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Reviews

# Fifty Shades of Pulp

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Monday 20 April 2015

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**Paula Rabinowitz exquisite and startling new book about the “golden age” of U.S. pulp publishing, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, is rightly confident in the originality of its enterprise. Gorgeously illustrated, *American Pulp* audaciously sets in motion at least a half-dozen crisscrossing storylines to create a new cartography of pulp performance.**

Rabinowitz spells out this stratagem in a boffo first chapter called “Pulp: Biography of an American Object”: “A story of quotidian objects, widely available and yet 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.” (39) *Pulp*, it seems, has a beguiling multipositionality that pollinates a lush garden of overlapping discourses.

Since the 1940s, Marxist theories of mass culture, including pulp, mostly come in two varieties. One trend is comprised of proponents of stringent versions of the Frankfurt School, who hold that popular culture effectively promotes passivity and docility, aimed at profit more than art.

More numerous are disciples of Fredric Jameson and Stuart Hall, who view popular culture as expressive of utopian longings that can serve as a site of struggle. But the truth is that academics can find in mass culture whatever they look for, and the British sociologist Alan Swingewood probably had a valid point in calling the whole notion of mass culture a “myth” back in 1977 (*The Myth of Mass Culture*).

To ascribe either a mostly repressive or, alternatively, a predominantly liberatory function to such a mysterious site of production is a thankless task. That’s one reason why these two trends might comprise the worst dysfunctional couple in the history of Left literary critique, both now overdue for scholarly retirement. Rabinowitz, in contrast, cocks a snook at all this and provides criticism of mass culture in a new key.

For the most part, *American Pulp* gives good narrative, but it took me a while to come to terms with its dance of fluctuating definitional veils involving inexact taxonomies for both “pulp” and “modernism.” These categories are joined together as Rabinowitz’s protean subject matter...but something funny happened on the way to the *Dictionary of Cultural Theory* (at least, my edition).

By “pulp,” Rabinowitz denotes not only the luridly-illustrated crime, science fiction, and risqué sex writing published on the coarse wood-pulp paper that most commonly defines this genre emerging in the early 20th century. She is also talking about inexpensive paperbacks of all varieties, including reprints of classics and non-fiction, some of which have covers duller than Andy Warhol’s eight-hour *Empire* (1964).

By “modernism” she signifies not only the customary allusion to movements such as Imagism, Surrealism, or stream-of-consciousness fiction. She nonchalantly uses the term almost interchangeably with “modernity,” itself a much-contested term (these days by post-colonial theorists) for the historical period, commencing in late 19th century Western culture, marked by a questioning of convention, prioritization of individualism, and belief in scientific progress. (Her discussion on page 31 suggests that the book’s subtitle should have read, “How Paperbacks Brought Modernity to Main Street,” or else, “How Paperbacks Brought Modernisms to Main Street.”)

## Speculative Mapping and Demotic Reading

The ingenuity of American Pulp is less in any “keywords” than in its striking, provocative camera angles, necessary because the hybrid nature of mass culture can cause identities to be lost in translation. At one point Rabinowitz even creates a relay of gazes (Chapter 7, “Slips of the Tongue: Uncovering Lesbian Pulp”) that finds us looking at her reproductions of seductive paperback covers that often feature characters eying each other in states of undress (for example, the cover of *Women’s Barracks* on page 193), even as the author (Rabinowitz) looks slyly back at us.

Thus, instead of extravagant claims for some new theory that is not all that new (what might be called the “bad” version of Cultural Studies), she provides a kind of speculative mapping, limiting herself to chiefly trying to coax a specter into view.

Admittedly, even after 390 pages, one may be left with a sense that this intellectual jigsaw puzzle is still missing a few pieces, but it’s a small price to pay for Rabinowitz’s mesmerizingly varied evocation of the complexities that are always bound to resist attempts to justify a label, paradigm, or airtight definition.

Drilling deep to unpack affinities within and across cultural regions, subcultures and social life, Rabinowitz orchestrates her discoveries into nine vivid chapters and a long coda that are dense with thinking even as they power high-voltage deliberations.

A selection of a few of her other chapter titles communicates the flavor of her intricate storyline: “Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday: True Crime and Twelve Million Black Voices*,” “Isak Dinesen Gets Drafted: *Pulp, The Armed Services Editions, and GI Reading*,” “Senior Borges Wins! *Ellery Queen’s Garden*,” “Demotic *Ulysses: Policing Paperbacks in the Courts and Congress*.” No other scholar has scrutinized this topic with such ardor and commitment.

To parse the bewildering mix of elements precipitated by the interaction of a cultural form (mostly cheap, mass-market fiction with frequently-titillating covers) and an epoch-making sensibility (customarily undergirded by the awareness of the loss of tradition) might seem akin to juggling a handful of hot potatoes. Rabinowitz, however, deftly weaves a tapestry of influence and overlap, all the while cultivating a vital thread of argument throughout polyvalent texts and images.

Her point of view is stated with perfect clarity and elegance, nimbly fused in an inextricable formulation: “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.” (3)

“Demotic reading” (demos is the Greek word for “commoner”) is a tidy overarching conceit that designates the capacity of inexpensive and widely-available mass market paperbacks to increase the ordinary citizen’s access to ideas and literature, thereby spurring social mobility and helping readers to fashion new identities.

Chapter Two, “Pulp as Interface,” adapts the concept of “interface” from communications theorist Marshall McLuhan to specify a place where different entities meet and connect with or modify one another: “Paperbacks linked objects and ideas to bodies, brought intimate longing and fear into public view, and circulated social experiences into the privacy of one’s home and one’s head.” (41)

Then again, if tracing the connections between the public and the personal is so central to the argument, how does one situate the resulting scholarship?

