


# Ellen White and Fiction



## A Closer Look

**T**he reading and study of fiction are not new topics for Seventh-day Adventists, especially Adventist teachers and librarians. Some might think that we have dealt with the fiction issue long enough, and we should just put up a grave marker that says “Buried: Done and Gone.”

But the question of whether Adventists should read—and teach—fiction continues to be raised. In 1972, after considerable input, the General Conference Department of Education tried to settle the issue by preparing a set of criteria that would guide teachers in assigning selections from any of the major literary forms—poetry, drama, and prose fiction.<sup>1</sup> However, in many Adventist schools, the teaching of literature, including fiction, is still a controversial and contentious issue.<sup>2</sup> We hear of students who refuse to attend church schools or colleges where literature courses include the study of fiction.

The controversy stems from the writings of Ellen G. White, who lived through most of the 19th century and into the early 20th century. Seventh-day Adventists believe that this remarkable woman was divinely guided to instruct their church. An educational reformer in the truest sense, she did much to shape and guide the development of a system of holistic education whose philosophy and ideals differed markedly from the

schooling patterns and practices of her time. She gave practical counsel regarding the choice of literature and reading matter for both home and school. Some of her strongest statements attacked the prevailing storybook fiction of her time.

### Extreme Views

It is not surprising that Adventists sometimes hold opposite and extreme views on this topic. Those who believe fiction is consistently evil quote some of Ellen White’s statements such as these:

“All [novels] are pernicious in their influence.”<sup>3</sup>

“Novel readers are mental inebriates.”<sup>4</sup>

“Novel and story-book reading are the greatest evils that youth can indulge in.”<sup>5</sup>

At the opposite extreme, some take the view that Ellen White’s counsels about fiction are outdated and unduly restrictive and thus should be ignored. Proponents of this position emphasize that she came from a very conservative religious background and had little literary training.

This article will explore the nature of American fiction in the second half of the 19th century, comparing what Ellen White and secular thinkers of that time said about it. Then it will draw some conclusions from this analysis.

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## Fiction in 19th-Century America

Several Adventist scholars<sup>6</sup> have written about 19th-century American literature. During this period, several authors achieved fame for their literary art and became respected names in American literature. But it was also a period that produced some of the worst examples of popular literature—specifically, cheap and sensational novels. What influenced this genre of literary output, and what did it look like?

Until the 1840s, education in America occurred mostly in private schools. Rapid expansion of free public schools, which began about this time, created a new literate and reading-hungry class of young people. This hunger was soon fed with a new class of reading matter: sentimental and dime novels. Both made their appearance in the 1850s and monopolized the American fiction market until the end of the century.

Starting in the late 1850s, publishers produced an ever-increasing number of “sentimental” or “domestic” novels. The plots featured unfaithful or drunken husbands and struggling wives trapped in a “loveless marriage.” The writers were women—at least a hundred of them. Perhaps the best known and most prolific author of this type of fiction was Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, who wrote more than 50 novels, most of which sold more than six figures. Appearing in cheap paper editions, some popular titles sold as many as two million copies.<sup>7</sup>

The “dime novel” originated in the early 1860s and quickly became popular. Often issued as a series, these novels began with Indian themes and soon expanded to “Wild West” stories, popularizing American heroes such as Billy the Kid and Buffalo Bill. Sometimes referred to as “sensational stories,” most dime novels contained stories of crime, intrigue, immorality, bloodshed, and violence. They thrived on excitement, suspense, and hairbreadth escapes. A contemporary author believed that “in the department of murder, the instruction given by the dime-novel writers is all that could be desired. There is not a possible method of murder that is not fully described. . . . Our boys are taught how to kill.”<sup>8</sup>

## Religious Fiction

It should come as no surprise that these sentimental and sensational novels stimulated a negative response from religious and thought leaders. In fact, fiction of any caliber had been widely condemned since the beginning of the 19th century. A 1797 magazine article entitled “Novel Reading a Cause of Female Depravity” was republished several times, and in 1803, the commencement address at Harvard discussed “the dangers of fiction.”<sup>9</sup>

A writer in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* of 1846 complained that “many young persons of both sexes have been totally spoiled by the novel-reading mania! How many students in our boarding schools and colleges have, through this mischievous agency, lost all relish for study, and finally become totally disqualified for severe mental toil of any kind.”<sup>10</sup>

