

# Horatio Alger, Jr.—Juvenile Writer, Enduring Icon, and Collectible Author

**Keynote Address**

**Snyder Book Collecting Contest**

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**Arthur P. Young**

*If I would have my name endure,*

*I'll write it on the hearts of men*

H. Alger

Let's pretend for a moment that I am 5'2," balding, and speak in a soft voice. With that suspension, we can invite Mr. Alger to introduce himself to you this evening.

My boys strive and succeed, with character and a dollop of luck. They are my street heroes and my partic'lar family. I am Horatio Alger, Jr. and Chelsea, Massachusetts, is my home town. My father was a minister and our family was quite comfortable. After graduating from Harvard College in 1852, I began writing poetry and juvenile stories. My first book, *Bertha's Christmas Vision*, was published in 1856. Later, I became a minister, and accepted the Unitarian pastorate in Brewster, Massachusetts. In 1867, *Ragged Dick*, my signature contribution, portrayed street life in New York and chronicled how one young

man coped and prevailed. Until journey's end in 1899, I wrote 119 books and hundreds of short stories and poems. A modest life of some accomplishment.

In death, my fortunes ebbed and flowed. A hoax biography by Herbert Mayes in 1928 reinvented my life in a cruel way and misinformed the public about the nature of my writings. And then I became that rarest abstraction of all—a cultural icon signifying success, or lack thereof, in our capitalist-based society. More ensued: abridgments; biographies; criticism as a formulaic author; high praise from many readers; parodies in fiction, stage, and cinema; appearances in scores of academic syllabi; several hundred reprint publishers; collector enthusiasts; organizations named in my honor; and even board games and stamps extolling my life's work. My efforts are recognized by the inclusion of several titles in bibliographies of landmark literature. Still, the unconvinced literary elite withholds the hallowed literary canon from my grasp. So now is the time for a more nuanced study of my life, writings, and enduring presence. After all, my story is a struggle without end. My boys understand.

Thank you, Horatio.

Now, for the rest of the story, in my voice.

Our story begins on January 13, 1832, when Horatio Alger, Jr. was born in Chelsea (now Revere), Massachusetts. His father, Reverend Horatio Alger, Sr., was a Unitarian minister at the First Congregational Church and Society of Chelsea. Alger's mother, Olive Fenno Alger, was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and land owner. Alger was home schooled during his early years, became a voracious reader, and was well versed in Latin and algebra by the age of ten.

Alger's parents moved to Marlborough, a town situated in the rolling hills between Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts in December 1844. Alger enrolled for three years at the Gates Academy to prepare for college. Following in his father's footsteps, Alger entered Harvard in 1848, paying for his tuition by serving as a "president's freshman," running errands for the college president. Alger excelled at Harvard, graduating near the top of his class, and receiving awards for academic achievement and prizes for his essays. He won the coveted Phi Beta Kappa key and reflected later that, "No period of my life has been one of such unmixed happiness as the four years which have been spent within college walls."<sup>1</sup>

During the next five years, Alger held a variety of positions, including teacher, headmaster, editor, and writer. His first book, *Bertha's Christmas Vision*, was published in 1856, and a year later was followed by *Nothing to Do*, an anonymously published volume of satirical poetry. He wrote many poems and short stories for a variety of Boston, New York, and Rhode Island monthlies and weeklies. He then entered the Harvard College Divinity School in 1857, and graduated three years later. Alger was drafted for service in the army of the Potomac in 1863, but two weeks after his pre-induction physical, Alger was exempted because of severe nearsightedness and a failure to meet the minimum height requirement.

He began to hit his literary stride in 1864 with the publication of *Frank's Campaign*, his third book. In the same year, he became minister at the First Unitarian Church and Society of Brewster, Massachusetts. He continued writing ballads, poetry, and short stories for a variety of publications. In spring of 1866, Alger's life turned upside down. He was accused of molesting two youngsters, did not deny the charges, abruptly resigned his ministerial post, and was gone in a matter of days. His father's support saved his son's writing career. The subject never came up again during Alger's life time.

