
Guardians of Morality: Librarians and American Girls' Series Fiction, 1890–1950

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the contentious relationship between the first few generations of librarians and series fiction for girls. Librarians and library boards had mixed responses to twentieth-century series books; they favored earlier postbellum series that taught girls traditional religious behavior and caretaking, by authors such as Louisa May Alcott and Martha Finley. While such series could certainly offer empowering kinds of agency, they left out a great many options that were opening up to women, including higher education, new professions, and individualized consumption. Keeping more contemporary series off library shelves also meant that librarians were boycotting most of the work of publishing syndicates, particularly the work of Edward Stratemeyer. Syndicate volumes were often viewed as immoral and dangerously influential by the newly professionalized arbiters of reading.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, reading became an increasingly important leisure activity for middle- and upper-class young women. Reading was a key method of self-cultivation and education, and as literacy and schooling became more valued for both women and men, the demand for reading material also increased. Historian Mary Kelley estimates that “approximately 90 percent of the adult white population, men and women, entered the literate category during the first part of the nineteenth century. By the 1840s America had the largest reading audience ever produced” (2002, p. 10). The increase in literacy had specific consequences for young women. More young women than ever could read, and they had access to an unprecedented range of periodicals and books. Girls were encouraged to read and write in their free time because such

activities furthered their cultural respectability, as well as augmented their formal education. By the late nineteenth century, high school education and extensive reading at home were seen as an economic insurance policy for girls, who could work as teachers if they did not marry right away (Hunter, 2002, pp. 58–62, 169–174).

Both public libraries and Sunday School libraries acted as free or inexpensive sources of reading material.¹ Those institutions did their best to stock books considered appropriate for young women, although public librarians eventually had to compromise their belief in moral reading for young women with girls' obvious desire for sensational romance. Middle- and upper-class girls were encouraged to read religious writing, history, philosophy, biography, travel writing, and science as part of a proper and thorough education. Parents, advice writers, and librarians considered novels a dubious form of reading; it was up to adults to make sure that their daughters read the "right" kinds of stories, novels that would demonstrate a woman's place within the home and family. "Proper" novels for girls generally included Scott, Austen, Dickens, and Alcott (Hunter, 2002, p. 57–62).

Series fiction for girls appeared after the Civil War, through female authors including Louisa May Alcott, creator of the *Little Women* series; Elizabeth Champney, author of the *Three Vassar Girls* and *Witch Winnie* series; Martha Finley, writer of the *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Mildred Keith* series; and Isabella Macdonald Alden, also known as "Pansy," who wrote the *Chautauqua Girls* and *Esther Reid* series. All these women were also authors of many individual novels. Much of this literature was religious and didactic, but also empowering in that it offered possibilities for girls to move beyond the home and into higher education or organizations like the Chautauqua Movement and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). While parents relied on reading to ensure the proper religious and moral behavior of their daughters, that same reading also allowed girls to glimpse a means for personal agency—the religious social reform organizations that gave women an outlet for meaningful, if often unpaid, work. Benevolence societies allowed young women contact with people of other races, ethnicities, and classes, people who desperately needed economic help and material comfort. While such people and their living conditions might have seemed like something out of a novel initially, plenty of benevolent women quickly found reason to identify with the working-class women they were trying to help. The larger national organizations that emerged in the postbellum period, like Chautauqua, the WCTU, and the expanding suffrage movement, gave women the skills to organize politically, to fight for legislative change, and improve their own circumstances as well as the circumstances of other women.

Alcott's, Finley's, and Alden's series were intended to promote a certain religious and social outlook, and in many cases they were intended as

recruiting tools as well as pleasurable fictions. The fact that Chautauqua and the WCTU both sustained themselves for three-quarters of a century is another indicator of their ability to recruit through multiple generations of women. Postbellum series fiction offered young women an introduction to a unique sort of social and moral empowerment focused on national housekeeping and religious and moral teaching. Fiction taught girls how to extend white, middle-class Protestant values to the lower classes and African Americans, although the extension of those values in the text was often uncomfortable and uneasy.

One example of the persistence of these values in series fiction can be found in the *Witch Winnie* series opening volume by Elizabeth Champney, published in 1889. Adelaide, Nellie, Emma, Milly, and Winnie, who all attend a boarding school known simply as “Madame’s,” decide that they would like to form a benevolent society to help city children. They encounter a child named Jim Halsey whose mother works as a seamstress and domestic. Mrs. Halsey has no spouse, and she knows many other families that have either one working parent or two. The parents cannot look after their children and earn money at the same time, so the children are often sent to exploitative child-care providers known as baby farmers, who provide mediocre child care and charge exorbitant rates.

The five schoolgirls recruit classmates to help them and organize a fair, the proceeds of which allow them to rent several floors of a nearby building for a year. They take donations of furniture and other items from the community and open the Home of the Elder Brother. The children of working parents are boarded, fed, sent to school, and taught basic trade skills. The parents contribute to their children’s board according to their income. The King’s Daughters, as the boarding-school girls christen their group, thus create a home where children can be safely cared for while their parents are earning money. Parents can see their children if they wish and still contribute to their children’s welfare without going beyond their means.

In an introductory note, Champney says the idea for the Home of the Elder Brother and the King’s Daughters society depicted in her book was inspired by a group of New York City children who raised money for the Messiah Home for Little Children, which functioned much like its fictional counterpart. She says that she hopes similar kinds of homes will emerge all over the country. This introduction reveals the extent to which fictional series mirrored actual charities and organizations sponsored and/or run by women. By re-creating the Messiah Home, Champney not only extends knowledge of the home and its operational methods to (presumably female) readers but also encourages them to sponsor similar homes wherever they happen to live. She takes an actual institution, translates it into a fictional medium, and, via her introduction, asks other women to duplicate the institution to serve society. With such open and

acknowledged interplay between the real and the fictional, authors like Champney, Finley, and Alden attempted to persuade their postbellum female readers to engage in social activism. Thus series fiction helped promote a more active and political "True Womanhood" in the postbellum period.²

By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the focus of girls' series books changed almost completely, and consumption exploded both in life and in print as the new method of individual, personal fulfillment, the modern road to happiness. Home décor, ready-made fashions, prepared foods, motor cars, and motion pictures are just some examples of the many enticing new items that could be paid for and enjoyed. Within the fictional world of series, the moral life that would have been familiar to the March girls and Elsie Dinsmore diminished considerably within a decade and a half, eclipsed by the novelty of a consumer society and a massive marketing machine that appealed to both readers and consumers (Hamilton-Honey, 2010, p. 142).

