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PULP MAGAZINE

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Pulp magazines (often referred to as "**the pulps**") are inexpensive fiction magazines from 1896 through the 1950s. The term *pulp* derives from the cheap wood pulp paper magazines were printed; in contrast, magazines printed on higher quality paper were "slicks". The typical pulp magazine had 128 pages; it was 7 inches (18 cm) wide by 10.5 inches (1.3 cm) thick, with ragged, untrimmed edges.

In their first decades, pulps were most often priced at ten cents per magazine, with 25 cents apiece. Pulps were the successors to the penny dreadfuls, dime novels, and magazines of the 19th century. Although many respected writers wrote for pulps, they were known for their lurid and exploitative stories and sensational cover art. Modern superheroes are sometimes considered descendants of "hero pulps"; pulp magazines often featured stories of heroic characters, such as The Shadow, Doc Savage, and The Phantom.

ORIGINS

The first "pulp" was Frank Munsey's revamped *Argosy Magazine* of 1896, with about 135,000 words (192 pages) per issue, on pulp paper with untrimmed edges, and no illustrations, even on the cover. The steam-powered printing press had been in widespread use for some time, enabling the boom in dime novels; prior to Munsey, however, no one had combined cheap printing, cheap paper and cheap authors in a package that provided affordable entertainment to young working-class people. In six years *Argosy* went from a few thousand copies per month to over half a million.^[1]

Street & Smith, a dime novel and boys' weekly publisher, was next on the market. Seeing *Argosy's* success, they launched *The Popular Magazine* in 1903, which they billed as the "biggest magazine in the world" by virtue of its being two pages (the interior sides of the front and back cover) longer than *Argosy*. Due to differences in page layout however, the magazine had substantially less text than *Argosy*. *The Popular Magazine* did introduce color covers to pulp publishing, and the magazine began to take off when the publisher secured rights to serialize *Ayesha*, by H. Rider Haggard, a sequel to his popular novel *She*. Haggard influenced several key pulp writers, including Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, and Abraham Merritt.^[2] In 1907, the cover price rose to 15 cents and 30 pages were added, with establishing a stable of authors for each magazine, this change proved successful. *The Popular Magazine* began to approach that of *Argosy*. Street and Smith's next innovation was the introduction of genre pulps, with each magazine focusing on a particular genre, such as detective

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At their peak of popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, the most successful pulps could sell 100,000 copies per issue. The most successful pulp magazines were *Argosy*, *Adventure*, *Blue Bird*, and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, collectively described by some pulp historians as "The Big Four".^[4] Among the best-selling pulp magazines of the period were *Amazing Stories*, *Black Mask*, *Dime Detective*, *Flying Aces*, *Horror Stories*, *Love Stories*, *Oriental Stories*, *Planet Stories*, *Spicy Detective*, *Startling Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Tales and Western Story Magazine*.^[5]

Although pulp magazines were primarily an American phenomenon, there were also pulp magazines published between the Edwardian era and World War II. Notable UK pulp magazines included *Magazine*, *The Novel Magazine*, *Cassell's Magazine*, *The Story-Teller*, *The Sovereign Magazine*, *Hutchinson's Mystery-Story*.^[6] The German fantasy magazine *Der Orchideengarten* had a pulp magazine feel, in that it was printed on rough pulp paper and heavily illustrated.^[7]

WORLD WAR II AND MARKET DECLINE

The Second World War paper shortages had a serious impact on pulp production, increasing costs and the decline of the pulps. Beginning with *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1941, pulp magazines began to switch to digest size; smaller, thicker magazines. In 1949, Street & Smith closed several pulp magazines in order to move upmarket and produce slicks.^[8]

The pulp format declined from rising expenses, but even more due to the heavy competition from hardcover books, television, and the paperback novel. In a more affluent post-war America, the pulp magazine or slick magazine was far less significant. In the 1950s, men's adventure magazines like *Argosy* and *Planet Stories* were still published, but their circulation was declining.

The 1957 liquidation of the American News Company, then the primary distributor of pulp magazines, has sometimes been taken as marking the end of the "pulp era"; by that date, many of the pulp magazines of the previous generation, including *Black Mask*, *The Shadow*, *Doc Savage*, and *Weird Tales*, were no longer published. The few remaining pulp magazines are science fiction or mystery magazines now published in "digest size", such as *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. There are still some lengthy serials, like the German science fiction weekly *Perry Rhodan* (over 2,600 issues).

Over the course of their evolution, there were a huge number of pulp magazine titles. Popular Publications claimed that his company alone had published over 300, and was publishing 42 titles per month.^[9] Many titles of course survived only briefly. While some were monthly, many were bimonthly and some were quarterly.

The collapse of the pulp industry changed the landscape of publishing because pulp was the largest sales outlet for short stories. Combined with the decrease in slick magazine circulation, pulp magazines attempting to support themselves by creating fiction switched to novels and book-length shorter pieces.