Alger then moved to New York City and soon visited the Newsboys' Lodging House and met Charles Loring Brace, a prominent social worker and philanthropist, who founded the Children's Aid Society in 1853. It was through his friendship with Brace that Alger learned firsthand of the life and plight of beggars, street Arabs, street urchins, bootblacks, homeless boys, newsboys, and hustlers. And it's from this setting that Alger experienced his greatest success, namely the *Ragged Dick* series, which is a group of stories about New York street boys who struggle and eventually make good. *Ragged Dick* was published in May 1868 and it was an immediate success, delivering Alger from relative obscurity to literary prominence in the juvenile arena and beyond.

The characterizations in this series set the stage for the dozens of similar books which followed. *Ragged Dick*, or, as he is also known, Richard Hunter, was a playful lad who smoked, gambled, and played tricks on his friends. He was, however, generous, enterprising, self reliant, and told the truth. With *Ragged Dick*, Alger began a lifelong commitment to the urban community, chronicling the dislocations

resulting from the rapid industrialization of the nation. The young people and their trials, tribulations, striving, and eventual success are highlighted in this series and in many others. The typical Alger hero was a solid character who often advanced through enterprise and luck, and with the help of a friend or two along the way.

Following publication of *Ragged Dick*, Alger continued writing at a rather frenzied pace, regularly contributing to such story papers and magazines as *Ballou's*, *Gleason's*, *Harper's*, *New York Weekly*, *Student and Schoolmate*, and *Young Israel*. By the time of his death in Natick, Massachusetts, in 1899, Alger had written more than one hundred full-length books and more than 500 short stories and poems. Alger did not exclusively write juvenile fiction. He wrote several biographies which included the lives of James Garfield, Abraham Lincoln, and Daniel Webster. Alger's work has been reprinted by more than 125 publishers since his death, and in fact, he enjoyed far greater sales following his death than during his lifetime.

To comprehend the continuing hold of Horatio Alger on the American imagination, one must go back to the 19th century and become familiar with the tensions inherent in the evolving structure of capitalism. These dualities and tensions have been brilliantly captured in Jackson Lears' book, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*, published by Viking in 2003.

Debate about gambling reveals fundamental fault lines in American character, sharp tensions between an impulse toward risk and a zeal for control. Those tensions may be universal, but seldom have they been so sharply opposed as in the United States, where longings for a lucky strike have been counterbalanced by a secular Protestant Ethic that has questioned the very existence of luck.

What makes the conversation so revealing is that it counterposes two distinct accounts of American character. One narrative puts the big gamble at the center of American life: from the earliest English settlements at Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay, risky ventures in real estate (and other less palpable commodities) power the progress of

a fluid, mobile democracy. The speculative confidence man is the hero of this tale—the man (almost always he is male) with his eye on the Main Chance rather than the Moral Imperative. The other narrative exalts a different sort of hero—a disciplined self-made man, whose success comes through careful cultivation of (implicitly Protestant) virtues in cooperation with a Providential plan. The first account implies a contingent universe where luck matters and admits that net worth may have nothing to do with moral worth. The second assumes a coherent universe where earthly rewards match ethical merits and suggests that Providence has ordered this world as well as the next.

The self-made man has proven to be a far more influential culture hero than the confidence man. The secular version of Providence has resonated with some characteristically American presumptions. A providential sense of destiny could be expanded from individuals to groups and ultimately to nations—and to none more easily than the United States. Even before there was a United States, colonial orators assumed their settlements would play a redemptive role in the sacred drama of world history. As the Puritan John Winthrop declared in 1630, the holy commonwealth at Massachusetts Bay would be a “City on a Hill,” a beacon of inspiration for all Christendom. By the revolutionary era, the city on a hill had spread to the whole society: America became “God’s New Israel.” As the new nation grew richer and more powerful during the nineteenth century, the profounder religious meanings of Providence began to fall away. Prosperity itself came to seem a sign of God’s blessing—at least to the more affluent, who have always felt drawn to secular notions of Providence. For the deserving nation as for the deserving individual, progress was inevitable. Or so the more fortunate have assumed, from the first Gilded Age to our own more recent one.

