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News

Collecting

Extracting a pocket size profit from pulp fiction

Once these 1950s low-brow tales of the hard-boiled detective and the sultry blonde were throwaway items. Not any more, says Dan Syngé

Saturday April 16, 2005

[The Guardian](#)

A smoky bar, a hard-boiled detective, a sultry blonde and her murdered husband; there's no mistaking the ingredients of a typical pulp novel.

Few would argue that the genre — one which peaked in popularity during the 1950s contains much in the way of literary merit. Indeed, in their day, they were considered so low-brow that copies were sold mainly at news stands or from subway vending machines. Booker Prize winners they weren't.

Despite the reputation, growing numbers of vintage book lovers are getting hooked on these well-thumbed works of fiction with their signature lurid cover art and irresistible titles like *When Dames Get Tough* and *I Want To Sin*.

As befitting books which once sold for around 2/6d, prices remain on the low side and, yes, it's still possible to find copies in charity shops for £1. On the other hand, rarer paperbacks and original cover artwork are known to trade hands for thousands.

The *Good Earth*, Pocket Books' first US title in 1938 and practically the Holy Grail of vintage paperbacks, has commanded prices over £6,000, while William Burroughs'

Junkie, published by Digit in the UK, but destroyed in large numbers due to tough obscenity laws, is valued at £7,000.

"Never before has the finger of light shone so glaringly on the wasteland of the drug addict," promises its reverse dust jacket alongside an image of a blonde with a syringe in her naked thigh.

Long before Quentin Tarantino's eponymous movie, the term "pulp fiction" was used to describe trashy story magazines produced on cheap, rough paper. By the 1930s, when the first paperbacks appeared, it was synonymous with the kind of fast-paced thriller churned out by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

Many so-called pulp writers went on to appear on more high-brow imprints, among them Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Philip K Dick. Others like Hank Janson (aka Stephen Frances) will forever be associated with the rather shadowy world of popular fiction.

Once billed as "England's best-selling author", Janson wrote more than 300 stories for a post-war British paperback market high on US-style gangsters and hot dames.

In their day, Janson's covers were considered so obscene the Home Office seized copies from newsagents and his publishers went to jail.

Artist Reginald Heade's work from Janson's early 1950s series on New Fiction Press, epitomise the classic sex-kitten pulp cover.

Although women often starred on covers, female pulp writers were poorly represented. Only Ann Bannon, "the Queen of lesbian pulp" and author of *Women in the Shadows* and *Odd Girl Out*, remains high on the collector's shopping list.

By today's standards, pulp covers seem simply quaint and nostalgic, a fact that sums up their appeal for collectors. "People specialise in covers with smoking women, or those where someone is holding a claw hammer — any theme is possible," says dealer Maurice Flanagan of Zardo Books.

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Tools

Flanagan began picking up near worthless mass market pulps from junk shops and boot fairs about 20 years ago. Pickings

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aren't quite so rich today, as older copies are likely to have been damaged or binned by unappreciative dealers. On the plus side, there exists an organised network of collectors and dealers who hold regular book fairs while keeping a sharp eye out on eBay for rarities.

Zardoz stocks hundreds of old paperbacks covering fictional genres as diverse as spies, sci-fi, lesbian, beatnik and juvenile delinquents.

Serious collectors, says Flanagan, like books that are part of a long-running series such as *The Man From Uncle* or *James Bond*, which first appeared in 1955.

"First edition *Bond* paperbacks, published in the late 1950s by Pan, are worth more than £100 today," he says. "People buy them for the work of artist and ex-boxer Sam Peffer, who once they started using photographs on covers, went on to film posters and video covers."

Specialising in publishers is another good approach. Gold Medal in the US brought out the first paperback originals in 1950; before then, all paperbacks were simply reprints of hardback versions.

Other collectible US publishers include Armed Services Edition, aimed at the GI market, and Ace, pioneers of the double-backed edition— two novels for the price of one.

Over here, it's Agatha Christie and *James Bond* imprint Pan, alongside Corgi and New English Library that keep dealers busy. New English Library employed a team of hack writers working under pseudonyms, such as Richard Allen and Mick Norman, to produce tales of biker gangs and bovver boys.

Much like the books of war author Sven Hassel, *Skinhead* and the later *Suedehead* were required reading in the early 1970s playground, and they retain a cult following today.

Gillingham-based collector Peter Chapman has been buying mainly American vintage paperbacks since 1952. Today he owns around 7,000, some worth more than £500. "Value is determined by author, publisher and cover artist," he explains. "Some artwork is amazing and everything was hand-painted."

Among his most prized possessions are a US double-backed

copy of Junkie and original artwork from Sam Peffer, also known as Peff. Some of the titles are worth the cover price, and Chapman still finds it hard to resist a chuckle at Panda Bear Passion and Latex Lady.

Is there an ounce of literary appeal in these lost pulp classics? I ask. Chapman is unrepentant, like one of his hard-boiled heroes emerging on to a neon-lit sidewalk: "Back in the old days, these books were 120 pages and they had a beginning, middle and end. That was it. Who needs 700 pages of crap you can't even fit in a coat pocket?"

- Where to buy and sell: www.zardozbooks.co.uk; www.abebooks.co.uk; www.ebay.co.uk

- Dan Synge is author of Cool Collectibles (Miller's, £14.99)



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