Series books published at the turn of the century were complicit in this newly emerging culture of consumption; after all, publishers wanted their readers to buy as many of their books as possible. Since girls in particular were encouraged to read for self-development, series books were a sensible place in which to promote the idea that consumerism was the new, modern road to self-fulfillment and happiness. Women and girls could pick and choose goods that suited their tastes, openly display their personality through the clothes they wore and their home furnishings, venture into public places of business and exercise power as customers, and fulfill their citizenship obligations all at the same time. Thanks to the rapidly expanding consumer economy, girls and women no longer needed a reason to be in male public spaces; they had a right and even an obligation to be there as responsible citizens (Hamilton-Honey, 2010, pp. 144–145).

Of course, the independence of women (actual and fictional) was not always complete; their purchasing power often depended on money provided by fathers or spouses. Series books from this period reveal a great deal of anxiety surrounding the new capitalist market in general and female consumers in particular. Disproportionate buying and spending could lead to moral corruption by fostering greed, materialism, self-indulgence, and selfishness. If women succumbed to the allure of consuming for its own sake, then the moral standard bearers of the country would be permanently tainted. Finding a balance between too much and too little and developing the liberating possibilities of consumption while minimizing its drawbacks became a central cultural concern. Series authors spent a great deal of time demonstrating responsible, balanced consumption and warning against the excesses that led to moral decay. These worries persisted throughout the girls' series fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, even

while girl heroines enjoyed the new delights of department stores, Hollywood films, and new inventions like motor cars (Hamilton-Honey, 2010, p. 145).

For librarians organizing and running the new free public libraries springing up between 1876 and 1920, series books posed a particularly vexing problem. The increasingly influential American Library Association (ALA) saw fiction in general and novels in particular as a problematic genre. Although the ALA left it to those in the academy to define what the “best” adult fiction was, professional librarians felt it their mission to make sure that young patrons read only beneficial books, whether fiction or not. “Best” reading included large doses of history, memoir, nonfiction, religious writing, and travelogues as well as novels. Librarians subscribed to “an ideology of reading shared with other middle-class professionals who believed that good reading led to good social behavior, bad reading to bad social behavior” (Wiegand, 2011, p. 3). Reading too much fiction, librarians believed, led to bad social behaviors that could include anything from laziness and selfishness to alcoholism and lust. The fact remained, however, that fiction was the most popular genre at most libraries, so professionally trained librarians had to weigh their conscience against the desires of their patrons.

Series books were particularly problematic because of the changing cultural messages they contained. Despite being fiction, those series published in the postbellum period were deliberately didactic, educational, and moral, encouraging girls to adhere to an older set of Christian values that did not challenge the status quo. The world of Alcott, Finley, and Alden was a safe, community-centered space that encouraged obedience and selflessness as well as social activism. Fin-de-siècle series like *Patty Fairfield*, *Grace Harlowe*, *Ruth Fielding*, and the *Outdoor Girls* were not nearly so simple; with their promotion of education, sports, travel, ecumenicalism, and above all, consumerism for girls, they upset long-standing assumptions about girls’ place in the community and the family.

The content of series fiction was not the only problem. Series books published at the beginning of the twentieth century were primarily turned out by publishing syndicates, most famously Edward Stratemeyer’s juvenile empire. Syndicates used ghost writers, paid flat fees for stories, and used pseudonyms for their authors instead of real names, all of which made them highly suspect businesses to the library profession. ALA members “deliberately crafted a profession independent of a publishing industry, which, they believed, was permanently tainted by the desire for profit” (Wiegand, 2011, p. 5). Ironically, of course, librarians were castigating the very industry that provided books for their patrons. However, the profit motives of the Stratemeyer Syndicate and other publishing companies meant, to librarians, that publishers were willing to peddle any kind of books the public would buy, whether they were “proper” and “best”

or not. Series were often seen as worthless drivel that would corrupt the minds of young people. Librarian Lucille Shanklin wrote to the *Wilson Bulletin* in 1935 to castigate the Stratemeyer Syndicate for “the machine-like regularity with which he and his hack writer assistants produced books about places where they had never been and people who acted like automatons” (as cited in Johnson, 1993, p. 164). At the same time, in communities where series books were in high demand, librarians might have been forced to compromise with their professional scruples, or may have decided not to limit series book acquisitions at all.

In addition, the ALA’s hostile attitude toward series fiction for youth made series fiction difficult for any librarians to endorse. Dime novels came in for the same sort of heavy-handed criticism. In the July–August 1921 *Bulletin of the Iowa Library Commission*, children’s librarian K. Irene Bowman pointed to another reason why the ALA did not endorse series fiction: it was, quite simply, too easy to read: “The fact that, after he had mastered the first book [of the series] he can sail through several volumes without mental effort, is exactly what makes the reading of series delightful to the child, and here is the greatest danger, for the child slips easily into the rut of easy reading” (as cited in Wiegand, 2011, p. 297). The idea that “easy” reading might provide a source of enjoyment and even potential areas of agency for young people apparently never occurred to the ALA; reading was supposed to be educational and engage the mind on a logical level beyond imagination.

