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THE CALL

The Magazine of the Jack London Society

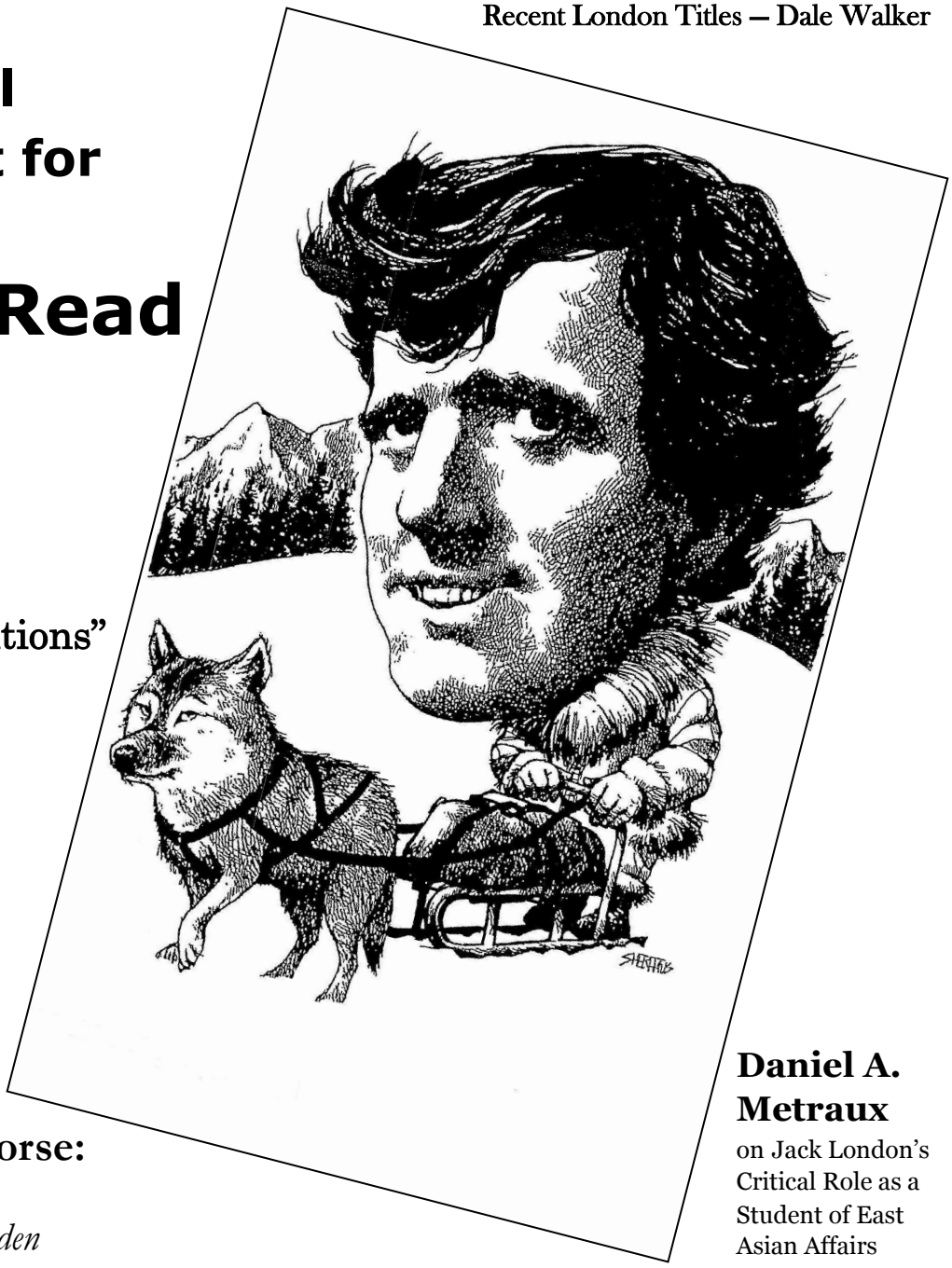
The Call of the Wild

selected for the National Endowment for the Arts'

The Big Read

program

Recent London Titles – Dale Walker



Jack London's
"Hollywood Ambitions"
An Interview with
Marsha Orgeron

Justice to Ruth Morse:
The Devolution of a Character in *Martin Eden*
By Lisa Anderson

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on Jack London's Critical Role as a Student of East Asian Affairs

Jack London and *Hollywood Ambitions*
~ An Interview with Marsha Orgeron ~

photo: elizabethgalecke.com

Marsha Orgeron is Associate Professor & Director, Film Studies in the Department of English at North Carolina State University. She is the author of *Hollywood Ambitions: Celebrity in the Movie Age* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

◊Why did you decide to include a chapter on London in *Hollywood Ambitions: Celebrity in the Movie Age?* How does he fit into your study?

MO: One of my ongoing interests is the way that film history intersects with other aspects of American culture, and so when I was searching for interesting intersections between early film history and Hollywood, Jack London was one of my many candidates. He was obviously a major literary celebrity of his day and the fact that he got involved with Hollywood intrigued me. There had been some material published about his interactions with the motion picture industry—most notably Tony Williams's *Jack London: The Movies* (1992)—but I didn't feel entirely satisfied by the mainly historical, factual presentation of London's film adventures. I also questioned the tendency to explain London's involvement with Hollywood as purely financially motivated. I think that's a real simplification of a much more complex story and my instinct at the time was that there was much more to be found and more to be said about London and Hollywood.

