Pulp magazines, which get their names from the cheap wood pulp paper they were printed on, put popular fiction into the hands of readers for a very low price from the late 1800s until the mid-1950s. They were originally considered to be “low-brow” forms of literature, but recently have seen a revival in scholarship as researchers explore both their form and their content. This exhibit is in support of the First Annual Pulp Studies Symposium at James Madison University, a conference celebrating that scholarship.

The pulps’ publication spanned expansive social change in the United States, as well as two world wars. Though they wrote quickly and for low pay (often a penny per word), authors who later became famous in their own right, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Isaac Asimov, H.P. Lovecraft, and L. Ron Hubbard, were first featured in pulp magazines. From the turn of the century to the 1950s, the pulp magazines were a mainstay for short stories about detectives, adventurers, cowboys, space pioneers, and more. Many of the stories were serialized or featured recurring characters. Violence and sexual tension were prevalent thematically, but despite their reputation at the time of being perhaps a little sordid, the magazines birthed many
well-known literature genres and master narratives. The “hard-boiled” crime detective genre that inspired film noir, the classic Western movies and stories of the mid-20th century, and science-fiction as we know it in 2016 are all deeply rooted in pulp magazine culture. The comic book and the present-day mass-market paperback also sprung from the tradition of the pulps.

Similar to many of today’s magazines, the pulps were considered culturally disposable. As a result of this and the chemical composition of the pulp paper, very few original issues of pulp magazines exist today. Collectors and scholars have recently begun saving and studying those issues that remain. JMU Special Collections holds one of the largest pulp fiction magazine collections in the country, and continues to collect in this area. They are carefully preserved in a climate controlled area of the library due to their fragility. Because of this fragility, please note that this exhibit features high-quality facsimiles of the originals held in our collection. Anyone is welcome to visit Special Collections to see the originals!

A companion website to this exhibit is available at: sites.jmu.edu/psx.

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MAGAZINE TITLE DESCRIPTIONS

More information about each of the magazine titles in this exhibit is provided in this section. Turn to the last section of descriptions of major themes represented in this exhibit.

AMAZING STORIES

Founded in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback, Amazing Stories was the first magazine that could be considered “science fiction,” though at the time it was founded that term wasn’t yet coined. In the foreword to Amazing's first number, Gernsback introduced his "New Sort of Magazine," geared to the "entirely new world" of the modern. He cited as his forebears Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells and detailed the twin aims of the publication to instruct and entertain its readership. Despite the Amazing Stories’ popularity with its reader base, Gernsback’s reluctance to pay writers fair wages combined with a growing negative perception of the magazine outside his reader base, caused Gernsback to abandon the project and sell the magazine.

In the 1930s, the magazine continued to flounder, and new editors John W. Campbell (1929) and Raymond A. Palmer (1938) tried to keep it afloat. Palmer occasionally was able to publish stories from big-name authors such as Ray Bradbury, Eric Frank Russell, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, but ultimately the magazine was secondary to its competitor, Astounding Stories.

In 1950, new editor Harold Browne tried again to revive Amazing Stories, bringing in authors such as Isaac Asimov, Fritz Leiber, Arthur C. Clarke, but still the magazine never saw overwhelming success, partially due to cuts created by the Korean War. A new editor, Cele Goldsmith, brought back in authors such as Asimov and Cordwainer Smith, and also printed early stories from writers of the soon-to-be-labeled New Wave, among them Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, and J.G. Ballard. However, the publication was consolidated and folded into one of its competitors, Fantastic, and was subsequently sold in 1982 to Gary Gygax, finally ceasing production for good in 2005.

ARGOSY

First known as The Golden Argosy, scholar Nathan Vernon Madison asserts in his article on PulpMags.org that “The Argosy was the first pulp magazine and progenitor of an entire medium.” Argosy was founded by Frank Andrew Munsey in 1882, and began as a weekly children’s “story paper.” Munsey changed the publication’s focus audience to adults, began printing on the cheaper wood pulp paper, and renamed The Golden Argosy to simply Argosy in 1896. Munsey immediately saw increased success after changing the publication’s audience base and format, and within ten years saw circulation numbers above 500,000 copies per month.

