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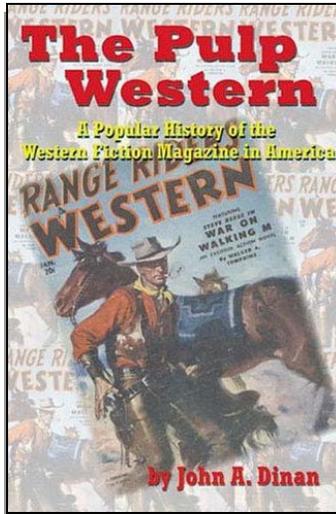
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The Pulp Western

*A Popular History of the
Western Fiction Magazine in America*

by **John A. Dinan**

Boalsburg, PA: BearManor Media, 200.

vi + 152 pages, selected bibliography, index, photographs.

ISBN-1-59393-003-8. paperback \$14.95.

In *The Pulp Western*, John Dinan has cataloged the fascinating three-decade production history of western pulps. There are about forty books available on pulp magazines and their cover artwork. However, Dinan is the first to document the western genre of the pulp magazine, its writers, and its importance in American popular culture. Called "pulp" by modern collectors, these magazines are actually novels of 10,000 to 15,000 words. Once known as "westerns" or "adventures," they descend from 19th century dime novels.

Pulps came in five main genres: westerns, science fiction, horror, detective, and romance. Horror and detective pulps were occasionally criticized for violence and veiled sex, but the pulp westerns escaped most of this disapproval. The bad men in westerns usually needed killing, and there was often more affection between the cowboy and his horse than with the female leads.

Pulps were written by a group of unbelievably prolific freelance novelists who were often paid by the word. Many of these authors churned out several complete novels in more than one genre each month "without big-assed words," as one put it. They followed established formulas and produced these works on manual typewriters. More often than not, pulp authors wrote under pseudonyms or "house names," and they received a check but no credit. Even so, pulp freelancers included several famous writers such as Zane Grey, who authored as many as 200 of these works.

Pulps had a subtle and lasting effect on American popular culture, and pulp westerns helped to shape the perception of the American West and the Texas Rangers. Even real Texas Rangers found this notoriety amusing. When famed Texas Ranger Captain Manuel T. Gonzauillas donated his papers to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum, he included a stack of *Texas Rangers* pulp magazines carefully stamped, "Property of Capt. M.T. Gonzauillas."

Western pulps outsold all others. Enthralled by the Old West, youngsters of the 1920s-1940s bicycled down to corner newsstands with 12¢ or 25¢ for the latest issue.

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There were the more than 165 of these magazines in publication, from *Ace High Weekly* to *Zane Grey's Western Story Magazine*. Among them is *Texas Rangers*, which began publication during the Texas Centennial in 1936 and ran into the 1940s.

Today, pulps are known primarily by collectors and persons over 50, who read them as children. There are two reasons for this obscurity.

First, few pulps survive in readable condition. They were published on low-quality newsprint paper containing sulfuric acid, which quickly darkened to brown and made the paper brittle. Most surviving pulps have to be handled delicately or their pages flake into fragments. Devoted fans of some titles are scanning the survivors and placing the text on the Internet so the magazine will not be lost. Just as the majority of early motion pictures have irretrievably vanished, many pulp magazines face the same fate.

A second reason pulps are poorly remembered is that they were literature, which required imagination. Often the only artwork was a cover illustration to set the tone; the rest was up to the reader to visualize. No two readers would imagine exactly the same thing, and it was truly a personalized interactive experience between the writer and the reader.

Comic books slowly replaced pulps during the 1940s. They substituted artwork for reader imagination, eliminated most of the prose, and invited little reader creativity. The trend continues today with "graphic novels" that are virtually all high-quality art. Ironically, comic books and graphic novels (*Spiderman*, *Fantastic Four*, *X-Men*, etc.) are now made into movies requiring no reading and zero imagination on the part of the viewer—just the suspension of disbelief.

Dinan offers a pragmatic look at the western pulp genre. He admits that most of the writing was "junk prose" created by "hack writers," facts that were confessed by the surviving novelists he interviewed. But Dinan also recognizes that something inherent in western pulps appealed to readers, evidenced by the millions of sales. Whether good or mediocre, the pulps conveyed an image of the American West that fired the imagination. Like the dime novels that preceded them, they popularized the West and added to its legend.

Due to the sheer number of western pulps, Dinan was unable to provide a detailed summary of each magazine. Undoubtedly, museums and libraries will wish for more in-depth information about production dates, number of issues, known writers and publishers, etc. However, it is unlikely that such time-consuming research for a limited audience will be undertaken any time soon. Until then, we have John Dinan's survey of a genre that generated no literary masterpieces but left an indelible impression on American culture.

Review by: Byron A. Johnson, Director, Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum

[Go to page or click on this title for the article, "The Pulp Cowboy," written by John Dinan, the author of *The Pulp Western*.]