

The following is a transcript of a presentation I made at the In Your Write Mind Conference at Seton Hill University on 22 June 2018. The audience comprised largely graduates of the University's MFA program for novelists. - FAJr.

WRITING FOR THE NEW PULP FICTION MARKET

Ever hear of The Purple Scar? Lady Domino? The Black Bat? How about the Shadow? Doc Savage? Conan the Barbarian? Ah, I see recognition lighting up a few faces.

The aforementioned heroes and heroine are members of the pantheon of pulp fiction characters popular in the magazines of the 1930s and 40s. Literary types are fond of tagging Pulp Fiction as "escapist literature named after the cheap pulp paper on which the magazines were printed." I prefer to think that Pulp Fiction is named after the state in which the villains are left after the hero is finished beating the living snot out of them.

Hundreds of pulp magazines graced the newsstands and magazine racks of America, some monthly and some weekly in the 1930s and 40s. And they kept authors like H.P. Lovecraft, Fritz Leiber, Ray Bradbury, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, Kenneth Robeson, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and a host of others from starving to death in the hard times of the Great Depression. As a matter of fact, during the Depression, the prolific Robert E. Howard had a greater income than the President of the bank in his hometown of Cross Plains, Texas.

The magazines had titles like *Spicy Detective Stories*, *Weird Tales*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, *THRILLING ADVENTURE*, *THRILLING DETECTIVE*, *THRILLING MYSTERY*, *THRILLING RANCH*, *THRILLING SPORTS*, *THRILLING WESTERN*, and *THRILLING WONDER STORIES*.

It's no coincidence that so many of these magazines had the word Thrilling as the lead adjective in their titles. That's what their audience wanted - thrills; escape, adventure, romance, to take their minds away from the grinding sadness of the Depression or the horrors of war.

Much of the writing was poor at best, in many cases because it was cranked out so quickly for magazines that came out on a weekly schedule. But the Pulps included gems of very high quality: Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* first appeared in *Black Mask*. H.P. Lovecraft, Fritz Leiber, and Robert E. Howard saw much of their best work appear in *Weird Tales* for a half-cent a word (one reason why their stories are often so long and detailed). Even the young Tennessee Williams had a story. "The Vengeance of Nitocris" published in *Weird Tales*.

In principle, the circumstance is illustrated by an anecdote involving Science Fiction grand master Theodore Sturgeon. The story has it that an interviewer once said to Sturgeon, "Mister Sturgeon, you know that 90 percent of science fiction is crap." Sturgeon replied, "Young man, 90 percent of

everything is crap." This was true of Pulp Fiction in the 30s and 40s, and is still true of the Pulp Fiction written today. It's that other ten percent that pulp fans look for in new fiction.

In the fifties, the pulps faded away and disappeared from the newsstands, but the best stories and their characters came back in the 1960s in the form of Ace Paperback doubles featuring Conan stories by Howard, and Ballantine paperback reprints of the hundred thirty-odd Doc Savage novels by Lester Dent, aka Kenneth Robeson, Western authors Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour.

What possessed editors and imprints to bring these stories back? It was the nature of the fiction.

Pulp writers had one rule that good and bad writers alike followed: adherence to the art of storytelling. Every story had a beginning and an end, sharply etched economical, almost archetypal characterization, loads of action, high emotions, and plenty going on. The mission was to keep the reader hooked while you transported him or her into a more exciting and interesting world of fantasy and make-believe, to spirit the reader away from the drab, everyday world. Its mission was to entertain with a capital E.

My generation, largely born after the pulps disappeared from the newsstand, bought and read these adventurous stories in anthologies with lurid paperback covers and found they were, simply put, fun to read. Pulp fiction has experienced the first stirrings of a new wave of interest in recent years as another generation discovers that reading pulp fiction can be at least as entertaining as video games, television, and social media.

