

## CHAPTER 1

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# Pulp: Biography of an American Object

There is real hope for a culture that makes it as easy to buy a book as it does a pack of cigarettes.

—Eduard C. Lindeman, New American Library  
advertisement flyer (1951)

The growth of paper-bound books has been, in simple fact, a giant stride forward in the democratic process.

—Freeman Lewis, president of  
the National Conference of Social Welfare

## Scenes of Reading

During my research at the archives of the New American Library at New York University, I found a letter from a grateful reader describing how he'd stopped by the neighborhood candy store on the way home from choir practice to pick up a pack of cigarettes, grabbed a book along with the newspaper, and discovered, hours later, that he had spent the entire afternoon immersed in reading. Many other readers wrote in with similar stories. They wanted to let the publishers and authors know how much readily available cheap books

meant to lonely readers in the middle of the last century, and they wanted more of them.

In another archive, at the Winston Churchill Library in Cambridge, England, I found the remnants of a journal kept by an escaped prisoner of war, or perhaps he was a deserter from the French Foreign Legion, jailed in Casablanca. The journal, entitled “Diaries of Fedor Minorsky (alias Theodor Harris [son of noted Orientalist Vladimir Minorsky]),” details the escaped prisoner’s long trek across North Africa, including the reading matter he somehow managed to find while making his way across the barren Rif and Atlas Mountains. With loving detail, he retells the stories found in a pulpy American magazine and one book, Christopher Morley’s 1925 novel, *Thunder on the Left*, which he picked up somewhere. His writing veers into a sort of purple prose, on one hand, and modernist stream of consciousness, on the other, depending on which of the two texts this British officer was reading and rereading during his trek.<sup>1</sup> His accounts recorded in his journal might be seen as an inversion of James Thurber’s 1939 *New Yorker* story, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (made into a movie in 1947 starring Danny Kaye and remade in 2013 with Ben Stiller in the lead), where the henpecked, suburbanite editor of paperback adventure tales imaginatively inserts himself into the books’ plots and vicariously lives the life of swashbuckling adventurer. This officer actually was living dangerously.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, in another archive at Boston University housing Meyer Levin’s papers, I found letters from Levin’s wife, the recently deceased writer Tereska Torrès, whose scandalous autobiographical novel, *Women’s Barracks*, precipitated a congressional hearing. These letters recounted the various suits and countersuits provoked by Levin’s novel *Compulsion*, about the notorious “crime of the century”—the murder of a teenage boy by University of Chicago students Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb—and his dispute with Otto Frank over Levin’s dramatic adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Books are intimate objects, and reading verges on the illicit, even as it is encouraged by parents and schools. The paperback revolution sparked a certain form of reading—what I call demotic reading—as it lured readers with provocative covers at an affordable price into a new relationship with the private lives of books and so with themselves. In the creation myth of the founding of modern paperbacks, Penguin Books by Allen Lane, recounted on the back of the lined notebook with a reproduction of the Penguin cover of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, which I bought at an independent bookstore in Berkeley to use while doing archival research, we learn that wanting something to read triggered this new commodity, a revival of a nineteenth-century form fallen out of fashion. Written in the flip and confidential prose of Penguin back-cover biographies, the tale goes as follows:

He just wanted a decent book to read . . . Not too much to ask, is it? It was in 1935 that Allen Lane, Managing Director of Bodley Head Publishers, stood on a platform at Exeter railway station looking for something good to read on his journey back to London. His choice was limited to popular magazines and poor-quality paperbacks—the same choice faced every day by the vast majority of readers, few of whom could afford hardbacks. Lane’s disappointment and subsequent anger at the range of books generally available led him to found a company—and change the world. . . . The quality paperback had arrived—and not just in bookshops. Lane was adamant that his Penguins should appear in chain stores and tobacconists and should cost no more than a packet of cigarettes.<sup>3</sup>

Lane’s experience as a reader was essential to the origins of the quality paperback, which, under his tutelage, was conceived as an alternative to the “poor-quality paperbacks” then on sale. His signature look—“dignified but flippant”—combined the sober tripartite

two-toned cover with the playful penguin sketched from life at the London zoo.

The concept and the brand migrated to the United States after war broke out in Europe. In fact, paperbacks were stolen, some say, by Ian Ballantine and Robert de Graff, both of whom had worked at Penguin in the 1930s and carried the idea across the pond. Other stories assert that they were brought by Allen Lane to Kurt Enoch and Victor Weybright to become New American Library (NAL), because in the United States vast resources of paper meant books could still be widely printed during wartime. In America, the books remained for sale in train stations, newsstands, and candy stores, but the covers were transformed. They often imitated the sensational covers displayed on movie and true detective and romance magazines, but occasionally also hinted at the new art movements percolating in the wake of Europe's mass destruction, as did Robert Jonas's cover for the 1947 Penguin edition of Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (plate 1). And the logo was subtly altered: birds were forbidden (Penguin had a lock), so the clever founders of NAL hit on Signet as a sly allusion to that ugly duckling.<sup>4</sup> This being America, after all.

A lowly yet somehow revered object, the paperback book exemplifies a modernist form of multimedia in which text, image, and material come together as spectacle to attract and enthrall a recipient, its audience, its reader. This medium was designed for maximum portability and could move seamlessly from private to public spaces. Guy Pène du Bois, a midcentury modernist art critic and painter derivative of Edward Hopper's style, like many of his contemporaries—especially photographers John Vachon, Walker Evans, Jack Delano, Russell Lee, and Esther Bubley—was fascinated by the act of public reading and by the materials and circumstances that enticed readers (figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5). The image of the woman reading in private had long been a subgenre of portraiture in Western art, but these modern artists captured a moment

when silent, solitary reading entered public spaces. These artists noticed the flood of magazine covers displayed in public newsstands that brought an array of images and type styles into view, fleetingly glimpsed while passing by; but sometimes—as when Allen Lane needed something to read on his train—capturing the eye, arresting the step, and landing in someone’s hands when the buyer found a seat, to completely absorb her. Reading in public offers an uncanny experience as one slips into the private world of the book while also remaining vigilant, for example, if one is on the train so as not to miss one’s stop or have one’s purse picked. The public reader is always at once immersed and on guard (plate 5).

Often Pène du Bois’s paintings depict scenes of reading where two or more women are seated together, strangers on a train most



Figure 1.1 John Vachon, Newsstand, Omaha, Nebraska, November 1938. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information (FSA/OWI) Collection [LC-USF34-008939-D]. Note that the stands are full of magazines but no paperbacks.



**Figure 1.2** Arthur Rothstein, Magazines at newsstand, Saint Louis, Missouri, January 1939. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF334-0o30s5-M462571-D].

**Figure 1.3** (*facing page top*) Photographer unknown, Newsstand with foreign language newspapers, Fall 1941. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF346-001359-Q-C].

**Figure 1.4** (*facing page bottom*) Jack Delano, Chicago, Illinois. Newsstand in Union Station train concourse, January 1943. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USW3-015452-E]. By this time, the kiosk prominently displays a selection of paperbacks.





**Figure 1.5** Esther Bubley, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Passengers in the waiting room of the Greyhound bus terminal, September 1943. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USW3-037110-E]. Note the paperbacks hanging above the women's heads.

likely, each absorbed in her own book, isolated within its world, yet linked by the shared act of reading. But one of Pène du Bois's paintings, *Portia in a Pink Blouse*, now hanging in the Indianapolis Museum of Art, merits special mention (plate 6, *top*). Since the sixteenth century, in both Europe and Asia, the relationship of woman and book has been so widely depicted as to be almost a genre of painting, perhaps simply because it gave models something to do

during long hours of sitting. In *Portia in a Pink Blouse*, however, this iconic relationship is altered. A woman sits at a café table, capped by a black hat with a mesh veil covering her face, staring into space away from a bouquet of pink and blue flowers that dominates the frame. Although she is not reading, a book is at the center of this portrait; she is saving her place with her finger as she looks off, out of the picture frame, to her left. The book is a paperback, an NAL paperback to be exact, judging by the layout of the cover with its title and author clearly legible: Portia wrote this book, which means she is at once a somewhat upscale writer (NAL only published reprints) and a popular one at that (NAL usually produced runs of a single title in the hundreds of thousands). She is on display along with her wares.

