

# Frank Norris Studies

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## A New Short Story by Frank Norris?

Shortly after the death of Frank Norris in 1902 began the process of defining his canon. The initial checklist appeared in the 1903 collection of his literary essays published by Doubleday, Page & Co., *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*. On pp. 305-311, Isobel Strong and Jeannette Norris offered their unsigned bibliography of "Essays, Articles, Letters." Since then there have been numerous attempts to establish Norris's publication history. The task has proven even more difficult than recovering letters written by Norris, and less satisfying insofar as all of the several letters found since the 1986 publication of Jesse S. Crisler's *Frank Norris: Collected Letters* can be said with certainty to manifest the hand of Norris. Instability, however, is the signature trait of all accounts of Norris's non-epistolary output, given the number of articles and fictional works possibly written by him that saw print either unsigned or pseudonymously signed.

With essays, short stories, and sketches suspected to be Norris's, those intending to remedy the situation as best they can have turned to internal evidence of Norris's hand, i.e., signs of his authorship that correlate with characteristics of his style, subject-matter interests, and points of view seen in works that were signed. As well, they have turned to external evidence indicating authorship. When neither is sufficient in itself nor a combination of both types suffices, one refrains from attribution (or *should* demur).

As Thoreau once noted, some circumstantial evidence is rather strong and appears to promise certainty. When one finds the editor of *The Wave* stating in a subsequent issue that Frank Norris was the author of the two-part descriptive essay of 1895 entitled "The Country Club at Del Monte," the trout in a pail of milk comes to mind. Less certain is Mrs. Norris's and Isobel Strong's listing of "The Unknown Author and the Publisher," *World's Work*, 1 (April 1901), 663-65. One may initially assume that they had access to a now-lost list of publications maintained by Norris or a sheaf of clippings and tear sheets; further, Jeannette may have known from personal experience that the author of this essay signed

"A Publisher's Reader" was none other than her husband. These assumptions seem justified. For, they square with the fact that Norris was employed to read manuscripts for Doubleday, Page & Co., which published *World's Work* as well as Norris's novels; and the internal evidence is strong in this essay encouraging inexperienced authors to trust that their manuscripts would not be ignored by publishers but carefully evaluated.

What may have been overlooked since 1903 is a companion piece that appeared five months later in *World's Work*, 1 (September 1901), 1217-22. Like the April essay, it was signed in an impersonal manner: Norris, as "A Publisher's Reader," received a heated reply from "An Unknown Writer"—a member of the legion of tyros Norris had addressed. In "The Unknown Writer and the Publishers," Norris was chided for his misrepresentation of the situation in which the neophyte finds himself. This "Unknown Writer" then went on to spin a fantastic tale recounting the extravagant lengths to which he went to find a publisher for the manuscript that he felt he had perfected and for which he spent the remarkable sum of \$800 to secure the finest illustrations possible. Along the way, though, "An Unknown Writer" gave reason to suspect that Norris had waxed Swifitean by launching an attack upon *himself*, possibly tipping his hand by referring to authors and works about which he had already commented in essays and reviews and to which he would allude in his later writings.

Printed anew in this issue of *Frank Norris Studies* is a typical problem situation faced by the Norris bibliographer. Norris, no stranger to waggishness and the author of eight already known pieces for *World's Work*, could have been the "Unknown Writer."

Was he?

*FNS* welcomes reflections upon the possible external and internal evidence of Norris's hand at work here, or the lack thereof. —*The Editor*.

## THE UNKNOWN WRITER AND THE PUBLISHERS

MANUSCRIPTS OFTEN NOT EXAMINED BY PUBLISHERS  
—ACTUAL EXPERIENCES OF AN UNKNOWN WRITER WHO  
SOUGHT A PUBLISHER—READERS OFTEN INCOMPETENT

BY

AN UNKNOWN WRITER

[We print this article for its interest as a real experience. But if, as the author says, America has never produced any really great author, and such a one would not be appreciated for years if he did appear—his publisher who used "typewriter girls" for first readers was a man of common sense and good judgment.—ED.]

PERHAPS a reply is due from a typical unknown writer to some erroneous statements in the article by "A Publisher's Reader," in the April number of *THE WORLD'S WORK*.

