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Shame of the Southland: *Violence* and the Selling of the Visceral South

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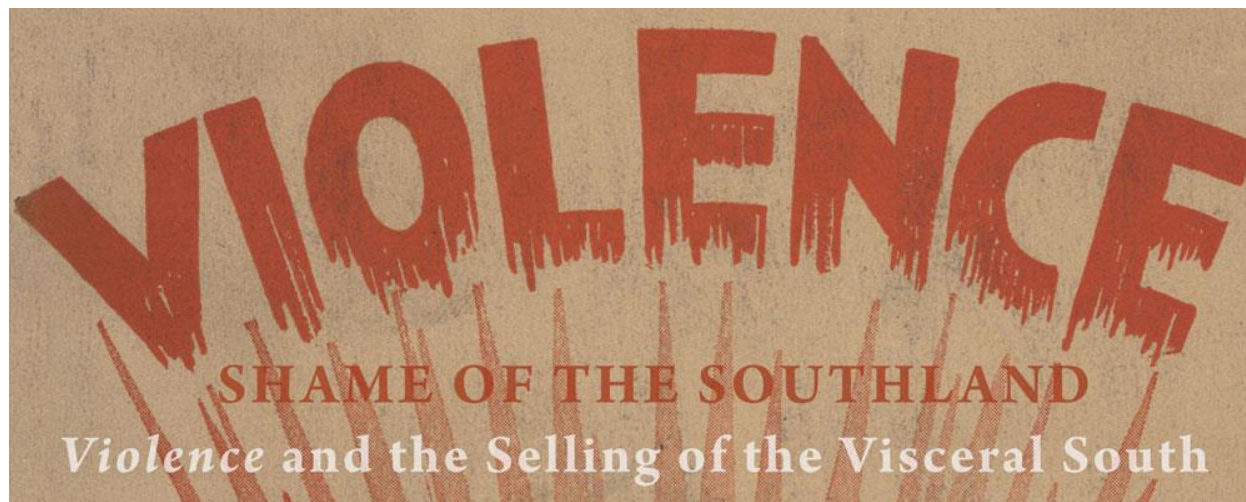
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STUDY *the* SOUTH



**SHAME OF THE SOUTHLAND:
VIOLENCE AND THE SELLING OF THE VISCERAL SOUTH**

**BY SARAH E. GARDNER
PUBLISHED: JANUARY 29, 2019**

Dick Simon and Max Schuster knew they had a hit on their hands. As the principal founders of the upstart publishing firm Essandess, the two were bold, innovative, aggressive, and hungry for a bestseller.¹ In the late 1920s, the enterprising publishers signed the writing team of socialist Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, son of Russian-Jewish émigrés, and his wife, Marcet, the niece of social reformer Jane Addams and herself a feminist. The authors had achieved a measure of success with their first novel, *Dust*, a study of the settling of Kansas in the post-Civil War period, which had generally earned the favor of the nation's leading critics. Indeed, reviewers likened the authors to Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and other leading lights of the midwestern literary renaissance, which had held cultural sway during the early decades of the twentieth century. It was perhaps not surprising, then, that Simon & Schuster was eager to see the Haldeman-Juliuses remain on its list. What was surprising, however, was the subject matter of the writing team's next literary venture: "The problem South," a region made familiar to the Haldeman-Juliuses through the national press's coverage of the decade's most sensational stories.² True, the two reformers had published an antilynching pamphlet in 1927, but it was merely one of thousands of titles that had appeared in their publishing venture, Little Blue Books, which put cheap paperback books in the hands of working-class readers.³ Their publishing savvy, it seems, was enough for the Haldeman-Juliuses, and it was certainly enough for Simon & Schuster, which had calculated that it had just acquired a license to print money. But all was not as it seemed.



Promotional photo of publishers Max Schuster and Dick Simon

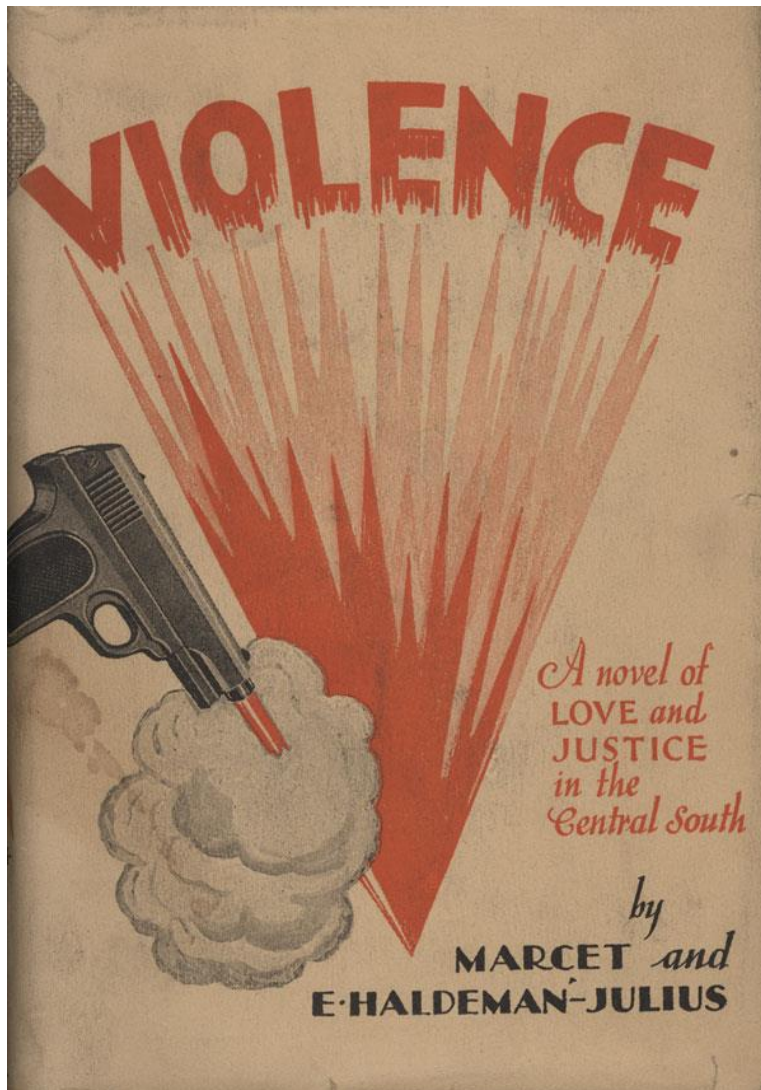
The novel, published under the title *Violence*, failed miserably, going virtually unnoticed by consumers and critics alike during the fall 1929 book season. The onset of the Great Depression only partially explains the novel's poor sales. Simon & Schuster's ill-conceived marketing plan, the Haldeman-Juliuses' clumsy attempt to awaken the conscience of America, and a southern book critic's unsuccessful effort to convince Max Schuster to abandon the project before it went into production, all combined to doom *Violence* before it was even released.

