

# American Values and Popular Culture in the Twenties: The Little Blue Books

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AMERICAN VALUES AND POPULAR CULTURE  
IN THE TWENTIES:  
THE LITTLE BLUE BOOKS

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In my comments during the next few minutes I hope to accomplish two goals: first, as the title of my paper indicates, I will discuss the Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books as a medium of popular culture, and suggest the kinds of things they reflected about American values during the nineteen twenties; second, in the last minute or so of my allotted time I should like to do something not at all hinted in my title — encourage the increased use of popular culture sources in historical research and teaching.

But, taking first things first, who was this fellow Haldeman-Julius? And what were the Little Blue Books?

The publisher of the Little Blue Books was born Emanuel Julius in 1889 in a Philadelphia tenement building. He was the son of Jewish-Russian immigrants, his father was a bookbinder. Leaving school at the age of 13, young Emanuel drifted from menial job to menial job until he was finally able to make use of his interest in the printed word working as a copyholder in the proofroom of a Philadelphia newspaper. Having been an avid reader of the Socialist tracts produced by his father, and having adopted early in his life the values of the American workingman, it was not many years before Emanuel Julius joined the American Socialist Party and went to work as a writer for Socialist newspapers in New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Los Angeles, and, ultimately, Girard, Kansas.

Arriving in the small southeastern Kansas farmtown of Girard in 1915, the future Little Blue Book publisher immediately assumed a position as a writer for the *Appeal to Reason*, a national Socialist paper whose circulation was on the decline since the suicide of its editor, Francis Wayland, the year before. In 1916 Emanuel Julius married Marcet Haldeman, a niece of Jane Addams (of Hull House fame) and the daughter of a well-to-do physician in Girard. As a result of the current wave of women's rights enthusiasm the marriage brought about a merger of names — "Haldeman hyphen Julius." It was from his wife Marcet that "E. H-J," as he came to be called, borrowed \$25,000

in 1919 to make a first payment on the by-then-defunct *Appeal to Reason* printing plant and equipment.<sup>1</sup>

On the very same January day in 1919 that he signed the papers making him owner of the *Appeal* plant, Haldeman-Julius did something that was eventually to earn him the title "The Henry Ford of Publishing." He actualized an idea that he had toyed with since he had been a boy sitting on a wintry Philadelphia park bench, totally immune to the cold, totally lost in a ten-cent pamphlet version of Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. In the years since his nearly religious experience with that ten-cent pamphlet, Haldeman-Julius had pieced together a hypothesis. He was convinced that the average American was a potential buyer of good books; he could and probably would read good literature if it was presented to him in a size small enough to be carried in his work-trouser pocket and at a cost low enough that he could afford.<sup>2</sup> Putting his idea to the test, Haldeman-Julius marked for the press the very same pamphlet he had read years before, and told his linotype operator that his work was for a new series of booklets rather than for the newspaper. The *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the *Rubaiyat*, of Omar Khayyam, became numbers 1 and 2 in his *Appeal's* Pocket Series, and started him on the road to success as a publisher of popular literature.

The 3½ x 5 inch paperback books sold so rapidly that Haldeman-Julius immediately moved to publish a series of fifty established classics, including Dickens, Coleridge, Goldsmith, Burns, Hugo, Balzac, Maupassant, Ibsen, Lincoln, Irving, Darrow, Ingersoll, and Jack London. By the end of his first year as a publisher he was able to pay off in full the \$75,000.00 debt he had incurred in purchasing the old *Appeal to Reason* plant. And by 1928, just nine years after the Little Blue Books had been born, he had added over 1200 titles to his list and sold over 100 million five-cent booklets. By the time of his death in 1951, E. Haldeman-Julius had published nearly 2000 titles and had sold an estimated 500 million Little Blue Books.<sup>3</sup>

At the outset of his publishing venture Haldeman-Julius had only his intuition to guide him in determining popular reading tastes. He considered himself to be "Mr. Public — E. H.-J. multiplied hundreds of thousands of times," and judged a manuscript by only one standard — "do I like it?"<sup>4</sup> His intuition was seldom incorrect. Over the years, however, Haldeman-Julius supplemented his intuition with a combination of more scientific market analysis techniques. He eventually relied

heavily on sales data, advertising feedback, response to questionnaires, and response to published appeals for information about readers' tastes.

