Pulp magazines (often referred to as "the pulps") are inexpensive fiction magazines that were published from 1896 through the 1950s. The term pulp derives from the cheap wood pulp paper on which the magazines were printed; in contrast, magazines printed on higher quality paper were called "glossies" or "slicks". The typical pulp magazine had 128 pages; it was 7 inches (18 cm) wide by 10 inches (25 cm) high, and 0.5 inches (1.3 cm) thick, with ragged, untrimmed edges.

In their first decades, pulps were most often priced at ten cents per magazine, while competing slicks cost 25 cents apiece. Pulps were the successors to the penny dreadfuls, dime novels, and short fiction magazines of the 19th century. Although many respected writers wrote for pulps, the magazines were best known for their lurid and exploitative stories and sensational cover art. Modern superhero comic books are sometimes considered descendants of "hero pulps"; pulp magazines often featured illustrated novel-length stories of heroic characters, such as The Shadow, Doc Savage, and The Phantom Detective.

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]
Many classic science fiction and crime novels were originally published in pulps. In many ways, the later popular titles were monthly, many were bimonthly and some were quarterly. Over the course of their evolution, there were a huge number of pulp magazine titles; Harry Steeger of Popular Publications claimed that his company alone had published over 300, and at their peak they were publishing 42 titles per month. Many titles of course survived only briefly. While the most popular titles were monthly, many were bimonthly and some were quarterly.

Although pulp magazines were primarily an American phenomenon, there were also a number of British pulp magazines published between the Edwardian era and World War II. Notable UK pulps included Pall Mall Magazine, The Novel Magazine, Cassell's Magazine, The Story-Teller, The Sovereign Magazine, Hutchinson's Adventure-Story and Hutchinson's Mystery-Story. The German fantasy magazine Der Orchideengarten had a similar format to American pulp magazines, in that it was printed on rough pulp paper and heavily illustrated.

WORLD WAR II AND MARKET DECLINE

The Second World War paper shortages had a serious impact on pulp production, starting a steady rise in 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 most of their pulp magazines in order to move upmarket and produce slicks.

The pulp format declined from rising expenses, but even more due to the heavy competition from comic books, television, and the paperback novel. In a more affluent post-war America, the price gap compared to slick magazines was far less significant. In the 1950s, men's adventure magazines began to replace the pulp.

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 famous pulps of the previous generation, including Black Mask, The Shadow, Doc Savage, and Weird Tales, were defunct. Almost all of the few remaining pulp magazines are science fiction or mystery magazines now in formats similar to "digest size", such as Analog Science Fiction and Fact and Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. The format is still in use for some lengthy serials, like the German science fiction weekly Perry Rhodan (over 2,650 issues as of 2012).

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

GENRES

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

- 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 sketches of the covers of such western magazines.

The American Old West was a mainstay genre of early turn of the 20th century novels as well as later pulp magazines, and lasted longest of all the traditional pulps. In many ways, the later men's adventure ("the sweats") was the replacement of pulps.

Many classic science fiction and crime novels were originally serialized in pulp magazines such as Weird Tales, Amazing Stories, and Black Mask.
NOTABLE ORIGINAL CHARACTERS

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

Popular pulp characters included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Character</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Avenger</td>
<td>Jim Anthony</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biggles</td>
<td>John Carter of Mars</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Black Bat</td>
<td>Jules de Grandin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bran Mak Morn</td>
<td>Ka-Zar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buck Rogers</td>
<td>Khilt the Cossack</td>
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<tr>
<td>Captain Future</td>
<td>Kull</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conan the Barbarian</td>
<td>Moon Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Continental Op</td>
<td>Nick Carter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dan Turner, Hollywood Detective</td>
<td>Operator No. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doc Savage</td>
<td>The Phantom Detective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor Death</td>
<td>Lord Lister (aka Raffles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Yen Sin</td>
<td>Secret Agent X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domino Lady</td>
<td>Sexton Blake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Eel</td>
<td>The Shadow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fu Manchu</td>
<td>The Spider</td>
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<tr>
<td>G-8</td>
<td>Solomon Kane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Lama</td>
<td>Tarzan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopalong Cassidy</td>
<td>Zorro</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

ILLUSTRATORS

Pulp covers were printed in color on higher-quality (slick) paper. They were famous for their half-dressed Rudolph Belarski.\[13\] Covers were important enough to sales that sometimes they would be designed first; authors would then be shown the cover art and asked to write a story to match.

Later pulps began to feature interior illustrations, depicting elements of the stories. The drawings were printed in black ink on the same cream-colored paper used for the text, and had to use specific techniques to avoid blotting on the coarse texture of the cheap pulp. Thus, fine lines and heavy detail were usually not an option. Shading was by crosshatching or pointillism, and even that had to be limited and coarse. Usually the art was black lines on the paper's background, but Finlay and a few others did some work that was primarily white lines against large dark areas.

AUTHORS AND EDITORS

Another way pulps kept costs down was by paying authors less than other markets; thus many eminent authors started out in the pulps before they were successful enough to sell to better-paying markets, and similarly, well-known authors whose careers were slumping or who wanted a few quick dollars could bolster their income with sales to pulps. Additionally, some of the earlier pulps solicited stories from amateurs who were quite happy to see their words in print and could thus be paid token amounts.\[14\]

There were also career pulp writers, capable of turning out huge amounts of prose on a steady basis, often with the aid of dictation to stenographers, machines or typists. Before he became a novelist, Upton Sinclair was turning out at least 8,000 words per day seven days a week for the pulps, keeping two stenographers fully employed. Pulps would often have their authors use multiple pen names so that they could use multiple stories by the same person in one issue, or use a given author's stories in three or more successive issues, while still appearing to have varied content. One advantage pulps provided to authors was that they paid upon acceptance for material instead of on publication; since a story might be accepted months or even years 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 in their magazines. Preeminent pulp magazine editors included Arthur Sullivant Hoffman (Adventure), Robert H. Davis (All-Story Weekly), Harry E. Maule (Short Stories), Donald Kennicott (Blue Book), Joseph T. Shaw (Black Mask), Farnsworth Wright (Weird Tales, Oriental Stories), John W. Campbell (Astounding Science Fiction, Unknown) and Daisy Bacon (Love Story Magazine, Detective Story Magazine).

AUTHORS FEATURED

Well-known authors who wrote for pulps include:
Sinclair Lewis, first American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, worked as an editor for Adventure, writing filler paragraphs (brief facts or amusing anecdotes designed to fill small gaps in page layout), advertising 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


LEGACY

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

Many of the paperback houses that contributed to the decline of the genre—Ace, Dell, Avon, among others—were actually started by pulp magazine publishers. They had the presses, the expertise, and the newsstand distribution networks which made the success of the mass-market paperback possible. These pulp-oriented paperback houses mined the old magazines for reprints. This kept pulp literature, if not pulp magazines, alive. The Return of the Continental Op reprints material first published in Black Mask; Five Sinister Characters contains stories first published in Dime Detective; and The Pocket Book of Science Fiction collects material from Thrilling 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 Black Mask,[20] in homage to the pulp magazine of that name, and it embodied the seedy, violent, often crime-related spirit found in pulp magazines.

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


In 2002, the tenth issue of The Scottish publisher DC Thomson publishes "My Weekly Compact Novel" every week.[21] It is literally a pulp novel, though it 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

SOURCES


FURTHER READING

**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 influential literary & artistic forms: the all-fiction pulpwood magazine.

ThePulp.Net

Pulp Illustration Art


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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