The painting is intriguing for any number of reasons: its pink color scheme; its evocation of the film noir femme fatale obscured by a black veil; and its tableau still life of flowers, table, and book with text, a nod to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, and the entire corpus of café images by them and others. The table looks Parisian, and Pène du Bois—born in Brooklyn to natives of New Orleans and having traveled to Paris in 1905 and again in the 1920s—has positioned Portia amid emblems of modernism: a woman alone in public, seated at a table that might have once been used by Édouard Manet's *Absinthe Drinker* or any of the dissolute women seated beside him. (A few years after creating this portrait, Pène du Bois returned to New Orleans to paint women at an absinthe house.) But most important, she is the *author* of a paperback, which dates the image—to the 1940s. War is on, but her preoccupations are elsewhere; she is Portia LeBrun, the poet, author of the book entitled *All Is Crass* or maybe *All Is Grass*, it is hard to tell. The painting was completed in 1942, the year Orson Welles was filming *The Magnificent Ambersons*, based on Booth Tarkington's novel, and was given to the museum by the author's wife: Mrs. Booth Tarkington. But, as a review in the *New York Times* indicates, she had commissioned a portrait in 1939—the year Penguin came

to America—so perhaps it was the first painting of this modern object, the pocket-size paperback.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Portia's been pulped.

Pène du Bois *had* already painted a portrait of Portia in 1939. In this painting, she sits properly upright in a chair, facing directly out from a canvas dominated by dull oranges, browns, and burnt sienna, primly dressed in a rust-colored, man-tailored suit. By 1942, Portia has become a louche woman, no longer seated inside a domestic space but on the prowl in her garish pink and black—colors that would dominate the covers of pulp during the next decade. Her right hand is hidden within the open pages of the book, which is propped up by her left hand. It is as if she is fingering its pages, much as Sigmund Freud saw Dora doing with her *Schmuckkasten*; Portia's masturbating in full view. Pène du Bois was known for his derivative paintings of high-society patrons; thus he was hardly the populist Edward Hopper was (see his 1943 painting *Hotel Lobby* [plate 6, *bottom*], also in the Indianapolis Museum of Art, where a lone woman sits in an armchair, legs stretched before her shod in elegant pumps with ankle straps, reading a magazine across from an elderly couple, and watched by the clerk, who lurks in the shadows). Its architecture focuses on the erotics of the woman reading in public, her legs, sheathed in silk stockings, claiming attention. Hopper's public space is actually far more claustrophobic than the private hotel room where another woman sits reading in 1934 Chicago (J. Theodore Johnson, *Chicago Interior*, plate 7, *top*), but both hint at interiority and loneliness. So this 1942 portrait, commissioned by a friend, of a woman writer seated with her paperback, impatiently searching for someone, is more than a paean to the idle rich, which was the painter's hallmark; it is a hymn to modern life—where a woman alone can sit in public on display, like a pulp cover beckoning from a rack, and read a book, her book, an advertisement for herself.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, women were not the only public readers; it was widely assumed that pulp fiction's target readership was male.<sup>7</sup> But this

easy transit between public and private, where the portable book, the pocket book, as the earliest American brand was called, could move from inside the home to inside the pocket or pocketbook and then be pulled out at any free moment, seems especially emblematic of modern femininity. In fact, Hopper's original conception of *Hotel Lobby* foregrounded a man reading, but as the work came to fruition, he refigured the lone reader as a young woman, a more fitting avatar of the modern urban subject.

The distinctions between what could be read in private or in public were not obvious. Moreover, pulps' global invasion was not a simultaneous occurrence; their incursion into readers' homes varied across nations. As Pritham K. Chakravarthy recalls from her 1960s childhood in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, the serialized fiction that was read at her proper home—with stories yanked out and hardbound for summer reading—were not the racy fare she and her friends imbibed on the school bus from other more sensational magazines read by the driver: “I remember when this story [*En Peyar Kamala* by Pushpa Thangadurai] was being serialized in the mid-seventies. The journal was kept hidden in my mother's cupboard. The subject matter was deemed too dangerous for us young girls. Since I was not allowed to read it at home, naturally, I read it on the school bus. Thanks to Natraj [the driver].”<sup>8</sup> This true crime tale of a kidnapped Tamil girl working in a Delhi brothel (where another native Hindi-speaking prostitute spent her free time reading Hindi pulps) was enormously popular, running for weeks. Since at least the 1930s, when pulp achieved massive success in India thanks to increased literacy, available printing, and the influence of the “British penny dreadful” and “American dime novel,” a female readership of popular fiction predominated.<sup>9</sup> Women's reading of fiction has long elicited various social anxieties—about female idleness and the commercialization of literature. By 1933, Sudhandhira Sangu was dispensing “The Secret of Commercial Novel Writing”:

1. The title of the book should carry a woman's name—and it should be a sexy one, like “Miss Leela Mohini” or “Mosdhar Vallibai.”
2. Don't worry about the storyline. All you have to do is creatively adapt the stories of [British penny dreadful author C.W.M.] Reynolds and the rest. Yet your story absolutely must include a minimum of half a dozen lovers and prostitutes, preferably ten dozen murders, and a few sundry thieves and detectives.
3. The story should begin with a murder. Sprinkle in a few thefts. Some arson will also help. These are the necessary ingredients of a modern novel.
4. You can make money only if you are able to titillate. If you try to bring in any social message, like Madhaviah's *The Story of Padhmavathi* or Rajam Iyer's *The Story of Kamalabal*, forget it. Beware! You are not going to lure women readers.<sup>10</sup>

These directions for crime fiction in Tamil differ from those offered by George Scullin to aspiring American true crime authors in 1937. In “Crime Pays,” published in *Writer's Digest*, Scullin explains that visuals were essential for selling a story to a true crime magazine. With most magazine covers featuring women—as victims or perpetrators—and with the new emphasis on the photographic essay within the slicks (*Life* magazine began in 1936), “[p]hotographs to illustrate fact-detective stories are of vital importance.”

Because “copy” is not enough in the face of movie culture, photographs (not the painted illustrations from early 1930s magazine cover art) were central to engaging readers. What editors needed to accompany the facts were images, and images designed to narrate—“first . . . The victim, the murderer, the officer . . . Then comes scene stuff. The house in which the murder took place, the field in which the body was discovered, the bridge from which the killer leaped in making his escape, the car he wrecked in his flight, the clues which

led to his capture . . .”<sup>11</sup> Will Straw argues that with the emergence of cinema and mass-circulated magazines (and I would argue paperback book covers) “crime [like religion or nature] has generated full-blown approaches to visuality, large-scale systems for aesthetically rendering the world as a whole.” These, of course, reference “guns and bodies,” but, as he maintains, “Crime is suggested . . . when . . . streets or parks are shown as empty . . . or when darkness is cut by beams of electric illumination.”<sup>12</sup> In short, the iconography of danger, especially for the female, is essential to conveying urban space as a zone of criminality and to selling it as a visual form as recognizable as a pastoral landscape or the beatific virgin. All this, of course, had already occurred in “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” according to Walter Benjamin’s reading of Charles Baudelaire’s poems and Eugène Atget’s photographs. As historian Vanessa Schwartz elaborates, “The visual representation of reality as spectacle in late nineteenth-century Paris created a common culture and a sense of shared experiences through which people might begin to imagine themselves as participating in a metropolitan culture because they had visual evidence that such a shared world, of which they were a part, existed.”<sup>13</sup> Producing and consuming the world of spectacle was an essential part of modern life. Americans may not have gotten to it first, but when they arrived, *Pow!*

