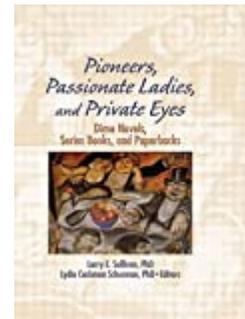


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Larry E. Sullivan, Lydia Cushman Schurman, eds. *Pioneers, Passionate Ladies, and Private Eyes: Dime Novels, Series Books and Paperbacks*. New York and London: Haworth Press, 1996. xiv + 306 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7890-0016-3.



Reviewed by Richard W. Etulain (University of New Mexico)

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This collection of nineteen essays on popular literature probably would not have appeared before the late 1960s. Until scholars realized that studies of dime novels, series and pulp fiction, and other forms of conventional writing revealed a good deal about the popular culture of the United States, these literary genres lacked serious academic attention. But that earlier oversight has been corrected in the past generation. Indeed, this book resulted from papers presented at a symposium that the Library of Congress sponsored in June 1995. In addition to being published here, these essays also appeared in *Primary Sources and Original Works* 4 (Nos. 1-4, 1996).

Several of the essays make valuable contributions. For example, Kathleen Chamberlain raises interesting questions about the cultural meanings of popular literature in her essay "Capitalism, Counterfeiting, and Literary Representation: The Case of Lizzie Borden." Noted book dealer and scholar Madeleine B. Stern also provides a rewarding discussion of Louisa May Alcott's dime novels. In an equally important section, Angela J. Farkas shows how author Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller carefully studied the content and plot lines of numerous story papers before writing her own very successful popular novels. In the final essay, and one of the most valuable in this collection, Jean Carwile Masteller revealingly compares the working-girl romance fiction of Laura Jean Libbey

written between the 1880s and the 1920s with more recent Harlequin Romances, especially those by Jayne Ann Krentz.

Other authors contribute brief overviews or bibliographical essays. Well-known collector Edward T. LeBlanc and boys fiction specialist John T. Dizer, respectively, provide overviews of the dime novel and of several dime novel authors. Alison M. Scott and Karen Nelson Hoyle discuss pulp magazines and series fiction, and J. Randolph Cox, David K. Vaughan, M. Paul Holsinger, and Elizabeth S. Frank contribute abbreviated examinations of Nick Carter, aviation, WWII combat juvenile fiction, and "war preparedness" novels. Meanwhile, Deidre A. Johnson studies dime novel fiction and the famed Edward Stratemeyer's work with these "pugilist" writers.

Still other contributors scrutinize the impact of sociocultural changes on popular fiction. Clark Evans, for instance, evaluates the role of the enigmatic librarian V. Valta Parma on the "Development of Popular Culture Collections at the Library of Congress," and volume coeditor Lydia Cushman Schurman points out how shifting postal rates impacted collections of popular fiction at the Library of Congress. Taking a decided feminist tack, Nancy Tillman Romalov studies the possible cultural meanings of inscriptions in girls' books. E.M. Sanchez-Saavedra takes a larger view in describing the

“Anglo-American Pulp Wars” between Englishman Edwin Brett and American Frank Leslie. In the briefest essay, Leona Rostenberg narrates how she discovered the pseudonym Louisa May Alcott used for her dime novels.

Taken together, these chapters illustrate the familiar strengths and limitations of such volumes. All essays provide a good deal of information about little-studied authors and popular literary types. Most of the essays are fact-filled, but some are more descriptive listings than careful, probing evaluations of the popular fiction studied. In fact, the collection could have been more than a gathering of academic conference papers if the essays had focused on a few explicit themes or utilized similar interpretative approaches. Unfortunately, the value

of the volume is undercut because it lacks coherence—thematically, structurally, or theoretically. Too many of the essays are too narrowly focused; too many fail to ask important or revealing cultural questions. Still, readers and researchers looking for information on dime novels, series books, and other forms of popular literature will find useful factual information in all of the sections. Through the individual essays the volume makes a larger contribution than as a whole.

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