While the cover art on the copy of Argosy in this exhibit represents a Western story, the magazine was a cross-genre fiction showcase, and included Western, romance, adventure, war,
crime, and science-fiction stories. Argosy included stories from contemporary authors like Edgar Rice Burroughs, Max Brand, Malcolm Wheeler Nicholson, H. Bedford Jones, and Fred MacIsaac.

During the first part of World War II, the magazine began running non-fiction articles about the war. In 1942, the magazine was sold to Popular Publications, which owned a competing title, *Adventure*. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the magazine became rebranded again as a men’s magazine. It ceased publication in 1979.

**ASTOUNDING STORIES**

*Astounding Stories* is the longest running continuously published magazine of any genre, beginning its publication run in 1930 and continuing into the present. It is widely considered part of the “Golden Age of Science Fiction.”

It was initially founded by Clayton Publishing Company as a copycat publication of Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*. Despite Clayton’s attempts to compete with *Amazing Stories*, featured many stories that weren’t true Gernsback-style science fiction, but that were instead stock, pulp adventure yarns transplanted into exotic or alien environments. This tactic attracted both science fiction fans and general pulp readers and aided *Astounding Stories*’ first three years of survival; in 1933 *Astounding Stories* hit financial difficulties and shuttered production for three months during the Great Depression.

Upon its return, the generic adventure stories ceased, and science fiction that the magazine’s editor at the time, F. Orlin Tremaine, termed “thought variants,” because he imagined that they truly challenged the readers’ perspectives in terms of understanding science and technology.

In 1938, John Wood Campbell, who had been Tremaine’s editorial assistant, took over the editor position and held the job for 33 years. Campbell continued to honor Tremaine’s legacy of keeping stories’ focuses on the experiences of both the readers and the characters. Campbell wrote in an editorial that “it is the man, not the idea or machine that is the essence,” of science fiction.

Through the years, the magazine has featured many notable authors including Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Orson Scott Card, author of the popular young adult novel, *Ender’s Game*. In May 1950, before he would be known as the founder of Scientology, the magazine introduced the world to L. Ron Hubbard’s theory of dianetics.

It was rare to see women authors publishing in science fiction magazines. One exception was Leigh Brackett, who was first published in *Astounding Stories* in May 1940. She then embarked on a long screenwriting career including *The Big Sleep* (first published in *Black Mask*) and the first draft of *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back*, the second of the original *Star Wars* trilogy.
Hoping to distance the magazine further from its more sensationalized pulp origins -- and subsequently to create a more "futurology"-oriented image for it -- Campbell changed the magazine's title to *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1938, and later to *Analog Science Fact & Fiction* in 1960. In November 1992, the logo was revised to read "Fiction and Fact" rather than "Fact & Fiction," but *Analog* is the name by which the magazine is still known to this day. The magazine is included in the library of the International Space Station; in 2011, it became the longest running continuously published magazine dedicated to the SF genre.

**BLACK MASK**

*Black Mask*, which was to become the most significant pulp magazine oriented towards crime and detective fiction, was initially started as a way for journalist H. L. Mencken and business partner George Jean Nathan to fund the low-income but more prestigious and high-brow publication, *Smart Set*. *Smart Set* was part of the group of literary “little magazines” that had a heyday during the modernism period (the mid 1910s-about 1930).

This venture of publishing a low-brow magazine to fund a high-brow was, by economic measures, an unqualified success, and *Black Mask* would also go on to have far more cultural impact than Mencken and Nathan likely expected. After publishing the first eight issues, Mencken and Nathan sold the magazine to Eltinge Warner and Eugene Crow for $12,500, receiving a huge return on the initial start-up investment of $500 they had made on the first issue in April 1920.

*Black Mask* would go on to contribute substantially to the development of the “hard boiled” detective fiction genre. Under the direction of “Cap” Joseph Shaw, who was named editor of the magazine in 1926, issues showcased the writing of Samuel Dashiel Hammett and Raymond Chandler, among many others. Hammett created the iconic detective Sam Spade. Chandler wrote such classics as *The Big Sleep* and *Double Indemnity*, starring the private detective Philip Marlowe. Humphrey Bogart immortalized both Spade and Marlowe in films throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The hard-boiled genre also paralleled with another important pulp category: the Western. Detective fiction took vigilante justice from the lawless west and brought it to the streets of U.S. cities. The change dovetailed with the public’s increasing mistrust of law enforcement. This left the market ripe for stories about hard-driving private detectives who achieved justice at any cost.