It would seem we are a far cry from Paris or my mother’s bedside nightstand or Portia LeBrun’s portrait, but reading the paperback book—even *Dr. Zhivago* in a suburban backyard in the early 1960s—was part of a process that included mass-circulating popular magazines and movies featuring crime fiction and true crime stories, whose combination of “cyanide and sex,” to use Will Straw’s term, appealed to women as much as to men. The exposé covers Straw collects, with titles such as “The Strange Case of the Ravaged Housekeeper” or “Murder Tryst of the Minnesota Beauty” or “My Mommy is Shot,” as much as “I Was a Stoooge for the Commies” and “Sex, Schoolbooks and Switchblades,” depict domestic space as a

zone of mayhem—as dangerous as “Sniper on 42nd Street” and as alluring as “Paris’ Sidewalk Salesgirls.” They show how the startled look of the woman, either interrupted in her crime or frozen as its victim (“Woman at Bay”), is part of the iconography that both enabled and was enabled by modern woman’s mobility and her ability to carry not only the snub-nosed pistol in her purse but the Pocket Book in her pocketbook as well.

## Objects on the Shelf

*The Hare with Amber Eyes* tells the story of Edmund de Waal’s netsuke collection inherited from his great uncle and the saga of how his uncle came to possess these objects, first owned by *his* great uncle or second cousin Charles Ephrussi, a Parisian art critic and scion of one of Europe’s wealthiest Jewish families, fabulously rich grain dealers from Odessa. Edmund de Waal says of his ancestor that the trip he took to Italy in the mid-nineteenth century, a vagabonding Grand Tour, turned Charles Ephrussi “into a collector. Or perhaps . . . it allow[ed] him to collect, to turn looking into having and having into knowing.”<sup>14</sup> Looking, having, and knowing form a progression of possession as the object of desire moves from outside inward, first into the home (the vitrines holding the netsukes) and then into the mind as a source to be studied, analyzed, handled, and described. Knowing means narrating, as what had been seen and held becomes storied. All collecting then tends to death, decay, ruin, and the eventual collapse of the collection, and of the collector as the materials disintegrate, get lost, and as the set breaks apart. For miraculous reasons, Charles Ephrussi’s netsuke collection remained intact, even as the family it belonged to was destroyed. These tiny objects, any and all of which might have been lost, held together across continents, wars, and mass murders, merit the amazing book by de Waal. They tell us how objects held together hold history.

“For a collector,” writes critic Walter Benjamin in “Unpacking My Library,” “ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to things.”<sup>15</sup> Collectors need collections. That seems obvious; but how and when does the presence of random objects coalesce into a collection? When are collections personal and private obsessions lining one’s walls and when are they part of a nationalizing project that seeks to create a body of work in the name of collective identity?<sup>16</sup> At what point does mere possession develop into that more “intimate relationship” of ownership, when the sheer numbers of the things—things that are at once the same yet different; discrete yet part of a series, reproducible yet unique—become a collection, visible, with a life of its own?<sup>17</sup> When are you transformed from someone just looking to one who must have, who becomes what is known in the collecting world as a “completest,” one who knows it all?<sup>18</sup>

I cannot remember when I began amassing pulp. They were the books my parents owned, bought to be read because they were cheap. I took some of them with me when I left home as a teenager. Something about their size, their covers, and their smell attracted me—mementos of my childhood hauled from apartment to apartment. Then I began to consciously seek out some of these pulp books—though not any one would do. Don’t ask me why, but I was interested only in the pulp versions of “great literature.” I have no idea how this began—looking for the pulp Faulkner, the pulp Freud, the pulp anthropology book, the pulp physics text. Pulp meant to be pulp, true trash, never intrigued me—or not at first. I wanted the special thrill that came from seeing Nathaniel Hawthorne’s name on a cheesy cover, the pleasure of seeing the most revered writers brought low, sitting right next to John O’Hara or worse, covers with cellophane peeling, pages yellowing just the same. Without knowing it, New American Library was my brand.

At some point, the collector becomes conscious (shifts from looking to having and then knowing), acknowledges the power of

the collection, and searches for additions to it in order to refine its dimensions, then builds a separate case for it, catalogs and analyzes it, who is the person who sorts by size or color or some other system. The books acquire value, a secret value, not for “their usefulness,” as Benjamin notes, but “as the scene, the stage, of their fate,” which is to evaporate. A collection is always disappearing, even as it grows. It recedes into its owner’s past, and foretells her passing. Its very density cannot hold off decay; it’s already a memory in the making, holding a perverse appeal akin to that recounted by Henry James in *The Aspern Papers*. In addition to the leftovers from my parents’ bedside tables, my collection includes the cheapest edition of this or that novel, those traded while hitchhiking across Europe or Brazil, and, more recently, my scholarly study of censorship and women’s pulp fiction. It was forged in the fortuitous first apartment just steps from Moe’s Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley and from countless other used book stores around the world, from library book sales and garage sales, from trash bins, and now from the comfort of my office as I peruse AbeBooks.com—that’s where I recently acquired the three different versions, from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, of Ann Petry’s 1946 novel *The Street*, each with a different cover modeled on Billie Holiday or Lena Horne (in her role in *Stormy Weather*), then Dorothy Dandridge, and finally Lena Horne as she looked a generation later (plate 14 [*top*], [*bottom left*], and [*bottom right*], respectively). Marrying my husband, an avid sci-fi reader during the 1950s, netted me a wonderful cache of racy Ace double-sided visions of atomic and robotic apocalypse. Their flyleaves explain that with the advent of nuclear weaponry, these works of fantasy actually offer keen sociological insights.

After a while, people know your taste and pick up little finds for you—as a friend of a friend did when he snagged a copy of Don Kingery’s novel *Paula* for me at a book fair. Some books are disintegrating, held together by rubber bands or paper clips, stuffed in Baggies. I love some for their garish colors, their nods to mod-

ernist art styles, and their abstractions. I love some for the contrast between the cover art, with its lurid femme fatale, and the demure picture of the woman author on the back. I love some for their back-cover blurbs: “A sort of female Hemingway,” declares one about the author of *Louisville Saturday*, Margaret Long. I love some for their prudishness. On the copyright page of Fletcher Flora’s risqué novel *Leave Her to Hell!*, we are informed, “A professional model posed for the cover art of this book,” a sultry blond whose slip strap has fallen off her shoulder. I’ve not read them all. Try to and they fall apart. Besides, that’s not the point of book collecting—anyone can read a book, probably has read this very book, at least once. The collection is for keeps—a spectacle for when there is nothing to read; insurance against the disaster of *Fahrenheit 451* (a thirty-five-cent Joe Mugnaini illustrated Ballantine Books paperback original, 1953); meant to be stashed away, rarely revealed as it exposes too much; an oracle of one’s death, the boxes sprung open by one’s survivors and the tawdry stuff cherished. Here I am: an open book.

