In her introduction to this book, Anne Lundin charts the historical and theoretical contours of scholarship on print culture for youth. She writes about the contributions of reader-response theorists to what we know today about the reading cultures of children and young adults in the United States. Reader-response theorists argue for the importance of studying readers’ engagement with popular literature within the social context of their everyday lives. Since the pioneering work of literary feminist and reader-response theorist Janice Radway on women’s interpretations of romance novels, cultural studies in the United States has witnessed a boom in studies of people’s experiences with popular culture. Scholars from a variety of disciplines including history, journalism, English, sociology, anthropology, and education have examined the impact of everyday material culture such as soap operas, fiction, talk shows, tabloids, and shopping catalogs on consumer’s social identities.

While the recent academic attention to popular culture is a welcome respite from the earlier focus on high culture, much of the research that exists concentrates on Europe, United States, Canada, and Australia. It is only recently, with the appearance of academic journals such as the International Journal of Cultural Studies, that we have seen a strong commitment in cultural studies to research about popular culture in non-Western settings. In the current context of widespread consumption of global popular culture, it is important to pay attention to people’s engagement with popular media in geographic areas that are not part of the Euro-American world.
Furthermore, the history of books, reading practices, and contemporary print cultures in the Third World have received little attention until the last decade. Because urban, cosmopolitan cultural formations in the Third World have not been the focus of the social sciences, especially anthropology, we know little about the production and reception of print media, which in many Asian and African countries are more common in metropolitan spaces. With respect to South Asia, cultural studies scholars have begun making inroads into the study of popular culture such as global television and audience reception of television texts. However, with the rise in film and television studies, popular literature has receded into the margins.

The lack of knowledge about children’s and youth reading in the non-Western world is thus part of a more widespread neglect of a vibrant print culture in areas such as South Asia where reading, writing, and the politics of literacy have been major forces in their colonial history and in the postcolonial experiences of modernity. At the most basic level, scholars still need to gather information about adolescents’ and children’s reading around the world. Apart from an empirical concern with recording basic data on reading practices in the Third World, more urgent questions that address historical and theoretical issues are: How has European colonialism and its impact on contemporary language use affected children’s leisure reading in Asian and African contexts? Does the social formation of girls’ gender identities in the non-Western world influence them to read fiction just as girls do in the United States? In a global era when mobile, diasporic populations from the Third World are traveling to and living in the West, how do memories of reading, youth, and childhood recall and constitute a sense of home? Do non-Western readers perceive Nancy Drew to be a neocolonial, global symbol of the United States’ economic and cultural power?

In this essay, I explore answers to these research questions by analyzing interviews I conducted with a group of Indian women about their experiences in reading Nancy Drew fiction. At the time of the interviews, all these women were living and studying in the United States at a large Midwestern university. My qualitative research involved three stages: seeking out women’s responses to an e-mail questionnaire, conducting personal interviews with selected women who filled out my questionnaires, and moderating three focus group sessions (five, six, and six women in each group) which included all the women I interviewed in individual sessions. Out of the thirty women who received my questionnaires, twenty-two responded, and seventeen of these consented to personal and focus group interviews. A qualitative, methodological approach seemed ideal for my study on Indian women’s childhood and adolescent reading, because I wanted to capture the nuances, details, and contextual moments that surrounded their childhood reading practices.

The women themselves were fairly homogeneous in terms of age, class, education, residence, religious background, and family structure. All twenty-two who participated were between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-eight. With two exceptions, they all grew up in large Indian cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, and New Delhi. All had attended schools and colleges in urban areas where the medium of instruction was the English language, although they had also learned to write and read in at least two vernacular Indian languages. Twelve had attended private Catholic schools for girls, six had attended coeducational central government schools, and four had attended exclusive private boarding schools for girls. All were Indian citizens by birth except two, who were born in Zimbabwe and Kenya but attended school and college in India. At the time I conducted the study, all had lived in the United States for two to four years and were attending graduate school in various disciplines including history, sociology, engineering, pharmacology, chemistry, computer science, and business. Except for two women who were Christian, the rest were Hindu, and all who participated in the study were middle and upper middle class with respect to their parents’ incomes and education. Of the twenty-two, eighteen women’s mothers worked or had worked at some point outside the home.

My analysis of adult Indian women’s memories of reading Nancy Drew books shows that pleasure in reading popular culture texts is experienced and understood within historical and cultural contexts, and that reading Nancy Drews was a social experience that involved explicit and overt mediation by parents, relatives, peers, and schoolteachers. Additionally, talking about their childhood reading of Nancy Drew books, as I will argue in this essay, was an avenue for these young women to express and experience nostalgia about “home” and India. Indian women’s nostalgic framing of their childhood Nancy Drew reading as a memory about the “good old” days back at home presents an interesting and paradoxical dimension of our lives in times of diasporic modernity. What does it mean when non-Western people recount nostalgia about their homelands through their experiences of reading Western popular literature such as Nancy Drew books? What are the implications of such cross-cultural reading experiences for theoretical discussions about authentic and inauthentic postcolonial identities?
My curiosity about Indian women’s childhood reading, especially their memories about reading Nancy Drew books, was originally piqued at a social gathering for international students at a small, private university in the Dallas–Fort Worth area in Texas. Attending the gathering as an international student from India, I found myself in a group of people where there were students from several countries in Europe (Germany, Sweden, and Norway), Africa (Kenya and Cameroon), and Asia (China, Japan, and India). The conversation within the group suddenly turned to our childhood experiences and what we did for fun as children. For many of us, reading took up a list of favorite activities. In the course of our conversation, I found that along with me, two Indian women from Bombay, three women from Kenya, and one from Cameroon had all read similar kinds of children’s fiction, and we had all read and enjoyed Nancy Drew books in the English language, much to the surprise of the other foreign students from Germany, Japan, and China. This essay is an extended exploration of my initial curiosity about Nancy Drew reading as a postcolonial experience that is shared among women who were born and raised in the former British colonies in South Asia and Africa.

