

## THE SALAMANDER: FICTION AND FASHION

By BARRY NOVICK

I N 1914 the Bobbs-Merrill Company, seeing the potential of the ever-growing feminist controversy, bought from *McClure's* the book rights (along with the illustrations) to Owen Johnson's eighth novel, *The Salamander*. The series in *McClure's* ran from August, 1913, through June, 1914. Illustrations were by Everett Shinn. The first installment contained Johnson's sociological foreword to the novel in which he explains his reasons for, and some of the problems involved in, writing the novel. The salamander, a mythical creature which could live in fire unharmed, represents the new American woman who, with increased economic and social freedom, was able to indulge an insatiable curiosity for life without penalty. As if inspired by this concept of immunity, the publisher promoted the novel virtually without regard to cost. In a year the book sold some 76,000 copies; for six months it appeared on best-seller lists. It had the distinction of being parodied in *Vogue* and *Smart Set*; it created a new woman's fashion, was dramatized for the stage less than half a year after its publication, and ultimately was made into a motion picture.

### I

In the copious promotional file of Bobbs-Merrill, one sees the complexity of producing a book for the mass reading public. Illustrations got particular attention in repeated

attempts to catch the delicately slender and graceful figure of Dore (or "Dodo") Baxter, Johnson's "salamander," while preserving the aura of freedom pervading her person. Two different images finally emerged. The first, and most popular, was a figure of wholesome innocence and youth unlikely to escape unscathed from the flames her zest for life have kindled. With a subtle touch of the chameleon, her right foot is extended, revealing a good part of her leg; her dress is a relatively narrow skirt with a Russian peasant blouse. Her head is tilted slightly, with the face almost undelineated except for two large eyes, an inkling of the nose, slightly rouged cheeks, and small, red lips. The second figure has a more sinister look; her face is more detailed. She is less the coquette and more the demirep—for one who had not read the novel a more appropriate figure to point up the advertising copy.

Successful advertising can be no better illustrated than by the firm's handling of prepublication promotion (before blurbs from reviews could be used). Exploiting the public nose for controversy—controversy the novel was sure to arouse—the early promotion aimed to create antagonism in groups on both sides of the "woman question." Then, a month in advance of publication, copies were sent to leading feminists and antifeminists with requests to voice opinions. To reach the public at large, press releases were prepared bearing a gamut of titles, including "Johnson. Feminist or Anti-Feminist," "How Owen Johnson Happened to Write the Salamander," "Owen Johnson: What Sort of Fellow is He, Anyhow?" and a list of stories for future use, with such titles as "The Haunts of the Salamander," "Salamander Boarding Houses," and "Is the Salamander a Worse Grafter than Her Conventional Sister on Fifth Avenue?"

Complementing the stories was Johnson's foreword to the novel, separately printed in pamphlet form by the publisher for counter display and bearing the subtitle "A Perplexing Type Created by the Great Feminist Upheaval."

Office suggestions for these advertisements, generally written in memo form, were voluminous. In the material one finds not only the common editorial jargon of "Kill" and "O.K." to sort out ideas, but some pieces were given letter grades to further condense the volume of paper crossing the editor's desk. The Company was bent on provocation, and some of the final choices, of which it is possible to give only a sampling, were:

A girl of the present day in revolt, adventurous, eager and unafraid, without standards or home ties; with a passion to explore but not experience and a curiosity fed by the zest of life.

Where lights are brightest you will find her. Where life is freest she will join the group. Where danger lurks, she always enters, defying you to judge her other than she is.

What other girls shun, she courts . . .

She abhors convention, she defies custom . . .

And what came to be a favorite slogan: "The girl who wants to know!"

Considering that similar advertising is still in use half a century later, one can imagine the effect it had on an age which, though slowly elevating women within the social structure, had not yet given them the vote, looked askance at those who went riding in cars unchaperoned, and regarded the unmarried woman as an anomaly.