In 2009, Chinese artist Song Dong’s installation on the floor of the Museum of Modern Art’s atrium, entitled *Waste Not*, laid out the objects kept by his mother in her tiny *hutang*—hundreds of shoes, plastic ice cream containers, the shiny and colorful shopping bags one acquires from shopping in China’s quality shops, dried and compressed slivers of laundry soap, combs, dozens of chairs and pots and broken umbrellas—everything a life might collect and store, in this case, stuffed within the tiny footprint of a home dwarfed by the expansive space of the museum. The melancholic tribute to the smells and stains that cling to old things, stuff that in its place would be invisible and should have been tossed out long before, but once exposed to view became emblems of time and loss, evoking embarrassment in the outsider who looks upon this life of stuff with an ache of recognition, a whiff of distaste for the abjection and poverty expressed. And, of course, an anxiety about one’s own accumulating archive—and what kind of spectacle it might be

if one's son were to unpack it in public. "Yet," as Olivia Judson remarks in a meditation on the objects, including many books, left behind in a rambling house after her parents both died, "when someone is dead and belongings are all that is left, dispersing those belongings feels like an erasing of that person's physical presence on the earth."<sup>19</sup>

I recently reread Henry Roth's great Depression novel, *Call It Sleep*. It's a ninety-five-cent Avon paperback with classy rounded corners, the 1964 first paperback edition, one of those owned by my parents and taken by me from their house when the novel was assigned in a class I took as an undergraduate. I read it then in awe—perhaps this reading experience was behind my decision to specialize in 1930s literature. It gave me some inkling of my parents' lives as children, though the novel is set in the Lower East Side in the first decades of the twentieth century, and my parents, far poorer than David Shear's parents, were both in the Old Country and in the new, lived in Williamsburg and Bedford-Stuyvesant when the novel was being written. (It was first published in 1934, with a second printing in 1935; then the publisher, Robert Ballou, went bust.) The protagonist Davy's secret world of love, fear, guilt, and visionary seeking gripped me and still does. This is a terrifying novel, resurrected the year after Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a book I did not read as a child but discovered as a parent. Sendak had modeled Max's monsters on his uncles and aunts, figures that come straight out of Davy's world and the Old World remnants of mine too—not the American-born aunts and uncles but their parents and the other old Jews one encountered occasionally on visits to apartments in Brooklyn.

I have *Call It Sleep*, along with dozens of others salvaged in one way or another from my mother's apartment over the years, especially when I moved her out of it and into an assisted-living apartment near me. Culling her shelves of the self-help and pop psychology (she had been a psych major at Brooklyn College, studying

with Abraham Maslow) she had poured over as she contemplated and initiated her divorce from my father, I decided I was only keeping paperbacks published before the 1970s, only those with the distinctive stained edges of the early years of paperback publication, only those with the gold borders of Signet or Mentor books, only those of value—to me. The rest I loaded into a large black plastic garbage bag that I hauled across the street where trash cans were arrayed along the curb, as it seemed to be garbage day on that side. But the haul weighed a ton, and as I bumped the bag down the long flight of stairs from her Westbeth loft to the street below, the plastic tore as it scraped across the sidewalk, so when I reached the street, the entire bag had shredded. I pushed the books back toward her curb and hurried back into her place. I had much work to do in the few hours before the movers showed up. As I worked, sorting and arranging her paintings and clothes and art books and journals and sketchpads, I'd occasionally glance out the window to see passersby sifting through the books and picking up one or two from the pile, this being Greenwich Village and the strollers—mostly early-morning dog walkers—book-collecting types (how else had my mother amassed her vast store of these but at sidewalk sales, used bookstores, rummage sales, the stash in her building's laundry room, or found in the trash on walks through her neighborhood?). By the time I went out to meet the moving truck, the pile had disappeared, and with it my guilt, as I had never in my life thrown a book away, perhaps the only sin I recognize, destruction of words, even silly words compiled and bound into that sacred object, a book, promising a scene of reading. It seems I was reversing a trend that Harlequin Books—which my mother would never have read; her schlock remained at the slightly higher level of Belva Plain—had inaugurated in the 1980s of packing new Harlequin novels in boxes of Hefty garbage bags.<sup>20</sup>

This is the conundrum of the archive—richly theorized over the decades since Michel Foucault outlined it in *The Archaeology*

*of Knowledge*. What remains, what is saved, cataloged, and taxonomized, “the order of things,” is as seemingly arbitrary as “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” found in Jorge Luis Borges’s “Analytical Language of John Wilkins” that had provoked Foucault’s laughter and generated his inquiry into the deep systems of modern thought and information.<sup>21</sup> The tension Foucault limns between utopias, “a fantastic, untroubled region,” “a place of residence,” like the archive or even the bookshelf, and heterotopias, which shatter the myriad “sites so very different from one another,” haunts my story of why these books that hold such deep fascination for me (at least those from the immediate postwar decades) and for the many others who develop websites devoted to their covers and contents. They are really little more than junk to be hauled across a street and tossed or, in the case of the Kelley Collection, preserved in a kind of book jail to the dismay of those charged with keeping them.<sup>22</sup>

Utterly fascinating and alluring in their cheap form, yet a nuisance, like any trash littering public and private spaces, these used books, remnants of others’ reading, cheap and available and essentially the same, yet “so very different from one another,” offer an expression of democracy unlike many others. They are keys to demotic reading, an experience of literature that traverses many social distinctions. Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman speak of “the hole in the archive” because the remains of the many modernist little magazines founded a century ago have been lost, or if retained have been denuded of their form, stripped of advertisements so central to the modernist aesthetic that links text and image; but this is also a problem for paperback books produced in the more recent past, despite the fact that in 1950 hundreds of thousands of paperback books were bought by public libraries, such as Brooklyn’s and Cleveland’s, for their “Put ’N’ Take” plan.<sup>23</sup> Libraries lack space, like all of us. So books end up on the streets, sold, like the millions of *xiao ren shu* (little people’s books) produced during and after the Cultural Revolution in China and now cluttering the stalls of

street merchants all over China's bustling cities, tokens of childhood trips to local lending libraries where stories of valiant heroes fighting imperialist Japanese, or of Lenin or Mao, or of Chinese opera heroines struggling to survive taught a generation to read. Or they get pulped—tossed out, as did hundreds of thousands of paperbacks during periods of economic squeeze, like that following the Korean War in 1953, or more recently, when Penguin India pulped, that is, destroyed all remaining copies of theologian Wendy Doniger's 2006 book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, after a successful four-year lawsuit found it in violation of the Indian Penal Code.

The monotony of the paperback—its uniform dimensions and the ways in which it blurs the lines between high and low, fiction and nonfiction, text and image—allows for readers to embrace them for various reasons, often having nothing to do with reading, including how the spectacle of paperback attracts one to purchase it (as the reader who wrote to NAL did one afternoon in a candy store in the Bronx) or being attracted to something on its cover (as Charlotte Nekola was after her older sister Jane pulled the paperback edition of *Jane Eyre* off her shelf to show her dreamy younger sister how both of their names were inscribed there, sending Charlotte on a mission to read it and eventually become an English professor). One reads these books for the dirty parts—as does Paul Newman's nephew in the film *Hud*—or for a summertime beach read; or for a sense of sophistication, as I had, sprawling in my backyard, a sixth grader reading *Dr. Zhivago*; or for “company,” which is what a *Pocket Book of Verse*, “one of the first paperback anthologies ever published,” provided William Styron for the two years he was in the naval hospital at Parris Island during World War II (the same book, “found on the jo-house seat,” had sustained Ezra Pound during his postwar imprisonment in Pisa);<sup>24</sup> or because of an intense interest in math and science, coupled with teenaged alienation, that led him to empathize with the bizarre and otherworldly, as did my husband, an avid sci-fi reader in the 1950s; or to pass the time on “the troopship,

U.S.S. *Maui*, leaning against the stack reading *The Robe*” in an Armed Services Edition on V-J Day, as had Pierson Davis;<sup>25</sup> or “while living in a tent for two years . . . totally bored” on the armistice line in Korea in 1955, as had architect Peter Eisenman, who recalls: “It was the first year of the Vintage paperbacks. There were Alain-Fournier, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and André Gide, which my brother [at Cornell] kept sending to me as they came out. I had the collection from one to thirty or whatever.”<sup>26</sup> Long before Vintage paperbacks, John Updike “remember[ed] as a boy the dramatic arrival, in the town variety store, of a rack of Pocket Books, mostly mysteries, whose discreetly lurid covers were covered by a thin sheet of cellophane that tended to curl at the corners and could be peeled entirely off by persistent little fingers. They cost a quarter, compared with a dime for a comic book, and had much more text, as well as sexier covers.”<sup>27</sup>

Paperbacks propel demotic, even democratic, reading; one reads above or below one’s “level,” grabbing whatever is at hand. Or, finding nothing to read in them, one keeps them because books, a library of paper garishly colored, produce a spectacle, taking up shelf space, and accumulate weight when placed alongside others, their heft accruing meaning for the owner, “a dam against the springtide of memory,” for “the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”<sup>28</sup> The shelves threaten collapse.

