

Building a Special Collection of Popular and Middlebrow Fiction, 1900-1950

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Abstract

In 2011, Sheffield Hallam University, UK, launched an archive of popular and “middlebrow” fiction published between 1900 and 1950. This article will describe the innovative practices developed at the university to collect, research, and catalog the novels, and how members of the public have been actively involved in these processes. As well as producing significant scholarly outputs, this project formed an innovative Impact Case Study for submission to the Research Excellence Framework in 2014. This system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions requires departments to demonstrate the impact their research has had outside academia.

Keywords: popular fiction, middlebrow, literary history, twentieth century, public engagement

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The Readerships and Literary Cultures 1900-1950 Special Collection at Sheffield Hallam University is a unique resource. Popular novels of the period are rarely preserved systematically in the UK; our university libraries have never collected this type of fiction, while public libraries regularly disposed of such books once they fell out of fashion. Works by individual popular authors are sometimes preserved in special collections, usually in the city associated with the author, such as the J. B. Priestley collection at the University of Bradford, but the Sheffield Hallam collection brings together the disparate popular and middlebrow fiction from the period, reflecting the wide range of literary tastes. It includes over 1,250 novels by 351 authors, ranging from those who have been remembered and reprinted, such as Elizabeth von Arnim and John Buchan, to those who have been almost entirely forgotten, such as Warwick Deeping, W. Riley and Elinor Mordaunt.¹ As many of these authors died relatively recently, (less than 70 years ago), their works remain in copyright and will not be digitized for many years. Out-of-print, their works are therefore in danger of being lost. In addition to the novels, there is a small collection of non-fiction: biographies, histories of publishing houses, and contemporary literary criticism, which inform our understanding of literary culture of this period.

Popular and Middlebrow Fiction

The scholarly rationale for the collection grew out of the work of the *Middlebrow* Network, a transatlantic interdisciplinary research network funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.² The network provides a focus for research into the disreputable term middlebrow and the areas of cultural production it purports to represent. Middlebrow

1. A full list of contents is available at www.middlebrow-network.com/SpecialCollection.aspx.

2. See www.middlebrow-network.com. There are currently 337 subscribers to the network mailing list and 192 in the database of researchers.

culture is that of the masses. It is therefore fundamentally important to collect and research these novels because these are what the majority of people read; they were the best-sellers and the lending library favorites of their day and reveal an enormous amount about cultural life in the period. Academic scholarship of the early twentieth-century has tended to focus on the avant-garde movement, modernism, and in doing so, has constructed a distorted view of literary history that often ignores what the majority of people were reading.

In the categorization of low-, middle- and high-brow literature, the question of readership is crucial. In the earlier twentieth century when the term emerged, middlebrow became associated with both a mass middle-class readership and with the female reader. The much-debated label middlebrow, therefore, is as much about who is reading, as what is read. This is demonstrated by Q.D. Leavis's seminal *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), a key source of contemporary opinion on popular and middlebrow authorship.

This highly influential polemic, (based on Leavis's PhD thesis), sought to examine public taste in reading through an in-depth study of the production of books, from the advice of editors and the machinations of promotion, to the recommendations of the assistant on the book shop floor. Leavis aimed to be anthropological, but she brought to bear on her study the full weight of an increasing pessimism and paranoia among the cultural elite in which she wished to be part. She believed that literary culture was in a process of disintegration, soon to be dominated by lowbrow pulp, and more threateningly, the middlebrow.

Ironically, Leavis's book offers rare critical traces of the authors that she sought to demonstrate were unworthy of attention. She gives particular attention to the novelists Gilbert Frankau and Warwick Deeping, now almost forgotten, but two of the most popular writers of the period. Leavis gives quotations from Frankau's novels *Gerald Cranston's Lady and Life-and Erica*, and from Warwick Deeping's *Sorrell and Son*, to argue that they "touch grossly on fine issues":

This for the sensitive minority is no laughing matter: these novelists are read by the governing classes as well as by the masses, and they impinge directly on the world of the minority, menacing the standards by which they live. And whereas their forerunners were innocent of malice, devoting themselves to assuring their readers of "the beauty of human affection and the goodness of God," these writers are using the technique of Marie Corelli and Mrs. Barclay to work upon and solidify herd prejudice and to debase

the emotional currency by touching grossly on fine issues. (Leavis, 2000, p. 67)

