The Great Pulp Heroes

Don Hutchison
They were gaudy. They were gory. They were glorious. And they were everywhere.

Back in the thirties and forties, every newsstand in places big enough to have sidewalks harbored stacks of magazines bearing enameled covers that were designed to flypaper the eyes with circus-poster brilliance.


The roll call is endless. They were called the pulps. By definition they were magazines of popular fiction, handling such staples as adventure, action, and romance. Between their birth in the first years of the last century and their demise in the middle fifties, they represented the greatest explosion of mass entertainment via the printed word that a thrill-seeking public ever experienced.

Variety was infinite. There were detective pulps, western pulps, science-fiction pulps, sports pulps, romance pulps, gang-war pulps, horror pulps, spicy mystery pulps, jungle and desert adventure pulps, and The Shadow. There were straight aviation pulps with names like Dare-Devil Aces and Sky Fighters, as well as macabre variants like G-8 And His Battle Aces, which routinely ladled out titles like “Squadron of Corpses,” “The Headless Staffel,” and “Scourge of the Sky Beast.” From railroad yarns to pirate stories, from the center of the earth to the farthest reaches of the universe, the gaudy, gory, glorious pulp magazines delivered on their promise: something for everyone.

How to explain the euphoria of the pulps? Perhaps you had to be there. You had to be young—at least in spirit. You had to
be poor (most people were). You had to be part of that troubled, more innocent time. For armchair adventurers it was a Golden Age—before television, when imagination and a need for heroes were coupled with a world of vicarious wonders.

It is ironic that the most galvanic era in American popular culture was not that of the two Great Wars but the decade of the Great Depression, when the popular arts were fired with creative optimism. Middle- and lower-class workers—whose fear was that of the breadline—flocked to movies with titles like *Flying Down to Rio*, *A Night at the Opera*, and *Grand Hotel*. And hero-hungry readers, anxious to buy an hour’s anodyne, poured mountains of dimes across newsstand counters to find new worlds of adventure printed on cheap pulp paper sandwiched between eye-searing covers. Whole forests were leveled to supply the insatiable demand for dreams that mere pennies could buy. And the word merchants were there to make sure that demand never exceeded supply.

At a penny a word—sometimes more, but often less—you had to sell a lot of words to make a living. Even so, a few pulp scriveners discovered gold in them thar thrills. In the depths of the Great Depression, it was rumored that a fictioneer named Frederick Faust (aka Max Brand) earned $80,000 a year on pulp writing alone. He wound up living like a Medici in a castle in Italy, surrounded by a retinue of servants.

As the audience for pulp thrills grew, the magazines became an enormous market for would-be wordsmiths as well as for familiar names. By the twenties and thirties, the mass-market pulps were into a Golden Age of creativity, with new and exciting writers commanding armies of devoted fans.

The fantasy pulps developed such names as Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. The detective story was elevated to a fine—and peculiarly American—art form by the gargantuan talents of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Cornell Woolrich. The Western pulps had Max Brand, Walt Coburn, and Ernest Haycox, among others, and the adventure fiction field boasted too many famous names to enumerate.

Possibly the only fictional category invented by the pulps was that of science fiction. Beginning as early as 1910, adventure titles like *Argosy* and *All-Story Magazine* had featured what they called “scientific romances,” stories of lost races and adventure
on other planets. But it took a man named Hugo Gernsback to begin a new magazine, *Amazing Stories*, that would deal exclusively with this new breed of story as a genre in itself. Gernsback’s discovery led the way to other pulp titles that attracted the early works of Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein.

It was a literary Gold Rush, but for the few who struck pay dirt (Hammett, Burroughs, Erle Stanley Gardner), hundreds of others found the panning tough. In his book *The Pulp Jungle*, author Frank Gruber confided:

> There were in existence, at this time, some 150 pulp magazines, solidly established. A vast market for stories. But these were still Depression Days and the competition was fierce. It was a literary jungle and every writer was a tiger. You had to be brash, you had to be tough, you had to claw your way into the jungle and fight for your life every minute you were in it. There were more writers than there were magazines. All were hungry writers.

