Divine Dimes: My Adventures Down the Rabbit Hole of Religious Pulp Literature

“I can’t wait to read this religious nineteenth-century pulp magazine!” said no one ever. Yet as a historian, I have found myself reading such texts repeatedly. I stumbled upon the pulp fiction of yesteryear as an undergraduate. Since then, I’ve learned that dime novels, story papers, chapbooks, and other literary ephemera of the nineteenth century offer unconventional perspectives on American culture—and especially on American religion.

I happened upon dime novels while desperately searching for a paper topic for an undergraduate research seminar. At the urging of my professor, I contacted the librarians at the University of Rochester’s Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, & Preservation to consult their collection of dime novels. I vaguely knew that dime novels, with their ludicrous and fanciful stories, anticipated twentieth-century comic books. I also knew that British dime novels, known as *penny dreadfuls*, introduced iconic characters such as Sherlock Holmes and Sweeney Todd. However, I had never seen an actual nineteenth-century

dime novel.

Within fifteen minutes at Rare Books, I had more dime novels than I knew what to do with. Manuscript Librarian Phyllis Andrews brought out a stack of texts measuring roughly six inches high. A closer look revealed that *dozens* of dime novels, each wafer-thin, made up this stack. Most of the novels were not catalogued, so Phyllis encouraged me to just dive in. She also gave me a copy of J. Randolph Cox's reference work, *The Dime Novel Companion* (2000), which explains that, although story papers and other pulp publications originated in the early 1800s, dime novels in the literal, *sold-for-a-dime* sense were published after 1860.

1. Pen and ink drawing of Francisco Solonois, page 13 of *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main: or, The Fiend of Blood. A Thrilling Story of the Buccaneer Times* by Edward Zane Carroll Judson, alias Ned Buntline (Boston, 1847). Photograph by Dan Gorman. Courtesy of the Dime Novel Collection, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester River Campus Libraries.

Leafing through my sample pile, I saw small dime novels formatted like a modern magazine and others the size of newspapers. After a few minutes of sifting and feeling a bit overwhelmed, I found a mid-sized title that sounded familiar—*The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main* (1847), written by the prolific dime novelist Edward Zane Carroll Judson, a.k.a. Ned Buntline. Thinking back to high school English class, I remembered that, in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, young Tom imagines himself as the Black Avenger. A look at the academic literature revealed that the connection between Judson and Mark Twain/Samuel Clemens had not been explored in depth. Intrigued, I re-read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and connected them to Judson's *Black Avenger*.

Judson's tale describes a runaway slave, Francisco Solonois, whose family is kidnapped by the governor of Cuba. Francisco expresses his desire to live a good Christian life, yet he argues that circumstances force him to commit piracy. The implication is that (male) vigilantism is permissible so long as the vigilante cites Christian morality as his justification. Judson portrays the protagonist's seventeen-year vendetta against the Cuban government through overblown prose, racist caricatures, and hapless female characters. Francisco

unleashes mayhem with the assistance of a self-loathing black hangman, Lobo, who speaks with mangled grammar. A handful of female characters attempt to aid Francisco and his allies, but the women are generally depicted as incompetent, and always accompanied by male chaperones. These themes resurface in at least one other pirate dime novel, Prentiss Ingraham's *The Black Pirate* (1882). Ingraham borrows Judson's ends-justify-the-means approach to vigilantism; he gives readers female characters devoid of agency (one gives up and kills herself moments before our heroes are rescued); and he reuses the pernicious stereotype of the murderous black man, which sadly appeared often in post-Civil War fiction. Judson and Ingraham glorified Protestant family life, but in a manner that is discomfiting when read today, due to their dime novels' ingrained misogyny and racism.