He asserts that the "author" as yet unpublished believes that his manuscripts are not read; but that in fact "every manuscript submitted is given a chance" because publishers sometimes make fortunes from first books, whose writers are not in a position, as famous "authors" are, to demand heavy royalties. He says that such books as "David Harum" and "Eben Holden" must be accepted, or the publisher will lose a quarter of a million dollars. Stress is laid on the "fact" that it is easy for "fair work" to "pass muster;" but it is added that not more than one manuscript in a hundred is worthy—so these "unavailables" serve to produce the "infinite relief, the sensation of actual exhilaration, that invades the Reader of Many Manuscripts when he realizes that here at last is something good." "The next wrapper may uncover the *chef d'œuvre*." And when the "New Man" for whom "every house is searching," is discovered, "a hundred clashing presses" will print his books, and money will

be advanced to him while he creates books.

Special attention is asked to his statement that, somewhere, an unpublished "author" is working on a story soon to be "*the literary sensation of the year*."

And he insists, no doubt with reason, that the average unknown "author" is sure to have his manuscript rejected. Indeed, that "author" is shown to be doomed, and justly, as he enters the publishers' office, to occupy the position of Sterne's Ass, which said: "Don't thrash me; but if you will you may."

But he does *not* state that no real "New Man" has been "discovered" by any publisher's reader, either in America or England, during the last twenty years, and that no really great writers have ever been produced in America. Indeed, if such a writer were to submit a manuscript to the average publisher's reader, the chances would be very remote that its merit would be recognized. Even the "commercial" merit of the "successful" books is often not realized by publishers' readers. If a "sensation of actual exhilaration" was experienced by the six sets of such readers who caused six publishing houses to reject "David Harum" before

it was accepted by a seventh, such condemnations of the story were not proof of alleged "exhilaration" on the part of such six sets of readers. For they caused it to be refused by reversing their thumbs; their employers lost money, wailed, and reprimanded their readers for lack of perspicacity and taste.

Seventeen publishers rejected "Lorna Doone." "Innocents Abroad" is another book which, I believe, was rejected by several publishers. "Mr. Barnes of New York" was rejected by about every publisher in the country; yet the American News Company sold many thousands of copies when the book was finally published at its writer's expense.

The anonymous writer of this article confesses to having been guilty of writing a book, which has just been published. His experiences with the publishers and their readers may be of interest; and certainly they disprove the assertion that publishers cause all manuscripts to be examined.

To please an only child, the writer's book was slowly written during a period of five years; it was revised seven times. Several hundred dollars were expended, buying black-and-white drawings for the story from an artist in Europe. When the manuscript was ready, a writer of national reputation was asked how a publisher for the book could be obtained. Here is some of the cynical advice by that writer:

"Take the advice of *Punch* to those who contemplate getting married: *Don't!* You will not find a publisher unless you pay him enough to cover cost of publication. Why? *You are unknown as a writer!* You say you have no friends, influence or acquaintance with publishers. You will fail, and justly, for you cannot possibly have any real message for the world, and your book can rightly be judged as unworthy without even an examination. The world has produced a scant dozen of really great writers. The Prophets, the Four Gospels, and, most wonderful of all, the Sermon on the Mount—all these are in a class by themselves. Yet people read them and the Psalms like religious parrots—blind to their grandeur. But tell me what three profane writers are greatest."

"Homer, Shakespeare, Dante," I replied.

"True! but what have they really done for humanity? Read Ruskin's terrific arraignment of them in his lecture on 'The Mystery of Life,' which you will find in 'Sesame and Lilies.' So what possible excuse have obscure *you* for writing? You have an itching to be called an 'author,' for 'fame,' and for earning money with your pen. But you have no longing to help humanity by writing, much less supreme faith that you can do so. Work for others, feed people, clothe them, relieve distress, minister to want, and you will be great and noble; but do not write for publication. Try rather to be one of the few who form the real literary world, and read only classics. Expect next to nothing from American authors, known or unknown, and less from publishers who have both eyes on the main chance of making money, as they serve hasty-pudding books to a public which has a depraved literary taste. Thus writers and publishers are blocking the way for the advancement of the world's real books. Charge them with this, and they call you a common scold; 'but the truth remains.'"

These statements were disheartening; but eight duplicates of the writer's manuscript were simultaneously placed in the hands of eight publishing houses for examination by their readers. This was not a violation of any rule of ethics, for it was to be a case of sale to the highest bidder if bids were made—no contract or proposition being submitted to publishers, but merely the manuscript for preliminary approval or rejection, a mutually satisfactory contract to be hoped for later.

