



Romantic Pulp

by Julia Ann Charpentier

At the beginning of the 20th century, a strange entity called pulp was born. Pulp was mass market fiction magazines printed on pulpwood paper that sold for ten cents. At their peak they reached more than 10 million readers a year.

Each issue was seven by ten inches. It contained 128 pages, half a dozen short stories, a couple of short or serialized novels, and sported a cover that consisted of three primary colors only. Interspersed with letters to the editor, puzzles, and a few ads was the pulpy entertainment, much of which was romance.

Insulting?

Readers didn't think so. Pulp was the first inexpensive fiction periodicals available and competed with dime novels (also printed in magazine format), which leading publisher Street and Smith started in 1855, because they provided more reading for the same price. Ninety thousand words, to be exact. Most were adventure tales for men that included all major genres: Western, detective, masked avenger, war, sport, and fantasy. Love and romance targeted the female readership. Like today's category fiction, these stories had a reputation for predictability and familiar plots.

Only the strongest survived. Any pulp that failed to show a profit disappeared overnight. Successful publishers launched others. Expenses were kept low so the magazine would profit even if sales were not high. Advertisers are de-

scribed as having been "on the edge of respectability."

In 1896 Frank Andrew Munsey founded *Argosy*, a monthly adventure fiction anthology. With the publication of *Detective Story* in 1915, the pulps became specialized and abundant by the 1930s. Superhero comic books, radio, movies, paper shortages of World War II, and eventually television and paperbacks provided such obstacles and stiff competition that the popularity of these magazines waned by the 1950s. A few converted to "slick" publications or other specializations.

Pulps were among the first commercial roots for romance writers and leave an interesting historical basis for the mass market novel of today. In these 2¢ words of love are the beginnings of a trade that expanded into an industry worth millions, with glamorous Italian model Fabio as its trademark.

A prolific period for the pulps was the 1920s. In a decade when flappers, Prohibition, and Valentino were headlines, escapist entertainment was at its prime. John William Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, authors of *The Magazine in America: 1741-1990*, write, "Their content was pure escapism, but at the same time, they did make magazine readers out of many who otherwise would never have opened the pages of a periodical."

Love Story was launched in 1921, the first in the romance pulp category. It was conceived by Anita Fairgrieve. *Love Story* was a quarterly magazine that eventually went semiweekly, then weekly. Pulps would frequently test the market, starting on a monthly basis, gradually moving to frequent publication. Competitors included *True Love Stories*, *Pocket Love*, *Romantic Range*, and *Real Love*. Later in the 1920s a new type of love pulp appeared that contained

more explicit sex. *Breezy Stories* and *Young's* were two of the most successful.

Tebbel and Zuckerman point out misconceptions about this so-called permissive time in our history. "For all its reputation, the decade of the twenties was not as morally unfettered a period as people today tend to believe. Flappers might roll their hose, wear the first mini-skirts, smoke and drink, and even appear to be careless about their virginity, but it was a time when Homer Croy's popular novel *West of the Water Tower* was attacked and removed from bookstores and libraries in some places because of a single sentence: 'He turned out the light and the bedsprings creaked.'"

Yet the reader of the 1920s had come a long way from the ante-bellum American woman. Educators and religious leaders of the period protested against fiction for young women. Most writers of romance were female, an irritation to male critics. Some magazines labeled fictional stories factual, and by providing moral endings these publications escaped criticism and still filled the market.

Before the Civil War more than a hundred magazines for women existed. These were models for mass market publications and an outlet for romance authors. "Most of what was in early women's magazines was frankly sentimental; it was a little later that women writers began to be masters of the historical romance, as they remain today. Short stories usually featured a young heroine faced with an obstacle to the consummation of her love. This was embellished with the struggle of the heroine to identify and reject evil and to make a choice of the heart that accorded with honorable and true principles."

Just before the turn of the century a war raged between romanticists and realists. *Munsey's*, an 1894 publication,

stated, "These are the days when the romantic in literature — the strong, the shining, the imaginative, the ennobling — flourishes, and holds the ear of the world, while 'realism' and 'veritism' are the languishing cults of the select few."

By the 1930s romanticists had won. Many were unemployed during the Depression, so these inexpensive magazines provided entertainment. In 1938 there were 18 love pulps with a total circulation of 3 million per month. Tebbel and Zuckerman describe the heroines of these stories as virgins who guarded their innocence scrupulously. "The appeal, obviously, did not lie in descriptions of sexual adventure but in standard narratives about the agonies of loving, being loved, or being ignored or otherwise traduced by the love object."

Bernarr Macfadden, from the 1920s until his death in 1955, launched publications that contained sex. The most important of these were confession magazines, some of which still exist

today. Macfadden, whose publishing empire was worth 30 million, renamed these publications "Family Behavior Magazines."

The distinction between "confession" and "romance" was unclear. "In the confession stories could be seen the plot formulas that would make mass market successes in our time out of such book categories as romance novels.... There was enough realism in the confession stories so that readers could identify with the characters, and use of the first person aided that effort. Critics erroneously called these stories 'escapist,' but in fact, they depicted real situations that readers could understand and that expressed their values."

Despite their reputation for being lurid, the stories were moral in tone. The heroine, always a fighter, realized her offense and retribution followed. Tebbel and Zuckerman compare this "sin, suffering, and repentance" pattern with later romance novels. The authors believe these magazines actually offered

good advice on how life's problems could be handled.

Just like the noble heroine of today's best-selling novelist, the reminiscent "pulp" counterpart to her character lives on in the contemporary pages of Macfadden's *True Confessions*, *True Experience*, *True Love*, *True Romance*, *True Story*, and *Modern Romance*. In addition, Sterling/Macfadden owns five bimonthly publications for African-American women: *Black Confessions*, *Black Romance*, *Secrets*, *Bronze Thrills*, and *Jive*.

These magazines are nearly 100 percent freelance written, with about ten stories per month, per publication. All work is in the first person. Contributors are not given bylines.

But are the tales really true?

I won't tell if you won't. □

Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance journalist. Her work has appeared in newspapers, editorial and romance trade journals, and Italian, singles, sports, and entertainment publications. She specializes in profiles of regional and international personalities.