Stratemeyer’s particular innovation as a series creator was to create a literature that not only combined new printing technology with the publishing techniques of dime novels but also melded the working-class excitement and action of dime novels with the morals and patriotism of middle-class domestic fiction. The result was fiction that was distinctly geared to middle-class adolescents, stories that appealed to their sense of adventure and fun and channeled most of the morality into secular ideas of loyalty, bravery, justice, patriotism, and friendship. However, the secular nature of Stratemeyer’s books as well as their dime-novel origins put him on the defensive with librarians, who were profoundly unhappy with his highly profitable success as a series publisher.

The Newark Public Library attempted to remove all books by Stratemeyer from its shelves in 1901, before Stratemeyer had even formed the Syndicate. Many libraries refused to carry any books produced by the Syndicate well into the twentieth century. As interest in the quality of childhood increased through the early part of the century, so did the criticism of the Syndicate’s volumes—criticism from professional librarians, educators, and community leaders. However, the vocal opposition did not hurt the Syndicate’s sales. In fact, the controversy in libraries ultimately helped sales of the books. The boycott by the Newark Public Library prompted Stratemeyer to write to the chairman of Newark’s Book Committee,

"Personally, it does not matter much to me whether or not my books are not put back on the shelves of the juvenile department. . . . Taking them out of the Library has more than tripled the sales in Newark" (as cited in Rehak, 2005, pp. 97–98).³

The debate over series books was much like an earlier postbellum debate over story papers and dime novels, an indication of the similarity of their origins and their cultural capital. Librarians saw the books as trashy, poorly written, and a threat to the morals of young readers, much the same reaction they had to dime novels for working adults a few decades earlier. When Stratemeyer was six years old, in 1868, Louisa May Alcott condemned story papers in the second half of *Little Women*; she did it again in *Eight Cousins*, published in 1874. It is ironic that Alcott denounced the very work that kept her family solvent, for she herself wrote for the story papers under various pseudonyms, as does her heroine Jo March. When Jo wins her first check from a prize story sponsored by one of the papers, she is ecstatic and sends Marmee and Beth to the sea for a month. However, her father says, "You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money" (Alcott, 1868–69/2000, p. 261). A little later in the story, it is her future husband Professor Bhaer who makes her realize the "evil" nature of the story papers: "I wish these papers did not come in the house; they are not for children to see, not young people to read. It is not well; and I haf [*sic*] no patience with those who make this harm. . . ." he says. "I do not like to think that good young girls should see such things. They are made pleasant to some, but I would more rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash" (Alcott, 1868–69/2000, p. 343). Jo promptly reads over her stories, finds them to be completely tasteless, condemns herself for going down a slippery slope to moral pollution, and burns them all in the stove. Alcott conveniently lets Jo keep the money "to pay for [her] time" (p. 344) while censuring the act and having Jo cease her story-paper writing. Thereafter Jo sticks to healthy, wholesome stories that win her eventual fame.

Damaged innocence and unwholesome reading were not the only objections of librarians and literary critics. Dime-novel reading (and later, series reading), critics argued, led to other dangerous behaviors, including gambling, drinking, and criminal activity. Alcott also echoed this concern in her "wholesome" literature. In *Eight Cousins*, Alcott presents a small lecture about dime novels when two of Rose's boy cousins are reading them. The boys' mother, Aunt Jessie, tells them that "[The books] give boys such wrong ideas of life and business; shows them so much evil and vulgarity that they need not know about, and makes the one success worth having a fortune, a lord's daughter, or some worldly honor, often not worth the time it takes to win. It does seem to me that some one might write stories that should be lively, natural, and helpful,—tales in which the English should be good, the morals pure, and the characters such as we can love

in spite of the faults that all may have" (Alcott, 1874/1927, p. 189). In other words, Alcott promotes works like her own, and simultaneously disavows her old type of writing and its legitimacy. Alcott wrote her "sensation" stories under a pseudonym for a reason, and after the phenomenal success of *Little Women*, she did not have to write them anymore to make money. No one connected her to the "cheap" stories from the papers until Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine Stern unearthed Alcott's story-paper pseudonym of A. M. Barnard in the 1940s. Stern then published edited collections of Alcott's stories and dime novels in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively.⁴ It is hard to know whether Alcott wrote her critiques of dime novels and story papers into *Little Women* and *Eight Cousins* merely to poke fun at herself, unbeknownst to her readers, or whether she actually regretted her involvement in the production of "cheap" literature. Since she regarded most of her later work as "moral pap" for young people, it seems quite possible that she did not share Aunt Jessie's moral scruples about "sensation" literature.

However, regardless of Alcott's actual feelings on the matter, cultural critics in the 1910s took up the thread of Alcott's protests and redirected them at the series books that Stratemeyer sold by the millions. The most vitriolic and inflammatory was an oft-cited article by Franklin Mathiews, the chief librarian of the Boy Scouts of America. Titled "Blowing Out the Boys' Brains" and published in 1914, the article excoriated both the Syndicate's methods of production and the moral substance of the books it produced: "As some boys read such books, their imaginations are literally 'blown-out,' and they go into life as terribly crippled as though by some material explosion they had lost a hand or foot," Mathiews wrote (as cited in Johnson, 1993, p. 163).

The debates continued through the 1950s, but Stratemeyer's books showed enormous success for decades after his death in 1930, and while he was still living he could literally afford to ignore the criticism hurled at him. It is important to note, however, that even though he was a practical man when it came to sales, he still took offense at the critiques hurled at his volumes and combated the notion that they were little better than dime novels. Stratemeyer felt that he was producing books that were morally clean, patriotic, and gave good models for behavior. His books were everything that dime novels were not and had never been; he wanted young people to be reading books that were good for them and would not give them evil ideas or bad habits. In a letter to W. F. Gregory, a manager for Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard of Boston who published Stratemeyer's writing under his own name, Stratemeyer conveyed his emphatic feelings about the quality of his books: "I do not claim everything for my books, but I do claim that they are clean and moral, written in good Anglo Saxon English, and that such works as have an historical and geographical background are historically and geographically correct. Boys and young men

of to-day are full of vigor and action and demand stories which shall suit such tastes" (E. Stratemeyer, 1862–1930; E. Stratemeyer to W. F. Gregory, letter, February 19, 1901). Stratemeyer's strong feelings about the morality of his books could be, he felt, backed by the many parents who happily bought his books for their children. It was always a small minority that condemned the works of the Syndicate, but since part of the minority contained people who decided what deserved the label of "good" literature, including librarians and literary critics, their voices had to be addressed.

