

## **Fancy Nancy and the Frightful French Class (Featuring Adolescent Angst)**

When Jane O'Connor wrote her first Fancy Nancy children's book in 2005, she had no idea she was creating my hero. And she certainly had no idea she was predetermining my entire personality. Like many other young girls of the aughts, I grew up reading the *Fancy Nancy* book series. Nancy was a staple in my night-time routine: brush my teeth, put on pajamas, read a tale of precious, precocious, six-year-old Nancy, go to sleep.

Whether I had picked up her latest tale from the local library or got my hands on a copy I could call my own, Nancy never ceased to enchant me from just her book cover alone. No matter which book of hers I chose to read that night, I could always count on seeing her in the most dazzling, dapper outfits on the front page while standing next to a little blurb of what was to come; *Fancy Nancy and the Posh Puppy*, *Fancy Nancy and the Fabulous Fashion Boutique*, *Fancy Nancy Bonjour Butterfly*, and other alliterate titles of the like. While these repetitive plots probably lulled my poor father to sleep, I was just as delighted to read each book as the last. Every night that he and I would read one of her stories, I couldn't help but get caught up in the glitz and glamor of Nancy and her elegant escapades. Whether she was sporting the frilliest of frocks, throwing lavish tea parties with her dolls, or teaching the reader her favorite fancy words (*souvenir*, *parasol*, *divine*, *etc.*), I found myself obsessed with this little redhead.

I adored Nancy's posh lifestyle and tried to mimic it the best I could. I decorated my room to the high heavens with stickers, Christmas lights, and basement junk galore. I became fascinated by my mom's makeup table. And I started to take playing dress-up a little too seriously. But the one trait I wanted to emulate the most was Nancy's use of the French language. Along with her extensive English vocabulary, Nancy often spoke of her love for French. From the moment she taught me how to say *bonjour*, I wanted nothing more than to speak French

fluently. Forget all the *mode*, *vocabulaire*, and *personnalité* I stole from Nancy over the years; THIS was the Nancy essential I craved most. I devoured any mere morsel of French I came across, whether it was books, television, or even home decor.

Throughout elementary school, I longed for the first day of eighth grade when I could finally take French in school. Was I a little *obsédant*? As Nancy would say, *Oui, Oui, Oui!* But I was too busy engulfing myself in the language to even care.

When the miraculous day finally arrived, I sat in my unfamiliar French classroom practically feral with fever to get my hands on that fabulous, foreign language I had wanted for so long. Just when I was about to *mourir d'impatiance*, my French teacher walked in the door. Without missing a beat, she jumped right into speaking the language I'd been dying to hear. As someone who's never dabbled in Buddhism, I can only assume that moment is what reaching Nirvana feels like. With each syllable, with each new sound, with every 'r' hacked to perfection, I felt true *joie de vivre*. Could I understand a word she was saying? Absolutely not. But my life goal had finally been reached. As I continued listening to my teacher's beautiful nonsense, I was flooded with memories of reading *Fancy Nancy*. All those years of her teaching me her favorite *mots français* had led me to this moment. Her voice rang in my ears, "*tu as bien fait*:" I'd done good. At that moment, I was determined to make my dreams of becoming a fluent French speaker a reality.

Unfortunately as my youth dwindled, so did my *amour* for French. My overwhelming excitement to attend class eventually soured, and French became like all my other mundane classes. The fluency never came to me and my passion for the language began to die. Along with this death was *la mort de mon temps avec Nancy*. At this point, I hadn't read a *Fancy Nancy* book since elementary school, and with each year, she faded more in my memory. Her

boa-wearing, party-throwing, and over-accessorizing tales that once flooded my juvenile mind were replaced with typical adolescent thoughts of misery and woe. Dramatic I was indeed, but not in a way Nancy would be proud of.

In truth, my life was completely fine during these years between thirteen and sixteen, but my pituitary-driven pessimism was trying to prove me otherwise. In my developing mind, everything was horrendous; the sight of my brother chewing, the sound of my mother asking me how my day was, the smell of adolescent B.O. – just about everything felt like it was delivered to me straight from Hell. But perhaps the most atrocious thing in my life was school, especially French class. I hated trying to keep track of the zillions of accent marks. I despised feeling like a fool trying to mimic the sputtery accent. I loathed feeling the cogs in my brain go haywire when trying to understand a single sentence of a textbook stanza I had just read.

French, a once beautiful, nonsensical sound that fluttered in my ears, became nothing but a violating vernacular that rattled my brain.

One day in my French III class, as my teacher berated me with bludgeoning sounds, I finally stopped and asked myself, “Why am I still doing this?” My high school only required two years of language classes, and yet here I was, willingly taking francophone abuse for a whole extra year. Why was I so committed to a language I hadn’t loved for a long time? A language that did not love me back? I scoured my brain for answers, trying to find a reason why I shouldn’t devoid my ears of the stuffy, soul-sucking language once and for all. It wasn’t for grades, it wasn’t for a good resume, it wasn’t for ego. Then, it dawned on me...

Nancy.

Fancy Nancy was the ONLY reason I was taking French.

While Earth certainly didn't stand still at this revelation, I was shocked nonetheless. For the past few years, I had let French become the bane of my existence. Did my childhood admiration for a fictional, French-speaking illustration really have that much of an impact on me? So much so that I kept taking French to make her proud? I began to reflect on other aspects of my life that might've still held some vestiges of Nancy. I looked down at my outfit and noticed that my sense of style felt familiar. For years I'd found so much joy in overdressing and accessorizing, and it wasn't until that moment that I realized it was Nancy's influence as well. My younger years of dressing up like her had become an integral part of my identity. I guess I never stopped playing dress-up.

Upon further reflection, I also realized that my love for theater had Nancy written all over it. Had her unapologetic, larger-than-life personality influenced my own and pushed me to pursue the stage? My love for cosmetology? My adoration for attention? All the things I've done over the years that have earned me the title of "quirky?" Nancy, Nancy, and Nancy once again.

While my realization did not lead me back to her books – as I've thankfully moved onto literature that's above a preschool reading level – recognizing Nancy's impact on me has, in turn, helped me recognize who I am now that the throes of my adolescence angst are safely behind me. Along with my still *avant-garde* wardrobe and ever-present *l'amour du théâtre*, I am still taking French after all these years thanks to her. I can barely hold a conversation and I'm certainly not getting my seal of biliteracy anytime soon, but my epiphany instilled a new love for it in me. I take it not for any scholarly reason, but as a way to thank *Mademoiselle* Nancy for all she's done for me. I will forever cherish her convivial chronicles, and no matter how long I go without reading her books, I will never bid her *adieu*.