

A Collection of Value: Mass-market Paperbacks at the Library of Congress

SUMMARY

This paper discusses the history and current status of mass-market paperbacks at the Library of Congress. Particular attention is placed on the research value of paperbacks, and the obstacles these traditionally expendable works have faced in gaining acceptance within the world's largest library. The unique manner in which the deposits of the Copyright Office have been utilized in building the collection is also investigated.

A WATERSHED EVENT

In 1870, the United States Congress passed a new copyright law which decreed that "all records and other things relating to copyrights and required by law to be preserved, shall be under the control of the Librarian of Congress." The legislation called for claimants to deposit with the Librarian two complementary copies of any copyrighted book, map, chart, dramatic or musical composition, engraving, cut, print, or photograph within ten days of publication.

The foremost champion of the new law on the floor of the House of Representatives was Thomas Jenckes of Rhode Island. Arguing for its passage on April 14, 1870, he stated that "when we change the place of registration to the Library of Congress, to transfer also to the Library of Congress, where it can be exhibited and taken care of, all this mass of American literature now stored away in the recesses of the Interior Department.¹ These books should be so arranged and cataloged as to be accessible to all. There are many valuable works there, and no doubt a great deal of trash; but still all of them have value in an historical point of view. Even the school-books showing the progress of education in this country will have some value to some persons. With the transfer of these books to the Library it will place them where they will be convenient of access. With these books, and those placed there hereafter for protection of copyrights, the Library of Congress will

possess properly arranged and cataloged complete copies of all works published in America" (Library of Congress, 1946, p. 105).

For Ainsworth Rand Spofford, Librarian of Congress from 1864 to 1897, "the great copyright law of 1870" would prove to be the chief instrument in fulfilling his



Fig. 1. Library of Congress stack area used to house the Copyright Paperback Collection

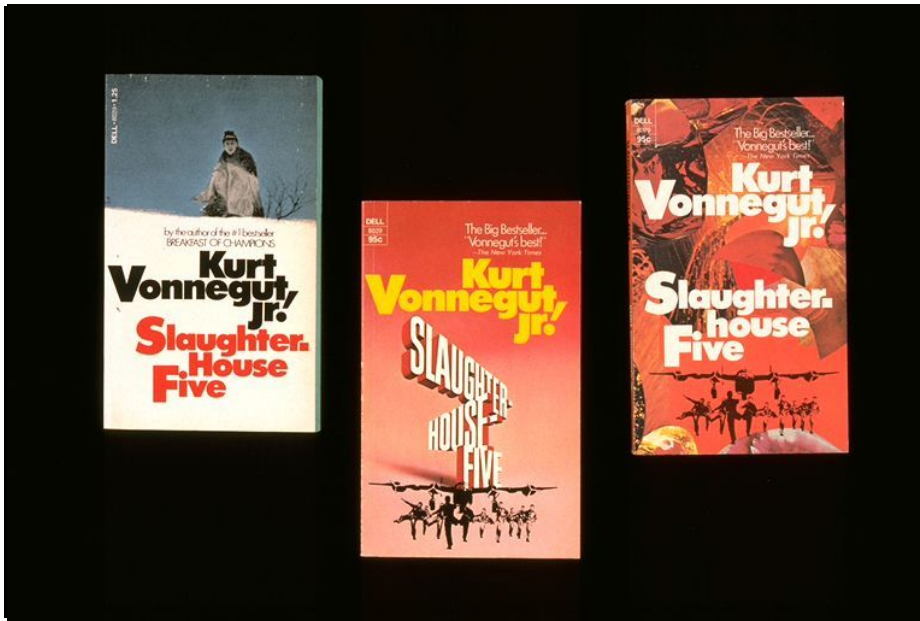


Fig. 2. Several different printings of Slaughter-House Five done over the years from the archival set of Dell paperbacks.

dream of making the Library of Congress the National Library of the United States. The unrelenting growth of copyright receipts, however, provided a sobering element to this watershed event. Spofford quickly discovered that the Library, then located in the Capitol Building, lacked both sufficient cataloging staff and physical space to handle the influx of new materials.

When the Library moved to the new Thomas Jefferson Building in 1897, these problems were only partially rectified. Congressman Jenckes' belief that the Library would be able to arrange and catalog "all works published in America" proved to be untenable. Only certain portions of the copyright receipts were to be incorporated into the Library's collections. As a rule, the greater portion of mass produced paperbound literature was rejected by personnel engaged in selection.