Over the past eight to ten years, vendors began showing up at Sci-Fi cons and then at cons devoted to pulp fiction, cons like the Pulp Fest in Columbus (this year the last weekend of July in Cranberry, PA) and The Windy City Pulp and Paper Con in Chicago with crumbling pulp magazines in plastic sleeves and reprints of entire pulp magazines. The old vintage magazines, because of their cheap paper are hard to find in good condition, so people who wanted to read the adventures of The Shadow or Secret Agent X bought these facsimile editions (complete with the ads for X-ray glasses, sneeze powder and joy buzzers from Johnson-Smith Company) in big numbers.

A common sentiment was the lament that having read the entire canon of a specific author, the fun was over; many wished that the adventures would continue. And they have. Built on the popularity of Conan the Barbarian, Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp, among others, began writing new Conan adventures with the blessing of the Howard Estate's literary executor the late Glenn Lord. Today, I've lost track of the number of authors writing new Conan novels and stories. But they sell. How do we know? Because the publishers keep cranking them out. They will stop when people stop buying them.

As more fans discovered lesser known heroes like some of the ones I mentioned earlier, a demand arose for new stories involving these characters as well. When publishers went looking for literary rights, they learned that a large number of these characters had never been copyrighted, or that their copyrights had never been renewed under law, and they were public domain - free for the taking.

A whole new subgenre of fiction has arisen around the revival of these characters in new stories. As I said earlier, new wine in old wineskins.

In addition to Conan, new stories featuring Doc Savage, Alan Quatermain, and other characters began to appear, even new Sherlock Holmes stories written by different authors. Alongside the traditional pulp heroes, new characters also emerged and the pulp fans embraced them.

While many of you may not particularly like the kind of rock 'em sock 'em fiction that the pulp milieu presents, ask yourself this question: what am I? The answer is: a writer. What do writers do? They write for publication. Writing New Pulp is a road to your name on the cover of a book from a legitimate publisher.

Go to the websites of the publishers that I'll discuss later and download their submission requirements. Those who publish new stories based on established characters provide a character "bible" ranging from a paragraph to a page of information; back story, regular associates, and other details peculiar to the character. Some of these publishers post anthology projects and request submissions. Others send out regular e-mails to writers who work with them or who request the information.

Check them out. If a publisher wants novellas for a Purple Scar anthology, give it a shot. Because these folks are not Knopf or Simon & Shuster, they are a little more down-to-earth and will work with you within reason. Bottom line, they'll give your work a fair read, and if you write a good piece, they'll likely use it. The checks may not be huge, but they cash.

And don't think that this is all you pitch to the New Pulpers. You can submit characters of your own. I'll use myself as an example.

My entry into Airship 27 was my novel *Hitwolf* (what would the Mob do with a werewolf?). It was accepted immediately, as was *Six Gun Terrors, vol.1* (cowboys and Cthulhu) that I wrote and submitted four months later.

These two paved the way for my supernatural detective C.O. Jones, *Mobsters and Monsters* and my first novel and *Dead Man's Melody* (rejected by one agent who shall remain nameless – he told me the only thing that sells these days is troubled female investigator fiction). *Dead Man's Melody* coincidentally was nominated by the 2017 Pulp Factory Awards as Pulp Novel of the Year.

Other characters of my own accepted and published by Airship 27 include conjoined Chinese twins, the Smith brothers (*The Eye of Quang-Chi*, nominated as pulp novel of the year this year), and Thirties private eye Ike Mars (*Bloody Key*).

In addition, I've written original character novellas for anthologies for Airship 27: *All-American Sports Stories* and *Aviation Aces, Vol. 1*. I've also written established character stories for *Pulp Mythology vol. 1* (a Beowulf story) *Secret Agent X vol. 5 and vol. 6*, a Conrad von Hoenig story for Flinch Books' *Quest for the Space Gods*, and a pair of original Sherlock Holmes stories for *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective vol. 9* as well as stories for volumes 12 and 13.

