

ERIC HENWOOD-GREER

GAY MALE PULP FICTION OF THE 1960S

FROM THE DRUGSTORES TO THE STONEWALL RIOT

In the 1940s, paperback novels helped feed the desires of an American public yet to be served by publishers. Cheap novels began appearing in drugstores alongside comic books, making them more appealing to a mass market that may otherwise be put off by the high cost and elitism of hardcovers and bookstores. This new market stimulated demand for a plethora of titles on all types of subject matter. Simultaneously, “legitimate” (hardcover) American fiction had a brief inflow of significant titles with homosexual themes, as men in the armed forces of World War II became aware of just how many homosexual men there were out there (Gunn and Harker 3). A notable example is Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948)—a bleak story about a young man obsessively seeking the great love of his adolescence, which ends in the murder of his lover (Bram 6). The reviews were not kind, with many questioning why such material even deserved to be published. As gay novelist and historian Christopher Bram notes, “reviewers called the book ‘disgusting,’ ‘sterile,’ and ‘gauche’—and the brief interest by the mainstream press in gay fiction quickly ebbed” (qtd. in Gunn and Harker 4). However, the mass-market paperback industry took notice of this underserved audience, and began filling the niche by the late 1950s. This was partly due to the loosening of censorship laws, which now allowed novels with graphic homosexual themes—even positive depictions of homosexuality—to be distributed by mail so long as they could be justified as having “literary value and no direct appeal to prurient interest” (Gunn and Harker 4). By the 1960s, gay pulp fiction became a lucrative industry, arguably having helped forward the gay movement of the decade.

In the introduction to his collection of excerpts from gay pulp fictions, Michael Bronski notes that in order to attract attention to their “cheaply produced and disposable” paperbacks, pulp publishers quickly learned to use sexually provocative and eye-catching cover images (2). The novels’ low prices meant that buyers could purchase and then, once read, throw away or hide the books with little of the investment of that

of a cloth-bound novel; thus, buyers were less concerned how their purchase might look to others. These “paperback originals colored the racks of 100,000 or so national mass-market dealers, which included drug stores, bus depots and airport terminals” where purchases could be made with relative anonymity in comparison to high-end book stores or libraries—which appealed to the gay reader in particular, who may worry about being seen (Wood 374). Pulp fiction with homosexual themes quickly formed a large niche market in major cities; but, due to the less discriminative distribution process, these novels also ended up alongside “straight” pulp novels in bus depots and drugstores across the country—including small-town America, where homosexuals were otherwise completely isolated from larger structures of gay society. A number of publishing houses quickly caught on to the popularity of these titles. Grove Press initially made its mark by publishing controversial titles such as D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) in paperback, but then refocused on original gay works in response to the success of their paperbacks with homosexual content (Gunn and Hacker 5).

Until recently, little scholarly work has been published on male homosexual pulp novels, particularly in contrast to the study of lesbian pulp fiction. Christine Wood points out that as early as the 1960s, lesbian pulp fiction was being catalogued and examined, partly because it tied into emerging feminist movements of the time (374). In “Historicizing Pulp,” Whitney Strub states that by the 1980s, lesbian pulp fiction had become “perceived as integral to the modern lesbian community and identity, [and it had become] difficult to imagine a comprehensive lesbian history that did not account for the writing, circulation, and reading of lesbian pulp novels as a critical force in fostering awareness and providing a social roadmap to midcentury lesbians” (943–944). Bronski adds that lesbian pulp fiction initially outsold its gay male counterpart because it was purchased not only by lesbians but also by heterosexual men (4). The gay male community may not embrace a pulp heritage like the lesbian community, because gay men—while undeniably oppressed—ultimately benefit from male privilege. Though implicit, a gay subtext was present in American culture, and thus attracted the historical analysis of gay men’s work in “legitimate” culture, rather than of gay pulps (Strub 44). Gay pulp peaked in the decade immediately preceding the 1969 Stonewall riots—in what Strub terms the “homophile” era. Therefore, historians focused on gaining mainstream acceptance by “downplaying the role of anything that reinforced homophobic aspects of gay life,” also downplaying the pulp novels with their lurid covers and often lurid subject matters, which were seen as perpetuating negative stereotypes (45). Regardless, by the mid-1960s, gay male pulp fiction began to

supersede lesbian pulps in popularity as much of the audience for lesbian titles had moved on to lesbian pornography (made possible by lessening censorship laws) or to more “legitimate” lesbian novels (Bronski 4). A contemporary awareness of gay pulp fiction’s prevalence in the 1960s and of the diversity of its quality and content has sparked a recent reappraisal of the genre by gay historians.