Storytellers have always existed, of course, from caveman practitioners who spun tales to keep the clan together and the demons at bay, through Dumas and Dickens to twentieth-century writers like Edgar Wallace who could, and did, churn out a novel a week and in between find time to dash off a play and a few short stories. But never before and never again did there exist a market for wordsmiths like that of the fabulous pulps. Each month, brightly colored covers shrilled the names of hundreds of writers as familiar as household brands. To their fans, they were names that crackled with the thrill of lightning: Carroll John Daly, H. Bedford Jones, Cornell Woolrich, Walt Coburn, Raymond Chandler, Robert E. Howard, A. Merritt, Edmond Hamilton, Hugh B. Cave, Talbot Mundy, Harold Lamb, Johnston McCulley, and legions of others.

While the pulp magazine was a twentieth-century publishing sensation, the history of cheap fiction for the masses can be traced as far back as the Industrial Revolution. When more leisure time for workers was combined with universal education and the invention of the steam printing press, a new reading public was created. Inevitably, a new type of literature arose to meet demand—a literature that did not attempt to educate or uplift but existed simply to entertain. Freed of the patronage of
the well educated and the wealthy, it was a literature conceived as a branch of show business, produced for a mass audience that wished to be excited and amused.

What we now call “pulp” fiction was produced as early as the 1840s, when publishers decided that one way to lower costs, and thus price, was to use newspaper presses and cheap newsprint paper. A news sheet, doubled to make four pages, made a reasonable booklike format. The product of this discovery was something called the family story paper.

Such story papers as *The Corsair* and the *Yankee Privateer*, although called newspapers and enjoying special newspaper postal rates, were really collections of fiction that ran novels in serial form.

Then came the revolution. In 1860, a firm called Beadle & Adams published a paperbound novel for ten cents, titled *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*. The dime novel had arrived. Small wonder that the first dime novel was a home-spun western, or that the most popular series characters would be frontier icons like Buffalo Bill Cody, Kit Carson, and Jesse James. (The dime novel dream parade also included such fictitious buckaroos as Red River Bill, Deadshot Dave, Young Wild West, and the marvelously alliterative Roaring Ralph Rockwood, the Reckless Ranger.)

For the next forty years, dime novels (later reduced to a nickel) would pour from the presses by the millions. They would be much criticized and reviled, but generations of children gobbled them up. They found that beneath their lurid paper covers were even more lurid stories chock full of blood, bullets, heart-stopping suspense and relentless, frantic action. The dime novel shocker introduced and defined many pulp fiction staples: western stories, war stories, pirate stories, romance stories, detective stories, and even continuing-character series.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the appeal of the dime novel had waned. Its characters, style, and action-oriented plots were soon transferred to the *pulps*, so called because a publisher named Frank Munsey had begun to print an all-fiction magazine titled *The Argosy* on cheap pulpwood paper. Munsey had the idea that the story was more important than what it was printed on. He must have guessed correctly because the lowly pulp magazine
went on to become the most popular form of reading material in America between World War I and the end of World War II.

Street & Smith, a dime-novel giant, began converting paper-covered books into pulp magazines as early as 1903. Eventually, The Buffalo Bill Weekly dime-novel series was transformed into Western Story Magazine, with old Bill held over briefly in a series of new stories. Likewise, that resolute but fictitious detective, Nick Carter, became editor emeritus of the newly created Detective Story Magazine. Other genres—science fiction, love story, horror, war and aviation—soon followed.

What made the pulps different from the weekly story papers and dime novels was that they were true magazines, generous in both size and variety of content. They were an all-permeating atmosphere, a delirious environment of irresistibly lurid covers, dynamic illustrations, worshipful letters, and breathless fiction. For only ten cents, or a little more—the price of a magazine containing novels, short stories, departments, and artwork—a reader could get lost in the violent lives of heroes and heroines as outsized and engrossing as any to be found in the great myths and legends.

As pulp publisher Henry Steegar once explained it:

Pulps were the principal entertainment vehicle for millions of Americans. They were an unflickering, uncolored TV screen upon which the reader could spread the most glorious imagination he possessed. The athletes were stronger, the heroes were nobler, the girls were more beautiful and the palaces were more luxurious than any in existence; they were always there at any time of the day or night on dull, no-gloss paper that was kind to the eyes.