The novel's circumstances might have been peculiar, but its fate was more typical than not. We are well attuned to the process of canon formation. Some books, either by critical acclaim or commercial success, survive well beyond their shelf life. The vast majority of titles, however, do not fall in this category. O. H. Cheney, who conducted an economic survey of the book industry two years after the publication of *Violence*, concluded that the life cycle of a book rarely lasted longer than a literary season. These were the lucky ones. Of course, there were exceptions, *Gone with the Wind* being perhaps the most notable of those titles published during the southern literary renaissance. But typically, books were published to much ballyhooing, lived short and inconspicuous lives, and died silently in relative obscurity. Indeed, Cheney had estimated that the active life of a book, whether a good or a bad seller, was short, typically between four and five months.⁴ The life cycle of *Violence* did not extend that long.

Nevertheless, the story of this novel and its ignominious fate is worth noting, for it reveals both the place the South held in the popular imagination of 1920s America and the difficulties of dislodging it. That Simon & Schuster failed to realize a literary coup does not gainsay the firm's effort to profit from the selling of the visceral South. That the Haldeman-Juliuses failed to arouse the nation's indignation does not erase their understanding of Jim Crow's worst abuses.

And that Aaron Bernd failed to persuade Max Schuster to suspend publication does not mitigate the effort to temper exploitation with sober reflection.

This article argues that, in this sense, then, the story of *Violence*—a novel that failed—tells us as much about the literary marketplace as the stories of those more familiar novels that came to dominate the national discourse about the problem South during the late-1920s and 1930s. It tells us about a crusading writing team that imagined it could reform the South through print; it tells us about a publisher’s fantasies of a region that had been exoticized for much of its history; and it tells us about the limits of a narrative strategy that sought to combine a reformist impulse with outlandish sensationalized content. Perhaps most importantly, *Violence* reminds us that a literary canon represents a small percentage of titles that were actually published. It thus encourages us to ask what we might find if we shift our gaze away from those works that command our attention to those titles that lived short and inconspicuous lives.⁵



Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius, *Violence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929)

Simon & Schuster's unorthodox approach to publishing had ruffled more than a few industry-insiders' feathers. Rather than wait for manuscripts to come to them, the two would "think up ideas" and then "find people to carry them out." A radical departure from the typical way of doing business in the staid world of publishing.⁶ A note Max Schuster had written to himself in the fall of 1929, after *Violence's* unremarkable fate had been sealed, suggests how this process worked. "Dixie—A Novel of the South. To do for the country below the Mason-Dixon line what Sinclair Lewis did for Main Street," Schuster dictated. "We originally discussed this title for the book by E. Haldeman-Julius finally labeled *Violence*. The Label, DIXIE, is too good to overlook. Let's see if we cannot find somebody qualified to do such a book."⁷ In the meantime, however, Simon & Schuster still had sell *Violence*, whose imminent publication had been announced a month earlier.

An internal document reveals the publishers' initial heady optimism for the Haldeman-Julius manuscript. "Form D" was designed both to inform the firm's marketing department as it drew up the novel's promotional campaign as well as guide its traveling book agents whose job it was to convince bookstore owners to stock Simon & Schuster titles. Facing stiff competition in an increasingly crowded marketplace, publishers' ads then as now promised both the bookseller and the consumer that their latest lists contained "colossal, world-arresting" masterpieces.⁸ Yet bloated advertising budgets and splashy ads meant nothing if readers' local bookstores did not carry the latest titles. The book agent's role was thus critical. Unlike ad men and women, who spoke in grand gestures and hyperbole, the book agent had to temper his enthusiasm for fear of "overselling" any given title. He needed to know his region, its buyers and their tastes, and the selling power of his clients. In an era when publishers did not accept returns on unsold merchandise, the overzealous book agent risked jeopardizing the trust of the bookseller whose livelihood depended on an honest appraisal of a book's appeal to his customers. The bookseller stuck with a basement full of unsold titles was unlikely to believe the book agent who came through promising a bestseller. Yet "Form D" betrayed none of these concerns. "Dixie," if the form were to be believed, was destined to outsell *Elmer Gantry* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, two of the bestselling novels of the late 1920s.

The novel had something for "South watchers" everywhere: murder, political corruption, religious hypocrisy, racial violence, complete with a lynching and an execution, and sex. Lots and lots of sex.

