

## ENG 4936 (Honors Seminar): “Reading Science Fiction: The Pulps”

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“The Pulps” were illustrated fiction magazines published between the late 1890s and the late 1950s. Named for the inexpensive wood pulp paper on which they were printed, they varied widely as to genre, and included titles specializing in aviation fiction, fantasy, horror and weird fiction, detective and crime fiction, railroad fiction, romance, science fiction, sports stories, war fiction, and western fiction. In the pulps’ heyday a bookshop or newsstand might offer dozens of different magazines on these and other subjects, often from the same publishers and featuring work by the same writers, with lurid, striking cover and interior art by the same artists. Pulp magazines came into and went out of publication with little fanfare; they changed titles without warning. The pulp canon represents one of the most innovative and dynamic periods of modern fiction publishing.

In this seminar, we will focus on pulp science fiction (sf) published during the Anglo-American “Golden Age” of sf, from 1938 to 1946. We will review magazines such as *Air Wonder Stories*, *Amazing Stories*, *Astonishing Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, *Marvel Science Stories*, *Planet Stories*, *Science Wonder Stories*, *Tales of Wonder*, *Unknown Fantasy Fiction*, and *Wonder Stories*. We will read short fiction by authors such as Ray Bradbury, Edmund Hamilton, Fritz Leiber, Murray Leinster, Eric Frank Russell, Theodore Sturgeon, Clifford Simak, E.E. Smith, Leslie F. Stone, and Donald Wandrei. We will examine the work of pathbreaking illustrators such as Earl Bergey, Howard V. Brown, Margaret Brundage, Virgil Finlay, Frank Kelley Freas, Frank R. Paul, and Norman Saunders.

The cheap paper and binding methods favored by pulp publishers were never intended to last; many issues of the magazines are now rare because they have turned to dust. The widespread assumption that sf was an ephemeral genre unlikely to endure, wartime paper shortages, and the postwar rise of cheap paperbacks and

comics, did not help. A lot of pulp sf was tossed after reading, became impractical to publish, or was abandoned as audiences moved on.

Yet the origins of contemporary sf are clearly discernible in this uniquely energetic literature; the pulps pretty much invented sf as a genre and that alone makes them worthy of study. (Moreover, much of the fiction remains hugely entertaining!) Fortunately, historical and critical work on pulps has been transformed by the emergence of scholarly and enthusiast, crowd-sourced online archives such as [Archive.org](https://archive.org) and [The Pulp Magazine Project](https://www.thepulpmagazineproject.com). It is now possible to read complete and accurate digital versions of many of the magazines.

Assigned course readings will include contemporary writing by sf historians and theorists such as Mike Ashley and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. Most of our reading will be from digital facsimiles of the pulps themselves. The course will have a strong digital humanities component. The principal writing assignments are collaborative critical online essays and exhibits of pulp sf on subjects selected by students in the course.