All were accepted and all are paid publications. Six have already been made into audio books with the others to follow as Airship converts its entire catalog.

I would also point out that the publishers are now looking for female heroes, super powers or not because of the success of last year's *Wonder Woman* movie. Robert E. Howard's Red Sonja is coming back with re-issues of novels by David C. Smith and Dick Tierney. Lady Domino is back under the Airship 27 imprint. Female pulp heroes are going to be a big seller in the near future.

You may not get rich writing new pulp this year, or maybe next year, but your name will be out there, and when an agent or editor asks "what have you published lately?" you have a legitimate answer. Also, when you do a book signing or an author sale like tomorrow's, you have hard copy books to offer. This week I have fifteen titles to put out for sale, all from the past four years.

Things are looking better all the time for the new Pulp Market. Currently, an Airship character named Brother Bones was recently optioned for a movie, and if that succeeds, the producers will be looking for more titles.

So, the market is out there. Now how do you write a New Pulp Fiction story?

Pulp fiction, to my thinking is a logical extension of Gothic fiction from the 18th century. Lurid, sensational novels were popular reading then, and those two adjectives certainly apply to pulp, but the similarities run deeper.

In my doctoral dissertation, *Edith Wharton's American Gothic: Gods, Ghosts, and Vampires* I defined Gothic fiction as "Literature that portrays society's inability to protect the individual in extreme circumstances. "

A favorite example of this extension in the modern world is the classic B movie alien invasion flick of the fifties. A spacecraft lands. The first thing police and/or the army do is surround the craft and point weapons at it, in military parlance, all by the book. The aliens soon prove to be beyond human control. Standard protocols are ineffective, and the outsider, in many cases a curmudgeonly scientist dismissed by the establishment as a crank, comes up with a solution that saves humanity.

Pulp fiction carries this a step further. In extreme circumstances, beyond the reach of law enforcement, government, military force, religious authority, or science, where can a person turn? I.e. who ya gonna call? The private detective who operates outside the proscribing rules of a police officer, the hired gunslinger whose fast draw settles things marshals and posses can't, the anti-hero who breaks every rule to set things right.

Pulp Fiction has absolutely no literary pretensions. It is written to entertain. As Ron Fortier, Airship 27's editor in chief says, "if you want to develop character, do it between the gunshots."

The advice editor Marcel Duhammel gave to author Chester Himes, who went on to write the successful Grave Digger Jones series (ever see the movie *Cotton Comes to Harlem*?) is as valid today as it was sixty years ago: Make pictures. We don't give a damn who's thinking what, only what they're doing.

I've always enjoyed Pulp because when I read it, I don't have to psychoanalyze the characters, or go to the library and find a book on organic chemistry or marine biology (are you listening, Randy Wayne White?) to make sense of the plot. I don't need to reference some deep literary allegory or have to know minutiae about some historical period.

Pulp fiction is action, action, action. Fist fights, gun fights, sword fights; conflict and mortal peril underlie everything in the story, narrative tension should run high throughout. August Lenniger, in a 1929 *Writer's Digest* article about the infamous *Black Mask* magazine wrote of its stories, "There is never a moment in [its stories] where there is not something happening. There is constant action; a continual series of surprises, and it holds its suspense through the threatening [of] death"

As I am fond of saying, the fundamental question at the heart of fiction is "what if?"; The fundamental question at the heart of pulp fiction is "what next?"

As in Gothic fiction, pulp fiction achieves this by either placing an extraordinary individual into ordinary circumstances, or an ordinary individual into extraordinary circumstances. The result is what literary snobs call escapist fiction, but that is pulp fiction's greatest appeal: its ability to push an uncomfortable reality to the back of your mind for the duration of the story. Herein lies the source of nostalgia for something today's readers may have never experienced before. A gateway "to those thrilling days of yesteryear."

