

Collecting Vintage Mass Market Paperbacks And Paperback Originals

by Bruce Black

In the Beginning

In 1939, a man named Robert DeGraff gambled on American literacy and won.

Whether or not there were different types of readers in the U.S., there were distinctly different markets. Books were sold to those who could afford the sizable \$2 to \$3 price tag. Cheaper, paperbound books did exist, but most were very specialized: romances, mysteries, westerns and adolescent adventure novels made up the bulk of these titles. Many had serial characters. Almost none were considered significant literature. They were what would later be called “digest-sized” books, and the covers, though they supported color, were much thinner than those of the paperbacks that we think of today.

And then there were the pulps ... cheap magazines that catered to various literary genres and offered serialized works (and sometimes complete novels) that sold for a quarter or less. DeGraff wanted to offer modern reprints of favorite books at pulp magazine prices.

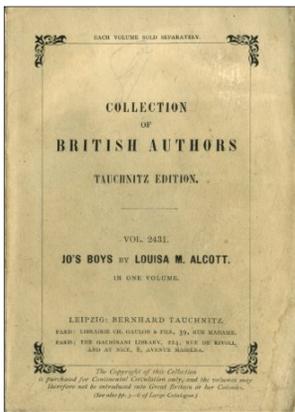
Well, actually the concept wasn't new at all. The first true English-language mass market paperbacks were printed more than a century before by *Tauchnitz* of Leipzig, Germany. Tauchnitz began publishing the books in 1835, reprinting popular British and American works at the rate of one per week, and it continued to do so well into the 1930's ... almost a hundred years and more than 5,000 titles in all. The unwritten agreement for the right to print the books was that the volumes would not be sold in any English-speaking country (most were probably sold in France).

In 1932, a new paperback label entered the scene: *Albatross Books*, a joint venture between publishers John Holroyd-Reece of England and Kurt Enoch of Germany. But once again, the English-language Albatross books were sold only on the Continent. (Enoch would eventually become instrumental in U.S. paperback history, but we'll get to that later.)

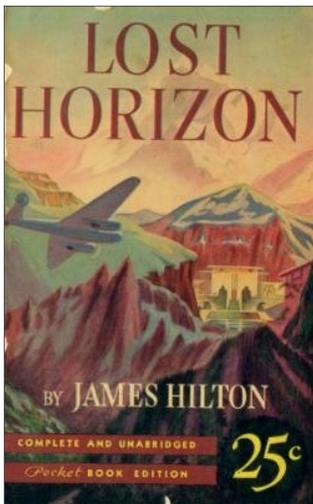
And then in 1935, the true mass market paperback (as we think of it today) was born when Allen Lane launched his famous *Penguin Books* in England. The price: sixpence, which was the cost of most items at Woolworth's, his first customer. Legend has it that Lane almost lost the Woolworth's contract (and probably the publishing project), but the Woolworth's director's wife happened to enter the office at the very moment he was being told “no” and expressed her interest in the books. Penguin became an immediate success in England. The size of Lane's company was tempered only by the cloud of war looming on the horizon, and England's entry into the fray, four years later.



Paperbacks before there *were* “paperbacks.” A mystery novel by C.C. Hochkiss. A typical paper-covered novel, printed by The Howell Publishing Company, Chicago, 1920. 300 pages. Approximately the size of a digest book.



Tauchnitz paperback #2,431: *Jo's Boys*, by Louisa M. Alcott, printed in Leipzig, Germany in 1886. Tauchnitz paperbacks were printed in English, but could only be sold on the European Continent. The books were about the size of a digest, and their covers were made from the same paper used for the pages. This one is 336 pages.



The beginning of an American industry. Pocket Book #1, published in 1939.

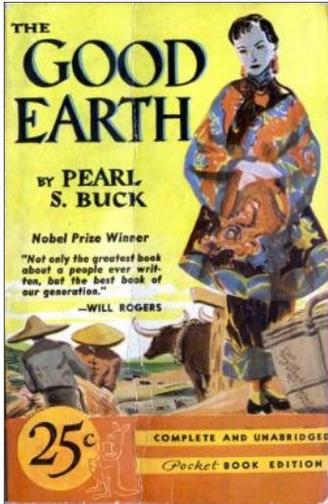
Pocket Books

Meanwhile, across the pond, entrepreneur DeGraff sought financial support for his idea of American mass market books from Marshall Field III, owner of the Chicago Sun; then eventually, he partnered with publishing house *Simon and Schuster*, and he published a test paperback in New York in 1938. He chose *The Good Earth*, by Pearl Buck, who had just won the Nobel Prize for literature. The test batch of 2,000 copies did well enough to launch an America industry the following year when DeGraff started his company. He had originally considered the name *20th Century Books*, and a corresponding cover price of 20¢, but he chose instead to call the company *Pocket Books* to emphasize the fact that a book would fit in a man's jacket pocket, and the 25¢ cover price would be a standard that would remain for the next 20 years. As his company's logo, DeGraff paid friend and illustrator Frank Lieberman \$50 to produce a suitable colophon. Lieberman named the little kangaroo after his mother-in-law, and though it's changed quite a bit over the years, "Gertrude" still graces the covers of Pocket Books today.