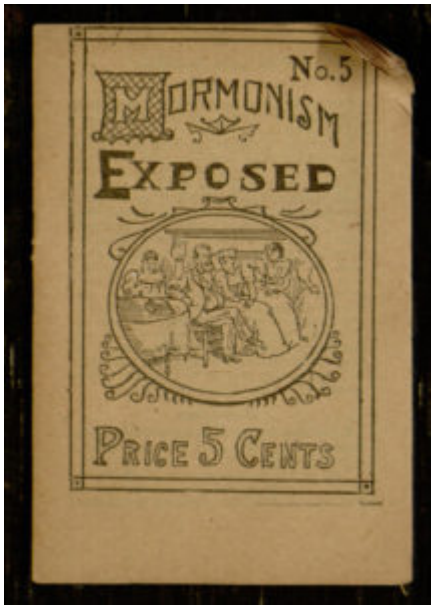
As for the Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain connection, Clemens in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) patterns young Tom on Francisco Solonois. Both characters are master manipulators who shirk normal expectations of behavior, although Tom just wants to have fun, rather than inflicting harm like Francisco. Like Judson, Clemens includes a violent non-white character (Injun Joe, instead of Lobo) and portrays women as passive (Becky Thatcher languishing in the caves while Tom seeks a way out, to name but one example). Still, Clemens shows some interest in mocking the conventions of dime novels. When Tom, Huck Finn, and Joe Harper run away to play pirates on Jackson's Island, they quickly run out of supplies and become homesick. Clemens thereby reminds his readers how difficult it would be to launch, let alone sustain, a multi-year crusade like that of Solonois.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), however, Clemens actively attacks the clichés of American pulp fiction instead of recycling and gently mocking them. The African American slave Jim is an active, noble character. Mary Jane Wilks and Aunt Polly play strong supporting roles: they are the opposite of the weak women in pirate stories (or Becky in *Tom Sawyer*, for that matter). Most of all, Clemens skewers the implausibility of dime novel plotting. When Tom and Huck plan to liberate a captured Jim, Tom foolishly makes the plot convoluted, so that it is more exciting—like a real-life dime novel. Tom's dramatic scheme proves a disaster. In this way, Clemens shows that the events described in dime novels, with all their unbelievable coincidences, cannot play out in reality.

2. Librarian Phyllis Andrews and Dan Gorman reminisce about *The Black Avenger* during the University of Rochester's Meliora Weekend, October 10, 2015. Photograph by Dan Gorman.

My work with Ned Buntline and the *Black Avenger of the Spanish Main* revealed that the lines between high and low culture were blurry in nineteenth-century America. Dime novels lacked critical acclaim, yet famous authors like Samuel Clemens readily drew from dime novel conventions. No wall separated pulp from art. Historians should continue to explore this intersection of prestigious and pulp literature, replacing rigid genre boundaries with a more fluid understanding of writing and reading in America.

Although I enjoyed the Black Avenger project, I didn't work much with dime novels during the rest of college. As I started graduate school at Villanova, however, dime novels returned to my life. When the librarians showed me around Special Collections, they revealed stacks of dime novels, some of which were being digitized for the first time. I recalled the despairing words of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part III*—"Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in"—but I spun those words in a positive way. Since I had access to extensive primary materials and many of the texts had never been studied, I decided to embrace this sign from the pulp heavens and get to work.



3. Cover of *Mormonism Exposed*, John Regan Five Cent Pamphlets (Chicago, 1896). Courtesy of Villanova University Library Special Collections, Villanova, Pennsylvania. Villanova University Digital Library, last modified January 9, 2014. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Maybe it was Villanova's Catholic ethos, or maybe it was because I'd written my senior thesis on Mormon portrayals in nineteenth-century newspapers, but I became curious about the treatment of religion in dime novels. Although it was clear that ideas of Protestant morality undergirded *Black Avenger*, I had relegated the topic of religion to the background of my project, focusing instead on the connections to the Tom Sawyer novels. What might I discover, I wondered, if I brought religion to the fore? With this approach in mind, I turned to a small, decaying pamphlet, *Mormonism Exposed*, which the J. Regan firm of Chicago published in 1896.

My investigation of this booklet focused on its literary contents and its material aspects, especially as they related to the dime novel industry. Supposedly authored by a "Mormon slave wife," *Mormonism Exposed* purports to be nonfiction, but it is almost certainly a false document—a thinly veiled Protestant critique of Mormonism sold as the account of a survivor. The book is not billed as a dime novel, but it sure reads like one. The *Exposed* author recounts the history of the Latter Day Saints (LDS) movement, but portrays the new religion as corrupt and immoral. Although most pulp fiction could be read by youths, *Exposed* does not seem like children's fare. The violent narrative deems Mormonism despotic, interrogates LDS theology at length, claims that Mormon secret societies kidnapped women to serve as sex slaves, and concludes by recounting the Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which Mormons and Native Americans wiped out a wagon train.

