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# "Take It and Like It": Violence in the Pulp Magazines

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## **“TAKE IT AND LIKE IT”: VIOLENCE IN THE PULP MAGAZINES**

**Brian Flota**

**April 4, 2014**

**Violence: Empowerment or Self-Destruction**

**James Madison University**

1. The image on the left promotes a story titled “TAKE IT AND LIKE IT” by Frederick Nebel. The one on the right is often considered to be the first important issue of *Black Mask*. The issue features stories about the Ku Klux Klan. One of them, “The Knight of the Open Palm,” by Carroll John Daly, features the first appearance of pulp’s most famous hard-boiled detective, Race Williams.

In a passage in Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), protagonist Samuel Spade gets into a scuffle with Joel Cairo. Spade grabs him by the throat hard enough to make his eyes bulge. Spade reprimands Cairo sternly: “And when you’re slapped you’ll take it and like it” (449). The psychosexual pleasure Spade takes in tormenting Cairo is not uncommon in the fictional worlds contained within pulp magazines. The lurid covers of the pulps – often featuring gun-strapped, male villains and women in bondage – combined with the equally violent content of the stories contained between their covers helped the magazines sell millions of copies per month at the height of their popularity.

The Special Collections of James Madison University Libraries houses one of the nation’s preeminent collections of pulp magazines. These magazines boast some of the most widely distributed fiction of the era, fiction that has mostly been

forgotten because of its “low-brow” nature. In recent years, scholars have begun revisiting the pulps to examine the mainstream values and stylistic trends of the period. Titles such as *Black Mask*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Weird Tales*—the most important pulps from the era—represent the heart of the collection. In this talk, I will argue that an examination of this collection, ranging from the early 1920s to the late 1940s, offers a snapshot of the pleasures writers found in and readers took from the violent representation from the period, a period profoundly influenced by Prohibition, The Great Depression, and two World Wars.

One of the most important early issues of *Black Mask* in our holdings is the infamous Ku Klux Klan issue of June 1, 1923. The terrifying image of a Klansman holding a large, charred cross obscures the fact that the most popular fictional private eye of the 1920s, aptly named Race Williams, is introduced in the issue. The creation of Carroll John Daly, critic Ron Goulart describes Williams as operating in a “sort of a nightmare projection of the real world of the twenties and thirties ... The people Race was trying to help were continually being shot at, kidnaped, tortured” (30, ellipses added). In that first story, titled “Knights of the Open Palm,” Race, who has been given the first-person treatment by Daly, claims, “I do a little honest shooting once in awhile—just in the way of business. But my conscience is clear; I never bumped off a guy what didn’t need it” (“Knights” 33). Race’s shoot-first, ask-questions-later attitude, along with his braggadocio, is a regular feature of his stories. At the conclusion of that same story, Race reflects, “Was he quick? Well, he never had no chance. Mind you, he had his gun in his hand, but he never used it. Just as clean as a whistle I had pulled and shot him straight between his bloodshot eyes”

("Knights" 47). When he has to use his fists, he is apparently no slouch either, bragging after one confrontation, "There was no fear in my mind that this bozo would take a shot at me ... When I tap a boy away he stays tapped for a bit" ("The Silver Eagle" 72). His attitude toward women, not surprisingly, is just as insensitive and lacking in self-consciousness. He claims, "It isn't pleasant to maul a woman. Women mean nothing in my life" ("Snarl" 108).

Five years later, in a story aptly titled "Rough Stuff" (August, 1928), he describes vanquishing the villain Olaf Sankin in the following manner: "[He] sort of stretched himself as he stood upon his toes—then the whiteness of his face in the stage-like glare was given color by the two tiny streams of red that came from both sides of his forehead. Not bad shooting that" ("Rough Stuff" 85). Race seemingly takes pleasure in head-shots, like in the following passage where he shoots Olie Rostener, a dirty cop: "He just stood there facing me. A tiny black hole in his forehead was growing larger—burning eyes had gone sightless—as if you'd thrown water on a fire. Then he clicked his heels together and pitched forward on his face" ("The Silver Eagle" 97).

To a certain extent, the violence portrayed in the pulps, here exemplified by the leading pulp magazine's most popular character, is a by-product of the idealized masculinity of the time. In her book *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (2000), Erin A. Smith notes, "*Black Mask* regularly informed readers about the manly exploits of its writers as soldiers, airmen, police officers, and outdoorsmen" (28). Furthermore, the construction of the era's leading female archetype, the "femme fatale," suggests that the so-called "new woman" of the World

War I period evolved from a sexual threat to what pulp scholar Christopher Breu describes as “the root cause of male violence” (31). In Daly’s Race Williams stories, Florence Drummond, more commonly referred to as “The Flame,” is a recurring femme fatale character that, in the words of critic Woody Haut, “was illustrative of how women supposedly influenced, and even controlled, the world of pulp culture” (112).

