GARY SCHARNHORST recovers a Jack London Interview

ANOTHER WOMAN in the Life of Jack London — Jay Williams

ALA & PCA/ACA Panels on Jack London

JACK LONDON NIGHTS: The Tradition Continues
Another Recovered Interview with Jack London

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JACK LONDON TRAVELED to Los Angeles for a week in early January 1905 to visit Cloudesley Johns and other friends and to deliver his lecture “The Scab” on behalf of the local Socialists. While in the city, he was also interviewed for the Los Angeles Examiner, a Hearst newspaper, by the young reporter Constance Skinner, one of Johns’s friends and later a distinguished journalist and author. London had recently reported on the Russian-Japanese war for the Hearst papers in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, though his conversation with Skinner was more likely the result of his eagerness to publicize his lecture than his willingness to placate an employer. The interview is noteworthy for the verbal repartee between the principals as well as for some details it sheds on London’s life, particularly his love for poetry and the circumstances surrounding his interview with the future U.S. president William Howard Taft in 1902. I transcribe below the entire interview as it appeared in the Examiner for January 8.¹

*  *  *

“I once did an interview,” said Jack London, cocking the gray eye that carries most green at me with a judicial air.
I refused to be intimidated.
“Only one?” I asked, nonchalantly. “Then you are a mere amateur.”
“Only one,” said Jack London, ignoring the latter half of my remarks rather elaborately, I thought. “But I consider myself in a position to judge of interviews: because that one was so very important.”
“Oh, well, this one won’t be,” said I, comfortably.

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Jack London lit a cigarette and looked laughter at me over the end of it.

"What a perfect hostess you are," he said. "You have put me completely at my ease."

"It is my specialty," said I, with more modesty than appears in the writing.

"I wonder if all interviewers are like the one I tackled?" Jack London continued from nowhere in particular. "It was Governor Taft, who had just returned from the Philippines. I had a certain number of subjects on which I wanted him to talk. I met him on the transports, I met him on the ferry, I met him in the Palace Hotel and he talked and talked and talked, columns and reams, but never a word on those subjects I had prepared for him. Oh, I got an interview, but it wasn't at all what I expected."

"That is what generally happens," I remarked. "There's no success in an interview that is too thoroughly planned."

"I see that you rely entirely upon your imagination. You don't take notes," said Jack London.

"You might have said memory," I expostulated.

Jack London smiled the cheerful smile of the man who has scored.

"I shall read you very critically tomorrow morning," he said, "and if I find any errors I shall report you."

"Very well," said I. "In that case I shall put into this interview my criticism of your play."

"Oh, come, come! that would hardly be fair. You know that is only the first rough draft. I haven't even revised it and of course I shall rewrite it entirely—probably several times. You must not criticize a first draft."

"It will be the first—and only draft of this interview that will be published. Remember that, and don’t criticize a first draft."

Jack London lit another cigarette. "Suppose we cry pax," he said.

In the whiles we talked I was reminded of the fact that we had formerly laughingly admitted—that an interview seldom takes the trend planned for it. Jack London is known to the world first as a novelist and an author of short stories, then as a war correspondent and a venturesome traveler, and last as a writer on socialism and economics.

So I had somewhat vaguely planned a path down which the oiled wheels of interrogatory conversation should mobile, stopping an instant here and there at the way stations of Jack London’s artistic career. But we did not stop at those stations, for the vehicle of our thought took the turning to the left and went adventuring in an hitherto unexplored country.

"People who say that their work is everything to them are making a grave error. They are crushing out the reality—which is worth a thousand-fold more than the greatest work. My life, with all it can give me of experience, of happiness, or of sorrow, is a far greater thing to me than my work can ever be."

—Jack London

In the first place, Jack London does not care to talk about himself. He is unaffected, modest. The public clamor that follows him has been none of his seeking. In fact, I think he regards it as one of the penalties of success—a success that he values very lightly, notwithstanding he has worked for it hard and faithfully.

Jack London is a man who is not giving the best of himself to the world because he realized early that the world does not want the best. So he tells the world stories for its entertainment—and his bread-and-butter—and, being an artist, he tells it good stories.