And how could it not? The novel had something for "South watchers" everywhere: murder, political corruption, religious hypocrisy, racial violence, complete with a lynching and an execution, and sex. Lots and lots of sex. Extramarital sex. Teenage sex. Interracial sex. Sex in secluded cabins. Sex in a church belfry. The novel, set in the fictional state of Texlarkana, positioned, according the novel's front matter, somewhere between Arkansas and Louisiana,

Texas and Oklahoma, Mississippi and Tennessee, promised to capitalize on the nation's fascination with all things southern. "From these six states," readers are told, "Texlarkana draws its traditions, its ideals, and its prejudices."⁹

The novel opens with a confrontation between Phil Jordan, the town's devilishly handsome crusading fundamentalist preacher, and Charlie Brooks, a ne'er do well who is no stranger to local law enforcement agents. The conflict stems from Brooks's accusation that Jordan profited from his church and thus should pay taxes. For his part, Jordan sees Brooks as part of a larger conspiracy to silence his criticisms of the town's mayor and to destroy his congregation. Brooks barges into Jordan's office as the pastor works on Sunday's sermon. Without so much as a second thought, Jordan reaches for his "revolver and fired." As Brooks stumbles backward "in clumsy retreat," Jordan fires three more bullets.¹⁰ Jordan turns himself in, claiming self-defense, a bit of a stretch since Brooks was unarmed. A high-profile trial follows, but not before the town stages a parade to show its support of Jordan and tens of thousands throng his church to hear him preach. Despite this outpouring of good will, the defense requests a change of venue, alleging a cabal between the mayor and the town's liberals will prevent a fair hearing. After days of testimony, "there came at last the moment when . . . twelve partly illiterate, opinionated men" render their verdict: not guilty.¹¹ Phil addresses his supporters at a rally following the trial's conclusion: "But for the crusades I have made, there never would have been even an indictment," he intones. "At the time of the tragedy we had evidence of the deep-laid conspiracy to assassinate me. The conspirators, failing in this, sought to destroy me in the courthouse. Their testimony fell of its own weight. May God . . . forgive them."¹²

The Haldeman-Juliuses borrowed heavily from the murder trial of J. Frank Norris, a national leader in the Fundamentalist movement, who had shot an unarmed political rival in his office. Both the murder and the ensuing trial made headlines in the *New York Times* throughout the second half of 1926 and early 1927. To be sure, the Haldeman-Juliuses hoped to capitalize on this well-known case. Yet, in their minds, the sensational trial and the obvious miscarriage of justice were not enough to reveal the enormity of Jim Crow's sins. The authors thus juxtaposed their fictionalized version of the acquittal of a powerful white man with the invented stories of a lynching and an execution of two of the novel's minor African American characters. The three plotlines—guilty man found innocent, an innocent man lynched, and a guilty boy executed—are meant to be read together. And they are to be read as tragedies that demand redress.

The first of these invented stories involves a group of sexually curious teenagers. Phil Jordan's son, Dan, described in the novel as "a sensitive youth of sixteen," begins a sexual relationship with his fifteen-year old sweetheart, Sue Jean. Dan feels guilty after his first sexual encounter, which takes place in the belfry of his father's Methodist church. "But Sue Jean," the authors explained, "felt merely triumphant. There weren't . . . so very many girls just turned fifteen who could make boys love them like that. And Dan was nice. Still, she wondered—was [sex] always

just the same? Then and there, half-consciously—but none the less surely, she determined to find out.”¹³ Sue Jean thus took a succession of lovers, including the grandson of her great uncle, to the belfry. Not terribly discrete, Sue Jean was discovered by the church’s African American janitor’s son, Skip, a boy “tall for his age and supple of body, well proportioned and strong. . . . Without ever stopping to analyze it, Sue Jean knew that if he had been a white boy she would have wanted him. What she found it difficult to remember was that he was not white.”¹⁴ Skip confronts Sue Jean in the belfry intending to blackmail her. Both, however, yield to temptation, despite the risks. In Skip’s “excitement Sue Jean had ceased to be to him either white or colored,” the authors explained sympathetically. “She was just a flower-like bit of tantalizing womanhood whom he wanted more than he ever yet had wanted anything. Sue Jean felt it.”¹⁵ An hour later, both recognize the seriousness of their transgression. Sue Jean panics and threatens Skip: “My father will kill you for this.” Skip’s fear is more profound. He strikes her on the head, “plung[ing] her into darkness.”¹⁶

Once the body is found—it takes three weeks for the stench of the moldering body to assault the noses of those who work in the church—the police immediately suspect Skip, because of his connection with the church, because he was known to have had “affairs with various girls,” because he had a record of petty theft and truancy, and because he was African American. While in custody, the police offer Skip the choice of confessing, thus guaranteeing him a quick and “painless” execution, or of continuing to deny his guilt, which will lead inevitably to a lynching at the hands of an angry mob. The police had no direct evidence linking Skip to the murder, so they concoct it. No African American attorney will take Skip’s case, for they all doubt Skip’s innocence. Never mind the right of the accused to a fair trial; in this climate, only the indisputably innocent can secure representation. What else can Skip do, the authors imply, but confess?

Only Dan’s mother, Mary, suspects that there might have been extenuating circumstances. When she voices her concerns to her husband, Phil, she is met with a swift and harsh rebuke: “You’re out of your senses,” Phil admonishes. “No sane white woman could talk as you’re doing. There are no extenuating circumstances. All your life you’ve sublimated, poeticized, and idealized these niggers until you have convinced yourself that these kinky-headed black bucks and their women are the mental and spiritual equals of the white race with its thousands of years of refinements and ameliorative influences. Do you realize,” he asks, still confounded by Mary’s supposition, “that many of these blacks were only brought to this country in the beginning of the last century, and that they were taken from the depths of a primeval forest, stark, raving savages? They have no traditions, no racial memories, except the hot African nights, the love-calls of wild beasts and primitive matings to the beat of tom-toms. Don’t you see, these blacks are primeval people and they cannot be accepted on the same plane as people whose traditions are steeped in a past made glorious by achievements and overcomings? When a gust of passion seizes them, they yield to it. That’s what happened to

Skip.”¹⁷ This passage reveals as much about the Haldeman-Juliuses’ assumptions of how a white southern racist might sound as it does about Phil’s character. Even Mary found him unconvincing, for her doubts still linger.