Despite her popularity among readers around the world, research on Nancy Drew’s impact on girls’ and women’s identity formation has only recently entered the academic arena. Pointing to the multiple reasons for the neglect of girls’ series books in scholarly research, Sherrie Inness writes: “Girls’ reading has long been considered unimportant when compared to adult reading. Girls’ series books have been quadruple outcasts from critical circles because they are written for young readers, are targeted at girls, are popular reading, and, even worse, are series books, which often have been regarded with disdain by literary critics.” Gradually, however, with the tide of interdisciplinary attention to popular culture and the entry of feminist scholars in the academy, we have witnessed a surge of interest in the Nancy Drew phenomenon. Popular passion for Nancy Drew is and scholarly interest in the economic and cultural aspects of Nancy Drew reading came together during the Nancy Drew conference in Iowa City in 1993. The edited book Rediscovering Nancy Drew, which contains proceedings from the 1993 conference, provides valuable information and analysis of Nancy Drew’s popularity, including the production and publishing of Nancy Drew books, readers’ perceptions and responses to Nancy Drew, and collectors’ roles in archiving and recording knowledge on Nancy Drew.

Fortunately, research on women’s Nancy Drew reading has critically examined Nancy’s privileged, white, upper-class heterosexual life in the United States. A powerful First World nation. As with many mainstream popular culture texts, which reflect and perpetuate hegemonic values about the meanings of gender, race, class, and ethnic identities, Nancy Drew books relied on dominant representations of marginalized people to accentuate and define the normality and wholesomeness of Nancy Drew’s life and her identity. Among the scholars who critique Nancy Drew books for producing skewed representations of non-white people, Melinda de Jesús’ essay takes us outside and inside the U.S. context to reflect on Nancy Drew as imperialist fiction. She argues in her essay that Nancy Drew reading, for herself, a Filipina American, and for her mother, a Filipina, was essentially an experience that reinforced cultural imperialism, American colonization, and hegemonic Western feminism. My essay provides additional insights regarding the complexities of cultural imperialism and cross-cultural reading experiences by showing how girls in India negotiate popular literature from British and American culture simultaneously. In analyzing the implications of Indian women’s Nancy Drew reading for theoretical debates about cultural imperialism, this essay demonstrates that our leisure reading practices are dynamic, lived phenomena that include capitulation and resistance to dominant discourses.

For many young Indian women, reading Nancy Drews represented welcome relief from the pressure of studying and doing homework as children. Although all the women spoke about their Nancy Drew reading as pleasurable, I was struck by the even stronger feelings of frustration most expressed regarding access to these books and the scant leisure time they had as children to read fiction. In seeking out women’s responses to how they gained access to Nancy Drew fiction in India, I found that there were essentially five regular sources that they relied on: school libraries, peer and family networks, bookstores, private clubs where their parents were members, and private lending libraries.

Buying Nancy Drew fiction at bookstores or getting series fiction and comics as gifts were reserved for special occasions because these books were fairly expensive—about twenty to thirty rupees (sixty to eighty cents approximately) in the 1970s—and many women wrote that their parents could not afford to buy them Nancy Drew books on a regular basis. Birthdays and festivals were some events when women said they could ask for and expect to get books as gifts. Relatives who visited would also give women out shopping and buy them books. Five women wrote that whenever their fathers went out of town on business trips, they would bring back books for them as a special treat. During personal interviews, ten women described Nancy Drew reading as a part of their experience of
relaxed summer holidays when they took long train trips to visit relatives around the country. Sharmila, whose strongest memories of reading Nancy Drews were connected to her summer travels, contrasted her busy and stressful life as a student in the United States with the quieter and more restful pace of her life in India:

Those two summer vacations when I went through my Nancy Drew obsession were wonderful. My aunt who lived in the United States brought back several Nancy Drews for me. Usually, my parents would have bought me one or two Nancy Drews to read on the trip but that summer I had something close to seven I think. Those train trips were great. I feel like I can never get that part of my life in India back. It’s gone forever. I feel no one relaxes in this country and soon I will be part of this hectic life.

For Sharmila, a middle-class woman whose parents were teachers, getting Nancy Drew books and other fiction as gifts was thus part of a seasonal pattern of summer vacations and family travel. Apart from three upper-class women who described the well-stocked libraries in their parents’ private clubs, most middle-class women said that as girls they were constantly “on the prowl” to find Nancy Drew books. Motivated by the constant need for fiction during summer vacations, four women spoke about becoming entrepreneurs in their early teens, that is, starting small collections of fiction contributed by the neighborhood children to start a commercial library. Describing the small library she and her two friends supervised, Sudha said, “We called it the Cheery Chums Library. We collected all our friends’ books and then charged a daily fee for book rentals. The fee was nominal and we got all the money for running the library.”

Given the lack of public libraries other than university libraries and the high prices of children’s fiction, lending libraries for all the Indian women who participated in this study were one of the main sources for leisure reading materials. Private lending libraries in India are different from the public libraries in the United States. Lending libraries in urban India are small, privately owned one-room stores, where only popular fiction, popular magazines, and maybe a few video and audio tapes are stacked on shelves, and there is very little room to sit down and read. The purpose of these libraries is for library patrons or members to walk in, quickly browse, choose what they want, check items out for a daily fee, and leave. The books themselves are rented out by the library owner (a small business entrepreneur, rather than a trained librarian). People become library members for a fairly modest fee and a deposit amount to cover missing or damaged books.

Adult Indian women’s comments about their ritual everyday visits to these libraries to obtain Nancy Drew books suggests the difficulties these library owners had in fulfilling their young customers’ appetite for reading. In her written responses about finding Nancy Drews at the local lending library in her neighborhood, Seema wrote:

I read all the Nancy Drews at Anwar library during one summer holiday when I was in the seventh class [grade]. I remember a friend urging me to read one, The Ghost of Blackwood Hall, and I enjoyed it so much that I read the rest of them—eight books—in two months. I’m not a slow reader. I was reading other books too of course. And then I ran out and would be so hopeful every time I visited the library. My older brother always got frustrated because I would insist on looking at the same eight books every time to make sure I did not miss any new ones.

