



“Slip into your nicest lightweight summer sleuthing outfit and find that poodlenapper”:
Queering 1950s style in Mabel Maney’s lesbian mystery novels, starring
Cherry Aimless, Nancy Clue, and the Hardly Boys.

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Before the girls began their walk into town, they changed into comfortable walking shoes. Cherry donned a pair of stylish penny loafers. Nancy chose a pair of leather-soled ballerina slippers. But there was one problem!

“These shoes don’t go with my outfit!” Cherry wailed, looking ruefully at her flared skirt and soft blouse, which was just right for a long car-ride, but entirely too fussy for a casual stroll. Nancy saved the day by pulling a matching red and white gingham skirt and blouse ensemble with a wide white belt from her suitcase.

Cherry ran behind a bush to change her costume, and minutes later she and Nancy were ready for their walk into town. (Maney, 1994, pp. 69-70)

Introduction: Mabel Maney’s 1990s trio of campy, lesbian mystery novels recreated the heroes and heroines of three mid-twentieth century youth fiction series in a celebration of 1950s vintage style. Nancy Drew, Nurse Cherry Ames, and the Hardy Boys were transformed into lesbian and gay characters Nancy Clue, Nurse Cherry Aimless, and the Hardly Boys (Gibson & Meem, 1997). By queering these young adult heroines and heroes, Maney created a set of impeccably-dressed LGBTQ+ heroes who solved mysteries and fought crime with all the skill, plucky know-how, and youthful enthusiasm of the characters they parodied (Inness, 1997). With fresh handkerchiefs always at the ready, and well-stocked handbags and rucksacks, Nancy Clue, Cherry Aimless, and the Hardly Boys solved mysteries and foiled villains, while simultaneously subverting and reifying 1950s gender stereotypes.

The research objective was to explore Maney’s queering of 1950s style. As descriptions of their appearances (found on nearly every page of Maney’s novels) revealed, the starring characters dressed for detective work, San Francisco nightclubs, nursing, road tripping, boating, lunching, and spelunking. For these sleuths, to be clothed in the fashionably and functionally appropriate attire for each activity was imperative. Naturally, mishaps abound: Sometimes Nancy’s nose becomes shiny, Cherry’s high heeled shoes prove impractical for escaping from a cellar prison, and butch-presenting Midge Fontaine is barred from sharing a motel room with the rest of the women while road tripping across the rural American west.

Method: Dress scholars have noted the paucity of studies on dress in fiction (Hughes, 2006; McNeil, Karaminas, & Cole, C., 2009). This study analyzed the text on dress and appearance in Maney’s three books in the Nancy Clue series, set in 1959 Seattle, San Francisco, and rural Illinois: *The Case of the Not-so-Nice Nurse* (Maney, 1993), *The Case of the Good-for-Nothing Girlfriend* (Maney, 1994), and *A Ghost in the Closet* (Maney, 1995). Data were coded using the constant comparative method and open, axial, and selective coding, by which emergent themes

were identified and analyzed (Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Findings include Maney's characters' dress that challenged 1950s gender norms at the same time that it reified them (Butler, 1990; Clarke & Turner, 2007; Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Kaiser, 2012; Steele, 2013).

Findings: Emerging themes on dress and appearance included classic 1950s style, butch and femme identity, dapper and handsome women, passing, and transgender identity. The classic 1950s shirtwaist and sheath evening dress both made their appearance, as did a variety of elements of menswear. Maney's text contained a notable emphasis on fit, with home economics instructor Bess and Uncle Nelly Hardly both taking up needle and thread to ensure no hemline, either on dresses or trousers, was too long or too short. The female characters who dressed in masculine style related their troubles shopping for menswear, and when gifted with masculine clothing rejoiced in wearing quality apparel with dapper style and appropriate fit. Maney's characters reveled in the details of dress, changing clothes several times a day, either for a variety of social activities, or for the various disguises needed for their detective work.

Across the three books analyzed in this study, Maney's characters traveled from Seattle to San Francisco to the American Midwest, for the most part impeccably coiffed and starched, or dapper and handsome, depending on the character. The series opens with Nurse Cherry Aimless becoming entangled in a mystery on her way to San Francisco for a vacation, where she meets daring girl detective, Nancy Clue. Nancy Clue is a wealthy heiress who buys a new wardrobe following traditional seasonal fashion cycles, whereas Cherry Aimless never travels anywhere without a spare nursing uniform or administers medical care without first pinning on her treasured, and starched, nurse's cap. One core character in the series, the handsome Midge Fontaine, bears a striking resemblance to the older of the two Hardly boys, Frank, and on more than one occasion passes as Frank Hardly, even impersonating Frank and marrying her longtime sweetheart, Velma Pierce. When Cherry, who resembled Velma, was at risk of being kidnapped by thugs (who had already mistakenly kidnapped Velma), Midge took her to a hairdresser in San Francisco's Castro District and shopping in the menswear department of J.C Penney, giving her a butch makeover. Midge instructed Cherry in deportment and slicked back her hair with "Butch Wax" pomade to complete the disguise (Maney, 1993, pp. 81-83). Appearing in the third installment of Maney's series, *A Ghost in the Closet* (Maney, 1995), the two Hardly brothers, Frank and Joe, their Uncle Nelly, and his longtime partner, Willy, joined the young sleuths after Frank and Joe's parents were kidnapped by Soviet spies. At the end of the novel the Hardly boys discovered that their father, Fennel P. Hardly, was transgender, revealing the eponymous ghost in the closet.

Conclusion: Maney's books were written with a sense of humor and a dual love of mid-twentieth century mystery novels and vintage style, viewed through a queer lens. Maney wrote a variety of lesbian characters who lived in a utopian version of 1959 and expressed both femme and gender nonconforming style, respectively (Feinberg, 2003; Gibson & Meem, 1997). What resulted was both a subversion and a reification of classic 1950s fashion and gender norms with the addition of gender nonconforming bodies and queer style.

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