At this point I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of Maryland and taking a class on Naturalism with Jonathan Auerbach, who has published extensively on London, and he encouraged me to apply for a Huntington Library fellowship to explore Jack London's papers for myself, which I did. I also went to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library and found Hobart Bosworth's scrapbooks, with lots of clippings about Jack London during the years of their

collaboration. I was overwhelmed with material, most of which had not been worked with in any detail. I knew within a few days of my research that Hollywood played an integral role in London's development as a writer and that he was an essential figure for exploring celebrity and ambition in relationship to early Hollywood.

The premise of my book as a whole is that the motion picture industry shifted the aspirations of a wide array of individuals to this new medium and to this new cultural hotspot (Hollywood) as that city became the industrial center for making of motion pictures. My aim was to think about ideas of celebrity, ambition, and success in the context of a dramatic shift towards Hollywood as a new epicenter of American culture. I also wanted to study individuals in each chapter who were well known Hollywood personalities (like Clara Bow) and those whose Hollywood ambitions were less well known (like Wyatt Earp and Gertrude Stein). London falls somewhere in between these categories. In many ways I think that Jack London is one of the most important neglected figures of Hollywood history. London's business struggles, the pirating of his work, his entanglements with copyright law and the ownership of his literary properties, his court battles, his involvement with the Author's League, his rethinking of what it meant to be an author in the age of the movies, all make him an exemplary figure in terms of sorting out the tremendous impact Hollywood had on American life.

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◊ In what ways did Jack London try to circulate his literary works and his image through the film?

MO: One context for thinking about London's involvement with the motion picture industry is to explore the prior relationship he had with the theater. In 1910, for example, London signed a contract licensing dramatic rights for *Burning Daylight*. So before he was even approached by Sidney Ayres of the Balboa Company to make film versions of his work (this would happen in 1913), London had been trying to circulate his writing in another cultural context. London is certainly experimenting with the value of his name and of his literary properties in the early 1910s (even doing product testimonials) and his involvement with the motion picture industry might be understood as a kind of outgrowth of these other experiments with the value of his work, his name, and his image.

London was really a pioneer, on the cutting edge of a group of authors who decided to work with the film industry. As London regularly bemoaned, motion picture producers were freely taking plots and characters from nearly every published writer, living or dead. So London took the plunge, signing first with Balboa Amusement Co. and then, later, with Bosworth Incorporated (which was created with the sole purpose of making London adaptations). He didn't want to be involved with the day-to-day business of making these film adaptations, but he did want script →

Had he lived, I have no doubt that London would have continued his Hollywood pursuits and would have learned lessons from each hurdle he crossed, both the business hurdles as well as the authorial ones that shaped the way he was writing in his final years.

approval and he did contractually stipulate that his image would appear as a preface to the Bosworth films, largely as a means to authenticate the films as authorized London adaptations. London was very eager to have good films made of his work, and very frustrated when the films weren't well received or, in his opinion, weren't well made. In her diary entry for June 30th, 1914, Charmian reports that London was depressed by a preview screening of Bosworth's *Martin Eden* (several reels of which survive at the Library of Congress). She doesn't explain why, but given the lackluster reception that most of the Bosworth adaptations had, with the exception of *The Sea Wolf*, it is likely that London felt the film didn't live up to the medium's potential, which he had real faith in. In fact, London once opined that movies were better than the written word when it came to representing action. London really wanted to have a successful relationship with the motion picture industry and invested a good deal of time and energy to making it happen, but his ambitions in this area were certainly not met.

◊ **Are there any particular film adaptations of London's writings that you find particularly interesting from a cultural or aesthetic perspective?**

MO: I'm really not a big fan of most of the film adaptations of London's work, although I'd love to see some of the Bosworth and Balboa adaptations that are considered lost. I suppose that the 1941 *The Sea Wolf* (Dir. Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros.) adaptation is the most interesting, to me, of the bunch. London's writing is well-suited to the Warner Bros.' ethos and style of the 1930s and 1940s, with its elements of social realism and gritty characters. Warner's contract players Edward G. Robinson, John Garfield, and Ida Lupino (I also write about Lupino in the book) make sense as performers in *The Sea Wolf*; other stars—at MGM or RKO, for example—would have had a much harder time fitting the bill. It would be interesting to know what Jack London might have thought of Edward G. Robinson in that role. London became quite observant about films (including adaptations of his own work) and what worked in them and what didn't, so I have no doubt he would have expressed his opinion on the matter had he lived to see this incarnation.

◊ **What challenges did London encounter in his dealings with the business side of motion pictures?**

MO: The better question might be "what challenges *didn't* London encounter"? London's literary properties were being made into films without his consent and without compensation; then London signed a contract with Balboa Co. to make authorized film adaptations and this relationship doesn't work out, so London canceled the contract and signed a new one with Bosworth Inc.; London had to file a lawsuit against Balboa Co. because they were still showing their film adaptations and London worried about the sullying of his reputation and his value because they were, allegedly, bad films; in addition to this London worried about how making film versions of his work would impact licensed theatrical versions, which may have seemed like a significant challenge until it was dwarfed by a court decision that wedded dramatic rights to movie rights, which forced London to scramble to get back all of his dramatic rights (he even had to pay for some of them!). And these are just some of the highlights!

It is really interesting to read London's letters and to see him struggling with the gargantuan frustrations of the business end of the industry while also clearly being intrigued and seduced by the power of the moving image and its ability to educate audiences and disseminate his literary works to a new segment of the population. Despite all of the obstacles and irritations he experienced working with the motion picture industry, London was—in the last months of his life—still working

on trying to negotiate a film version of *The Little Lady of the Big House*. Had he lived, I have no doubt that London would have continued his Hollywood pursuits and would have learned lessons from each hurdle he crossed, both the business hurdles as well as the authorial ones that shaped the way he was writing in his final years.

