

# Missing Millie Benson: The Secret Case of the Nancy Drew Ghostwriter and Journalist

Michella M. Marino  
*Hastings College*

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to the masses. Yet the visionaries and viewers Weems investigates are primarily male — from photographers, boosters, mapmakers, and artists to an implied audience of land-owning individuals who bought property, worked with agents, and made decisions. Gender is apparent in some analyses; Weems makes an intriguing connection between a photograph of quilters and the ways that *Life* editors may have imagined resonances between domestic ritual and the “agricultural future” (123). What happens when women claim aerial perspective? Would the perceptions and experiences of women working on farms in the 1930s and 1940s have been affected in the same way by aerial views as men’s were? Perhaps, but that possibility is only hinted at in the conclusion, which begins with a discussion of the “cognitive transformations” intimated by Dorothy’s aerial exodus to the land of Oz in the influential 1939 film (254).

The conclusion, like the rest of the book, opens the door to new interpretations of midwestern landscapes, particularly as they pertain to mass culture. Enthusiasts of visual culture, history, and rural life should welcome this book, which performs significant cultural work itself in re-orienting scholarly views of the Midwest, and is a strong contribution to the current recentering of the Midwest in American culture studies.

*Missing Millie Benson: The Secret Case of the Nancy Drew Ghostwriter and Journalist*, by Julie K. Rubini. Biographies for Young Readers. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. viii, 123 pp. Illustrations, sidebars, appendices, notes, bibliography. \$28.95 hardcover, \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewer Michella M. Marino is assistant professor of history at Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. Her master’s research focused on young girls growing up in the Midwest during the World War II era.

Much like author Julie K. Rubini, as a young girl I, too, was drawn to the yellow-spined mystery novels starring the independent amateur sleuth Nancy Drew. Despite my interest, I never gave much thought to Carolyn Keene, the author of the Nancy Drew books. Had I looked more deeply into Keene’s life, it would not have mattered, because, as Rubini explains, “There is no Carolyn Keene. There never was” (1).

Thus, Rubini establishes a mystery surrounding the original ghostwriter of the series, Millie Benson, and why she only gained authorial recognition after a 1980 court case and a Nancy Drew conference held at the University of Iowa in 1993. Rubini sets up her biography for young readers in the same charming, formulaic manner as the Nancy Drew books, right down to her use of “holding points,” the concluding hook at the end of each chapter that compels readers to turn the page.

Rubini chronologically details the personal life of Mildred (Millie) Augustine Wirt Benson while also highlighting relevant Iowa history until roughly 1940, when Benson relocated to Ohio. Readers get a glimpse into early twentieth-century small-town life in Ladora, Iowa, before witnessing the growth of the University of Iowa campus and its academic programs in the early 1920s. Rubini explores Benson's development as a journalist and writer from a young girl growing up in Iowa through her time at the University of Iowa, which helped prepare her to ghostwrite for the Stratemeyer Syndicate as well as write and publish under her own name. By the mid-1950s, Benson parted ways with the Stratemeyer Syndicate but continued to pursue a career as a journalist, combining her love of travel, flying, and mystery.

Rubini's book is geared for younger readers, but the best part of the book is that Rubini slyly teaches children what scholarly historical research and writing looks like. She splendidly contextualizes changing gender roles, merges national and local history through such topics as the Great Depression, and explains the history of early to mid-twentieth-century writing and publishing. Furthermore, she uses footnotes and a bibliography to showcase an interesting array of primary and secondary sources.

Even though it is intended primarily for young readers, the book still offers much for adults in its insight into book syndicates and in the life story of an under-discussed but important author in children's literature. A few mysteries remain unresolved, however. Readers who are intrigued by passing mention of the "challenging" relationship between Benson and her daughter never learn more about the topic, including what became of Benson's family after her death in 2002. Although Benson seemingly played an integral role in interpreting the Nancy Drew character, Rubini does not analyze Benson's development of Nancy Drew in comparison to the outlines created by the Stratemeyer Syndicate. Doing so would have added depth to Benson's contributions to the legacy of the Nancy Drew character. Still, the secret case of the Nancy Drew ghostwriter is one worth exploring.

*Cold War in a Cold Land: Fighting Communism on the Northern Plains*, by David W. Mills. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. ix, 300 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Michael S. Mayer is professor of history at the University of Montana. He is the author of *The Eisenhower Years* (2009).

According to David Mills, people in the northern Great Plains states (South Dakota, North Dakota, and Montana) "enthusiastically supported