Deidre Johnson hypothesizes that the real objection behind critics' moral posing was that the books gave young adults agency in a way that conventional literature for young people did not:

Traditionally, in the more acceptable children's literature of the period, adults give children necessary advice and impose restraints on them. In series fiction, however, the adolescents make their own crucial decisions. They demonstrate the intelligence, capability, and freedom of adults, in violation of this tradition. Children, not adults, become the moral arbiters and shapers of their fate. They willingly enter the adult world and compete on an even footing—a fantasy, certainly, but one that appeals to almost every child. (Johnson, 1993, p. 165)

In the pages of fiction, children act like adults, make responsible decisions under their own power, and have voices and opinions that are often ignored in real life. Series books gave young men and women a chance to make choices about who they wanted to be, what they wanted to do with their lives, outside the confines of adult authority. It did not hurt, either, that the Syndicate's books were in the price range of every child with a small income or allowance. Even girls could purchase an occasional book for themselves out of allowance money, provided their parents were not too strict about what they read. More resourceful young people often hid the books away or traded books with friends to get the most recent volume in a series.

Stratemeyer's correspondence suggests another possible reason for the fierce professional opposition that librarians erected against his books. Stratemeyer's strenuous defense of his books to Mr. Gregory at Lothrop, Lee & Shepard was in response to a report on fiction in the Boston Public Library, given to the trustees of that institution, in which Stratemeyer's books were criticized. A woman named Elizabeth Parker chaired the committee that authored the report, and Stratemeyer was angered by her comments that his books were "clean rubbish—very cheap and melodramatic." He continued, "It seems to me, if such public statements hurt my books in sale I can hold her, or the committee, responsible. If the Public Library of Boston does not wish to handle my books they need not do so, so far as I am concerned. I have made the writing of books for boys a close study for twelve years, and I think I know more about what such books ought to be than does some person who has probably never written

a juvenile in her life and who had never had any worldly experience” (E. Stratemeyer to W. F. Gregory, letter, February 19, 1901).

In his reply, Gregory recommended that Stratemeyer put some of his comments in a letter to the *Boston Transcript* and ask for a written defense in their pages (W. F. Gregory, 1863–1936; Gregory to E. Stratemeyer, letter, February 21, 1901). While I have not yet been able to determine whether Stratemeyer did so, or whether any defense of him was published, his comments would hardly endear him to either the Boston Public Library or the American Library Association. His letter to Gregory implies little respect for either libraries or their employees. His willingness to hold the library responsible if his sales are reduced indicates that he did not see libraries as a particularly important venue for exposing young people to the Syndicate’s literature. Nor does he seem to feel that library employees have any quantifiable knowledge of “good” literature; as a successful writer and producer of boys’ books for a dozen years, he feels he is in a much better position to educate librarians about quality reading for adolescents.

At the turn of the century, librarianship as a profession had finally attained a measure of stability. The American Library Association had been in existence for two and half decades; Andrew Carnegie had been donating money for library buildings for fifteen years, although the majority of his giving was yet to come (Bobinski, 1969, p. 14). However, there was still a serious lack of professionally trained librarians: “By 1900, there were almost 5,400 public, school, academic, and special libraries in the United States, but only some 377 graduates of all the library training schools were employed in them” (Bobinski, p. 110). With such small numbers, it is possible that librarians felt their position was tenuous unless they could establish themselves as essential to the community. As professionals, librarians felt it was their duty to recommend “good” books to the public, and thereby influence the morality of their patrons. Wiegand points out that many of the services established by early libraries were both efforts to make libraries necessary community institutions and to fulfill what librarians felt was their professional obligation to distribute “better” reading.

As a general rule they disapproved of popular works with mass appeal, preferring instead materials that had staying power and promised to uplift readers. . . . Work with children, immigrant’s [*sic*], the physically handicapped, the functionally illiterate; the establishment of travelling libraries to rural areas, circulating collections to local schools, branch libraries whose collections were tailored (within acceptable limits) to local populations; . . . all manifested the desire of turn-of-the-century public librarians to place the best reading into the hands of as many people as possible. (Wiegand, 1989, p. 3)

Of course, it was up to the librarians themselves, as well as the ALA, to determine what the “best reading” was, and often it did not include the

books of Edward Stratemeyer or his Syndicate, as the report to the Boston Public Library makes clear.

To understand ways that library officials might have negotiated the problem of series fiction for girls, I examined the collections of five small-town Midwest public libraries between roughly 1890 to 1970: the Morris Public Library of Morris, Illinois; the Charles H. Moore Library of Lexington, Michigan; the Sage Public Library of Osage, Iowa; the Bryant Library of Sauk Centre, Minnesota; and the Rhinelander Public Library of Rhinelander, Wisconsin.⁵ Since series books were so numerous from the 1870s onward, it would be nearly impossible to canvass the inventories for every series in existence. I chose eighteen popular series authors published from the 1870s through the 1950s, with the bulk of authors clustered around the turn of the century. Some authors, like Alcott and Carolyn Wells, wrote under their own names or under pseudonyms; others were pseudonyms created and controlled by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, like "Carolyn Keene" and "Laura Lee Hope." Some authors were also created (or were credited with) multiple series rather than just one; Isabella Alden, for example, wrote both the Chautauqua Girls and the Esther Reid series. Because Carolyn Wells was a successful mystery writer as well as a series author, I only included her series books when counting up her volumes from each library. I also included four popular male authors (Horatio Alger, Oliver Optic, Arthur M. Winfield, and Franklin W. Dixon) to see if there was any gender difference in librarians' perceptions about series and dime novel fiction.