◊ What were some of the interesting or odd things you uncovered about London's interactions with the motion picture industry?

MO: For me, the most interesting thing about London's involvement with the motion picture industry is how involved he got in many aspects of it and how sincerely interested he was in its potential. London went to movies (and greatly admired Charlie Chaplin), he studied copyright law that pertained to films, he wanted to inspect the scenarios that were based upon his work, he wrote screenplays, he gave interviews and published essays about the motion picture industry, and he rethought the process of writing with eventual film production in mind. I had never read *Hearts of Three* when I first started researching this project and I was blown away by the fact that London was willing to write a novel based on a moving picture scenario. He even gave up working on other projects to undertake this rather experimental method of authorship. I think this is all a real testament to the power of the emergent film industry, and to London's own savvy awareness of how the literary marketplace was changing because of that new industry.

◊ How did London's awareness of film's potency influence the nature of his writing and his own perception of himself as an author?

MO: I think it is no overstatement to say that the cinema changed London's writing in terms of how he wrote and what he wrote about. His letters indicate that, at least in his final years, he was writing with eventual movie adaptations in mind. London was really interested in getting the most out of a literary work, which was, after all, his labor. I think he also perceived the more intangible value of his name and image, and he was constantly trying to figure out what Jack London was worth to the industry. He seems to have significantly overvalued himself in fiscal terms, but not in terms of his appeal as a celebrity author. I think the movies made him have to think about himself precisely in terms of celebrity.

◊ What further opportunities do you see for film historians and literary scholars in the field of London cinema studies?

MO: Another book and many articles could be written about Jack London and his relationship to the motion picture industry. In many ways he's an ideal figure to develop a Hollywood history around because he allows for the discussion of so many important business, legal, aesthetic, and literary elements. Literary scholars should also find riches here, given the concrete ways that we can explore the movies' impact on London's writing process and on his writing itself. Williams's book is a great start; but there is much more material to work with and so many other things to explore. Surely there are also many other authors of this same time period who might be productively placed in this context. One article from the early teens, for example, mentions Ida Tarbell, Rex Beach, and Booth Tarkington as other authors working in Hollywood in these early feature film eras. I wonder how their experiences compare to London's?

I'd also love to see *Hearts of Three*, the novel London wrote based upon moving picture serial scenarios written by Charles Goddard, back in print (there is a 2003 Kessinger Publishing edition available) with the extant parts of the Goddard screenplay (I discuss *Hearts of Three* at length in my chapter on London). It's a fascinating book and an even more intriguing story in terms of how it was written. It really illustrates the ways that cinematic and literary economies were becoming intertwined and, in many ways, confused. I think it would be a really valuable text to study in any course on Jack London, or on twentieth-century American literary history, or on Hollywood history, for that matter.

The Big Read
Celebrated at The Huntington

"In the main I am self-educated; have had no mentor but myself. . . . [F]rom my ninth year . . . my life has been one of toil. . . . Of course I continued to read. Was never without a book."

—Jack London, in a letter to Houghton, Mifflin & Co., January 31, 1900.

As a young boy, Jack London had to work at hard laboring jobs to help support his family, but he never gave up his dream of becoming a writer, and he never stopped reading. Self-educated and fiercely proud of it, he read widely and voraciously, an activity confirmed by the scores of annotated books from his own library, now housed in The Huntington's stacks.

This past autumn, The Huntington presented a series of programs and events focusing on London's novel *The Call of the Wild* as part of a grant-funded, nationwide initiative called The Big Read. Created by the National Endowment for the Arts, The Big Read promotes reading and literacy, reaching out especially to non-readers and to reluctant readers. Jack London is an ideal author, and *The Call of the Wild* an ideal book, with which to reach reluctant readers. London continues to exert considerable charisma for his fans, and he serves as an inspiring model for those of any age who are disaffected by formal education or simply unaware of the joy of reading for sheer pleasure and fulfillment. For its part, the novel richly rewards its readers on multiple levels: as simply an action-packed adventure of the frozen, unforgiving Northland, or as a multi-layered work to be interpreted more deeply.

To promote reading *The Call of the Wild* and reach out to reluctant readers, an ambitious series of programs was presented. In an exhibition drawn from the library's Jack London Collection, the largest archive of his papers in the world, visitors viewed such items as the author's Yukon diary, the autograph manuscript of London's classic short story "To Build a Fire," a first edition of *The Call of the Wild*, and an oversize, full-color theatre manager's advertising booklet for the 1935 Clark Gable film based on the novel. The Big Read kick-off on September 27th featured Robert Stradley of Adventure Quest Institute presenting a team of sled dogs, Michael Oakes appearing as Jack London, and the Humbugs, a trio from Nevada City, performing Klondike and gold rush music. For several weeks thereafter, a variety of events—nearly 100 in total—were held, including lectures, book discussions, musical programs, and children's and family events. These took place not only at The Huntington, but also at the locations of two dozen Big Read partners – public libraries, schools, and community organizations in ten cities nearby.

Several Big Read events took place just before and after the Jack London Society Symposium. On October 8, Jeanne Campbell Reesman presented a lecture, "*The Call of the Wild* as a Slave Narrative;" on October 10, Pasadena Public Library attracted 1,957 visitors with multiple programs focusing on Jack London for its annual "Art Night Pasadena;" on October 12, Fred Bercovitch of the Zoological Society of San Diego spoke on canine communication and presented a New Guinea singing dog; and, on October 14, Earle Labor presented a lecture, "From Call to Calling: A Biographical Odyssey."

For more information about The Big Read and a Calendar of Events in communities across the nation, go to www.NEABigRead.org.

