



Fifty Years in the Fiction Factory **The Working Life of Herbert Allingham**

Julia Jones

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'A surprise every tenth page, a shock every twentieth' was how the detective novelist Margery Allingham described her father's methodology as a serial writer for the ha'penny magazines from the 1880s to the 1930s. The comment was not a put down but a matter-of-fact assessment of the formulaic but nonetheless rich plotting and

characterisation that underpinned Allingham's position as one of the most successful and prolific writers of his generation.

Although he did not call himself an author – that accolade, he said, was restricted to those who had published between hard covers – Allingham's output was prodigious and the thrilling, often lurid tales that went on week after week for months at a stretch, kept millions of readers spellbound. Stories were followed and discussed with the enthusiasm of soap operas or reality shows today; in 1925 the *Family Journal*, one of many magazines he wrote for, sold 341,000,000 copies, over six million a week.

As Julia Jones shows in this fascinating biography and social history, the rise of popular serial fiction blossomed in an era of compulsory education, an increasingly urban population and innovations in printing. When Allingham started his career in 1886, the ha'penny magazines offered an improving image, espousing Christian family values alongside adverts for patent medicines of dubious value. By the end, the selling point was centred, as in today's magazines, on the promise of sensation and the cult of celebrity and the market had begun to segment into male, female and children's magazines.

Driven From Home, His Convict Bride or Plucky Polly Perkins promised adventure, romance and suspense to a readership that was overwhelmingly working class. Within these stories, whether melodrama or comedy, the powerless are championed and reveal themselves to be resourceful and moral.

As Jones points out, serials share many traits with fairy tales, including sudden reversals of fortune, disguise, identity swaps and a dramatis personae that translates ogres and magicians into the late Victorian equivalent of unscrupulous plutocrats and sinister experimenting doctors.

Magazines such as the *Christian Globe* (which was founded by Herbert's father, James), *The Jester*, the *People's Journal* and *My Weekly* (one of the few titles from that era still appearing today) often represented the only reading matter in a family and stories were designed to appeal to every member.

Where expenditure was measured in pennies, the 1/2d cover

price of *Merry & Bright* or *The Butterfly* often represented the entire entertainment budget. At the advent of cinema, magazines capitalised on the new medium, with fictionalised accounts of the boyhood of Houdini and *The Girl who Looked Like Gladys Cooper*.

Allingham came from a solid middle-class South London family, most of whom were engaged in writing, publishing and advertising. His wife, Emily, also his first cousin, had a natural flair for story telling; his son Phil wrote a popular memoir of fairground life; and by the age of seven his eldest child Margery was asking for a desk of her own, eager to join the family business. Her father's tutelage was crucial to her future success as the creator of Albert Campion and the eccentric and laconic detective's ancestry can perhaps be traced to Herbert's 'Duffer' character of 1904.

Allingham called his family the 'fiction factory' and their crumbling Essex rectory was in effect an 'outside department' of Lord Northcliffe's Amalgamated Press.

Fifty Years in the Fiction Factory is a compelling examination of the production of a genre that has almost totally disappeared. In unpicking an unsung life it also gives an identity to one of the legion of anonymous hacks who entertained and informed millions.

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