There is, as might have been expected, a glaring lack of girls' series fiction published after 1900 in the libraries' collections. While the five libraries have older postbellum series in abundance, including Martha Finley's Elsie Dinsmore books, Elizabeth Champney's Three Vassar Girls, Isabella Alden's Chautauqua Girls, and literally hundreds of books by Louisa May Alcott, volumes of series published after the turn of the century are few and far between. There is the occasional exception; author Carolyn Wells, for example, wrote the Patty Fairfield series along with many mystery novels for adults, and libraries gladly stocked her Patty books for their patrons.

The lack of series books published in the 1910s and after can be explained in part by librarians' dislike of publishing syndicates in general, and their ire over the Stratemeyer Syndicate in particular. Newly professionalized librarians who had graduated from library schools often eliminated Stratemeyer's books completely from library shelves or deliberately blackballed the Syndicate's volumes in library acquisitions. Of course, in libraries where the hired librarian had not been through the rigorous training of library school, such rules and vendettas might have been relaxed or even nonexistent. However, the overall evidence suggests that librarians had very specific ideas about what constituted "proper" reading for girls and which books would teach them correct manners and morals.

At one end of the spectrum was the Morris Public Library (MPL) of Morris, Illinois, which seems to have avoided girls' series fiction of all kinds.⁶ The library opened in 1913, later than other libraries examined here, and its first librarian, Ethel Thayer, was a graduate of a summer library training program at the University of Illinois. She was a determined advocate of the ALA *Catalog*, its recommended list of "best" children's books, and its *Booklist* magazine. Records also indicate that Thayer actively tried to shift her patrons' interests toward practical information and nonfiction rather than novels. Thayer's successor, Dey Smith, also pushed for more nonfiction reading and practical community use of the library, teaming up with local teachers and encouraging school children to utilize the library for research and current events. Despite their efforts, however, fiction remained the largest circulating genre at the library, and while Thayer and Smith clearly did not keep fiction off the shelves, series fiction in particular was deemed an unacceptable form of reading for their patrons. Their perspectives can probably be attributed to library training they received in a University of Illinois summer program and the standards of the ALA (Wiegand, 2010).

Searching through the MPL catalog reveals that postbellum series authors Martha Finley, Isabella Alden, and Elizabeth Champney, who wrote nine girls' series between them, are not represented on the Morris shelves, even though they show up frequently in the inventories of the other libraries. Likewise, twentieth-century series are nearly nonexistent in the Morris inventory; there are no Rover Boys, Ruth Fielding, Outdoor Girls, Dorothy Chester, Betty Gordon, Girls of Central High, Cherry Ames, Hardy Boys, or Nancy Drew books. The few girls' series volumes that existed at the MPL may have been the result of donations, like the four Bobbsey Twins, acquired in 1923 (ten to nineteen years after publication); the first two volumes of the Betty Wales series by Margaret Warde, acquired in 1913 (the year after publication); one volume of the Grace Harlowe series, acquired in 1926 (three years after publication); and one volume of the Molly Brown series, acquired in 1926 (eleven years after publication).

Nonetheless, two exceptions to the moratorium on girls' series exist. The first is Carolyn Wells, who not only created the detective Fleming Stone but was also author of the Patty Fairfield books. Morris Public Library had seven of the seventeen volumes of the Patty Fairfield series—three of them in multiple copies—for a total of ten. The library acquired seven of those ten books within two years of publication, suggesting that it deliberately purchased the books rather than waiting for them to be donated. This might have been because Wells was both a popular author and *not* working for a publishing syndicate, and therefore was seen as a more respectable producer of fiction for girls. While it might be possible that an MPL official or librarian simply liked Wells and included her books without objections from anyone, the appearance of Wells's juvenile work

in all five of the libraries studied here implies that her writing was deemed culturally acceptable.

Predictably, Louisa May Alcott is the second exception and the one girls' series author to have consistent and constant popularity across all five libraries. The MPL held forty-nine Alcotts. Twenty-two were the three books that make up the Little Women trilogy: *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys*. Professional librarians clearly approved of Alcott's writing. For example, a September 1906 article in the *Bulletin of the Iowa Library Commission* mentioned Alcott as an author who "stood the test of time"; *Little Women* and *Little Men* were, according to editors, worthy of having multiple copies on library shelves (as cited in Wiegand, 2011, p. 58). Alcott's work is listed in the *A.L.A. Catalog* from 1893 (seven titles), 1904 (eleven titles), and 1926 (four titles, with two additional titles mentioned in the notes). Librarians' endorsement of Alcott probably resulted, at least in part, from her denouncement of story papers, dime novels, and "bad" series within the pages of her novels. Librarians might have also liked her promotion of resourcefulness, thrift, community benevolence, and unselfish behavior for female characters. Whatever their reasons, librarians approved Alcott's work from the start. Her books were some of the few explicitly written for girls that Morris patrons could take home and enjoy.

The Rhinelander Public Library (RPL) of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, followed a similar pattern. There are a minimal number of girls' series books in its collection, and Alcott has the greatest number of volumes, at eighty-six. Analyzing the acquisition dates for Alcott's books, however, is revealing: the earliest date given for an Alcott book at the RPL is 1900. Alcott published the first half of *Little Women* in 1868, and was immediately popular with readers, yet the Rhinelander did not have any of her work on its shelves when it opened in 1895. Interestingly, the first two RPL librarians were not library school graduates, yet library officials seem to have made it library policy not to acquire series fiction (Wiegand, 2011, pp. 95–97). There are two Horatio Algiers, one Elizabeth Champney (volume one of her *Witch Winnie* series), one Martha Finley (*Elsie on the Hudson*), four Oliver Optics, and five Isabella Aldens (all individual novels; no series) listed in the Rhinelander inventory. All were acquired between 1898 and 1900. The small numbers and consistent years of acquisition suggest that they were probably donations rather than books purchased with library funds. While the library officials may not have been willing to turn down donations for fear of offending townspeople, they plainly did not feel that series literature qualified as "good" reading. They may have also been influenced by the discriminating *A.L.A. Catalog*: the 1893, 1904, and 1926 editions do not list any of the five aforementioned authors.