"To be spoiled, by anything, one must care for it," said Mr. London. "I don’t care for acclaim; in short, I less than care for it. It was very painful to me at first, but I saw that I must harden myself to endure the expressions of appreciation that would come from people who were not capable of judging—appreciation I would know myself to be unworthy of.

"I have had one compliment that I value. It came to me in Korea. I stopped at a small mission station for a day or two, and they asked me there to give a reading from my ‘Call of the Wild.’ It happened to be the only fiction they had. Staying at the station was a young cockney, a correspondent of an Anglo-Chinese weekly of some little port. He had been in the Klondike.

"Well, we went over the book together as I selected portions for my reading, and it did me good to hear his comments and see his enjoyment as he read those lines between the lines that only the man who has been there—who has seen and known that life—can read.

"That is one of the disappointments in writing books. A certain sympathy of art or emotion will make many people enjoy the story, but there are so few who can enjoy because they know. So the best of it all, the truth of it, is lost. There is always a motive underneath the surface—the motive of telling the story—but I see by the reviews that are sent me that, generally, even the reviewer does not suspect it.

"I have nothing enthusiastic to say about fiction writing. I don’t care for it. I don’t write fiction because there is in me demanding that form of expression. There is not. I write fiction because the world demands it and pays for it—and I must live. But when I write it I give it the best I have. My artistic conscience will not let me do less.

"My first love was music. Perhaps it is still strongest. My next was poetry. I would rather write a sonnet than the greatest novel. But the world does not want sonnets. Editors and the public will not buy them—unless they are very trashy—and even then only occasionally. So I write fiction. But if I wrote what I cared for I would write poetry and pamphlets.
“My lecture tonight? Well, I am not a speaker, but I am deeply interested in all the questions that stir humanity. Tonight I shall speak on ‘The Scab.’ After the lecture I expect we shall have a free discussion. No work in the world is as absorbing to me as the people of the world. I care far more for personality than for work. Work is extraneous. The actuality is the person—the soul and mind beneath the work. Work, however fine, however enjoyed, cannot satisfy because work alone cannot fill a life.

“People who say that their work is everything to them are making a grave error. They are crushing out the reality—which is worth a thousand-fold more than the greatest work. My life, with all it can give me of experience, of happiness, or of sorrow, is a far greater thing to me than my work can ever be.”

Jack London has a face in which merriment and gravity, emotion and intellect, alternately strive for the throne. His eyes have the direct gaze of a man to whom fear in all its phases is unknown. At a cursory glance one would say: “Just a sunny-hearted boy.” But it is the second glance that tells one of the man; and it is a pleasant tale and well worth the telling—even to this careless old world that wants only fiction.

Notes

1. Constance Skinner, “Jack London’s Call of the Wild Draws Him to Poetry and Song,” Los Angeles Examiner, 8 January 1905, 1. Skinner (1877-1939) was the author of Pioneers of the Old Southwest (1919), Adventurers of Oregon (1920), Adventures in the Wilderness (1925), and Beaver, Kings and Cabins (1933). After her death, the Women’s National Book Association established the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award to honor women who made “an outstanding contribution to the world of books.”

2. William Howard Taft (1857-1930), future President of the United States and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, was also the first civilian Governor-General of the Philippines from 1901 until 1904.


4. According to “Jack London Visits Los Angeles Friends,” Los Angeles Examiner, 6 January 1905, 2, London was “engaged in writing a play to be called ‘The Ways of Women’... based on one of his best stories, ‘Scorn of Women.’” The three-act play would eventually be published (New York: Macmillan, 1906) under the same title as the story.