But where does pulp fiction originate? I am fond of saying that most pulp fiction stems from two of the great classics of western literature: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

I have recently added a third root to the tree: the Knight and his Squire, Don Quixote and the faithful Sancho Panza as a leading example. Buddy fiction, if you will, the hero and a second banana sidekick like Tonto to Fran Stryker's Lone Ranger.

The Iliad: a team of characters, each with a specialty; strength, wisdom, cleverness, etc. who join forces to fight an enemy. You've seen it since in Doc Savage's team, the Blackhawk comics from the 40s and 50s, Mission Impossible, the A-Team, the first Star Wars film, and the Justice League and Marvel Avengers. Each member of the team contributes to the victory in his or her unique way.

The Odyssey: Homer was very shrewd to choose Odysseus, "the man of many schemes" as his stand alone hero. He is the prototypical loner against all comers, natural and supernatural. He is human, not even a demigod, and though he gets help from a few deities, he faces opposition from others in his quest to return home from the Trojan War. He is the archetypal trickster found in every mythology: Hermes, Loki, Coyote, Anansi, Popocatepetl, and he uses his many schemes to thwart his powerful enemies and to succeed in his efforts.

The fact that Odysseus is human and not supernatural opens the door for strong reader identification with the hero, an element crucial to successful pulp fiction. H. Bedford-Jones writes: "Never forget that the reader, in general, identifies himself with the chief character of a story. He

desires to see things through the eyes of that character." Herein lies the escapist appeal of Pulp Fiction, the Walter Mitty-ism of the reader seeing himself as a two-fisted Alpha hero.

A main staple of traditional Pulp has always been the private detective, a figure George Will recently wrote was an extension of the American Cowboy (another staple of Pulp Fiction), the gun-toting loner who has substituted a car for a horse, and an automatic for a six-shooter, but who embodies the same tough-guy ethic and sense of right and wrong that motivates him to protect the vulnerable (as did another action figure, the Knight Errant of an earlier era). I.e. people the system cannot protect.

Ron Fortier of Airship 27 writes on Airship's website, "People love mysteries, and they love private eyes." If mystery is your forte, write one and submit it to Airship 27. I purposely write detective novels set in the 30s (Ike Mars), the 40s (C.O. Jones), and the 1890s (The Smith Brothers) so that I can write about detecting skills and physical confrontation, not the Internet, cell phones, digital surveillance cameras, The NCIS database, and a host of other modern conveniences that allow investigators to solve crimes and catch criminals in fifteen minutes while sipping a latte in their swivel chairs.

My detectives get their info the old way, by paying snitches, trading on old friendships with cops still on the force, peering through keyholes and over transoms, and beating it out of recalcitrant people. Action, action, action. As Raymond Chandler once wrote, "When in doubt, have two guys come through the door with guns."

Sam Dunne, my protagonist in *Dead Man's melody* is my sole protagonist who operates in the present. Sam manages to navigate modern technology well enough, but when all else fails, he has the reassuring knowledge that when all else fails, he can always climb over the table and punch the s. o. b. in the teeth.

Your loner hero can be a detective (private or otherwise), a cowboy, a closet crime fighter, a pirate, someone with supernatural ability, or the character I'm developing now, an 18th century insurance investigator for Lloyd's of London who offers me the potential to pit him against crooked customs officers, pirates, sea monsters, the antagonistic French and Spanish governments, spies, and dockside ruffians. Good ripping fun with a sword, a belaying pin, and a musket; no iPads allowed.

Lester Dent, pen name Kenneth Robeson -- remember him? He created Doc Savage and wrote hundreds of novels, sometimes one a week. He published "the Lester Dent Pulp Paper Master Fiction Plot" in 1936. It still works. You can Google it at:

<http://www.paper-dragon.com/1939/dent.html>

and for those of you who like to use Scrivener software, an enterprising author has created a Scrivener template for Pulp Fiction found at:

<http://byzantineroads.info/pulptemplate>

Dent pretty much nails it. I'll read an excerpt from his four-phase formula.