As Phil rants, an angry mob gathers at the courthouse, hell-bent on lynching Skip. The authors describe the crowd’s carnivalesque atmosphere, noting, “One could feel its vibrant energy.” The townspeople “milled around, both exciting and being excited by the brush of flesh against flesh, emotion against emotion. . . . Underneath the impatience, the curiosity, and the eagerness generated by the turbulence was savage hatred and a sadistic pleasure in the thought of the torture they hoped to inflict.”¹⁸ Anticipating such a gathering, the police chief had secreted Skip to another location, but the mob would not be mollified. Only the violent death of a “black beast rapist” at its hands will provide satisfaction.

At this point, Haldeman-Juliuses conveniently introduce the second of their invented stories of miscarried justice, a *deus ex machina* for the mob, if you will. This one involves a character named Mose, a hulk of a man “who could have fitted perfectly as a savage into any motion picture. His muscles rippled under the black satiny skin. His long head, thick skull, heavy lips, and flat nose, with its wide nostrils, were typical of the class in his race to which he belonged.”¹⁹ A ditch digger by trade, Mose had been serving time in the local penitentiary for defending himself against an attack by his foreman. Mose escapes while working on a road gang while under the supervision “of a guard whose intelligence was only a grade higher than [his] own.”²⁰ While on the run, he encounters a poor white woman who assumes that Mose intends to “menace” her. She cries rape, thus sealing Mose’s fate. Mose is quickly captured and delivered to the angry mob that refuses to be denied.

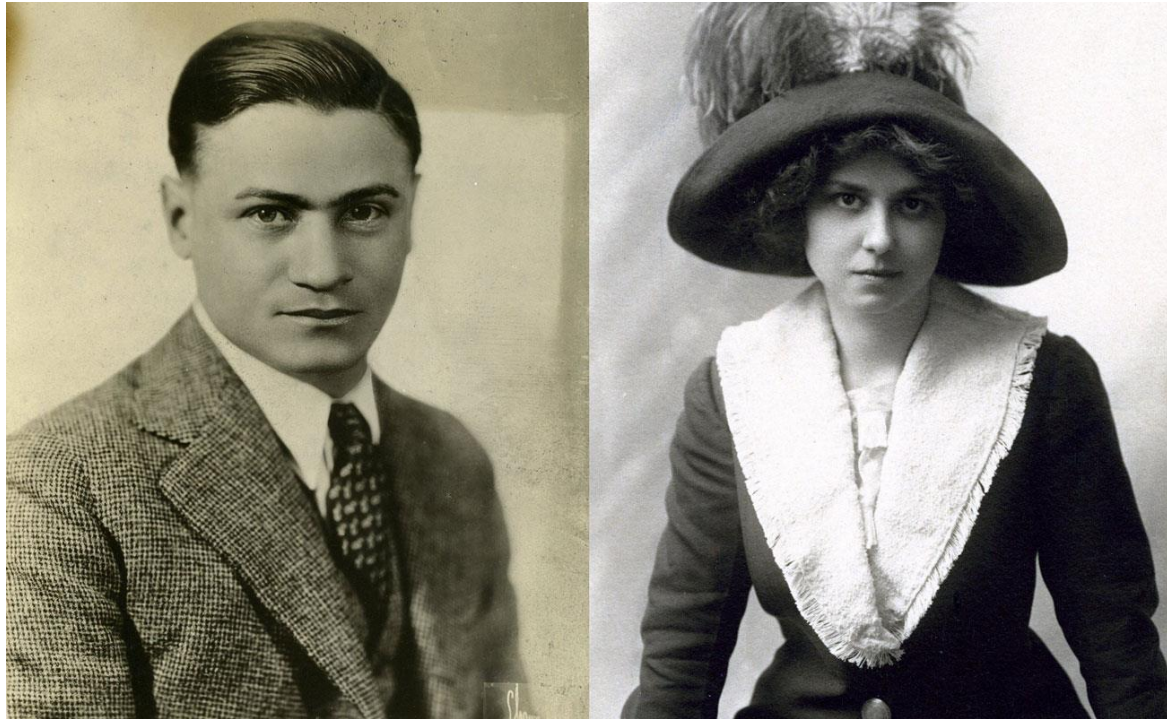
Phil Jordan brokers a deal between the more violent members of the mob, who threaten to burn Mose alive, and the more “moderate” members, who promise to hang him first. “I’m not going to lift my finger to stop this lynching,” Phil boasts. “There are too many first-class fellows here, like yourselves, my friends, who think it ought to be done. But there’s going to be no torture stuff pulled off while Phil Jordan is here to prevent it.” The “violent” faction is not immediately convinced. “I don’t see why we should begin to handle niggers so different here from the way they do in other States,” one protester objects. “Why, jus’ last week my cousin wrote me that over a thousand folks tied two of ’em to a telegraph pole, poured gasoline over ’em and burnt ’em alive.” But calmer heads prevail. Mose is hanged, his body then riddled by hundreds of bullets, tied to the back of a car and dragged into town, where it was set afire. Only after Mose’s body is burned does the governor send in the militia to disperse the crowd.²¹

The only outcry against Mose’s lynching comes from Peter Randall, the town’s northern-born newspaper editor and the husband of Phil Jordan’s lover, Greeta. Under the headline “Law and Order Betrayed,” Randall’s editorial indicts the town for engaging in “a saturnalia of savagery.”