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest designed to revitalize the role of literature in American culture and bring the transformative power of literature into the lives of its citizens. The Big Read brings together partners across the country to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment.

Sara S. "Sue" Hodson,
Curator of Literary Manuscripts
The Huntington Library

JACK LONDON'S CRITICAL ROLE AS A STUDENT OF EAST ASIAN AFFAIRS

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Daniel A. Metraux
Professor of Asian Studies
Mary Baldwin College

Looking at Jack London's life from the vantage point of a scholar of East Asian studies, it is clear that he was one of the foremost writers on Asian affairs at the turn of the last century, and that he had a truer understanding of the future potential of China and Japan most other Asianist scholars of the day. His journalistic coverage of the Russo-Japanese War and his essays and short stories provide not only excellent coverage of the war, but also a detailed view of life and social and political conditions in East Asia at the turn of the last century. What makes London even more interesting is his ability to discern the potential power of both Japan and China and to predict their rise to dominance later in the twentieth century.

London's firsthand essays and photographs on the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) present a very clear in-depth picture of the early phase of the conflict. Over a period of nearly four months London sailed to Japan and then marched with the Japanese army through Korea into Manchuria. He filed at least twenty-four articles, each several thousand words long, to the Hearst newspapers where he not only presents his own views of the development of the war, but also analyzes the development of Korea, Japan, and China in their struggle to modernize and thus defend themselves from the onslaught of Western imperialism. London's Russo-Japanese War articles, if ever published as an anthology, might well be the best contemporary work on the subject. His analyses of East Asian development, especially his views on the downtrodden state of China and its potential for greatness, are especially perceptive. London made uncanny predictions of a future Japanese invasion first of Manchuria and later China and of China's rise as a world power. Any student of early twentieth century Asian Studies would do well to read London's insightful analyses that cover political, economic, social and cultural themes.

London republished many of his articles, essays, and stories in a variety of anthologies, but oddly he never published his Asian essays in any anthology except for a couple of pieces. Sadly, much of his work on Asia is generally inaccessible to the modern Asianist scholar, and when I show my Asianist colleagues some of London's work, they are stunned at the high quality of his writing and analysis. They agree that London's coverage and commentary on Asian affairs in the early 1900s represents some of the best work of the period. They support the idea that a full in-depth study of London's Asian writings would be an invaluable contribution to the field of early modern East Asian history.

It is important to note, however, that London was much more of a journalist, novelist, and essayist than a scholar of Asian affairs. A dedicated reader of scholarly works on Asia, he consumed everything he could find by writers like Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), whose work he lavished with praise in his essays. London very correctly focuses on the role that China's conservative governing "learned classes" had on slowing the modernization of the country. He writes that China would only progress when its masses rose up and overthrew their masters. On the other hand, London formulated several stereotypical views of various Asian societies that left out certain important elements. For example, he wrote that the Japanese were a nation of warriors who decried commerce, totally ignoring the critical role of the merchant class throughout Japanese history.

London made two trips to Japan and East Asia during his brief lifetime. In 1893, at age 17, he signed on to the sealing schooner *Sophie Sutherland*, bound for the coast of Japan. He spent a raucous time in the Bonin Islands and had a chance to explore Yokohama when his ship stopped there on its return to San Francisco. After his return he wrote several short stories based on his time in Tokyo and Yokohama including "Story of a Typhoon off the Coast of Japan," "Sakaicho, Hona Asi and Hakadaki," "A Night's Swim in Yeddo Bay," and "O Haru." These stories, among the first written by London, reflect a deep affection for Japan and its people, especially those from the lower classes.

Jack London deserves recognition as one of the pioneer students of modern East Asian affairs.

Recent London Titles ~ Dale Walker

***Oakland, Jack London, and Me,* by Eric Miles Williamson, Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, $24.95 (paper) ISBN: 978-1-933896-11-3**

A college English professor and novelist, Eric Miles Williamson grew up a few blocks from Jack London's boyhood home in Oakland and escaped the ghetto by scrapping for an education and learning to write professionally, echoes of London's struggles 125 years ago.

A rare example of literary criticism by an author of fiction, the book is an often angry polemic on London's place in American literature which the author believes has been reduced to that of whipping-boy for the "universally fractured English departments around the country." In the chapter on "The Academic Treatment of London" Williamson states that London can be trotted out and "flogged without let-up" as a "crowd-pleaser" for a variety of trendy "isms" which, he says, "pluralize literary sump tanks today."

***The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution*, Edited by Jonah Raskin, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, $24.95 (paper), ISBN: 978-0-520-25546-3**

"The atrocities of the war in Iraq would not surprise him [London], nor the machinations of the George W. Bush administration and the unrelenting propaganda of the mass media," writes editor Raskin in the opening passages of his 50-page introduction to this collection of London's political writings. How much of London and how much of Raskin is revealed in this essay will be for the reader to decide, but the editor provides an educational view of London's life and insights into the author as a "social visionary."

The book is divided into four parts: Boy Socialist, 1895-1899; Comrade White Man, 1900-1905; Apostate Revolutionary, 1906-1912; and Cosmic Voyager, 1913-1916. Each of the two dozen selections is preceded by an informative headnote; thus, in the note preceding the selection from London's 1915 novel *The Star Rover*, Raskin observes that the book "reads like the last imaginative work of an exhausted writer: a parting gift to himself and a farewell to the world."