Surprisingly, it would not be until the late 1970s that the Library of Congress initiated a systematic effort to collect mass-market paperbacks. To fully appreciate why this decision was made, it is necessary to examine how materials viewed as precursors to the modern paperback had earlier found their way into the Library's holdings.

DIME NOVELS, PULP MAGAZINES, AND COMICS

Under the curatorship of V. Valta Parma, the Library of Congress opened its first reading room expressly designed to service rare books in 1927. The new section was promptly stocked with books which would traditionally define a well-rounded rare book library—including substantial holdings of incunabula, sixteenth century English

imprints, and early examples of printing in colonial America.

In the midst of these treasures, however, Parma had also shelved more than 20,000 dime novels--the largest gathering of these mass produced paperbound works in any American library up to that time. The collection was culled from the Rare Book Curator's frequent expeditions into the storage areas of the Copyright Office, then located in the cellar of the Thomas Jefferson Building. Parma would later describe the environment of the cellar as a place of "dirt, dampness, leaking pipes, and rats" (Archives of the Library of Congress, Parma, 1939).

It is not entirely clear today what motivated Valta Parma to rescue these traditionally scorned tales of "blood and

thunder." Although not considered monetarily valuable during the 20s and 30s, was he able to look into the future and envision the day when dime novels would be highly collectable pieces of Americana? Was he aware that the pseudonyms for some of the authors disguised first editions of Louisa May Alcott, Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser? Or that the third issue of Beadle's *Book of Fun* (1864) contained the first printing of Mark Twain's *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*? Did he have a premonition that some of the dime novels transferred, such as *The Phantom Coach* (Dawley's Ghost and Vampire Series, 1864), and *War-Axe* (Dick and Fitzgerald's Bordertale Series, 1863), were so scarce that it would subsequently be determined they were the only extant copies? Or was he simply reliving a boyhood enthusiasm in protecting these salutes to Buffalo Bill and Kit Carson?

Regardless of his motivations, we can be grateful for Parma's actions, for the Dime Novel Collection is today one of the main national resources for the study of mass produced literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The output of the major dime novel publishing houses of Beadle and Adams, Frank Tousey, George Munro, and Street and Smith are all well represented. The Collection also allows investigators to study the various formats in which dime novels appeared, from the booklets of the 1860s bound in orange paper, to the brightly colored octavos popular from the 1890s.

The Serial and Government Publications Division has also drawn from the copyright deposits to build substantial collections of pulp magazines and comic books. Happily for students of popular culture, the Library's collections

policy which had originally decreed that these materials not be retained was generally ignored.

Making their initial debut in the 1890s, pulp magazines were popular reading material for 60 years. Printed on cheap acidic paper with untrimmed edges, a common characteristic of the “pulp” was their richly illustrated color covers. The magazines featured sensationalistic stories of mystery, adventure, romance, sports, and science fiction—genres that would later influence the modern paperback. The format helped launch the careers of writers such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, H. P. Lovecraft, and Isaac Asimov (Melville, 1980, p. 282).

Comprised of over 15,000 issues from approximately 300 pulp magazines, the highly acidic nature of the paper led the Serial and Government Publications Division to recently microfilm the texts of the magazines, while retaining the much valued color covers.

The Comic Book Collection contains over 6,000 titles dating from the 1930s to the present. Due to the extreme brittleness and high collectible value of many of the comic books, the Serial and Government Publications Division has restricted the use of the Collection only to patrons who show a sincere and scholarly research interest in the history and influence of the format. A microfiche collection exists for the early numbers of five of the most famous comic book series: *Action Comics*, *Adventure Comics*, *All Star Comics*, *Batman*, and *Superman*.

THE DELL ARCHIVE COMES TO WASHINGTON

Inspired by the idiosyncratic collecting instincts of V. Valta Parma, the Rare Book and Special Collections Division has continued to safeguard popular culture collections that one would not necessarily expect to find in an antiquarian setting. Patrons interested in the evolutionary development of the modern paperback will likely be intrigued with the pristine and complete set of the Armed Services Editions—the paperbound books distributed to American military personnel during the Second World War by the Council on Books in Wartime. The 122 million books produced for this project undoubtedly helped spur post-war sales of paperbacks as the soldiers and sailors returned to civilian life (Cole, 1984). Also of interest is the Division's gathering of “Little Blue Books”—the remarkable series published in Kansas by E. Haldeman-Julius. Starting in the 1920s, it is estimated that more than 300 million of these pocket-sized works bound in blue paper were sold via mail order.