“The capital of Texlarkana suffered last night the shame of being delivered over to anarchy,” Randall writes. “In millions of homes throughout America, when families gather for the morning meal today, the name of Rockworth will be read with expressions of horror; and mental pictures will be formed of this city and its people which will be unjust to its thousands of law-abiding men and women but unfortunately indelible with those who know us only through a lynching that was followed by a burning in a public street. Rockworth and Rockworth County must demand an accounting of the officers who have failed us.” Randall beseeches. “Rockworth County must have in places of authority men who are fearless and determined, men who can measure up to the most serious of emergencies and men who can always defend our community against excess and lawlessness and vindicate its devotion to peace and order.”²² Of course, no such accounting is forthcoming.

By satisfying the mob’s bloodlust, at least temporarily, Mose’s lynching paves the way for Skip’s “lawful” execution. Mary has appealed to the governor to grant a stay and reduce Skip’s sentence to life imprisonment. The governor admits that if Skip were white he would not send him to the chair. “But he was *not*, and there was the rub. No one knew better than the Governor of Texlarkana how such a commutation would be seized upon as a justification of lynching—and against lynching his face was set. In this crime in particular, which, rightly or wrongly, the whole State believed so unmitigated and atrocious—lynching would follow almost inevitably. Already stories were afoot, and believed by conservative citizens, of further outrages connected with the murder.” As the authors explain, “Tradition and self-interest had triumphed” over the governor’s “impulse toward mercy. In the intensity of his feeling, the charred pile before him seemed to be the funeral pyre of Skip Early.”²³ The novel ends unclimatically with Skip’s execution.

The Haldeman-Juliuses saw their novel as an indictment against the South for its myriad sins: religious hypocrisy, political corruption, racial prejudices and violence, and cultural rigidity. Casting the nation’s reading public as the “far-flung jury,” they pleaded with their audience to stand in judgment. Although not above sensationalizing elements of the plot, they used those gratuitous scenes to serve their larger goal. Simon & Schuster’s only purpose, however, was profit. At some level, then, the authors’ intentions and the publishers’ expectations were at odds.²⁴



Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius

“Form D,” the internal marketing memo, makes clear Simon & Schuster’s primary interest in the novel had little to do with the injustices of Jim Crow justice. Although briefly alluding to Phil’s, Skip’s, and Mose’s fates, the summary suggests something else altogether: “Back of the bloody triangular dramatization of the attitude is a portrayal of the life, at once barbaric and decadent, of the town’s middle and younger generation. Under the sun of Texlarkana bodies and passions ripen early. Sex burgeons tropically. Moral codes are so much jetsam. The most popular minister in town is the lover of Greeta Randall, adventurer in the forbidden country of the flesh. The words virgin and infant are practically interchangeable. Adultery is less a crime than a local habit.”²⁵ The strategy is even more telling when put alongside the firm’s advertising philosophy. “The selling field is the most important department of the publishing business,” Schuster had told a reporter for *McClure’s* magazine in 1927. “Publishers will welcome sound selling ideas whether in developing the market or improving the selling appeal of a book’s appearance—jacketing, printing or advertising.” He then went on to profess his commitment to “truth in advertising. It wins the confidence of the bookseller. I’d rather understate than overstate.”²⁶ The last comment is particularly revealing, for it demonstrates Schuster’s understanding of the symbiotic relationship between publisher, marketing team, and bookseller. Note that the consumer is left out of this equation. The Haldeman-Juliuses might have wanted to reform America; Simon & Schuster wanted to sell books.

A full-page ad that ran in the *Saturday Review of Literature* reveals the degree to which Simon & Schuster’s marketing department followed “Form D.” Consistent with publishers’ penchant

for announcing the next literary darling, the ad first boasted of Simon & Schuster's authors, "who pass from the Inner Sanctum's door into the ever-widening circles of literary acclaim . . . sometimes on the slow ascent to enduring recognition, sometimes on the dizzy heights of best-sellerdom, sometimes on both." Perhaps even then, the ad's readers sensed that the Haldeman-Juliuses would never achieve "enduring recognition" or "best-sellerdom," and certainly not both. The ad then went on to describe *Violence* as the "flaming story of the South of rope and faggot, the South of intrigue and passion."²⁷ Nowhere did the form or the advertisement make any mention to the plot's similarity to the trial of J. Frank Norris. At first blush, Simon & Schuster's resistance to capitalize on an infamous murder trial—something that anticipated *Law & Order's* "ripped from today's headlines" tag—seems curious. To be sure, the novel begged for charges of libel, despite its now-familiar disclaimer, "No character in this story is a portrait of any actual person, living or dead." Yet a legal kerfuffle would only boost sales, as the bannings of *Elmer Gantry*, *Ulysses*, and *God's Little Acre* suggest. Given the firm's interest in creating "buzz" for its latest release, Simon & Schuster should have mailed the book's first copy to J. Frank Norris. It did not. The publisher had something else in mind. Indeed, the list of "selling points" that concluded "Form D" bespoke a broader strategy, one that saw the novel's appeal reaching far beyond a Texas murder.

NOVELISTS

from the INNER SANCTUM
acclaimed in ever-widening circles

IT is a notable procession of writers who pass from the *Inner Sanctum's* door into the ever-widening circles of literary acclaim . . . sometimes on the slow ascent to enduring recognition, sometimes on the dizzy heights of best-sellerdom, sometimes on both. Among them are not only brilliant stars in the sphere of non-fiction, but also novelists old and new.

It is with deepening and perhaps pardonable satisfaction that the *Inner Sanctum* here groups a few of those authors, representing novels of many types.

● **ARTHUR SCHNITZLER**, in whose latest book, *Little Novels*, critics here and abroad have noted the soul of Vienna, the terror of De Maupassant and the skill of Poe. Since *Fraulein Else*, a steadily enlarging public has hailed his works—*Beatrice*, *Rhapsody*, *Thereso*, *Daybreak* . . . because only Schnitzler can write like Schnitzler.

