olic pamphlet, for instance, used a man's murder of his family to discuss the inevitable punishment of sin, while Protestant authors "could use similar content to stress the power of God's word to redeem even the worst sinners through faith." But sensationalism also served important secular purposes. In an era when rudimentary, state-sponsored criminal justice systems were starting to emerge, sensationalist writings stirred crucial "right-thinking people" to support them.

Sensationalism has shifted form and focus over the centuries. In 17th-century England, ballads "fixed their gaze squarely on the criminal," and increasing attention was paid to the motive behind the deed. Murderers were seen as having transgressed more against the state (by violating laws) than against God (by sinning), a change of perspective that moved the implied causes of criminal violence in a decidedly more secular direction.

Today's blood-soaked sensationalist crime reports may have strayed far from their religiously oriented, morally straitening roots, but they still "exert substantial political and cultural power." Studies suggest that they promote an exaggerated sense of the incidence of crime and of an individual's perception that he or she is likely to be a victim of crime. As Wiltenburg points out, such fears can affect a broad range of choices and attitudes about our society, from where we choose to live to "what punitive governmental actions to support."

Press & Media

Queen of Days

"Imperial Soap Opera" by Les White, in *The Common Review* (Spring 2005), 35 E. Wacker Dr., Ste. 2300, Chicago, Ill. 60601–2298.

Ever feel that if you've seen one soap opera, you've seen them all? That's because many were the brainchild of one woman, Irna Phillips, mother of *Another World*, *As the World Turns*, *Days of Our Lives*, and the world's longest-running show today, *The Guiding Light*. The shows live on, but Phillips died in obscurity in 1973 after a career as turbulent as any of her creations. Her gender was one handicap; her personality and her independence by turns helped and hobbled her.

Born in Chicago in 1901 into a large, poor, Jewish family, Phillips took the rare step—for a woman—of attending college, where a theater teacher said she had more talent than looks. Then came a series of dramatic plot twists. After graduation, an affair with a married doctor left her pregnant and syphilitic, and a botched abortion made her sterile, says White, a Chicago writer and clinical psychologist.

She volunteered at *Chicago Tribune*–owned radio station WGN, and station manager Henry Selinger hired her to write and act in his "playlet" *Painted Dreams*, a generation-gap–themed drama aimed at housewives. Selinger, the creator of the hot evening show *Amos 'n' Andy*, hoped to duplicate his success with daytime audiences, but left for another job shortly after *Painted Dreams* premiered in 1930.

Phillips wrote six 10-minute *Painted Dreams* episodes a week. In the process, she developed the three (seemingly autobiographical) plot lines she would recycle throughout her career: (1) the love triangle, in which a career-minded heroine involved with a married man loses out; (2) single motherhood, in which a heroine risks community scorn to raise a child out of wedlock; and (3) obscure identity, in which a hero or heroine searches for family roots. Phillips never married, but reputedly had a thing for doctors and lawyers, which may explain why they continue to populate daytime screens.

Just when *Painted Dreams* finally began to succeed, WGN and Phillips crossed swords, and she was fired. Meanwhile, *Chicago Tribune* ad man Frank Hummert took notice of *Painted Dreams*' success and began churning out knockoffs, and he, rather than Phillips, became known as the creator of the soap opera.

Phillips finally began making money with *Today's Children*, a *Painted Dreams*-esque serial that first aired on Chicago's NBC af-

filiate. Then, in 1937, came *The Guiding Light*, "a smash right from the gate." Soon Phillips was earning $250,000 a year. Her career was itself the stuff of melodrama, filled with double-dealing, lawsuits, and rumors of financing from a mysterious mobster lover. In 1941, her cocreator on *The Guiding Light* brought a long and bitter suit against her, which revealed Phillips's harsh words about her sponsors and competitors, as well as a willingness to lie on the stand. She lost $250,000.

In 1949, she intrepidly leaped into television, premiering the first major network soap, *These Are My Children*. She pioneered the TV close-up, and in 1964 had hits on all three television networks. She made many enemies in the industry and unwisely insisted on negotiating her own contracts. In her seventies, she refused to join the Writers Guild union, forcing the producers of *As the World Turns*—considered the most successful soap of all time—to fire her. Six months later, she was dead.

Whether Selinger, Hummert, or Phillips deserves the credit for creation of the daytime soap opera, there's no denying the leading role Phillips played in its wild success. Like one of her own characters, she overcame long odds. The soaps themselves now face the same odds, as cable television and reality shows threaten to kill the entire genre. Phillips's name no longer appears in the credits of the shows she created, but her marriage of commerce and drama represents a lasting union.

Religion & Philosophy

They Don't Know from Adam

"Bible Illiteracy in America" by David Gelernter, in *The Weekly Standard* (May 23, 2005), 1150 17th St., N.W., Ste. 505, Washington, D.C. 20036.

"Unless we read the Bible, American history is a closed book," writes Gelernter, a Yale University professor of computer science who is currently a senior fellow in Jewish Thought at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. Yet a recent Gallup survey sponsored by the nonprofit Bible Literacy Project indicates that American high school students are ignorant of significant events in the Bible such as the Sermon on the Mount, and of concepts such as Covenant and the Chosen People. Eight percent of them thought Moses was one of the Twelve Apostles, and more than a quarter could not identify David as a king of the Jews.

One sign that teenagers could use a Bible refresher: Eight percent think Moses was one of the 12 Apostles.

The rhetoric of the Bible runs as an unbroken thread through American history. "Wee are entered into Covenant with him for this worke," said John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. "Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us." Three and a half centuries later, a sermon of Winthrop's would be drawn upon, famously, in President Ronald Reagan's evocation of a "shining city on a hill." Historian William Wolt, contemplating Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address—"With malice toward none; with charity for all: with firmness in the right, as God gives us to