## Bringing Modernism to Main Street

What is pulp? Steamy fiction? Sleazy magazines? Cheap paper? Or might it be a technology, a vehicle that once brought desire—for sex, for violence—into the open in cheap, accessible form? Or, and this is the question that motivates this book, might it be part of a larger process by which modernism itself, as high literature and art but also as a mass consumer practice, spread across America?

This is a story of paper, or rather of paperback books, produced in massive numbers between the late 1930s and early 1960s. These throwaway items hold within their covers a rich history of literary tastes; they point to, even reflect, a democratizing literacy and the new forms of identity and community that emerged in mid-twentieth-century America. The covers themselves present new visions of the American landscape and its inhabitants. In contrast to the tabloids and sensational crime and romance magazines that created what Simon Bessie called in 1938 “jazz journalism,” these mass-market, or as they were called “pocket-size books,” fostered a more intimate realm of feeling even as they participated in a vast industrial empire of pulp cultural forms.<sup>29</sup> The mechanisms of pulping a work entailed a process of redistribution or, more precisely, remediation: writings often created for an educated and elite audience took on new lives by being repackaged as cheap paperbacks. For example, in 1952, Signet reissued an NAL edition (No. 950) of stories by Thomas Wolfe with the provocative title *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*; the stories, from the 1930s, had first appeared in hardcover from Scribner’s, as well as in pulp and slick magazines. But they had already been gathered into a collection in 1947 as an NAL edition with the far less enticing title *Short Stories* (reissued in 1949), NAL No. 644. Where the first paperback edition featured the signature abstract cover of modernist illustrator Robert Jonas, with a cascade of a broken column, a marble bust of a man, and a stylized Brooklyn Bridge flowing from a dark navy background into a lighter shade of blue, the retitled volume presented a high-baroque, steamy cover by Rudy Nappi. Noted for his illustrations of such titles as *Girl-Hungry*, *Backwoods Hussy*, *Gang Moll*, and *Reefer Girl*, Nappi also illustrated many of the nurse pulps flooding the market in the 1950s, such as *Woman’s Doctor* and *Private Nurse*. In the 1952 edition, a woman dressed in a tight pink sheath leans alluringly against the front stoop; poised behind two trash cans, a boy in a leather jacket leers over her shoulder, while deep in

the background looms the Brooklyn Bridge. Why would Thomas Wolfe ever look homeward when he could wander the “wilds of Brooklyn,” as the back-cover blurb proclaimed? These new (and old) paperbacks traveled far beyond their intended circle of readers into the hands of anyone with a quarter to spare. In this way, Tess Durbeyfield, Daisy Miller, Connie Chatterley, and Holden Caulfield, not to mention Mike Hammer and Sam Spade, were among the thousands who made it onto Main Street.<sup>30</sup>

The story of modernism’s pulping is a reclamation project that might begin, as one must when rummaging for the secondhand, in any number of places. Picture, for instance, a married soldier from Brooklyn, who lies in a ditch to survive days of a firefight in Normandy during World War II, reading Lytton Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* in an Armed Services Edition paperback. Or consider the young James Agee, poised to begin writing his rhapsodic examination of three tenant farmers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, buying a copy of the true crime magazine *Actual Detective* and scribbling about it across pages and pages of his journal one lonely night in Atlantic City. Or think of Richard Wright, still an aspiring novelist in Chicago, collecting hoards of crime stories from pulps and tabloids, then drawing on these to write *Native Son* and *12 Million Black Voices*.

Or focus on the cover art, perhaps with a look at the sleazy naturalism of James Avati (known as “the Rembrandt of Pulp”), who immortalized the residents of his small New Jersey town as models for the dramatic scenes that peopled his steamy covers, displayed in racks found in drugstores, candy stores, and bus and train stations across America. Turn over a copy of a Dell mystery, with its Gerald Gregg cover of detached body parts floating in space, to look at the maps hand-drawn by Ruth Belew, one of the few women doing cover (admittedly back-cover) art (plate 2). Or peek into the Union Square studio, near that of painter Arshile Gorky, shared by Willem De Kooning, Maxfield Vogel, Bart van der Shilling, and

Robert Jonas in the mid-1930s. Pay special attention to Jonas, who, with de Kooning, worked as a window dresser at A. S. Beck's department store, and helped organize the left-wing Artists' Union before becoming a staff cover artist for Penguin and New American Library, where his cubist-inspired covers pared down the lurid expressionism of most paperbacks into clean lines and bold primary colors. Indeed, one might discover in the files of the New American Library—with its motto “Good Reading for the Millions,” where Robert Jonas served as art director—how millions of editions of books by black and gay writers were sold to a nation still living under a slowly cracking Jim Crow and solidly homophobic society, so that the decadent Sally Bowles spread across James Avati's cover of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* could seem part of the national landscape (figure 1.6).

The story of how pulp brought a secondhand modernism to midcentury America ironically could also be told after the fact, as the paperback revolution was ending, mainstreaming into higher-priced trade paperbacks used in college courses, by attending to the weeklong December 1952 congressional hearings on “Current Pornographic Materials” held by Ezekiel Gathings's (D-AR) committee. These hearings put paperbacks under scrutiny for their alluring covers, exemplified by Tereska Torrès's *Women's Barracks*, an account of her time in the women's Free French Army, with a cover that signaled the lesbian content within. This story might also track the long history of various censorship trials, including the efforts to suppress *Fanny Hill* (first banned in Massachusetts in 1821), which ultimately led to the 1963 Supreme Court ruling in *A Book Named John Cleland's Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure v. Massachusetts*, 383 U.S. 413 (1966), which had the curious distinction of having an object—in this case a paperback book published by G. P. Putnam—bring suit against a state. Or one might peruse an earlier Supreme Court decision: the landmark 1948 ruling on obscenity delivered through the complex appeals upholding the censorship

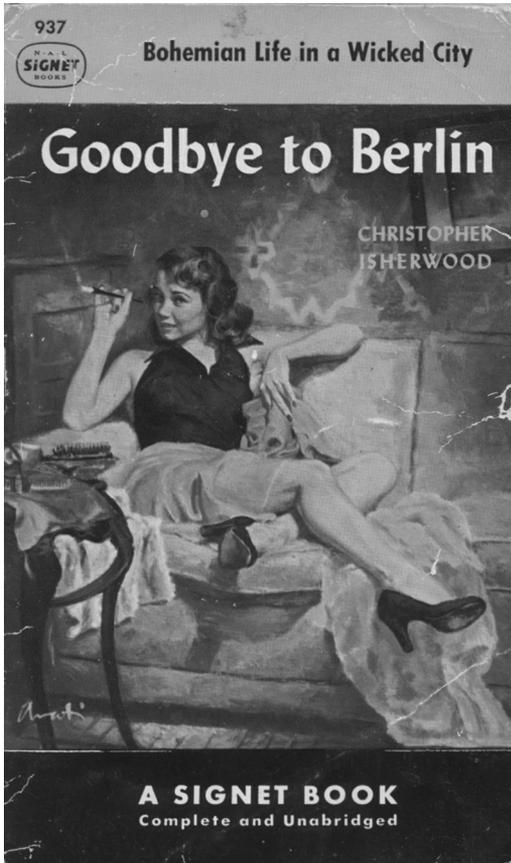


Figure 1.6 Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (Signet/NAL, 1952). Cover by James Avati.

in New York of Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*. Ultimately, the scandal surrounding this book became a marketing tool for the 1961 paperback edition, which was emblazoned with the words "Not for Sale in the State of New York" across its front cover. By then, paperbacks favored text over image on their covers. Censorship trials and government surveillance, university courses

and increased college attendance, and the steep economic downturn following the Korean War all contributed to the shift in cover styles. The heyday of “the great American paperback,” as collector Richard Lupoff calls it, lasted a mere generation.