Ironically, the author ignored the changes in LDS society that were underway in 1896. The LDS Church had officially disavowed polygamy, and Utah was about to become a state. By printing this book, the Regan staff perpetuated longstanding criticisms and stereotypes of Mormonism, even as those criticisms ceased to

describe contemporary Mormons. It is true that many dime novels after 1896 used Mormons as villains, but these stories were set in the days of the American West long past. By contrast, *Mormonism Exposed* asserted that Mormons remained enemies of Americans in the present, thereby failing to reflect the changing attitudes of Protestants toward Mormons in the early twentieth century.

4. Back cover of *Mormonism Exposed*, John Regan Five Cent Pamphlets (Chicago, 1896). Note the strip of tape on the bottom, in the place that J. Regan books typically provided publisher data. Courtesy of Villanova University Library Special Collections, Villanova, Pennsylvania. Villanova University Digital Library, last modified January 9, 2014. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 3.0).

The edition of *Mormonism Exposed* that I studied had a strip of paper pasted on the back, in the spot that other Regan books listed their publication information. The paper strip suggests that another publisher wanted to hide that *Exposed* was a Regan publication. This practice reflects the widespread plagiarism and the purchasing of companies' excess stock, both of which occurred with some frequency in the dime novel industry. Dropping down the rabbit hole of alternate editions, I identified several versions of *Exposed*, one of which—A.B. Courtney's—was apparently from 1894, but was not available online in full-text form. Not long ago, Prof. Marlena E. Bremseth, the current editor of *Dime Novel Round-up*, showed me her copy of the Courtney edition. Sure enough, it was published in 1894, two years before the Regan version. While Courtney at this point seems like the original publisher of *Mormonism Exposed*, it's difficult to know for certain. Earlier variants may exist, in a chain of plagiarism or buyouts all the way down. In this way, *Exposed* speaks to the volatility of the nineteenth-century pulp industry: Buy or steal an existing book; slap a new cover on it; artfully conceal older publication information; and put the "new" text on sale.

I initially assumed that the five-cent price of *Exposed* meant the booklet was written for and marketed to working-class laborers. However, *Exposed* contains

advertisements for bulk orders of two luxury items: mechanical pencils and a dice game. These items may seem like trifles in 2016, but in 1896 the daily wage for a non-farm laborer was approximately $1.20. It's unlikely that a person making a dollar a day, who already spent five cents on a book, would then spend ninety cents on pencils, or seventy-five cents on games. As such, it seems that *Exposed* was meant for middle-class readers with extra spending money. At the very least, Regan did not publish its pulps exclusively for the working class.

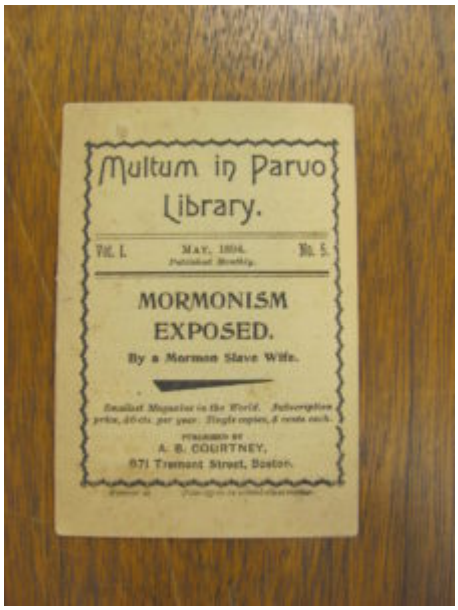
I could not confidently determine a target age group from *Exposed*'s ads (or from the book's cover price, although some historians speculate that nickel or dime prices denoted books for different age groups). Based on the content of *Exposed*, however, I doubt the book was meant for children. By appealing to an adult audience, Regan was out of step with current publishing practices. In 1896, most dime publishers were targeting an exclusively youthful audience, while Regan still aimed for adult readers. Similarly, Regan published *Exposed* with an understated black-and-white cover—showing a polygamist Mormon family reading—at a time when dime publishers were turning to sensational covers illustrated in color. Just as *Exposed*'s ideas lacked staying power, so too did its format fail to meet the changing conventions of the pulp industry.

5. Two religiously themed chapbooks from the J. Regan firm, *Mormonism Exposed* and *Spiritualism Exposed* (Chicago). Photograph by Dan Gorman. Courtesy of Villanova University Library Special Collections, Villanova, Pennsylvania. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 3.0).

