the *Emerald Queen* and I've got to find out what it is." (84-85)

Many Nancy Drew Files and Super Mystery stories end with Nancy evading Ned's plea to spend some time together, like in *Dead on Arrival* when the case is wrapped up and Ned asks: "'[D]oes that mean you and I finally get our romantic evening together?' 'Sure,' Nancy said, smiling up at him. 'At least until the next case comes along!'" (215). This tension takes over in *Two Points to Murder* (1987), when Ned is so embittered by Nancy's dedication to her work that he breaks up with her. She has travelled to Ned's college to look into mysterious issues plaguing the basketball team. He grows increasingly frustrated, however, as she digs up information on members of the team: "'What's with you, anyway?' he said furiously. 'Sometimes I think you care more about solving mysteries than you do about people'" (38). While Nancy's able to get to the bottom of the case, Ned's deeper unease about their relationship bubbles to the surface:

> "[W]hen you get right down to it, who comes first in our relationship? You! Your career! Your cases! Even your suspects!"
> "But—"
> "Every time I help you with a case, you keep me in the background. My opinion means nothing to you! Well, let me tell you something… I'm sick of being put down and ignored" …
> "Ned, what are you saying? I don't understand why you're so upset. I mean, we've shared everything… the danger, the fun…"
> "Sure, but that's not what I want anymore. It's not enough." (149)

Nancy is heartbroken and tries to distract herself with work, even trying to solve a thirty-year-old local murder case a few installments later in *Buried Secrets*, causing her and Ned to keep crossing paths since he is home on a study break. By the end Ned realizes his feelings for Nancy outweigh his resentment of her work:

> "I've been thinking about us all the time I've been home. At first, I just wasn't sure whether we ought to stay together. But the more I saw you, the more I realized I wanted to be with you. And it was hard, because you were so busy with the case and everything. I even worried about asking you out – I didn't want it to seem as though I was trying to take you away from your job."
> "It's probably always going to be that way, Ned," Nancy told him.
> "I know, and that's okay," Ned said. "It was just hard, because all I wanted to do was put my arms around you. That's still all I want to do." (152-3)

Their reconciliation establishes a pattern that persists throughout the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series: Ned regularly raises concerns about the impact of Nancy's job on their romantic relationship, and it is Ned who regularly compromises so that Nancy's work is not derailed.

While Ned may begrudgingly accept Nancy's single-mindedness, the Super Mystery series offers a potential romantic partner who adores Nancy *because* and not *in spite* of it: Frank Hardy. Though both Nancy and Frank are ostensibly committed to their long-time

partners (Frank's girlfriend Callie occasionally appears in the complementary series The Hardy Boys Casefiles), Frank has a "powerful effect on her," ensuring a layer of romantic drama in the crossover series as well (Keene, *Double* 7). And the feeling is mutual: in *The Last Resort* (1989), Frank and Nancy are trapped in a small cabin, buried by an avalanche that swept down the slopes of the ski resort where they are working on a case together. With escape or rescue unlikely, they finally give in to desire:

> The fire faded into blackness, and the room grew even colder. Frank took his arm from around Nancy's back and reached down to touch her face. She lifted her head. She saw the intense longing in his eyes. She closed her eyes and felt the power of her feelings overwhelm her. Her head was spinning with cold, fear, and longing.
> In a desperate, wonderful moment, their lips met. (148)

The Last Resort also illustrates the difference between Frank and Ned. As they close in on the story's villain, Nancy suggests she try to bluff her way through extorting a confession. While Ned is anxious, telling her "bluffing can be dangerous," Frank has full confidence: "Nancy's a very convincing person … I think Treyford will fall for a bluff. He's ready" (201). Ned's hesitancy is unwarranted, and Nancy cleverly coerces the villain into revealing their plans, intimating that Frank is the one who truly "gets" Nancy.

While Nancy leaves with Ned once they have solved the case, the attraction between her and Frank persists throughout other Super Mystery stories. In *Nightmare in New Orleans* (1997), for instance, Nancy is distracted by the jealously she feels when Frank seems to fall for someone else:

> Nancy noticed the special gleam in Frank's eyes as he looked at Faye. It was exactly the way he used to look at *her* sometimes. Of course, she and Frank both had separate lives, Nancy firmly reminded herself. And separate romances. They were friends, and that was that. If Frank was attracted to someone else, it was none of her business.
> Right? (19)

And in *Secrets of the Nile* (1995), the heat is nearly overwhelming as an undercover assignment requires Nancy and Frank to play besotted newlyweds. After a week of dangerous detective work and cozy cuddles, neither can deny their feelings:

> The kiss seemed to go on forever. When Nancy finally pulled away, she whispered, "Frank… that is, what I mean is… the case is over. We don't have to pretend we're a couple anymore."
> "I wasn't pretending," Frank said slowly, taking her hands in his. "Were you?"
> Nancy took a deep breath. "No," she said finally. "I wasn't pretending either." (215)

Their undeniable connection and the contrast between how Ned and Frank each react to Nancy's often-treacherous sleuthing, dramatize the 1980s and 1990s pop culture preoccupation with women balancing work and romance, foregrounding "the high degree of

ambivalence with which postfeminist culture treats women in the workforce" (Negra 87; see also Faludi). Elements of this constructed dilemma carry over into the Nancy Drew On Campus series (1995-1998). This spin-off follows Nancy, Bess, and George to college, where Nancy studies journalism and writes for the school newspaper—and uses her role as a reporter to cover campus intrigue. She also breaks up with Ned in the series' second installment *On Her Own* (1995), telling him: "I need my independence right now … It's not about other guys, Ned. It's just that I need to make a life here … And, well, I don't feel as if I can do that and be with you at the same time" (42). By positively portraying her capacity to prioritize herself and her future goals, Nancy's choice to end her relationship with Ned further feeds the girl power trope.[3]

Nancy Drew and the Girl Power Clues

In *Danger for Hire* (1990) Nancy is invited to speak at her old high school's Career Day, and meets a student named Cindy who professes to be her biggest fan. She agrees to let Cindy help with her latest case, yet when it turns tense and deadly, Cindy decides the job is not for her:

> "[A]fter this I think I'll just read about your cases in the paper, if that's okay. It was great to do it once, but I definitely think that detective work is for people who know what they're doing and love doing it!"
> With a smile, Nancy released the brake and hit the gas. Her Mustang surged forward and blended into traffic.
> She couldn't have agreed more. (149)

This dynamic imagery of Nancy grinning and gunning her sports car as she speeds off to solve more crimes typifies the era's "increased inclusion of women in action roles" (Tasker 68). While Cindy may not enjoy the rapid changes of pace and activity detecting requires, Nancy's enthusiasm for it emblematizes the 1980s and 1990s investment in girl power as an "attribution of capacity" to young women (McRobbie, "Top Girls?" 722). Nancy remains a pop culture icon in this era through how her stories dramatize young women's capacity to choose not just their career trajectories but also their romantic partners and sexual experiences.

Nancy's relationship troubles with Ned and chemistry with Frank continue in other media forms as well. The 1995 TV program *Nancy Drew* also mixed episodic mysteries with ongoing interpersonal and romantic relationship drama, signalling the pervasive importance accorded to narratives of young women's romantic and sexual autonomy as a hallmark of girl power. The best-selling Nancy Drew video games (HerInteractive 1998-present), many of which are adapted from specific Nancy Drew Files like *Secrets Can Kill*, gamify the books' "potent fantasy of living adventurously without the familiar hindrances of societal conventions" as players take on the role of Nancy and point-and-click their way through the sleuth's torrid relationship dynamics (Nash 39). The breadth of this teen-girl production trend (Kearney 2004) is unusual for its time, and suggests a renewed interest in Nancy Drew as a character especially amenable to a postfeminist sensibility. Pop culture discourses of agency, capacity, and desirability contextualize the ways in which she (re)appears and is (re)evaluated as independent, determined, and successful, affirming that "Nancy Drew is a

powerful cultural icon because of, not despite, the paradoxical nature of the lessons she teaches" (Chamberlain 2). By looking closely at the ways in which Nancy Drew Files and Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys Super Mystery stories turn Nancy into a heartthrob, we can solve the case of how Nancy Drew remains a paragon of pop culture girlhood.

My thanks to the reviewers for their thoughtful and supportive feedback.

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[1] Queer readings of Nancy Drew also flourished in the 1990s. One of the most visible, author Mabel Maney's parodic Nancy Clue series, "call[s] attention to the erotic potential of the ostensibly desexualized, homosocial worlds inhabited by the original characters and refuse[s] to explain relationships between women as simply 'friends'" (Gardner 253; see also Cornelius; Mitchell).

[2] All italics in quotations from the Nancy Drew Files and the Super Mystery series are reproduced as found in the original texts.

[3] Inside the first Nancy Drew On Campus story *New Lives, New Loves* (1995), amidst advertisements for other young adult romance series, Nancy Drew readers were exhorted to call a 1-800 number and weight in on the question: "Should Nancy Drew break up with Ned Nickerson?" While the promotional blurb—and even the title—for *On Her Own* included at the end of *New Lives, New Loves* already teases the result, Ned and Nancy's break up suggests through implication that Nancy Drew readers felt similarly empowered to end what the advertisement describes as "one of the greatest romances of the century."

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