The point seems to be that these novels are not worthy to examine the important emotional issues of the day. They are, by their own admission, not intellectual. Leavis seizes upon Frankau's declaration that "authorship is not so much a function of the brain as it is of the heart. And the heart is a universal organ" (p. 68). But this is simply "herd prejudice" rather than universal emotions, in Leavis's view. The reader of bestsellers, Leavis argues, goes to them "to be confirmed in his prejudices" (p. 69). However, one gets the sense from Leavis that this would be acceptable if it were just the reading of the masses—the problem is that the governing classes read them too, and thus these novels and their reading culture impinge on the sensitive minority—i.e. the intellectual.

What particularly upset Leavis is that these novelists were not trying to emulate good or highbrow literature; instead, they were openly hostile to it. Pamela Frankau wrote an account of her father's approach to writing in *Pen to Paper* (1961) which shows that he was well aware of his status in contemporary literary hierarchies:

In Gilbert's view, he was a paid entertainer, who must never for a minute lose sight of his public. It was, he admitted, as difficult as shooting on a moving target. "Unlike your highbrow friends I don't regard myself as a hothouse-blooming genius." He wrote for housewives and ex-soldiers and tired business-men and what he still called "flappers." A novel's first duty was to be long. I have seen him pick up a short one with the disgust of somebody who found something nasty in the salad: "Call that a novel – look at it ... can't be more than sixty thousand words at the outside." The public deserved their money's worth. Length, sex, colour, pace, action; and— most importantly—life-size characters. (Frankau, 1961, p. 186-187)

A focus on the importance of audiences has been a key advance in thinking developed through the Middlebrow Network's research. There has been a move away from thinking about the middlebrow as a genre or style and towards an understanding of it as a mode of production and reception. The special collection at Sheffield Hallam University was designed to support this developing direction in research, as well as involve the contemporary reading public.

Building, Researching, and Cataloging the Collection

The collection began with an initial donation of 450 books by a retiring academic, Dr. Mary Grover.³ Since then the collection has grown to 1,200 books, almost all through donations from the public. Building a collection in this way means that we do not seek and acquire particular texts to fill a perceived gap; instead, the collection grows through serendipity, and more significantly, by what texts people have thought worth keeping over the years. Many donations have come when an elderly relative dies and we receive a whole collection of novels from this period that the person valued enough to keep for over sixty years. Sometimes donations have come from the descendants of popular novelists. An important example of this was the donation of the works of Gilbert Frankau and his literary family by his grandson. The donor is noted on the catalog record for each book; searching by donor name gives a researcher the group of texts the donor kept from this period. While contemporary critical opinion often homogenized the reading of middlebrow, these individual donations show that readers often read and kept novels that ranged across the hierarchy of brows, and indeed, that novels lumped together as middlebrow have little in common in style or subject matter.

The collecting policy is to preserve early editions of adult novels published between 1900 and 1950 that were significant to contemporary readers either because they sold well or because the names of their authors were widely recognized and had come to represent the tastes of a particular readership. The collection does not usually include authors whose enduring popularity or assured place in the literary canon ensure they will remain in print or accessible in digital versions. Likewise, for reasons of space, the collection does not attempt to hold complete works for prolific, popular novelists, such as Edgar Wallace, of the period.

One of the key aims of the collection is to preserve these books as material objects. It is only with the physical artifact that we can see evidence of ownership, readership, and the value placed on the book. Many of the books in the collection contain bookplates, inscriptions, annotations, and library stamps. W. Kirk, for example, designed his own bookplate in the 1930s, which he placed in all his books. The completely forgotten comic novel *The Major's Candlesticks* by George A. Birmingham (1929) contains the original library stamps and reveal it was continually on loan from the Derby Railway Institute lending library in the early 1930s. An inscription, “From Dad” in Ethel M Dell’s highly sexual and violent romance novel *The Bars of Iron* (1916), informs us that this was considered a suitable gift, presumably for a daughter. The books, most of which do not have a high monetary value, are reference only because of their increasing

3. Mary Grover is author of Warwick Deeping: *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Associated University Presses, 2009) and co-editor with Erica Brown, *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (Palgrave, 2012).

fragility through age. However, it was decided from the beginning that to increase the accessibility and usage of the collection, the books would be on open shelving rather than in the restricted special collections area. The development of the collection coincided with refurbishment of the library and a special enclosed pod was built to house it, with a desk and comfortable seating area within that quickly became popular with students and visitors. It was particularly important to keep the books on open shelves to encourage use by students, a priority for the library.

