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Pulp in the Ivory Tower: One University Library's Development of a Pulp Magazine Collection

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PULP IN THE IVORY TOWER: One University Library's Development of a Pulp Magazine Collection

The postmodern collapse of the distinction between the high- and low-brow has brought about renewed scholarly attention to pulp magazines, which flourished from the early 1920s to the late 1930s and survived until the late 1950s. The magazines were produced on cheap paper and featured sensationalist works of crime, adventure, Western, science fiction, and romance fiction. They are also notable for their imaginative, vibrant, and often tawdry cover illustrations. Because they were deemed culturally disposable at the time and were made on such low-quality paper, limited numbers of originals have been collected and made accessible to the general public, despite the fact that numerous pieces by now-canonical writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, H.P. Lovecraft, and Hugo Gernsback, just to name a few, graced their pages. Contemporary literary, gender, art, and cultural studies scholars are now looking back to the pulps as valuable resources that provide insight into the values and practices early 20th Century popular and mainstream culture.

James Madison University (JMU) Library's Special Collections began collecting notable pulp magazines in 2011 in collaboration with English professor,

Brooks Hefner, who does scholarly research on the subject. Notable issues of highly sought-after titles such as *Black Mask*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Weird Tales* were soon added to the collection. During this process, which included several donations, JMU's collection of pulp magazines has become one of the strongest in the United States with more than 350 items. Collecting in this area presents numerous challenges for the library and the English Department, such as developing broader uses for the collection, collection development, preservation, providing access, copyright issues, advocacy, and budget constraints. In this presentation, my colleague Mark Peterson and I will discuss the evolution of this collaboration, the challenges mentioned above, and how we see it moving forward.

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In 2010, the Collection Development Committee at James Madison University Libraries procured the funds to create a Special Project Funding Grant. Assistant Professor Brooks Hefner of the English Department, who counts pulp magazines among his scholarly interests, proposed a special project to develop a pulp magazine collection at JMU. In collaboration with my predecessor Melissa Van Vuuren, the grant was approved and an initial purchase of important issues of *Black Mask* were received beginning in early 2011. Since then, we have acquired key issues of the magazine such the first three of five issues containing the first appearance of Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), two of five issues containing Hammett's *The Glass Key* (1930), and the infamous Ku Klux Klan issue of June 1, 1923, which features the first Race Williams story (who was the most popular fictional hard-boiled private detective in the 1920s and 1930s). We have also

acquired issues of *Weird Tales* and *Astounding Stories* with fiction by Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft and stunning cover art by Margaret Brundage.

There are several scholarly reasons for initiating this collection. In the aftermath of the boom of high literary theory in the 1980s, especially deconstruction, post-structuralism, feminism, gender studies, and postmodernism, the literary canon began to be reshaped and, depending on one's perspective, collapse. As a result, scholarly interest in more popular, less "highbrow" creative writing increased. Similarly, as works by long-canonized writers became critically exhausted, younger and more adventurous scholars started looking elsewhere for scholarly subjects. The more popular pulp magazines had circulation numbers as high as two million during the peak of their popularity in the 1920s and 1930s. As numerous pulp scholars have pointed out, the pulps did have an important influence on numerous canonized writers of the modernist era. One such example includes William Faulkner's early novel *Sanctuary* (1931), which scholar Walter Wenska argues draws plenty of influence from the pulps, particularly in its deployment of popular tropes of masculinity. Furthermore, the pulps offer a variety of content to examine. Not only do they feature popular fiction. They possess lurid cover art, letters sections which can speak to a magazine's readership, and quirky advertisements. Analysis of single issues or runs of issues can yield complex analyses ranging from pulp poetics and gender roles to graphic design and the deployment of Orientalist tropes.

Brooks Hefner, who has spearheaded JMU's effort to collect pulp magazines, cites a number of reasons why pulp magazines are worth collecting. For most

scholars, it is a format that one can examine to find the intersections between high and low culture. As writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Hugo Gernsback become more fully entrenched in the canon, examining original issues of the pulps provides context for their popularity, much in the same way the so-called “small magazines” helped build the reputations and audiences of high modernists such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, James Joyce, and H.D. Studying the pulps helps contemporary scholars get back in touch with a large group of readers who have been pushed to the edges of history because of the continued focus on the most privileged group of readers: the educated, the wealthy, and the artisan classes. Pulps can be a more effective way of gauging cultural anxieties than literary classics because of the speed with which they were produced and published. Highbrow works of fiction often take much longer to conceive, write, and publish.

