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ONLY ONCE OR TWICE, AND ALWAYS IN THE DAYTIME

THE LOST WORLD OF AUSTRALIAN PULP

BY IAN MORRISON

THE EXHIBITION "SENSATIONAL Tales: Australian Popular Publishing 1890s–1990s", displayed at the Baillieu Library 17 January to 7 May 2000, highlighted the University of Melbourne's holdings of popular middlebrow and lowbrow writers whose works are now largely forgotten. This article explores some aspects of the history of Australian genre writing and publishing. The exhibition continues in an online version at <<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/whatson/exhib/pulp>>.

CRIME AND REPUTATIONS

"\$2.95, real pulp at last!" crowed Peter Corris when paperback editions of his early Cliff Hardy thrillers *White Meat* and *The Dying Trade* were published in America in 1981. Corris was at the forefront of a renaissance in Australian crime writing that saw the emergence of such diverse characters as Kerry Greenwood's sexy 1920s super sleuth the Hon. Phryne Fisher, Claire McNab's lesbian policewoman Detective Inspector Carol Ashton, Gary Disher's ice-cool professional criminal Wyatt and Robert G. Barrett's big fisted anti-hero Les Norton.

The 1980s, though, were a notable period in Australian crime writing not just for the new writers who emerged; more significant was the new audience that these writers found. Unsurprisingly for a country that traces its origins to a penal colony, crime is a constant pre-occupation of Australian literature. The first novel published in Australia, Henry Melville's *Quintus Servinton* (1830)

deals with the convict experience. Ellen Davitt's *Force and Fraud* (serialised in the *Australian Journal*, 1865) has some claim to being the first mystery novel in English. Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), Fergus Hume's *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886), and Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* (1888) are among the landmarks of our literature. A landmark of a different kind is the *oeuvre* of Nat Gould (1857–1919) who wrote over 100 novels that remained popular long after his death. Most writers agonise over multiple drafts; Gould's first drafts are said to have been so clean that he could send them to his publishers with only minor corrections. At its worst his writing does read like a preliminary sketch:

Chapter I

Millbourne

Zachary Peach was a very old man; he claimed to be the oldest inhabitant of the little village of Millbourne, and no one disputed his right to the title.

Millbourne is a picturesque village in Derbyshire, not many miles from Ashbourne.

A long white road runs through Millbourne, and it branches off from the main road to Buxton. Travellers passing along this road, in days gone by, were brought to a stop at the foot of Mill Hill by an old-fashioned toll-bar, and payment was demanded before they could drive through on their way.

Probably many surmises and conjectures arose in the minds of these travellers as to why they should be forced to pay toll at this particular spot.



Ssssh! — *She's A Killer* by "Peter Carter Brown", Sydney, 1952.

Mill Hill was a pretty rustic lane, but to the ordinary mind there could be no adequate reason why it should be guarded by a toll-bar, which gave it almost as much importance as the main road.

The village of Millbourne was not visible from the highway. When the top of Mill Hill was reached, the road ran on level for some distance ...¹

Gould maintains this extemporised geography lesson for several more pages, eventually returning to the theme of Zachary Peach, who will by the end of the first chapter have entered into conversation with Evan Cross, the blacksmith, who has just received some distressing news... Zachary dies, universally beloved and greatly missed, on page 228. The toll-bar plays no further part in the story until page 303, when — its presence still unexplained — it is removed, increasing by one the numbers

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Top: *Jungle Murders* by Philip Richmond, Sydney, 1943.

Below: "Peril of the Sea Planet", Thrills Incorporated, No. 22, 1952.

of unemployed in Millbourne. *Middlemarch* this is not.

But Gould's books sold in vast numbers, for over half a century. It seems reasonable to suppose that a good number of the people who bought them read and enjoyed them. This in itself is a notable achievement.