In special collections, resources are always limited. Sheffield Hallam employed one researcher to work alongside the library cataloging team. The aim, in addition to the normal cataloging of the books, was to collect highly detailed data on the novels, including: genre, subject, evidence of ownership, advertisements/marketing, plot summary, and indicators of literary and cultural taste. The last was collected through quotations from the novel which mentioned books, newspapers, plays, films, authors, and reading, or high, low, or middlebrows. The objective was to identify brow terms and depictions of other authors and texts in order to understand how fiction writers both responded to and constructed the literary hierarchies of the period. To do this the books needed to be read, and clearly the number of novels the researcher alone could read was small. Therefore, the creating of reading groups with members of the public was not only a valuable outreach activity for the university, but fulfilled a real research need.

By recruiting through links with local libraries, existing reading groups, and public lectures, we soon had two groups of readers meeting each month to read novels from the collection under the guidance of the researcher. Each person read a different novel, and completed a template to collect this information. The additional content from the form was added to the standard library catalog record using Millennium, a library Management System from Innovative Interfaces, with the researcher trained to input this additional data into the record. We decided to use the library catalog rather than building a new, stand-alone database in order to take advantage of its search capabilities and accessibility. Most importantly, using the library catalog has ensured the long-term sustainability of the resource as the library is committed to maintaining the records in the collection.

Catalog records can be searched using keywords along with controlled searching by author, title and subject. During the initial phase of the project, the library and researcher produced a listing of terms to ensure consistency of use and phraseology.⁴ These subject terms are added to a specific local subject field, thus allowing greater freedom to express themes. Genre terms such as Historical fiction, Romance fiction and

4. This list can be downloaded. Normally, the library uses Library of Congress subject headings, but as this would have limited available terms, it was agreed to deviate from this practice for this collection.

Readerships and Literary Cultures 1900-1950
Special Collection

Cataloguing Form

Fields marked with an asterisk are essential.

*Your name:

*Your contact details (email address OR postal address):

*Book author:

*Book title:

*Place of publishing, publisher and date: (eg. London: Harper and Brothers, 1908)

*First edition: YES/NO

*If this is not a first edition give publisher and date of first edition: (eg. First published by Chatto and Windus 1927)

*Genre: (choose **up to three** from the list)

*Subject keywords: (choose **up to five** from the list)

Film adaptations: (eg. This novel was made into a film of the same title in 1923. Details of films can be found at www.imdb.com)

Evidence of ownership: (eg. This book was previously owned by the Victoria Sailors' and Working Men's Club, Bridlington: Book No 268. OR Inscription: C. W. Moorley)

Advertisements/marketing: (eg. Includes a catalogue of Messrs Blackwood and Sons publications at the back of the book)

Plot summary: (up to 200 words. This should be factual, and preferably not give away the ending. Use the book review section to say what you thought of the book!)

Literary and cultural taste: (quotations from the novel which mention books, newspapers, plays, films, authors and reading, or mention high, low, or middlebrows). Please give page numbers.

Book review:
What did you think of the novel? You could consider how your modern reading might have differed from that of the original readers. With your permission this review may be posted on the blog <http://reading19001950.wordpress.com/> Up to 1,000 words

Figure 1. Catalog template. Image courtesy of Humanities Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University.

Detective fiction were mostly Library of Congress terms, with a few variations. Additionally, the library created a specific location search scope so users could limit search results to this specific collection.

The inclusion of quotations from the novel to indicate literary and cultural taste formed a particular challenge for the catalog. We wanted the names of authors and texts mentioned in the novels to be searchable, but clearly it was not possible to put whole quotations on the record. Also, while the names of authors quoted should be searchable it should be clear to the catalog user that the record returned is not a book by that author. The solution we found was to put the list of authors and texts mentioned in a notes field with the entry beginning with the phrase “this novel contains literary and cultural references to...”. The quotations themselves were put in a Word document which linked to the record. Over 200 books in the collection now have this enhanced cataloging, forming a significant research resource.