*Black Mask* was instrumental in satisfying this demand and readers ate it up, with a peak circulation of 103,000 readers in 1930. *Black Mask* ended its publication run in 1951, but its legacy still resonates in contemporary detective narratives. Its cultural impact was wide-ranging. Keith Alan Deutsch wrote on BlackMaskMagazine.com that “although it is primarily the American West that provides the mythology for most dime novel fiction, the second favorite theme of these first mass market American fiction publications was crime and detection in the great cities, particularly New York. These two major themes of nineteenth century dime novel fiction, those that feature the American cowboy hero of the bright plains, or those that feature the
American detective hero of the dark cities, became the two great streams of popular fiction and popular culture in the twentieth century America.”

LOVE STORY

*Love Story* was publisher Street and Smith’s most valuable property, and ran from 1921-1947. It claimed the distinction of being the most popular pulp in its era, with a peak circulation of 600,000 readers. *Love Story* was published weekly for more than 20 years, beginning in September 1922. Its initial editor was Daisy Bacon. Many spin-off titles were inspired by *Love Story*, making the romance genre one of the most prevalent among the pulps.

The stories skew towards melodrama. The narratives run amok with love triangles, scandalous affairs, star-crossed couples, and a litany of romantic confessions. They are great fun to read, and nearly every page contains a gem of overwrought passion. In his 1954 book *The Fiction Factory*, Quentin Reynolds wrote that “Miss Bacon had an infallible instinct for choosing stories that would make the average woman forget either her unhappy financial state, her dreary husband or her aching heart. Daisy's own slim finger was never away from the feminine pulse of the nation; she knew just what girls of all ages wanted…”

RANCH ROMANCES

Although one of the more neglected pulps in terms of current-day collecting, *Ranch Romances* was once the most successful Western-romance hybrid pulp on the market with more than 850 issues published during its long run from 1924-1971. Fanny Ellsworth, known for her editorship of *Black Mask* from 1936-1940, served as editor of *Ranch Romances* from 1929-1953, editing it through three different publishers. Harold Hersey, an editor for Clayton Magazines, took credit for the magazine’s inception in 1924. The magazine went to Warner Publications in 1933, and to Thrilling Publications in 1950.

The magazine’s Western-romance hybrid genre featured primarily female protagonists who exercised their independence and navigated challenges, dangers, and love in the Wild West. Though it was immensely popular, none of its writers became well-known outside the magazine. Hersey once said that “there are only two kinds of women in the western pulpwoods -- your sister and nobody's sister,” and that “your sister” is the woman most frequently seen on the cover of *Ranch Romances*.

WEIRD TALES

*Weird Tales* was not the most valuable property of the pulp era, but it does have an interesting history. It ran from 1923 to 1954. It reprinted the works of many classic authors, playwrights, and poets, including Oscar Wilde, John Keats, and Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*. Its genres of choice were horror and fantasy, with a dash of the macabre.
Weird Tales encountered a range of financial challenges, nearly succumbing to bankruptcy several times. The somewhat risqué cover art by Margaret Brundage in the 1930s drove up dwindling circulation numbers during economic shortfalls. Brundage’s art deserves a share of credit for the magazine’s overall popularity.

Its most celebrated contributor was science fiction author H.P. Lovecraft, who collaborated with Weird Tales editor Farnsworth Wright, who edited the magazine from 1924-1940. Lovecraft was even approached with a lucrative offer to take on the position of editor, but he declined. While Lovecraft died in obscurity, he posthumously gained great fame for his influential works of horror fiction. His only published work while he was living was in the pages of pulp magazines. Weird Tales acquired debut fiction from writers like Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, and Frank Belknap Long. It also reprinted the works of an eclectic mix of earlier writers: Edgar Allan Poe, Mary and Percy Shelley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bram Stoker, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, H.G. Wells, John Keats, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Paul Verlaine, and Charles Baudelaire.