Currently, there are several scholars doing fascinating, multidisciplinary work on the pulps. John Cheng, a historian and Assistant Professor of Asian and Asian American Studies at Binghamton University, wrote *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America*, which was first published in 2012. David M. Earle, an Associate Professor of English at the University of West Florida, published *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form* in 2009. He has published several articles on pulp, modernism, and popular print forms. He also curated an exhibit at the University of West Florida’s TAG Art Gallery, titled “Modern Pulp,” in February of 2014. Erin A. Smith, an Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, is another notable scholar in the field. In 2000, she published the widely read monograph

Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines. She has published numerous articles on pulp culture and its intersections with religion, masculinity, and working-class reading audiences. Furthermore, a cursory search of the term “pulp” presently turns up nearly 500 results on MLA International Bibliography from 2000-2013. This is an expanding field in literary studies, which has broader applications to American Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and many other interdisciplinary fields of study.

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Several JMU faculty members and one outside researcher have used the pulps for research in the past three and a half years, but students have only come to us for specific presentations or assignments for Brooks Hefner’s classes. This has included an honors class and a graduate seminar. Between 2011 and March 2014, our collection of *Amazing Stories*, *Black Mask*, and *Weird Tales* were used 337 times. In 2011-12, our *Black Mask* collection had 33 unique users, but in the following year only one. Clearly, we need to work more with faculty who have an interest in the collection to make it fit with their teaching programs and to publicize these resources to pulp researchers around the country.

Because of the dramatic covers with their explosive colors, Special Collections has put issues of the pulps on display at every general exhibit and class session in the last three years, generating a great deal of excitement. Several articles about the collection and its use in classes have appeared in campus publications, including JMU promotional sites. JMU Libraries have also sponsored two presentations by scholars on the pulp collection in that time. The Special Collections

blog has covered the pulps frequently, and Brian's LibGuide for pulps shows students how to use them successfully for primary source research.

Special Collections has acquired much of the pulp collection by having alerts on popular auction sites online for specific dates and periodically looking through the major titles that are available. Faculty members periodically let us know of specific issues for sale that they would like us to consider, too. The most successful purchases have come from identifying booksellers with a lot of stock and letting them know that JMU would like purchase a bulk order with less concern for condition than many collectors. I should say too that once word got out that we collect pulp magazines, a number of donations have come to us. Larry Huffman gave Special Collections nearly one hundred western pulps from the 1940's and 50s. We are in discussions to get a major run of *Argosy*. Going forward, the plan is to continue to search for stories from major writers in our three main titles and do fill in the different decades of our holdings, starting with 1929 to 1939 but getting more good examples from each period. This has to be done with some care, since there are always issues from our three titles available, but not necessarily the best ones for our developing collections. The budget for building this collection has been modest but we have been lucky to work with the English and History librarians to work on several major purchases that have helped us get major issues and some bulk purchases to support the university's teaching and faculty research.

JMU Special Collections has purchased these items to be used in classes, which means that while every effort is made to preserve the issues, we also have to recognize that this use is going to damage the magazines over time. The paper and

glue have become brittle enough that every use breaks off tiny fragments. We work to keep the magazines together as long as possible. Every one who comes into the reading room to work with this material is taught how to handle the fragile paper and spines of the pulps carefully. We store each in a four-fold archival box. In cases where the cover has separated from the text block, our preservationist puts the cover in a mylar sleeve.

This is a project clearly worth continuing. As works and perspectives on high modernist authors become exhausted, the writings of more obscure popular writers from the era will provide a new, yet old resource for literary historians, popular cultural studies, and many other interdisciplinary scholars. We hope to continue to grow the collection to not only serve our faculty, but also the broader, growing scholarship on the pulps and more popular forms of expression in general.