Since sales volume was such an important criterion for the success of the Little Blue Books it came to be the single most valuable tool in determining what the public wanted. By offering something for nearly everyone in a standardized format at a standardized low price, Haldeman-Julius had only to advertise his product widely and then carefully study Little Blue Book consumption in order to feel the popular pulse. Beginning with advertisements for his pocket books in his own paper, Haldeman-Julius rapidly expanded the exposure of his product in such nationally circulated newspapers as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He also ran full-page advertisements in the popular magazines of his time, such as *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Liberty*, *Nation*, *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. His advertising was successful largely due to its simplicity. By merely listing columns of book titles under such helpful subject headings as "Sexology," "Self-Education," "Evolution," "Health," "French Love Stories," "Religion," "Prostitution," and "Psycho-Analysis," he was usually able to bring a return of at least two to one, occasionally even ten to one, on the amount he had invested in advertising.

It was important to the outcome of Haldeman-Julius' careful sales research that virtually all Little Blue Book advertising was "coupon advertising." Fully ninety-five per cent of the more than one hundred million Little Blue Books sold during the twenties were ordered on tear-out coupons which the customer sent directly to the factory in Girard. This enabled Haldeman-Julius, who was his own advertising manager, to test the "pulling power" of all kinds of printed advertising media and methods, while at the same time discovering exactly what the public wanted. Utilizing primarily the "key" advertising method, which required the customer to respond to a special "key" box number or "key" address, the publisher could tell even before opening an incoming order exactly which advertisement should receive credit for the business. The data he thus received was direct, controlled, immediately quantifiable, and valid.<sup>5</sup>

Louis Adamic, in an article published in 1930, stated that Haldeman-Julius' sales were a "weathercock which shows which way the breezes of public taste are blowing."<sup>6</sup> In January of 1929 the *New*

*Republic* used another meteorological analogy in assessing the extent to which this medium of popular culture accurately reflected the attitudes and concerns of the society for which it was produced: "Mr. Haldeman-Julius' titles are so numerous and the volumes of his sales so fantastic as to make his business almost a barometer of plebeian taste."<sup>7</sup> By the later years of the nineteen twenties Haldeman-Julius was so confident of the social diagnosticity of his Little Blue Book sales that he could claim to have discovered even the comparative popularity of chess and checkers in the United States: checkers led by 20 per cent!<sup>8</sup>

An important corollary to the above method of checking the popular pulse was Haldeman-Julius' basic premise that the Little Blue Books were books that were actually *read*, rather than displayed on tables or in bookcases. While other book publishers might *claim* to reflect public taste in their annual sales figures, Haldeman-Julius *knew* that his success reflected more accurately than that of any other bookman the general psychology of American readers. Unlike many "merchandise books," in luxurious bindings, the Little Blue Books had no luxury or pictorial appeal, whatever. For this basic reason, and because the editorial policy in Girard was to select manuscripts for their informative rather than prestige value, there was no conceivable reason for buying Little Blue Books other than to read it. Haldeman-Julius frequently referred to his business as "the democracy of books"; the orders he received (sometimes 4000 in a single day) were "votes" indicating the degrees of interest people had in the great variety of reading matter represented in his pocket-book series.<sup>9</sup> His dual role of "campaign organizer" and "chief vote-counter" uniquely equipped him to keep his candidate in office!

Probably the second most valuable source of information about what the public wanted came to Girard in the form of letters from readers of Little Blue Books. When in 1924 Haldeman-Julius published his five-hundredth Little Blue Book title, he, in typical style, used the occasion to publicize his "University in Print." He drew together and published in his monthly periodical, *Life and Letters*, several favorable letters received from prominent American Little Blue Book readers. An old Milwaukee socialist newspaper friend named Carl Sandburg wrote the following:

The Haldeman-Julius hip-pocket library has a fine picked list of the best things men have thought and written. For a five-dollar bill it brings an amazing array of good things to read. It is the bricklayer's hope, the mucker's dream, the wop's wonder of an education.<sup>10</sup>

Upton Sinclair, whose muck-raking novel of the Chicago meat-packing industry, *The Jungle*, was published as six Little Blue Books, saw the Pocket Series as the solution to the problem of culture. He wrote:

Haldeman-Julius has solved the problem of culture for the people. In a year or two he will be printing more books than all the rest of the publishers of the world. He is going to put all the comic strips, sports pages and Sunday supplements out of business. The most important invention since the art of printing is the art of printing five cent books!<sup>11</sup>

And Will Durant, author of *The Story of Philosophy*, was another Little Blue Book booster. After all, Haldeman-Julius had "discovered" him; his lectures on various philosophers were first published in a dozen Little Blue Books selling for a total of 60 cents. Eventually, selling for \$5.00, *The Story of Philosophy* became the best-selling non-fiction clothbound book in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Durant wrote the following letter:

After wandering through all the radical and liberal political and economic movements of the 20th century I have been brought forcibly and inevitably to the conclusion that the only hope of political or economic redemption lies in the spread of knowledge and the enlightenment of understanding and judgment. We cannot change our institutions until we change ourselves; and we can change ourselves not by sermons but by knowledge and wisdom. If there is a utopia Mr. Haldeman-Julius has found the road to it.<sup>13</sup>

Letters from the common man were probably a better indicator of what the average reader in the United States wanted. The following letters, published in 1928, substantiate what Sandburg, Sinclair and Durant had said four years earlier about the Little Blue Books:

Starr G. Bennett — Student, Kalamazoo, Michigan

The Little Blue Books on marriage and its problems and health and hygiene, for example, are books everyone should possess. They contain practically all I have ever learned about sex and I consider them invaluable in this line of education.

Louis B. Greenberg — Lawyer, Kansas City, Missouri

Looking back on my five years in the University and considering the various educational forces with which I thus came into contact, I find that I cannot attribute to any single factor a greater portion of credit for the little learning I now possess than to the Little Blue Books.

W. L. Nelles — Telegrapher, Rawlins, Wyoming

The Little Blue Books, being pocket-size, furnish me with a means to employ my spare moments to advantage. They enable me to continue in isolation my studies in subjects that interest me. Large, cumbersome books are difficult to transport and cannot be kept constantly at hand to catch these exclusive, idle moments.<sup>14</sup>

These three devices, then, sales data, advertising feedback, and letters to the editor, were the primary methods used by Haldeman-Julius to analyze popular American tastes in the nineteen twenties. What were some of his findings?

An important discovery was the composition of the American general audience. He received letters and orders from people in every socio-economic and age group in every state in the Union. In addition, orders poured in from Canada, China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, all South American nations, the West Indies, Central America, Mexico, all European nations, Iraq, Egypt, and South Africa.<sup>15</sup> The average Little Blue Book reader was a fairly young middle-class male who, to use Haldeman-Julius' own terms, had a "middle-brow," rather than "high-brow" or "low-brow" educational and aesthetic background.<sup>16</sup> To Haldeman-Julius his audience was a promising multitude of former George F. Babbitts.<sup>17</sup>

In 1928 Haldeman-Julius claimed that he had discovered four main subject classifications covering 90 per cent of the reading interest of Americans. They were, in order of popularity, Sex and Love, Self-Improvement, Freethought and Religious Skepticism, and Fun and Laughter.<sup>18</sup> Extensive support for these conclusions was provided by Haldeman-Julius in the form of extrapolated and rounded sales figures in his hardbound book, *The First Hundred Million*, published in 1928 by Simon and Schuster.

Among the most popular books in the "Sex and Love" category were *What Married Women Should Know*, *What Married Men Should Know*, *Women's Sexual Life*, *The Physiology of Sex Life*, *Modern Aspects of Birth Control*, *Prostitution in the Modern World*, *Illicit Love* (Boccaccio), *One of Cleopatra's Nights* (Gauthier), *26 Men and a Girl* (Gorki), and *A French Prostitute's Sacrifice* (Maupassant). Haldeman-Julius frequently pointed out that his books dealing with sex were reliable and factually based; several of them were written by medical authorities who were specialists in the field about which they were writing, and, despite their titles, none of them were sensationalistic or in any sense "smutty." He was struck by the fact that American readers had a "weakness" for tales by French authors such as Maupassant, especially tales of illicit love.<sup>19</sup>

In the field of Self-Improvement, best selling titles included *How to Improve Your Conversation*, *How To Improve Your Vocabulary*, *Hints on Etiquette*, *How To Write Letters*, *Care of Skin and*

*Hair, Common Faults in English, How to Psycho-Analyze Yourself, and How To Fight Nervous Troubles.* Haldeman-Julius concluded that the traditional American quest for self-improvement was no idle dream. What Americans wanted most, he discovered, was *social* improvement; they were primarily concerned with their *external* appearance. Physical attractiveness, social etiquette, and the ability to express oneself clearly were considered by the upward mobile average American of the twenties to be criteria for culture and refinement.<sup>20</sup>