For yet another woman, memories of visiting the lending library in her neighborhood in Bhubaneswar to borrow Nancy Drews were tied up with similar hopes and dreams of seeing new books. After being disappointed for months, she reached a point where she decided to talk to the library owner:

I was very surprised. I was a shy child you know, actually very shy. My mother was with me that day. I spoke to Prabhu Uncle who owned the library. I asked him why he was not getting any more Nancy Drews. He said he had been to Bombay and could not find any that were cheap. I begged him to go back and said I would take care of the library when he was gone! I went to the back of the book I had just finished. I think it was The Mystery of the Tolling Bell, and asked him to find all the earlier books.

Two other women reported feelings of anger when they arrived at the library only to find that the new Nancy Drew books they had reserved the day before had not yet arrived. One of these women wrote that she had begged the library owner to call the patron who still had the Nancy Drew books to come right away and return them. Apart from two upper-class women who reported that the lending libraries in their neighborhood had a fairly good stock of Nancy Drews, most women remembered that lending libraries could not satisfy their desire for reading about their favorite girl detective. Despite these frustrations, for many women, their visits to lending libraries and their relationships with the owners of these libraries were experiences that recalled the personal and intimate quality of community relationships they had in India.

For instance, one woman in a focus group session provoked several responses when she said, “I used to nag my library chaacha [uncle] everyday
about getting more Nancy Drews, but he never got upset! He would just
smile and tell me to read very, very slowly because Nancy was special
and deserved careful attention. He was a part of my life. It's not the same
here—going to the public library.” Other women reacted immediately to
this comment and soon there were several stories that recalled childhood
relationships with lending library owners. Unnathi remembered that the
owner of the library in her neighborhood would often stop by her house
to give her a new book because he lived very close. “His son and my
brother used to play cricket together so sometimes he would bring his
son over with him, and I was such a pest about bugging him for new
books.” Chethana, who was the last one to comment before the group
moved on to a new topic, said, “Guru uncle used to embarrass me in the
beginning when I started reading Nancy Drews. He would refer to me as
the Nancy girl.”

While small lending libraries with limited funds could barely keep pace
with adolescent Indian girls’ demands for Nancy Drews, school libraries
that stocked many more Nancy Drew titles were guilty of allotting little
time for fiction reading. Sixteen of the twenty-two women bitterly com-
plained about the brief one- or two-hour library classes they had each
week to visit the school library. Some women who attended private Cath-
olic convent schools for girls wrote that during the library period, they
were all marched down to the library, ordered to get their books, and then
had to sit down quietly to read these books, which they were not allowed
to take home. The policy of reading fiction during only these library peri-
ods meant that these girls often had to read a book in fragmented fashion
over three or four weeks.

Erica vividly remembered that she started the book *The Clue in the Old
Stagecoach*, “I read chapter one and was just beginning to get lost in
the book when Sister Maria interrupted me to collect the books. I looked at
her hard and asked her why I could not take the book home just this once.
I actually held on tightly to the book and believe me, I was brave because
nobody misbehaved with Sister Maria.” Other women talked about how
difficult it was to stop and begin reading Nancy Drew books over an
extended period of time because each chapter built up to such a sus-
penseful end and left you hanging. Poonam, who ranked Nancy Drew as
the favorite author of her early teens, said, “Reading a Nancy Drew was
not like reading Little Women or an abridged version of some Dickens
book, you know. I would try to read only up to the middle of a chapter in
a Nancy Drew book so I could bear to leave and not wonder what hap-
pened to Nancy.”

Complaining about the limited time allotted for fiction reading at
school, one woman compared her busy and stressful childhood in India to
young teens’ lives in the United States. Drawing on her interactions with
children, adolescents, families, and relatives who lived in the United
States, she wrote:

Even children in India work so hard and we have so much pressure to per-
form well in schools. Our teachers probably were told to make us do well on
state board exams. Our school had a reputation for the highest marks on the
state board exams. It’s not like here, you know, where these children are so
pampered. When I baby-sit here, I am shocked. The two children I baby-sit
this semester play all evening and the boy is twelve years old!

Paradoxically, some women’s memories of stressful teen years studying,
doing enormous amounts of homework, and attending lessons with tutors
were also tied to special and pleasurable moments spent reading Nancy
Drew books. Several women wrote that they experienced intense pressure
from parents to perform well in school. However, only one woman thought
that this was unfair. Instead, for many women, their Nancy Drew reading
felt all the more relaxing and fun because they felt they deserved it as a
reward for being good students. Five women said that the promise of read-
ing Nancy Drew books in the summer holidays after their final exams in April
helped them get through the days and nights of studying during the weeks
leading up to the exams.

These women’s framing of their childhood and adolescence as stressful,
but that the stress was unavoidable, and their rationalization of the pres-
sure that middle-class Indian parents impose on young adults to perform
well on exams, is partly influenced by their current location in the United
States. These new immigrants, who had moved very far from home for
the first time in their lives, recount memories of living in India through
the filter of a somewhat uncritical and romantic nostalgia. In coping with
the changes of living in a new environment, these women cast their stress-
ful adolescence as a necessary recipe for success. It is important to note
here that young Indian women’s reluctance to criticize their parents during
interviews and focus groups could also arise from my own position as an
insider and the public nature of focus group settings. Speaking negatively
about one’s parents and family members in a group situation where we
were all new to each other (and thus violating social conventions) may
have been too uncomfortable for some women.

Some parents actively encouraged Nancy Drew reading because they
thought it would improve their children’s English literacy. Because these
books were expensive, parents who wanted their children to read fiction to improve English language skills became members of a lending library; others asked their children to share Nancy Drew books with friends. One woman recalled that her mother had, in fact, been responsible for her interest in Nancy Drew books:

My mother spoke to my best friend who was my neighbor and she went to the same school as I did. My friend used to read Nancy Drews and she always did so well in her English classes. My mother spoke to her mother and found that reading Nancy Drew books was helping my friend learn to read and write in English. Suddenly I found my friend pestering me to read Nancy Drews and when I asked her why she told me my mother had asked her to get me started on Nancy Drews.

Two other women said that their parents complained a lot when they asked them to buy comics and candy at the train stations during summer trips, but were willing to buy them Nancy Drew books or other series books even though these books were more expensive. These women also spoke about receiving Nancy Drew books as gifts from relatives and adult family friends because their parents had explicitly requested relatives to choose books as gifts instead of dolls, toys, and comics.