Thirty-two publishers "examined" the manuscript in two years. All refused to publish it. They were located as follows:

Indianapolis . . . . .	1
Cincinnati . . . . .	1
Philadelphia . . . . .	2
Chicago . . . . .	5
Boston . . . . .	6
New York . . . . .	17

This does not include two publishers who sent my manuscript to readers whom I considered incompetent, and of whom I therefore asked its return. Neither does

it include publishers who refused to become responsible for the safety of the drawings, and were asked to return them.

Note, now, the error of the statement: "If you submit a manuscript it will be read."

Six of these publishers returned the story with the specific statement that it had not been examined. Five others added to that statement, that it had not been examined because "it is of a kind we do not publish."

In other words, over thirty per cent. of the publishers rejected a carefully typewritten manuscript, revised seven times, with about eight hundred dollars' worth of black-and-white pictures, *without examination!* This was the way they were "looking" for the possible "New Man!"

The following action was taken by the twenty-one other publishers:

Six rejected the story because it had failed to pass each of the four readers with the approval of all.

Four rejected it because its writer would not furnish them money to cover cost of publication, and then give them all money receipts from sales of the book! Two of these four seemed hurt that what they called a "reasonable" suggestion was rejected by the "unknown writer."

Four rejected the story because the writer refused to buy enough copies of the book when printed to cover their statement of cost of publication.

And seven rejected the story for the *specifically stated reason that its author was unknown*, so the book would be an "uncertain commercial venture, in spite of any merit it might have."

All the publishers treated the author with the utmost courtesy; in all cases they softened the unwelcome fact of rejection by kind words of deprecation and regret. But some were very frank. One New York publisher said to me:

"You will not get your book published unless you pay for the cost of the plant, and not then if it is so bad that a publisher would be ashamed to have his imprint seen on it. Why? Your obscurity and lack of influence make your manuscript impossible. Become famous or infamous before you write. Sink a Spanish fleet, marry a

great heiress, get yourself arrested or tortured—anything so you will be talked about, and are in the public eye. Then I will gladly publish inanities from you, rather than really worthy work from any unknown genius. You may be a great writer; the chances are a million to one you are not; and if you were, your book would probably be a failure as a cash venture."

A few of the publishers showed me written opinions of the story by readers; two or three even gave me the names of their readers. But I already had lists of the readers for nearly all the leading publishers. Some have asked me how I obtained the lists. They were offered to me by a "literary bureau," and I paid a small sum for them. I made no use of these lists except twice, when I withdrew the manuscript from publishers who had sent it to men as first readers whom I considered incompetent. In each case I knew within a few hours that the manuscript had been sent to an incompetent reader, and the information was volunteered or furnished to me by persons whom I advised that I did not wish it.

One member of a leading publishing house read my story aloud to his wife and daughter. All three recommended it for publication. Another member of the firm read the first ten pages after he had been to the theater, and had secured a late supper of deviled crabs. He rejected the whole story.

I now make a statement which has been questioned as manifestly a mistake. With utmost emphasis I assert that a prominent publisher (not one in New York) told me that as not one manuscript in a hundred was accepted, he *could not afford* to pay a really competent judge to wade through the mass of chaff to get the single kernel; therefore, he was obliged to rely largely on his typewriter girls as *first* judges of stories. He added that it was *too bad to have to give up fifty cents or a dollar to the girl for her verdict that the story was unavailable.*"

Think of Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter" in the hands of such a reader, earning her dollar and deciding, as first judge, that the manuscript would not "do!"

Men in charge of the illustration "department" for

prominent New York magazines had pronounced the drawings for my book "first-class." Yet every publisher regarded them with disfavor—the usual phrase being that "they did not impress." A great publisher from London rejected the manuscript on sight "because the head of a horse in one of the pictures is *awful!*" Of course his true reason was that the writer was unknown; but the reason given was worthy of Thackeray's *Bungay*.

Two publishers advised me that the story had passed three of their readers, while a fourth one had rejected; and added that if he also had approved, it would have been returned to me anyhow. They did not answer my queries why, therefore, they had taken the trouble to have the manuscript examined at all.

One New York publisher lost the manuscript for ten days. A Chicago publisher held the drawings for ten days after writing me they had been shipped to me. Nearly all violated written promises to decide by a date specified. Over a dozen held the manuscript two weeks longer than the date fixed by themselves for a return. Six held it a month, and three six weeks, longer than the return dates. So it will be seen how vital it was to use several copies of the story, instead of one, while seeking preliminary approval.