For many Americans, belief in the breaks was a psychic necessity—a release from the moral closure of secular providentialism. Ministers might preach of merit

rewarded, but even Horatio Alger acknowledged that luck was as important as pluck in achieving success. Decades ago, Louis Hartz recognized “how frequently Ragged Dick came to riches as a result of falling asleep in the snow and being found by a portly widower or rescuing a child from disaster and winning eternal gratitude.” Yet Alger held onto an implicitly providential framework: his heroes earned their good fortune through relentless energy—they were always up and doing, on the lookout for opportunity. No wonder they got all the breaks.<sup>2</sup>

Now for two commentaries on Alger’s accomplishments as a writer. The first is by Carol Nackenoff, author of the best thematic analysis of Alger’s works in a book entitled, *The Fictional Republic*:

Horatio Alger, Jr. unwittingly derived a formula to deal with hopes and anxieties in a rapidly changing world. He captured a form of discourse that not only spoke to many in the era in which he wrote, but could still be spoken by later generations. The story, “Fiction,” by the time the ink was on the page, touched something vital. The narrative about our future and our past — and the relation between these — constitutes political identity. In it, Jeffersonian virtues meet the industrial era. The country meets the city and both win: virtue and economic opportunity are wedded. The American Jeremiad exhorts its audience to stand true to its principles and meets the forces threatening to undo the grand experiment. And the Republic of the Creator, emerging from its rite of passage, triumphs.<sup>3</sup>

And Shaun O’Connell, author of *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York*, distills this essence from Alger’s writings:

Alger’s heroes, too, would have it both ways — by achieving their success through manners and morality, by acquiring money, and attaining grace. The solution to this dilemma for Alger was to contrive a hero who preserved his sense of decency and

character at the same time he pursued the dream of success. Alger adapted to his own purposes Benjamin Franklin's myth of the impoverished idealistic young American who enters a strange city and through hard work, and exemplary character, shrewdness, and good fortune, eventually triumphs. Alger's novels, then, are triumphs of hope over experience; their vast popularity tells us much about what America wanted to believe about themselves and about the America they saw in New York City.<sup>4</sup>

Alger, along with a number of other juvenile writers, was not immune from criticism by reviewers and by those who worked in libraries. Alger's works were seen by some as formulaic, repetitive stories with predictable outcomes. And the subjects of many of the tales, namely the orphans and street children, were not always considered sufficiently wholesome to ensure a redeeming value. One such sentiment was recorded by an Edison T. Filmore, who wrote to the *New York Times* on August 20, 1898:

The growth of free public libraries is nowhere so rapid and conspicuous as in the large cities. There, there is scarcely a child of what class or grade whatsoever that does not belong to one library or another. The libraries, acting in concert with the schools, form one of the principle instruments of modern education, as is plainly shown by the increasing intelligence and culture of the body, of the younger generation.

Yet, though the benefits to be derived may be many and great, I have found what is in my estimation an evil, and that in New York City, affecting the children. The practice has been spreading among the smaller libraries of giving much undo prominence to the books of such authors as Horatio Alger, Oliver Optic, etc. Considering the large percentage these books form of the total number on the shelves, it seems as if the libraries were making a specialty of circulating them. What object they may have in doing this I cannot imagine, except that since these books seem interesting they serve to keep the children from the streets.

This is all they accomplish. They are books devoid of truth, degrading and pernicious in effect. They have nothing in them that is instructive, nothing in them that is animating, and nothing in them that is elevating or ennobling. They treat mainly of the exploits and achievements of newsboys, bootblacks, street Arabs, Fagans, thieves, gamblers, tramps, and robbers. Their utter disregard for truth gives them a novelty and fascination that are almost irresistible to children. Once they fall into the hands of children it is only with the greatest effort that they can be got rid of afterwards. Naturally the harmful influence they exert molds much that is bad and unwholesome in the yielding minds of their inexperienced and youthful readers.

Recently, I interviewed a boy in one of the smaller libraries in regard to the reading of such books. He told me that he had read 52 Alger books all of them taken out of the Yorkville branch of the New York Free Circulating Library, and that there were yet many more not yet read. He avowed that they were so much alike, repeating the same incidents and holdups so many times, that he could now write one himself. He said they are just as attractive to him now as they ever were and he wondered why he did not get sick of them.<sup>5</sup>

I think this letter writer and interviewer did not quite prove his case by interviewing the young school boy!