Weird Tales is unofficially known as “the magazine that never dies,” because it was revived after each downturn in readership or content. Its most recent revival occurred in 2011 when a new publisher bought it. Recent issues of Weird Tales are available online at WeirdTales.com.
DESCRIPTIONS OF THE MAJOR THEMES REPRESENTED IN THIS EXHIBIT ARE PROVIDED IN THIS SECTION.

GENDER IN THE PULPS

As a visitor may notice from even the small sample of cover art in this exhibit, many pulps placed women in a subjugated position in both pictorial and editorial content. Margaret Brundage’s famous cover art for *Weird Tales* was broadly described as “women in distress” with women being loomed over by men, aliens, or monsters (for an example, see *Weird Tales* March, 1953). The women of *Weird Tales* were often tied up or held down, unable to escape danger.

The alternate depiction of women in sci-fi pulps was sexually exploitative, with women being pictured nearly nude and bared to the largely male gaze (for an example, see *Weird Tales* April, 1934). The few sci-fi covers that picture powerful women suggest that this authority is dangerous and will be directed against men (for an example, see *Astounding Stories* May, 1952).

*Black Mask* often used the covers and the stories as a venue to tell tales of strong men rescuing women from nefarious villains who held guns to their heads and brutalized them. The opposite stereotype of the female victim is the “femme fatale.” This conceptualization invests women with power, while still characterizing it as sexualized and predatory. This female power can be seen as something to be fought against by the noble hard-boiled heroes, and not a display of justice (for an example, see July, 1945).

*Love Story* reinforced the then-prevailing narrative that a woman’s main goal was an engagement ring and a husband to protect her, physically and financially (for an example, see February 9, 1935 and June 6, 1936). Occasionally covers departed from this party line, depicting women in uniform as either nurses or military members (for an example, see *Love Story*, May 18, 1943). This mirrored the cultural and political shift that required women to direct their talents beyond the home during World War II.

Western-themed pulps provide a valuable counterpoint. Many covers of Westerns, even the more sentimental *Ranch Romances*, picture women wielding guns either next to men, or even protecting the homestead on their own (see *Ranch Romances* April 23, 1954, and *Western Trails* September, 1942). Hersey’s comments about “your sister” being the main protagonist of *Ranch Romances* alluded to the heroine who was featured on every cover of the publication.

RACE IN THE PULPS

Black Mask’s infamous Ku Klux Klan number (June 1, 1923), cast the KKK’s brutal regime of racial violence in the same light as the vigilantism done by the hard boiled detectives. Disclaiming any “connection whatsoever” with the hooded ones, the magazine’s editorial staff wrote that the issue might prove to be "the most interesting and sensational number of any
American magazine this year.” While the editorial staff vociferously declared itself “ABSOLUTELY NEUTRAL,” and claimed to present a balanced view of the group, later inquiry suggests that *Black Mask* was in overall favor of the KKK’s adherence to citizen-led “justice.” Reader response letters (both pro and con) poured in, prompting the establishment of a KKK Forum in an issue later that summer.

The sci-fi pulps (*Astounding Stories, Amazing Stories, and Weird Tales*) displayed racial tension in different ways, casting racial and ethnic minorities as the exotic or feared Other. Covers display white women being attacked by violent caricatures of African men (*Weird Tales* April, 1934) and Orientalism (*Weird Tales*, May 1931). Vampires and science-fiction alien creatures were also featured in some of these covers and stories, representing other facets of the fear of differences.

Western pulps sometimes featured images of Native American people in traditional clothing as either sidekicks or adversaries of the cowboy. The romanticized myth of the disappearing Indian, frozen in the past, had been in existence since the early 1800s when the American government began pushing Native American people from their homelands. This imagery was perpetuated in some of the Western pulps.

**WAR IN THE PULPS**

Science fiction pulps were quite interested in the leadup to World War II and the successive dawning of the Cold War. The fear endemic to these time periods can be seen in the visually striking covers and evocative titles such as “When the Gods Make War” (*Amazing Stories* July, 1940) and “If This Goes On” (*Astounding Stories* February, 1940). The imagery of looming tanks and airplanes raining down destruction reflect the large-scale disruption felt by civilian populations across the world. The thematic elements appear to reflect the panic and foreboding that many felt as the second world war begun.