***Hollywood Ambitions: Celebrity in the Movie Age*, by Marsha Orgeron, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, $24.95 (paper), ISBN: 0-8195-6865-1**

The author, director of film studies at North Carolina State University, devotes 35 pages of this important investigative book to "Jack London's Hollywood" and concludes that while the author did not have a successful motion picture experience he "was willing to relinquish and, in so doing, debunk the sanctity of authorship in the name of his future successes in the more loosely defined field of popular culture..." London's frustrations over his own public image, over the adaptations of his works, over the financial end of the adaptation business, form illuminating episodes in the author's life and career. Of special interest is the influence of motion pictures on such late-life London works as *Hearts of Three*.

In Prof. Orgeron's study, London is but one of a disparate cast of fascinating characters who had a Hollywood "experience." The author also takes up the cases of Wyatt Earp, Clara Bow, Gertrude Stein, and Ida Lupino and how each dealt with the role as celebrity in "the mythic city" in the film industry's formative years. →

A Student's Guide to Jack London, by Stephanie Buckwalter, Berkley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc., $27.93 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-7660-2707-7

This 160-page guide appears aimed at a mid-teen audience and performs a valuable service in introducing London to that age group. The emphasis is on *The Call of the Wild, White Fang*, and *The Sea-Wolf*, as well as London's life and how he drew from his life's experiences in writing his most memorable fiction.

The author provides an informative introductory discussion of London's Yukon and South Sea tales (in particular) plus brief sidebars explaining socialism, Marxism, naturalism, determinism, the Klondike gold rush, suffrage, and many other historical and literary terms.

The endnotes and interior quoted material reveal that while Buckwalter makes use of such scholarly works as the Labor-Reesman revised *Jack London* (Twayne U.S. Author Series, 1994), and the Cassuto-Reesman *Rereading Jack London* (Stanford University Press, 1996), she also, unfortunately, quotes several times from John Perry's *Jack London: An American Myth* (Nelson-Hall, 1981).

***The Call of the Wild*, Introduced by Melvin Burgess, Puffin Classics, $4.99 (paper), ISBN: 978-0-141-32105-9**

***White Fang*, Introduced by Richard Adams Puffin Classics, $4.99 (paper), ISBN: 978-0-141-32111-0**

For close to 30 years, Puffin Books, an imprint of Penguin, Ltd. of London, has reissued these London classics in beautiful, inexpensive, trade paperbacks. These 2008 reprints are skimpy on introductory material (Melvin Burges managed to write his introduction to *The Call of the Wild* without ever mentioning Jack London's name) but make up for it in the excellence of the production—readable type, handsome, artistic covers, and imaginative backmatter aimed at students that includes an "Author's File" about London, "Wolf Pages" on wolves and dogs, a "Who's Who," "Some Things to Think About, "Some Things to Do," and a glossary.

JLS Society Symposium 2008

Noël Mauberret, Martin Svensson, Chris Million (standing), and Christian Pagnard unwind after a long day on the trail.

JLS Society President Tom Tietze expounds on Gary Riedl's editorial acumen with Bruce Knight, Jack London's great-great Grandson.

JACK LONDON SOCIETY 9TH BIENNIAL SYMPOSIUM

October 10-11, 2008
Henry E. Huntington Library

The Jack London Society 9th Biennial Symposium was held at the Huntington Library October 10-11, 2008. Participants enjoyed a substantial program filled with thoughtful papers and lively discussions on a wide range of subjects related to London's life and work. Highlights included Dr. Philip Klemmer's informative presentation on "London's Use of Mercury for Yaws and His Untimely Death," Earle Labor's spirited plenary address, "'She WAS a wonder!': Genesis and Genius in 'The Night-Born,'" and Tom Tietze's illuminating banquet keynote address, "When Reason was All the Rage: The Occult in Jack London's Time." Symposium participants also had the opportunity to enjoy a number of exhibitions, screenings, presentations for National Endowment for the Arts' The Big Read Program on *The Call of the Wild* at the Huntington, which ran from September 27th to November 2nd, 2008. Tom Tietze is the new Jack London Society President and Gary Riedl is the new Vice President. Gina M. Rossetti of Saint Xavier University and Christian Pagnard of Lycée Alain Colas, Nevers, France, were elected to the Advisory Board. The Jack London Society 10th Biennial Symposium will be held in Sonoma, California, October 2010.

SYMPOSIUM PROGRAM

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Jeanne Campbell Reesman, The Jack London Society
Sara S. Hodson, The Huntington Library

SESSION I. "THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS AND THE BIG READ: *THE CALL OF THE WILD*"

Erika Koss, The National Endowment for the Arts
Sara S. Hodson, The Huntington Library

SESSION II. JACK LONDON AND *INTO THE WILD*
Chair: Kenneth K. Brandt, Savannah College of Art and Design

1. "One Hundred Years Later: Is There An Answer from the Wild?" Noël Mauberret, Lycée Alain Colas
2. "Calls of the Wild on the Page and the Screen: From Jack London to Jon Krakauer, Sean Penn, and Gary Snyder," Jonah Raskin, Sonoma State University
3. "'You Were Right Old Hoss; You Were Right': Jack London in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*," Caroline Hanssen, Dominican University of California

SESSION III. JACK LONDON: BEGINNINGS
Chair: Earle Labor, Centenary College of Louisiana

1. "Jack and Flora: The Last Years," Jacqueline Courbin, University of Ottawa
2. "Jack London's Poetry: the Genesis of his Literary Artistry," Danie Wichlan, Jack London Foundation
3. "James I. McClintock: Faulty Logic and Noble Lies," Susan Nuernberg, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

SESSION IV. B. REDEFINING GENRES: NATURALISM, SCIENCE FICTION, AND THE PASTORAL IN JACK LONDON'S FICTION
Chair: Donna Campbell, Washington State University

