Pulp fiction for the Victorian traveller

An archive of racy ‘Yellowback’ books is now available online, says David Hayles

We might think of the airport novel — a fat James Patterson thriller, or a misery memoir — as a relatively modern phenomenon, a byproduct of cheap flights, endless delays and the proliferation of chain shops. But travellers in the 19th century had an equivalent: Yellowbacks, cheap and disposable reading material that they would buy at railway station bookstalls to while away their long journeys.

The Yellowbacks marked a watershed in publishing in Britain: until then, books, in plain covers, were the expensive mainstay of the learned class. So-called because of their coloured covers, Yellowbacks were aimed at a wider audience, covering everything from melodramas and detective stories to spurious exposes (Confessions of an English Lady, anyone?).

The books were cheaply bound and perishable; and, with titles such as Dick Rodney: Adventures of an Eton Boy, Vixen and The Backwoods Bride, they were perhaps not considered worthy of literary merit. But as the academic writer John Sutherland points out, Yellowbacks were an important part of the evolution of book publishing. “The huge change was the Elementary Education Act of 1870, which meant there were people who could read to a reasonably proficient level,” he says. “There was suddenly a huge appetite for fiction, and bookstallers realised display was important, so you had these racy covers, the equivalent of gossip magazines you see now.”

One of the foremost collections of Yellowbacks is held in Emory University’s esteemed Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Library (MARBL) in Atlanta, Georgia. This has, among other things, the papers of W. B. Yeats and Ted Hughes, as well as several of Salman Rushdie’s computers (the latter part of its pioneering effort to archive “born digital” material). The 1,200 Yellowbacks, part of its archive of British Victorian literature, has recently been digitised, so if you care to pay state likes of the proto-feminist text Wife or Slave? by “Mrs Albert Bradshaw, author of Dick, a touching narrative of all the evil effects of drink”, it can be downloaded from the university website free. As well as works by Wilkie Collins and Anthony Trollope, there is a trove of previously unavailable books by long-forgotten authors, including French translations and American writers (that the publishers could sell without having to pay writer royalties).

“For a number of them we have the only recorded available copy of a book in any edition, and it’s great to be able to provide access to that,” says David Faulds, a rare-book librarian at MARBL. “I’m hoping this resource will give people a chance to rediscover writers. There’s a novel called Ouida that Ouida had written many historical romance novels, who is unknown today, and was one of the first detective writers — it’s partly thanks to Yellowbacks that detective fiction became mainstream.”

The era of the Yellowbacks — the middle of the 19th century — marked the effects of the Industrial Revolution and emergence of the middle classes, who had more time to read and more opportunity, thanks to the new rail network, to travel. “The Yellowbacks were introduced by Chapman & Hall in conjunction with W.H. Smith, whose first bookstall opened at Euston in 1848, so that the rail traveller could ‘read as they ran’,” says Sutherland, who has written a history of the book.

“The crude woodcut-illustrated covers and garish colour were designed to be seen at 20 yards by the traveller in a hurry — you’d buy your book, sit in the first-class compartment and read it, eyeing up the lady opposite as your sexual excitement rose.”

The rise of the railways and tawdry reading material are inextricably intertwined, Sutherland says. “There’s always been for travellers a noticeable relaxation of moral discipline — people tend to read things which they wouldn’t like to be seen reading if they were among their usual family and social acquaintances.” The Yellowbacks not only gave the hard sell with their striking covers and sensational titles (such as Killed by Mistake and In Peril of His Life, which it is claimed was “The favourite reading of Prince Bismarck”), but the inside covers were plastered with advertisements. Rowlands’ Odonto Tooth Powder, Rumstead’s Table Salt, Booth’s Glycerine and Cucumber For the Skin (“It keeps skin cool”), Rowlands’ Eukonia Tooth Powder (sold in three tins) — the adverts offer a peek into an age when capitalism was starting to take hold and the populace was getting a taste for commerce. They are reproduced in the digitised versions of the books.

Sutherland isn’t convinced, though, that this digital form gives the reader the true measure of Yellowbacks. “They are very physical objects, a bit bulky,” he says. “Unless you feel them and look at them and smell them — it’s a bit like looking a skeleton and trying to imagine Marilyn Monroe.” Nevertheless, Emory’s reproductions, digitised using automated technology, are notable for being extremely crisp and clear. “We cleaned up any blunders and markings to enhance the readability for the optical character recognition software [which allows you to search the text],” says Kyle Fenton, the curatorial assistant who digitised the 40,000 words of the Emory collection. “One of our focuses is on quality.”

The painstaking process to put all the Yellowbacks online (the PDFs of which can be transferred on to a Kindle or e-reader) took MARBL about a year, and each book takes about half a minute to download. But they’ll take half a lifetime to read. So you had best get started now. To download the Yellowbacks, visit web.library.emory.edu/Yellowbacks

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Our favourites

Diary of an Ex-Detective (1886)
These stories open with: “Detective is tracking Gustave Pégolon as he flees London.” Could see nothing of his face except a pair of keen black eyes, the savvy investigator declares as he bumps into him on a train.

Dick Rodney: Adventures of an Eton Boy (1897)
A James Grant’s searing epic, “series of pents and penelope adventures” is narrated by Dick, who encounters mutineers, hurricanes and shipwrecks.

Dick Rodney: The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox, the Ventriliquist (1885)
A youth causes mayhem in Suffolk village with his voice-prowling antics, including interrupting a wedding ceremony “for the barns!” At more than 550 pages, it’s possibly the longest ventriliquism book yet written.

A Race for a Wife (1892)
The town of Xminster is in flutter by the arrival of the beautiful Maude Denison. “By Jove, she’s handsome — thoroughly top!” tips of her fingers. “I must know her!” her potential suitor cries.