Another aspect of parental involvement in Nancy Drew reading pertains to parents’ anxieties about the influence of television on their children's English-language writing, reading, and speaking skills. While the primary battle for parents revolved around the impact of television on children's homework assignments, a secondary battle, according to eleven women, concerned children relinquishing reading fiction for watching films on television. Shobana and Ritika reported that their parents, who had always criticized them for not paying enough attention to their homework because they were reading Nancy Drew fiction, were now suddenly upset when they switched on the television after school. Shobana remembered the tactics her mother had employed to motivate her to continue reading:

My mother was really proud of my vocabulary and speaking skills in English. She felt that my Nancy Drew reading had a lot to do with my English and then when I started watching television she got nervous. She would ask me to invite a couple of my friends over in the evenings. She would then bribe us with all kinds of tasty snacks like samosas, pakoras, and chapatti and jam to get us to read together.

Ritika’s father, who had been similarly concerned about the increase in her television watching, also attempted to discourage this behavior:

My father hated us to watch TV. When we started watching TV, we stopped going so frequently to the library to get Nancy Drews and other books to read. My father actually spoke to Mr. Salim Khan, the library owner and the next time we went to the library, Salim Uncle told us that if we came to the library every other day to get books we would get every sixth book free! I only found out that my father asked him to do this two years ago when I went to say goodbye to Salim Uncle. I was leaving for America when I went to see him.

Preethi said that once television arrived in her home, her parents started taking them out more often to bookstores to buy books and offered to accompany her during visits to lending libraries. “I was so shocked to get three Nancy Drews at one time because I usually had to beg and beg for one,” Preethi wrote in answer to my question about the Nancy Drew books she owned. My own parents, who also possibly had similar concerns, did not buy a television for a long time. I remember being the only person in my neighborhood in ninth grade who did not have a television at home.

These urban middle-class parents’ perceptions of Nancy Drews as facilitating and supplementing English-language education provided at schools is not surprising given the emphasis placed on English-language skills in postcolonial India. The English language was introduced in India in the early part of the nineteenth century by the official machinery of the British colonial system for a range of complex reasons: to train urban Indian elites in the English language so they could assist in administration, to deploy English literature as a way of introducing a higher form of civilization to colonial subjects, and to encourage the widespread use of English among the vast Indian population through the education of native elites. With the passage of an 1835 law, the English language became a part of Britain’s official colonial machinery. Enamored of the advantages of English education, since it promised access to the corridors of power and intimacy with the powerful, Indian members of the upper castes and classes themselves began to seek an English education.6

The origins of the English language in India during British colonialism, its subsequent growth as the language of higher education and commerce, and its intimate links with the urban upper and middle classes in India’s postcolonial phase have been noted and discussed by several scholars.7 Connecting the proliferation of English in urban India with the “increasing
concentration of the privileged English-speaking class with greater leisure in the metropolitan cities." Svati Joshi writes that knowledge of English promises "success in the job market, social mobility, and cultural superiority." English, despite government policies to promote regional languages, remains the language that ensures access to higher education and economic benefits.1

Although most women did not speak or write about fiction reading as a tool that was used by their English teachers, three of the twenty-two women discussed nontraditional teachers who incorporated fiction into their pedagogy. Malathi’s teacher had students in her class read Nancy Drew books and summarize the plots in brief essays, which they then had to give their classmates to read and evaluate, and thus help improve each other’s writing skills in English. In addition, Preethi reported that they had "Elocution" or public speaking classes in school where they had to read out aloud passages from Nancy Drew books. Priya said that her fifth-grade teacher used Nancy Drews to test their spelling: "We were broken up into groups in class and each group was assigned to read a chapter in a Nancy Drew book. When we came across difficult words we were supposed to spell them out to each other or write them down to learn the spelling. Our teacher would then give us a spelling test on the words we learned."

Echoing fiction reading practices that follow gender boundaries in the United States, the adult Indian women in my study also talked about brothers, fathers, and male friends and cousins reading different kinds of fiction. Several women recalled that when they were reading Nancy Drew books, their brothers mostly read Hardy Boys and the British Billy Bunter series books. However, ten of the twenty-two women reported that their brothers and male cousins were casual readers of Nancy Drews. Bhavani, whose entire family read voraciously for pleasure, wrote that her two brothers would ask her for Nancy Drews when they ran out of their own books. In discussing train trips she enjoyed as a child, Meera wrote about the "precious night and day train trips during winter and summer vacations when I could read uninterrupted." Meera also added that her brother would typically finish reading his books in a few hours and then would request to borrow her comics and Nancy Drew books.

Although they read different books, most women remembered that their male siblings read as much as they did until their late teens. These readers reported that adult men chose to pursue social activities outside of the home rather than reading, in contrast to young Indian women whose mobility becomes much more restricted as they enter adulthood. This study did not probe women’s adult reading. However, in a related ethno-

graphic study on adult Indian women’s reading practices in India, I found that girls continued to pursue reading as a primary leisure activity into their adulthood for a complex range of reasons. Although women expressed enthusiasm for the pleasure that leisure reading provided them, they also suggested that parents’ rules about curfew times, frustrations with sexual harassment on streets, and discomfort with the overwhelming male presence in public spaces influenced their choice to read in the private spheres of home and in the gender-segregated environment of college campuses.

Adult Indian women’s feelings of admiration for Nancy Drew and their sense of identification with her character focused on her relationships and the sense of adventure and discovery that was built into each chapter and the entire narrative. Fourteen of twenty-two wrote that Nancy was brave because, despite not having a mother and being an only child without the companionship of siblings, she was able to manage and go on successfully in her life. One woman whose mother died when she was two described her emotional attachment to Nancy’s character as a motherless child and said, "I used to think if Nancy Drew could find motivation and happiness in solving mysteries even though she was different from others—she had no mother you know—I could also behave similarly. I used to miss my mother very much when I was nine, ten, and actually until I was thirteen I think. Nancy Drew seemed very real to me then."