SENSATIONAL TALES

Genre fiction flourished in Australia through the 20th century. Crime writers such as Arthur Upfield, Charlotte Jay, "Carter Brown", and S. H. Courtier built international followings but their works were seldom the focus of academic study. Corris's "real pulp" comment was partly at least a note of homage to "Carter Brown", and it is significant that the scholarly critic who picked up on Corris's remark, although deeply knowledgeable about crime fiction, including British and American pulp, seemed unaware of the existence of an Australian pulp industry.² Because they rarely produce a single outstanding masterpiece, few genre writers are represented in Grahame Johnston's *Annals of Australian Literature* (Melbourne University Press, 1970), which sought to list Australia's great and notable books. Upfield, one of a handful of Australian authors able to live entirely from the proceeds of their writing, regarded academic critics with contempt — and the feeling was by and large mutual.

The distinctive achievement of the Corris generation was to lend the art of thriller writing an air of intellectual respectability. It is no accident that the publicity campaigns for post-1980 crime writers stress their scholarly and literary credentials — Corris was an academic historian before he turned to fiction writing, Greenwood is a solicitor with the Fitzroy Legal Service,

Disher teaches creative writing and so on. The notable exception is Robert G. Barrett, whose publicity proves the rule by emphasising his *lack* of formal education and his crude Ocker blokkiness.

By the end of the 1980s Australian crime fiction was receiving serious scholarly attention: the magazine *Mean Streets* (Melbourne, 1990–1996) combined promotional pieces with substantial historical and critical studies; Wakefield Press issued a series of "Crime Classics" by such forgotten or neglected authors as A. E. Martin, Arthur Gask, Pat Flower, S. H. Courtier and Charlotte Jay; and prices for first editions began to climb. A spate of substantial reference books suddenly made genre writers both accessible and respectable.³ By the mid 1990s the wheel had swung so far that emerging publishers Duffy & Snellgrove launched their gore-drenched "Autopsy" series with lurid fluorescent covers proclaiming an ambition to "put crime fiction back in the gutter where it belongs". The term "pulp" originally referred to the cheap wood-pulp paper used by high volume popular publishers; the "Autopsy" books give a nod to this when they announce that they are "printed on recycled trees".

ECONOMICS OF PULP PUBLISHING

Precisely because of its unabashed commercialism, genre writing can tell us much about popular attitudes and reading tastes — and about the grimy realities of making money from writing and publishing.

Publishers' margins were surprisingly tight, even with large sales. English writer Stephen Frances self-published his "Hank Janson" thrillers in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He became a victim of his own success:

The economics of the business were simple: the total cost of producing the book was £290. Selling 10,000 copies would bring in £750, less 50% to the distributor. The profit was £85, which allowed an average weekly wage of £7 (about average for the time). But only if the books appeared at regular intervals.⁴

By 1950, "Hank Janson" sales were averaging 60,000 copies per title. In 1952, however, Frances sold his rights in the name "Hank Janson" outright for

£4,000. His explanation throws further light on the economics of pulp publishing:

On paper I was financially well-off. But not in fact. I'd been pulling myself up by my own bootstraps. From the beginning all the money I'd earned I'd ploughed back into the business to pay for ever bigger editions of subsequent books.⁵

A generation earlier the Australian publisher A. C. Rowlandson experienced similar quandaries. Rowlandson had built the New South Wales Bookstall Company from a small distributor into one of the most successful publishers in Australian history — producing some 200 titles by Australasian authors, and selling some five million copies.

Rowlandson usually paid his authors between £30 and £40 per book. Arthur Wright, who wrote 25 books with titles such as *A Rogue's Luck* (1909), *Fettered by Fate* (1921), and *The Squatter's Secret* (1927), earned a total of £1,012 plus royalties during his 20 year career. Leading authors received much more: Norman Lindsay was paid £100 for *A Curate in Bohemia* (1913); A. H. Davis ("Steele Rudd"), the most highly paid Bookstall author, earned on average £168 plus royalties per annum between 1904 and 1927.⁶ Although the royalties on individual titles could be quite small — in 1904 Davis received £4 in royalties for the phenomenally successful *On Our Selection*⁷ — established writers preferred regular royalty payments to a single lump sum. For the publisher, however, royalties complicated the costing of a publication, and Rowlandson preferred to buy works outright. The prices that successful authors could command meant that outright purchase also presented risks: Davis's *Sandy's Selection* (1904), for which Rowlandson paid the unprecedented sum of £500, had to sell 20,000 copies to cover costs — the standard Bookstall print run was 5,000 copies.⁸ By the 1920s Rowlandson was finding some established authors too expensive.⁹