1. "'What is *scarlet*?' History and Temporality in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*," Hannah Allen, Michigan State University
2. "Looking for land": The Naturalist Pastoral in *The Valley of the Moon,"* Jessica Schubert McCarthy, Washington State University
3. "Justice to Ruth Morse: The Devolution of a Character in *Martin Eden,"* Lisa Anderson, Washington State University

SESSION V. JACK LONDON, ASIA AND THE SOUTH SEAS
Chair: Jeanne Campbell Reesman, University of Texas at San Antonio

1. "Jack London and the Industrial and Economic Rise of Asia," Daniel Métraux, Mary Baldwin College
2. "Mastering the Machine: Technology and the Racial Logic of Jack London's Asia/Pacific," John Williams, University of California, Irvine
3. "Supraracialism in London's Late South Seas Stories," Jessica Greening Loudermilk, University of California, Davis
4. "London's Use of Mercury for Yaws and His Untimely Death," Philip Klemmer, University of North Carolina Medical School

SESSION VI. LONDON'S HEROES AND HEROINES
Chair: Jessica Greening Loudermilk, University of California, Davis

1. "Revolution in the Rear View Mirror: Nostalgia as Ideological Lens in Jack London's *The Iron Heel*," Gina M. Rossetti, Saint Xavier University
2. "Claiming California: Land Use, Speculation, and the Pioneer Myth in Jack London's and Rose Wilder Lane's California Novels," Donna M. Campbell, Washington State University
3. "Smoke Bellew's Journey," Gary Riedl, Wayzata High School

SESSION VII. CONTEXTS FOR READING LONDON
Chair: Donna M. Campbell, Washington State University

1. "Is He Martin Eden? Recovered Film Footage of Jack London in Hobart Bosworth's 1914 Film Adaptation of *Martin Eden*," Kenneth K. Brandt, Savannah College of Art and Design
2. "Jack London's Dialectical Philosophy: Between Friedrich Nietzsche's Radical Nihilism and Jules de Gaultier's *Bovarysme*," Per Serritslev Petersen, Aarhus University
3. "Catharsis Within Similarly Themed Short Stories: Tennessee Williams's 'Portrait of a Girl in Glass' and Jack London's 'The Apostate,'" Roberta Wirth, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

SESSION VIII. PLENARY ADDRESS: "'She WAS a wonder!': Genesis and Genius in 'The Night-Born,'" Earle Labor, Centenary College of Louisiana

SYMPOSIUM BANQUET KEYNOTE ADDRESS: "When Reason was All the Rage: The Occult in Jack London's Time," Thomas R. Tietze, 2008-2010 JLS President. Introduced by: Donna M. Campbell, 2006-2008 JLS President

Peter Blodgett and Sue Hodson at the Jack London Society banquet dinner.

Justice to Ruth Morse:
The Devolution of a Character in *Martin Eden*

Lisa Anderson
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Within criticism on Jack London's *Martin Eden*, defenders of Ruth Morse are few. To a lesser or greater extent, emphasis on her character is commonly discussed in various permutations of Brissenden's memorable description of her as "that pale, shriveled, female thing" (345). In fact, few critics express any sympathy at all for Ruth Morse. Perhaps this lack of sympathy is a function of the fact that Martin, for multiple and various reasons, does garner our sympathy and our respect for being a self-learned, self-made man. Because our sympathies lie with him, maybe they cannot, too, lie with the woman who throws him over and is unable to see and accept him for who he truly is. In an essay on the novel, Sam Baskett wrote that "[Ruth] is, next to Martin, the most important character in the book, and I think the most misunderstood" (29). For those of us who want to do justice to Ruth by understanding what drives her choices and behavior, this statement remains unsatisfying for two reasons. One, Baskett's exploration of Ruth leaves the question of *why* she is the most misunderstood character in the novel unresolved and two, the exploration of her character offered by Baskett is made solely from Martin's point of view, the person who, after passing through his own awakening, repeatedly sees himself as being superior to Ruth in every possible way. Baskett perpetuates this position of inferiority by deeming her to be the *second* most important character in the novel. Considering that Martin, not Ruth, is the title character of this novel, it is acceptable to assign Ruth a second-place position in terms of character importance; however, a portrayal of Ruth as a second-class citizen merely because of the limitations her lover constantly forces upon her and the narrator demands that the reader acknowledge is unacceptable. I would argue that it is not necessary for Ruth Morse to be degraded and diminished in the reader's esteem in order for Martin Eden to be elevated and idealized in our estimation.

My endeavor here is to present a different portrayal of Ruth Morse than the one commonly drawn for her in London criticism. Such a radical re-presentation of her character is necessary in order to spark dialogue that would require us to return to Baskett's insightful assertion that Ruth is the most misunderstood character in the novel and make a serious attempt at ascertaining the reason why this is an accurate description of her character. Additionally, such a re-presentation of Ruth would ask that we consider not what Ruth has historically stood for, but what she *could* stand for if she is viewed within the framework of a naturalistic novel and shown to be subject to the same evolutionary forces that mold Martin into the man he becomes.

In his study of American realism and naturalism, Donald Pizer suggests that in a naturalistic novel, the characters are described "as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance" (10-11). Additionally, in his book *The Vast and Terrible Drama*, Eric Link upholds this conception of a naturalistic novel when he writes that "American literary naturalists [such as London] explored theories of evolution, atavism, degeneration, and natural law" (18). Granting the naturalistic label to the novel based upon these definitions allows us to then determine the extent to which the characters in the novel are subject to the effects of evolution, atavism, and degeneration.