The rise in the number of gay pulp novels in the 1960s, as Bronski surmises, depended on three key factors. First, homosexual male authors already had formed a niche market, despite critical attacks, due to works published in the 1940s and ‘50s—such as *The City and the Pillar*. Second, Bronski speculates that gay male pulp had an appealing ring of “truth” because of its being largely written by homosexual male authors—unlike lesbian pulp, which was often written by straight men concealed by pen names. Third, waning censorship laws caused gay pulp fiction to flourish with much more graphic—even pornographic—sexuality, an aspect still taboo to the mainstream (5).

One appeal of gay pulps was their attitude towards homosexuality. Bronski disagrees with the common belief that pre-Stonewall gay fiction nearly always ended with the “long suffering, usually self-hating hero” doomed to death. He states that unlike the few early “literary” gay novels, the majority of 1960s gay pulp fiction ends with “optimism, understanding or [at least] a degree of self-knowledge” (7). He specifically takes to task Vito Russo’s popular critical study, *The Celluloid Closet* (and its subsequent documentary film adaptation), for perpetuating this belief. But, this seems unfair—Russo’s book focuses on mainstream Hollywood gay (and lesbian) portrayals, which were nearly all negative and ending in tragedy, even when their depictions strove to be sympathetic. Bronski argues that gay pulp fiction largely escapes this tradition because of its “fringe” location in relation to the mainstream, unlike Hollywood. It was directly consumed by gay readers without the need of being advertised or reviewed by the mainstream press—it could bypass standard social concerns and fears. Gay pulp fiction managed its stories precisely because it was hidden from mainstream culture.

The multitude of genres contained within published gay pulp fiction cannot be understated. Pulp fiction appropriated pre-existing genres and narrative tropes, but with the addition of gay themes: it took up familiar genres such as Westerns, hard-boiled crimes, near-pornographic (and, later, genuinely pornographic) romances, and covered everything from social satire, parody, gothic horror, fantasy, and sci-fi. Gay pulps particularly focused on coming-of-age narratives, particularly with an emphasis on the discovery of one’s homosexuality, as well as gay erotic stories involving

archetypes such as hustlers, sailors, and others.

The novels of Victor J. Banis provide an excellent example of the diversity within gay pulp fiction. According to Randall Ivey, at gay pulp fiction's peak between 1966 and 1970, Banis used various pseudonyms, and published "nearly sixty pulps [. . .] in a variety of genres but especially the historical novel, the science fiction-horror tale, and the detective story" (Ivey 190). Ivey credits Banis' appeal to his broad subject range, his talent, and perhaps most significantly, to the fact that "in none of [his works] does one find leading characters who hate themselves, for being gay, or deny it strenuously, or attempt to change [their lifestyle]" (193). Banis' first gay novel, *The Why Not* (1966), an experimental non-linear character study of the demimonde patrons of the titular gay bar, "was turned down by several publishers who thought there was no market for gay literature. But when the manuscript arrived at the Greenleaf editor's desk, Earl Kemp was so taken by the quality of the writing that he signed on despite the fact that he had never before published a gay book" (Gunn, "Victor Banis" 32). With *The Why Not's* quick success, Greenleaf Press switched its focus to gay pulp fiction, becoming a pre-eminent West Coast publisher particularly noted for the superior quality of their titles (32). Banis and Greenleaf followed *The Why Not* with *Born to Be Gay* (1966), *The Bronze and the Wine* (1966), and *Man Into Boy* (1968); all three are sexually explicit but also highly emotional coming-out stories notable for their small-town America settings. Next, Banis publishes *Gay Treason* (1968), a World War II period novel dealing less with questions of sexual identity and more with questions of national identity, and then the campy *The Gay Haunt* (1970), an erotic comedy about a ghost haunting his former male lover (Ivey 193–208). However, Banis is best known his character Jackie Holmes, the protagonist of a hugely successful gay pulp series published between 1966 and 1968. Secret agent Jackie Holmes was a satire of the popular James Bond and the 1960s television show *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Ivey ascribes the popularity of the series—which is still in print today, unlike most gay pulp fiction—to its sexually charged satires and recognition and celebration of the effeminate gay stereotype. While Jackie fits every gay "sissy" stereotype, the effeminate is valorized rather than mocked.. Jackie is unapologetic in his actions: he successfully uses his élan to bed his sexual target, and, is exemplary of the resourceful and capable spy (195–197). By challenging the heteronormative masculinist expectations of the spy genre. This subversive hero marked a refreshing change for gay readers.