Let's now take a look at how Alger has been received by his several biographers, key bibliographies, and by posterity itself. Horatio Alger's treatment by biographers has been varied and uneven, to say the very least. Alger's first biographer, Herbert Mayes, wrote about his subject in 1928.<sup>6</sup> He took a great many liberties with Alger's life, concocted a series of episodes which never occurred, and attributed books to Alger which he never wrote. The biography, of course, was a literary hoax which took nearly 50 years for the author to disclose. Amazingly, he confessed the fabrication at a meeting of the Horatio Alger Society in 1977, and proceeded to sign a reprint edition of the hoax biography. He said the hoax was not intended to last very long, but that he felt trapped after a family friend gave the book a very

favorable review. It was a wonderful hoax if you are into this genre of literature, but it regrettably had a lasting impact on subsequent Alger chroniclers and the many entries about Alger which appeared in various biographical and encyclopedic sources. Whenever you read that Alger was born in 1834 (1832 is the correct year), you know that writer has consulted the Mayes biography.

In 1964, Ralph D. Gardner wrote *Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era*.<sup>7</sup> Gardner's well-written biography brought together many new facts about Alger and conveyed the Alger story in a briskly-written volume. It is a good read. However, Gardner, as stated in his preface, did manufacture some of the dialog. He also appended an immensely important bibliography of Alger's works. Gardner single-handedly launched the resurrection of interest in Alger's writings and his importance to the history of American popular culture. Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales published *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* in 1985. This work is the best-researched biography of Alger which we have and is the result of the exhaustive mining of primary sources. Scharnhorst and Bales set the record straight on many aspects of Alger's literary career and private life. If Gardner may be criticized for being overly buoyant about some of Alger's contributions, Scharnhorst and Bales may be judged overly cynical about some of Alger's flaws and literary shortcomings. The most recent treatment of Alger, as already mentioned, is *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse*, by Carol Nackenoff, published in 1994. Nackenoff looks at Alger through the lens of thematic analysis and addresses such topics as technology, capitalism, democracy, mass fiction, culture wars, and the national character. Professor Nackenoff's work is an outstanding piece of scholarship which presents a nuanced and balanced view of Alger's writings and contributions.

As for his inclusion in mainline bibliographies, Alger has received some coveted recognition. *Ragged Dick* was selected by Jacob Blanck for *Peter Parley to Penrod: A Bibliographical Description of the Best-Loved American Juvenile Books* (New York: Bowker, 1938). *Ragged Dick* appears again in the landmark exhibition of the Grolier Club in 1947 and published by the Grolier Club as *One Hundred Influential American Books Printed Before 1900*. Alger has just been recognized again by Jay Parini in

*Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America*. Alger appears in a supplemental list of one hundred titles with such authors as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, and Rachel Carson. Alger's rival for most popular and important nineteenth century juvenile writer, Louisa May Alcott, does not appear at all! Horatio would be having a long-delayed good day.<sup>8</sup> Turning now to Alger's impact over the decades through the incorporation of his works and themes into all manner of American culture, I will offer a brief and highly selective inventory of his continuing presence.

The first measure is from the arcane parlance of literary analysis, namely intertextuality. Intertextuality refers to the introduction of prior textual elements into the current work. Intertextual encounters may apply to the printed text and to other forms of media such as the cinema. Horatio Alger Jr. may be preeminent among writers who are referenced by later authors in either a positive manner or derisively in the form of parody. In Alger's case, the "rags to riches" shorthand is much more commonly found than either textual references to the biographical or authorial Alger. A brief list of authors adapting the Alger myth would include Jan Boorstin, Forrest Campbell, Robert Coover, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Gaddis, Paul Goodman, Robert Herrick, Arthur Miller, Henry Miller, Jane Smiley, Hunter Thompson, Luke Walton, and Nathaniel West. Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* and West's *A Cool Million* are the best known parodies. There are hundreds more!