Ellen White voiced the same concerns. She wrote in 1860: “It is love for storybooks, tales, and other reading which does not have an influence for good upon the mind. . . . It produces a false, unhealthy excitement, fevers the imagination, unfits the

mind for usefulness, and disqualifies it for any spiritual exercise.”<sup>11</sup>

By the late 1880s, moral respectability began to be emphasized in American literature. Popular fiction began to embrace a rigid “code of morality,” which caused a new type of popular religious fiction to flourish. Churches and Sunday schools began setting up circulating libraries, and Sunday school papers serialized a variety of novels. In the 1890s, the *Youth’s Companion* developed into an illustrated family paper, filled with religious fiction. Its circulation quickly rose to 500,000. Meanwhile, the Sunday school papers catered to youthful desires for excitement and adventure. According to a source quoted by Wood, “Sunday school libraries were filled with stories of dedicated girls who found and converted atheists with the same zeal that boys in the dime novels shot and skinned buffaloes.”<sup>12</sup>

Ellen White perceived the dangers inherent in this religious fiction. “Love stories and frivolous, exciting tales constitute another class of books that is a curse to every reader. The author may attach a good moral and all through his work may weave religious sentiments, yet in most cases, Satan is but clothed in angel robes, the more effectively to deceive and allure.”<sup>13</sup>

## Genuine Literature Held Hostage

The best 19th-century American writers (Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman) had limited success selling their works in the mid-century because of the influence of popular culture and competition from cheap novels. In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne complained to his publisher and friend, William Tichnor, “America is now given over to a damned mob of scribbling women.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Davis, American tastes in literature and reading were largely uninformed and unschooled during this period. Critical approaches to literature were almost never taught in schools and universities during the 19th century. Serious study of literature was restricted to the ancient classics of Greece and Rome, and even then, the instruction often failed to emphasize anything but linguistic competence.<sup>15</sup> Not until 1876 did Harvard appoint its first full-time professor of English. Most American universities did not treat English and American literature seriously until the early 20th century, and it took much longer for the study of modern literature to percolate down to the grade schools.

## What 19th-Century Librarians Said

The Boston Public Library, which opened in 1836, came to be regarded as one of the largest and finest libraries in the United States. Serious concern about the type of fiction available to the American public is expressed in its 1875 report: “There is a vast range of ephemeral literature, exciting and fascinating, apologetic of vice or confusing distinctions between plain right and wrong, fostering discontent with the peaceful, homely duties which constitute a large portion of average men and women’s lives, responsible for an immense amount of mental disease and moral irregularities which are so troublesome an element in modern society.”<sup>16</sup>

One year later, *The Library Journal* was founded by Melvil

Dewey. Among other topics, its first issues dealt with the problem of fiction in American society. Librarians and societal leaders were deeply concerned about the influence of contemporary fiction. It is interesting to compare some of their forthright statements with the counsels given by Ellen White.

First, some quotations from the librarians and the director of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of New York:

- William F. Poole, head librarian of Chicago Public Library, wrote in 1876, "The librarian who should allow an immoral novel in his library for circulation would be as culpable as the manager of a picture gallery who should hang an indecent picture on his walls."<sup>17</sup>

- The director of the YMCA of New York said, "Our Association aims to reject not only the immoral, but the sensational and the trivial—such works as fill the mind with false, wild ideas of life. I believe the influence of this class of books is decidedly injurious."<sup>18</sup>

- William Kite, a respected librarian at the Carnegie Library of Germantown, Pennsylvania, expressed concern about romantic novels. In 1876, he asked: "Do novels teach them [young women] contentment with their lowly but honest occupations? The factory girl, as she tends the loom or her spinning jenny, turns over in her thoughts the fortunes of the heroine of the last novel she has read, raised by impossible suppositious incidents from humble life to princely fortune, and she pines for a lover to so lift her into notoriety."<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to place that quote alongside an 1871 statement from Ellen White's pen: "I am acquainted with a number of women who have thought their marriage a misfortune. They have read novels until their imaginations have become diseased, and they live in a world of their own creating. . . . From what the

Lord has shown me, the women of this class have had their imaginations perverted by novel reading, daydreaming, and castle-building, living in an imaginary world. They do not bring their own ideas down to the common, useful duties of life."<sup>20</sup>