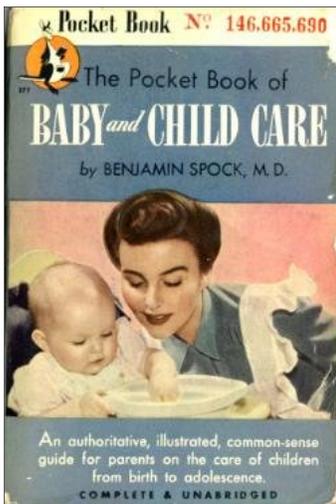
The biggest difference between Pocket Books and Lane's Penguin Books in England was the cover art. At Penguin, the concept was simple: there was none. The only picture present was the company colophon, an outline of a stiff-looking little bird whose image denoted the only animal in the natural world that dresses in a tuxedo. That simply wouldn't do for the visual-oriented Yanks, where more and more outlandish cover art had greeted readers of pulp magazines for decades. In the U.S., packaging was the key to sales. And so, from the very beginning, cover art became an important aspect of the American paperback industry.

Pocket Books was officially launched in June, 1939 with the first ten numbered issues. Pocket Book #1 was James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, which would eventually be reprinted more than 40 times. Pocket Book #11 was a reprint of the test novel, *The Good Earth*, bearing the same cover art. Pocket Books were almost exclusively reprints of previously released works, though there were a few original anthologies, such as *The Pocket Book of Verse* (#62) and *The Pocket Book of Short Stories* (#91).

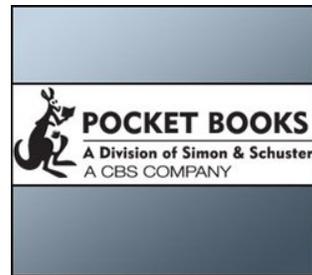
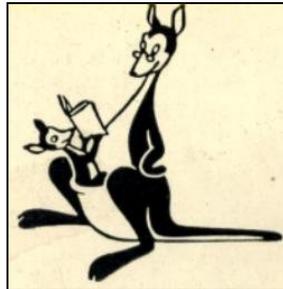
The paperback original that hit the home run came in 1946 with the book that was destined to sell more copies than any other book in American history except the Bible: Dr. Benjamin Spock's *The Pocket Book of Baby and Child Care* (#377). (And yet, even that is not considered by all experts to be a true PBO, since Pocket Books had arranged to have it released simultaneously with a hardbound issue by new publishing house *Duell, Sloan & Pearce* under the title *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*.) A study of this one book and what became of the man who wrote it could easily fill a long and fascinating article of its own, and it would be replete with history, intense controversy and a multitude of protagonists and antagonists ... including an emphatically adoring public, Robert DeGraff, J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon and many others. What's germane to us now is the fact that Spock may have been a tremendous pediatrician, but he was a lousy businessman. He earned only a half-cent royalty per book (he'd later manage to renegotiate for three quarters cent), with no advance.



Pocket Book #11, 1939. This cover art was also used on the company's original test-book, which was published the preceding year.



Pocket Book #377. 1st printing of what would eventually become the best selling book in American history, with the exception of the Bible. Later, the company would move the book to its 35¢ line: *Cardinal Books*.



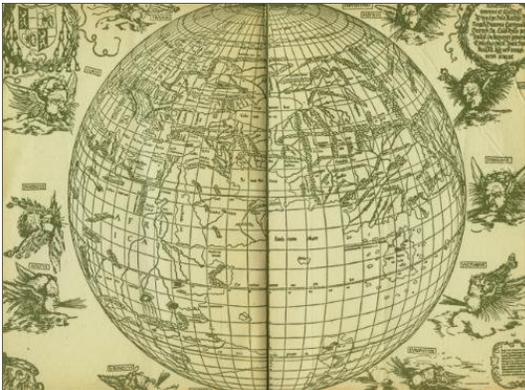
The Evolution of Gertrude.
 In the beginning. The war years (produced by Walt Disney). And the current logo.

One of the major things that distinguished paperbacks from other books was distribution. Hardbound books were sold in book stores. But other printed materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and earlier paperbound books were sold in newsstands, train stations, drug stores, department stores ... almost anywhere. There had to be a network to dispense these items. By far, the largest distributor was *The American News Corporation* (ANC), which had been around for decades before Pocket Books used them for distribution of their earliest books. Competition between distributors became fierce, especially in New York, and it was not long before suspicions of illegal activities, including mob influence, became a concern.

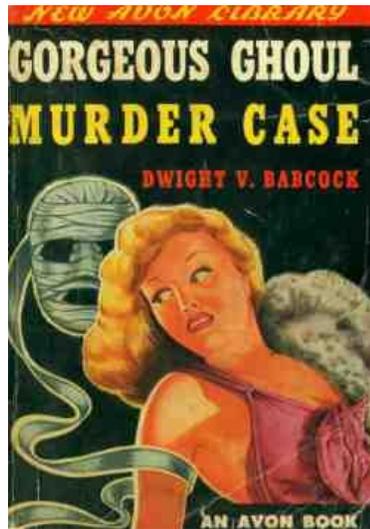
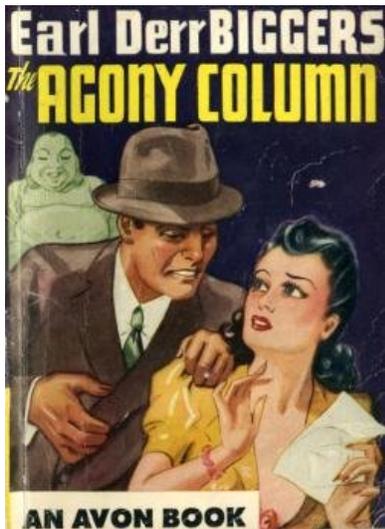
Avon

Close on the heels of Pocket Books, four major paperback houses were formed that would be instrumental in U.S. publishing history. The first was *Avon Books*, founded by Joseph Meyers. ANC asked him to begin paperback publishing when Pocket Books pulled out and started setting up its own distribution network. While Avon's titles were pretty standard, their covers were ... well, interesting. They were eye-catching but rather cheesy. While not overt, they were the first to use subtle sexuality on their covers, including pictures depicting a man kissing a woman's bare shoulder: a cover art technique used more than a dozen times through the original run of books. Avon sought out popular authors, and was the first paperback house to print a book by Raymond Chandler.