Haldeman-Julius' extensive publication of Freethought or Religiously Skeptical books stemmed from a combination of his liberal philosophy and the public demand for such reading material. He was proud of his role in the emancipation of readers' minds, and hoped that his efforts had helped so some extent to remove the possibility of there ever being another Index Expurgatoris. At the same time, he found Freethought to be more profitable, from a publisher's point of view, than the most devout creed. This fact was proven by his experiences as a publisher of the Bible. Despite traditional claims that the Christian Scriptures are the best-selling book in America, he found that his readers purchased four copies of *Self-Contradictions of the Bible* to every single copy he sold of *The Essence of the Bible*. He attributed "best-seller" figures for the leather-bound Bible to the fact that it was a "merchandise book"; a book that people wanted "just because it is the Bible and one really ought to have one on the premises." Even though the Bible might have been a best-seller in the leather-bound market, Haldeman-Julius was convinced that *its* publishers could not claim, as *he* did, that their Book was bought to be read. He pointed out, too, that for every copy sold of *The Life of Jesus*, nearly four copies of other books were sold suggested that He did not live at all. Even *The Life of the Infidel Ingersoll* was more than twice as popular as the *Life of Jesus*.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the other most popular Freethought titles were *Reasons for Doubting the Bible, Forgery of the Old Testament. The Myth of the Resurrection, Thomas Paine's Age of Reason, and Luther Burbank's Why I am an Infidel.* Individual titles in Joseph McCabe's 50-volume "History of Religious Controversy" sold over 5 million copies . . . from 13,000 to 46,000 copies each annually in the twenties.

The fourth most popular category of Little Blue Books during this decade was Entertainment, or Fun and Laughter. It is no coincidence that the best-seller in the category during the days of Prohibition was *Toast for All Occasions*. Nor should it surprise us that *Best Jewish*



*Jokes, Best Negro Jokes, Best Irish Jokes, and Best Scotch Jokes* were twice as popular as joke books about Americans during the twenties . . . a moment's reflection will remind us that this decade in American history marked the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, the passage of strict immigration quotas, and egotistical belief in all things American. Equally reflective of the historical context in which they were published were jokes about Henry Ford's popular invention. Although the Model T died in 1927, the jokes about it went rattling on. *Best Ford Jokes* sold an average of 22,500 copies per year during the mid and later twenties.<sup>22</sup>

Haldeman-Julius generalized about the most popular joke books of all; they dealt with what human beings have most revered, most idealized, and most consecrated — love and its relationships. Because love is human, and universal, it makes good material for humor: *Best Jokes About Married Life, Best Jokes About Lovers, and Best Jokes About Kissing*, all best-sellers in his series, sold in excess of 33,000 copies each per year. Very popular also were the so-called “fun books” — *Crossword Puzzles, What Do You Know?, Who, When, Where, What?, Mathematical Oddities, Party Games for Grown-ups, Amateur Magic Tricks, and Children's Games* — all selling by the tens of thousands per year.<sup>23</sup> •

Besides identifying his audience and discovering the reading categories they most preferred, Haldeman-Julius learned a few other things about the average American during the nineteen twenties. Contrary to what Henry L. Mencken was saying at that time about the “American booboisie,” Haldeman-Julius concluded that there was, amongst the common people in the United States, “a nucleus around which to build something worthwhile.” The Girard publisher was convinced that “Mr. Average American” was thorough in his quest for knowledge; there was no doubt that the readers wanted the facts, “whether they were in accord with their hopes and their religious beliefs or not.” And Haldeman-Julius was confirmed by solid evidence in his belief that the American general public would be receptive to the intelligent presentation of literary classics as long as the presentation was not intimidating, and as long as it was entirely removed from the academic and traditional.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the fact that the first two booklets in the Pocket Series were both brisk-selling poetry classics, sales data proved unequivocally that Americans did not want *poetry*. Equally as unpopular with the common man were books of literary criticism and books that were

too esoteric or obviously “high brow.” Haldeman-Julius also discovered that long books, especially multi-volume works such as Upton Sinclair’s *Jungle*, were dismal failures with the masses.<sup>25</sup> Readers bought the first volume to see what the book was all about, but never got around to ordering the rest. Then too, a multi-volume work couldn’t be carried in a trouser pocket without bulging!

So much for some of the “customs and manners,” as Tocqueville might have put it, of Americans during the nineteen twenties. Hopefully this has not been a vain attempt to demonstrate the kinds of conclusions one might draw from a study of a popular culture medium such as the Little Blue Books.

Turning now, for no more than a minute or two, to my second goal in this paper, I should like to say something about popular culture as it relates specifically to historians.

When I stated at the outset that I hoped to encourage increased consideration of popular culture sources in historical research and teaching, I did not intend to suggest that we need a new historical methodology. Rather, I am suggesting that the study of popular culture sources *can open up new areas of evidence* — areas which can contribute significantly to what we know about attitudes, values, and ideas of a given society at a given point in time.