There is a continuing fascination with Alger in the scholarly literature, and several dozen dissertations have been written over the past decade with Alger as either a main or important secondary theme. Easily the most imaginative piece that ties Horatio Alger to another social setting and another time is the article written by Kathleen Abowitz, "Horatio Alger and Hip-Hop," published in 1996.<sup>9</sup> She believes that the Alger formula is alive and flourishing in the many spheres of hip-hop music, which includes gangsta, rap, reggae, and other musical forms. The basic Horatio Alger mythology is very much present in hip-hop culture: ghetto boy or girl rises from humble beginnings through a combination of grace, lyrical style, performance virtuoso, hard work, strength in adversity, luck, and the help of elders and inspirational heroes. In the same way as Alger's heroes come from poor beginnings, hip-hop heroes

come from the meanest city streets of Los Angeles, New York, Newark, and Oakland. Abowitz concludes, “With their wit, moxie, and rapping skills, they, like Alger’s heroes, ‘come well equipped with the qualities it takes to recognize and foil the con men, robbers, and other assorted evil-doers they encounter.’”

Forty years after his death, Alger’s stories resurfaced in the comics, namely in *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage*, issued in the early 1940s. Horatio Alger’s *Struggling Upward* was converted into the drama format and issued as a play in 1946 by the Dramatic Publishing Company of Chicago. One year later, the great detective and western pulp writer, Frank Gruber, wrote *Murder ‘97*. This volume was one in the series of famous Simon Lash detective stories, and revolved around a quadruple murder that was unraveled through tracing the original owner of Horatio Alger’s *Ralph Raymond’s Heir*. So here we have Alger inspiring a biblio-mystery.

*Shine!: The Horatio Alger Musical* was issued in 2001, and received some very nice reviews. The CD jacket notes describe *Shine!* as “a touch of *Tintype*, a glimmer of *Annie*, a smidgeon of *Oliver!*, bits and pieces of a dozen other musicals that have delighted Americans, and a lot of its own.” *Shine!* follows rather closely the travails and triumphs of Richard Hunter, otherwise known as Ragged Dick. Then in 2003 Jan Boorstin published *The Newsboys’ Lodging-House, or, The Confessions of Williams James*.<sup>10</sup> Boorstin takes William James on an imaginative fictional journey to New York City in the 1870s to save a nine-year-old seduced by the darker side of street life. Along the way, Horatio Alger is actively brought into dialog as a real person.

And in 2009 we find Alger represented by 180 Kindle ebook titles, the increasingly popular electronic book reader issued by the internet retailer, Amazon. Many Alger ebooks come with foreign language thesauri such as Bulgarian, Czech, French, German, and Turkish.

There are two organizations named after Horatio Alger, the Horatio Alger Association, founded in 1947, and the Horatio Alger Society, established in 1961. The Horatio Alger Association makes annual awards to people who have distinguished themselves in many different arenas, awards scholarships to high school students, and periodically issues reports on the state of American society. The Horatio Alger

Society was formed as a group of book collectors who were inspired by Alger's messages of hard work, persistence, and success. The Alger Society holds an annual convention which features speakers and workshops on Alger-related themes, and sponsors an auction of Alger's books that is one of the highlights. The Society's repository is at Northern Illinois University. Northern Illinois University has made a commitment to acquire all possible books issued by Horatio Alger and to purchase the supporting scholarship. The collection has a permanent endowment exceeding \$50,000 and the collection has 4,000 Alger volumes. It is the finest Horatio Alger first edition collection in the world, including that in the Library of Congress.

There has been a resurgent interest in Horatio Alger throughout higher education, particularly in courses offered by departments of history, English, American studies, and so forth. I have located dozens of universities that offer courses, in whole or in part, about Horatio Alger and the success theme in the American social fabric. Among these institutions may be noted Southern Illinois University, Wayne State University, University of Wisconsin, University of Pennsylvania, and Syracuse University.

Most recently, the *New York Times*' coverage of the movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*," brought forth the headline, "Horatio Alger Relocates to Mumbai Slum."