● **FRANZ WERFEL**, another major star in Vienna's literary firmament, who adorns the *Inner Sanctum's* roster of novels with *Class Reunion*. Before that came *The Man Who Conquered Death—Juarez and Maximilian* . . . and the *Inner Sanctum's* own dateless favorite of favorites—*Verdi*, a Novel of the Opera.

● **JOHN COWPER POWYS**, essayist, lecturer, critic of international renown, whose latest book, a two-volume novel, *Wolf Solent*, has evoked tributes of rare eloquence both here and abroad. Literally, John Cowper Powys is compared with the immortals, and "an author's author" has once more been startled by fame.

● **FELIX SALTEN**, author of *Bambi: A Life In The Woods*, enjoyed by 90,000 American readers and characterized by John Galsworthy as "a delicious book . . . a little masterpiece". Salten is the third of the Vienna literary triumvirate to have his work published in America by the *Inner Sanctum*.

● **J. P. McEVROY**, whose *Show Girl* played fast and Anita Loos with best seller records last season and whose new book *Hollywood Girl* just arrived in the bookstores October 3rd—recounting the further adventures of Dixie Dugan, with sound and effects.

● **E. & M. HALDEMAN-JULIUS**, who wrote the widely acclaimed novel *Dust* and who now come back to the field of fiction with their new book *Violence*, a flaming story of the South of rope and faggot, the South of intrigue and passion. Marces Halldeman-Julius is the niece of Jane Addams—and her husband, Emanuel, is the Blue Book King, "the Henry Ford and F. W. Woolworth of literature."

● **ALAN SCHULTZ**, author of *Private Secretary*. This is the story of the high drama and adventure behind the frosted glass doors of big business . . . written by a man who knows his business and his girls, from stenographer to very private secretary.

● **THELMA WOODHILL**, whose novel *Love Story* has just been published with rousing reviews on all sides . . . *Love Story* recounts the struggle between an ambitious mother and her comely girl-flower—a convincing recital aimed at one hundred thousand dominated daughters.

● **LAWRENCE DRAKE**, whose first novel *Don't Call Me Clever* is presented by the *Inner Sanctum* this month . . . Evelyn Scott is one of several distinguished writers who are most enthusiastic in commending this brilliant performance to ever-widening circles.

● **SAMUEL SPEWACK**, who is remembered by detective story addicts for *The Skyscraper Murder* and who revisits the bookshops now with a new thriller—*The Murder in the Gilded Cage* . . . This is the first of the *Inner Sanctum's* keyed mysteries.

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Name:

Address:

Simon & Schuster ad in October 5, 1929, issue of the Saturday Review of Literature

According to Simon & Schuster's calculations, the novel's top-selling points included: 1) "interest in the South"; 2) "sex interest"; and, 3) Phil Jordan's similarity not to J. Frank Norris but to Elmer Gantry, the titular character of 1927's bestselling novel. The first point acknowledges Simon & Schuster's appreciation of the South's cultural currency in 1920s America. Point two admits what we all know: sex sells. Given the commercial success of books such as *The Sheik* (1921) and *The Constant Nymph* (1924), Simon & Schuster had every reason to believe that *Violence* would resonate with America's readers. Point three reveals a shameless attempt to duplicate Harcourt's success with *Elmer Gantry*. For the publisher, the Norris trial was merely a convenient hook on which to hang the story, a way to place a Gantreyesque character in the South.²⁸

Max Schuster hoped to increase the book's odds by seeking a bit of advance puffery from one of the nation's leading critics. All the better if he could find a southerner willing to promote a scathing appraisal of the South's sins. Macon, Georgia's Laurence Stallings, entertainment editor at the *New York World*, member of the Algonquin Round Table, and coauthor with Maxwell Anderson of the hit Broadway play *What Price Glory*, seemed a likely contender. Stallings had the added cache of being one of Hollywood's golden boys—*The Big Parade*, an adaptation of his autobiography, appeared in 1925 and was MGM's top-grossing film until *Gone with the Wind*. Finally, he should have earned bonus points with Schuster for having been denounced by his hometown newspaper as an apostate and rabble-rouser: "The day has not yet come," an editorialist for the *Macon Telegraph* proclaimed, when the paper would stand silent while radicals hurled slurs "against the honor . . . [and] integrity of the Southland." Stallings, the paper accused, had sacrificed tradition on the "altar of Menckanism."²⁹ (This became national news when Stallings's colleague at the *New York World*, Heywood Broun publicized Macon's rejection of its homegrown hero in his syndicated column.)

Stallings should have been Schuster's man. But he wasn't. Instead, Schuster approached another Macon native and newspaperman, Aaron Bernd, a columnist for the *Telegraph* who wrote under the penname "Coleman Hill." Unlike Stallings, Bernd had not fled the South, despite the encouragement of several friends, including Walter White, field investigator and executive secretary for the NAACP. "It must be lonely living as a rebel in the midst of so much conformity," White wrote Bernd early in their friendship. White elaborated this point in a later letter, noting sympathetically, "It's all very well for Stallings and Mencken and me to launch our attacks on the Methodist Sahara because we are reasonably safe but those of us who know Georgia know how much real courage it takes for you to have done all that you have." And although White later apologized for attempting to "drag" Bernd out of the South, he nonetheless confessed that he wanted to see Bernd "living in a more civilized community than Georgia. Having escaped myself," he reasoned, "I hate to see anybody else suffering from the things which I so long endured."³⁰

White didn't know the half of it. True, Bernd was well plugged into New York's literary scene, befriended and supported, as White's correspondence makes clear, by the likes of Stallings, Alfred A. Knopf, and that bane of traditionalists everywhere, H. L. Mencken. And until Bernd publicly questioned the South's standard defense of lynching—the need to protect southern white womanhood—he was well liked and respected in Macon, serving on the boards of various civic organizations, for example, despite his outsider status as a Jew. Then things started getting ugly for Bernd and his family. Yet Bernd remained. It was Bernd's, and not Stallings's, imprimatur that Schuster eventually sought. "As our favorite guide on the State of the South," Schuster wrote, "please note, appraise, and speak out."³¹

Bernd accommodated, but he hardly gave Schuster what he wanted to hear. Bernd was singularly unimpressed and raised a number of objections to the proposed manuscript. First, he claimed that the Haldeman-Juliuses's portrait was outdated. "Things are not nearly so bad in this backwoods as they used to be," he maintained. "The lynching figures and the decline of the Klan prove that; the increasing number of cotton spindles and the decreasing fanaticism of the preachers furnish some explanation." For whatever reason—perhaps because he was a native southerner, perhaps because of his association with Walter White and the NAACP—Bernd had a vested interest in seeing declining rates of lynching. Indeed, he had written a letter to the editor of the *Nation* disputing its tally of recent lynchings, claiming that the magazine had improperly included a murder in its final figures. "Motive cannot be held the criterion" for lynching, he explained. "Only the size of the attacking mob—and this a shame-faced confession from a southerner—the publicity attending its congregation, may be held the characteristic marks of a lynching." Cautioning the *Nation* to receive the reports of "unofficial investigations" with a healthy dose of skepticism, Bernd concluded by reminding the editor, "We already have a sufficient number of indisputable sins to answer for."³²

Bernd doubted whether the "South" described by the Haldeman-Juliuses had ever existed at all. "This is an objection which will be thrown in your face a hundred times before the book appears," he warned. "You must be prepared to answer it."

Too, Bernd suspected that Simon & Schuster was banking on white southerners' moral indignation, the kind of moral indignation that had made national headlines and propelled Walter White's 1924 antilynching novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, to commercial success. In this case, however, the publisher would surely be disappointed, Bernd predicted. "Horrorified readers have passed on," he claimed. "We grow . . . more tolerant." That said, Bernd was himself horrified at the authors' portrait of the South. "'This bloody dramatization of the Southern attitude,'" he quoted mockingly from Form D. "Well, it isn't. It is a bloody dramatization of one

small segment of the Southern attitude, a segment which is not even as characteristic of the existing South.” Indeed, Bernd doubted whether the “South” described by the Haldeman-Juliuses had ever existed at all. “This is an objection which will be thrown in your face a hundred times before the book appears,” he warned. “You must be prepared to answer it.”³³

Finally, Bernd found the sexually charged climate of Texlarkana laughable. Again, he quoted from Form D: “‘Under the sun of Texlarkana, bodies and passions ripen early.’ Bunk!” he exclaimed. “‘Sex burgeons tropically.’ Popycock!” “Where is Texlarkana?” Bernd wondered, not unreasonably. “North of the Rio Grande, or among the cases of THE SHEIK?” “‘The words virgin and infant are practically interchangeable.’” Bernd couldn’t even finish that thought. The sentence trailed off before he regained his composure, warning that “the tone of your Form D . . . sound[s] more like the secret memoirs of the French court than the output of a reputable publisher.” He was well aware of Simon & Schuster’s reputation for puckishness. Still, he feared Schuster’s promotional plan was too cheeky “for the readers of the advertising columns.”³⁴

Schuster paid no heed. Perhaps he should have. Although the firm postponed the book’s publication from spring to fall, no extant evidence suggests that Schuster had “a frank discussion with the author by mail,” as he had promised Bernd he would initiate. There’s certainly no evidence to suggest that he altered the novel’s promotional plan in response to Bernd’s comments, even though he had intimated that he would do that as well.³⁵ Still, Bernd’s letter was not completely wasted on Schuster. In the editorial memo Schuster had dictated some eight months later—the one that hinted at the Haldeman-Juliuses had failed to do what the publishers had hoped—Schuster reminded himself to call on “our southern correspondent, Mr. Aaron Bernd” for suggestions of suitable authors.³⁶

Although there is no guarantee that the novel’s fate would have improved had Schuster listened to Bernd, one suspects that ignoring Bernd did not help, either. *Publishers’ Weekly* barely registered the book’s existence, noting only its date of publication in its weekly tally. The novel received virtually no critical notice—and this during the golden age of reviewing. Of the major reviewing mediums, only the *Nation* and the *New York Times Book Review* paid attention to *Violence*. Of the two, the *Times’* review was kinder. Concluding that *Violence* was no mere tract, the reviewer asserted that the Haldeman-Juliuses had “centered enough interest of Phil Jordan and Skip Early as individuals to evade the direct charge of preaching.”³⁷

The *Nation* disagreed. If the authors had hoped to awaken the conscience of America, they had failed miserably, the review asserted. “There is no novelty,” the notice sighed, “by being told by Mr. and Mrs. Haldeman-Julius that the Negro receives a sorry kind of justice in the South.” At best, “they have produced a novel which might conceivably wake up the South to the obvious differences in the legal status of a fifteen-year-old black boy and a sanctimonious white

preacher of the Methodist church.” But probably not. Worse, the reviewer doubted whether even the most credulous reader “will believe in the reality of Parson Jordan, murderer, liar, and accomplished seducer.” His character was too exaggerated “even to find place in a Methodist-baiter’s nightmare.”³⁸ Nary a word in either of these reviews was suitable for follow-up promotional campaigns or for a blurb on the back cover of the dust jacket of a second printing. Good thing—since there were no more advertisements and no additional runs.

Violence was not destined to beat the odds, despite the best efforts of its authors and publisher.