5. London delivered his lecture “The Scab” at Simpson Auditorium on Hope Street the evening of 8 January 1905. Skinner favorably reviewed the lecture and excerpted verbatim some 800 words from it in the next edition of the Los Angeles Examiner (“Only Way to End Fight for Existence,” 9 January 1905, p. 7), suggesting London had loaned her a copy of his MS so that she could quote from it accurately. This article is also mentioned by Charmian London in The Book of Jack London (New York: Century, 1921), II, 19-20.
Who the Hell Is Ernestine?
A Possible Source for Ruth Morse
by Jay Williams

IF JACK LONDON IS MARTIN EDEN, as he is for those who like to read Martin Eden as an autobiographical or (for those who want to hedge their bets) semi-autobiographical novel, then it follows that Ruth Morse is Mabel Applegarth. This is a time-honored exegesis. Starting with the supposition that London modeled Morse on Applegarth, the argument then reads the novel backwards to mirror London’s life. For example, London must have considered Applegarth “ethereal” because Eden took one look at Morse and thought, “She was a pale, ethereal creature, with wide, spiritual blue eyes and a wealth of golden hair. . . . 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” (Martin Eden 4).

Charmian London wrote that London must have carried his letters to Applegarth with him on the Snark; they are blue-pencilled and surely that must mean that “much of the matter in these letters was combed for the creating of Martin Eden’s Ruth” (Charmian London 1:263). Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Earle Labor’s biography is representative of modern-day biographical exegesis of Martin Eden: “Mabel Applegarth. . . became his first great love and was later used as the model for Ruth Morse in his autobiographical novel Martin Eden” (Reesman and Labor 139). Yet new evidence shows that this relationship, like all the others in Martin Eden, was thoroughly revised into fiction. Ruth Morse is most likely the result of a mixture of women London knew; he created characters, as many writers have done, from bits and pieces of a number of real people. One story idea from 1898–1899 illustrates London’s method: “A Proletarian (title) A series of tales of labor leader agitator, socialist—improvement on Effingwell—rather, a composite of him, Hamilton, and myself” (London JL 1004). What London planned to do to Effingwell he eventually did to Applegarth. He improved her.

The new evidence is an unpublished draft of a letter from London to a woman named Ernestine. Her last name is unknown. Robert Leitz, who did the annotations for The Letters of Jack London, footnotes the first mention of Ernestine in the following way: “Possibly Ernestine Conghram,” who wrote for the San Francisco Morning Call and the Seattle Daily Star under the name Nan Byxbie (London Letters 1:17 n. 8). Leitz remembers that he probably got this information from Russ Kingman’s file records, an archival source that unfortunately is inaccessible as I write (Robert Leitz, email to author, 25 May 2009). Earle Labor, who of course worked with Leitz on The Letters, says he does not include Ernestine in his forthcoming biography (Earle Labor, personal email to author, April 2009). Ernestine Conghram (or Ernestine, or Nan Byxbie) does not appear in Kingman’s A Pictorial Life or Jack London: A Definitive Chronology, nor does she appear in any of the biographies of London. There are other sources she doesn’t appear in, either, but I am not going to list them all. Suffice it to say that we all would welcome any information on Ernestine’s identity. For now, let us assume that Kingman was right and that Ernestine is Ernestine Conghram, aka Nan Byxbie, aka, as we shall see, one of London’s early loves and one of several probable models for Ruth Morse.

There are a few clues in the published letters as to how London met Ernestine and what exactly was the nature of their relationship. An Ernestine was known to both London and Ted Applegarth, making it likely that she was also known to Mabel. It appears that Ernestine had a sibling, “J. C.” (the C making it possible that the last name was indeed Conghram), so it is possible that the Applegarth and Conghram families were friends and that when London met Mabel he soon after met Ernestine. Or, of course, he met Ernestine before he met Mabel. In any case, London mentions Ernestine three times in the published letters. First, in a letter to Ted, he writes, “by the way, Ernestine informs me that J. C. discovered we were corresponding & mentioned it in your household & that some way you got wind of the same thing—Who told you? I am a little curious. Don’t mention it to Ernestine however, if you write her. She is in ‘Frisco now, typewriting but I have as yet failed to visit her. What do you think of that? Can you conceive it to be the same old Jack?” (Letters 1:13). I think the implication of that last question is clear: Jack knew Ernestine before he left for the Klondike, that they had been very familiar, and that he has for some reason been too busy to see a girl whom he is interested in and who was interested in him. No, not the Jack we all know and love so well, indeed.