After I published my paper on *Exposed*, I learned from Marlena that *Mormonism Exposed* is not a dime novel in the official sense (i.e., a cheap novel sold after 1860). Technically, this kind of small, (dubious) nonfiction pamphlet is called a chapbook. Marlena's suggestion reminded me to look beyond dime novels to analyze other formats in the pulp industry. In particular, Marlena prompted me to study documents that I had scanned as a volunteer for Villanova's Digital Library. Many of these documents constitute religious pulp literature, although they are not dime novels per se.

Consider the *Catholic Weekly Instructor*, a Philadelphia-area periodical for children from the 1840s. Some issues begin with fictional stories like those

found in story papers and other proto-dime novels, while other issues begin with essays and poems. Various other sections—Bible excerpts, Catholic Church news, travelogues, devotionals, jokes, advertisements, and even math questions—fill the remainder of each issue. A Catholic child reading the *Instructor* would encounter literature, even escapist stories, but in a manner approved by Catholic elders. In other words, the stories and essays reinforced a religious and social worldview that Catholic adults wanted their children to adopt.



6. *Mormonism Exposed: By a Mormon Slave Wife*. Multum in Parvo Library 1, No. 5 (Boston, May 1894). Photograph by Dan Gorman. Courtesy of the Marlena E. Bremseth Collection.

Texts like the *Catholic Weekly Instructor*, with their explicit references to Catholic customs and doctrines, provide historians with alternatives to the non-denominational Protestant perspective expressed in works like *Mormonism Exposed*, *Black Avenger*, and *Black Pirate*. Historians should further investigate the youth magazines of American Jews and other non-Protestant religions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The LDS Children's Friend, which existed from 1902 to 1972, comes to mind. By identifying pulp stories and literary ephemera written by non-Protestants, historians can construct counter-narratives of American religion within nineteenth-century popular culture.

I also digitized an 1898 volume from the New Sabbath Library, a short-lived series of moralistic Protestant dime novels. The volume in question contained a reprint of Rev. J.H. Ingraham's The Prince of the House of David (1855), a histrionic epistolary novel about a young Jewish woman caught up among Jesus' followers. In the context of the New Sabbath Library, *House of David* works as a devotional text and an evangelization tool, imparting the glory of Christianity to young readers. Very few secondary sources discuss the New Sabbath Library, although dime novel historian Nathan Vernon Madison wrote a blog surveying the series in 2011. However, historians know that religious pulp novels like those of the New Sabbath Library left their mark on at least one famous reader: Cecil

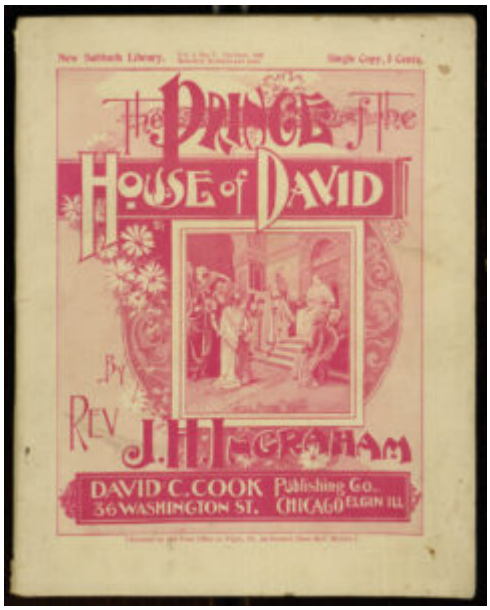
B. DeMille based his 1956 film, *The Ten Commandments*, on Rev. Ingraham's 1859 Moses novel, Pillar of Fire.

7. Cover page of *The Catholic Weekly Instructor* 4, No. 1, Whole No. 136 (Philadelphia, January 6, 1849). Courtesy of the *Catholic Weekly Instructor Collection*, Villanova University Library Special Collections, Villanova, Pennsylvania. Villanova University Digital Library, last modified June 23, 2015. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Essentially, the New Sabbath Library's editors were not satisfied with contemporary literature that simply reflected their worldview (as is the case in *Mormonism Exposed*, *Black Pirate*, and *Black Avenger*). Rather, the editors of the New Sabbath Library sought to write children's literature that foregrounded and actively promoted Christianity. The New Sabbath editors worked within the Protestant idiom that the *Catholic Weekly Instructor*'s editors challenged, but these Protestants and Catholics had the same strategy. They would use the conventions of pulp fiction to attack what they considered the sinful nature of pulp fiction. As Nathan Madison points out in his blog, advertisements for the New Sabbath Library made the editors' message of evangelization plain. According to the ad inside House of David's front cover: "To meet the growing demand for *pure literature* at popular prices, we began in April, 1898, the issue of a monthly publication entitl[e]d the New Sabbath Library…" As such, the New Sabbath editors would likely be happy that DeMille recycled *Pillar* as a movie, and that the film still airs at Easter time.