Conventionally, criticism on the novel has focused upon Martin and how he is conditioned and controlled by the forces and effects of evolution. Joseph McElrath's study of the novel is only one example of such critical focus upon Martin and his evolutionary progress. McElrath writes that "in this quasi-autobiographical portrait of Martin, [London] illustrates how the genetically superior, sensitive individual malformed by a bad environment and

long confined within the culture of the lower classes can, by dedicated effort, transcend the limitations associated with his past" (81). This notion of Martin successfully transcending his limitations is an interesting one because it articulates a truth that is rarely spoken within criticism on the book—namely, that Martin is afforded the opportunity to transcend his limitations and escape the malformations of his bad environment and lower class origins, whereas Ruth is not afforded the same opportunity, even though Martin and the narrator judge the environment and culture of which she is a product as being the more evil of the two. There is room, then, to study Ruth under the same lens which critics have used to study Martin.

The image Martin and the narrator inscribe upon Ruth is, in fact, a false image. Ruth, just as much as Martin, and perhaps even more so, is conditioned and controlled by her environment, heredity, and instinct.

It is commonplace to introduce Ruth as a topic for analysis by presenting her in the same terms with which Martin and the novel's narrator first describe her: "She was a pale, ethereal creature, with wide, spiritual blue eyes and a wealth of golden hair. He did not know how she was dressed, except that the dress was as wonderful as she. He likened her to a pale gold flower upon a slender stem. No, she was a spirit, a divinity, a goddess; such sublimated beauty was not of the earth" (35). This passage displays something very important about Martin—upon meeting Ruth, he doesn't really *see* her. He sees a divinity, a goddess, an unearthly creature. He instantly places her upon an elevated pedestal, a height from which she cannot help but fall. His view of her as a deity inherently ascribes to her an unlimited power, potential, vision, knowledge and wisdom. Already, through the power of his male gaze, he has confined Ruth in a gilded cage, objectified and assigned her the label of ideal, perfect woman.

The image Martin and the narrator inscribe upon Ruth is, in fact, a false image. Ruth, just as much as Martin, and perhaps even more so, is conditioned and controlled by her environment, heredity, and instinct. Ruth's struggle with her sexuality is eloquently and viscerally expressed during a scene in which Ruth finally acknowledges that she is in love with Martin. It is in this moment that all of the biological and sexual urges she possesses overcome her reason. The narrator paints the picture with careful attention to each detail that speaks to Ruth as a naturalistic character who is now wholly controlled by her instincts and has shed her inhibitions. This depiction of Ruth is a stunning reversal of the curious, cultured, educated young girl to whom we are first introduced in the opening chapters of the novel. The fact that Ruth gives in to her elemental desires is a signal to us that Ruth has begun her evolutionary descent backward.

In contrast to this animalistic depiction of Ruth is her portrayal as an educated member of the upper-middle class. She possesses all the social graces and skills demanded of a young woman of her class, and she also possesses the quick mind, reasoning and argumentative skills of a woman about to obtain a college degree. There are, however, two vital aspects of life that she is missing—experience and a sexual drive or interest in men. It is the former that draws criticism from Martin and the latter that leads her parents to encourage a cross-class relationship that according to the customs of their own class they should have immediately ended. Ruth will eventually become a woman under siege, and because of her "limitations" she finds herself ill-prepared to face the onslaught.

Richard Lehan, in his book *Realism and Naturalism*, provides a specific look at how naturalistic themes function within London's fiction that is also beneficial to an understanding of Ruth's character. He begins his discussion by isolating what he believes to be "the essence of London's concern—the pull up and down of the evolutionary process" (142). He also identifies a recurring theme in London's fiction in which the characters are so transformed by their experiences that they are unable to return to their former lives (145). My assertion is that London's characterization of Ruth depicts the pull down side of the evolutionary process and that London leaves Ruth in a place from which she cannot return.

When Ruth first appears in the novel, she is very near the pinnacle of womanhood prescribed for her by her social class and gender. She only lacks entry into womanhood and a respectable marriage that promises future financial prosperity and motherhood.

Upon attainment of these social goals, Ruth would then be viewed as being a "complete" woman, evolved to the highest level any woman could hope to reach. For this reason, her parents allow her dalliance with Martin, believing that he will serve their purposes—namely, effecting a sexual awakening within their daughter which can then be re-directed from Martin to a suitable, respectable husband.

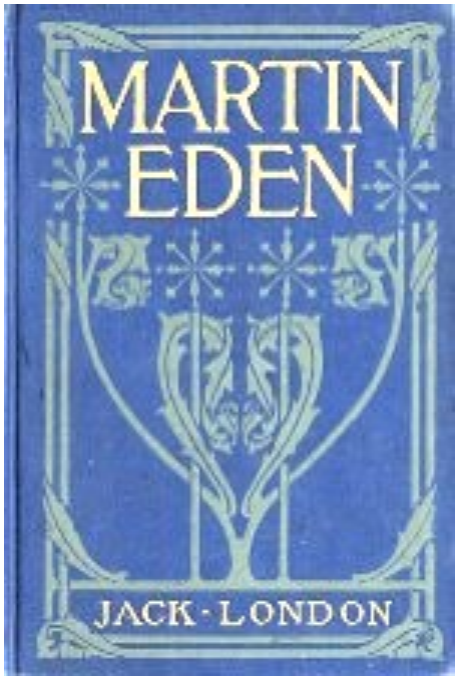
Ruth has been betrayed by her own sexual awakening and unleashed passions and the damage is irreversible. While London affords his title character with the release of death, Ruth is not afforded the same luxury and it is for this wasting of her life that she deserves the sympathy of the reader.