Bobbs-Merrill put advertisements on every conceivable size and type of paper, the variety of gimmicks running into dozens. Colored posters, almost billboard size, appeared beside post cards. Two-page pamphlets saluted



the reader ("This is to introduce the Salamander") and included an order form with a blank for specifying the number of copies desired. Large stamps, not unlike present-day Christmas and Easter seals, colored in bright blue and green with a salmon-colored figure of the Salamander, were placed on outgoing letters. Company envelopes carried below the return address a similar salmon-tinted illustration. To book-sellers they sent out Salamander kits of leaflets with "A Bit of Biography" of the author, bookmarks and broadsides which reproduced copy from the forthcoming dust jacket, and a two-foot square white handkerchief with the intense figure of the Salamander extending the length of the diagonal. Finally, Everett Shinn, the "Ash-Can" painter, drew a portrait of Johnson—a dominating figure in his own right—for the decoration of innumerable counter and window displays.

Within a short time the Company could boast in the newspapers that "More copies of *The Salamander* have been printed in advance of publication than any book published by us in the last five years." Whatever happens, it said, "*The Publication will not be deferred.*" To potential readers it also sent out a pamphlet announcing the unprecedented action "of the French critics in reviewing *The Salamander* before it appeared in French translation." The first (and only) printing ran to 100,000—25,000 more than were actually to sell.

## II

The publishers could not, of course, rely on sensationalism or "delicate" subject matter to create a best-seller: other novels of the period dealt with the more volatile themes of adultery and free love. Nor was it the first novel to treat the women's rights movement. But Bobbs-Merrill

could see in the novel a logical development from Johnson's earlier literary endeavors, writings which moved Sinclair Lewis (a personal friend of Johnson) to write: "The future is his. We prophesy that he can do anything he wants to" (promotion brochure published by Frederick A. Stokes & Co., publishers of Johnson's *Stover at Yale*, p. 7).

Lewis' judgment apparently was not based on Johnson's earliest novels, *In the Name of Liberty* (1905) and *Max Fergus* (1906), stories highly derivative from Balzac and failures in the selling market. More likely he referred to the boy stories which Johnson had begun to write in 1901 while still a student at Yale. Collected into novels, *Arrows of the Almighty* (1901), *The Prodigious Hickey* (1908), *The Varmint* (1910), and *The Tennessee Shad* (1911), these were products of experiences at the Lawrenceville School and of a gifted imagination. Together they yielded tales of adolescents which, despite their relative obscurity now, for two decades were the *vade mecum* of hilarity.

The stories trace the antics of the Tennessee Shad, the Triumphant Egghead, Doc MacNooder, the Uncooked Beefsteak, Brian de Boru Finnegan, and Dink Stover—a gallery of characters whose names became synonymous with spontaneous ingenuity, cunning, and guile. But the virtues of the stories lie in Johnson's refusal to portray purely simple little creatures motivated by the "bad boy" love of practical jokes and youthful rebellion against authority. He attempts to show the realistic side of adolescents as they develop, in the process shedding the "embryonic maliciousness" of youth. Unlike other juvenile writers, Johnson was said to have drawn "perfect little 'varmint' possessed by every obnoxious quality a boy can have, influenced by hero-worship, emulation, and the senses of



responsibility, and emerging, finally, into admirable specimens of American manhood" (Diane Gatlin, "Owen Johnson: Literary Rebel," *Book News Monthly*, July, 1914, p. 519; the manuscript is in the Bobbs-Merrill files).

Almost as if his own development was to be achieved by outgrowing the adolescent, in *Stover at Yale* (1911) Johnson followed the development of Dink Stover through college. The pseudoaristocratic snobbery of secret fraternities within a democratic system provided the main problem of this novel. But whereas the emphasis on values had been implicit, universalized, subdued, and minimized by the earlier humor, here it becomes localized and individual, and as the humor falls into the background it becomes the primary force accounting for Stover's growth. Individual responsibility, whether to one's self, one's friends, or society at large, and the compromises involved provided a question that deepened Johnson's thought and his ability to handle ideas with a degree of realistic significance.

Johnson's objective and controversial treatment of social problems continued into his next two novels, *Murder in Any Degree* and *The Sixty-First Second* (both 1913). Lewis' enthusiasm for the author persisted and led him to prophesy that "His books are in effect the beginnings of an American '*Comedie Humaine*'" (Sinclair Lewis, "The Real Owen Johnson," *Book News Monthly*, July, 1914, p. 519; also in the *Boston Post*, June 13, 1914).