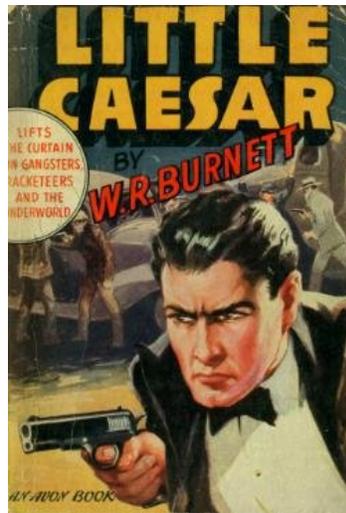
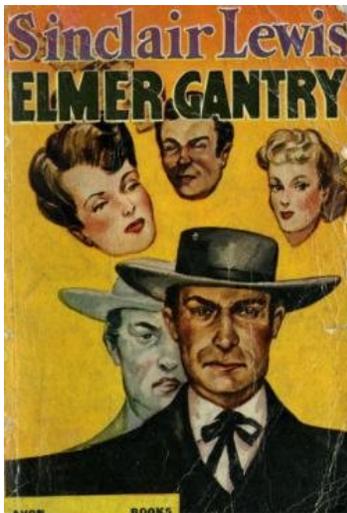
The first 40 titles were not numbered, and while the order of publication is well known, they are referred to by collectors as the "no-number" books. There is usually no printing information listed in Avons, and it's difficult to determine first printings of many volumes. Some first printings among the no-numbered books sport inside-cover decorations, line drawings of the earth, described as "Globe Endpapers" by collectors. Otherwise, printings can roughly be determined by viewing a list of available Avon titles at the end of most books. Other than a few short story anthologies, the first Avon PBO (paperback original) was Avon #64, *Back Stage*, by Vicki Baum.



"Globe Endpapers," identify first printings of some of the no-numbered Avon editions to today's vintage paperback collectors.

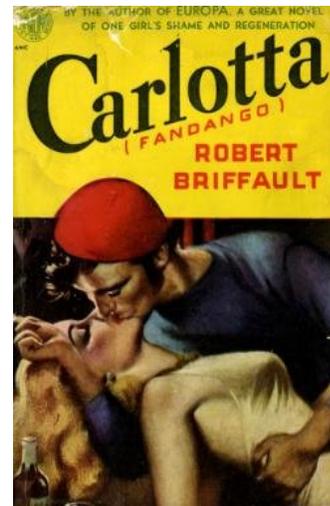
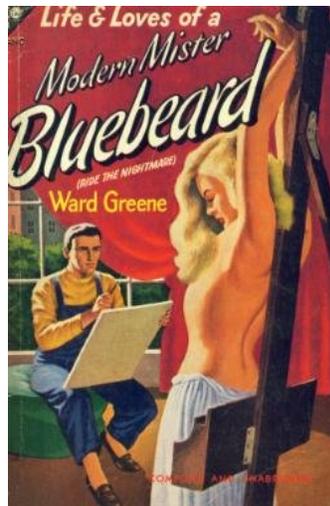
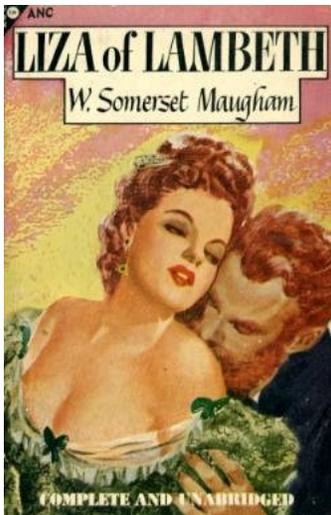


Avon (no-number) 17 and Avon (nn) 30. Early Avon cover art was eye-catching, but rather tacky. The first 40 books were un-numbered, of cheap construction, and they were slightly larger than Pocket Books.



Avon #1

Avon #66



Avon #139, Avon #190, Avon #250. As Avon evolved after the war years, the company's cover art became bolder.

Penguin

Next, *Penguin* entered the American market when Lane made the acquaintance of a young, London-educated U.S. businessman named Ian Ballantine, and decided to make him the head of the American Penguin operation. Ballantine was given the power to order paperbacks from England (in batches of 100) and distribute them in the U.S. Some of the books' covers were printed in England with the American price and business address. A few were wrapped in American dust jackets.