Three publishers wrote me much the same thing, saying that if I would write a story like one by Dickens or Thackeray, they would print it! I hold these letters.

Five desired to see the illustrations before seeing the manuscript. Six said they must see the manuscript first. Two or three advised me orally that they did not know what to do, so rejected to be "on the safe side." One who had already agreed to sign a contract, finally said he must first send it to "a shrewd old fellow over in Boston." This Boston party advised the publisher to reject unless he was *sure* the book would "be a financial plum." He refused it.

All this time I was receiving circulars from "literary bureaus" offering to revise (for a consideration) and "perfect" the story, and *get me a publisher*. They said they "stood between the author and the publisher." I did not notice these circulars. I also had three offensive callers, loth to give their names and addresses, who offered

me "influence" with a publisher for pay. They were shown out of my rooms.

About six hundred lines of rhymes were in the story—most carefully revised, and edited by a thorough expert on poetical composition, and writer of several standard school-books on English. A Boston woman "visiting New York" called on me, said she had acted as a reader of my story for a Boston publisher, and wanted to revise the rhymes in it, for pay. She showed me a copy of her alleged written opinion; and I made the following extract from it, an amusing example of cheap pedantry:

"The poems in it are without rhythm. In forming the trochees, cesura, anapest and iambus seem to be unknown to the writer. Euphony and alliteration are neglected. One of the poems should have each stanza close with an Alexandrine. In short, the verse is not a catelectic."

Yet here is an extract from a written opinion by a New York reader, shown to me by his publisher employer:

"The poems are very fine; indeed, they are so much finer than the prose of the story proper that it seems very unlikely they could have been written by the same person."

A Boston publisher said his readers called the prose "simple in style, flowing, worthy, with remarkably good sequence of incident." A Chicago publisher's reader reported that the story "broke off and compelled the reader to go to other scenes and incidents—a fatal defect."

These contradictions by readers could be considerably extended. I close mention of them by citing a Philadelphia reader's opinion that there was too little of a certain line of incident in the story, and that of a Chicago reader that there was too much.

After two years of great effort, and regarding difficulties as merely obstacles to be overcome, I had found little but discouragement, and had a lot of letters to and from publishers which exceeded the story itself in bulk. I was thinking of submitting the manuscript to publishers in England, when it dawned upon me

that perhaps I could do for American publishers what I did not believe they were in my case doing for themselves—that is, submit the story to undeniable literary experts and famous scholars. So I placed a duplicate of the story in the hands of each of two writers of national reputation, and said:

"What you charge pays you liberally for examination of this manuscript, and writing an opinion of it. Be sure to condemn it if you must, for then I wish to suppress the book and escape ridicule. I rely on you to protect me. But if you approve, you must write and sign an opinion accordingly, and give me full authority to say to any publisher that you stand by what you have said in praise."

Both these experts praised the story. One declared it was "very charming;" the other said it would "take a high place among books of its kind."

Armed with these letters, I invaded the offices of a prominent publisher whose readers had already condemned the story, and said that I was not prepared to listen with much patience to opinions by his readers, when I held two written opinions by acknowledged writers and scholars that the story was meritorious. The long quest for a publisher ended—the adverse decision was reversed, a very favorable contract was signed—the book is on sale. My prayer is that very few copies will be purchased, but that after some years, its sales will become larger; otherwise I shall know the book is unworthy.

I ask readers to see from citation of opinions by two experts about other books, how little the average publisher's reader can judge of the merits of a manuscript.

Poe's analysis of the mental processes by which "The Raven" arrived at completeness proves him to have been an exceptionally good judge and writer of poetry. Yet this lecturer on "The Poetic Principle," and writer of "The Raven" and "The Bells," says in an elaborate review of Horne's epic poem "Orion:"

"Its beauties are *supreme*." "The description of Hell in 'Paradise Lost' is *altogether inferior* in graphic effect, in originality, in expression, in the true imagination, to these magnificent, these unparalleled passages." "An

exalted sense of art *for which we look in vain in any other poem*." "In all that regards the loftiest and holy attributes of the true poetry, 'Orion' has *never* been excelled; indeed, we feel strongly inclined to say that it has never been *equalled*." "One of the noblest, if not the very noblest poetical work of the age." (See essay on R.H. Horne.)

Poe himself italicized the words as shown in these quotations. Yet grim time "grinding slowly, but with exactness," has demonstrated that "Orion" is little more than rhymed sleight and tinsel. Probably not one per cent. of the reading public ever heard of Horne or his poem.