Perhaps encouraged by this hint of the literary rebel, Johnson sought to enhance the notion with his next novel. How *The Salamander* originated is difficult to say. If we rely on press releases it would seem that Johnson had been deeply concerned with feminism and had pondered a novel about it for some time. A more likely account is given in

*The Bookman*. There we are told that in the early 1900's in a Washington Square studio a party was thrown. Among the guests was an uninvited young woman who announced she had just arrived in New York, had heard of the party, had never attended one, and wanted to find out what it was like. The first to come, she was the last to leave (A. B. Maurice, "A History of Their Books: Owen Johnson," *Bookman*, LXX, December, 1929, p. 414).

The bold mysteriousness with which a woman appears and disappears is only one of the perplexing aspects of the Salamander. In Johnson's foreword to the novel we are told that she is a new type of American woman, come "roving from somewhere out of the immense reaches of the nation, revolting against the commonplace of an inherited narrowness, passionately adventurous, eager and unafraid, neither sure of what she seeks nor conscious of what forces impel her." In a sense she is a development from the old idea of the parasitic woman who has moved to a life of freedom more from necessity than choice. She accepts presents from men which she converts into money to pay the rent. She makes men take her to the finest restaurants and night clubs, arouses their passions, plays with their affections, then walks out, leaving them frustrated, confused, and infatuated. She treats it all as nothing more than a game, a game with its own rules and restrictions, its own moral code, and its own jargon. After she has immersed herself in such a life for from three to six years, tired of flouting convention, she either marries or settles down to pursue a career. To the more astute critics she represented no more than a type come down through the ages: the coquette, the paramour, the tease—Becky Sharp with a philosophy of moral purity.



Of Dore Baxter, Grant C. Knight said, "Few characters in American fiction of the time are more complex than is this Salamander." We watch her flit through the city, involving herself in a variety of relationships—the more dangerous ones referred to as "precipices"—each time extricating herself with guile, force, and daring—the standard attributes of the *femme fatale*. In each affair she operates at a different level of consciousness, now displaying the indifference of a man, now the instinctive weakness of a woman overcome by masculine superiority. She is romantic and seeks love but is repulsed by the thought of marital confinement. She is compassionate and understanding, yet impervious to pleas or reason; and while she will allow her suitors a certain amount of freedom, she gives only one warning, admonishing her well-wishers that she is "different." Johnson is generally convincing in his portrayal, carrying the reader along by his "tantalizing liking and dislike for several figures in the plot, especially for Dodo herself, as changeable as the color of silk turning in the sunlight, as deserving of censure as she is of affection" (*The New Freedom in American Literature*, Lexington, Kentucky, 1961, pp. 17-18). Yet, at the time, the majority of critics, intent on proclaiming Johnson a rebel, or an astute judge of the social scene, or as the forthcoming leading novelist in America, overlooked the literary qualities of the book.

### III

If the novel was a product of the women's rights movement, it also had a certain effect on it. The spirit of rebellion in *The Salamander*, bolstered by a constant flow of propaganda from the publisher, was infectious. It initi-



ated such a wave of imitation and a craze for novelty that, in retrospect, one can see some of the origins of the girl who "was presently to be a farmerette or a worker in the railroad yard, the girl who was later to be a flapper, a gold-digger, a crazy mixed-up kid" (Knight, p. 18).

First and foremost, the novel precipitated a new fashion, very different from the Victorian dress which had long shrouded the female figure behind massive skirts. In the early pages of the novel Johnson described Dore's dress:

. . . gold stockings and low russet shoes with buckles of green enamel. She was in a short skirt and Russian blouse . . . the neck was bare; the low broad, rolling silk collar . . . was softened by a full trailing bow of black silk at the throat . . . the costume exhaled a perfume of freshness and artless charm, from the daintiness with which the throat was revealed from the slight youthful bust delicately defined under the informality of the blouse, to the long clinging of the coat, which followed half-way to the knee, loins of young and slender grace which cannot be counterfeited (pp. 2, 8).

