

Not to be circulated: The Response of children's librarians to dime novels and series books.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Not to Be Circulated:
The Response of Children's Librarians to Dime Novels and Series Books

Mark I. West (bio)

Recent attempts to limit children's access to controversial books have generally met with stiff opposition from librarians. Through its Office of Intellectual Freedom, the American Library Association has waged a vigorous campaign against censoring children's books. Librarians, however, have not always defended children's freedom to read a broad range of literature. There was a time when they felt duty-bound to censor certain forms of children's literature.

American librarians first took a serious interest in children in the late nineteenth century. Although most libraries did not hire special librarians to work with children until the 1890s or early 1900s, children's literature began attracting the generation of general librarians as early as the mid-1870s. An increasing number of librarians believed that children's reading materials shaped their young readers' minds, and because of this belief, some felt that it was their duty to make certain that children read nothing but "wholesome" literature. The positive effect of this attitude was a movement on the part of librarians to improve the overall status of children's literature. To achieve this goal, some librarians wrote books of literary criticism on children's literature and promoted the introduction of college courses on children's literature (Nesbitt 416-424). But at the same time, the idea that children should read only "quality" books caused a number of librarians to suppress children's books that they judged to be unwholesome. The leaders of this campaign frequently expressed their views on children's literature in articles in the *Library Journal* and in other periodicals intended for librarians. In these articles, the authors made it clear that they viewed young readers as fragile innocents in need of protection.

Librarians from this era worried more about dime novels than any other type of children's literature. Several argued that the exciting plots, violent action scenes, depraved villains, and omnipotent heroes found in many dime novels had a corruptive influence on the minds of juvenile readers, ruining their reading tastes and causing them to engage in

criminal behavior. The editors of the *Library Journal* reprinted a number of newspaper articles in which the reading of dime novels was cited as the reason that children engaged in wrongdoing. In "Dime Novel Work," for example, C. M. Hewins reported that a fourteen-year-old boy "shot himself during a period of mental aberration caused by reading dime novels" (92).

Librarians devised unique methods of discouraging children from reading dime novels. Minerva L. Saunders, who worked for the public library in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, was one such librarian. In an article Saunders wrote for the *Library Journal*, she noticed that a number of children who used the library's reading room did not peruse books owned by the library. Instead, they read dime novels, which they concealed between the covers of bona fide library books. Whenever Saunders spotted children reading dime novels, she made it a point to tell them "the dangers of reading the stuff." Her lectures, however, "seemed to have little effect." In an effort to devise a more effective method of persuading children not to read dime novels, Saunders, together with W. R. Sayles, a trustee of the library, decided to employ scare tactics. Saunders and Sayles purchased a scrapbook which they filled with "clippings from newspapers at home and abroad, concerning the pernicious effect upon boys of reading such literature and especially items of police news . . . in which the dime novel was the inspiration to the unlawful deeds which brought the little fellows into the clutches of the police or into danger and trouble." After completing the scrapbook, Saunders would require every child she caught with a dime novel to read the clippings in her scrapbook. She reported that after reading these articles the offending child "was willing to give up his dime novel and be guided in the selection of his reading material" (105).

Most librarians who published articles on children's literature in the 1870s and '80s felt that librarians should guide children toward respected works of literature and nonfiction, such as...

Not to Be Circulated: The Response of Children's Librarians to Dime Novels and Series Books

by Mark A. West

Recent attention to children's access to controversial books has, generally, not elicited support from librarians. Through its Office of Intellectual Freedom, the American Library Association has waged a vigorous campaign not concerning children's books. Librarians, however, have not shared details of children's freedom to read a broad range of literature. There was a time when they felt compelled to do so as a matter of course.