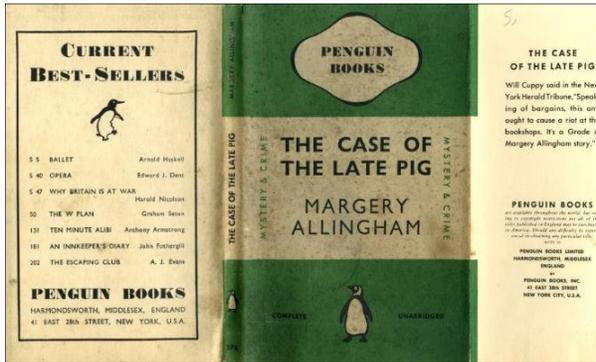
In 1941, Lane risked the U-Boat threat and visited New York, and he was not particularly pleased with what he saw. While there, he also met Kurt Enoch, who had fled to America

from Germany to escape the Nazis, and he quickly hired him as Penguin's Vice President of the American operation. In point of fact, Enoch was to report back to Lane and keep him informed of Ballantine's often unorthodox decision-making. The Lane/Ballantine "team" was never a comfortable one.

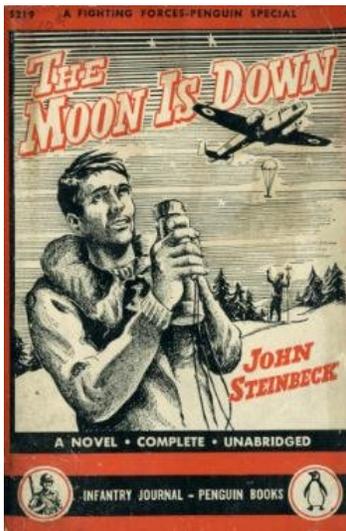
Ballantine had already been complaining vociferously about competing with Pocket Book while building his own distribution network. He also griped about the need for more titles by U.S. authors, and especially about the need for better cover art. Lane had already agreed to let Ballantine publish books here, and it seemed he was relenting a great deal by allowing cover art on the books *at all*. Even then, the cover art on the new books would certainly fail to live up to Pocket Book's idea of the concept, and it came nowhere *near* the garish illustrations on Avon books.

And then, very shortly after Lane went back home, America found itself embroiled in the same war that England had been gallantly fighting for two years now. Ballantine had a little bit of an advantage, since he recognized from dealings with the parent company that there would soon be dramatic wartime shortages ... especially paper. He signed an historic agreement with the U.S. Army's *Military Service Publishing Company*. If war is hell, then this was as close as you could get to a match made in heaven. Penguin would print books that the Army wanted, the Army would supply the paper, and Penguin would be assured of production through the war years. Suddenly, Ballantine wasn't a book importer anymore; he was a real, full-time publisher. The first U.S.-printed Penguin came out in 1942 (and cover art followed a few books later). The U.S. run started with book #501.

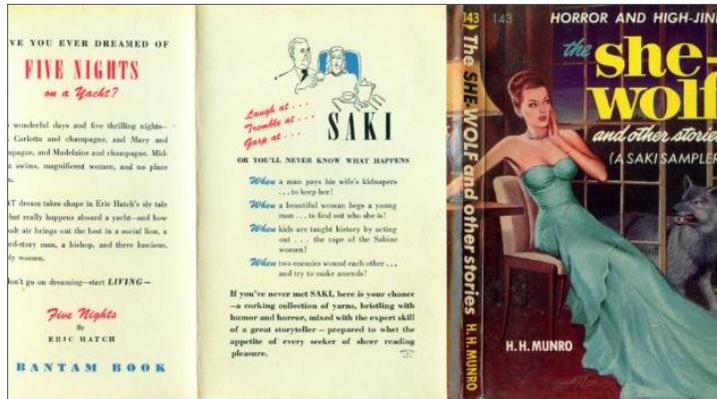
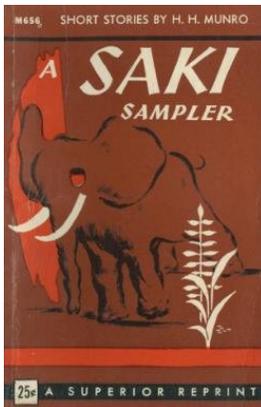
In addition, Penguin not only printed its own *Penguin S-series* wartime books, but also distributed the Army's *Infantry Journal* books (most of which were sold to the public), as well as *Superior Reprint* books, also published by the Military Service Publishing Company. Ballantine maintained the rights to those books, and took thousands of them with him when he left Penguin in 1946 to start his next publishing venture, *Bantam Books*. He wrapped them in Bantam dust jackets and distributed them under his new label.



Dust jacket for Penguin #276 listing the company's New York address. Early Penguins were imported from England for distribution in the U.S. British cover art was limited to the company's colophon.



Penguin S219, showing the dual colophons for Penguin and Infantry Journal. The American S-series Penguins mirrored the British orange and black wartime format.



Superior Reprint #M656, printed by The Military Service Publishing Company, in association with Penguin. Ian Ballantine took the leftover stocks of several of the wartime books with him when he left Penguin, and reissued them wearing Bantam dust jackets. This one was re-released as Bantam #143.