Librarians of the 1870s also had much to say about the sensational dime novels for boys: "The boy reads of equally false deeds of daring—fortunes made by unjust dealings, glossed over as to half conceal their iniquity—and his bewildered mind is unfitted for the hard duties of life."<sup>21</sup>

On the same topic, William M. Stevenson, librarian of the Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny, Pennsylvania, wrote: "It is evident that as long as the vulgarizing books for the young are within their reach, they will prefer them to those which ennoble. There is still a good deal of the barbarian in the average boy, and the novel of blood and destruction is just what he takes to naturally."<sup>22</sup>

Stevenson described the effects of novel reading on his library clientele: "I may say that I have taken pains to follow the reading of certain devotees of this kind of literature, fiction-fiends as they might be called, and I have never yet discovered a case of improvement among adult readers. Once the habit is formed it seems as difficult to throw off as the opium habit. . . . The most inveterate fiction readers are among the idlest class in the community. . . . The fiction question remains the vital question for librarians."<sup>23</sup>

Stevenson's observations square very well with Ellen White's experience: "I have known persons of well-balanced minds, whom God had endowed with mental powers of no ordinary character, to take up the reading of romance; and the more they indulged the appetite for this kind of mental food, the greater was the demand. The imagination constantly craved its accustomed stimulus, as the inebriate longs for his wine or tobacco."<sup>24</sup>

## An Annotated Bibliography: Adventists and Literature

(Entries listed chronologically)

- H. M. Tippet, English teacher, writer, and publishing house editor: "A Review of Some Principles in Dealing with Fiction and Imaginative Forms of Literature in Our Schools." 6 pp. This paper, read at a Council of College English Teachers, Takoma Park, Maryland, August 23-30, 1949, focused on where truth is found in literature.\*

- Richard B. Lewis, English teacher and book editor: "Creative Literature." 11 pp. This essay, presented to the faculty of Pacific Union College, Angwin, California, 1951, discussed fiction and drama.\*

- Paul T. Gibbs, English teacher at Andrews University: "Literature in Adventist Schools." 18 pp. Presented to an English

Teachers' Conference at Southern Missionary College, Collegedale, Tennessee, August 1961, this paper focused on how Ellen White used and quoted from literature in her writings.\*

- John O. Waller, professor of English at Andrews University: "A Contextual Study of Ellen G. White's Counsel Concerning Fiction." 24 pp. A paper read to a meeting of Seventh-day Adventist college English teachers at the Quadrennial Session on Higher Education, La Sierra College, Riverside, California, August 1965. (Reprinted, with slight revisions, in *Seventh-day Adventists on Literature*, Robert Dunn, ed., 1974.)

- Leon W. Cobb, college English professor: *Give Attendance to Reading: Guidelines in the Field of Books and Reading; Studies Based on the Writings of Ellen G. White*. 1966. 111 pp. Privately published. Contains a systematic and exhaustive collection of Ellen G. White statements about fiction and reading, with comments by the author.

- George W. Target, British Adventist author: "The Novel as Christian Witness," *The Claremont Dialogue* (Summer 1968):1-11. In this article, Target, who wrote and published several novels such as *The Evangelists*, *The Teachers*, and *The Shop Stewards*, defended the earthy language of many of his stories.

- Max Philips: "Fiction, E. G. White, and the Bible," *Insight 2* (June 15, 1971):6-11. Writing for young readers, Philips concluded that Ellen White did not consider all non-factual material as fiction.

- W. P. Bradley, chair of the Ellen G. White Estate: "Ellen G. White and Literature." Presented on June 15, 1971, to the Committee on the Teaching of Literature, this paper was accompanied by an extensive list of "exhibit materials."\*

- John O. Waller: "Fiction, Critical Theory, and a Graduate Criticism Course." 9 pp. Paper read to the North American Division



The so-called “classical fiction” of the time also received censure from public librarians. William Kite reported being told that “such and such works of fiction are classical and may be safely read by educated minds as recreation. As the world contains so much that is better, I can readily dispense with such books.”<sup>25</sup>

Ellen White’s strongest statements about fiction were recorded during the 1870s and 1880s, the very time when many men and women in American secular society were disturbed about the novels young people were reading. Here are sample quotes from Ellen White written around the same time:

“The world is flooded with novels of every description. . . . Some are immoral, low, and vulgar; others are clothed with more refinement; but all are pernicious in their influence” [1869].<sup>26</sup>

“The course pursued by the base and vile, is kept before them [young men] in the periodicals of the day, and everything which can excite curiosity and arouse the animal passions is brought before them in thrilling and exciting stories. . . . Novel and storybook readings are the greatest evils in which youth can indulge” [1875].<sup>27</sup>

“Our youth and children, and even those of mature age, should firmly pledge themselves to abstain from indulgence in reading the fascinating novels and sensational literature of the day” [1886].<sup>28</sup>

“If the intellectual and moral taste has been perverted by the over-wrought and exciting tales of fiction, so that you are disinclined to apply yourself to the diligent study of God’s Word, then you have a battle to fight with yourself to overcome this depraved habit. A love for fictitious reading should be broken up at once” [1883].<sup>29</sup>

### “What Shall Our Children Read?”

In 1874, when Seventh-day Adventists opened their first

college near the church’s headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan, Bible courses were not included in the curriculum, and the literature courses emphasized the Latin and Greek classics. The college followed a curriculum similar to that of other American institutions of higher learning, which relegated Bible study to the Sunday schools.

With the establishing of other Adventist colleges and schools throughout North America (starting around 1885), Ellen White became increasingly vocal about the nature and content of the curricula. She wanted these schools to avoid the mistakes made at Battle Creek College. In 1891, at the first Adventist educational convention, in Harbor Springs, Michigan, she reiterated her 1872 testimony on “Proper Education” as the foundation for a divinely guided, innovative approach for Seventh-day Adventist education. She called for drastic reform: discarding the traditional courses in the ancient classics, and emphasizing instead the Bible as the foundation of all true education. Shortly afterward, she moved to Australia, where these reforms were implemented at the Avondale School for Christian Workers.<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to follow the chronology of Ellen White’s writings about literature and reading during her lifetime. Prior to 1891, when she moved to Australia, her writings about fiction were almost entirely directed at the trashy fiction and sentimental novels of the time. Later, her counsels regarding books and reading addressed mainly the educational setting. She continued to warn about storybook fiction and serialized stories in magazines because they encouraged hasty and superficial reading. “Even fiction which contains no suggestion of impurity, and which may be intended to teach excellent principles, is harmful. It encourages the habit of hasty and superficial reading merely for the story.”<sup>31</sup>

Committee on the Teaching of Literature, June 1971.\*

- “Guide to the Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist Schools.” 12 pp. This booklet, prepared by the North American Division Committee on the Teaching of Literature for the General Conference Department of Education in 1972, contained specific criteria for the selection of literature for Seventh-day Adventist schools.

- Robert Dunn, ed., “Seventh-day Adventists on Literature” (Loma Linda University Department of English, 1974). A compilation of a selection of previously unpublished papers on the topics of literature and fiction.

- John Wood: “The Trashy Novel Revisited: Popular Fiction in the Age of Ellen White.” *Spectrum* 7 (April 1976):16-24. A scholarly study of creative writing in America during the second half of the 19th century. Wood’s article helps to explain the context out of which Ellen White’s statements about

fiction and novels arose.

- Delmer Davis: “Literature for the Nation” (Chapter 12 in *The World of Ellen White*, Gary Land, ed., published by Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1987.) A useful summary of American literature in the 19th century, showing how the significant literary figures of the time were overshadowed by the explosion of the popular novel.

- Scott Moncrieff: “Adventists and Fiction: Another Look,” *College and University Dialogue* 8:3 (1996):9-12. A concise re-examination of the issues such as understanding Ellen White’s legacy on the subject of fiction and suggestions for some new ways of approaching fiction.

- David James Duncan: “On the Necessity of Fiction in the Life of Faith,” *Spectrum* 27:4 (1999):65-68. In this article, Duncan argued that imaginary experience can open us

to truth and that fiction can be a form of truth-telling.

- Shirley A. McGarrell: “Should Adventist Academies Teach Literature?” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 58:1 (October/November 2002):22-27: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200265012206.pdf>. This article reported on a survey of English teachers in Seventh-day Adventist secondary schools in the Caribbean and concluded that “In many regions, the teaching of literature, including fiction, is still a controversial and contentious topic in Adventist schools.”