Not surprisingly, the heyday of the pulp heroes was the period of the “dirty thirties.” The Great Depression had smashed into America with the ferocity of a hurricane. Unemployment became a way of life, creating a new “leisure class,” as hundreds of thousands of rootless scarecrow figures shuffled through breadlines and soup kitchens, wan symbols of hard times. Pulp-paper fiction was the cheapest thrill around, and tattered copies of Detective Fiction Weekly and Dime Western were passed from hand to hand or left behind in boxcars and hobo jungles. To most citizens, the NRA acronym stood for National Recovery Act, but pulp fiction publishers proudly carried the familiar NRA blue
As the Roaring Twenties marched to a cataclysmic market crash, many North Americans had learned to accept organized crime (created by Prohibition) as “big business” and gangsters as a form of barbaric royalty. But the glorification of gang rule took an abrupt turn in the Great Depression when Americans awoke from their paralysis of fascination and began looking for new heroes who did not reflect the rule of force over ideals. As usual, the pulps were there to supply what the public desired.

Pulp avengers—individuals of strength, speed, brains, and stamina—arose to do battle with working-class America’s perceived enemies: gangsters, bankers, punks, fiends, lawyers, politicians, and threatening foreign hordes. The most famous of these avengers, The Shadow, leaped into the fray in 1931 as the first titular hero of his own magazine. He proved that a magazine built around the exploits of a single character was an idea whose time had come. The Shadow took off like a flash-fire, causing scores of new “character” titles to pop up on the newsstands, ranging from outright imitations to new departures. There were aviation heroes (the Lone Eagle and Bill Barnes), masters of disguise (Secret Agent X and the Phantom Detective), western heroes (The Rio Kid and The Lone Ranger), adventure heroes (Doc Savage and The Skipper), and even a science fiction hero (Captain Future). Ironically one of the most famous of all pulp-hero creations, Johnston McCulley’s Zorro (“the Robin Hood of California”) never did have his own title, but he appeared regularly in the magazines from his inception in 1919 right up to the final gasp of the pulps themselves.

Much has been made of the pulp magazines as training grounds for serious literary authors ranging from MacKinlay Kantor to Tennessee Williams. The fact is that most of the pulps treasured by collectors today represent an unpretentious, calculatedly disposable literature that was too exciting to be respectable and too much fun to be taken seriously.

The series hero is older than Beowulf and Ulysses. No doubt conceived around the flickering glow of Stone Age campfires, the protracted adventures of heroic champions appeal to the child in all of us—the kid who is willing to have a good story repeated because he wants it never to end. In the tradition of such liter-
ary ancestors, the great heroes of the pulps were not conceived as carriers of substantive meaning; they were invented for fans of the preposterous, for connoisseurs of the outrageous—for the child that lurks in all of us.

Say what you will of the great pulp heroes, but they were a beguiling lot. With their narratives yoked to gut emotions, they brought messages of a limitless world of adventure and experience, a great shining universe that was full of color and juice, where heroes were not forced to do homework, mow lawns, go to bed early, or eat up their vegetables. It was all fantasy, of course—heroism rampant with seldom a dull or ugly moment—but it got a lot of readers through some hard times and filled their minds with hope, wonder, and even inspiration.
The Great War put an end to his confusion. He was one of the first to sign up for service, and almost from the moment he set foot in France he became a war hero. To this day veterans tell countless tales of the time he captured an entire brigade of Germans singlehandedly, of how he saved dozens of Allied lives in the Argonne Forest, of his daring espionage missions behind enemy lines, of his time behind the stick as the leader of his own group of crack airmen, the Battle Escadrille. Unfollow great pulp heroes to stop getting updates on your eBay Feed. You’ll receive email and Feed alerts when new items arrive. Turn off email alerts. Save this search. Shipping to Ukraine. Canada - CAN Afghanistan - AFG Albania - ALB Algeria - DZA American Samoa - ASM Andorra - AND Angola - AGO Anguilla - AIA Antigua and Barbuda - ATG Argentina - ARG Armenia - ARM Aruba - ABW Australia - AUS Austria - AUT Azerbaijan Republic - AZE Bahamas - BHS Bahrain - BHR Bangladesh - BGD Barbados - BRB Belarus - BLR Belgium - BEL Belize - BLZ Benin - BEN Bermuda - BMU Bhutan - BTN Bolivia - BOL Bos Welcome To Pulp Heroes. This is a subreddit dedicated to Pulp Heroes for fans of period pieces with the pulp heroes of olde like The Spirit, Green Hornet, Zorro, John Carter, Tarzan, Doc Savage, the Black Beetle and so much more. Comic Book Publisher Subreddits. DC Comics. Vertigo Comics. Marvel Comics. Marvel Now NEW. Archie Comics.