Popular Library

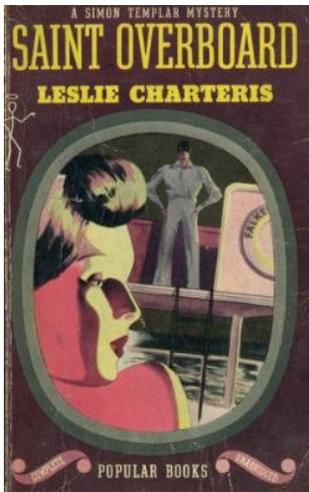
Another famous wartime paperback publisher was *Popular Library*. Ned Pines had already set up a huge pulp magazine and comic book company that sold labels such as *Thrilling Mystery*, *Thrilling Detective*, *Thrilling Western*, and the science fiction magazine *Thrilling Wonder*. He brought us such characters as The Black Bat and Captain Future. The paperback company started in 1942, with the first book published in '43, and most of the first hundred titles were by some of the most famous mystery authors of the day. The *Thrilling* magazines were renown for their bold, flashy cover art, but for the first four years, Popular Library's covers were all by the same artist, H. Lawrence Hoffman, and they were really rather bland, albeit distinguishing.

And then, after the war, things began to change. Often, covers were “reworked” from magazines to put on the paperbacks. Famous pulp artists, such as Earle Bergey, George Rosen, and Rudolph Belarski were used more and more often. The whole book operation began to take on more of a “pulp” look, and covers --- and some titles --- often had subtle sexual overtones. The company printed some very popular authors, such as Ben Ames Williams, Octavus Roy Cohen, Sax Rohmer and Cornell Woolrich (writing under the name William Irish), but by far the thing that makes these books some of the most collectible vintage paperbacks today is the covers. Stark and dramatic with sharp color contrast, Popular Library covers are some of the most distinctive the world has ever seen.

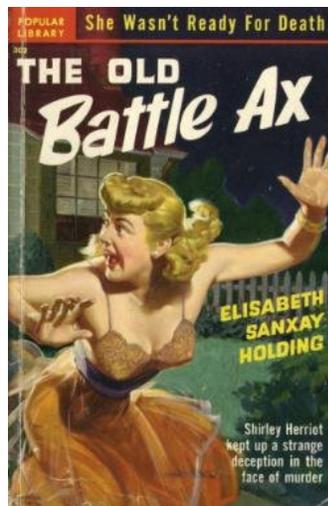
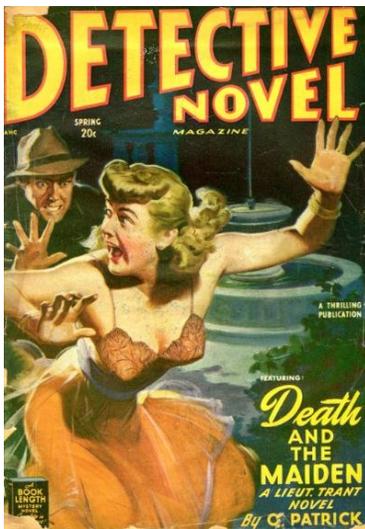
Dell

And finally, there was Dell Publishing Company. Dell, like Popular Library, had already established its own pulp magazine and comic book empire, to include *Western Romances*, *War Birds* and many detective magazines, as well as *Donald Duck* and *Looney Tunes* comics. Dell books were about 95% mysteries, with a very few adventure, romance and western titles sprinkled around for good measure. And they had a gimmick: the back cover of each book was graced with a scene-of-the-crime map. It was a tremendous idea, one that was to run throughout the first 500 + titles ... and it was something that would endure well beyond the books' normal, useful lifetimes. Today, the “Dell Mapbacks” are some of the most-collected books among vintage paperback enthusiasts.

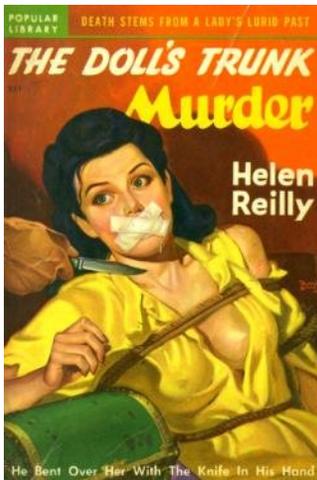
Dell authors included the best-respected mystery writers of the day, such as Dashiell Hammett, A.A. Fair (Erle Stanley Gardner), Agatha Christie, George Harmon Coxe, Brett Halliday and Mary Roberts Rinehart. The books were interesting, well constructed, and the cover art was very good throughout the run. Again, almost all of the books were reprints, but Dell would launch a string of paperback originals later, in the 1950's.



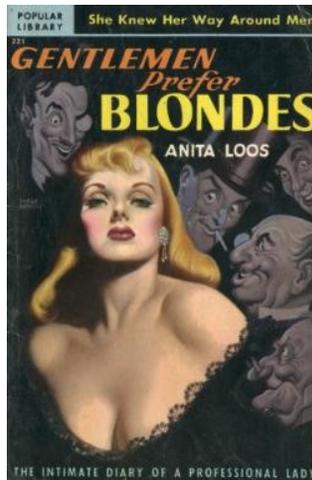
Popular Library #1, released in 1943. The first hundred + books were illustrated by H. Lawrence Hoffman, and the vast majority were mysteries. While distinctive, the book covers came nowhere near the bold, flashy cover art that graced the “Thrilling Publication” series of pulp magazines.



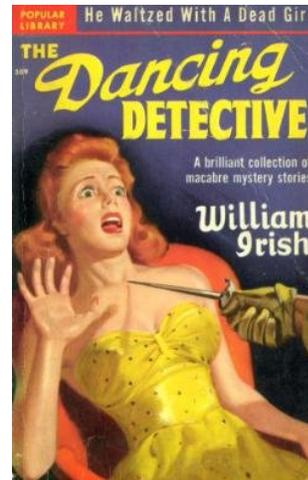
Detective Novel Magazine, Spring 1945, and Popular Library #302, printed in 1950. Original cover painting by Rudolph Belarski. After the war years, Popular Library cover art was much more dramatic. The reuse of cover paintings from the company’s pulp magazines was common.