As part of their plan to establish a new Carnegie Library building, the RPL Board hired Wisconsin Library School graduate Mary Smith in 1902

(Wiegand, 2011, pp. 97–98). Thereafter, the policy on series books in general, and Stratemeyer Syndicate books in particular, is clear: donation of series books were occasionally permitted, provided that the series in question were *not* Stratemeyer productions. The RPL possessed three volumes of the Patty Fairfield series, four volumes of the Betty Wales series, two volumes of the Grace Harlowe series, and two volumes of the Dorothy series, none of which were Stratemeyer productions.⁷ On the other hand, they did not own any Rover Boys, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Ruth Fielding, Betty Gordon, Girls of Central High, Outdoor Girls, or Bunny Brown books, all of which were Stratemeyer Syndicate staples. The one exception was six volumes of the Bobbsey Twins series, all acquired in 1933 and probably donated. Interestingly, the RPL Board seems to have made this distinction between Stratemeyer and non-Stratemeyer series fiction despite the fact that the *A.L.A. Catalogs* from 1904 and 1926 did not list *any* of the thirteen series mentioned above.

At the other end of the girls' series spectrum was the Sage Library of Osage, Iowa, which carried by far the greatest number of girls' series books in its collection. It is rather difficult to determine why this is so, for the Sage had community support from its patrons from its opening in 1876, but it was also used as a political pawn in town politics, frequently changing librarians and chronically underfunded, at least until a nine-person library board was established in 1895 (Wiegand, 2011, pp. 51–54). However, the one consistent community theme in Osage seemed to be that the library was there to provide its patrons with popular fiction and periodicals, rather than nonfiction, textbooks, or research materials (Wiegand, pp. 55–58). Wiegand also suggests that the board and librarians at the Sage deliberately crafted their inventory to suit the reading preferences of their patrons, and that those preferences were quite different from those of critics and librarians themselves. In her research on Sage Library patrons and their reading preferences between 1890 and 1895, Christine Pawley found that library users preferred a particular kind of uplifting literature:

In many ways, Sage Public Library users were the ideal audience for Christian success genre writings, directed as these were to middle-class, American-born Protestants. Christian success authors, with their nativist leanings, held up as an ideal the independent farmers, merchants, and craftworkers who formed the bulk of Osage's population. This literature was anachronistic, but from the perspective of Osage's Protestant middle class, it had real meaning. (Pawley, 2001, pp. 104–105)

Authors like Isabella Alden and Martha Finley, in other words, would have fit squarely into the reading preferences of Sage patrons, with their highly religious and uplifting writings about Christian generosity, hard work, and moral behavior. Alden, in fact, was the Sage's most popular author between 1890 and 1895, according to Pawley. She estimates that

Alden's books had 456 borrowers between 1890 and 1895, and notes that her numbers are probably a low estimate (2001, pp. 95–96). The Sage had seventy-two books by Alden, including nine of her Chautauqua Girls series and five of the Esther Reid series. The sheer number of books—many more than in the other four libraries—suggests that Alden was tremendously popular with Sage patrons. Similarly, the Sage also had the greatest number of volumes by Louisa May Alcott (132), Horatio Alger (36), Carolyn Wells (41 series volumes), and Oliver Optic (80). Except for Wells, all of these authors became famous in the postbellum period; all advocated hard work, faith, charity, responsible consumption, and class mobility.

Notable blank spots, however, appear even in the Sage's collection, most of them after 1900. It contained eleven volumes in the Betty Wales series, while the Bryant Library in Sauk Centre, MN had fourteen. There were fourteen volumes in the Cherry Ames series at the Sage, while the Moore Library in Lexington, MI had nineteen. However, there are no volumes listed for "Arthur M. Winfield," pen name of Edward Stratemeyer. Likewise, there are no books by Gertrude Morrison or Alice B. Emerson, both Syndicate pseudonyms. The Molly Brown and Grace Harlowe series, authored by Nell Speed and Jessie Flower respectively, are also absent, even though neither series was a Stratemeyer creation. Interestingly, there are three Stratemeyer Syndicate series represented in the Sage's collection (The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and the Bobbsey Twins), but almost all of the 144 books from those series were acquired in the 1950s and 1960s, anywhere from twenty-three to sixty-five years after the series were created. It appears that while the Sage did acquire books to suit its readership, and was not afraid to stock even dime novels from the postbellum period, it still avoided some of the "suspect" series turned out by Stratemeyer and his competitors until well into the mid-twentieth century.⁸

Concerning series fiction for youth, the Moore Library of Lexington, Michigan rests between the Sage and MPL. Several factors make the Moore unique among the five libraries studied here. The library in Lexington was established in 1899 and initially run by the women of the Lexington Athenaeum Literary Society. Four years later, the society purchased a new building to house both the library and their offices, and moved the more than one thousand books to their new quarters. The first two librarians at the Moore, Anna Henry and Florence Walther, were local women citizens of Lexington from respected families, neither of whom had library school training. Both catered to their community's reading needs, but neither made significant efforts to cooperate with the Michigan Board of Library Commissions or the Michigan Library Association (Wiegand, 2011, pp. 80–83). The acquisitions for the library were driven by community taste and demand.

The Moore also differed from the other libraries in this sample because Lexington was a tourist destination and hosted summer residents who came

north from Detroit in order to enjoy the pleasures of Lake Huron. After the failure of the lumber trade in Lexington in the 1880s, the town was dependent on agriculture and summer tourism for its economy (Wiegand, 2011, pp. 77, 81–82). The library was expected to provide recreational reading for vacationers, which meant a great deal of fiction and less of the “useful” nonfiction reading promoted by professionally trained librarians.