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# Expanding “Cultural History”

“Cultural history” is the phrase used several times on the book’s jacket to describe American Pulp. If so, it’s history that is not fundamentally chronological or systematic like Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996) or Sander Gilman’s *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (1996), procedurally closer to my own preferred approach.

Rabinowitz’s method is more lateral and intensive as she moves to and fro among deeply rooted inquiries in dozens of areas. Yet where necessary, she provides sufficient brief pocket summaries of certain episodes such as the origins of Penguin paperbacks and the background to the federal government’s Council on Books in Wartime; and the volume is always true to its larger vision.

Rabinowitz is certainly a cultural historian par excellence, but *American Pulp* is structured as a sequence of gemlike components of a multilayered metanarrative; it is more than a history “or at least more interesting than just history. It’s cultural studies in the best sense, that of widening the landscape.

Literary archeology is a cornerstone of cultural studies, and Rabinowitz, a specialist in materialist feminist cultural studies at the University of Minnesota, has long been a master of exhuming and reinterpreting texts. (Personal disclosure: Thirty years ago I had the privilege of directing her doctoral dissertation on revolutionary women writers of the 1930s; even then she outdistanced me in her discoveries.)

Such efforts reach a happy apotheosis in her treatments of Richard Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941) and Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “The Garden of the Forking Paths” (1948). This aspect makes *American Pulp* exemplary of the “good” cultural studies, which expands the historian’s purview by arguing for the significance of overlooked issues. And she does much more than counter misrepresentations by cataloguing remedial examples, a method that risks simply replacing one skewed vision with another.

Certain of the most delightful moments occur when, perhaps impatient with the virtues of logical progression, Rabinowitz gives herself over to the throws of an associative imaginative freedom as if she were a brilliant analyst in a psychoanalytic session. In a few pages she moves from Edmund de Waal’s *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010) to Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library” (1931) to Henry James’ *The Aspern Papers* (1888) to Moe’s Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley (the 1970s) to Chinese installation artist Song Dong’s “Waste Not” (2011).

Yet her discrete chapters are essentially thematic “about GI Reading, Lesbian Pulp, Science Fiction, and Censorship Cases” although within each one she jumps and perambulates to unleash caches of intelligence coiled in the links she makes between what initially might seem to be hermetically private correlations.

In a book appearing under the auspices of the usually staid Princeton University Press, this doubles as a soupçon of mischievousness to disconcert dull academic decorum. The same might be said of her insertion of so many provocative covers from books like *No Nice Girl* (1959, “She sold herself “ for her lover’s sake”), *City of Women* (1954, “A hundred women came to paradise and a hundred angels fell”), *Three Women* (1958, “An intimate picture of women in love “ with each other!”), and *Leave Her to Hell* (1958, “She went too far “ too often”).

## Contrarian Positions

*American Pulp* is a boldly argumentative and ambitious book with a few contrarian positions that will be red meat for

specialists who have a stake in some of the assessments “or simply because literary tastes naturally vary.

A case in point may be *Country Place* (1947) by African-American novelist Ann Petry, a curious work that has gone down in literary history as thin and underwhelming, a well-meaning but weirdo cousin to *The Street* (1946) and *The Narrows* (1953). There are always those who resist a scholar’s focus on a minor work, even though it’s necessary to clear the stage of giants to study the function of lesser texts that populate so much of the cultural terrain.

That’s why it’s imperative to appreciate that her fabulously researched chapter, “Pulping Ann Petry: The Case of *Country Place*,” offers a scrutiny that is fully repaid. Yet it’s unfortunate that Rabinowitz begins with a dubious claim: “Unlike her other two novels [see above], purposely based on her consideration of the novel as a form of sociology, this pulpy and largely forgotten work reveals traumas operating latently on an intimate level...” (134)

Actually, the method demanded here, in which the novelist’s words are secondary and her secrets primary, is precisely the reading appropriate to fully apprehend Petry’s more famous works.

Some readers may be distracted by Rabinowitz’s episodic personal references, a few of which seem like privately significant moments held up for public consumption. Then again, part of the charm of this study is precisely that it was prompted by Rabinowitz’s own history of reading and collecting in a family context.

For others readers, her reluctance to rank artistic quality will be the ghost at the feast. Rabinowitz operates in an unbounded aesthetic universe, placing television’s *Mad Men* next to the etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Yet I find this a good choice, inasmuch as the pursuit of hierarchies of “literary quality” in a study of this kind can get as messy as the bogs and marshes that slowed up Napoleon in his ill-fated Russian campaign.

Instead, with an engaging blend of panache and erudition, Rabinowitz writes as if she is the beneficiary and conduit of the entire literary and artistic tradition of the world. Scholarship and authority shine through this high-paced narrative: “In ‘The Waste Land,’ T. S. Eliot, riffing on Baudelaire and Dante, disparaged the ‘unreal city’ full of immigrants, workers and tawdry lives, speaking ‘demotic French.’” (31)

A poet in her youth (see “Stairmaster Yeats: An Epic,” *Wide Angle*, January 1996), she cares what language sounds like because she wants to convey the sheer energy and presence of the vital range of material that went into the marathon reading underlying this splendid interpretative investigation.

Among the many incidental pleasures are marvelous phrases, such as “pulping is the process by which Americans became modern”; “pulp was a medium that was massaged”; “a borderland of pulp;” and “the seamy side of an American pastoral.” (27, 41, 81, 136)

A feast of a work of pinpoint detail and transporting international reach, *American Pulp* steadily gains power with each chapter. The result is a book capacious enough to satisfy multitudes.

[Against the Current](#)