

AMERICAN PULP FICTION

The carnage of The Great War (1914–18) and the rise of the modern city and its “mean streets” were two events that helped create a new kind of literature, one considered below the standards of good taste and the moral rectitude of high culture. However, both the war and the polyglot metropolis seem to erase the difference between high culture and low. “No Man’s Land” and the trenches came to describe the terrain of the war and the city; social distinctions became muddy (among other things) in a world without maps.

H. L. Mencken helped found *The Black Mask* two years after the end of the war, a magazine devoted to hard-boiled detective fiction and one to which young writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler contributed. Hammett and Chandler were veterans of the war, as was Ernest Hemingway, who also became linked to this distinctly low-brow fiction (e.g., his short story “*The Killers*”). The writing in this magazine was often good and its insights perceptive, especially since it pointed to a distinctive feature of American life: its underlying violence.

The word “pulp” refers to the quality of paper used, as well as to the quality of the writing, but a year after WWI ended, H. L. Mencken would publish his ground-breaking *The American Language* (1919) in which he argued that England’s English remained mired in tradition and “precedent,” whereas American English was bold and innovative and reflected the language of the streets and the common man rather than that of academy and the upper classes. Chandler himself was a Brit who lived in Los Angeles and said that “when I began writing,” I wanted “to play with a fascinating new language” that was “unintellectual” but was still capable of creating great literature. He pointed to Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) as an example of pulp fiction in which its author took a genre associated with trash and raised it to the status of art. The pulps at their best, Chandler said, were stories “in search of a hidden truth.”

This course will focus upon the classics of hard-boiled fiction such as *The Maltese Falcon* and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, but will also include women writers such as Sara Paretsky, who gives a feminist twist to what has been considered a male-dominated domain. I will also argue that the pulps have seeped into what is now considered “serious” literature such as Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*. I will also include essays (online) of Chandler’s famous “*The Simple Art of Murder*,” Paul Fussell’s chapter in *The Great War and Modern Memory* entitled “The Troglodyte World,” and Paula Rabinowitz’s *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street*, Chapter 1. I highly recommend reading her excellent book.

There will be five two-hour sessions in all. The class will be hybrid: in-class and Zoom.

Class #1

Introduction with a focus on Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, with special attention given to the covers of pulp magazines sold on the streets of American cities in the 1920s and 1930s. In 2003, the Brooklyn Museum of Art hosted a show focusing on those magazine covers called “*Pulp Art: Vamps, Villains, and Victors*.”

Class #2

Chandler’s *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) as a revision of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

Class #3

Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* as a version of the "Passing" theme in *The Great Gatsby* and *Farewell, My Lovely*.

Women Writers and the Pulps.

Sara Paretsky's *Killing Orders* (1985) and Barbara Neeley's *Blanche on the Lam* (1992).

Class #4

Pulp Legacy: Ross Macdonald's *The Chill* (1964); Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280* (1964).

Class #5

Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000).