The second and third mentions are not to Ernestine but to Nan Byxbie, and they come in two separate letters to Cloudesley Johns. The first: “Say? I am acquainted with Nan Byxbie, one of the new space-writers on the Call. Her name you have probably seen in recent issues if you read that paper. I coached her up in versification and a little bit on style at odd intervals; besides we know each other very well. If the Call does not dig up your Ms., shall I see her about it?” (Letters 1:130). This letter, coming a year after the letter to Ted, makes clear that London and Ernestine’s relationship, unlike that between him and Mabel, lasted. Perhaps it did because they worked on writing together, London the tutor and Ernestine the student. Yet the student quickly got a newspaper job, and the teacher of course had by December 1899 completed a run of short stories in The Overland Monthly, not to mention the forty-one other poems, stories, and essays he had written since September 1898. This aspect of their relationship is the most fascinating and telling. Here we have an early example of London romancing a woman of talent and independence, a writerly woman. The third mention reinforces the second. He told Johns that he was “going to take a run up to ‘Frisco next
The new evidence that I found shows a depth of feeling for her that others have thought London only had for Mabel. What I found is a draft of a love letter that he wrote to Ernestine in the late fall, early winter of 1898 that he never sent. Rather, he rewrote it and sent it to Mabel.

Unfortunately, Johns does not mention London's offer to meet with Byxbie to discuss the manuscript in his autobiography, though he does make a comment that might bear upon the London-Ernestine relationship. When Jack told Cloudesley that he was going to be married, omitting the name of his bride-to-be, Johns thought, "I knew of at least two women who might be 'Mrs. Jack London' with distinction if not in altogether harmonious comradeship with 'Boy Jack'" (Johns 107). Two writers, man and woman, who had known each other for five years might easily, in Johns's mind, form a "harmonious comradeship." They didn't, and Ernestine's fate remains unknown.

So London and Ernestine shared professional and personal interests. What exactly was the depth of their personal relationship? The new evidence that I found shows a depth of feeling for her that others have thought London only had for Mabel. What I found is a draft of a love letter that he wrote to Ernestine in the late fall, early winter of 1898 that he never sent. Rather, he rewrote it and sent it to Mabel. It is an oft-quoted letter—Kingman actually reproduces it in its entirety in A Pictorial Life—because it comes at a turning point in London's life. He had been writing poetry and stories all fall, his first in California since leaving for the Klondike, and he was broke and unsuccessful. He had taken the postal service exam, and Mabel was writing to Mabel, he didn't know how to spell it? He didn't know it? The last supposition seems unlikely. Her name is sandwiched between Cloudesley's and Anna Strunsky's, both of whom he met in 1899 and both of whom rate first and last names. She was too well known to him then to require a last name.

Nay, I lost myself in my dream. A little house, a couple of servants, a select coterie of friends, a wife, a pair of diminutive models of us twain; the hanging of the stockings, the merry morning surprises, the Christmas greeting; a cozy fire, a snug room, the sleeping children cuddling on the floor between us; an assured though monotonous future in prospect; a feeling of oneness, of fellowship with all mean, [yes, “mean,” though I’m sure he meant “men”], a satisfied optimistical contemplation of all things; a ----- Ever feel that way?

Thus I sometimes dream, and wonder if I am destined to taste such delights. God knows how I often hunger for it! And then—and then the world calls loudly, the fairy edifice crumbles away, and a dreary yet enticing future, similar to the past, confronts me.

And again, the seeming impossibility, the foreboding, that I shall never realize [a page has been ripped out from the notebook] There they were, in each other's arms as happy as two clams at high water. Neither has felt, nor will ever feel, a higher or other call than that of (rather [?] it be lower [?] or higher [?]) loving and marrying and settling down to housekeeping.

They are happy and as long as the landlord is paid and the flour barrel is not empty, they will be happy.

Lives may be represented in divers ways—theirs by a line, without breadth or thickness, along which they travel from birth to burial. Other lives have the second, and a few, the third dimension. I know it is egotistical, but I do classify myself without the first category; and yet, I often feel that they will attain at least in quantity more happiness than I, while I--I have and shall suffer far more deeply, more keenly. And often, I consider the alleged dim Law of Compensation to be a
farce. Physiologists say that the higher the organism, the more exquisite the pain it suffers over a lower organism, and correspondingly, the more exquisite its pleasure. Sometimes I doubt this, and unlike the deist, there is for me no compensation in a future life.

