

Pioneers, passionate ladies, and private eyes : dime novels, series books, and paperbacks

Sullivan, Larry E. & Cushman Schurman, Lydia eds.

Binghampton: Haworth Press

1996

ISBN 0-7890-0016-4

Hard cover, 306p.

\$39.95

Pioneers, passionate ladies, and private eyes : dime novels, series books, and paperbacks has also been published as *Primary source and original works*, vol. 4(1/2) and (3/4), 1996.

Pioneers, passionate ladies, and private eyes : dime novels, series books, and paperbacks, is a cumbersome title, but sums up the contents as well as gives an idea of the lurid nature of said fiction. Paperbacks have since lost their negative conno-

tations. In fact they have become mainstream. This book traces the history and culture of what is collectively known as pulp fiction in 19 chapters. And what a history it is!

The opening chapter by Edward T. le Blanc whets the appetite by giving a brief history of the paperback, series book and dime novel. It is so crammed with fascinating facts, figures and dates that it is a bit awkward to read.

The second chapter is even more fascinating, but also a lot easier to read. It describes the efforts of V. Valta Parma to convince the Librarian of Congress that pulp fiction also needed to be preserved. If his name sounds like a character from a dime novel, his life (or should that read lives?) and activities seems even more so. It's a cliché, but truth *is* stranger than fiction.

Subsequent chapters deal, *inter alia*, with:

- differences between British and US pulp fiction
- detective series
- WW II as a marketplace as well as source for publishers
- the rise of aviation as theme
- romances
- the arguments for and against the suitability of pulp fiction for children
- authors who wrote pulp fiction as well as serious literature
- propagandist use of pulp fiction
- historical events as source material in pulp.

Pulp fiction was regarded as neither 'high' nor suitable literature in the 19th century. Much as Barbara Cartland and to a lesser extent Stephen King type novels are today regarded as having a bad influence on young readers' habits and morals. The 5th chapter, by Schurman (p.59), deals with the efforts by Ainsworth Rand Spofford – the Librarian of Congress – and the ALA in the 1880s to increase postal rates on pulp fiction or 'immoral fiction' as he called it. This was just another 'attempt to control the type of literature people should read' (p.64). Spofford felt that low cost fiction encouraged the reading of novels over science, philosophy and religion. Among others he described pulp fiction as 'un-wholesome', that it 'taught foreign ideas', came from the 'bigamy school of fiction' and depicted 'the decline and fall of women'. Even authors such as Dumas and Zola were included in his derision. It would be interesting to see whether successful modern authors like John Grisham and Wilbur Smith will be favourable regarded 100 years from now.

The 14th and 15th chapters (p.193–214) in particular grabbed my imagination. Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine B. Stern – partners in a rare book firm – separately describe their discovery of the secret identity of Louisa May Alcott. The author of *Little Women*, held in high regard in literary circles was also known as 'The Children's Friend' and as such served as a role model. Before her fame however she had earned a significant second income as writer of raunchy romances and despite generous offers refused to reissue these early works in her later life in order not to damage her by then well-established reputation. The detective work the authors did while researching this topic makes for gripping reading.

Apart from these two chapters the book is not sequential and after reading the first chapter (for background and terminology) random sampling is possible.

Although most of the chapters are written by scholars and are well-researched *Pioneers, passionate ladies, and private eyes : dime novels, series books, and paperbacks* is not essential reading, but well worth the effort for anyone with more than a passing interest in books and fiction, for it gives an in-depth and fascinating look at a billion dollar industry that was nudged out of the limelight by television.

TIM SANDHAM

Acquisitions librarian, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg.