



Chapter 1

YOU AIN’T HEARD NUTHIN’ YET: Novelizations from Silent Movies into Early Talkies

The most interesting hard, historical facts about the earliest novelizations are things we’ll likely never know. Underlying rights deals were almost certainly worked out in private, even handwritten, correspondence: simple, individual letters of agreement that seem never to have been preserved or archived.

But we can make a few guesses about how the creation of novelizations found its increasingly steady rhythm. If the overview I’ve taken over the years, via web browsing, book hunting, free-associative research and obsessive data-diving gives a true indication...and I *think* it does...novelization started to earn its keep as a growing literary category (or at least phenomenon) in the latter half of the 1800s, and most meaningfully between 1880 and 1914.

And began, naturally enough, with the novelization of the only scripted dramatic work available:

Stage plays.

Popular, on tour, forthcoming and/or of international renown.

During this period, the reason for a play novelization’s existence no doubt varied from case to case. Here are a few scenarios; some are a matter of historical record, some are probable enough for us to safely assume they happened:

The novelist approached the playwright, inspired by the story to expand on it.

The playwright himself realized he had a good thing on his hands and novelized it himself. (Probably the most famous example of this is J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, but there are numerous others).

The producers of the play thought a novelization would be a good way of promoting it—particularly if it was to go on tour—and approached a publisher (presumably with the author’s permission, but not necessarily) to commission a novelist.

The *publisher* saw the potential in the property and approached the playwright and/or producer.

Whatever the circumstances of any *individual* book, a presentation format began to emerge and become standard: The book jacket (if there was one), or the glossy paste-down graphic sheet applied to the front cover (if there wasn’t) would display an artist’s rendering of a key scene, or a black-and-white production still. And *inside* the book, between thick-stock pages of usually medium-sized text (variously tightly or openly spaced), would be glossy pages—called plates—with more production stills. These could be one-sided or two sided.

This format made novelization more than just a literary transformation from play to prose—it likewise transformed the physical book into the souvenir of an event; a keepsake tied to the glamor of mainstream theatre.

*Opposite—Top Row: Jack Lait, Harry Sinclair Drago;
Middle Row: Arline de Haas and Eustace Hale Ball;
Bottom: an avatar for the unknown face of Guy Fowler*

This could be fantastically potent for the reader who considered himself lucky enough to have *seen* the play in question, on Broadway, in the West End or on tour...though perhaps even more so for readers to whom theatre was simply geographically inaccessible, but who nonetheless lived it vicariously via newspapers and magazines...who now also had the full stories to thrill them—up close, personal and with the detail and dimension of evocative, full-blooded prose.

The market for these novelizations thrived sufficiently that *Green Book Magazine* got into the act. An American publication whose run spanned 1909-1921, it spent all but the last few years of its existence as a dedicated magazine of the theatre. And every issue contained a novelization of a new play, banged out by one of the regular staffers on a rotating roster. At twelve issues a year, with a turnaround time that had to realistically account for getting a novella-length adaptation completed by deadline, the source material probably ranged from established hits, and forthcoming openings to a number of unanticipated flops. It was likely even a challenge to novelize a hit in a timely fashion; a successful run, back then, could be quite short by contemporary standards, and over by the time the magazine hit the stands.

In the last few years of its life, *Green Book Magazine* shifted its emphasis from theatre to women's interest. One might surmise this is because, on a national level, *movies* had taken over the glamor spot where publication was concerned—in particular the publication of related fiction.

From the recurrence of one particular copyright year, 1915 could be cited as a credible pivot point: What started hitting the bookstores *then* were novelizations of plays



Two shades of *Green Book*

upon which new silent films were based; rather than featuring *stage* production stills, these "first transition" editions (my term for them) featured movie stills.

Dedicated movie tie-in novels—it would be decades before they were actually, formally *called* tie-ins, but that's what they were—really started to make their presence known around the middle of the 1920s, leading to a particularly fertile "second transition" period from about 1927 through 1932, which reflected the progress of silent films giving way first to hybrid films (partially silent but with certain segments utilizing synchronized audio) and eventually to the new all-sound "talkies."

Almost a century later, the novelizations of this "second transition" era are usually discussed only in academic passing, as antiquarian curios, vague footnotes of cinematic history; or as movie memorabilia collectibles—the price for all but the rarest, nostalgia-interest titles being in the cheap-to-reasonable category...and zooming up like crazy for copies with book jackets in decent condition.

What's been largely overlooked is that a good many of the novelizations themselves—the actual content on the pages *wrapped* by the jackets—represent some of the finest, most interesting and most dynamic prose in adaptive literature.

Don't bother about the jackets. You can find almost all the images online and print 'em out in better condition anyway, if you care about owning 'em.

Let's look *between* the covers.

There are some enigmas surrounding the publication of transition-era novelizations.

It has been reported that the once-mighty publishing house, Grosset & Dunlap, who dominated the field, made a wide-ranging deal with the major studios to be able to publish their branded Photoplay Editions (same familiar text-and-photos format, only now, of course, the photos were candid movie stills and/or posed publicity shots of the cast in character). Photoplay editions were either reprints—classic and contemporary novels that were the basis of films—or, when no source novel existed, novelizations of screenplays (which at that time were routinely *called* photoplays).

The business nature of this arrangement remains vague, though several rival publishers, most conspicuously A.L. Burt of NYC⁸, concurrently published their own very similar tie-in editions, based on *different* films from the *same studios*. So Grosset & Dunlap's blanket arrangement could not have been exclusive. For at least *some* of the novelizations, publication arrangements *must* have been subject to individual negotiation—and/or the studio itself initiating the deal, in the interest of overseeing promotion.

But some things are knowable toward forming a larger picture.

The vast majority of novelizers started their careers as journalists for big city newspapers.

Some of these journalists became part of the film industry, tending to fall into two sub-groups: "Scenario" writers novelizing their own material (such as John Monk Saunders, author of *Wings*); and screenwriters who might as easily novelize films they had nothing to do with (such as author-director Eustace Hale Ball—you'll meet him shortly—who adapted scripts authored by himself and by others).

⁸ Which would be sold off to Blue Ribbon Books in 1937; and two years later, Blue Ribbon would sell of its assets to Doubleday.

Some of these journalists continued to gain more prominence in the communications game, such as Edwin C. Hill (one-time novelizer of *The Iron Horse*, a silent film about the building of the first transcontinental railroad), who became a household name as a radio commentator, famous for his program (and subsequent book) *The Human Side of the News*.

Some became more prominent as novelists, most significantly Harry Sinclair Drago. (You'll be meeting him as well.)

...And a surprising number—perhaps *unsurprisingly*—became studio publicists, such as Russell Holman, whose novelizations most notably included silent movie comedies (among them the Harold Lloyd flicks, *The Freshman* and *Speedy*), and whose trajectory was idiosyncratic, as he *remained* in the movie biz; he entered as a Paramount flack and worked his way up to studio executive.⁹

When, in researching this book, I started to develop a fascination for, and then an adoration of, this period in the literature, I noted a core of five bylines that kept recurring; as I began reading their books, it became apparent why: Each was extraordinarily gifted and possessed of a unique imprimatur; unique enough to become a go-to hire and a "brand" byline for readers. And as I delved into that core group's careers and backgrounds, one more commonality revealed itself:

Not only had all five started out as newspaper people...but four of them had begun in Ohio...three of them at the same time. The outlier Ohioan had begun his quite different journalist-to-novelizer trajectory much earlier, but the remaining trio—along with the fifth journalist, a New Yorker—produced their novelizations between 1927 through 1931. A highly significant period, as it marked the end of the silent film era, the transition through *partial* sound movies, and the entry into feature film talkies.

The why of Ohio seems lost to posterity...but a likely explanation is that one particular editor, or agent reaching out to several editors, was given the specific task of recruiting novelizers from the ranks of newspaper personnel. And this editor-or-agent was probably scouting on behalf of a syndicator in the business of licensing material to newspapers across the country. And Ohio ranked high as a talent pool target. Extend this scenario to include key journalistic centers like New York City and we may have our insight into the networking that reduced the degrees of separation between a given journalist's reporting a *news* story and novelizing a *screen-story*.

Why a syndicator? And why, when there were so many career *fiction* authors to commission for such gigs, were reportorial *newspaper people* the chosen recruits?

Logic suggests the answer: Many of the novelizations from this period, perhaps most of them, were serialized in newspapers prior to full-book publication. A reliable newspaper wordsmith with a knack for grabby prose and evocative detail would be accustomed to writing in installments and writing *fast* enough to keep up with the deadlines. And if you match up the *subject matter* or *milieu* of the film or films with the *specialty* (or pointed sensibility) of the journalist, you can quite often see the straight line drawn from a

⁹ Holman's books, unfortunately, are not among the era's worthwhile reads. They're way too leadenly overwritten for the situations and rhythms of comedy—and his prose style has not aged well.

screenplay to its assigned adapter (anticipating a future trend in which screenplays would be assigned to veteran specialists in the given genre or non-genre type of story).¹⁰

And a typewriter-for-hire with newsprint in his or her veins would work more cheaply than a veteran, published novelist. Possibly even for a flat fee, with no royalty.

My friend, actor Daniel Marcus (also quoted in *The Teaser*) adds this intriguing thought to the thesis:

Seems to me a reporter's innate skills are *perfect* for novelization gigs. Rather than looking at a situation and immediately seeing the possibilities in telling the story, they actually *see what's there* and nothing else first: the who/what/why/where/when/how. They recognize instantly the bones of a thing—and only after they understand that the girl was naked in the riverbed, and make *that* note, will they start to think about how to describe it. So if I were hiring someone to flog my property in a commercial form that was different from the original (but not), who better to get than someone who knows exactly what they're looking at, can tell only that story first, and *then* explores out?

Every good piano practice session that's heading for a sonata starts with scales.

Though it's nice to think that art held sway, and that the manuscripts were completed before being parceled out as tabloid column chapters, one or more times a week, bear in mind that a screenplay gives its novelizer a detailed road map; going in, he knows the thematic spine, the plot, the ending. Whatever else these scribes may have added, changed, extrapolated, reconceived or repurposed, the heavy lifting of universe-building and story architecture arrived on their desks fully cooked. So it's quite possible, even probable, that earlier chapters were hitting the newsstands as later chapters were still being hammered out on their clackety manuals.

And naturally, this would allow for immediacy; a novelization could appear in advance of its film's release, or *simultaneous* with it, making the prose narrative a powerful promotional tool—and for a hit film, the eventual book could continue being a valuable earner *after* the movie had disappeared from theatres. (No doubt this increasingly common newspaper immediacy contributed to the change of focus in *Green Book Magazine*. Their monthly full-novelization publishing schedule couldn't have begun to keep up, let alone compete.)

But this raises many intriguing questions that seem to have no surviving answers.

Who commissioned the writers? Was it the publishers? The syndicators? The movie studios?

Who did the hands-on editing? How was it done?

How much and under what circumstances did the studios oversee the manuscripts?

¹⁰ My friend and colleague, dramatist-essayist Jerry James, suggests that the roots of snobbery toward tie-in work may even have begun here, in the response of established authors to being passed over in favor of (*unagented*) "tabloid hacks"—a response that might also have been echoed or triggered by their representatives—making them feel sour-grapey enough to grumble that dashing off a novelization "isn't *real* writing."

There's enough evidence—not much, but *enough*—to demonstrate that there was no one-size-fits-all scenario.

What we *can* talk about with some degree of Universal (even Paramount) application are the challenges novelizers faced.

Screenplay format hasn't meaningfully changed since the advent of talkies, save that once font-swappable electric typewriters hit the market, the long-held preference for Courier established itself as *de rigueur*. Otherwise:

1. INT: THIS BOOK

A NUMBERED SCENE, identified as INT (interior, for indoor filming) or EXT (exterior, for outdoor filming), and a STAGE DIRECTION like this one. There's no hard and fast rule but often NOUNS are capitalized the first time they appear, to flag that a newly introduced PROP or SET PIECE is important to the scene, or indeed the STORY. Also capitalized, first time they appear, are CHARACTER NAMES¹¹. (Note: these words are fully capitalized in stage directions only; never in dialogue except for context-appropriate emphasis.) Mine, for example. Let's say DAVID enters the screenwriting class.

DAVID

(Pulls down a CHART that shows screenplay format)

You'll notice that when a character is speaking, his name is capitalized and centered, and that stage directions can appear in parenthesis under the character name too, if they apply to him. And you'll notice that both the dialogue and stage directions have their own inset margin wraps, again, as visual cues for the filmmakers and actors to immediately identify them as such.

2. EXT: THE FRONT STEPS OF THE BUILDING

as DAVID descends. A READER follows behind.

READER

Well, that was all pretty standard. I'd bet a lot of us interested in tie-in novelizations know what a source screenplay usually looks like. For a talkie. How does that differ from a *silent* movie screenplay? Or should I say photoplay?

¹¹ For those sticklers about format niceties (like me): In a play's rehearsal script, character names remain capitalized in stage directions throughout. In screenplays this tends to be a personal option.

David stops walking, looks at the reader, smiles.

DAVID

(Pointing a finger straight up)

Ah-hah! A good question! And entirely relevant. Because, you see, in a silent film, we couldn't be having quite so detailed a discussion as we're having now.

READER

Why not?

DAVID

Well, because...

Our scene now continues in *silent* screenplay format:

3. ANOTHER ANGLE ON DAVID AND THE READER (as long as we're within the same sequence, we don't have to clutter it up with redundant INTs and EXTs)

David gesticulates, making an emphatic point. We cut away from the scene for a TITLE CARD, which can contain a bit of dialogue and/or continuity for clarity.

Title card 1: "Because you can't give the viewers too much to read. It has to remain visual as much as possible. Show, more than tell."

4. THE READER

Takes this in. Suddenly her eyes open wide, almost in shock.

Title card 2: "But doesn't that also mean the story has to be much less complex? I mean, without actual speech, there's a limit to the nuance you can communicate."

5. DAVID AND THE READER

David nods emphatically, as if to say "Got it in one, head of the class"—and then he runs away as fast as he can. The Reader, startled, raises a hand and shouts, "Stop!" She chases David to a tree against which he is supporting himself, catching his breath from the sudden sprint. She seems offended and puzzled. Just in case we can't guess what she's saying:

Title card 3: "Why the hell did you run away from me?"

6. DAVID

Regaining his breath. Replies:

Title card 4: "Gotta keep it visually dynamic. Us standing on the steps just talking isn't really all that interesting to look at, is it?"

7. DAVID AND THE READER

She nods, says "Oh" in understanding. Then has another epiphany.

Title card 5: "Oh. WAIT! Doesn't that mean the novelizer has a bigger job than just adapting the source material?"

8. DAVID

Makes an abracadabra gesture at her with both his hands. Spot on! Right again!

And etcetera.

For indeed, if you make an A-B comparison of any silent (or partially silent) film with its novelization, you'll note that the novelizer has done much more than "merely" re-tell the tale in another medium. He's had to take a black-and-white format geared toward verbal minimalism and reimagine with verbal richness: the milieu in vivid color, the plots with greater complexity, the characters with appropriate psychological depth via internalization. And he's had to imagine matching dialogue: witty and pithy, sincere and human, often informed by subtext: the meaning *beneath* what's said...essentially taking a journey mapped out for the screen in primary hues...and serving up its fulfillment for the printed page in a cascade of pastels. And—since it can be argued that any but the most cursory novelization is also a *personal* interpretation—that fulfillment can reveal as much about the novelizer as a work completely original to him-or-her, because this extrapolation, and the generously multi-layered expansiveness of it, is *totally* a product of the novelizer's sensibilities, instincts, reflexes and imagination.

Whereas if you make an A-B comparison of any *talkie* (or reference-able stage play adapted for a silent film) and its novelization, you'll most often find that the novelizer is hewing more closely to the source because there are more detailed particulars to define its parameters: He tends to approximate, if not appropriate, the script's dialogue, because it does much more of the narrative heavy lifting—as well as setting the *tone* for further dialogue, contextualization or scenes the novelizer may add or extend.

But more on this as we examine our five key authors of the period.

EUSTACE HALE BALL

Books with his byline:*The Gaucho**The Legion of the Condemned**The Mysteries of Myra**The Voice on the Wire**Traffic in Souls***Book without his byline:***The Ghost-Breaker*ⁱⁱ

and

Newspaper Serialization only:*The Ocean Waif*

Eustace Hale Ball (1881-1931; novelizer from 1914-1928) was an industry player right from the beginning of American cinema history. Upon graduating from college (the Boston Conservatory of Music; he was also a gifted violinist), he became a newspaperman for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. He spent the next six years writing syndicated stories and features for a group of large city dailies. On top of this, he pumped out sensationalistic dime novels for “blood and thunder” publisher Frank Tousey, at the rate of one a week. (The Tousey-brand specialty of stories featuring damsels in distress and tormented heroes would hugely inform his approach to novelizing.) He wrote even more dime novels—suspense, mystery and *Nick Carter*, *Detective* thrillers—for Street and Smith. But from an early age, Ball was the very embodiment of an unstoppable, all-purpose

writing machine, and this would account for his genre—and sometimes stylistic—eclecticism.

In 1912 he started his career as an advertising agent of the Eclair Company (founded in 1907, still active today), later becoming their “scenario” (story) editor. From there he moved to a position with the Solax Company, a short-lived—but for a time quite successful—New Jersey-based film studio. (Surviving info says Ball was “director of” Solax but that seems not to true up with any of the management history I came across. More likely, Ball was one of their behind-the-camera directors, helming a number of the short films they produced while he was there.)

He was ahead of the curve in the transition from one-off short subjects and serialized stories to feature films as the dominant product of the industry (Ball called it “the theatrical movement,” which is either a term he coined or a term since neglected). Though there seems to be no supporting documentation, he credibly claimed to have organized the “All Star Film [later: Feature] Corporation” in association with historically noted producer

Harry Raver in 1912; and in 1913, he founded "The Historical Film Company" of New York and London, for which he wrote a dozen feature scripts in that single year. According to a profile written of Ball in 1914, taking in his entire young career, he had, by that point alone, produced about 250 comedies and dramas. He's reputed to have been a gifted painter as well, though details of his achievements with brush and canvas are...well, sketchy.

Ball seems to have been best-known as a novelist. Among his significant successes was a mystery called *The Voice on the Wire* (1915), in which he renovated—or so he claimed—the procedures of a master detective to be more in keeping with reality ("a wealthy, socially prominent bachelor...[who] allowed no one except the Police Commissioner, the head of a private detective agency and the Chief of the Secret Service to know that he was a professional sleuth"), and used modern technology as a key element ("I believe the telephone is the greatest modern aid to criminology," Ball proclaimed). He went through an elaborate rewriting process to ensure that it would have enough thrills to be optioned for a silent film serial for which he would write the screenplays—at the time, those were more profitable and well-attended than features—and indeed it *was* optioned, shortly after its publication. But even so...



Characterization had to be shown by action, instead of dialogue, because of serial conventions. The "villains" had to be increased and some of my pet theories about scientific criminology were perforce simplified to make a shallower and more universal appeal [...] The result naturally was that a new story had been produced to meet the changed circumstances. So when Universal [Studios] decided to [syndicate a serialization of the story in newspapers nationwide], I was engaged to write not only the additional scenario material, but to [create a new prose fiction version], consistent with the [film's] changed details. It was a strange task—not without its humorous aspect.

This may well have made Ball the first author in history to novelize the film based on his own prose source.ⁱⁱⁱ

Implicit by a gap in several film data bases, his screenwriting career paused for about five or six years, following *The Voice on the Wire*. Though it's probable that, during the interim, he was regularly sought as a rewrite man and consultant, for he was also known as a craft pundit, having authored three well-regarded texts: *A Handbook for Scenario Writers*, *The Art of the Photoplay* (both 1913), and *Photoplay Scenarios: How to Write and Sell Them* (1915). The hiatus ended with a silent feature, *Beyond the Rainbow*, in 1922. After which he is credited with no further films. This may be due to his having been based primarily in the East Coast while the movie industry's growth in Hollywood was making migration to the West necessary for

many. Adding credence to this supposition: He married Mary Josephine Collins in Manhattan (1918), and in the 1920 census, they were living in NYC and he gave his job as "Feature Editor, *NY Evening Sun*."

He remained active as a novelist, his last two, both in 1928, being novelizations of Hollywood screenplays by others, *The Gaucho* and *The Legion of the Condemned*.

He would be dead three years later.

Whether he maintained a second residence in the West Coast during his earlier career is unclear, but we do know that, come the 1930s, he had one. In February 1931 he travelled to California from New York—by boat—to be there. It was located in Laguna Beach, about fifty miles from Hollywood. He may also have had the intention of reviving his movie career, but his main project was reported to have been work on a painting...that, ironically, he'd hoped to put on display in New York.

His body was found on the running board of his car outside his home, cause of death diagnosed as a cerebral hemorrhage. His wife arrived by steamship to meet him the day after, expecting him to greet her. She was near collapse when given the sad news.

Despite a long enough resume for three lifetime careers, Eustace Hale Ball, at the end, was all of 49 years old.

The Ball Books: Unlike the work of the four other early novelizers profiled herein, Eustace Hale Ball's had limited connection to psychological verité. Oh, he made sure motivations were clear and credible, all right, but he only rarely presented them naturalistically. He was the kind of writer I think of as a "hard mechanic." He made sure all his characters were positioned so that the audience knew just what to expect from them. He thought nothing of having them speak to each other in melodramatic exposition, or to speak aloud to themselves when thinking out things alone, as if breaking the fourth wall and delivering an aside to the audience. He likewise made sure the plot machinery was well-oiled; not enough to let you leap ahead of his story, but enough so that an alert, critical reader could see the beat-for-beat engineering.

My theory about Ball's career—both his fecundity and versatility—is that he personified the perfect paradox for a pivot-point practitioner: He was an oldschool stylist, yet he had an almost mathematical fascination with meeting and solving the challenges of new media. Thus, while his novelizations bear the tells of a fellow who developed his muscles in the tabloid-and-penny-dreadful pulp venue, they also represent its apotheosis and final form, before the growing maturity of film encouraged a maturity of style among its next generation of novelizers.

