



ANNE NESBET DISCUSSES DARING DARLEEN, QUEEN OF THE SCREEN WITH BETSY BIRD

This exchange originally appeared in an extended form on the blog A Fuse #8 Production.

BETSY BIRD: *So! Silent films, eh? There aren't a lot of middle-grade novels that center silent film at their core. Brian Selznick's Wonderstruck, perhaps, but not much beyond that. Where did the kernel of an idea for this book originate?*

ANNE NESBET: Well! This time we can thank my day job (film historian and teacher) for providing the seed. In fact, the idea for *Daring Darleen* popped into my head one morning as I was walking to class to talk about the brave and talented young women who starred in some of the most popular serial adventure films between late 1912 and 1917. I thought to myself, *Oh, but wouldn't it be fun to write a story set in the early film world? Cliffhangers! Stunts! Technical tricks! And what if a publicity stunt in 1914 went quite terribly wrong? YES!*

BB: *So what kind of research did you conduct for this book? And is Darleen herself based on a particular star, or would you say she's a composite?*

AN: Thanks again to the day job, I had been researching early film for many years. (I'm lucky to be located in the Bay Area, where the Pacific Film Archive and the San Francisco Silent Film Festival are fabulous resources.) For this particular story, I studied up on the history of one of the major cinema centers of its time: Fort Lee, New Jersey. I watched as many films from the period and from the particular location as I could find (you should have heard me cheering in the Italian movie theater when a short film turned out to be *all* about the Fort Lee trolley lines in 1914!). I read the 1914 *New York Times* with care and delight, as well as the *Moving Picture World* (for film industry updates and gossip).

Darleen is a fictional figure, but of course she incorporates aspects of many of the famous adventure serial heroines (though Darleen is a little younger than the nonfictional stars): Helen Holmes of *The Hazards of Helen*, Pearl White of *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Exploits of Elaine*, Kathlyn Williams of *The Adventures of Kathlyn*. Darleen Darling starts her fictional career as a child star, and here I was influenced by an

amazingly gifted child actor from the silent period, Baby Peggy (later known as Diana Serra Cary), whom I had the honor to meet several times at the great silent film festival held each year in Pordenone, Italy. As of 2019, Baby Peggy is one hundred and one years old—the last living silent film star!

BB: *Your favorite silent film: Go!*

ANNE'S SLIGHTLY SNEAKY ANSWER: I love many silent films, as I also love many books. I can't possibly pick a single favorite, but I can say that as accompaniment (a kind of video playlist) for *Daring Darleen*, the following combination might be good:

— William K. Dickson's 1894 *Annabelle Butterfly Dance* (made for Edison's Kinetoscope)

— Alice Guy-Blaché's early serpentine dances (several films available, made between 1897 and 1902)

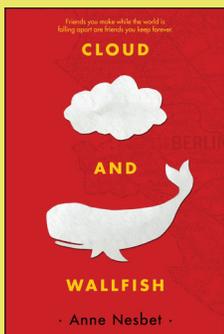
— While we're at it, Alice Guy-Blaché's 1912 *Falling Leaves* (made at her Solax studio in Fort Lee in 1912), a lovely little melodrama about a girl who tries to save her ailing older sister by tying leaves back onto tree branches

— Early episodes of the adventure serial *The Hazards of Helen* (1914–1917) are available online: see Helen Holmes leap on and off trains!

— Two silent comedies that our Daring Darleen would surely have appreciated, although they were made in the 1920s: Buster Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), in which Keaton tries to solve a mystery and win the heart of a girl with the help of great trick sequences and lots of comedy, and Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last!* (1923), which is an incredibly funny (and suspenseful!) movie about climbing up the sides of buildings

Think of Harold Lloyd as the Daring Darleen of his day!

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