

THE SELF-MADE MAN!

Possibly as a reaction to the decrease of skirmishes with Native Americans and outlaws, or possibly in response to the many youths a year that ran away from home to find a cowboy fantasy out west, dime novel publishing toward the turn of the century turned its interest to self-improvement stories. Horatio Alger became more popular than ever and a priggish prep-school boy, Frank Merriwell, became the center of a new brand.

There had been school stories before, but they were often imported from Britain and were never very popular. These new American stories retained the “larger-than-life” dimensions and salacious episodes while switching the narratives from crime and slaughter to football games and prep schools. Horatio Alger stories were taken very seriously by the author as social actions, and by all accounts, taken seriously by the public. *Adrift in New York* offers a detailed picture of daily life in Victorian Gotham while lionizing the drive upward. Frank Merriwell was very deliberately created by the editorial staff of Street and Smith to counter the British school stories. He was to be wealthy through inheritance, graduate from Yale, embody democratic principles, and appear much more tolerant of class differences than his British counterparts. There were more than a thousand sequels.

These stories branched off in two directions. One took Frank and other collegiate heroes to dangerous destinations and political intrigue. This began a return to a frontier-loving hero who now had more consistent talking points and American ideals on his side. The other direction was the rags-to-riches story. In these episodes young men reinforced societal myths about success for everyone who works at it. Published about almost every profession, the plots showed boys getting taken advantage of by stereotypes, and then persevering through hard work and business savvy.