

Hollywood, Etc.: The secret of the new Nancy

by Norma Meyer

The new Nancy Drew loves the catty catwalk show "America's Next Top Model" and had her recent Sweet 16 bash at a Sunset Boulevard hot spot where Lindsay Lohan has partied. Well, not really Nancy. That would be teen actress Emma Roberts - niece of Oscar-winner Julia - who portrays the wholesome iconic sleuth in "Nancy Drew." With generations of readers out there, Hollywood wasn't totally idiotic when it updated a 77-year-old literary titan who was last in a feature film (starring Bonita Granville) in 1939.

THE NEW NANCY - Teen star Emma Roberts, Julia Roberts' niece, walks a pop-culture tightrope to do 'Nancy Drew' justice. CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros.OMG! Imagine if modern-day Tinseltown reinvented her as some Britney bimbo-ette. Or gave her a pierced tongue!

"I think fans would seriously revolt," gasped Jennifer Fisher, a Nancy Drew collector and historian who consulted on the PG-rated pic.

Nancy-philes needn't sweat. The girl gumshoe is her old-fashioned focused and polite self, although she does have an iPod, searches on the Internet for clues and uses a cell phone (until she realizes the villains in the Land Rover are tracking her through GPS).

In a nod to the past, the big screen's 16-year-old tools around in a 1960 blue Nash convertible; she drove a blue roadster in her first book in 1930 before it morphed into a sporty Mustang and, in newer paperbacks, an environmentally friendly hybrid car. Unlike her case-cracker character, Roberts doesn't own wheels. She explained why over a cell phone, after doing a movie-related mall appearance, and as she was being chauffeured to a Dallas airport in a black Suburban crammed with her mother, her manager, her tutor, a Warner Bros. flack and her hair and makeup person. "I don't drive," she said. Then, suddenly, she yelled, "I am not! That's ... hold on for a second. I'm sorry. My mom was just talking to me. Um ... "

Oh yeah, she flunked her driving test. "Um, I blocked the right turn lane," she chirped, sounding as upbeat as Nancy Drew.

NANCY GOES HOLLYWOOD

In the tweener flick, the amateur detective and her attorney-dad relocate from small-town River Heights to Hollywood, where Nancy sets out to find the killer of the movie star who once lived in their rented, decrepit mansion. On the train trip west, preppy headband-fond Nancy passes time reading InStyle.

This is 2007, after all. Before she leaves River Heights, Nancy's kind-of boyfriend, Ned Nickerson (Max Thieriot), worries she'll go off to California and meet "that guy on 'Smallville.'" After Ned joins Nancy in Hollywood, he orders an iced latte at a restaurant. That's after the fresh-faced heroine marches into the principal's office at Hollywood High to ask for a salad bar in the cafeteria - and not because she has an eating disorder. While Nancy's mean-chick classmates sport belly-button-baring tops and frantically type into their BlackBerries, she prefers penny loafers and plaid skirts and is as time-warped nice as when she solved "The Secret of the Old Clock," just a decade after women got the right to vote.

"There was a moment when I thought, 'Wait a minute, should we take this name and turn her into a modern girl and give her all kinds of gadgetry and bravado and give her flirty trendy outfits?'" director and co-writer Andrew Fleming recalled from London, where he was visiting friends. "I just felt it would lose all of its meaning and become something else entirely."

Like, he sooooo knew, "Nancy Drew is not a Valley girl." Fleming even hired an etiquette coach to teach Roberts how to sit up straight and shake hands properly. In real life, the starlet, who lives in Los Angeles and appears on Nickelodeon's "Unfabulous," doesn't know one peer similar to her well-mannered and "so cool" character.

"She's more of like the perfect mold of a perfect like daughter," said Roberts, who is the daughter of Aunt Julia's once-estranged actor-brother, Eric, and his ex-girlfriend Kelly Cunningham. On screen, Nancy carries in her handbag her trusty flashlight, her familiar notebook to jot down clues and a modern digital tape recorder. So what was in Roberts' black Chanel purse this day? "Sunglasses, my iPod, my BlackBerry, some makeup and my wallet," she giggled.

(Surprisingly, she wasn't toting a leather Emma Bag, which handbag company Dooney & Bourke had her design and is being marketed to teens for - get a clue! - \$235.)

In the movie, Nancy plans on having a "taffy pull" when she throws a birthday party for herself at the rented mansion, but the revelers, including a guy with a pierced eyebrow, get out of control. Amid the chaos, Nancy assures Dad over the phone that "everything's totally mellow."

Roberts had her birthday blowout at the in-spot Social Hollywood.

"I had all my friends there and we had photo booths and a DJ and a psychic and lots of cool stuff," she said. Lancome Cosmetics helped host and "gave me and my friends a lot of makeup, which was cool."

Fleming says he auditioned more than 150 young actresses before casting Roberts, who ironically, had never read a Nancy Drew mystery until she got the leading role.

The original 56 hardcover novels were published from 1930 to 1979 and are still in print. After that, there were 119 digest-style volumes and dozens of books in various spinoff series. Nancy Drew was created by Edward Stratemeyer in 1930 and penned by various ghostwriters under the pseudonym Carolyn Keene.

"It wasn't until I was into the project that I realized how strongly, especially grown women, felt about this character," Fleming said. "I would say I was working on 'Nancy Drew' and women would grab me by the shoulder and say, 'I love those books.' I thought, 'Oh, we better get this right.'"

Before Roberts, the last silver-screen Nancy was 15-year-old Granville, who was more of a ditzy detective in four B-movies of 1938 and '39. (Warner Bros. just released a DVD set of the old films in connection with the new "Nancy Drew.")

Pamela Sue Martin, before going on to "Dynasty" fame, played the snoop in a 1970s TV series. Actress Tracy Ryan was Nancy Drew in a short-lived 1995 series and Maggie Lawson portrayed her in a 2002 TV movie.

As the fictional flatfoot was busy discovering secret passageways, her marketing machine cranked out everything from a cookbook to pajamas to a Christmas ornament and computer games. Fans were stoked when they heard that, after nearly 70 years, there would finally be a movie, said Fisher, the Nancy Drew expert from Arizona. But they were also nervous the beloved trailblazer would be trashed.

"We've seen what Hollywood can do to book characters or comic book characters," Fisher said. "Are they going to make her into this 'Charlie's Angels' sleuth?"

"She didn't deal with drugs. She didn't deal with sex. She didn't deal with any of that in the books."

In the end, Fisher stamped her approval on the film character. And no, Nancy doesn't confront drugs or sex on celluloid - although it may be too early. Fleming has signed on to write and direct a sequel, in which Roberts again will star.

"I think the maturity level will progress," Fleming said. He's not ready to talk specifics. But odds are Nancy won't get her tongue pierced.

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