Despite the religiosity of these denominational pulps, we should not assume that religious dime novelists were exclusively wedded to pure literature. It is true that Rev. Ingraham wrote *House of David* and *Pillar of Fire*, but he also wrote pirate stories and other adventure pulps—the *sinful* kind of dime novel. His son Prentiss, author of *Black Pirate*, continued in this sensationalist vein. It seems that the Ingrahams were comfortable balancing their religious impulses with thrilling stories.

Historians have only scratched the surface of American dime novels. Unfortunately, two major obstacles impede the academic study of these stories: the overwhelming number of dime novels in American archives, and the fact that many archives have not catalogued individual volumes. Research projects like the ones I have embarked upon are regrettably piecemeal, looking at small samples of dime novels, while the full range of, say, pirate stories or religious dime novels remains unknown. If historians are truly to understand pulp literature, then they must collaborate with librarians, archivists, and antiquarians to track down and catalog surviving dime novels. This process will require historians to learn digital techniques like scanning, optical character recognition (OCR), and text mining, all of which are common in library science but are not yet standard parts of a history graduate degree. Nonetheless, the study of dime novels can be a rewarding one for historians who learn to wear multiple hats—much the way Rev. Ingraham learned to pivot between evangelist and fabulist.



8. Cover page of *The Prince of the House of David* by Rev. Joseph Holt Ingraham, New Sabbath Library 1, Vol. 7 (Chicago, October 1898). Courtesy of the New Sabbath Library Collection, Villanova University Library Special Collections, Villanova, Pennsylvania. Villanova University Digital Library, last modified January 18, 2015. Creative Commons License (CC BY-SA 3.0).

The ultimate goal in dime novel cataloging should be the creation of a national database of extant dime novels. Such a database would allow scholars to track trends in publishing over time and identify titles dealing with religion, gender, race, and other relevant topics. Villanova's ongoing Edward T. LeBlanc Memorial Dime Novel Bibliography is a step in this direction. Yet the LeBlanc Bibliography needs the help of more people—professional historians and interested citizens alike—to be completed.

A comprehensive database would open up dime novels to research in fields as diverse as the history of publishing, race and gender studies, and material culture. The study of religious pulp fiction, to take but one example, has

spatial implications. It would be illuminating to map the places where dime novels, magazines like the *Catholic Weekly Instructor*, and chapbooks like *Mormonism Exposed* were published, and then to classify the publishers based on the attitudes they expressed toward different religions. To identify a publisher's view of a religion is a subjective process, reliant on what the historian deems normative or not. Nonetheless, such a spatial project would show how religious opinions varied across the United States and among publishing houses. If the resulting dataset were run through a customizable application like CartoDB or Google Maps, historians could produce striking visualizations of these religious views, region by region.

Finally, historians should strive to make dime novels accessible not only to other researchers, but also to K-12 educators. The vast majority of dime novels are not great, or even good, literature. Yet the best of the stories still have entertainment value, while the worst—the most sexist, racist, xenophobic, and religiously bigoted—reveal the prejudices of past Americans. Dime novels are as educational as they are shocking, so they have great potential as teaching tools for high school teachers of history and English. Since most dime novels are now in the public domain, accessible dime novels would also provide educators with free primary source materials. HathiTrust, Project Gutenberg, and Google Books contain some nineteenth-century dime novels, but these websites provide only a small percentage of what was actually published. The holy grail of dime novel digitization would be to place the Library of Congress's enormous collection online. Until the Library obliges, academic historians should work with their universities to digitize local dime novel collections. Once the digital repositories are available online, historians should write lesson plans and discussion guides to accompany the texts. In this way, the study of dime novels could become a form of public history.