First 1,500 words: 1--First line, or as near thereto as possible, introduce the hero and swat him with a fistful of trouble. Hint at a mystery, a menace, or a problem to be solved--something the hero has to cope with.

Yep. That's how pulp works, and that's why the readers love it. Joseph T. Shaw says, ". . . it is not necessary to stage a gun battle from start to finish, with a murder or a killing in every paragraph. You can keep it alive and moving, when sympathy is once aroused, by tension and suspense, through dialogue or other form of plot development, when action is absent. Action in one form or another, is, however, pretty much in demand."

So you've got an idea about plotting and characters. Run with it. Be as outlandish as you like, because Pulp Fiction (new or old) demands internal logic, but not external logic. Within the bounds of the story, you can be as outlandish as you like.

My First Six-Gun Terrors novel, subtitled "Six Guns and Old Ones" featured not only cowboys and Indians and the Cavalry; it included a wagon train with forty Dayak headhunters from Borneo, a boatload of Chinese Pirates, the Vatican, a one-eyed tribal chief who reads Aristotle, and of course, H. P. Lovecraft's Old Ones. I just said what the hell and threw everything I could think of into the plot.

It sold. So can your work.

I mentioned earlier the prospect of writing pulp stories and novels with previously established public domain characters. Dozens exist. The magic era seems to be the mid-1930s. Anything copyrighted before then, if not appropriately renewed, has become public domain. This frees the presses to publish new fiction featuring these characters and it frees you to write it. My recommendation is that you not only look over the character bible on any of these you might want to try but that you read some of the older fiction involving these characters to acquaint yourself with the character(s) and the style of the original works.

Certain characters are still protected by copyright: Tarzan is still owned by the Burroughs estate. Doc Savage, and Robert E. Howard's characters Conan, Bran Mak Morn, Solomon Kane, et al. If you want to try a character that's not on the list I gave you, I'd vet it with the publisher before going to the trouble of writing a novel you can't legally sell.

Of course, you could write a Conan novel, and simply change the name of the hero and the name of the land or the milieu as did Gardner Fox, (Kothar the Barbarian) or Lin Carter (Ka-Zar), or a host of other sword and sorcery scribes. The risk you run with that strategy is the likelihood that an editor will read the first three pages and dismiss it as *faux* Conan.

The temptation exists to put a personal spin on an established character. Be careful about that. Readers cherish their favorites, and don't always take kindly to a new face on an old favorite. I'd liken it to Hollywood directors remaking classic movies with the attitude, "It was great, but it will be perfect if I just make this one change to the plot." The road to bad reviews, gang, and the waste of a hefty Hollywood budget.

There's a reason these characters are still popular seventy or eighty years after they first saw print: they were engaging. Readers liked them and knew what to expect issue to issue of a given magazine. A long series can be repetitive, but with the good ones, readers don't mind so much. As Walter Gibson tells us, it's like chatting with an old friend.

One way to handle individualizing your take on a character is what I did with Secret Agent X. My Agent X story "The Devil in the Deep Blue Sea" is set immediately after World War I, earlier in X's career than the original canon. That gave me leeway to work X to my satisfaction without distressing fans of the original. My second foray into Agent X's adventures, "Island in the Sky" is set in 1939 on the verge of World War II and allowed me the same freedom.

Some publishers frown on changes. Airship 27 has published eleven anthologies of new Sherlock Holmes fiction with two more awaiting publication. Despite the popularity of the mega-star anthology *Shadows Over Baker Street*, Airship 27 refuses to take Holmes stories that involve the supernatural or science fiction elements. I wrote a pair of Holmes novellas without knowing this fact, and at the Windy City Pulp Con two years ago, Ron Fortier told he couldn't use them for the aforementioned reason.

I was lucky that day. Tommy Hancock from Pro Se Press was standing beside me and as soon as Ron said he couldn't use the stories, Tommy said, "I'll take 'em." And they are now in print in *Sherlock Holmes and the Adventure of the Chronic Argonaut*.