Our graduate history programs have trained us well, for the most part, to scrupulously research treaties, state papers, inaugural speeches, census reports, church position statements, newspaper accounts, and diaries. But do we take into account in our research or teachings such things as five-cent pocket booklets? Or comic books? Or lyrics of folk and popular music? Or cinema, or radio, or television? In our diligent reading of microfilmed newspapers and periodicals from the past do we overlook the advertisements and cartoons?

Popular culture, the culture of the masses, represents the greatest single shared experience of society, the *broadest common experience* in which an individual participates. This common cultural experience is a powerful binding factor in society, and in a modern mass society such as that of Canada or the United States, probably the greatest force working against individual isolation. Popular culture provides a set of reference points, a kind of language, a set of metaphors, if you will, for millions of people to communicate with each other. To ignore popular culture in historical studies — or in sociological or anthropological or

literary studies — is to ignore an important means of forming and preserving ideas, attitudes, and values in society.

If we want to know something about basic ideologies and how they are driven deep into the consciousness of a society, we have to look at the popular culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William J. Fielding, "Prince of Pamphleteers," *Nation* (May 10, 1952), p. 453; for further biographical information see Albert Mordell's compilation, *The World of Haldeman-Julius* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1960), Andrew Cothran's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Little Blue Book Man and the Big American Parade," (University of Maryland, 1966), and Haldeman-Julius' two-volume autobiography (Big Blue Books #B-788 and B-184), *My First and Second 25 Years* (Girard: 1949). Gene DeGruson is currently writing a biography of Haldeman-Julius, *The Paper Giant*, in collaboration with Mrs. Sue Haldeman-Julius, the publisher's widow.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Gunn, Little Blue Book #678, *E. Haldeman-Julius — the Man and His Work* (Girard: 1924), pp. 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> Although exact sales figures do not exist, interviews with Mr. Gene DeGruson, curator of the Haldeman-Julius Collection at Kansas State College, and Mr. Henry Haldeman, son of E. Haldeman-Julius, indicate that the figures I am presenting here are more accurate than any previously published lower estimates; *New York Times*, June 14, 1964, p. 84; *Saturday Review* (April 12, 1969), p. 23; E. Haldeman-Julius, *The First Hundred Million* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1928), p. 61 (hereafter *FHM*).

<sup>4</sup> "Porter Library Bulletin," Vol. 3, no. 18 (May 15, 1969), p. 3. (The Haldeman-Julius Collection, Porter Library, Kansas State College of Pittsburg.)

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion on Haldeman-Julius' advertising techniques see *FHM*, chs. XV and XVI; my article, "The Little Blue Books as Popular Culture: E. Haldeman-Julius' Methodology," in R. B. Nye, ed., *Perspectives on Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: University Popular Press, forthcoming, 1971), is a more general treatment of E. H-J's *modus operandi*.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Adamic, "Voltaire From Kansas," *Outlook and Independent: An Illustrated Weekly of Inquiry* (June 25, 1930), p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> *New Republic* (January 9, 1929), p. 206.

<sup>8</sup> *FHM*, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 121, 247.

<sup>10</sup> *Life and Letters* (January 1924), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> E. Haldeman-Julius, Little Blue Book #1366, *How To Become a Writer of Little Blue Books* (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Company, 1934), p. 2; *FHM*, p. 211.

<sup>13</sup> *Life and Letters* (January 1924), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Haldeman-Julius Weekly*, no. 1684 (March 10, 1928), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *FHM*, pp. 251-252.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 38, 52, 166, 270, 295; personal interview with Mr. R. E. Runser, Michigan State University Library Bibliographer, a Little Blue Book reader during the 'twenties; *Life and Letters* (September 1922), p. 10. For a cross-section of Haldeman-Julius' numerous comments about "highbrows," see *FHM*, pp. 69, 117, 120, 172, 194.

<sup>17</sup> *FHM*, p. 51; references to Sinclair Lewis' works, especially *Babbitt*, abound throughout Haldeman-Julius original and secondary sources. Victor Willard said the publisher was "Bringing the Light to Main Street," and "making bookworms of all the Babbitts," in *Sunset Magazine*, (January, 1926), p. 62. William Saroyan, in "The American Clowns of Criticism," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, (March, 1929), p. 77, was less complimentary, but used the same allusion.

<sup>18</sup> *FHM*, p. 322.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 27, 31, 140; Willard, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 51, 58-59.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 85, 86.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. IV.

<sup>24</sup> William McCann, "Sex-mad Socialism," *The Progressive* (September 1967), p. 46; *FHM*, pp. 47, 49, 55, 61, 117, 120, 125-26, 172.

<sup>25</sup> *FHM*, pp. 32, 156, 194, 195, 197.