The masochistic glee on display in the pulps is not limited to physical or sexual violence. At the beginning of this talk, I made reference to a line of dialogue with the phrase “take it and like” as an example of the sadistic glee Sam Spade takes in choking Joel Cairo. Four years later, those very words grace the cover of the June, 1934 issue of *Black Mask*. They form the title of the leading story in the issue by noted pulp writer Frederick Nebel. The violence in the piece is very real, but mostly fictional within the frame of the story. “Take It and Like It” is one of Nebel’s many MacBride and Kennedy stories, following police Captain Steve MacBride and the alcoholic journalist Kennedy. In it, Kennedy is accused of murdering an heiress. When questioned by the thick headed Assistant D.A., Kennedy puts on a show, confessing to the crime, claiming, “Yeah, I killed her. I guess I kind of went nuts, Tom, but you know how it is: a pretty dame, a little booze” (18). He continues, “I killed her because she was too beautiful for this world” (19). In the process he essentially re-enacts a staple crime scene in a pulp detective story. Ultimately, what the Assistant D.A. and Kennedy’s former editor “take” is Kennedy’s performance of a confession to a crime he did not commit for the purposes of giving his former editor a false lead in order to besmirch his journalistic reputation. When Kennedy gives

MacBride the truthful account of what happened to the heiress, he makes the D.A. and the editor look foolish. They have no option but to “like it.”

Now to the fun stuff! As Frank M. Robinson and Lawrence Davidson argue, “No history of the old pulp magazines can be complete without a gallery of the cover art that enticed the reader and sparked the imagination” (13). They continue: “With time cover art for the pulps became as sensational as the contents” (29). During the pulp magazine’s peak in the 1920s and 1930s, lurid covers by the likes of *Black Mask* regulars like Rafael De Soto and any number of anonymous, cheaply paid artists emphasized humanity’s more violent, voyeuristic, and sexually sadomasochistic impulses.

A male gaze is fairly explicit in the more tawdry of these cover illustrations, frequently featuring images of women as both the object and subject of violence. This appears to be a fairly calculated move. Frank Armer, the publisher of a rival pulp, *Spicy Detective*, jots down in a memo to one of his fiction writers:

Whenever possible, avoid complete nudity of the female characters. You can have her strip down to her underwear, or transparent negligee or nightgown, or the thin, torn shreds of her garments, but while the girl is alive and in contact with a man, we do not want complete nudity. A nude female corpse is allowable, of course ... Do not have men in underwear in scenes with women, and no nude men at all. (qtd. in Haining 81, ellipses added)

This led to a subgenre of the pulps known as “shudder pulps.” They regularly featured scantily clad women receiving elaborate forms of torture from crazed male

villains. Pulp expert Peter Haining notes, “As the 30s drew to a close, it was becoming evident that the public appetite for sex and sadism was dwindling” (149). Why this would’ve been popular at this particular moment in America’s history is can only be explained in a number of long scholarly monographs. But what’s clear is that, based on the cover art of issues of *Black Mask* from the 1940s in JMU’s Special Collection, violent, sadomasochistic covers continued to appear with regularity.

## NOTES ON COVER IMAGES

2. [read]
3. Three of the women appearing on this set of covers have their hand or hands restrained. Two of the images involve making phone calls. Two cannot speak. They are clearly being harmed, and sexualized in the process.
4. These two covers complicate the narrative somewhat. The women on these covers are confined in some way or another, but they seem to be assisting men in (potential) acts of violence.
5. In three of these images, women have been murdered. In the image in the lower right corner, we see a phallic, bloody harpoon-like murder weapon, dripping with blood. The featured title on the cover is "Murder is a Pleasure." The image in the upper right shows a woman being forced to write at gunpoint.
6. In these two images, two men have guns pointed at their heads. The one on the left is in the grim position of being trapped in a sauna. In the image on the right, the murderer appears to be female, and probably a "femme fatale."
7. On this cover, there appears to be a struggle between a man and a woman. The man is reaching for a knife, but is stopped by a woman in high-heels and a short red skirt. The female on the cover has the power here, but she is highly sexualized and fetishized, which phallic high heels and mostly bare legs. The man is unable to reach his gun. Paging Dr. Freud.
8. This might be one of the creepiest Black Mask covers in our collection. A man confined beneath a gutter grate points a pistol essentially between a



woman's legs. He also has what some would refer to as an "upskirt" angle of sight. The middle title on the issue, "Your Corpses are Showing," makes this even more sinister.

9. If you can make heads or tails out of this one, let me know.

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