Popular Library #211



Popular Library #221



Popular Library #309

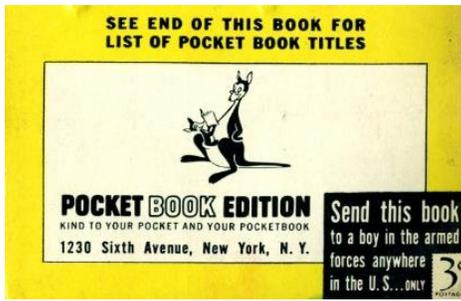
Armed Services Editions

Before we can leave the war years behind in our little study and move on to the momentous events that led to whole lines of paperback originals, we have to mention a publisher that wasn't *really* a publisher, because it never sold a single book ... but it was responsible for printing 123 million of them. It was *The Council of Books in Wartime*. The United States had never been known to do things by degrees, and when the nation entered the war, everyone knew we would muster a huge fighting force (there would be 16 million Americans in uniform by the time it was over). Human nature dictated that they could not be denied books during that time, but the prospect of a soldier toting a heavy book (for his own enjoyment) into forward-deployed positions was unthinkable.

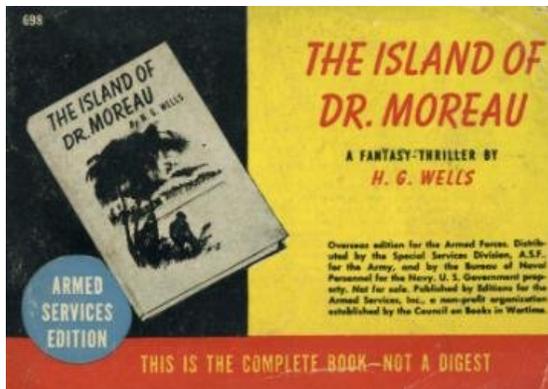
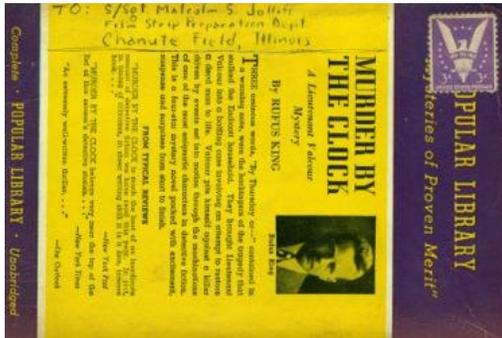
Friends and relatives could send a paperback book to a service member at any address in the United States simply by putting a 3¢ stamp on it and dropping it in any mailbox. That was a great first step, especially considering that the vast majority of recruits had to undergo several months of training here before being shipped out to their overseas assignments. But it was going to be impossible to send books, even paperbacks, through the mail once the men had been deployed.

The answer to the problem was the *Armed Services Editions*. Collecting ASE's is a topic unto itself, and perhaps the realm of another article; but believe it or not, there actually WERE paperback originals to be found in the ranks of the 1,322 numbered editions put out solely for use by American active duty soldiers, sailors and marines. Once again, one could certainly argue whether most of these were true PBOs because they were made up of previously published materials. But ASE's are important to us for two reasons (that are actually the same) pertaining to the books' covers. One is an important point to collectors of modern first editions, and the other is simply a piece of the strangest literary trivia in the annals of American publishing.

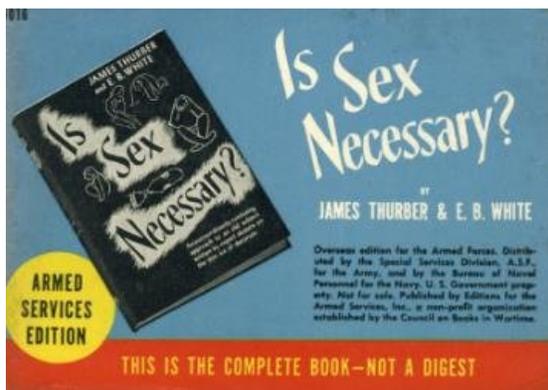
First, I'll give you a personal illustration. I collect James Thurber first editions. Thurber primarily wrote magazine articles for *The New Yorker*, but he compiled 32 books over his lifetime. I own all of his first editions, including, obviously, his first book: *Is Sex Necessary?* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1929), which he co-authored with his friend, E.B. White. What I do NOT own is the dust jacket for that book. In fact, I've never even SEEN one, and I can't find one for sale anywhere. But I DO know what the dust jacket *looks* like. That's because I own the Armed Services Edition. ASE's always sported a picture of the first edition on the cover.



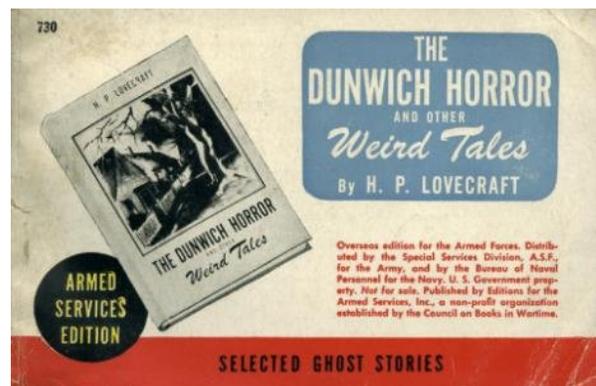
During the war, a 3¢ stamp would send a paperback book to a serviceman anywhere in the U.S.