For many women, their pleasure in reading Nancy Drew books and their understanding of Nancy the girl detective were embedded in the "universal" quality of human relationships that transcended cultural and geographic boundaries. Sixteen of twenty-two emphasized their empathetic identification with the close father-daughter relationship in Nancy Drew books and talked about their own relationships with their fathers. During one focus group interview, discussions about Nancy’s father, Carson Drew, became emotional moments because some women missed their own fathers who now lived far away in India. Drawing metaphorically on the supportive and warm character of Carson Drew, who encouraged his daughter in her adventurous pursuits, to describe how much she missed her own father, Keerthi said:

My father is very much like that . . . just like Mr. Carson Drew . . . he wanted to listen to everything I said even when I was a girl and probably told him stupid things. We are very close and many days I wish I could get his advice on everything like I used to in India. It’s hard not being able to see him whenever I want to.
Yet others brought up similarities in Nancy’s friendship with George and Bess and their own intimate friendships with girlfriends in school and college. However, in comparing the representation of fictional female relationships in Nancy Drew series books, seven women (a third of interviewees) said that they could recall discussions among friends on the quality of the friendship Nancy, Bess, and George shared. These women reported that they all rated their own friendships as much closer and more intimate because they shared and participated in many everyday rituals on a routine basis with their girlfriends, which they did not see reflected in Nancy Drew books. For instance, in a follow-up personal interview, Madhuri said, “We decided that we were much closer, after all, we did many more things together; walking to school, sharing our lunches, doing our homework, playing in the evenings…”

Feminist scholars in the United States and Europe have expressed a sustained interest in the potential impact of strong heroines in fiction, heroines who defy Western culture’s conventional standards of ideal femininity, and on girls’ and women’s identities.9 In a qualitative study of adult women’s memories about their childhood reading in the United States, Ana Garner found that many women discussed positively the role played by independent, bright, and enterprising heroines such as Nancy Drew in their choice of careers as lawyers, scientists, academics, and judges. These women wrote about the sense of identification they experienced with “sassy” childhood heroines in fiction because they were rarely exposed to strong female role models in the world around them and in their own families. The Indian women I interviewed also expressed their admiration for Nancy Drew. They were enthusiastic about Nancy’s “unforgettable qualities” and used adjectives such as “persistent, brave, smart, loyal, clever” to underscore the affection they still had for their girlhood heroine. However, unlike the women in Garner’s study located in the United States, none suggested that Nancy Drew might have been a role model or influenced them in their choice of careers or their decision to pursue higher education.10

Some reasons for the cross-cultural differences between Indian and American women in perceptions about Nancy Drew as a strong and positive role model may lie in the class, caste, age, and location of these particular informants. As upper-caste and middle- to upper-class women, these Indian readers represent a privileged group of Nancy Drew readers in the Third World. All but two women’s mothers had attended college, and many came from families where education was valued for men and women. Fifteen of these twenty women reported that their mothers and other female relatives, including aunts and cousins, were doctors, bankers, entrepreneurs, teachers, school principals, professors, and scientists. While attending school and college in India, these women reported that their male siblings were equally expected by parents and other elders in the family to excel in school, to perform well in mathematics and science, and to secure professional jobs as adults.

Historically, these women represent a class of women who have benefited the most from reformist, anti-colonial nationalist movements in the nineteenth century that resulted in the entry of many urban middle- and upper-class women across Indian towns and cities into the public arenas of education and paid employment.11 Middle-class Indian women in upper-caste families in the metropolitan areas in independent India received support and encouragement to get educated and succeed in male-dominated, upper-class professions such as law, medicine, accounting, and teaching. However, it is critical to understand here that these early historical efforts to promote women’s entry into the public sphere were ultimately conceived within a patriarchal model because they did not advocate women’s true autonomy from the roles of mothers, daughters, wives, or sisters, domestic roles that women, unlike men, were still expected to play. Additionally, in an effort to combat British colonizers’ views about Indian culture as barbaric, elite male Indian anti-colonialists conceived of educated middle-class Indian as merely visible symbols of India’s superior culture. Yet another more contemporary reason for the absence of talk or writing about Nancy Drew as a “role model” among the Indian women who participated in this study might be the absence of public discourse about role models and self-esteem in India, unlike the United States where such discussions on women’s empowerment are a part of everyday media culture.12

At the time these women were young girls in India, the commodified, global forms of femininity imported to other cultures from the United States—thin, white, fashionable, and available to men—had not yet become pervasive through women’s magazines or television. Additionally, these women who are now in the United States represent a relatively elite demographic group that has the economic and cultural capital to aspire to travel and study abroad in Western countries. Thus, language about the desirability of girls’ cultivating rational (not emotional) intelligence, resisting patriarchal beauty ideals, or pursuing successful, professional male-dominated careers may not have constituted the social context within which these Indian women read Nancy Drew fiction.

These differences in experiences of gender and expectations of professional success do not imply that these women did not encounter patriarchal
constructions of ideal womanhood. In fact, in focus group interviews, many women spoke about the different forms of surveillance and gendered expectations they experienced, such as pressures to dress modestly, learn domestic chores, and come home early before darkness set in. Women also recounted the many warnings they heard from mothers and other extended family members about becoming sexually active before marriage, dating, or engaging in public interactions with men who were not a part of their social circle. Reading about Nancy Drew for these Indian women was a part of the more idyllic world of girldhood when they had not yet confronted the more overt ideological construction of ideal femininity in Indian culture.

I found evidence of Nancy Drew functioning as a symbol of innocent girldhood in Indian women’s lives in an ethnographic study of young women in India who read paperback Western romance novels. These novels, which are imported to India from the United States and the United Kingdom, are commonly referred to as “Mills & Boons,” after the publishing firm Harlequin Mills & Boon that produces these books. Some readers, who were defensive because parents and other authority figures disapproved of young women reading “trashy” literature that focused on sex and romance, legitimated their romance reading by explicitly referring to their childhood reading experiences. Twenty of the thirty women I interviewed in India legitimated their current romance reading as reading that “smart” women did by citing their enjoyment of Nancy Drew series books. Some readers argued that their fondness for Nancy Drew books when they were younger was an indication that they were not women who indulged in “stupid fantasies” now because they read romance fiction. Twenty-year-old Samhita, a Nancy Drew fan during her young teen years, argued:

I read Nancy Drews until a few years ago. I really liked Nancy Drew because Nancy is so clever and she always was ahead of her boyfriend Ned. Then around the age of sixteen, I started reading Mills & Boons along with Nancy Drews. So what is the difference? The heroines in M&Bs are sometimes smart too just like Nancy but the stories are a different angle.