- Charles H. Tidwell Jr.: “Literature and Reading,” *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon, eds. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2013), pp. 943-946.

\* Reprinted in *Seventh-day Adventists on Literature*, Robert Dunn, ed. (Riverside, Calif.: Department of English, Loma Linda University, 1974).

On more than one occasion Ellen White asked, “What shall our children read?” What indeed? It would be easy to conclude that she restricted children’s reading to the Bible and a handful of approved authors. But we must contextualize her counsels. When we grasp the reality that courses in modern literature were completely absent in most grade school curricula, her concerns about hasty and superficial reading make sense. And because the Bible was neglected in the schools of her time, she emphasized and re-emphasized its prominence as the foundation for all true education.<sup>32</sup>

### Concluding Observations

Clearly, Ellen White’s early statements about fiction were specifically directed toward the trashy novels that were popular among the youth of her day. Her strongly worded counsels seem hardly more severe than the published comments by her secular contemporaries. Public librarians of the time were also deeply concerned about the reading habits of young people.

Ellen White did not consistently judge literary works by their factuality or non-factuality. Her primary concern was with influence and content rather than form. She read and quoted from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,<sup>33</sup> and advocated John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which is allegorical.<sup>34</sup> She compiled *Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle* from several scrapbooks containing stories she clipped from a variety of religious and secular magazines over a period of 10 years. John Waller made a study of many of the stories and the magazines from which they were taken, and concluded that a significant percentage of them were fictional in nature.<sup>35</sup> Ellen White may not have been aware that some of her clippings were fictitious. Evidently, though, she selected material based upon its moral and spiritual influence and application, not its genre.<sup>36</sup>

Yesterday’s “sensational” stories and “dime novels” have metamorphosed into today’s myriad forms of entertainment: movies, TV, video and role-playing games, social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.), and myriad types of material posted on the Internet. These powerful media hook children and youth in the same way that trashy novels did a century ago. Thinking people today condemn the influence of crime, violence, sex, and the occult on the children and youth of our time. While being careful not to take Ellen White’s counsels out of their context, we may look for and apply her warnings and principles to our own time and place. ✍

*This article has been peer reviewed and reviewed by the Ellen G. White Estate.*



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including Ghana, Kenya, Lebanon, and the Philippines. He is the author of several books and articles in professional journals.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Shirley McGarrell, “Should Adventist Academies Teach Literature?” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 65:1 (October/November 2002):22-27.
3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1869, 1948), vol. 2, p. 236.
4. \_\_\_\_\_, *Review and Herald* (October 9, 1883).
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9. Delmer Davis, “Literature for the Nation,” chapter 12 in Garry Land, ed., *The World of Ellen White* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1987), p. 198.
10. Quoted by John O. Waller in “A Contextual Study of Ellen G. White’s Counsel Concerning Fiction,” a paper read to the quadrennial section meeting of Seventh-day Adventist college English teachers at La Sierra College, Riverside, California, August 1965.
11. White, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 241, 242 [1861].
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13. White, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 7, p. 165 [1902].
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15. Davis, “Literature for the Nation,” op. cit., p. 206.
16. *Report of the Examining Committee*, Boston Public Library, 1875.
17. William F. Poole, *Library Journal* 1:2 (1876):50.
18. *Library Journal*, *ibid.*, p. 98.
19. William Kite, *Library Journal* 1:8 (1876):278.
20. White, *Testimonies*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 462, 463 [1871].
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22. William M. Stevenson, *Library Journal* 22 (March 1897):133, 134.
23. *Ibid.*
24. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Signs of the Times* (May 19, 1887).
25. Kite, *Library Journal*, op. cit., p. 279.
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28. \_\_\_\_\_, *Review and Herald* (November 9, 1886).
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30. George R. Knight, *A Brief History of Seventh-day Adventists* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 2004), pp. 96, 97.
31. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1905), pp. 445, 446.
32. Throughout Ellen White’s book, *Education*, published in 1903, she emphasized the Bible as the foundation of all school study. For an example, see pages 445 and 446.
33. Paul T. Gibbs, “Literature in Adventist Schools,” in *Seventh-day Adventists on Literature*, Robert Dunn, ed. (Riverside, Calif.: Department of English, Loma Linda University, 1974), p. 121.
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