And now some comments about Horatio Alger as a collectible author. Evidence of Alger's continuing interest to the collecting community is revealed by a recent search of the Advance Book Exchange or ABE online books site, which currently has 110 million used books for sale. When books by and about Horatio Alger and other contemporaries are entered, the results are most instructive. There are only five nineteenth-century juvenile authors who lead Alger in the number of hits: Mark Twain, with 68,000; Louisa May Alcott, with 17,700; James Fenimore Cooper, with 16,600; Frances Hodgson Burnett, with 14,500, and G. A. Henty with 12,400. Following Henty is Horatio Alger, with 11,200 books available. Collecting the first 30 or 40 Alger books in first edition format is still relatively easy, with the average volume, depending on condition, costing between \$100 and \$400. Moving beyond the initial 30 or 40 to the remaining 80 first editions becomes incrementally more difficult, and for titles in the top ten

one will pay between \$750 and \$7500 for the rarest treasures. Parenthetically, several of the rarest Alger titles in first edition format are *Timothy Crump's Ward*, written anonymously; *The Disagreeable Woman*, written pseudonymously by Alger under the name Julian Starr; *The New School Man*, also written anonymously; *Dan the Detective*; and *The Young Boatman*.

With well over one hundred reprint publishers to date, collecting various subsets of the Alger constellation is much easier and a lot of fun. Many Alger collectors focus on the more affordable reprint books and collect according to many variables, such as years of publication, cover design, period illustrator, dustjacketed or not, etc. eBay can be an important source for the buying and selling of books, including Horatio Alger. There are usually several hundred Alger items at any given time, and occasionally a real treasure comes down from the attic and bestirs the interest of advanced collectors. Some items have gone as high as \$2500. I will save the pricing of Alger's works and the level of bibliographic *in*expertise displayed by not a few book dealers and eBay listers to another time and place.

Horatio Alger was not only one of the major writers of the 19th century, but he became an important symbol of American culture. What attracted me most to collecting Alger is the fact that he is a lens through which one can plumb the American character. Alger, for example, used the newsboy as a recurring character in a number of his books, and that led me to read further about the 19th and early 20th-century newsboys and to collect newsboy memorabilia. I now have a collection of more than 100 newspaper boys, ranging in size from an inch tall to about 20 inches, in all manner of materials, from cast iron to bronze to porcelain. I have enjoyed doing research on the fine points of determining Alger first editions, and publishing the results. Collecting Alger has brought me into contact with many people that I normally do not encounter in my library life. In the Horatio Alger Society, for example, one's expertise in particular Alger works is the great leveler. Your education or status in life is clearly secondary. And I find that rather refreshing, given the sometimes stodgy nature of academe. I have also met my fair share of overly zealous collectors who have displayed less than gentlemanly or ladylike behavior at auctions and

in other collectors' homes. Yes, collectors will sometimes misrepresent a value to one another and, on the rarest of occasions, commit the most heinous crime, the theft of a book.

In view of my career as a librarian, I am particularly pleased that I entered the collecting community. Before becoming a collector, I really could not have imagined the amount of effort, dedication, learning, travel, and emotional attachment to various books that is common in the collecting community and generally not part of the framework of librarianship. And above all, it is the passion that must be applauded because it is the collector who brings together a unique group of books that is often difficult and sometimes impossible for a library to do. And getting some of these collections into libraries requires patience, finesse, and an understanding of what it took for that private collector to amass his or her collection.

On the passion of collecting, I can do no better than to quote a friend and former colleague from the University of South Carolina, the redoubtable Matthew Bruccoli, who over his lifetime amassed the greatest collection of F. Scott Fitzgerald material. He recently emoted and, if you've ever met Matt, you know that's a proper verb, "As long as they can wheel me into a bookstore I'll be buying books and improving the Fitzgerald collection. That is what I do. I will still be looking for two Fitzgerald items that I stupidly failed to buy when I could have acquired them. I recently received a tip that one of them may be sold by the estate of the collector who got it. I had nothing to do with his demise. If the item is put up for sale, we'll get it. The lesson I've learned over and over again — but we don't always live up to our own best lessons — is that you never regret buying a book. There is no such thing as overpaying for a book. The ones you regret are the ones you failed to buy for some foolish, cowardly, irresponsible reason."<sup>11</sup>