Echoing Samhita’s defensive comments, other readers too presented the fact that they had read Nancy Drews earlier as evidence of their basically “sensible” nature. These informants implied that their admiration for Nancy Drew, who was independent and smart, during their early teen years was proof that their current reading of formula romance novels, which emphasized love, sex, and romance, was not deviant.

Some previous research and personal anecdotes about Nancy Drew reading have pointed to the alienating impact of the white, mostly upper-class world of Nancy Drew on women of color in the United States. In biographical essays about reading Nancy Drew, Njeri Fuller and Dinah Eng reflect on the emotional and psychological burden they had to confront in order to identify with Nancy’s character. Fuller writes that she mentally transformed Nancy into a black girl while Eng recollects that she “whited out” herself, that is, she denied her Chinese identity and imagined she was white so she could enjoy Nancy’s adventures. Placing Nancy Drew within the historical context of the myth of white supremacy in the United States, Donna Raec MacCann notes the representation of black people in Nancy Drew books that appeared in 1930 as comic, shiftless, unreliable, and surly characters. MacCann writes that it was unfortunate that these stereotypical black characters were erased from later editions only to be replaced by white characters but not with more well-rounded or positive black characters.

Unlike Fuller, Eng, and MacCann, Melinda de Jesús takes her readers outside and inside the United States to analyze Nancy Drew reading as an integral part of internalized racism, cultural imperialism, and hegemonic white feminism. De Jesús examines the racial and cultural implications of Nancy Drew reading for herself, a second-generation Filipina American feminist, and for her mother, a first-generation immigrant Filipina. While acknowledging the feminist aspects of Nancy, especially her agency as a strong and independent girl, De Jesús writes that Nancy Drew books were overt symbols of American colonization and imperialism in her mother’s life in the Philippines. In an American colony where the United States government had replaced military rule in the islands after the Philippine-American war, Nancy Drews arrived in her mother’s life at the same time that American teachers began moving to the Philippines as a part of the mission to impart Western education and civilization.

In the case of young women from India, the consumption of American fiction such as Nancy Drews in the phase of preadolescent girldhood is a leisure reading practice that follows and coexists with the early and late childhood reading of British fiction, comics, and fairy tales. Based on a triangulated analysis of Indian women’s written and spoken responses in questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, I found uniformity in their responses about the books and comics they had read as children. Among the reading materials listed were fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen; paperbacks from Britain such as the Enid Blyton series books; comics from the United States such as Archie, Wendy the
Witch, Casper the Friendly Ghost, and Dennis the Menace; as well as the famous Asterix & Obelix and Tintin comic series that are translated into English from French. Prior to reading Nancy Drew books, twenty out of the twenty-two women recalled voraciously reading Enid Blyton series books, starting with the Secret Seven and moving on to Famous Five, Five Find-Outers, Mallory Towers, and the Carlotta series.

Although they had read Indian comics and tales, and some stories based on Indian history and mythology, most of the women's childhood reading consisted of imported books. An important reason for their childhood reading preferences for these books and comics can be located not in explanations about "colonial" reading tastes, but in the fact that English-language publishing in India, particularly in the area of children's books, is a relatively recent and postcolonial phenomenon. The British colonial history of English-language publishing in India, coupled with the lack of children's books in English written by Indians, means that for many young urban Indians, imported series books and comics from the United Kingdom and the United States were the staples of their childhood reading material. Scholars have expressed concerns about the implications of English-language publishing's early colonial history in India for the growth and autonomy of Indian publishing, and for the cultural identity of India's reading public. Reflecting on the domination of English-language publishing and reading among the urban elite, Urvashi Butalia writes: "The English book is ubiquitous. Publishing in English, from the time it was introduced in India, has come to occupy the largest segment of the market. Not only do books in English make up almost 50 percent of the numbers published in the country. India is one of the largest English publishing countries in the world, standing third after the US and UK in publishing." Given the production costs and meager profit margins, most indigenous English-language publishing has been confined to textbooks because of the expanding market for educational materials and the growing numbers of schools and universities. It is only recently that private publishing firms such as India Book House, Orient Longman, and Jaico Publishers and quasi-government firms such as Children's Book Trust have begun producing leisure reading fiction for Indian children.

When I asked the young Indian women I interviewed how they related to Nancy Drew, most reacted in a surprising and unexpected fashion. In focus group sessions and interviews, many women did not speak about the critical issue of reader identification, that is, their dilemma in connecting their own identity with Nancy Drew, a white American girl. Rather, they elaborated on the difficult transition they had to make from British fiction to American fiction. Tara, whose Enid Blyton collection was the envy of her friends, said, "I read my first Nancy Drew, The Crooked Banister, and remember having to read things twice and just missing the whole atmosphere of the British authors. I found Nancy Drews at first too abrupt, the people not well-defined, and nobody seemed to have enough personality or character." Another woman, Roopali, chimed in and said, "The sentences were short, there were few descriptions of scenes or characters, they did not eat as much good food or go on picnics like the British kids did." Summing up her difficulty with adjusting to the writing style in Nancy Drew books, Sudha remarked, "A little too gritty and a bit superficial after my Richmal Crompton and Enid Blyton books but by the third book I was into the writing style of Nancy Drew books." The reading of Nancy Drew books in India, which in part represents the economic power of American global publishing, and hence a form of neocolonialism, thus competes with the earlier cultural and economic imperialism of Britain.

In further discussions about the representation of Nancy Drew, none of these Indian women explicitly acknowledged the alienating effects on notions of selfhood and subjectivity that may be produced when children consistently immerse themselves in a fictional world that does not resemble their own. In fact, several women asked me to clarify the question: "When you were a girl, could you picture yourself or identify closely with anyone in Nancy Drew books?" Two clearly thought I was asking them a bad question and one of them said, "How can you ask us this? This was a story about an American girl. We don't live like that nor did we see things around us that looked like Nancy Drew's life."