In recent years, archivists have had to grapple with the as yet unanswerable question of how to maintain authors’ manuscripts in the digital age, since each new generation of computers makes the retrieval of early drafts nearly impossible.<sup>31</sup> The book, even in its shoddy pulp form, would seem to be a stable relic of past technologies. Yet paperbacks, like tabloids, were rarely collected by libraries or archives; they are almost as immaterial as digital bits. If these archives exist, the holdings are haphazard and incomplete, which, as Nancy M. West and V. Penelope Pelizzon, the authors of *Tabloid, Inc.: Crimes, Newspapers, Narratives* explain, curtails our understanding of narrative mobility and its readership during the twentieth century. Now, think about the contemporary sculptures of artist Long-Bin Chen, who carves discarded New York City telephone books into Buddha’s heads and builds installations out of abandoned and deaccessioned library books, reminding us of the tension between ephemera and memory, disappearance and continuity that clings to materials. Or consider how pulp lives on as a postmodern form to be sampled by artists and authors such as Gertrude Stein (postmodern avant la lettre), Charles Bukowski, Robert Coover, Richard Prince, or Joseph Kosuth. In effect, the story of American pulp is the story of American modernism. Pulping is the process by which Americans became modern.

In this tale, pulp traverses theaters of war, the Congress and courts, writers’ notebooks and journals, artists’ studios, and the ordinary people who bought, traded, and read these books everywhere. The pulping of almost everything suggests that the kinds of mash-ups of politics, popular culture, and high art we think of as hallmarks of our contemporary postmodern culture—the culture of YouTube clips, ’zines, sampling, web blogs, tweets, and so forth—actually

has an antecedent in the supposedly outmoded technology known as “the book” and the seemingly passé activity of reading printed paper. For, despite the arrival of radios and televisions in the home during the period of paperbacks’ mass appeal, despite the power of Hollywood during these decades, paper—and the books printed on flimsy sheaves—continued to entrance consumers throughout the twentieth century. The motto on the back of early Pocket Books explains the lure of the paperback: “Kind to your pocket and your pocketbook.” The many books on paperbacks—from coffee table editions featuring lush illustrations (like Richard A. Lupoff’s *Great American Paperback* [2001]) to paperback histories of paperback publishers (like Clarence Petersen’s *The Bantam Story: Twenty-Five Years of Paperback Publishing* [1970]) or catalogs (like William H. Lyles, *Dell Paperbacks, 1942–Mid-1962: A Catalog-Index* [1983]) to memoirs by pulp writers (like Frank Gruber’s *Pulp Jungle* [1967]) to scholarly studies (like Kenneth C. Davis’s *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* [1984]) and, more recently, David M. Earle’s *Re-covering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form* [2009])—speak to their ongoing seduction and fascination, a process that seems to be revived for each generation. In 1899, Henry James almost predicted the paperback revolution when he noted in his essay “The Future of the Novel” that “prolonged prose fables,” as he referred to novels, “will stretch anywhere . . . will take in absolutely anything . . . as cheaply as possible” (figure 1.7). The book, he presciently pointed out, “is almost everywhere . . . directly aided by mere mass and bulk.” *American Pulp* is, in other words, a history of a degraded form or “a biography of an object.” This book tells the story of how pulp paperbacks transmitted the ideas, images, and sensations of modern life, indeed of modernism itself, across a restless nation, a nation still riven by class antagonisms, racial divisions, gender biases, and sexual angst. Yet, at the same time, as mass culture spread, it formed intricate webs among various sectors of the population. Americans saw themselves becoming more homo-

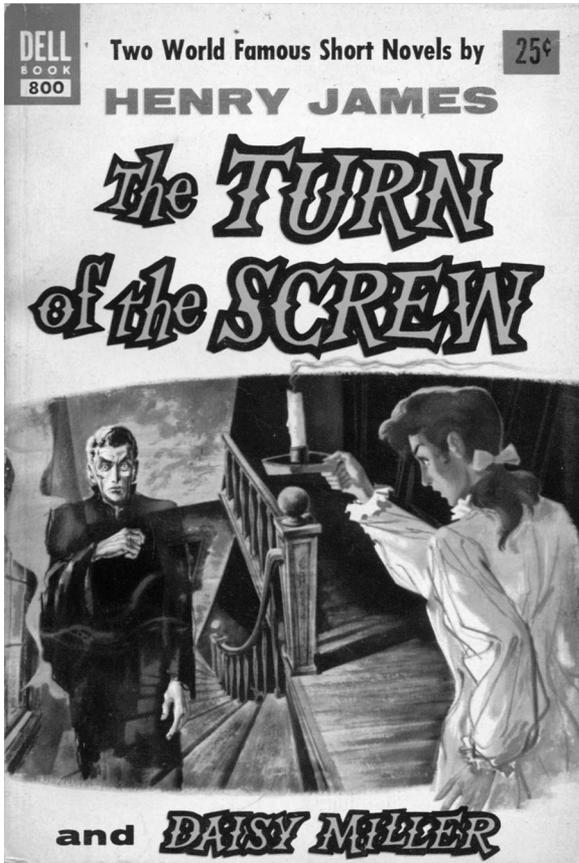


Figure 1.7 Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Daisy Miller* (Dell, 1954). Cover by Walter Brooks.

geneous, even as they were expressing new identities—as youth, as African Americans, as gays. These differences were forged in part through the common consumption of the debased but valued objects of mass circulation. In their quotidian nature, their everyday use, cheap paperbacks delivered art, eroticism, philosophy, literature, adventure, history, and science to vast numbers of people, and

thus made an impact on American political and social life in unexpected ways. Oscillating between the canon and kitsch, high and low, the secondhand modernism that was America's offered its citizenry an environment meshing commercial mass culture with avant-garde aesthetics and new political formations.

*American Pulp's* investigations of the effects of the paperback revolution on constructions of American racial, class, sexual, and gender relations stand at the crossroads of two major and as yet essentially distinct avenues of research and scholarship: New Modernist studies and the history of the book. A recent explosion of work links together popular and vernacular forms with canonical and avant-gardist modes.<sup>32</sup> This work has coincided, but often not communicated, with studies that pursue intensively archival research into national printing and publication histories, contributing to a sociology of reading and productive literary practices, which, until recently, largely focused on the pre-1900s.<sup>33</sup> Bringing insights and methodologies gleaned from the New Modernist studies to bear on the history of the book and vice versa, *American Pulp* gestures toward a significant contradiction within American literary modernism. As a movement that arrived in North America after the fact, modernism was always distilled through the obsolescent energies of modern life coursing across the continent.