Ruth does undergo the transformation from girl to woman; however, once reaching womanhood, she appears to stall out on the road to feminine completeness. Eventually, she is forced by her parents to break her engagement to Martin, and then later prompted to offer her body to Martin in exchange for his agreement to marry her. Both events are obstacles on the path toward Ruth's evolutionary fulfillment. After she breaks her engagement with Martin, she appears to be stuck in place, unable to move forward or backward. She cannot go back to the sheltered environment that her family and class have always afforded her. Nor can she go forward, because her sexual appetites seem to go dormant after her engagement ends. What little hope remains for Ruth's evolution to be complete is enveloped in a sordid and ugly pursuit of fame and fortune at the expense of Ruth herself and everything that makes her a respectable, marriageable daughter; however, this evolution can only be achieved if she convinces Martin to marry her. Yet when she fails to attract his attention and his agreement to take her as a mistress, she is more forcefully halted in her evolutionary progress. Ruth is trapped, unable to return to her former life and barred from any semblance of a future containing marriage and motherhood.

Ruth, therefore, has a very specific trajectory throughout the course of the novel, but it is not the conventional trajectory we have come to expect from a naturalistic character. Ruth is atypical because she is not someone occupying the bottom rung of life who subsequently experiences a climb upward followed by a period of decline that culminates in death. Rather, she already occupies a position of advantage in the world. According to Frank Norris' theory of naturalism, "terrible things must happen to characters of the naturalist tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched from the quiet, uneventful round of everyday life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" (qtd. in Link 47). Ruth's end in the novel is not a literal death, but it is a sudden death nonetheless. When she is viewed for who she is and understood within the context of her own life rather than simply analyzed from Martin's point of view and held up as the root cause of his disillusionment with life, what happens to her during the course of the novel most certainly qualifies as a vast and terrible drama. Ruth experiences sexual desire and what she believes to be love for the first time and for any woman that entails a vast drama.

However, there is a terrible aspect to this drama—the man she loves and desires is in no way an acceptable suitor or eligible bachelor when judged through the eyes of the bourgeoisie. Presented with this quandary, she attempts to change him, to fashion and mold him into the man she needs him to be in order to maintain her own place in society and her own social circle. The results of her tutelage exceed all of her own expectations; however, the consequences of her success are only too clear in the lovers' final meeting. Martin, determined to silence Ruth and thereby force her to acknowledge her own inferiority and limited existence rails at her, voicing his contempt for the cowardly and vulgar bourgeoisie of which she is a member. He derides her attempts to formalize him, which if she had succeeded in doing so would have destroyed his writing and his career. It is all too apparent to Ruth that her endeavors have failed and that her current endeavor—the cold and calculating errand her family has sent her on—is in jeopardy of failing too. On the heels of this outburst by Martin, Ruth is "thinking desperately" (463)—no doubt trying to find a way to bind Martin to her and extract a promise of marriage from him. Her only answer to his accusations is complete capitulation

and submission to his intellectual (and more importantly financial) superiority and she is reduced to pleading with him for another chance. Ruth has been brought to the point where she must renounce her own class, her own family, and her own self-respect as well as offer the most valuable possession that a woman of her social class has—her innocence—in order to secure what she wants and what her family has declared it must have. Indeed, when questioned by Martin as to whether she has come to his hotel room unaccompanied, she answers in the affirmative. Yet Martin and we as readers discover that Ruth has told a lie when the presence of her brother outside of Martin's hotel is revealed. This discovery tacitly implicates Ruth as a complicit participant in her family's greed. Clearly, this is the epitome of a vast and terrible drama in a woman's life. Martin's refusal to accept her and all that she offers does not effect her death, but it does effect her ruin, which for a woman of her social position is just as life-ending as death. Ruth has been betrayed by her own sexual awakening and unleashed passions and the damage is irreversible. While London affords his title character with the release of death, Ruth is not afforded the same luxury and it is for this wasting of her life that she deserves the sympathy of the reader.



I previously described Ruth Morse as a woman under siege. One side of the attack brought against her is orchestrated by her environment, heredity, and physical desire. The middle-class society she has always occupied coupled with her university education shaped her attitudes and opinions irrevocably. Those attitudes and opinions are reinforced by those of her mother and father, whose intentions for their daughter—both good and bad—resonate through the entire course of Ruth's life. And then amid these two strong forces exists a much stronger force that resides within Ruth—namely, the physical desire and instinctive attraction to Martin that she cannot resist or control. It doesn't occur to Ruth that she would need to be protected from these elements of her existence, but this very naïveté only assists in her ruin. From the opposite side, Martin's philosophical ideas, his idealization of Ruth and then his final rejection of her because she fails to live up to his vision of her exert their own pressures upon Ruth. Martin's persistent, desultory references to Ruth's limitations and the flawed conventions and notions of her class are barbed arrows from which she has no protection. She is left in the middle, unable to withstand the relentless onslaught that is advanced by both sides. While neither side is explicitly intent upon destroying her, her destruction is the final result of the siege laid against her. Such destruction can be termed inevitable and perhaps necessary, but not even those explanations justify the near absence of sympathy given to Ruth Morse in London criticism. Ruth may simply be a fictional character, the means to effect the evolutionary ends London envisioned for his title character, but the American naturalists prided themselves on depicting real life, unvarnished and uncensored. Ruth, then, should be viewed as a real person, a woman, a human, and the disintegration of any human's life, no matter what the cause, should evoke some measure of sympathy from any reader of the novel. Sam Baskett described Ruth as the most misunderstood character of the novel. By beginning to view her character with sympathy and recognizing the evolutionary forces that impacted her life with just as much devastation as Martin's, we can begin to see Ruth for the complex, naturalistic character that she is.

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Frontispiece by the Kinneys of the 1909 Macmillan *Martin Eden*

"They sat idly and silently gazing with eyes that dreamed and did not see"

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