Seven women suggested that they had thought of Nancy Drew as their American pen pal, somebody who lived far away but was a close friend with whom they regularly corresponded. Geeta, who cherished the ability she had as a girl to slip away into a fantasy world completely different from her own, said, "Nancy Drew would not be the same if she were anything but American. I loved visualizing and reading about her amazing life as a girl detective in America. I used to reproduce the images of Nancy Drew with pencil and watercolor paints." Anupama said she learned about how young girls in America lived, "Nancy Drew went swimming, dancing, skiing, dating, diving, and did all these things I could never do. She was my daring and interesting friend." Other women suggested that they could escape into Nancy's American life with ease as girls because there were no photos; instead, they said they loved the covers and pictures inside which were line drawings. Describing the time she used to spend gazing at the drawings, Priya wrote, "I loved those pictures. I could fill in
whatever meanings I wanted. I knew Nancy was and looked different from me but those pictures let me imagine her as an American girlfriend, a girlfriend I could create.

Interestingly, during focus group discussions about the fantasy of escaping into Nancy Drew's life as an American girl, many women spoke about the ease with which they could forget reality when they were girls growing up in India. Several women emphasized their carefree lives at home where they had no responsibilities other than to work hard at school, and were continuously surrounded by friends and extended family members. For instance, during our interview, Sharon described her Nancy Drew reading one week when they had gone to visit her uncle's family in Calcutta:

I loved reading about all the meals Nancy Drew ate. I imagined what the food would look like. I used to escape into Nancy's life completely... I remember that vacation like it was yesterday. I read my favorite Nancy Drew, *The Clue of the Leaning Chimney*, and was completely gone. My mother called me several times and I did not respond. I then remember my uncle who was a doctor walked over and said that my mom had asked him to check my ears to see if I was deaf! I wish I could do that now.

Contrasting her inability to relax as a busy graduate student, Smita wrote that she was no longer capable of reading in the same way, "The only place I can relax now is at the movies where I cannot check e-mail or get a phone call or read. I remember being lost in Nancy Drew's life—imagining she was my American pal and we were doing things together you know."

Although they did not express criticism of Nancy Drew's specific ethnic or class background, a few women spoke about the aura of America that surrounded and permeated their Nancy Drew reading in India. Remembering the Nancy Drew books she shared with her friends at school, Payal said, "Nancy Drew was definitely 'cool' because she was American. If you were not reading Hardy Boys or Nancy Drews you did not belong in the 'cool' circle." Several women remarked that some of the most quintessential American elements of Nancy Drew's character that they remembered were her speedy roadster, her mansion, the city of River Heights, and her informal relationship with her attorney father, Carson Drew. Sarita said her cousins who lived in the United States were shocked and surprised when they visited India because just like them, she too was reading Nancy Drews. "I used to ask them all about America and we would play Nancy Drew games." Rather than emphasizing Nancy Drew's race or her upper-class status, these Indian readers focused on her nationality as an American girl.

Unlike Melinda de Jesús' Filipina mother, who imagined that she became Nancy Drew, these Indian readers claim that they had not identified with Nancy Drew in the sense of substituting themselves into her character. Instead they incorporated her into their world as an exotic friend. While women of color in the multiracial culture of the United States talk about transforming Nancy Drew into a black girl or of learning to suppress their own Asian ethnicity to become white, Indian readers who grew up in a fairly homogenous racial environment in India do not emphasize Nancy Drew's racial identity. Additionally, although these Indian women by no means live in the same American upper-class world of Nancy Drew, as elites in their own culture they may not have experienced a rupture between their own privileged world and that of Nancy Drew.

This essay's exploration of Indian women's Nancy Drew reading suggests interesting implications for the impact and influence of social contexts—history, location, and gender and class structures—on adult women's recollections and memories about their childhood reading. Contemporary cultural phenomena such as children's leisure reading practices in non-Western, postcolonial settings are linked in complex ways to the history of European colonialism. In this study of Nancy Drew reading in India, at the most visible level, the connections among class, cosmopolitan culture in urban spaces, and colonial history were manifested in the reading of imported English-language series fiction by middle- and upper-class Indian women readers. Discussing the influence of colonialism on urban Indian culture, Ashis Nandy writes: "In spite of the presence of a paramount power [colonialism] which acted as the central authority, the country was culturally fragmented and politically heterogeneous. It could, thus, confine the cultural impact of imperialism to its urban centers, to its Westernized and semi-Westernized upper and middle classes, and to some sections of its traditional elites."18 Nandy's contention about the immersion of elites in India in Western culture could imply parallel developments and links among language, class, and colonial culture in other postcolonial locales in Africa and Asia. A less visible link to colonial history implicit in this study lies in the fact that Indian women readers' appetite for the fantasy world of English language series books is not a completely new artifact of our current global media culture.

In her insightful essay about the leisure reading practices of Indians in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Priya Joshi shows us that, contrary to
British colonial imperatives, urban Indians did not seek the “serious” high culture novels that the colonial administration advocated. “For one, the ‘good’ English novels that were part of the colonial curriculum and were entrusted with creating an Indian who was English in ‘taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect’ were in practice not the novels sought out by Indian readers for leisure reading,” she writes. “The canon of popular literature and the books most avidly and spontaneously consumed by Indian readers were increasingly disjunct from those prescribed by the Department of Public Instruction.”  