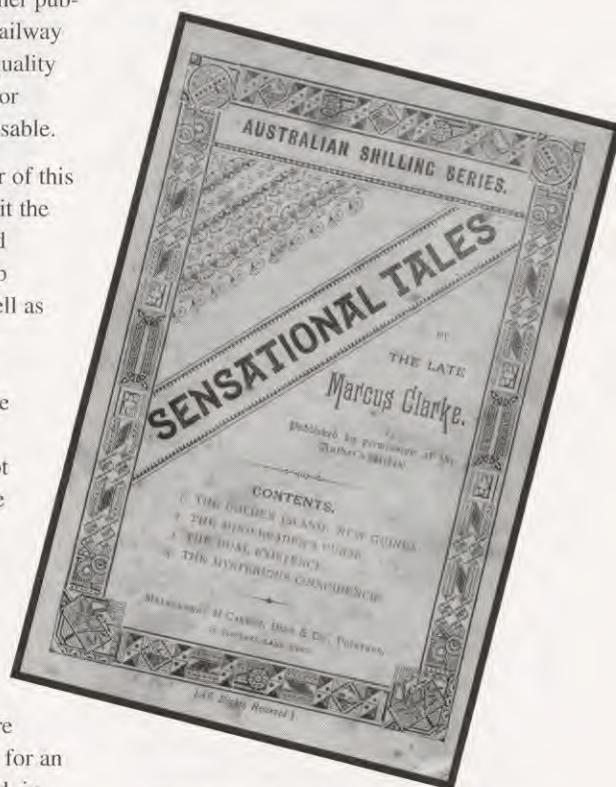
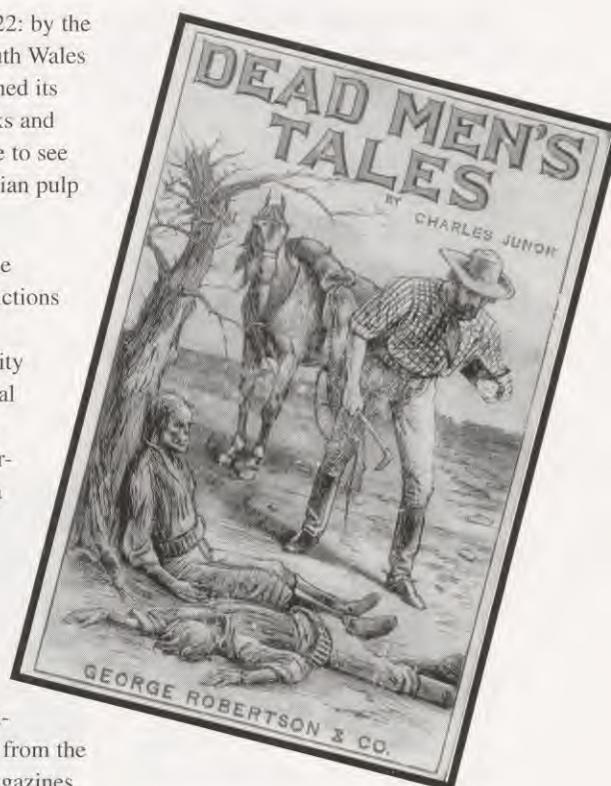
The New South Wales Bookstall's publishing program declined dramati-

cally after Rowlandson's death in 1922: by the end of the World War 2, the New South Wales Bookstall Company once more confined its activities to retail distribution of books and magazines. The 1940s, however, were to see the emergence of several new Australian pulp publishers.

In 1940, for economic reasons, the Australian government imposed restrictions that effectively banned the import of American publications. The opportunity this created was seized by several local publishers, notably Currawong Press and Invincible Press. Currawong flourished from 1942 to 1951, producing a vast quantity of novelettes written mainly by Australian authors. Invincible Press, owned by the *Truth* and *Sportsman* newspaper company, published a wide range of Australian and overseas authors, as well as comics, pulp magazines and sensationalised non-fiction, from the early 1940s to the mid 1950s. The magazines and novelettes issued by these and other publishers were sold at newsagents and railway stations. They were printed on poor quality paper and, priced as low as sixpence or ninepence, were designed to be disposable.