For the soldiers, sailors and marines already deployed, the *Armed Services Editions* were provided by the government at no charge. ASE #698



ASE #1016



ASE 730

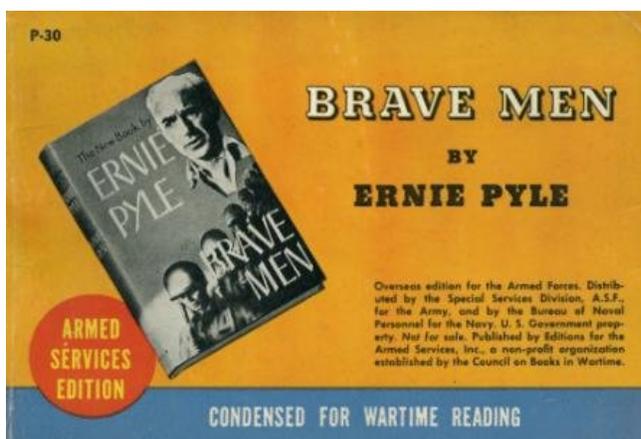
(#730 is a “Made Book,” an original edition made from short pieces compiled by the *Council of Books in Wartime*. The picture on the cover is a book that doesn’t really exist.)

But mixed in with the ASE line-up were dozens of books that Dr. John Y. Cole, historian at the Library of Congress, called “Made Books.” These were compilations of short stories and/or poems from various famous authors that the Council chose to compile and “make” into new, never-before-published books. They included anthologies of short works by Robert & Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Guy De Maupassant, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allen Poe, and many, many others. But, since the Council wanted to keep the appearance of the books uniform, they chose to grace the covers of these ASE’s with pictures of books *that did not actually exist!* Whether or not you choose to think of the “made books” as paperback originals, they were most certainly unique, and an American publishing oddity that deserves recognition.

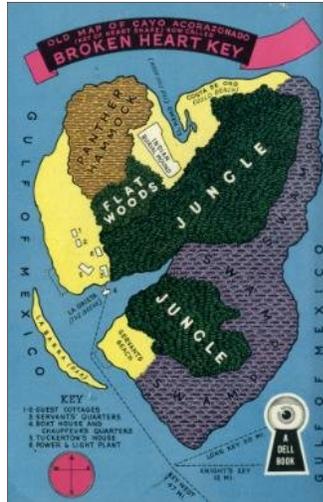
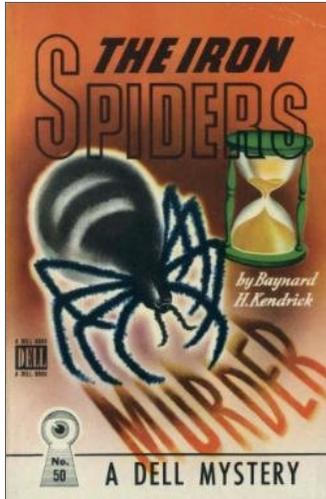
One of the “made books” of particular interest was ASE #P-30, *Brave Men*, by Ernie Pyle. Pyle was one of the great correspondents that sent first-hand stories of the European Campaign back to Americans at home who were frantic for news from the front lines. (Others, including Frederick Schiller Faust, who had written hundreds of books and short stories under the pseudonym Max Brand, would never make it home alive.) While condensed from the version that would be distributed in the States, *Brave Men* was a significant wartime book ... and one that is still in print today.

And so, at the end of the war years, the industry was primed and ready to take off. Deals had been forged, distributions networks were in place, and the country was literally hungry for cheap books to read. The only thing that had kept business depressed was the wartime paper shortages, and now those restrictions were being lifted. At the very least, one simple truth was manifestly obvious.

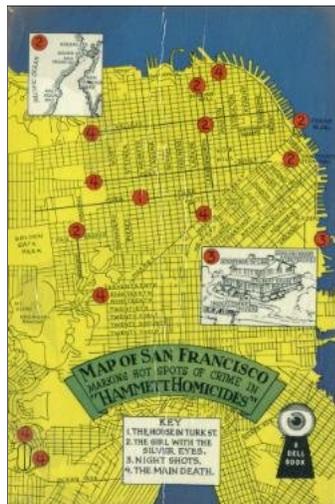
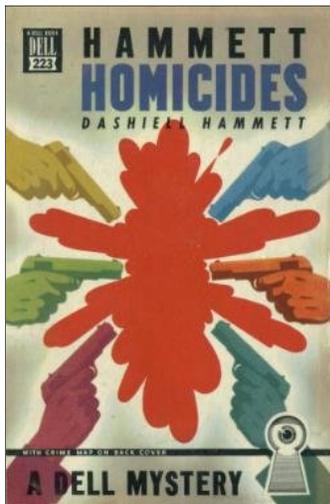
Paperbacks were here to stay.