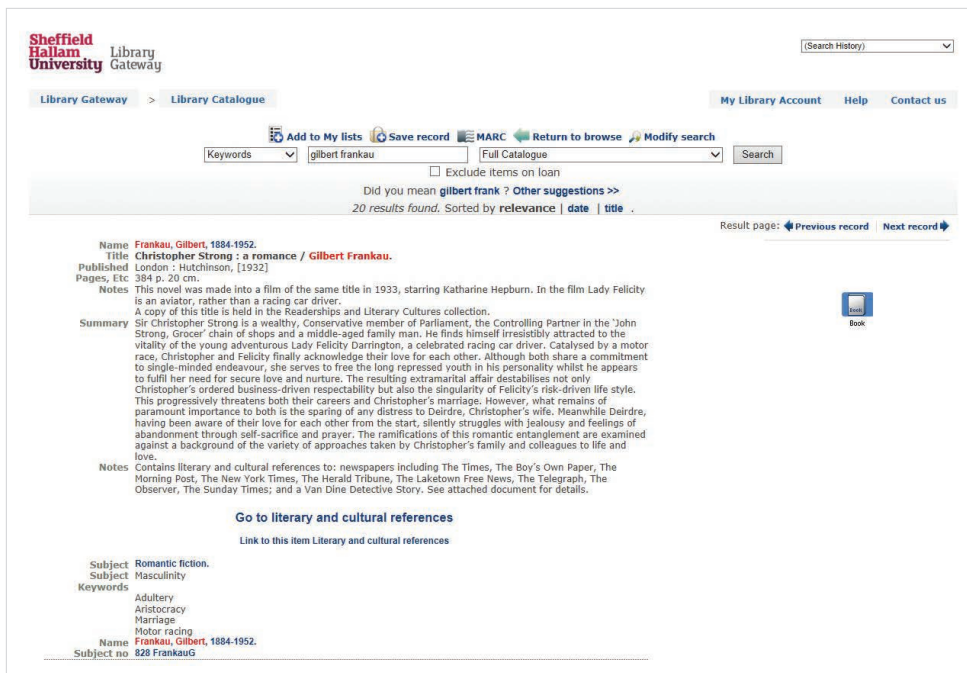


Figure 2. A catalog record. Image courtesy of Humanities Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University

Reviews documenting contemporary reader responses are a key part of the collection project, along with enhanced cataloging. Readers are asked to consider how their response might differ from the original readers, and why. For example, in the case of Gilbert Frankau, those characteristics that made him a consistent bestseller in the early twentieth century did not make him popular with modern readers of our groups. His novel *Royal Regiment* (1938) was described by one of our readers as a “cure for insomnia,” and most others fared only a little better. These reviews are posted to a blog. This blog, rather than being aimed at librarians or academics, is written for general readership and receives more views than our academic-facing Middlebrow Network site. Many donors have found out about the collection through the blog, and it brings us into conversation with people from around the world who are similarly interested in these books and the era’s literary scene.⁵

Project Impact

The Readerships and Literary Cultures 1900-1950 project formed a key part of Sheffield Hallam’s English department submission to the Research Excellence Framework in 2014. This system for assessing

5. The blog holds over 200 book reviews, and since its launch has received over 67,000 page views. It has 229 email followers and another 186 on twitter.

the quality of research in UK higher education institutions breaks research into three components: Outputs, Research Environment, and Impact. Departments are required to submit Impact Case Studies, which demonstrate the impact their research has had outside academia.⁶ Alongside academic outputs, project activities of reading groups, public lectures, film screenings, and blog and social media presence were designed with the need to document this Case Study in mind. This system of assessing research has had the effect of making universities more systematic in their public engagement activities, and more rigorous in their documentation and evaluation of them. In the collection project, as well as having an effect on the wider world, we needed to be able to evidence this with quantitative and qualitative data. The blog, in particular, was invaluable in reaching out to the public and in giving them the opportunity to discuss the books with us. The comments function allows lively conversations to take place, and helpfully for the researcher, all comments are recorded for future reference. Through the blog statistics we can see how many people have visited and where in the world they reside: 51% of visits are from the UK, and 49% are international, with 32% consisting of visits from the US, Canada and Australia, and 17% from the rest of the world. This international engagement is a delightful development, only made possible by web-based activities.

The most significant impact of the project has been on the reading group members. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge

6. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/>
Outputs are weighted at 65%,
Environment at 15% and Impact
is 20% of the overall assessment.