GENRES

Pulp magazines often contained a wide variety of genre fiction, including, but not

adventure

detective/mystery

fantasy/sword and sorcery

gangster

horror/occult (including "weird menace")

railroad

romance

science fiction

Série Noire (French crime mystery)

"spicy/saucy" (soft porn)

sports

war

westerns (also see Dime Western); the Colorado artist Arthur Roy Mitchell is particularly known for his illustrations in such western magazines.

The **American Old West** was a mainstay genre of early turn of the 20th century novel and pulp magazines, and lasted longest of all the traditional pulps. In many ways, the later "hard-boiled" pulp ("hard-boiled" was the replacement of pulps).

Many classic science fiction and crime novels were originally serialized in pulp magazines, such as *Amazing Stories*, and *Black Mask*.

NOTABLE ORIGINAL CHARACTERS

While the majority of pulp magazines were anthology titles featuring many different settings, some of the most enduringly popular magazines were those that featured a recurring character. These were often referred to as "hero pulps" because the recurring character was a larger-than-life hero in the mold of Doc Savage or The Shadow.^[10]

Popular pulp characters included:

The Avenger

Biggles

The Black Bat

Bran Mak Morn

Buck Rogers

Captain Future

Conan the Barbarian

The Continental Op

Dan Turner, Hollywood Detective

Doc Savage

Jim Anthony

John Carter of Mars

Jules de Grandin

Ka-Zar

Khilit the Cossack

Kull

Moon Man

Nick Carter

Operator No. 5

The Phantom Detective

Doctor Death
Dr. Yen Sin
Domino Lady
The Eel
Fu Manchu
G-8
Green Lama
Hopalong Cassidy

Lord Lister (aka Raffles)
Secret Agent X
Sexton Blake
The Shadow
The Spider
Solomon Kane
Tarzan
Zorro

ILLUSTRATORS

Pulp covers were printed in color on higher-quality (slick) paper. They were famous for the work of Rudolph Belarski.^[13] Covers were important enough to sales that sometimes they would be shown to authors and asked to write a story to match.

Later pulps began to feature interior illustrations, depicting elements of the stories. These were printed in black ink on the same cream-colored paper used for the text, and had to be simple to avoid blotting on the coarse texture of the cheap pulp. Thus, fine lines and heavy shading were an option. Shading was by crosshatching or pointillism, and even that had to be limited. The art was black lines on the paper's background, but Finlay and a few others did use primarily white lines against large dark areas.

AUTHORS AND EDITORS

Another way pulps kept costs down was by paying authors less than other markets. Many authors started out in the pulps before they were successful enough to sell to better-paying magazines. Similarly, well-known authors whose careers were slumping or who wanted a few extra dollars added their income with sales to pulps. Additionally, some of the earlier pulps solicited stories from authors who were quite happy to see their words in print and could thus be paid token amounts.

There were also career pulp writers, capable of turning out huge amounts of prose. Some, like Edgar Rice Burroughs, used the aid of dictation to stenographers, machines or typists. Before he became famous, Burroughs was turning out at least 8,000 words per day seven days a week for the pulps, keeping himself fully employed. Pulps would often have their authors use multiple pen names so that multiple stories by the same person in one issue, or use a given author's stories in three or four issues while still appearing to have varied content. One advantage pulps provided to authors was payment *upon acceptance* for material instead of on publication; since a story might be accepted before publication, to a working writer this was a crucial difference in cash flow.

Some pulp editors became known for cultivating good fiction and interesting features. Preeminent pulp magazine editors included Arthur Sullivan Hoffman (*Adventure*),^[15]

Weekly), Harry E. Maule (*Short Stories*),^[16] Donald Kennicott (*Blue Book*), Joseph T. Shaw Wright (*Weird Tales, Oriental Stories*), John W. Campbell (*Astounding Science Fiction, Unknown Story Magazine, Detective Story Magazine*).^[17]

AUTHORS FEATURED

Well-known authors who wrote for pulps include:

