



The cover of Ann Bannan's *Odd Girl Out* as reissued by Cleis Press.
Courtesy of Cleis Press.

Pulp Paperbacks and Their Covers

by Teresa Theophano

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As much an artifact of lesbian popular culture as a source of amusing kitsch in today's more tolerant political climate, pulp fiction paperbacks (named for the inexpensive paper on which they were printed) remain a fascinating slice of life from the 1950s and 1960s.

It was hard to miss those cheap books with their lurid covers and "shocking" tag lines, such as "She Hated Men and Turned to a Lesbian for Comfort!" Strangely enough, unlike today, lesbian-themed novels were easily available in almost any drugstore--and their publishers unknowingly provided a kind of lifeline for gay women living in a terrifically oppressive time.

While some of these books were penned by men using female pseudonyms, the majority were written by lesbians for lesbians.

Despite the buxom cover models featured to help sell the books to a male audience, there was some fairly serious literature among the pulp ranks. Indeed, author Ann Bannan, whose first pulpy book *Odd Girl Out* was published by Gold Medal in 1957, refers to the 1950s and 1960s as the "Golden Age of lesbian writing and publication."

Mixed in with the ultra-sleazy "adult" titles such as *Satan Was a Lesbian* (1966) and *Killer Dyke* (1964), which were clearly intended to function as soft-core pornography, were some profound examinations of lesbian life, such as Claire Morgan's [that is, Patricia Highsmith's] *The Price of Salt* (1952), Ann Bannan's Beebo Brinker series (1957-1962), Valerie Taylor's *A World Without Men* (1963), and even reprints of Gale Wilhelm's *Torchlight to Valhalla* (1938) and Radclyffe Hall's classic *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).

Primarily because of publishers' concerns about obscenity charges, the genre was characterized by unhappy endings, in which lesbian relationships were brought to a screeching halt one way or another. Often one woman "turned" straight and was married off, while the other--who might remain a confirmed gay bachelorette--drifted away, was committed to an insane asylum, or killed herself.

Books written by men or determined to expose the "perversity" of homosexuality usually described lesbians as nymphomaniacs and sexual predators corrupting innocent young girls in a shadowy underworld.

Even when written by a lesbian author, the censorship enforced upon the books often resulted in a misogynistic or homophobic tinge unintended by the writer. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the pulps is the tension that often resulted from the authors' attempts to present lesbian love sympathetically while also adhering to the publishers' demands that the novels serve a cautionary purpose and end unhappily.

Many lesbian authors implied that the pathology of lesbianism depicted in the stories--madness, suicide, adultery, etc.--was the result not of homosexuality per se, but of the social intolerance that homosexuals

face.

If the books' protagonists were to achieve a happy homosexual life by story's end, they could be considered obscene--and that was bad news for the publisher. Tereska Torres's book *Women's Barracks* (1950), for example, was made an exhibit by the United States House of Representatives' Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials in 1952.

And Vin Packer's best-selling book *Spring Fire*, a lesbian classic published in 1952, might have featured a rosier conclusion were it not for the editor's one stipulation: the book could not end happily. A publisher's defense to charges of obscenity could be that the books were intended to warn readers of the dangers of homosexuality.

Authors also did not have any say over book covers, which featured artwork and photographs that often had nothing whatsoever to do with the plot lines. Infamously sensationalistic, the covers usually portrayed lesbians as incredibly glamorous, ultra-femme vixens, often displaying deep cleavage and clad only in skimpy lingerie.

As Bannon explains, many of the female subjects looked like they "could have easily walked off those pulp covers and onto the pages of Harper's Bazaar"--no "real girl" in the 1950s lounged about in peach silk slips or half-buttoned blouses.

Or the cover might illustrate a hyperbolically butch-femme duo--the butch a short-haired brunette or redhead wearing pants, the femme a blonde cheerleader type--with a man sulking or looking worried in the background.

For all the stereotyping of the cover art and the pathologizing of lesbianism that mark the pulp novels, they had an immense impact on lesbian culture of the 1950s and 1960s. In crucial ways, they subverted the social and political prohibitions against homosexual expression during the McCarthy era. They also served a valuable purpose in reassuring isolated women that they were not alone.

Clearly, we have come a long way since those days of "twilight girls" and "forbidden love," as lesbian literature no longer requires misleading cover art to appeal to straight male readers, or extensive editing to evade obscenity charges. But women like Bannon and Taylor provided some much needed representation and authenticity to lesbians who could not form a community at the time, while other, usually pseudonymous writers provided sheer amusement.

A guilty pleasure to many women at the time of their publication, pulps still intrigue and entertain contemporary lesbians.

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