Another Australian pulp publisher of this period found a different way to exploit the import restrictions. The Sydney-based Phantom Books issued some 300 pulp novels between 1951 and 1960, as well as two fortnightly detective magazines, *Pursuit* and *Verdict*, offering "adult, modern stories... definitely not for the squeamish". Phantom Books covers bore the slogan "an original novel, not a reprint" but this was true only in the sense that they had not been previously published in Australia: they were in fact reprints of American thrillers. But few of the readers who bought Phantom Books could have obtained these works any other way, even if they were aware that they were not written exclusively for an Australian publisher. And buy they did, in huge numbers: print runs of 60,000 to 70,000 appear to have been the standard. The publishing pattern is unknown, but appears to have begun as monthly during 1951 and 1952, increased to weekly for the period 1953 to

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Top: *Dead Men's Tales* by Charles Junor, Melbourne, 1898.

Below: *Sensational Tales* by Marcus Clarke, Melbourne, 1886.

1957, then dropped back to fortnightly in 1958 to 1960.

The implications of Phantom's publishing strategy for Australian writers are difficult to assess. It may represent an incidence of the "cultural cringe" that regarded anything made overseas as inherently superior to the local product; but Phantom Books did feature locally produced cover art — in many cases copied from the American original, but sometimes entirely new.¹⁰ Their strategy may have been driven by economic considerations, but it is doubtful that reprint rights cost much less than Australian originals: American writer Harry Whittington was paid US\$150 per title for Australian reprint rights;¹¹ the standard rate paid to Australian pulp writers was £1 per 1,000 words. The locally produced cover art may have represented a saving — leading American artists could command fees as high as US\$1,000 to design a paperback cover¹² — but without more information on the rates paid to Australian artists, and the structure of arrangements with the American publishers, we can only speculate about the advantages and disadvantages. It is clear, however, that Phantom's reprint strategy would have been peculiarly vulnerable to the challenges posed by the lifting of import restrictions in 1958 and it is hardly surprising that the series ceased shortly afterwards.

WRITING FOR MONEY

Two of the most prolific and successful Australian writers of the 1950s, Gordon Clive Bleeck and Alan Geoffrey Yates, have left substantial records of their careers.

Gordon Bleeck began contributing short stories to popular magazines such as the *Bulletin*, *New Idea*, and *Woman's Mirror* in the early 1930s. By 1950 he was writing stories and novelettes at phenomenal speed, using his own name and at least 19 pseudonyms. His output, which included westerns, science fiction, horror, crime thrillers, romances

and sporting stories, totalled 448 short stories and novelettes between 1932 and his death in 1971.¹³ He wrote several of the "Scientific Thrillers" published by Stanley Horwitz in the late 1950s, and became a regular contributor to Horwitz's science fiction magazine, *Thrills Incorporated* (Sydney, 1950–1952), but the bulk of his output consisted of westerns. His papers, now in the National Library of Australia, record a gruelling schedule: up to four 22,000



Just Around the Corner by Jimmy Starr, Sydney, c.1948.

word novelettes every two months during the early 1950s — and this from someone who was never fully "professional" but wrote in his spare time while holding down a job as a railway signalman.¹⁴

Alan Yates began writing while working as a publicist for Qantas in the late 1940s. His autobiography records that, like many another ultimately successful author, he had numerous stories rejected before breaking into print:

Australian publishers had found great success with pulp novelettes, around

20,000 words in length, which sold for sixpence a copy. Westerns were most popular of all ... Denise and I spent four Saturday afternoons ... using one of the office typewriters. When it was finished we wrapped it neatly and sent it off to Invincible Press ... A month went by and then a letter arrived from them. They had accepted the story and enclosed a cheque for £20, being payment of £1 per thousand words, for the copyright and all world rights.¹⁵

Yates wrote several more westerns, and a romance, for Invincible Press, but with success came the ability to pick and choose his contracts. He soon turned to Horwitz, who "didn't pay quite as much as the others, [but] did pay more promptly ... They also often gave you a title for the book and a pseudonym to write under".¹⁶

Like Bleeck, Yates became a regular contributor to *Thrills Incorporated*. The pace was hectic: "Very often, when the editor was running to a tight schedule, he would have the artwork done and hand you a picture, saying, 'Three thousand words and a title, old boy, and I do need them by Friday!'"¹⁷ Horwitz noticed that Yates's most accomplished stories had more elements of the detective thriller than conventional science fiction and persuaded him to switch genres.