As a result, the Moore has the second-largest number of series books of any library among the five, coming after the Sage Library, and the breadth of its collection is considerably greater than the Sage. Catering to families with children, and tourists who wanted relaxing, light fiction to read, the Moore had an impressively wide range of series books. Lexington tourists often donated their own spare books at the end of vacation, which, along with the library board’s accommodation of tourist needs and reading demands, explains why the Moore has such an abundance of popular reading (Wiegand, 2011, p. 85). In cases where the Moore did not have *series* books by a popular author, they almost always stocked individual novels, nor did they shy away from Stratemeyer Syndicate productions.

For example, the Moore inventory shows eight novels by Isabella Alden or “Pansy,” but none are from her popular Chautauqua Girls and Esther Reid series; they are simply her stand-alone creations. The eighteen volumes authored by Louisa May Alcott encompass both her Little Women series and her single novels. Finally, the Moore inventory contains all twenty-eight volumes of Martha Finley’s Elsie Dinsmore series, one copy of each, as well as all seven volumes of the Mildred Keith series.

Most of the books by these three authors were on the shelves for the library opening or shortly thereafter. Six of Isabella Alden’s novels were acquired in 1903 and 1904; fourteen of the eighteen Alcott volumes in the Moore’s inventory were acquired in 1903; and the entire Elsie Dinsmore series was acquired between 1904 and 1907. The Mildred Keith books were acquired in 1908 and 1909. Given the fact that the Moore opened in 1903, well after the majority of Alcott, Finley, and Alden’s books had been written, one of two scenarios is possible. The first is that Alcott, Finley, and Alden’s books were among the thousand volumes that the Moore inherited from the Lexington Athenaeum Literary Society and its subscription library. In that case, the volumes would have been circulating in Lexington for four years prior to the opening of the Moore and may have already had devoted readers. The second possibility is that librarians went out of their way to acquire the books, either through donations or outright purchase, because patrons desired them. This is particularly likely for any of the books that were acquired in 1904 and after.

At the same time, there were contemporary girls’ series making their way onto library shelves as they were published. Newer series included Patty Fairfield, Betty Wales, Grace Harlowe, Molly Brown, Ruth Fielding, the Outdoor Girls, the Blythe Girls, the Moving Picture Girls, Bunny

Brown, The Bobbsey Twins, the Girls of Central High, Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and Cherry Ames. Even Edward Stratemeyer's Rover Boys, which he authored himself, were represented on the Moore's shelves, which contained eleven of the thirty volumes. While the Moore did not seem to worry about collecting complete series for its patrons, it certainly tried to have in its collection at least a sampling of most contemporary series, which surely would have made its juvenile patrons happy. The local paper noted that librarian Anna Henry reviewed all of the works of popular fiction herself "and sees to it that nothing of a harmful or doubtful character is placed before the young" (as cited in Wiegand, 2011, p. 80). While professionally trained librarians might have looked down on series fiction, Anna Henry clearly did not share their taste or their prejudices, and given the amount of series fiction on the shelves, Moore patrons clearly disagreed with professional librarians as well.

In fact, there were a considerable number of parents and prominent community members who supported the idea of novels and series fiction in the library. One such example was Illinois Supreme Court Justice O. N. Carter, who spoke at the MPL's dedication. Carter thought money spent on schools and books was money saved on jails, but he also chastised librarians for keeping novels off the shelves, especially when it came to fiction for young people. "When some of us were children, we were forbidden to look at a novel," he noted. "The parents of today are no longer so unwise. . . . The readers themselves, if permitted, will make the proper selection" (as cited in Wiegand, 2011, pp. 217–218).

Another example can be found in the words of Ernest Ayres, owner of a Boise, Idaho bookstore. Ayres responded to a "Not Recommended for Circulation" list in the *Wilson [Library] Bulletin* that targeted such series writers as Alger, Finley, Hope, Oliver Optic, and Edward Ellis. "Why worry about censorship, so long as we have librarians? . . . Is it the place of librarians, holding a position as trustee of public funds, to tell men and women who enjoyed those books when they were young, that their children shall not be allowed to read the same titles?" (as cited in Wiegand, 2011, p. 151). Ayres pointed to the beginnings of a trend that would eventually wear down libraries' resistance to series fiction: multiple generations of readers. If parents of the twenties and thirties were looking for copies of Alger, Optic, Alcott, Finley, and Alden for their children to read, children who grew up in that same time period would be looking for Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, the Outdoor Girls, and the Bobbsey Twins in the fifties and sixties, wanting their own children to read the Stratemeyer books they had loved as young readers. While three of the five libraries examined here (Bryant, MPL, and RPL) owned eleven Stratemeyer volumes *between* them in my sample of authors, the Sage and the Moore both owned substantial numbers of Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, and Bobbsey Twins books, anywhere from twenty-five to eighty-five for each series.

What is more interesting, though, is that the majority of these books were not acquired until the 1950s and beyond. For instance, the Moore owned seventy-two volumes of Nancy Drew mysteries, but only six were acquired before 1950; the rest were acquired during the 1950s and 1960s. The Sage owned seventy-seven Hardy Boys volumes, and sixty-five of them were acquired between 1950 and 1969. Similarly, all twenty-five volumes of the Bobbsey Twins owned by the Sage were acquired in the 1950s.