Poul Anderson

Isaac Asimov

Charles Beadle

H. Bedford-Jones

Robert Leslie Bellem

Alfred Bester

Robert Bloch

B. M. Bower

Leigh Brackett

Ray Bradbury

Max Brand

Fredric Brown

Edgar Rice Burroughs

William S. Burroughs

Ellis Parker Butler

Hugh B. Cave

Paul Chadwick

Raymond Chandler

Agatha Christie

Arthur C. Clarke

Joseph Conrad

Stephen Crane

Ray Cummings

Jason Dark

Lester Dent

August Derleth

Philip K. Dick

Arthur Conan Doyle

J. Allan Dunn

Lord Dunsany

C. M. Eddy, Jr.

Arthur Guy Empey

George Allan England

C. S. Forester

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Rudyard Kipling

Henry Kuttner

Harold Lamb

Louis L'Amour

Margery Lawrence

Fritz Leiber

Murray Leinster

Elmore John Leonard

Jack London

H. P. Lovecraft

Giles A. Lutz

John D. MacDonald

Elmer Brown Mason

F. Van Wyck Mason

Horace McCoy

Johnston McCulley

William Colt MacDonald

Merriam Modell

C.L. Moore

Walt Morey

Talbot Mundy

Philip Francis Nowlan

Fulton Oursler

Hugh Pendexter

Emil Petaja

E. Hoffmann Price

Seabury Quinn

John H. Reese

Tod Robbins

Sax Rohmer

Theodore Roscoe

Rafael Sabatini

Charles Alden Seltzer

Stephen Shadegg

Richard S. Shaver

Arthur O. Friel
Erle Stanley Gardner
Walter B. Gibson
David Goodis
L. Patrick Greene
Zane Grey
Frank Gruber
H. Rider Haggard
Edmond Hamilton
Dashiell Hammett
Margie Harris
Robert A. Heinlein
O. Henry
Frank Herbert
Robert E. Howard
L. Ron Hubbard
Carl Jacobi
Ardyth Kennelly
Donald Keyhoe

Robert Silverberg
Bertrand William Sinclair
Upton Sinclair
Arthur D. Howden Smith
Clark Ashton Smith
E. E. Smith
T.S. Stripling
Jim Thompson
Thomas Thursday
W.C. Tuttle
Mark Twain
Jack Vance
E. C. Vivian
H. G. Wells
Henry S. Whitehead
Raoul Whitfield
Tennessee Williams
Cornell Woolrich
Gordon Young

Sinclair Lewis, first American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, worked as an
filler paragraphs (brief facts or amusing anecdotes designed to fill small gaps in p
copy and a few stories.^[18]

PUBLISHERS

A. A. Wyn's Magazine Publishers

Clayton Publications

Culture Publications, originators of the *Spicy* line of titles

Dell Publishing

Doubleday, Page and Company, which published *Short Stories*, *West* and *The Frontier*

Fiction House

Frank A. Munsey Co.

Harold Hersey

Hugo Gernsback

Martin Goodman

Hutchinson, main publisher of UK pulps^[6]

Popular Publications

The Ridgway Company publishers of *Adventure*, *Everybody's Magazine* and *Romance*

Street & Smith

Better/Standard/Thrilling (The Thrilling Group)

LEGACY

The term *pulp fiction* can also refer to mass market paperbacks since the 1950s. The Library News noted:

Many of the paperback houses that contributed to the decline of the genre—Ace, Dell, Avon, among others—were owned or controlled by pulp magazine publishers. They had the presses, the expertise, and the newsstand distribution network that made the success of the mass-market paperback possible. These pulp-oriented paperback houses mined the pulp magazines for material to keep pulp literature, if not pulp magazines, alive. *The Return of the Continental Op* reprints material first published in *Dime Detective*; and *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* contains stories first published in *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Amazing Stories*.^[19]

In 1994, Quentin Tarantino directed a film titled *Pulp Fiction*. The working title of the film was *Ultimate Drive*, a homage to the pulp magazine of that name, and it embodied the seedy, violent, and sexually explicit content often found in pulp magazines.

After the year 2000, several small independent publishers released magazines with either short stories or novel-length presentations, in the tradition of the pulp magazine of the early 20th century. These included *Blood 'N Thunder*, *High Adventure* and a short-lived magazine *Argosy*. These specialist publications, printed in limited press runs, were pointedly printed on high-acid wood pulp paper of the old publications and were not mass market publications with a wide audience. In 2004, Lost Continent Library published *Secret of the Amazon Queen* as a contribution to a "New Pulp Era", featuring the hallmarks of pulp fiction for contemporary readers: violence, horror and sex. E.A. Guest was likened to a blend of pulp era icon Talbot Merton and real-life explorer David Hatcher Childress.

Moonstone Books, a comic book and prose anthology publisher, began publishing *Phantom* featuring characters such as *The Phantom*, *Zorro*, *The Spider*, *The Avenger*, *Domino Lady* and *Phantom*.

In 2002, the tenth issue of

The Scottish publisher DC Thomson publishes "My Weekly Compact Novel" every week.^[21] It is literature that does not fall into the hard-edged genre most associated with pulp fiction.

SEE ALSO

Hard Case Crime

Science fiction magazine

Serial (film)

Penny dreadful

Dime novel

Gay pulp fiction

Lesbian pulp fiction

George Kelley Paperback and Pulp Fiction Collection

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EXTERNAL LINKS

The Pulp Magazines Project is an open-access digital archive dedicated to the study and preservation of one of the 20th century's most popular & artistic forms: the all-fiction pulpwood magazine.

[ThePulp.Net](#)

[Pulp Illustration Art](#)

[CNN: "Girls, Guns and Money," November 2005](#)

[Mt. St. Vincent University Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection](#)

["Pulp Winds", December 2009](#)

[In Praise of Pulp Fiction — slideshow by Life magazine](#)

[Pulp Fiction Collection at the Library of Congress](#)

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Uncanny Tales (Canadian) |

Unknown |

Vargo Statten Science Fiction Magazine |

Weird Tales |

The Witch's Tales |

Wonder Stories

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WEIRD TALES

ENCYCLOPEDIA ARTICLE

Robert E. Howard, Chicago, World War II, Conan the Barbarian, Horror fiction

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ENCYCLOPEDIA ARTICLE

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