An evanescent form, cheap paperback books and pulp magazines before them fostered the spread of America's pulp modernism. From Jorge Luis Borges's first US publication in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* to 1940s GIs' battlefield letters disputing the version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" included in an Armed Services Editions poetry collection, throwaway reading matter set the stage for an explosion of new forms of literacy and identity among an increasingly mobile postwar population. Circulating paperbacks, through their lurid covers and daring subject matter, made visible to wide audiences lesbian and gay experiences of emerging desire and homophobic encounters, African American perceptions of

white racism and black cultural expression, modernist experimental prose, or scientific inquiry. Science, sociology, art, and history—an entire liberal arts education—became available to working people through such imprints as New American Library’s Mentor Books, setting the stage for the postwar expansion of higher education. These ubiquitous books were distributed outside traditional book publishing venues and their circulation precipitated new forms of reading communities. As a scandalous and demotic form, however, paperbacks were the target of censorship.

Strolling by advertising billboards and the other trashy emblems of modern urban culture along the “one-way streets” in late 1920s Berlin, Walter Benjamin found the secret to the “insoluble antinomies” of contemporary life in “The Newspaper,” among many other ephemera. In Benjamin’s readings of the incidental, the cast-off matter of bourgeois culture, a recognition of another modernism, a vernacular modernism of the streets, experienced as shock on the visceral levels of sound and image, evokes, in his description of Eugène Atget’s photographs, “the scene of a crime.”<sup>34</sup> Contemporary studies of modernisms, the multiple means through which modernity found its expression, have extended the range of what literary history traditionally calls modernism. In “The Waste Land,” T. S. Eliot, riffing on Baudelaire and Dante, disparaged the “unreal city” full of immigrants, workers, and prostitutes leading tawdry lives, speaking “demotic French.” His characterization of the streets influenced subsequent literary criticism, which cast high-modernist texts in an agonistic struggle to reclaim cultural authority from the unwashed masses. Reams of paper have been filled detailing how a virile literary modernism represented a break with feminized consumer culture. But there is another version of this story of modernism, one that finds writers and artists pushing the limits of form within conventional genres—or rather finding within mass media and genres the means to a modernist expressivity. Gertrude Stein was keenly attuned to detective fiction, penning her own murder

mystery, *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, in 1948. This view of modernism foregrounds literary investigations into scenes of crime, as content and context, but also notes the ways literature itself becomes criminalized through censorship.

The arena of the law, and paradoxically battles over obscenity, became central to modernism's mainstreaming. When a book was "Banned in Boston," the epithet might ensure large sales. When the "Exiles Returned," from their Bohemian years in Paris or Berlin carrying home their hidden copies of *Ulysses* from Europe after the 1929 Crash, they circulated a new mode of literary expression. Later, in Eastern Europe, the clandestine circulation of samizdat writing had a political impact on repressive regimes. Even the repression of marginalized subjects and deviant desires destabilizes social hierarchies when scandalous trials make visible new forms of identity and sexuality. All these encounters with the state and the law open new aesthetic possibilities. To help understand the place of paperbacks in this complex exchange, *American Pulp* considers them as a form of secondhand modernism that through their sheer excess—the flashy covers, the millions of copies—and even through their criminalization, allowed readers access to the modern.

Kin to the penny dreadfuls and dime novels of the nineteenth century, pulp fiction became popular in the 1920s and 1930s mass-marketed magazines devoted to crime, passion, and science: *True Love*, *Amazing Stories*, *Black Mask*. By the mid-1920s, pulp had entered slang as a term for nonsense and excess—over-the-top sentimentality. The first successful pulp paperback line in the United States was published in 1939 by Pocket Books. Wartime rationing and the Armed Services Editions made them patriotic; they fueled the postwar explosions in higher education. The paperback revolution propelled mass literacy, opening a landscape of pulp novels that ranged from bohemian enclaves and artists' colonies in Greenwich Village to gothic mansions in Greenwich, Connecticut. It included the steamy bayous of Louisiana, the divorce ranches of

Reno, Nevada, Los Angeles bungalows, and Viennese cafés. These cheap twenty-five-cent books found in bus and train stations, soda fountains and candy stores, drugstores and newspaper kiosks called out to a mobile population of workingmen and women commuting on trolleys and subways to work in midsize cities, or crisscrossing the country as traveling salesmen or leisured vacationers. Their lurid, colorful covers telegraphed stories of sex and violence that traversed class and racial boundaries. Small enough to be tucked into a breast pocket or handbag and read at a lunch counter or on the streetcar, the more risqué and daring books could be hidden and read late into the night. They are portable tokens of the public and mass experience of the movie theater but meant to be savored alone. These are novels of escape, escapist literature, where rebellious daughters attend art school or sing in nightclubs, running from their conventional middle-class homes only to discover that their dreary stay-at-home mothers also harbor secret knowledge and secret desires for escape. They are incantations of a private world of fantasy found behind *The Blank Wall*, as Elisabeth Sanxay Holding named it in 1947.

The many subgenres of pulp fiction echo crises in twentieth-century history: in the 1930s novels, Nazi spies must be tracked down and working-class solidarity celebrated. In the 1940s, war-wounded men spread violence across the home front, and sensible workingwomen must understand them; in the 1950s, the scene shifts to Eastern Europe, where communist plots are thwarted by perky American wives. In the 1960s, the “system,” with its vast computer networks and military budgets, traps freewheeling, artistic men and women. And there’s more: stories about waitresses, jungle explorers, schoolteachers, artists, chanteuses, secretaries, divorcees, movie extras—any woman anywhere could become a femme fatale. Pulp fiction offered writers a living and a means to imagine the exotic in everyday life. Dangerous men, even men with Princeton or Harvard degrees and combat medals, menace placid suburbs.

College dormitories might be brothels. An apartment complex houses unseen threats; housewives hide dead bodies. Simple household objects, like a hammer, become deadly weapons. But, through its reprints, pulp also domesticated the unusual, transforming the foreign or the arcane and scientific into a conventional American middle-class narrative: On the back cover of the Pocket Book edition of Eve Curie's biography of her mother, Marie Curie becomes more than a brilliant scientist—she is also “the young Polish girl, poor, beautiful . . . whom Pierre Curie found . . . strangely sweet.”

The hundreds of pulp novels, biographies, and travelogues comprise an archive of American tastes and habits, as popular culture increasingly became privatized, capturing a moment before TV antennas cluttered the suburban landscape. Yet when families sat isolated before their new sets mesmerized, pulp still circulated inside and outside the home. Pulp's sensational reception, including censorship, on the one hand, and celebrity, on the other, enables a view into the diverse ways men and women of all ages were exposed to and experienced modern popular literary expression. This medium can be seen in part as an effort to bring high modernism to Main Street by importing the icons of seedy American alleys—neon-lit bars, empty diners, smoky hotel lobbies—into modernist narrative form, a form that could be digested by a largely working-class readership. Leopold Bloom had traversed the Dublin streets one June night at the beginning of the century; the geography of desire leading a returning vet to contemplate murdering his two-timing wife (Ann Petry's *Country Place*) or a young woman to pick up a forlorn traveling salesman for a night of lousy sex and too much liquor on a cross-country train (Mary McCarthy's *Company She Keeps*) is at once vaster and more restricted in midcentury America.