Writing Sherlock Holmes stories is one of the most demanding and daunting tasks a writer can tackle. The readers are unforgiving of errors and/or misrepresentations and largely intolerant of plot twists like revealing that Holmes is a woman in disguise, is Watson's secret lover, or is from outer space or another dimension. Amazon reviews, fan blogs, and social media can be devastating to sales, and remember, barring nuclear war or collision with an asteroid, few things have a longer life than postings on the Internet. They'll haunt you for years to come.

The pulp characters on Airship 27's "fair game" list are a little bit easier to manage. You don't need to throw a reference to the character bible every other paragraph just to let the reader know you've done your homework. The result of that can often be the appearance of simply trying too hard to be another author. Those of you who have read any of the newer Spenser novels by Ace Atkins, who took over the series after Robert Parker's death will understand completely.

It is worthwhile to read newer fiction featuring an established character to get a feel of what a new pulp publisher wants to see, but that is no substitute for reading the original author's work to understand how he or she saw the character. A mistake some authors make is referring to or spinning off from an incident portrayed in a story that never occurred in the original canon. This is an immediate red flag that you are not familiar with the original author's treatment.

If you write a series of character revival stories, you can get away with referring to incidents, characters, etc. unique to your work, but keep everyone else's newer tales in a separate compartment. A few more caveats: most editors shy away from origin stories. There is a compelling reason.

Walter Gibson, who wrote over a hundred novels featuring The Shadow, wrote in his essay "A Million Words a Year for Ten Straight Years" (that's double NANOWRIMO all year 'round) the following wisdom about the Pulp hero:

You must treat the character as a discovery, rather than your own creation. Treat him, not just seriously, but profoundly. Picture him as real, and beyond you, in mind as well as prowess. Feel that however much you have learned about him, you can never uncover all. This mental attitude gives you deeper knowledge of the character than the story does.

Gibson is correct. When you think about fictional characters you have enjoyed, ask yourself, would I enjoy that character more or less if I were told every detail of the character's origin? That sense of mystery that Gibson's approach provides helps that character remain larger than life in the reader's mind, and enables what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "teleological suspension of disbelief" in the character that permits the most outlandish (and often the most entertaining) events to be presented.

Another red flag is a story that presents the death of the hero. Publishers want return engagements. If you kill off a popular hero, or one of your own creation, you've killed a golden goose.

If you create a new pulp character, keep in mind the words of Erle Stanley Gardner, creator of Perry Mason, but also the author of hundreds of pulp magazine stories:

An editor, usually with a strong individuality, cultivates writers who have strong individualities. They create characters that stand out. As writers, editors, and readers become more familiar with these characters, they develop, round out, and become flesh and blood beings to the readers.

Another aspect: in the current publishing game, many of the New Pulp Houses utilize Amazon's Create Space in tandem with Kindle for their releases. This has made a significant change in the market; instead of a publishing house printing a thousand copies or fifty thousand copies of a book and distributing them to sellers, then remaindering those copies that don't sell, effectively taking the book off the shelf, a title's life is open-ended, being available so long as Amazon is in business. Your books are never out of print. People will eventually read your stuff, like it, and go looking for more. They'll find it all on Amazon. A slow ride, perhaps, but you will arrive.

The strategy I pursue is to continue writing and publishing, building a catalog, and having it ready if and when my work enjoys its fifteen minutes of fame. In the meantime, I'm having fun.

A simple Google search of New Pulp Fiction will uncover a number of possible markets. Download their submission requirements, and study their publications. To learn what others are doing in the field, you might also join the Pulp Factory discussion group found at:

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/thepulpfactory/conversations/messages>

My advice to every author is: be your own demographic. Write what you'd like to read. If you don't like what you're writing, how can you expect a reader to like it any better? If you are excited what

you write, the excitement will be contagious. Writing will be less like work, and more like the adventure it ought to be.