Why Ernestine, did I believe in a future existence, I would at once, without the least hesitancy, bring my razor and my jugglar-vein in disastrous propriquity; but the belief that this life is all there is for me, that death shall see the disintegration of my spirit as it will my flesh, withholds me. Though death and I have been fearless bedfellows, I love life dearly. [crossed out: It's a grand thing.]

Pardon me, I started to write a curt note,

And, just as it begins in mid-sentence, so too does it end in midsentence. Here is the relevant portion of the letter he actually sent, now meant for Mabel:

And to-day is Christmas—it is at such periods that the vagabondage of my nature succumbs to a latent taste for domesticity. Away with the many corners of this round work! I am deaf to the call of the East and West, the North and South—a picture such as Fred used to draw is before me. A comfortable little cottage, a couple of servants, a select coterie of friends, and above all, a neat little wife and a couple of diminutive models of us twain—a hanger of stockings last evening, a merry surprise this morning, the genial interchange of Christmas greeting; a cozy grate fire, the sleepy children cuddling on the floor ready for bed, a sort of dreamy communion between the fire, my wife, and myself; an assured, though quiet and monotonous, future in prospect; a satisfied knowledge of the many little amenities of civilized life which are mine and shall be mine; a genial optimistical contemplation—

Ever feel that way? Fred dreamed of it, but never tasted; I suppose I am destined like wise. So be it. The ways of the gods are inscrutable—and do they make and break us just for fun? What a great old world! What a jolly good world! It contains so much which is worth striving for; and notwithstanding, so much to avoid. . . . There are numerous paths to earthly happiness; but to find them, skill in geography or typography is worse than useless. . . . I started to write a letter; I became nonsensical; forgive me. I go to dine at my sister's Happy New Year to all! (Letters 31–32)

We don't really know the status of London's relationship with Mabel at this point, but it is clear that by revising the letter and sending it to someone else, Jack had decided that Ernestine was not going to be his. Or had she in fact told him so directly? Did Jack thus feel like he had to settle for Mabel? At some point in their relationship he had seen how different, how incompatible they were. This letter seems to suggest that he was now reaching this point. The contrast in his mind between Mabel and Ernestine was making Mabel's desires less appealing. He wanted to be upbeat to Mabel and not discuss suicide and his love of life, as he had with Ernestine. “What a great old world!” he exulted to Mabel, even though the letter starts on a blue note, and this is probably an echo of her own feelings: Jack, she might have said, if only you would settle down with a regular job and marry and have kids, and, oh, such happiness in life! No, thoughts of suicide, the Law of Compensation, and “a dreary but enticing future”—dreary, because writing is hard work; enticing, because though the risks be great the reward is great, too—is not for bourgeois squares like Mabel. And there is no contrast between a higher calling and domesticity in his revision. There is only the picture of happy cottage life, something that he sometimes yearns for but for some reason he seems incapable of attaining it. To Ernestine, Jack makes it clear that he will not become a square because there is a “higher calling” that he must attune himself to. But to Mabel Jack cannot become a square because he can’t seem to find his way to that sort of life, the life she really wants with him. Some innate, unknown power within him causes him to avoid what he avows to be real happiness. To Ernestine, Jack says, see, I am a tortured artistic soul. Love me! To Mabel, he says, I wish I could be your husband and give you the love you really want, but “the gods” must want it to be that way. Oh well!

So London felt a deep bond between himself and the reporter-to-be and at the same time that he was supposedly madly in love with Mabel. It is not such a stretch to imagine that the love London felt for Ernestine got transferred to Martin Eden and helped shape Ruth Morse. Another incident in London’s life, also mistakenly attributed to Mabel by way of Ruth, shows how much of a composite Ruth really is. Biographers have used the moment in Martin Eden when Martin sees Ruth Morse’s lips stained with cherry juice as the marker of the abyss opening between Jack and Mabel:

And then, one day, without warning, the gulf between them was bridged for a moment, and thereafter, though the gulf remained, it was ever narrower. They had been eating cherries—great, luscious, black cherries with a juice of the color of dark wine. And later, as she read aloud to him from “The Princess,” he chanced to notice the stain of the cherries on her lips. For the moment her divinity was shattered. She was clay, after all, mere clay, subject to the common law of clay as his clay was subject, or anybody’s clay. (38)

However, the drama of the cherry juice never happened between Jack and Mabel. It happened between Jack and his first love, Haydee. As Anna Strunsky recalled, “He had been in love like everybody else. He had seen her at a Salvation Army meeting on the water front, and then they sat together on a park bench. Her name was Haydee. The touch of her gloved fingers set him trembling. Would he ever forget his surprise when he found that the cherries he fed her stained her lips and cheeks? He only then realized she was human like himself. They gave each other wondering kisses, asked no more, needed no more.” (Walling JL 1707). London tells Anna the same story, leaving out Haydee’s name, in an undated letter that editors of The Letters of Jack London tentatively date 1901. And they mistakenly identify the woman as, of course, Mabel (Letters 1:262, 264). One wonders then what’s left of Mabel in Ruth. Her ethereal quality, perhaps.
Odd that these similar titles might link an Ernestine (female) to a Coughran (male). The quizzing this time happens in the Klondike, where Jack is a miner, unmarried, and in love with Karen Sayther. But she spurns him because she loves David Payne (London, “The Great Interrogation,” 1:523–24). The story is really a revenge tale, in a way. Poor Karen tramps all the way to Klondike to tell Payne that she really, truly loves him, but, alas, he has already married and will remain true to his wife. So, her heart broken, she tramps back to, where else, San Francisco. I’m not saying that this story tells us that London wished that Ernestine’s heart would break in the same way that she had broken his heart. But I do want to reiterate and conclude with my central claim. That is, much of London’s emotional investment in his character Ruth Morse had as its partial source, not his love for Mabel Applegarth, but his love for Ernestine, whoever the hell she was.

Works Cited


-- No. 1. Magazine Sales. From 1898 to May 1900, Jack London Collection, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.


London Panels at the American Literature Association Conference, 2009, Boston

Session 18-H  Jack London
Organized by the Jack London Society, Chair: Jeanne Campbell Reesman, University of Texas at San Antonio

1. “Jack London’s Mysterious Malady: London’s Use of Mercury for Yaws and His Untimely Death,” Philip J. Klemmer, M.D., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Medical School

Correction: In the last issue of The Call, the following paper from the JLS 9th Biennial Symposium should have appeared as the fourth presentation in Session III. Jack London: Beginnings: "London's Celebrity Socialism," Andrew Furer, Fordham University.
Jack London Nights
An Interview with RedFence
Senior Writer James Roland

IN THE SUMMER OF 2004 three writers rented a house in the suburbs of Los Angeles. The fence in the backyard was fire-engine red. In honor of Jack London they dubbed their new address “Jack London House.” Once a month Titus Gee, John Fox, and James Roland held an open house, which drew other area artists, writers, and voyagers who shared their food, drink, ideas, and work. Eventually the fellowship and collaboration of these “Jack London Nights” led to the publication of the arts and literary magazine RedFence. For more on RedFence go to www.redfenceproject.com. To see footage from an actual Jack London Night go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eefHi89dec. RedFence's senior writer James Roland recently spoke to Kenneth Brandt about Jack London Nights and RedFence.

How did the idea of having Jack London Nights originate?

Roland: My friend Titus was sleeping on my apartment floor and we were debating whether or not we should pitch in with some other guys to rent a house. The idea was, since we were writing together and critiquing each other’s stuff, that living together would create a sort-of creative commune. We were right. Along with this came the idea for Jack London Nights. Apparently Jack London did the same thing. He’d spent so much time riding the rails (literally) and living life to its fullest that he’d collected a large body of friends from all walks of life. They’d congregate at his place in Northern California and they’d eat, drink, and make art. We LOVED that idea, so we announced our first Jack London Night. It went alright... awkward because no one was used to hearing stories read out loud. Nowadays that’s something for children or snooty artsy-types at coffee shops. Over time it picked up speed and we’ve had some AMAZING evenings.