In 1976, Helen Meyer, Chairman of the Board for the Dell Publishing Company, offered to the Library of Congress a nearly complete archival set of 8,500 Dell paperbacks, beginning with the first published title from 1943—Philip Ketchum's *Death in the Library* (Lyles, 1983).

William Matheson, Chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division at this time, gladly accepted the Dell gift. In addition to complementing the other aforementioned collections in the Library, Matheson was aware that there had been a marked increase of interest in mass-market paperbacks among bibliophiles, especially in science fiction and detective titles. All the early Dell paperbacks were murder mysteries, and the distinctive colored maps of the crime scenes which regularly appeared on the back covers from 1943 to 1951 were much sought after by collectors.

The Dell Paperback Collection also provided a significant research tool into the history of American paperback publishing, which had expanded from its modest beginnings in the 1930s to become a major force in the publishing industry. Researchers could now investigate how merchandising techniques for mass-market paperbacks had changed over the years, as reflected in the art work, cover design, pricing, and promotions for movie adaptations. Studies could also be performed on the changing reading tastes of the American public in popular

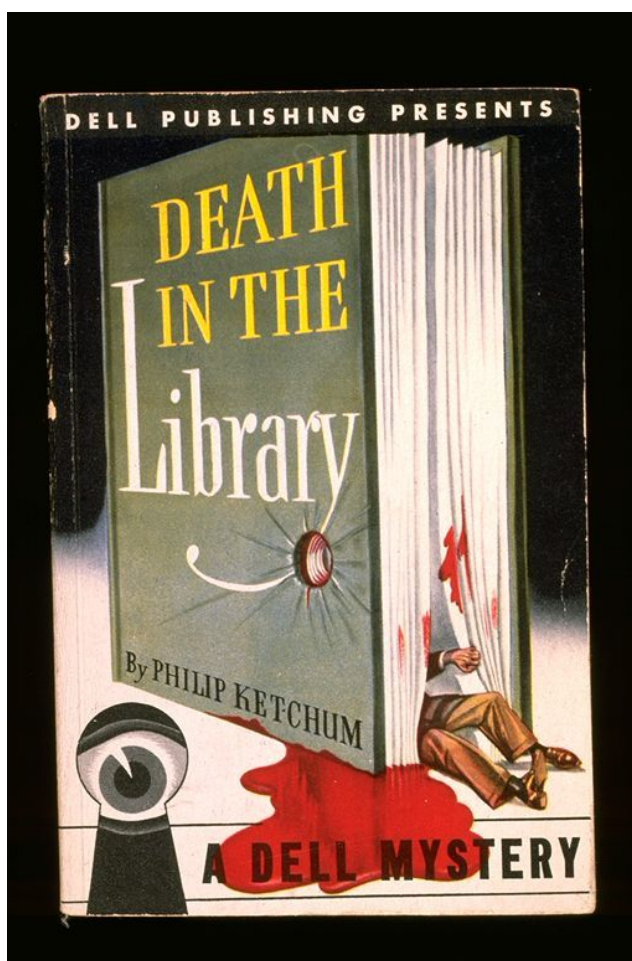


Fig. 3. Philip Ketchum's *Death in the Library* (1943) was the first paperback issued by Dell

fiction, from the early dominance of the detective story, to the rise of the romance novel in the early 1970s. Additionally, bibliographers would now be able to do a more complete study of particular authors. The Dell archive contains the first paperback editions of works by Kurt Vonnegut, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and J. P. Donleavy.

The study of the Collection was aided immeasurably by the scholarly work of William H. Lyles. In a letter of appreciation to Helen Meyer dated July 14, 1977, Lyles stated "I believe I was the first person to use the collection, a use of which prompts this letter. I am currently working on a book about the Dell paperbacks, the format of which will include text concerning the history of Dell, illustrations of early covers and maps from the back covers, numerical lists of titles, subject list, list of maps, author and title list, and something for lack of a better name I am calling Front Cover Iconography--a list of motifs on the front covers. If all of this sounds complex, I can only say that early mass-market paperbacks are now and will continue to be studied seriously, a fact which must have prompted your gift to the Library of Congress."