In her analysis of advertisements in the Times of India between 1861 and 1881, Joshi demonstrates that the demand among Indian readers for popular British literature such as the sensational, gothic, and melodramatic serial novels far exceeded their demand for more lofty novels by Dickens, Austen, Eliot, Thackeray, or Meredith. Joshi writes that these antirealist tales in which virtue always vanquished evil were reminiscent of pre-modern Indian tales and myths. Further, the forms of these popular novels also permitted adaptations with few cross-cultural restrictions. Joshi’s persuasive argument that the success of British popular serial novels in India “had its roots in the failure of British high culture to penetrate fully the Indian marketplace of ideas” suggests that the consumption of certain kinds of British fiction among Indians was a form of resistance to colonial ideas about good literature. The implications of Joshi’s argument about Indians’ resistance to reading only British high culture fiction and nonfiction in the nineteenth century casts a new light on Indian women’s pleasure in reading Nancy Drew fiction. On the surface, given the greater economic power of American popular culture, and its inherently greater likelihood of becoming a pervasive force in the rest of the world, one could argue that Indian girls’ voracious reading of Nancy Drew fiction is more evidence of American cultural imperialism in a Third World setting. However, Joshi’s historical context of Indian readers’ preferences for popular serial fiction as subversive resistance to British colonial pressures provides a different perspective on Nancy Drew reading, a perspective that cautions us against making hasty and sweeping judgments about contemporary cultural imperialism.

What does it mean when a group of non-Western women relive memories of “home” through their talk about reading popular American series fiction? Does this imply that their sense of self is engulfed by fictional characters from Western culture? Certainly, admiration for the material fantasy in Western popular literature—descriptions of food, houses, picnics—suggests that Nancy Drew reading is part of the predominantly one-way traffic in media culture from the developed world to the Third World. However, Nancy Drew books coexist with other lively and dynamic cultural forms and practices in many Third World readers’ lives. Although the world of leisure reading was dominated by British and American popular fiction for these Indian women, their lives outside of their fiction reading were simultaneously and robustly immersed in their local cultures. Many women talked about celebrating Indian festivals, watching Indian films, eating Indian food regularly at home, speaking in vernacular languages with friends and family, and learning traditional Indian dance and music. So, rather than absorbing only Western culture through their leisure reading in a passive fashion, these Indian women may experience what Vinay Dharwadker defines as “cultural ambidexterity,” that is, the ability to live and “act in two or more cultures without making unmixed, unilateral choices or commitments.”

Dharwadker writes that culturally ambidextrous subjects avoid extreme resistance or complete collaboration and instead learn to function in two or more cultures in an ambivalent yet confident manner.

Adult Indian women’s discussions about Nancy Drew as a filtered memory of their lives in India—relationships with lending library owners, friendships with other girls, relaxed summer vacations, and train trips—show us that the meaning of literature is embedded within our current experiences of modernity. Such modernity as this study shows is characterized by the increasing mobility of diasporic people who travel and live in the West but arrive here with a part of their imagination already rooted in Western culture. Furthermore, in my fieldwork, nostalgic discussions about childhood reading demonstrate that the setting and location of research is part of the “data” that we as scholars unearth and interpret. For instance, I found that focus group sessions about Nancy Drew reading functioned as significant cultural sites for women’s shared memories about home.

With regard to gender, the study shows that reading series fiction did conform to gender boundaries, that is, Indian women reported that they read Nancy Drew as girls while their male siblings and friends preferred Hardy Boys. Although these women did read Hardy Boys books, they did not express the same enthusiasm or affection for these young male detectives as they did for Nancy Drew. So, at a certain level, Indian women’s discussion of their childhood reading practices shows us that even across cultural boundaries, serial fiction such as Nancy Drew attracts and gives pleasure to girls from other parts of the world. As women who belonged to families in which education and professional success was valued for girls
as well as boys, Nancy Drew did not serve as a strong symbol of "cleverness or intelligence" as she did for women in Ana Garner's study of women in the United States. Discourses of gender, class, and nationalism thus form the backdrop against which Nancy Drew is interpreted by these Indian women. Finally, the issue of gender and reader identification in this study also brings up interesting methodological problems. In interviewing adult women about childhood reading, one must be prepared for the critical lens of adulthood through which women now view their childhood. Identifying with a white girl may seem out of place to these adult women, who now live in the United States and could be just beginning to sense their racial and cultural difference from white Americans.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Daniel Crowley for his timely help in locating secondary sources for this essay.


6. Hindu religious reformers Raja Rammohan Roy and Dwarka Nath Tagore in nineteenth-century India viewed English as the language that would help people to approach Western science and rationality, modern tools that would help to combat superstition. Kamal Sridhar points out that nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sardar Patel received education in India in English and then lived in England to pursue higher education. See Kamal Sridhar, "The Development of English as an Elite Language in the Multilingual Context of India" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1977), 16, 18, and 110. Aijaz Ahmad writes that members of the English elite of India, who were active in the nationalist movement to overthrow British rule, arose from sites closest to the institutions of colonial power—administration, law commerce, English-language journalism, teaching staffs of colleges and universities." See Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (London: Verso, 1992), 76.

7. British efforts to strengthen and consolidate their rule in India can by no means be conceived of as diabolical and direct forms of domination over their colonial subjects. Gauri Viswanathan's detailed and theoretically sophisticated work on the colonial conditions that enabled the rise of English studies in India avoids precisely this simple model of domination as direct control and instead begins from the Gramscian notion of hegemony, which allows for ideology to be understood as a form of "masking" or illusion. The decision to fortify their position as colonial rulers—and to quell rebellion—through English emerged not only out of strong ethnocentric assumptions of superiority, but it also revealed an instrumental, administrative application of language, ultimately motivated by a sense of frailty in the colonial position. Viswanathan writes that, for the British who inhabited a colonial world of "imminent rebellion and resistance," English became a way to contain rebellion and inculcate awe and wonder of the Raj. See Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 11. See also Ahmad, In Theory; Swati Joshi (ed.), Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History (New Delhi: Trianta Publishers, 1991); Lachman Khubchandani, Plural Languages, Plural Cultures: Communication, Identity, and Sociopolitical Change in Contemporary India (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983); Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); D. L. Sheth, "No English Please, We're Indian," The Illustrated Weekly of India 4 (August 19, 1990): 34-37; Sridhar, Development
12. Discourse on women’s low self-esteem and the need for strong female role models for women is a part of prime-time news, sitcoms such as "Murphy Brown" and "Roseanne," cable channels such as Lifetime targeted to women, talk shows such as "The Oprah Winfrey Show," popular women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, and self-help books. Such discourse on role models fits well into the therapeutic, individualist model of women’s liberation that guides liberal feminism.