The language of pulp speaks of pent-up desire or keyed-up anger: its simple, suggestive prose bursts from the cheap bindings of the Avon, Fawcett, Dell, Ace, Medallion, Gold Medal, Bantam, Cardinal, Penguin, Lion, and Signet paperbacks. But there is more to

it. Virtually anything could be pulped: Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* became "a haunting story of lovers confronted by the relentless pressures of a morality which no one can defy without disaster." French classics, like Honoré de Balzac's *Droll Stories*, reveal "wit and wickedness in the 16th century," as its cover proclaims. And, of course, soft-core paperback "originals" brought readers to *The Lusting Drive* by Ovid Demaris. Even the "dream and sex theories" of Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mead's ethnographic "study of adolescence and sex in primitive society," and George Gamow's physics text, *The Birth and Death of the Sun*, were transformed into pulp packages. In America, modernism cannot be separated from kitsch, mass culture, vernacular, and other popular forms. Pulp, lower grade than newsprint, is a paper stock destined to disappear, and modernism was supposed to be an artistic movement finished off by World War II. Made from the leftovers of paper production, pulp paperbacks were meant for the trash can, not the museum or library. Although these books were recycled throughout popular culture in comic strips, radio shows, movies, and television, they should not have survived. Yet they endure and provide a window onto the ways in which modernism cruised Main Street.

For example, adapting pulp fictions' codes, in the wake of Allied forces vanquishing fascism, black writers might investigate the racism of white characters through attention to their perversities, as had William Gardner Smith in *Last of the Conquerors*, with its tagline "Love Among the Ruins," a tale of interracial/international love set in postwar Germany. Young lesbians might be attracted to the covers of March Hastings's *Three Women* or Claire Morgan's (pen name of Patricia Highsmith) *The Price of Salt*, as much for their depictions of lesbian attire—white button-down blouse and dark skirt or skimpy white silk slip under prim sheath—as for the erotic connections offered by their plots. A newly visible gay male desire and community, sparked by the mobilizations of wartime, meant

readers could gaze at Truman Capote stretched out on a divan on the back cover of his novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and understand that its front cover illustration by Robert Jonas—of a broken window framing a blurry couple in the distance—signified on Manet’s *Dejuener sur l’herbe* as it opened the closet, what Henry James had noted as a “smashed . . . window all this time most superstitiously closed.” And, too, the photograph on the back cover nodded to the convention of gay male authors’ self-display dating from Walt Whitman’s open top button on the flyleaf of *Leaves of Grass* as far back as 1855. By 1951, New American Library was using this cover to help market Capote’s short story collection, *A Tree of Night*. Editors noted in their internal memoranda:

This book should be tied in as closely as possible with OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS and with this spectacular young author himself. His “high vixibility,” [*sic*] not only because he is an exotic, as well as an outstanding young writer, but also because of his widely reproduced picture, will amount to a good many newsstand sales. Newsstand-wise, these stories should be sold as by American’s most sensational young author.<sup>35</sup>

From its inception, New American Library took pride not only in its discerning literary taste but also its progressive attitude toward sexual and racial minorities. In an assessment of a mystery novel, *A Bullet in the Ballet*, described “lyrically” as “a really charming murder story” by newspapers in New York and London, editor Arabel Porter commented to publisher Victor Weybright that she “found the book absurd, and in very poor taste” because of the “chortling and sniggering about the male dancers who are fairies.” Calling it “sneering,” she concludes, “I didn’t like the book; don’t think it up to our standard. Further, I think the attitude toward the ballet portrayed in the book is not only cheap, but also dated.”<sup>36</sup>

This, then, is *not*, or not only, a study of the B genres—Westerns, spy novels, bodice-rippers, romances, police procedurals—usually

associated with pulp fiction. Paperback books opened worlds for readers and writers alike—providing access to literature thought to be beyond the capacities of most readers, on the one hand, and enabling audiences larger than most writers expected, on the other. Thus, William Faulkner's works appeared as yet another series of "swamp-book" tales about *Tobacco Road*, Erskine Caldwell's wildly popular novel that established a whole terrain of low-down Southern gothic sex tales. As readers and authors, modernists moved into and through the avenues of pulp—found in pockets, on magazine racks, bookshelves, and eventually the courts and Congress—blurring the lines among kitsch and canon and modernism and postmodernism. And this was a curiously American function, beginning in the nineteenth century, when words, Gertrude Stein argues, "began to detach themselves from the solidity of anything, began to excitedly feel themselves as if they were anywhere or anything, think about American writing from Emerson, Hawthorne Walt Whitman Mark Twain Henry James myself Sherwood Anderson Thornton Wilder and Dashiell Hammett [*sic*] . . . as well as in advertising and in road signs."<sup>37</sup> She makes clear, as she abandons punctuation, that this propulsion accelerated in the twentieth century.

Paperbacks circulated sensation—not only in the form of sexuality and violence (though certainly this was crucial)—but also by developing new sensibilities aware of racial, gendered, and queer expressions. For example, the story of Ann Petry's second novel *Country Place* reveals how African American writers were courted and introduced to a broad readership through publisher's pulping, on the one hand, and via their creation of narratives about white characters, on the other. From William Gardner Smith to James Baldwin, from Richard Wright to Chester Himes, from Ann Petry to Ethel Waters, and on to Frank Yerby, paperbacks brought the voices of black writers into white (and black) bedrooms, often by inserting criticism of racism into stories with white protagonists. As the magazine *Color* declared in 1949, "America's Top Negro Authors" were

amassing huge recognition: “Ten Million People Have Read These Books,” the headline insisted, listing Wright’s *Black Boy*, Yerby’s *The Foxes of Harrow*, *Golden Hawk*, and *The Vixens*, Petry’s *The Street*, Walter White’s *A Man Called White*, Roi Ottley’s *Black Odyssey*, and Willard Motley’s *Knock on Any Door*.<sup>38</sup>

The pulping of Faulkner—or Truman Capote, Richard Wright, Carlos Bulosan, or any twentieth-century American detective novelist from Cornell Woolrich to Vera Caspary, not to mention Sigmund Freud, Honoré de Balzac, Margaret Mead, George Gamow, or even William Shakespeare—instantiates an important contradiction within American modernism: its secondhand nature, its repetition of what has already been. Books by foreigners sometimes written centuries before were repackaged into modern American fare, even as new works delving into the long history of American racism swept into millions of households. America, the epitome of a modern nation—founded on the principles of Enlightenment modernity—was late to the ball of modernism. Modern before others, it received modernism belatedly, as an import, a modernism already in use, a used modernism that found its emblem in pulp. As Gertrude Stein explained it during her University of Chicago lectures in 1935:

But here in America because the language was made so late in the day that is at a time when everybody began to read and to write all the time and to read what was written all the time it was impossible that the language would be made as languages used to be made to say what the nation which was coming to be was going to say . . . but they will tell this story they tell this story using the exactly same words that were made to tell an entirely different story and the way it is being done the pressure being put upon the same words to make them move in an entirely different way is most exciting, it excites the words it excites us who use them.<sup>39</sup>

In America, modernism could never be simply an aesthetic movement; it was always tied to finance, industry, technology, immigration, and consumption across a landscape that was unevenly acclimated to modern life. The vast space and spectacle of the United States meant that the millions of paperback books flooding the markets would find their way into all sorts of pockets. As Stein noted, “all through the history of American literature you will see how the pressure of the non daily life living of the American nation has forced the words to have a different feeling of moving . . . it is in its last expression in the road signs which are a further concentration of the thing they did to the words in advertising.”<sup>40</sup>

*American Pulp* ultimately examines these very personal and intimate forms and materials of modern life found in the homes, purses (also called pocketbooks), and hip pockets of teenagers, workers, housewives, and almost everyone else with a bit of spare time and spare change. A story of quotidian objects, widely available and yet also somehow secreted or forgotten, this book meanders across law, art, government, war, literary forms, race relations, sexuality, crime, and popular media, which all intersect within the economics of publishing. It’s a many-hydra-headed beast, opening to scrutiny a history of reading in modernist America. Communities of readers developed literally out of the pockets and pocketbooks of Americans. Pulp’s materials and institutions helped determine the trajectory of modern life for the rest of the American Century and on into our postmodernist moment of the ostensibly paperless office and e-book.