Dime Novels Gone Digital

Eric Willey
Illinois State University, emwille@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Willey, Eric, "Dime Novels Gone Digital" (2015). Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library. 67.
https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml/67

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Milner Library at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISUReD@ilstu.edu.
Dime Novels Gone Digital

By Eric Willey, Illinois State University, Normal

Before people worried that television and video games would pervert morality, corrupt the mind, and destroy the fabric of civilized society, the same concerns were expressed over dime novels. The rise of literacy rates in the post–Civil War era and increasingly cheap printing processes resulted in a wave of titles aimed at the middle and working classes. These dime novels, known as penny dreadfuls in England, told sensationalized, sometimes lurid, and nationalistic tales of the Wild West, detectives and criminals, historical romances, early science fiction, exploration, pirates, military fiction, and sports. Often featuring covers and interior illustrations as fantastic and sensationalized as the stories themselves, these small, cheaply printed novels thrilled audiences from 1860 to 1926 when the pulp serials replaced them. Today they are widely used by scholars studying popular culture, history, women's studies, and literature. Fortunately, many of these novels have made their way to online collections either in their entirety or through their cover illustrations, forming a bridge between the twenty-first century and the thrilling entertainment of the past.

For readers who wish to test the waters and situate dime novels in a larger context, Stanford University maintains the Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls site at web.stanford.edu/dept/SUL/library/prod/depts/dp/pennies/home.html. Ten novels are available in their entirety, allowing modern audiences to enjoy the adventures of such alliterative heroes as Jesse James, Fred Fearnot, and Deadwood Dick, but a great deal of information on the dime novel phenomenon is also provided. This site features an article explaining the background and historical context of dime novels, as well as a guided tour of the print processes, typical cover elements, and detailed information about Stanford’s collection and other dime novel collections in the United States. Stanford also provides time lines of major events in the history of dime novels for the years 1860 to 1920. Visitors can examine a general time line for those years or a more detailed one by decade. They also have the opportunity to search and read (or browse by subject) 100 select issues of Secret Service (a weekly magazine of detective stories) and view 2,369 of the covers that adorned this and other tales by searching the series title or image feature, or by browsing the entire collection. These covers include 232 images from stories of the frontier West, with memorable titles such as The Giant Detective among the Cowboys and Link Rover among the Fire Worshippers; or, A Yankee Joker in the Land of Diaz.

The Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois, has also created a website at www.newberry.org/dime-novels for fans of the dime novel. While the Newberry has not placed numerous scans of covers or digitized novels on its site, it has included a brief history of the dime novel and a description of its collections. For those looking for a scholarly context for these stories, the Newberry provides an extensive list of bibliographies and reference works. This list contains 19 secondary sources discussing dime novels, from as recently as 2005. There is also a list of selected dime novels in the collections at the Newberry and links to collections and digital resources at other institutions.

The Street and Smith’s Preservation and Access Project via Syracuse University Library at library.syr.edu/find/src/collections/diglib/streetsmith.php is another site to keep an eye on. Street and Smith produced a wide variety of popular literature, including dime novels, for over 100 years. Through this digital archives, users can view the Street and Smith holdings list (with links to cover images for the 1,922 novels in the list), a dime novel cover gallery, images of the Street and Smith Company, and an inventory of Street and Smith’s editorial records. While the site does not appear to link to any texts, the rich background material on the publisher and the extensive cover gallery still make this a valuable resource.

Felicia L. Carr started the American Women’s Dime Novel Project at chnm.gmu.edu/dimenovels as part of research for her dissertation entitled All for Love: Gender
and Class and the Woman’s Dime Novel in Nineteenth-Century America. The site features a cover gallery of nearly 200 novels focused on women with titles such as A Coronet of Shame, Her Dark Inheritance, and Wild Oats. Carr also provides a list of primary materials and archives useful for the study of women in dime novels, a list of romance series and story papers (precursors to dime novels), a discussion of the history of dime novels, cover images of hardcover editions, and lists of authors and publishers, some with biographies. While Carr describes this website as a work in its infancy, it already contains a great deal of well-written and thoughtful explanatory text throughout. Finally, Carr offers a large selection of links to e-book versions of the dime novels she references. Many of these novels are freely available from Google Books.

Northern Illinois University (NIU) is also home to a growing digitized collection of dime novels. Its site can be found at dimenovels.lib.niu.edu, and it contains materials from two major dime novel collections: those of Albert Johannsen and Edward T. LeBlanc. The collections boast 364 novels at the time of this writing and can be searched or browsed by author, series, genre (the science fiction genre includes 11 novels with such fantastic titles as Tom Edison Jr.’s Electric Sea Spider; or, The Wizard of the Submarine World), subject, date, and publisher. Each novel has a digitized cover and can be viewed, searched, or printed through NIU’s site. For further context regarding these works, NIU provides a libguide at libguides.niu.edu/dimenovels. While somewhat brief, this guide contains a great deal of useful information about the collections these novels come from, as well as links to a digitized version of Albert Johannsen’s bibliography The House of Beadle and Adams. This bibliography contains a wealth of historical information about one of the great publishers of dime novels and can be viewed at www.ulib.niu.edu/badndp/bibindex.html. The Edward T. LeBlanc bibliography is at digital.library.villanova.edu/Item/vndl:283769.

The Falvey Memorial Library at Villanova also offers an impressive list of resources related to dime novels. The ongoing project can be viewed at digital.library.villanova.edu/Collection/vndl:24093; it includes story papers and international dime novels. The site separates

(Continued on page 28)
its materials into eight series: series list, covers and illustrations, fiction, nonfiction, periodicals, scholarship, the Spare Change library podcast, and paratextual materials (ephemera, primary source documents, and miscellanea). In viewing the covers and illustrations from this collection, noir fans will see familiar themes in the *The Cloak of Guilt* and *Hounded to Death*. While the sheer amount of material is not as extensive as that contained in other collections discussed in this article, this collection is a growing resource and fills in many interesting corners particularly with its nonfiction, podcast, and paratextual materials.

Individually and as a whole, these collections provide valuable resources for scholars and tell us a great deal about how rising working-class Americans viewed minorities, women, and their own pasts and futures. Dime novels provide as much of a view into the past as any other form of popular entertainment, and the vivid covers and illustrations make valuable additions to the texts. Thankfully, due to these digital collections, many rare and valuable dime novels are available to both scholars and casual viewers around the world.