Throughout, her simple but radical apparel and the freedom of social and physical movement it gives her are repeatedly alluded to. Johnson may have anticipated a fashion success. A summary of publicity for *The Salamander* tells that Johnson was a personal friend of many of the top clothing designers in the city and had initiated a meeting between the designer from *Vogue* and the chief designer from Wanamaker's which ultimately resulted in a style "with the idea of putting the dresses within reach of every girl who loves daintiness and comfort, yet does not forget the weapon of her own allure" (*The Morning Telegraph*, May 21, 1914). The same task force aimed to get leading women in society and the theatre to model the dresses.

Later, huge advertisements from Wanamaker's proclaimed that "The Salamander is—a girl, a book, a play, a fashion, a craze." It featured a picture of Johnson and below a certification written in his own hand that "your designs have caught the peculiarly free spirit of the American girl. . . . It gives me great pleasure to grant you sole privilege of applying the names 'Salamander' and 'Dodo' to your new fashion." The Russian blouses, the advertisements said, were to "give the free alert air and the slender graceful silhouette which are always associated with the American woman"; and, utilizing a popular phrase from the book, all styles would show "A bit of the throat, a bit of the ankle, and a slash of red" (*The Evening Telegram*, May 19, 1914). Soon the newspapers pictured live models who, to give reality to the notion that "The spirit of 'revolt' is shown strikingly in all these gowns," wore a grim, defiant—and utterly false—countenance. In their Russian blouses, they suggest to the modern observer four buxom Cossacks.

Salamander styling was attached to every conceivable article: petticoats, corsets, stockings, slippers, gloves, neckwear, handbags, handkerchiefs, sunshades, umbrellas, bracelets, watches, and stationery. And the craze was not confined to America. As one reporter noted: "The French designers saw the artistic merit in the long declining lines . . . and their La Salamandre gowns began to appear. . . . Then the word began to be utilized right and left. It was easy to say, nice to roll around the tongue, and the Salamander label began to grow in size while it covered a multitude of merchandise from breakfast foods to night caps." Indeed, it was predicted by many that the word would become a part of the English language, forever associated with the girl

who takes without giving. Certainly the word had nothing pejorative about it. As a dance only the tango could rival it. When it was announced by producers that they were casting for the lead role of a Salamander play, their office swelled with "young women who quite frankly and openly described themselves as Salamanders in real life and were ready, if necessary, to detail experiences with men in New York which would prove their rights to the title" (*Baltimore American*, October 11, 1914).

Encouraged by the first success of the book, Johnson dramatized it for the stage. It opened on October 23, 1914, under the same title; but fourteen performances later it closed. Perhaps it was Johnson's failure as a playwright; in any case, in the transfer of media, the story lost its luster. The common complaint of critics about the play was that of static sameness in characters and plot. Whether or not it was a coincidence, at about this time the novel began to decline as a best-seller.

If the novel was a success in its quick, wide-spectrum popularity, it was as much a failure in its early death. Johnson's literary career experienced a like fate. But it was not until the novel had its run that Johnson bought up the plate rights to negotiate movie rights. With the release of the film both he and the novel went into oblivion. (The film was produced by a minor company under the title *The Enemy Sex*. There is no evidence that it enjoyed great success.)

Fortunately for the publishers, the expense they devoted to promoting the book was not in vain. It not only sold well for more than a year but it also was translated into half a dozen languages. Johnson himself earned well over \$6,000 in royalties, to say nothing of side income. In



fact, until January of the year following publication there was mutual satisfaction between publisher and author. Then the situation changed. One of the few pieces of correspondence surviving is a letter from Mr. Bobbs to Johnson dated January 9, 1914: "As regards the Salamander, the sale of the book was satisfactory up to the time of the war. I was delighted with the book, proud of the campaign our organization put on it, and am confident that it would have reached our expectations if it had not been for the war." Johnson's reply, a week later, showed disillusionment:

I have had a growing feeling that your house has not looked upon your arrangement with me with the same enthusiasm as at the beginning, perhaps feeling that my work did not fit into your scheme of publishing. This is not in criticism, but recognising the situation as it has developed, I myself have begun to wonder if the quality of work I produce is susceptible to your popular handling.

In spite of "the quality of work" he produced and the high acclaim of Sinclair Lewis, Johnson had reached the apex of his literary career with his one best-seller. Though he continued to write he failed to achieve either literary importance or further popular success.

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