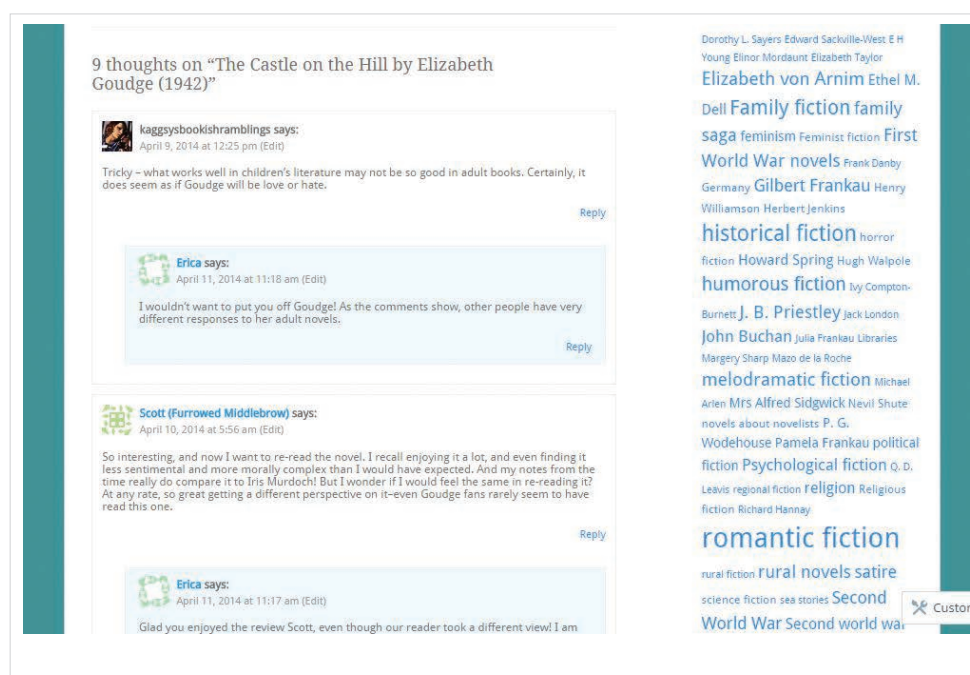


Figure 3. Comments on the blog. Image courtesy of Humanities Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University.

disseminated by the researcher, as might be the case in a traditional public lecture, reading group members became co-producers of research. At intervals we asked them what effect the process of coming to the reading groups and completing the enhanced cataloging had on them. There was a significant development in their critical thinking, skills, and knowledge: “I read more consciously, am more reflective on what I read and do learn more.” “I am learning to trust my opinions and find evidence to support them.” “I am far more focused and analytical.” We found there was great enthusiasm for the project in Sheffield, perhaps surprising in a city stereotyped as not particularly bookish. We quickly expanded the reading group to two groups, and there was a waiting list to join throughout the project.

For the Impact Case Study, work with the public is only considered impactful if it is underpinned by research produced by the institution. We had a strong base of publications in the field when we began, but as the project developed, work with the public fed into our scholarship, making this a process of knowledge exchange. Eight members of the reading group attended the collection academic conference *Culture Wars 1900-1950* in June, 2014, and contributed significantly to the debate. The researcher wrote an article, “The Rise and Fall of ‘the original Bright Young Thing:’ Beverley Nichols, *Crazy Pavements* (1927) and Popular Authorship,” which developed out of the intertextual data collected for the enhanced catalog record. This was also an example of the strength of having a physical collection for research; until the Nichols novel was received as a donation, the researcher had never heard of it so would not otherwise have done this research. This is the first scholarly article on this culturally important but now forgotten author.

Conclusion

Overall with the collection there are many benefits to having the material objects, from the evidence of ownership and reception, to the joys of being able to browse the shelves and come across authors you would not have known to seek out. Online, enhanced cataloging means that we have also created an electronic resource that can be used remotely by scholars across the world. The experience of working with the general public offers both an example of successful impact, and demonstrates how members of the public can contribute to collection development and research. It has also been extremely rewarding for everyone involved. As funding for the researcher has come to an end, members of the reading group have carried on meeting to read the forgotten novels of 1900-1950 independently, and are continuing to share their reading responses on the blog.

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