Every collector loves to share some experiences in stalking their favorite books, and I shall surrender briefly to that temptation. There was a privately published book, issued in 1922, which contained a large amount of material on Horatio Alger's Harvard class of 1852. Every one of the 88 students in the class has a photograph and a write-up, and the volume illuminates many other aspects of the collegiate experience at that time. The book is valued at about \$150-200, and that is what I happily

paid for it some ten years ago. When I received the book, I made a point of turning each and every one of the 400 or so pages, and when I got to the rear of the book where the various fraternities were listed and class songs, poems, and so forth were reprinted, I noticed that there was a folded sheet laid in, and I immediately started quietly saying to myself, “Oh no, it’s simply not possible that the original class ode, delivered by Alger, had been stored away all these years next to the page upon which it was reprinted.” As I took the sheet in my hand and carefully unfolded it, I saw that it was indeed the original broadside which was printed and distributed for graduation ceremonies for the class of 1852. It was in good condition, and I had it professionally conserved and put into a nice display folder. Quite recently, I purchased an Alger book published by A. K. Loring, the publisher who published the majority of his early books, without knowing whether or not it was a first edition or later. To my wonderful surprise, when the book arrived, the dealer had not noted that the book was signed by Mr. Alger.

Several years ago, a half dozen pen-and-ink drawings by J. Watson-Davis, a house illustrator for A. L. Burt for many years, came up for auction, and they were illustrations for Alger’s works. I’ve learned to ask, “Do you have any more of these?” In this case, the seller indicated, to my amazement, that he had another 30 original illustrations for Alger books done by J. Watson-Davis. I was able to secure the entire remaining lot for the Northern Illinois University Library. Even when a book is meticulously examined by a seller, if there is insufficient knowledge about first edition points and other matters of rarity, the book can be offered for sale at sometimes incredibly low prices. It does not happen very often, but you savor those moments when it does, and when you are the fortunate person to acquire it. Two such instances stand out in my memory. Several of the scarcest Alger first editions, the so-called leather-clad paperbacks, books issued in the late 1880s and early 1890s under an Alger pseudonym, Arthur Lee Putnam, came up at once and were priced at \$10-20 apiece. They routinely sell for \$1,000 or more dollars. Needless to say, the mouse on my computer activated the order at record-breaking speed. Recently, a book was put up on eBay, one of Alger’s anonymously published works, *The New School Ma’am*. The seller did not know that Alger was the author and failed to include other key bibliographic data. I got

lucky and the book closed at \$40 with only one bid, mine. The item last sold for \$2,700. May everyone have similar good fortunes in acquiring materials for their own collections.

For a personal assessment, I believe that Horatio Alger, Jr. and his works continue to resonate and to be debated because they confront the essential life experience. Alger wrote about young people in particular, sensing that they were the nation's great resource which must be shaped and nurtured. He wrote about the transformation of America from agricultural times to urban life, and he continually addressed the dilemmas of meritocracy, equality, manners, morals, advancement, economic reward, and above all, character. He always favored the underdog and extolled the virtues of charity. In fact, the two central themes in Alger's works are character and the common weal, two vital components of our personal identity and ultimately our national character. Both republican and democrat, left and right, will continue to invoke Alger to commemorate the past, or to criticize the present as failing to measure up to some mythical past. And what more enduring legacy to leave than to be the focal point of the nation's continuing dialog about its core values.

## Notes

1. Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 23.
2. Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America.* (NY: Viking, 2003), 2-3, 156.
3. Carol Nackenoff, *The Fictional Republic: Horatio Alger and American Political Discourse.* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 271.
4. Shaun O'Connell, *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York: A Literary History.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995): 84.
5. Edison T. Filmore, Letter to the editor, *New York Times* (August 20, 1898).
6. Herbert R. Mayes, *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero.* NY: Macy-Masius, 1928.
7. Ralph D. Gardner, *Horatio Alger, or The American Hero Era.* Mendota, IL: Wayside Press, 1964.
8. Jay Parini, *Promised Land: Thirteen Books that Changed America.* New York: Doubleday, 2008.
9. Kathleen K. Abowitz, "Horatio Alger and Hip-hop," *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 19 (1997): 409-25.
10. Jan Boorstin, *The Newsboys Lodging-House, or The Confessions of William James.* NY: Viking, 2003.
11. Matthew Bruccoli, Remarks, F. Scott Fitzgerald Centenary Celebration, University of South Carolina, 1997.  
<<http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/centenary/proceedings.html#bruccoli>>