

Nineteenth Century Sensational Fiction: Dime Novels

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Nineteenth Century Sensational Fiction: Dime Novels

In the late nineteenth century, a new form of sensational fiction emerged. Called dime novels because of the five to twenty-five cent sale price, these pocket-sized books told short stories of American frontier adventure. Often formulaic, these stories centered on macho heroes and damsels in distress, never venturing far beyond plotlines of capture and rescue, pursuit and escape. Violence and lewdness became the impetus for the popularity of this form which, because of its cheapness, was often passed along to friends and neighbors upon completion. The serial nature of these stories, which featured a set number of identifiable characters such as Deadwood Dick and Calamity Jane, kept readers coming back for more.

Not surprisingly, many young readers, boys especially, were drawn to the sense of adventure and rebellion in [dime novels](#). Gratuitous gore and debauchery were also points of attraction. These unsavory qualities became a major concern of parents who felt that their sons were being negatively influenced, perhaps into a life of crime and banditry. Still, the mass production of dime novels made it easy for boys to obtain them even without parental permission. Almost every newsstand or corner bookstore had copies of the latest

bloody Western and they were more than willing to sell regardless of the buyer's age.

The quality of dime novels began to decline as it became custom for publishers such as Beadle to allow several authors to write on the same serial or character interchangeably. Eventually the plots became so predictable that the only selling points were increasingly fantastical settings, unbelievable situations and more vulgarity. What...

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...his proliferation of "questionable" content has proven that the average American reader makes choices based on personal tastes rather than on the opinions of highbrow academia or moral crusaders. It is a victory of free speech as well as the capitalistic principle of demand but also perhaps a blow to artistic integrity. Concerned parents and religious groups continue to fight against indecency but consumerism has become the most powerful modern censor. Today, sales are so important that many authors find themselves tethered to a narrowing range of themes and situations that appeal to an increasingly homogenized audience. As far as the corruption of youth is concerned, most parents today echo Bishop's sentiments that any book is better than no book, pleased to see their children reading formulaic adventure stories or comics rather than glued to a television set.

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