Even publications such as *Love Story* acknowledged World War II and its effect on its prime readership: young women. It even briefly replaced the parade of courtship and marriage on their covers with women in professional roles. This is seen in the unabashedly patriotic issue titled “The Sergeant and the WAC” (May 18, 1943).

Westerns and *Black Mask* did not explicitly acknowledge World War II in their cover art, but their contents continued to detail the small scale retribution found in the Wild West and the urban noir landscape. Against the backdrop of global violent war, cowboys and hard-boiled detectives strove for their own resolution of injustice.
WANT TO READ MORE?

Below is just a small sampling of titles that started in or were inspired by the pulps, focusing primarily on the hard-boiled detective genre and on science fiction. You can also visit your local public library, Massanutten Regional Library, for more titles from and inspired by the pulps. For scholarly research sources, see our works cited page.

HARD-BOILED STORIES

*The Big Sleep*
Chandler, Raymond
Carrier Library
DVD 206
PS3505.H3224 B5 1992

*L.A. Confidential*
Dargis, Manohla
Carrier Library
DVD 189 (blue-ray)

*The Black Lizard Big Book of Black Mask Stories*
Ed. Penzler, Otto
Carrier Library
PS648.N64 B57 2010

*The Black Mask Boys: Masters in the Hard-Boiled School of Detective Fiction*
Nolan, William
Carrier Library
PS374.D4 N64 1985

*The Classic Era of American Pulp Magazines*
Haining, Peter
Carrier Library
PN4878.8 .H35 2001

*Double Indemnity*
Hammett, Dashiell
Carrier Library
DVD 191
PS3515.A4347 M33 2003

*Mildred Pierce*
Carrier Library
DVD 7941 (original)
DVD 2740 v.1-v.2 (HBO remake)

*The Maltese Falcon*
Hammett, Dashiell
Carrier Library
PS3515.A4347 M33 2003

*The Postman Always Rings Twice: Double Indemnity, Mildred Pierce, and Selected Stories*
Cain, James
Carrier Library
PS3505.A3113 A6 2003

*Them That Lives By Their Guns: The Collected Hard-Boiled Stories of Race Williams*
Daly, Carroll John (ed. Hefner, Brooks)
Carrier Library
PS3507.A4673 T53 2015

*The Thin Man*
Hammett, Dashiell
Carrier Library
PS3515.A4347 T5 1972
EARLY SCIENCE-FICTION

Fahrenheit 451
Bradbury, Ray
Carrier Library
DVD 6951
PS3504.R167 F3

Foundation and Empire
Asimov, Isaac
Carrier Library
PS3551.S5 F2 1983

H.P. Lovecraft in Popular Culture: The Works and their Adaptations in Film, Television, Comics, Music, and Games
Smith, Don G.
Carrier Library
PS3523.O833 Z865 2006

Prelude to Foundation
Asimov, Isaac
Carrier Library
PS3551.S5 P7 1988

The Time Machine, The Invisible Man, and The War of the Worlds
Wells, H.G.
Carrier Library
PR5772 .W45 2010

Waging The War of the Worlds: A History of the 1938 Radio Broadcast and Resulting Panic, Including the Original Script
Gosling, John
Carrier Library
PN1991.77.W3 G67 2009
WORKS CITED


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The First Annual Pulp Studies Symposium occurred on October 7-8, 2016, at James Madison University, and its task force members included David M. Earle, Associate Professor of Transatlantic Modernism and Print culture at the University of West Florida; Lynn Eaton, Assistant Professor and Special Collections Librarian at JMU; Justin Everett, Director of Writing Programs and Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at University of the Sciences; Brian Flota, Assistant Professor and Humanities Librarian at JMU; Brooks Hefner, Associate Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies at JMU; Kate Morris, Special Collections Research and Technical Services Librarian at JMU; and Erin A. Smith, Professor of American Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas.

The Pulp Studies Symposium’s website can be found at: sites.jmu.edu/jmupulpsym.

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