Lyles would subsequently author two books which would fully turn his intentions expressed to Ms. Meyer into a reality: *Putting Dell on the Map: a History of the Dell Paperbacks* (1983), and *Dell Paperbacks, 1942 to mid-1962: a Catalog-Index* (1983). The bibliographic thoroughness of the Lyles works, as well as a wish to keep the collection in pristine physical condition, likely swayed the Division's decision not to fully catalog the Dell Paperback Collection.

THE COPYRIGHT PAPERBACK COLLECTION

The reasons the Library of Congress did not traditionally collect mass-market paperbacks were manifold. These books were extremely difficult to bind because of the small gutters. Without binding the paperbacks would not have been safe to house in the general stacks. Paperbacks would also present shelving problems when their distinctly smaller size would be placed in juxtaposition with most other books. Notwithstanding the 1870 sentiment of Congressman Jenckes that all books "have value in an historical point of view," it would not be surprising if the sensationalistic nature of the fiction led some of the selection officers to question the appropriateness of saving such material. The result was that many titles released only in paperback were not available to readers at the National Library.

The news of the Dell acquisition inspired Lolita Silva of the Collections Policy Office to recommend establishing a collection of paperback books deposited by copyright. Begun in 1977 under the custody of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division, the Copyright Paperback Collection was made up of all paperback books not origi-

nally released in hardback editions. Some older paperbacks from as early as the late 1950s were also added to the modern receipts after being located in storage. The Collection was a bibliographical arrangement, gathered to show the publishing history of paperbacks in the United States, rather than a literary or subject arrangement.

The Copyright Paperback Collection grew steadily over the years until 1991, when it had amassed 35,000 titles. There was no bibliography, cardfile, or on-line records available to assist in serving the Collection. The first attempt at organizing the titles for use by readers occurred in 1992. A combination of copy cataloging from OCLC and Minimal Level Cataloging was used to create records in the MUMS database. A total of 1174 items were processed between 1992 and 1994. These records can be found in the Library's catalog by search on the title "copyright paperback collection" in the books files. Once cataloged, the books were arranged by an accession number in acid free boxes. A patron would receive an entire box when he requested a title.

The first cataloging method was too slow to make an effective impact on the arrears of titles in the Collection, so a second system was instituted. As the Copyright Paperback Collection was a bibliographic collection, an arrangement by publisher and year was purposed. The books were sorted by these parameters and stored in acid free boxes. The reader needed to know the publisher and year for a title, and then request the appropriate box. Two problems arose with this system: arranging the books and serving a specific title. The unsorted books were in dozens of boxes, so sorting took a great deal of space to accomplish, with books sitting on shelves until enough titles were found to fill an acid-free box. After requesting a book, readers might have to search through several boxes to find a specific title. This method of arrangement was used from 1994 to 1996, with thousands of titles being sorted.

In 1996, the most recent organization began, with greater success than the first two attempts. Technicians from the Cataloging Directorate were asked to volunteer to create an off-line Minaret database using the electronic Copyright deposit records for information. A technician would receive a box of paperback books, then search each title in the on-line Copyright records. Once a record was found, the author, title, publisher, and series were copied in the Minaret database and a genre term was added, if appropriate. Through the hard work of these technicians, the entire arrears was completed by 1998 and current receipts to the Collection, averaging 3,000 items a year, are being added without delay. The Minaret database will soon be available to readers in the Rare Book Reading Room and possibly in the Library's on-line catalog in the future.

With the Dell Collection accessible through the Lyles bibliography and card file, and the Copyright Collection useable via the Minaret database, the Rare Book and

Special Collections Division has made two large mass-market paperback collections available to the Library's patrons. In addition to the aforementioned research value of the Dell Archive, the Copyright Paperback Collection significantly strengthens the Library's holdings in this area. With the inclusion of such publishers as Ace, Avon, Bantam, Daw and Pocket Books, researchers will have the ability to perform more varied investigations of genre literature, and will be able to more accurately gauge the popular reading tastes in the second half of the twentieth century. It is hoped that additions to these collections will be possible, through the continued deposits to the Copyright Paperback Collection and through gifts to and purchases of paperback books to our National Library.

NOTE

1. In the late 1860s, the standard procedure for copyrighting was for the clerks at the various district courts of the United States to forward one copy of any published work to the Patent Office in the Department of the Interior. By 1870, some 30,000 to 40,000 volumes were stored in the basement of the Interior Department without cataloging or organization. Additionally, lax enforcement from this period meant that large numbers of published works were never received.

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