A broad swath of the American populace once consumed dime novels as disposable but diverting entertainment. In the process, readers likely absorbed some of the stories' ideas and biases. It is important to keep pursuing this line of historical inquiry, for dime novels provide rich insights into the popular culture of a past age. Besides, reading and interpreting tales of mummies, secret societies, pirates, and rogue religions never gets old.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Prof. Marlena E. Bremseth, the editor of *Dime Novel Round-up*; Demian Katz, Michael Foight, and Laura Bang of Villanova Library Special Collections; Phyllis Andrews of the University of Rochester Libraries, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, & Preservation; Dr. Joan Shelley Rubin of the University of Rochester, who advised my Ned Buntline project; Dr. Whitney Martinko of Villanova University, who advised my *Mormonism Exposed* project; and Dr. Wendy Woloson of Rutgers University-Camden, my editor for this essay. The friendly spirit of collaboration that I've experienced is one of the joys of working with dime novel scholars: Even when you're wrong, your colleagues are likely to be encouraging when offering criticism. Still, I have

learned that the historian of dime novels chases after loose ends, contradictory facts, and unclear terminology. Sometimes, it feels like falling down a rabbit hole of cultural history!

Further Reading

Michael Austin, "'As Much as Any Novelist Could Ask': Mormons in American Popular Fiction," *Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon, Volume Two: Literature, Art, Media, Tourism, and Sports*, edited by J. Michael Hunter (Santa Barbara, 2013).

The Beadle and Adams Dime Novel Digitization Project, Northern Illinois University Libraries.

Biography of "Col. Prentiss Ingraham," *The Beadle and Adams Dime Novel Digitization Project,* Northern Illinois University Libraries.

Biography of "Rev. Joseph Holt Ingraham," *The Beadle and Adams Dime Novel Digitization Project,* Northern Illinois University Libraries.

Ned Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson), *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main: Or, The Fiend of Blood. A Thrilling Story of the Buccaneer Times* (Boston, 1847).

Ned Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson), *The Hero of a Hundred Fights: Collected Stories from the Dime Novel King, From Buffalo Bill to Wild Bill Hickok*, edited by Clay Reynolds (New York, 2011).

Michael L. Cook, *Dime Novel Roundup: Annotated Index 1931-1981* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983).

J. Randolph Cox, ed., *Dashing Diamond Dick and Other Classic Dime Novels* (New York, 2007).

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

Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America,* from the Haymarket Series (New York, 1987).

Dime Novels from the Rare Book collections of the Library of Congress, LC online catalog, loc.gov.

The Edward T. LeBlanc Memorial Dime Novel Bibliography

Paul J. Erickson, "Judging Books By Their Covers: Format, the Implied Reader, and the 'Degeneration' of the Dime Novel," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 12:3 (September 1998): 248-263.

Chad J. Flake, ed., *A Mormon Bibliography, 1830-1930: Books, Pamphlets,*

Periodicals, and Broadsides Relating to the First Century of Mormonism, introduction by Dale L. Morgan (Salt Lake City, 1978).

Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York, 1997).

Daniel Gorman Jr., "The Untold Stories of Mormonism Exposed: Material Culture, Dime Novels, and Mormonism in American Society," *Concept: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Graduate Studies* 38 (2015): 18-45.

Daniel Gorman Jr., "The Joy of Piracy: Ned Buntline, Mark Twain, and the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main," eds. Mila Lemaster and William Patton, *Proceedings of the National Conference on Undergraduate Research* (2013): 574–582.

Index for Dime Novel Round-Up, Readseries.com.

Albert Johannsen, The House of Beadle & Adams and its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Story of a Vanished Literature (Norman, Okla., 1950).

Demian Katz, Paper for the People: Dime Novels and Early Mass Market Publishing, Villanova University Falvey Library Exhibits.

Nathan Vernon Madison, "An Interesting Find—The New Sabbath Library," *Argonotes* (April 23, 2011).

Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986).

John Springhall *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (New York, 1998).

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

This article originally appeared in issue 16.3 (Summer, 2016).

Daniel Gorman Jr. is a second-year history M.A. student at Villanova University. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of Rochester and is a member of Phi Beta Kappa. In Fall 2016, Dan is returning to Rochester for his PhD in American history. Dime novels are not the only religious topic Dan enjoys researching, but he is increasingly happy being the dime novel guy. Read more of Dan's work here and follow him on Twitter at @DanGorman2 and @TangentsUSA. He can also be reached at

dgormanjr14@gmail.com.