

Dime Novels

from e-notes.com

The firm of Beadle & Company published the first dime novel, *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, in 1860. The firm (its name would change to Beadle & Adams in 1872) was run by two brothers from Buffalo, New York, Irwin Beadle (1826–1882) and Erastus Beadle (1821–1894), who in 1859 moved to New York City and began publishing brief pocket-size paperback books on a variety of topics, such as *Beadle's Dime Debater*, *Beadle's Dime Base-ball Player*, and *Beadle's Dime Book of Verses*. In early June 1860 the brothers applied the "dime" formula to fiction and announced Stephens's work under the slogan: "Books for the Million! A Dollar Book for a Dime!" *Malaeska* was not an original work but had appeared in serial form in the *Ladies' Companion*; Stephens, far from being an unknown, was a prolific author and well-known literary professional who received \$250 from the Beadles for the rights to the novella. The "dime novel," as the format came to be known, caught on rapidly. *Malaeska* sold ten thousand copies in its first appearance in the Beadle series. Only four months later, Edward Ellis's *Seth Jones*, issue number 8 in the *Beadle Dime Novel Library*, would sell 60,000 copies on its first appearance (and almost 500,000 overall), and sales only escalated from there. This success bred imitators. George Munro, who worked for the Beadles, started his own competing firm, and George's brother, Norman Munro, followed suit. While many competitors arose, there were five firms that published dime novels for significant periods of time: Beadle & Company (Beadle & Adams); George Munro; Norman Munro; Frank Tousey; and Street & Smith.

THE POPULARITY OF DIME NOVELS

Dime novels did not represent a new type of writing but rather a new kind of book and a new approach to the process of selling and distributing fiction. What was most notable about dime novels was reflected in their name—the low price—which made them accessible to a much wider audience of potential readers. In 1860, when the Beadles published the first dime novel, books of a comparable length, if they were sold in a cloth or leather binding (in the early twenty-first century

thought of as "hardcover"), would have cost close to a dollar. Even the inexpensive paper-covered fiction of the 1840s and 1850s, written by popular, sensationalist authors like Ned Buntline, George Lippard, and Justin Jones, most often cost between twenty-five and fifty cents per volume. The Beadles' great innovation was to publish works of fiction in a



Cover of *The Lost Trail*.One of Beadle's dime novels, 1864.

BROWN RARE BOOKS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DIVISION,
THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

standard format at regular intervals (roughly every two weeks) at a standard price in a size that made for easy distribution through the mail.

The dime novels of the 1860s were paperbound books of around one hundred pages that measured four by six inches and had covers of colored paper (the most common colors were yellow and salmon). The early issues of the dime novel series did not have cover illustrations, but soon images depicting particularly exciting scenes from the novels were emblazoned on the covers. The low price was a substantial part of dime novels' appeal, as they were affordable to poorer (and younger) readers who would not have been able to buy clothbound books (the average daily wage for a laborer in the 1840s and 1850s was around a dollar a day, but younger workers would not have earned that much). The small size of the dime novels was also part of their appeal, as they were lightweight and extremely portable; their size also made them easy to conceal from disapproving parents and teachers.

Before the Beadles' innovation, cheap publication was a difficult business because the narrow profit margins on cheap books required large volume in order to make the business profitable and it was thought that there were not enough American readers to generate such sales. The issue was not, however, the small number of readers—the United States had one of the highest literacy rates in the world in the nineteenth century—but rather the difficulty and expense of distributing books to them. The Beadles saved money on cheap paper and small type, their production methods capitalized on technological advances in printing, and the absence of an international copyright agreement meant that they could pirate works by European authors without paying for them. But they also took advantage of a loophole in U.S. postal rates: it was prohibitively expensive to send books through the mail, but periodicals—publications that were issued at regular intervals—qualified for a much lower rate. This difference in postage was intended to allow for the easy circulation of newspapers, which were thought to be essential to the political life of the young Republic.

By issuing their dime novels regularly, dime novel publishers qualified for the lower rate that applied to periodicals and thus were able to let the U.S. Postal Service do their distributing for them through the mail. Readers generally paid for a book in advance, then the publisher sent the book out postage due; the buyer paid the postage upon receipt. While capitalizing on postal distribution, Beadle & Company in 1864

also formed a partnership with the nascent American News Company, which distributed dime novels to newsstands and bookstores. (The publishers of dime novels played a cat-and-mouse game with the Postal Service over the question of postage rates over the last half of the nineteenth century, ultimately losing their exemption.) As such, dime novels constitute a particularly useful example for the study of the growth of the mass-culture industry in the United States. Dime novels also offer a useful case for an examination of the creation of literary celebrity; authors such as Ned Buntline (E. Z. C. Judson, 1823–1886) and Horatio Alger Jr. (1832–1899) and characters including Buffalo Bill, Old Sleuth, and Nick Carter gained fame through dime novels (Ned Buntline published his first Buffalo Bill story in 1869).