So, despite their unpopularity with professional librarians and associations like the ALA and the Iowa Library Commission, series books remained a popular genre with both boys and girls, who bought them at local stationery stores and book vendors if they could not borrow them from the public library. A significant number of parents and community leaders, as well, felt that series reading was harmless, an enjoyable and nurturing experience for their children. Whether they were looking for the postbellum dime novels and domestic fiction series that they had read as young people, or whether they simply enjoyed watching their own children read series produced for a new generation, a significant number of adults endorsed series reading—enough that Edward Stratemeyer did not have to worry about the status of his books in public libraries. Between the adolescents who bought his books in droves at local bookstores or stationers and parents who purchased his books for Christmas and birthday gifts, the amount of sales that would have resulted from public library acquisitions would hardly have affected his overall profits.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, libraries had to choose between several positions when it came to girls' series fiction generally and Stratemeyer Syndicate fiction in particular. The first was to avoid series books altogether, like the Morris Public Library, which, aside from a handful of donated volumes, only carried series fiction by Louisa Alcott and Carolyn Wells. The MPL also had a trained librarian when it opened in 1913, and doubtless Ethel Thayer relied on *Booklist* and the *A.L.A. Catalog* to make purchases for the library shelves. The Morris's second librarian, Dey Smith, was trained as well. Based on their acquisition lists, the Rhinelander Public Library had a policy similar to the Morris.

The second possible position for libraries was to strike a compromise by freely acquiring girls' series from the postbellum period, series which taught girls to be upright Christian citizens and mothers, contributing to their communities through philanthropy and social reform. Series such as *Little Women*, *Elsie Dinsmore*, *Mildred Keith*, and the *Chautauqua Girls* promoted more traditional behavior for young women, avoiding the controversy surrounding the new consumer economy and the freedoms provided by new inventions like motor cars, department stores, and motion pictures. In addition, older postbellum series were penned by one

author, not many ghostwriters, and their profits did not go to publishing syndicates like Stratemeyer's. Libraries that made this choice, such as the Bryant, also might have acquired an occasional modern series like Patty Fairfield or Betty Wales, which were non-Stratemeyer products and written by a single author. The Sage also appears to have adopted this policy until the 1950s, when they began acquiring many volumes of the three most popular Stratemeyer productions: the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, and the Hardy Boys.

The third possibility, and the one that seems to have been adopted most infrequently, was to let community demand dictate library acquisitions and allow both postbellum and twentieth-century series fiction onto the library shelves. The Moore Library freely allowed any and all kinds of girls' series onto its shelves, from Alcott's postbellum work to Stratemeyer's new and plucky heroines. As has been stated already, however, the Moore was unique among the five libraries studied here: it was in a village that supported itself through summer tourism, and it only had two librarians in its first fifty years, neither of whom was professionally trained. Thanks to the wide and varied fiction acquisitions, the tourists came to the Moore in droves, and kept the library's circulation rates three times higher than that of other Michigan libraries (Wiegand, 2011, p. 256). The Moore attempted to satisfy the demands of its readers to the greatest extent possible within limits set by those readers; it did *not* try to mediate or redirect their reading tastes, as many other libraries did.

While most libraries may have done their best to control which series their young female patrons read, out of the belief that good reading would lead to good behavior, they were ultimately working against too many cultural forces, not the least of which were girls themselves. If the adventures of Ruth Fielding, Grace Harlowe, Patty Fairfield, the Outdoor Girls, Cherry Ames, and Nancy Drew were not available on library shelves, girls found other avenues through which to buy or borrow series books, utilizing friends, parents, and their own pocket money to obtain the latest volumes. Series fiction offered new perspectives on a world that was opening up for educated and empowered young women. Girls were trying to find their way in a growing consumer economy and a rapidly changing social landscape, and the heroines of series fiction offered them models for becoming independent and resourceful young women.

NOTES

1. Sunday school libraries were established much earlier than free public libraries, which did not come into existence until the last half of the nineteenth century. Subscription libraries were more common, where members would pay for access to a shared collection of books. As Carol Mattingly points out in her study of women's temperance literature, "Sunday school distribution was of supreme importance because, for most of the nineteenth century, Sunday school libraries provided the only publicly accessible books for the majority of Americans" (1998, p. 125).

2. Historian Barbara Welter coined and defined this term in her 1966 essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860." "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society," Welter says, "could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. Religion or piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (p. 152).
3. Some clarification is required here. Stratemeyer could afford to ignore the criticisms of librarians because even if a library had his books on their shelves, they did not generate much income for him or the Syndicate. Those libraries that did carry his books generally only bought them once, and after that they were free to library members. If a library refused to carry Syndicate series, youth or their parents would have to buy the books in order to read them, thus increasing Stratemeyer's sales. Stratemeyer *did* worry about his sales in general; he monitored royalty statements, complained to his publishers when he felt they were not doing enough to sell his books, and sometimes would even pull the publication rights for his books from one publisher and give them to another firm.
4. For further information about this discovery, see Rostenberg (1997), and Stern (1997).
5. The database containing these library inventories was put together by Wayne Wiegand and his research assistants. Without all of their extensive and painstaking scholarly work, this article would not have been possible. It should also be noted that parts of this article were taken or adapted from my dissertation and book manuscript, *From Spiritual Guides to Eager Consumers: American Girls' Series Fiction, 1865-1930*, currently under contract with McFarland Publishers.
6. For a more complete history of the Morris Library and its evolution as a civic institution, see Wiegand (2010).
7. The first two Dorothy Chester books were originally outlined by and written for Stratemeyer, but Stratemeyer ultimately decided that he did not want the series. He planned to pull it from publisher Chatterton-Peck, but the publishing firm persuaded Evelyn Raymond to continue writing at least some of the subsequent volumes, and took over the creation of the Dorothy Chester series. It is not known if Raymond wrote all of the books, though she certainly wrote a number of them. The books became simply the Dorothy books when they were issued by publishers Platt & Peck in 1914. Stratemeyer sold the printing plates for the first two Dorothy books as well as another Raymond manuscript. I am very grateful to Stratemeyer scholar James Keeline for this clarification.
8. It is also possible that the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books acquired during this time were the "second generation," revised versions of the series that the Syndicate began to publish in 1959. Similar revisions were undertaken for the Bobbsey Twins series beginning in 1950. All of the changes were intended to update the stories for a new generation of readers. Cars, clothing, hairstyles, and even slang were all changed, and in many cases the plots were reworked and the books were shortened substantially.

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