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**Out in Paperback: A Visual History of Gay Pulps.** IAN YOUNG. Toronto: Lester, Mason & Begg, 2007. 80 p. ISBN 13: 978-0-9781765-1-8.

As historical artifacts of popular culture, gay pulps occupy a peculiar space within the literary world of the disreputable and disposable paperback. With their sensational narratives of forbidden desire written in styles oscillating between the crudely literate and the poetically vernacular, gay pulps tread a fine line in representing the underground lifestyle of “the love that dare not speak its name” within a cheap package designed for mass consumption. Ian Young cleverly signals this implicit tension through the double entendre of the title of his new book, *Out in Paperback: A Visual History of Gay Pulps*. At a literal level, “out in paperback” can refer to the simple publication and availability of a book in the popular and accessible mass-market format. Seen through a queer lens, however, “out in paperback” suggests the ways that the format was subtly used to publicly disclose to its audiences the closeted sexual orientation of the narrative contents of the books. As Young highlights in *Out in Paperback*, gay pulps negotiated this process of subversive self-identification through their covers, using colourfully attractive and suggest-

- 3 See, for example, Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York, 1995).
- 4 For an argument that many photographs of men together might more meaningfully be read as part of the history of intimacy, not the history of sexuality, see John Ibson, *Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography* (Chicago, 2006).

ively lurid images to simultaneously stand out and blend in on the shelves of mom-and-pop shops, confectionaries, pharmacies, and newsstands across North America. Being “out in paperback” in these urban and suburban spaces offered the opportunity to covertly establish the primary encounter between a querying consumer and the scandalous text, with the cover images themselves serving to mediate the flirtation. If the eye-catching cover successfully communicated the promises of the narrative, the very act of taking one of these paperbacks from the shelves to purchase for private consumption was most likely a difficult public experience for most. Indeed, it may have been the first overtly political act for many young men, that autobiographical moment of “coming out” when the boundaries between the personal and the political were openly confronted. It is within this complex negotiation of public and private that Young ultimately situates his visual history, offering an interpretative analysis of the iconography of the front cover art of gay pulps that playfully doubles as a meta-history about the intersection of his own private and public encounters with the subject.

It is ironic, though ultimately not too surprising, that the public presentation of Young’s analysis, which forms the core of *Out in Paperback*, comes across as fairly straight. Young’s visual history is prefaced with a quick overview of the publishing contexts of gay pulps and their evolving relationships with the social, political, and cultural environments in which they appeared and circulated. His introductory essay, “How Gay Paperbacks Changed America,” is written with broad brush strokes that interweave the names of major gay pulp publishers and titles of key paperbacks with important historical figures, moments, and movements of the late twentieth century. It could be argued that Young glosses over this contextual information in far too casual a manner for readers who demand the academic rigour of footnoted research. To be fair, Young’s intentions are clearly enunciated in both the book’s subtitle and introduction: the aim of *Out in Paperback* is to be a visual chronicle of gay pulp covers, and not an all-encompassing history of gay pulp publishing. As a result, Young’s prose avoids academic jargon and specialist vocabulary, adopting instead a friendly, playful, and engaging style that works well in setting the stage for the analysis that follows.

With very few exceptions, the gay pulp covers are arranged in chronological order, using a timeline divided into six chapters, starting in the 1940s and ending in the 1990s. The cover art for the selected books is presented in clear reproductions of varying sizes, each accompanied by captions that provide credits for the author, publisher, and date of publication. *Out in Paperback* offers strong, clean scans of the front covers that seem to retain the lush brightness and dark blacks of their original colours. Alongside these reproductions, Young adds his own colourful commentary to the pageantry of gay imagery that he has selected for interpretation, focusing on the symbolic use of text and images to convey the pleasures and dangers that throb between

the covers. With playful insight and intelligent humour, Young's analysis "outs" the subtle visual codes that are so plainly displayed on the front covers, even as their forms evolved over time from the stylistically illustrative to the expressionistically photographed. Young takes note of the corporeal postures and facial expressions of the models, the overall frame of the cover with respect to spatial staging and composition, the strategic use of light and shade to connote difference, and the suggestive use of dress/undress to highlight recurring themes and motifs that all revolve around the concept of the gaze. It is this very act of looking, of perception itself, that dominates the imagery on these covers and which Young argues is carefully anchored in the shifting social, political, and cultural landscapes toward gays. In fashioning his chronicle in a teleological manner that begins with shameful repression and moves toward liberated expression, Young ably points out how these paperback covers not only presented a sensationalist portrait of gay culture, but more importantly, they presented the different ways that this representation may have been publicly negotiated between gay culture and mass culture over time.

Young's visual chronicle is amusing, insightful, and informative; however, there are some minor criticisms that pose challenges to the book's identity as an effective and encompassing visual history. For example, it is unfortunate that the reproductions of the covers could not be presented in a one-to-one ratio that could have afforded readers the simulacra of the experience of engaging with the images in their original dimensions. In a similar manner, although the front cover art of paperbacks carries the visual weight in terms of imagery and iconography, it is a shame that the back covers and spines of each respective book could not be reproduced and displayed as well. Young's attention to the detail of physical placement and composition also carries over to the positioning of the sensational text that reinforced the promotion of the contents, and the addition of these details could certainly offer a richer experience in the contemplation of the unbroken covers that wrapped these gay pulps. Another important omission is the lack of an artist credit in the captions accompanying each cover. To be fair to Young again, he does admit that the majority of the artwork provided for these paperbacks was produced in a purely industrial context and environment; consequently, the commissioned work often went uncredited. When Young does know the identity of artists responsible for certain covers, he openly discusses them in relation to their work, and provides sufficient biographical and professional information in his text.

As a final criticism, it must be noted that *Out in Paperback* is a very slim volume, especially when compared to the many similar tomes on the market that exhaustively present the cover art of other pulp fiction genre of the era. As a result, the brevity of Young's visual chronicle, when combined with the introductory text about gay paperbacks in America, reads more like an extended essay than an in-depth history. Depending on the expectations

of readers, this may be received as either a serious deficiency or a welcome intervention.

An autobiographical slant bookends Young's work; even though visual history is the substance of *Out in Paperback*, Young opens and closes his book with notes that directly address the reader and telegraphs the personal elements of the project. The first text that greets readers is actually titled "Note to the Reader," which presents a whimsical piece of found poetry by the author that samples a wide variety of cover blurb excerpts to greet/warn all those who enter (hard-core bibliophiles will complain about the absence of references for each phrase). The acknowledgments section notes that all the images in the book were taken from Young's personal collection, a point upon which he further elaborates in the addendum where it is revealed that this collection contained over twelve hundred paperbacks that have subsequently been donated to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. It is in these sections of the book that Young briefly recounts the pleasures of hunting for these elusive artifacts, of the triumphal ecstasies of acquisition, of establishing relationships with both the writers and illustrators, of the agony of whittling a collection of twelve hundred covers down to a greatest hits package of one hundred in order to present a representative history. One can see how *Out in Paperback* lies at the intersection of the archival and the autobiographical, and how gay pulps served to mediate the public and private aspects of Young's persona as a poet, book retailer, collector, bibliographer, activist, and one of the founders of the modern, Canadian gay movement.

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