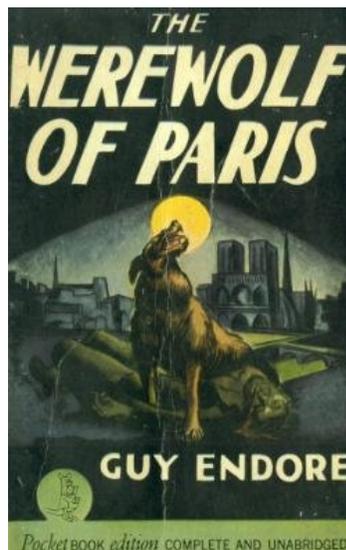
ASE P-30, another of the ASE “made books.” The title is still in print.



The Dell "Mapbacks," Dell #50.
 (An article on these books appeared in *Firsts Magazine*, April 2001.) This was a sales gimmick that was never successfully repeated by any other paperback house. Most of the back cover (map) artwork for the books was done by Ruth Belew.

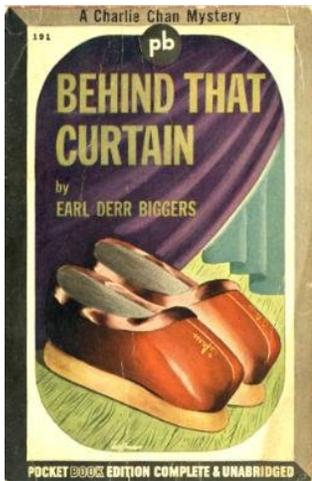


Dell #223.

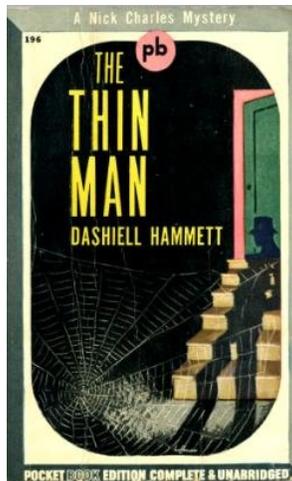


Avon #108

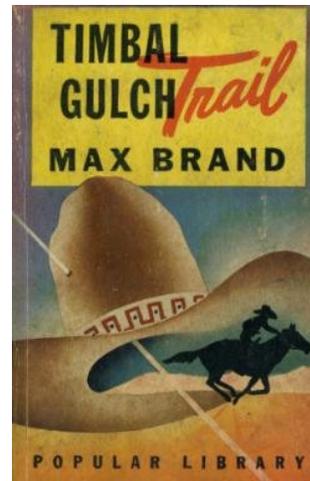
Pocket Book #97



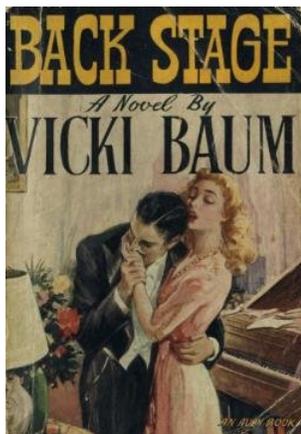
Pocket Book #191



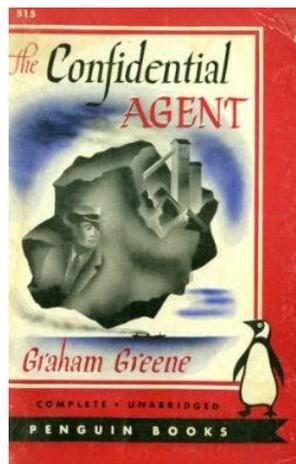
Pocket Book #196



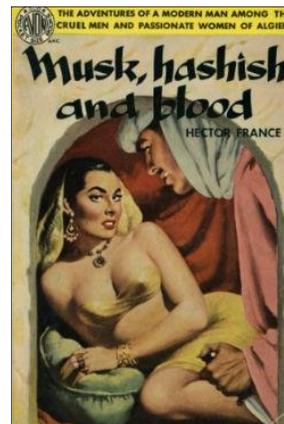
Popular Library 78



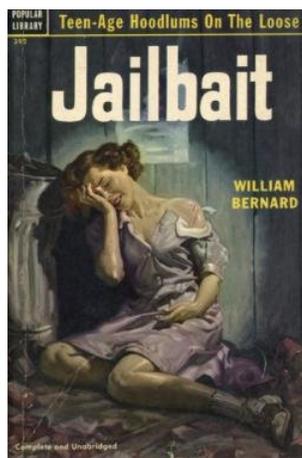
Avon #64



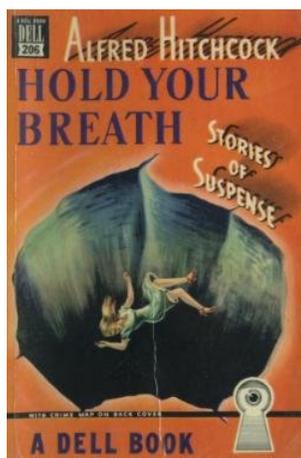
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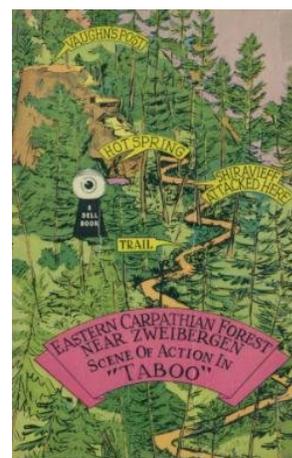
Avon #308



Popular Library #392



Dell #206



Dell 206 back