The original audience for dime novels was adult readers, primarily men, although there would later be dime novel series aimed at female readers. Part of the early success of the genre can be attributed to the market provided by soldiers fighting in the Civil War. Beadle, Munro, and other publishers shipped thousands of dime novels to Union army camps, creating a taste for the novels that persisted after 1865. Over time, however, the audience that came to be most strongly associated with dime novels in the public imagination was boys, prompting periodic panics over the books' "corrupting influence," including Anthony Comstock's crusades in the 1880s. It is likely, though, that early dime novels were read by everyone in the family, as they rarely contained any material that would have been considered morally questionable. Indeed the prominent critic William Everett wrote in the *North American Review* (1864) of the Beadle publications that they were "without exception . . . unobjectionable morally, whatever fault be found with their literary style and composition. They do not even obscurely pander to vice, or excite the passions" (p. 308). This view would change over time, however, as dime novels changed in physical format, came to be increasingly associated with juvenile readers, and were distributed more often from newsstand sales rather than through the mail. Regardless of the debates about dime novels' morality, they were astonishingly popular. No exact publication records exist for any of the publishers of dime novels, but Everett estimated that in 1864 there were five million dime novels in circulation that had been produced by the Beadle firm alone, not counting the output of its competitors.

DIME NOVELS AS A GENRE

It is difficult to characterize dime novels as a distinct genre of literature because the dime novel was primarily an innovation in production, packaging, distribution, and marketing rather than a new literary form. As was the case with *Malaeska*, many dime novels were texts that had previously been published elsewhere; indeed, Beadle & Adams republished some stories as many as fourteen times, often under different titles or in different series. Many of the early dime novels were westerns, which is what most readers think of when they hear the term "dime novel." Instead of being typical westerns, however, many dime novels of the 1860s were actually American historical adventures in the tradition of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) and William Gilmore Simms (1806–1870), set not on the high plains of the West but in the forests of the East and the swamps of the South as well as on the high seas (seafaring stories were extremely popular). Because many of the early dime novels were reissues of texts that had previously appeared elsewhere, they tended to deal with historical subjects, particularly the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods and the War of 1812. But many of these sensational stories featured more contemporaneous settings, such as California during the gold rush; in Texas, particularly during the years of the Texas Republic and the Mexican-American War; and in the mountain West during the heyday of the fur trade.

The primary literary effect that these novels strove for was excitement, with fights, captures, escapes, and reunions crowded improbably close together, all focused around the exploits of a rugged and always prepared male hero, with multiple plot lines being tied up neatly (but suddenly) in the final chapter. A passage from Edward S. Ellis's *Seth Jones; or, The Captives of the Frontier* (1860), which is set on the frontier of western New York in the 1780s, is indicative of their typical style:

All the savages sprung to their feet, and one held his tomahawk, ready to brain the captive Ina, in case they could not retain her. Another leaped toward Seth, but his surprise was great, when the man in turn sprung nimbly to his feet, and this surprise became unbounded when, doubling himself like a ball, Seth struck him with tremendous force in the stomach, knocking him instantly senseless. Quick as thought, Graham felled the savage standing over Ina, and seizing her in his arms, plunged into the woods, setting up a loud

shout at the same instant. The scene now became desperate. Haldidge and Haverland, fired almost to madness, rushed forward, and the former added his own yells to those of the savages. Ten minutes after, not an Indian was in sight. (Brown, p. 231)

Along with such "blood-and-thunder" effects, many dime novels also often incorporated regional dialect, frequently for humorous or satirical effect, in the tradition of the southwestern humorists like Simms and Davy Crockett. Seth Jones, for instance, in the eponymous novel, speaks in typical Yankee dialect when a Mohawk captor takes away his rifle: "I'll lend that to you awhile, provided you return it all right. Mind, you be keerful now, 'cause that ar' gun cost something down in New Hampshire" (Brown, p. 199).

Given their subject matter and setting, dime novels are useful sources for examining nineteenth-century attitudes about the wilderness and encroaching civilization, the frontier, masculinity and individualism, and race and ethnicity, particularly within the context of westward expansion. (Later dime novels were more likely to be set in cities, to have detectives as heroes rather than trappers or Texas Rangers, and to reflect current news events in their plots.) With their sensational plots, dime novels played a large role in shaping a popular image of the western frontier as a place of lawlessness and violence and provided a popular and sensationalized mass cultural account of the process of Manifest Destiny.

See also Book Publishing; Literacy; Literary Marketplace; Publishers

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Works

Brown, Bill, ed. *Reading the West: An Anthology of Dime Westerns*. Boston: Bedford, 1997.

"Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls." <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/home.html>.

Secondary Works

Cox, J. Randolph. *The Dime Novel Companion: A Source Book*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Denning, Michael. *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*. London and New York: Verso, 1987.

Everett, William. "Critical Notices: Beadle's Dime Books." *North American Review* (July 1864): 303–309.

Johannsen, Albert. *The House of Beadle and Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Story of a Vanished Literature*. 3 vols. Foreword by John T. McIntyre. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950–1962. Available at <http://www.niulib.niu.edu/badndp/bibindex.html>.

Noel, Mary. *Villains Galore: The Heyday of the Popular Story Weekly*. New York: Macmillan, 1954.

Pearson, Edmund Lester. *Dime Novels; or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1929.

Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950.

Streeby, Shelley. *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Sullivan, Larry E., and Lydia Cushman Schurman, eds. *Pioneers, Passionate Ladies, and Private Eyes: Dime Novels, Series Books, and Paperbacks*. New York: Haworth, 1996.

Paul J. Erickson

Source: *American History Through Literature*, ©2006 Gale Cengage.