Simon & Schuster learned a hard lesson: Not even a southern setting and southern sins would guarantee healthy sales. Moreover, a story about Flaming Youth as the Roaring Twenties came crashing to a halt hardly seemed propitious. Too, perhaps the admixture of sensationalism and social commentary proved too much for readers. It did not work for Caldwell, either, a few years later. We tend to forget that *Tobacco Road* sold around 500 copies in its first year, hampered, to be sure, by the Great Depression and by Scribner’s anemic advertising campaign, but also by reviewers’ unenthusiastic response to Caldwell’s unskilled blending of the grotesque with social criticism. *God’s Little Acre* fared better, but that was only because of the publicity it had garnered from its obscenity trial, which, incidentally, was wending its way through the courts as the Judge Woolsey was hearing testimony in the *Ulysses* case—and its sales were still modest. (*Ulysses* sold more than 10,000 copies when it was finally available in the States; *God’s Little Acre*, around 1,500.) But Caldwell had a few things going for him in the long run that the Haldeman-Juliuses did not. And so *Violence* was not destined to beat the odds, despite the best efforts of its authors and publisher.

Yet its failure reveals a great deal about the fabrication and consumption of the problem South on the eve of the Great Depression. The Haldeman-Juliuses had hoped to expose the injustice of Jim Crow justice. Simon & Schuster had hoped to capitalize on the popularity of salacious storylines and on the nation’s fascination with the “exotic. And both writers and publishers had hoped that this alchemic admixture would guarantee literary gold. Readers and critics were having none of it—perhaps because the novel’s indictment of Jim Crow injustice was hardly new; perhaps because the depiction of Texlarkana as the den of iniquity was as ridiculous as Bernd suggested. What remained unquestioned was the novel’s setting. Whatever criticisms were leveled (privately or publicly), whatever second-guessing might have occurred at the close of the fall 1929 literary season, the South’s position as the whipping boy for national ills stood uncontested. Max Schuster’s note to himself to find another author to write essentially the same story suggests as much. The South’s place in the literary imaginary was thus secure, even when novels failed.

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¹ Simon & Schuster had bestsellers with Wil Durant’s *The Study of Philosophy* (1927) and with Alfred Horn’s memoir, *Trader Horn* (1928). It had yet to publish a bestseller on the fiction list.

² See Natalie J. Ring, *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880–1830* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

³ Marcet Haldeman-Julius, “The Story of a Lynching: An Exploration of Southern Psychology,” ed. E. Haldeman-Julius (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1927).

⁴ O. H. Cheney, *Economic Survey of the Book Industry, 1930–1931* (New York: National Association of Book Publishers, 1931): 116, 85. See Sarah Gardner, *Reviewing the South: The Literary Marketplace and the Southern Renaissance, 1920–1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵ See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso Books, 2005).

⁶ See clipping, no banner, [1934], in the *Publishers’ Weekly Files*, MS #1422, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁷ [Max Schuster], E[ditorial] M[emo] #667, 11 September 1929, in the Max Lincoln Schuster Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁸ O. B. Stade, “Can Publishers’ Blurbs Be Depended Upon?” *Publishers’ Weekly* 119 (9 May 1931): 2296–97; Advertisement for E. P. Dutton, *Publishers’ Weekly* 113 (14 January 1928): 135; T. S. Matthews, “Fiction vs. Blurbs,” *New Republic* 76 (20 September 1933): 162.

⁹ Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius, *Violence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929): iii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹² *Ibid.*, 142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 216–17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 249–50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 286–87.

²² *Ibid.*, 311–12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 367, 370.

²⁴ Emanuel Haldeman-Julius was not a marketing neophyte. A “Little Blue Book” reprint of Guy de Maupassant’s “The Tallow Ball” sold 10,000 copies in one year. The following year, it sold more than 50,000 copies, after Haldeman-Julius had changed the title of the short story to “The French Prostitute’s Sacrifice.”

²⁵ Simon & Schuster, “Form D: Advanced Description,” [1929], encl., Max L. Schuster to Aaron Bernd, New York, NY, 9 January 1929, in the Aaron Bernd Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

²⁶ Clipping, Beatrice Barmby, “What It Means to Be a Book Publisher at 29: What Simon and Schuster Have Found Out in Their Pursuit of a Best Seller,” *McClure’s*, October [1927], in the Max Lincoln Schuster Papers, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²⁷ Simon & Schuster advertisement, "Novelists from the Inner Sanctum Acclaimed in Ever-Widening Circles," *Saturday Review of Literature* 6 (5 October 1929): 224.

²⁸ Historian Amy Wood has observed that anti-lynching activists and cultural critics tended to see lynching as a "backwoods remnant of an archaic and barbaric impulse towards vengeance—a sign that that the South and other regions that lynched were disconnected not only from American ideals but from modern civilization. Moreover, Wood continued, some reformers argued that the spectacle aspect of lynching bespoke the "South's cultural isolation—that is, in Mencken's words, [lynching] took 'the place of the merry-go-round, the theatre, the symphony orchestra, and other diversions common to large communities.'" That certainly holds true for Mose's lynching. But *Violence's* references to the flaming youth, to post-Freudian understandings of sex, to automobiles and radios, all suggest that the Haldeman-Juliuses saw the South as participating in modern culture.

²⁹ "Stupidity or Meanness," *Macon Daily Telegraph*, October 2, 1924; "The Stallings Editorial," *Macon Daily Telegraph*, October 5, 1924.

³⁰ White to Bernd, New York, 21 October 1924, 29 October 1924, and 20 November 1924, all in the Aaron Bernd Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³¹ Schuster to Bernd, New York, 9 January 1929, in the Aaron Bernd Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³² Bernd to Schuster, Macon, GA, 13 January 1929; AB to the editor of the *Nation*, Macon, GA, 15 July 1930, in the Aaron Bernd Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³³ Bernd to Schuster, Macon, GA, 13 January 1929, in the Aaron Bernd Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Schuster to Bernd.

³⁶ [Max Schuster], E[ditorial] M[emo] #667.

³⁷ "A Propagandist Novel," *New York Times Book Review*, 8 December 1929, 9.

³⁸ Fiction Shorts," *Nation* 129 (16 October 1929): 448–49.