And before me is a typewritten copy of Carlyle's "Signs of the Times," first published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829. This copy had been made by a colored boy in a New York railroad office merely for practice on the typewriter. But, in a spirit of malicious mischief almost criminal, he changed its title to "Reveries of a Recluse," and sent it as an original essay by himself to a famous publishing house in New York. And here before me is the letter from that house, saying the returned essay is unavailable. Upon this manuscript—also before me—is an uneraser endorsement in pencil by the publisher's reader, now dead, but yet well known here and in England. It reads as follows, over his initials:

"The work of a pompous pedant who cannot punctuate or capitalize."

Now, if Poe was so mistaken about Horne's epic, and this other notable writer proved himself to be a shallow connoisseur by speaking so arrogantly of what is known to be a classic English essay, what more than guess-work can be the judgments of the incapable, underpaid and overworked readers for the modern publishing houses, wading through dreary manuscript rubbish, all bad, looking for "the literary sensation of the year?" They simply cannot and do not judge well. Even Emerson called Hawthorne's stories "mere mush," and Hawthorne styled Emerson's books "muddy philosophy." Then what worthy work can be expected of the bizarre and nondescript lot of publishers' readers

—college tutors, decayed ex-editors, faded gentlemen wearing long hair for appearance and economy, truculent *Bludyers*, unsuccessful writers who have sunk to professional readers, or busy newspaper men who sample a manuscript as a grocer would a firkin of butter, by reading a few sentences in the middle? And typewriter girls!

Of course, it seems absurd that publishers with millions invested in books should have such readers. Let those who think my words are extravagant and incorrect recall their many unsuccessful publications and reconsider before they condemn. Their excuse and dilemma lie largely in the further fact that no quartette of readers, no group of literary men, not even the world without lapse of time, can tell whether a book will be an addition, real and permanent, to the world's scant but inexpressibly precious store of real literature. I mean by literature books of poetry and fiction, not books by specialists on art and science.

Perhaps this quotation from Carlyle will make this more clear; he is speaking of this very subject of real and false writers and books:

"The heavenly Luminary rises amid vapors: star-gazers enough must scan it with critical telescopes; it makes no blazing, the world can either look at it or forbear looking at it; not till after a time and times does its celestial, eternal nature become indubitable. Pleasant, on the other hand, is the blazing of a tar barrel; the crowd dance merrily round it, with loud huzzahing and universal three-times-three, and, like Homer's peasants, 'bless the useful light;' but unhappily it so soon ends in darkness, foul, choking smoke, and is kicked into the gutters, a nameless imbroglio of charred staves, pitch-cinders and *vomissement du Diable!*"

This is true today. So our best reviews keep asking: "What will be the next *craze* in fiction?" For the public will scan a mushroom book, believe in paid-for-praise of it by magazine or newspaper, and exchange plaudits. This is the public which delights in cheap antithesis and tawdry sparkle, horrors, swashbuckler heroes mouthing passions torn to rags, mawkish sentiment, strut and pose without meaning, stale epigram, dissection of processes

and states of human decadence, the public which went wild over "Trilby," and has all but forgotten her.

One more statement of my estimate of the average publisher's reader. If that "inspired idiot," Oliver Goldsmith, could send the first manuscript of his classic story "The Vicar of Wakefield" to an American publishing house, their readers, seeking for "the sensation of the year," could be absolutely trusted to condemn it. Probably it would reach a second reader, who would yawn, puff his cheap cigar, summon the tired powers of his "mind," wave his long ears, and report:

"This is rather commonplace. It lacks sequence; the interest flags. There is not enough 'suspense,' and the story lacks harmony as a whole. The incident of the boy selling a horse for a lot of green spectacles is rubbish, improbable, and should be removed. Worse, it is a palpable imitation of two other stories. It is strained in its sadness, too insipid and goody-goody in its pictures of domestic life. It has an offensive *insouciance*; its incidents lack verisimilitude.

Then the publishers, acting on the opinion of two first readers, would return the manuscript to Mr. Goldsmith, with the usual polite note that rejection did not imply lack of merit.

But suppose the story *were* accepted and the book actually published. Nothing is more certain than that it would not sell well. Verily it would not be "the literary sensation of the year," nor the "latest fad." Its worth would slowly dawn on the world; with lapse of years its perennial nature would be recognized.

And what then?

Only real literary men would read it. Not two per cent. of the reading public of today has ever read, much less joyed over, Goldsmith's exquisite story.



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