American librarians' first major setback occurred in a library in the late nineteenth century. Although most libraries at the time were special libraries to work with children, until the 1890s or early 1900s, children's literature began attracting the attention of general librarians as early as the mid-1870s. An increasing number of librarians believed that children's reading materials shaped their young readers' minds and systems of values, and some felt that it was their duty to make certain that children read nothing but "wholesome" literature. The positive effect of this attitude was a restriction on the part of librarians to improve the overall status of children's literature. To achieve this goal, some librarians wrote books of literary criticism on children's literature and promoted the introduction of college courses on children's literature (Nesbit 416-424). But at the same time, the view that children should read only a "quality" books caused a number of librarians to suppress children's books that they judged to be unedifying. The editors of this magazine began to respond to requests from children's librarians in articles in the *Library Journal* and in other periodicals intended for librarians. In these articles, the authors made it clear that they viewed young readers as fragile innocents in need of protection.

Most librarians who published articles on children's literature in the 1870s and '80s felt that librarians should guide children toward respected works...

Librarians from the west worried more about dime novels than any other type of children's literature. Several argued that the exciting plots, violent action scenes, detailed villains, and obligatory heroes found in many dime novels had a corruptive influence on the minds of juvenile readers, turning them into big game and chasing them to capture a criminal felonies. The editors of the *Library Journal* received a number of newspaper articles in which the reading of dime novels was cited as the reason that children engaged in wrongdoing. In "Dime Novel Work," for example, C. M. Hinsley reported that a fourteen-year-old boy "spent so much of his time in a period of mental aberration caused by reading dime novels" (92).

Librarians devised various methods of censoring children from reading dime novels. Minerva L. Spang, one who worked in the public library in Powhatan, Rhode Island, was one such librarian. In an article Spang wrote for the *Library Journal*, she reported that a number of children who used the library's reading room did not permit books owned by the library. Instead, they read dime novels, which they circulated between

the covers of bona fide library books. Whenever Spang spotted children reading dime novels, she made it a point to call them. "The danger of reading the stuff," she wrote, however, "seemed to have little effect." In an effort to devise a more effective method of persuading children not to read dime novels, Spang, together with W. B. Taylor, a trustee of the library, decided to make wire frames. Spang and Taylor purchased a scrapbook, which they filled with "clippings from newspapers at home and abroad concerning the pernicious effect upon boys of reading such literature and especially that of vulgar novels... in which the dime novel, was the illustration to the unfortunates which brought the little fellows into the clutches of the police or into danger and trouble." After completing the scrapbook, Spang and Taylor would require every child who came into a dime novel to see the scrapbook for ten minutes. She reported that after reading these articles the offending child "was willing to give up his dime novel and be guided in the selection of his reading material" (105).

Most librarians who published articles on children's literature in the 1870s and '80s felt that librarians should guide children toward respected works of literature and fiction, such as biographies, scientific treatises, and literary books, and classic works of literature. The most effective method of getting juvenile youngsters to do better was to find the necessary skill to entice them to read books that were unedifying, unwholesome, but that were thought to be less violent and vulgar. Only the availability of this sort would librarians succeed in convincing children to choose our books for reputable authors.

Samuel S. Green, a librarian from Worcester, Massachusetts, preserved the case for providing children with more "exciting" books in an article titled "Sensational Fiction in Public Libraries," which appeared in the *Library Journal* in September 1879.

In order to keep boys and girls from reading... (dime novels), we must give them interesting books that are better. But sensational books in the circulating departments of our public libraries do good in another way. They give young persons a taste for reading... If boys and girls grow up with a dislike of reading, or without feeling attracted towards any occupation, they will not read anything. But if a taste for reading has been cultivated by giving them what suits, such books as they will enjoy reading, then they will turn naturally to reading as an employment of their leisure, and will read such books as correspond to the grade of maturity and the stage of intellectual development, as well as to their... They will thus be saved from idleness and vice (348-349).

Howard Green's list of recommended "sensational" stories were the works of, and the children's books written by Horatio Alger and Oley Optic. Alger's topographical tales and Optic's adventure stories generally featured two-part plots and unusually complex child heroes, but unlike dime novels, they also included moralistic elements. Although Green felt that



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