Gunn and Harker's charting of the gay pulp fiction published in the United States from 1960 up to the Stonewall Riots in 1969 serves as a testament to the astounding

rise of the genre in the 1960s. In 1960, there were five novels of primarily gay subject matter published in hardback, and one published in pulp paperback. Then, in 1969, there were nine gay novels published in hardback, and an amazing two hundred and fifty new gay pulp paperbacks (2). However, by this point a number of publishers began recycling past novels—changing only the names and amplifying sexual content—so that the originality of titles is difficult to decipher (Bronski 20).

Bronski summarizes the importance of these novels in shaping a gay identity in pre-Stonewall America. While perhaps most importantly, the novels helped validate gay sexual desire for the reader (particularly in isolated or rural areas of the country in which gay visibility was practically non-existent), they also serve a pedagogical function. Bronski writes that “hidden within their plots and their characters’ lives were maps, hints, and clues that told gay men how they might live their lives” (8). Stressing that it is not presumptuous to see these novels as being at least partial how-to and self-help guides, Bronski points out that, while gay visibility was increasing throughout the 1960s, the gay world was still seen as shadowy and impenetrable, and so these novels could help shine a light on the inner workings of that world. This may include such basic information as letting a reader in the Midwest know that there was a thriving gay subculture in New York’s Greenwich Village by simply setting so many stories there. However, he is also careful to consider the novels as literature in their own right:

First and foremost they are works of imagination, written primarily by gay men, that commit to the hard reality of paper the passions and longings of same-sex desire. They vary in form and tone, and certainly their literary quality ranges from high to idiosyncratically low. However, each of them exhibits a rebellious, radical urge as they bring the possibility, and pleasure, of same-sex eroticism to a world that is both fascinated by and fearful of it. (9)

As the gay movement post-Stonewall became more established, the popularity of gay pulp fiction faded. Mainstream publishers were more eager to publish their own gay fiction, realizing there was a huge buying audience out there for the genre. And by the 1970s, graphic sex scenes were no longer taboo in major publishing houses. By the late 1970s, “legitimate” gay novels such as Patricia Nell Warren’s *The Front Runner* (1974) and Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) —two titles that featured sophisticated writing alongside unapologetic and, in the case of Holleran’s novel, extremely graphic gay sex—became significant best sellers, even while still largely being ignored by the straight press. Paul Newman even bought the film rights to *The Front Runner*, although the film was never made due to Hollywood’s continued hesitation

about homosexuality (Bram 160).¹ This led to the gay literary movement of the 1980s and '90s, with many major publishers forming gay- and lesbian-oriented houses, as well as the mainstream press finally reviewing and publicizing highly sexual gay novels like Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988) and Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), which received major literary awards.

The decline of gay pulp fiction is also linked to the 1970s rise of legal gay pornographic films and magazines—replacing much of the market for buyers attracted to the more overtly pornographic pulp novels. Indeed, for a brief period, the only remaining gay pulp novels were essentially plotless pornographies, which fought a losing battle against pornographic films and videos (Gunn and Harker 15). The niche of gay pulps was no longer needed by those seeking gay literary fiction or gay pornography. However, as even this quick survey of the genre shows, gay pulps not only filled a literary void, but also helped shape gay identity for their myriad readers and helped pave the way for the gay liberation movement of the post-Stonewall era. As Gunn states in a review of a *Man from C.A.M.P.* reprint, while gay literary novelists like “Vidal, Baldwin and Rechy might bolster [gay] literary pride, [it was] the pulps that offered us our first intimations that [gay men] didn’t have to lead abject and miserable lives because of their sexuality. If the pulps did not exactly cause Stonewall, they certainly contributed” (29). Gay pulp fiction absolutely played an important role in the progress of the gay rights movement of the 1960s.

¹ A Hollywood film adaptation of *Dancer* has recently been greenlit for a 2017 release, showing that these novels still hold resonance.

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