Could you describe what goes on during a typical Jack London Night?

Roland: First, we use it as motivation to clean our house! That in itself is quite a production! Then we make sure to buy a lot of candles; we’ve found that you can have JLN without candles, but something about candle light really adds to the artistic atmosphere. Then, we cook. We try to prep food beforehand, but we’re always late and are still in the kitchen when folks arrive. But this also really adds to the atmosphere. Everyone ends up helping with the food and it really loosens people up. Then, we feast. After a couple hours you kind of feel with the moment is right. Folks are talking but things are getting calmer. Then We turn off all but a few lights (again, candles help with this!) and Titus starts the evening off by reading the poem “Ode” by Arthur O’Shaughnessy. Then we take turns reading. We usually take a poll during the “party time” and find out how many pieces are being read, length, and general style. Then we compile a reading list and call peoples names during the “reading time.” This generally works very well. It also works to have short breaks if there are a lot of pieces. Sometimes our readings only go for an hour, sometimes three hours! After the reading folks tend to bolt rather quickly, except for a few hardcore people who hang out until the wee hours until everyone realizes they have to work the next day (we have them on Sundays).
What was it about Jack London’s life and work that inspired you and your friends?

Roland: Jack London is this odd mix of blue collar and literary elitism. He’s this fantastic writer. His chosen “genre” doesn’t quite get respect nowadays, but even though he wrote adventure stories, spent time as a hobo and a pirate, he has this beauty and thoughtfulness to his work. It’s great. I think this is what inspired us the most: the fact that he could write a story and read it to one of his hobo friends and some literary icon at the same time. That he made art without disconnecting himself from the real world. In that way he reminds me of the author Daniyal Mueennuddin, who writes beautiful short stories in morning and spends the afternoons working on his farm in Pakistan.

How did Jack London Nights lead to the publication of RedFence?

Roland: RedFence came out of Jack London Nights directly. It was during one (or maybe right before or after) that Ben Ross (Creative Director of RedFence) first called us and said “hey, send me some stories that you guys are reading at Jack London Night, and I’ll make them into a magazine.” Then, out of the creative synergy surrounding Jack London Night, all these artists ended up contributing to a much larger, constantly evolving project. The “final” result is a web magazine with a yearly print edition. It involves music, video, written word, and illustration. The “theme” of RedFence Magazine is “Art, Culture, Adventure.” And we picked “adventure” because we had a stockpile of essays that were about traveling, hiking, exploring, etc. It was such a strong element in us that we couldn’t ignore it. And I think London would really dig it. We try to combine the two worlds that he came from and all of our artistic endeavors really step from his legacy, in a way, so I imagine he’d like that. I know I would!

New Books


In the first thorough examination of race in London’s life and writing, Reesman explores his choices of genre by analyzing racial content and purpose and judges his literary artistry against a standard of racial tolerance. Although he promoted white superiority in novels and nonfiction, London sharply satirized racism and meaningfully portrayed racial others-most often as protagonists-in his short fiction. With new readings of The Call of the Wild and Martin Eden, and many other works, such as the explosive Pacific stories, Reesman reveals that London employed many of the same literary tropes of race used by African American writers of his period: the slave narrative, double-consciousness, the tragic mulatto, and ethnic diaspora.


The second entry in an ongoing series, Prospects for the Study of American Literature (II) brings together concentrated overviews of past scholarship with ideas for new and rewarding avenues of research on a diverse group of American literary figures:

1. James Fenimore Cooper by Lance Schachterle
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne by Leland S. Person
3. Margaret Fuller by Larry J. Reynolds
4. Emily Dickinson by Mary Loeffelholz
5. Louisa May Alcott by Daniel Shealy
6. William Dean Howells by Sarah B. Daugherty
7. Frank Norris by Eric Carl Link
8. Jack London by Jeanne Campbell Reesman
9. Theodore Dreiser by Paul A. Orlov
10. F. Scott Fitzgerald by James L. W. West III
12. Marianne Moore by Robin G. Schulze
13. James Baldwin by Maurice Wallace
14. Ralph Ellison by Gayle Pemberton
15. Eudora Welty by Pearl Amelia McHaney