In 1951 Yates signed a contract with Horwitz that guaranteed him a weekly advance of £30 against royalties and he quit his Qantas job to become a full-time writer. Neither the publisher nor the writer looked back. Despite bouts of writer's block, Yates wrote at a phenomenal rate, producing two 25,000-word novelettes per month. Within a few years, Yates was able to afford a house on Sydney's North Shore. By the early 1960s, with "Carter Brown" firmly established in the vast American market, Yates's annual earnings were "close to £25,000".¹⁸

In terms of sales, Yates was one of Australia's most successful authors. He wrote several hundred books (his own count is quite vague), with individual titles selling as many as 200,000 copies and total sales numbering in the

millions. In 1982 his novel *The Stripper* (first published 1961) was the inspiration for a musical produced by the Sydney Theatre Company.

Very few writers are able to write at such a speed, let alone maintain it over such a long period. In 1963, Horwitz had eight full-time and “perhaps a dozen” regular part-time writers. The full-time writers were required to produce a 45,000-word novel every month. Those able to maintain such an output could expect to earn £1,600 (about £30 per week) in their first year with Horwitz. This was significantly above the average weekly wage of £24 for men and £13 for women. Writers could rise to £3,000 once they became “established”; the handful that achieved overseas publication would earn much more.¹⁹

JUDGED BY THEIR COVERS...

Peter Corris summed up the appeal of “Carter Brown” books to adolescent boys: “They gave us erections”, he said.²⁰ Yet even by the standards of their time “Carter Browns” were suggestive rather than explicit, and characterised more by an arch playfulness than by steamy eroticism — and this playfulness is emphasised by the cover art of the 1950s and 1960s. *Blonde on the Rocks* (1963), for example, features a bikini clad blonde sitting cross-legged in a cocktail glass; *Sssh! She’s a Killer* (1952) features a coy young woman emerging from the pages of a book, forefinger to her lips to invoke silence, while a crudely drawn male corpse lies face down in the blood red price tag.

In his autobiography, Yates tells of an American journalist who was convinced that Carter Brown was gay.²¹ The rumour was almost certainly false, but on reading his novels it is easy to see how it may have arisen. Yates’s wife Denise was closely involved in his early success, and it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that she helped bring a feminine sensitivity to her husband’s writing. It is not just the cover art that

has a self-mocking, “camp” quality:

She sat down beside me, and the taut thrust of her breasts against the lowcut bodice of her flame-coloured dress would have given de Milo a coronary occlusion.

‘I cannot believe it.’ She looked at Mathis. ‘Is this the same man you were telling me about?’

‘He looks the same,’ Mathis said. ‘But he does not talk the same. Maybe he grows old?’

‘Old, weak, and frightened,’ she agreed.²²



Jig for the Hangman by Dick Wardley, Sydney, c.1952.

No-one would accuse Yates of extending, or even challenging, traditional gender roles. But in creating female characters like Mavis Seidlitz who “turns stripper to catch a killer”,²³ and Gloria Van Raven, “the redhead who set a million guys raving”,²⁴ Yates exhibited a lightness of touch unmatched by other Australian pulp writers. J. E. Macdonnell’s superspy Mark Hood, for example, is so closely modelled on James Bond that his adventures often read like pastiche. Hood’s sexual magnetism is an unstated

assumption, taken absolutely for granted with no attempt at humour or irony:

‘Would you care for a drink, sir?’

Hood glanced up. Less observantly trained eyes than his would have awarded full marks to the shapely blue-eyed brunette who inclined politely towards him. But this was the time and place for only a literal interpretation of the words, no matter what those eyes might later promise.²⁵

Why should they promise anything, one wonders?

The titles of W. H. Williams’s “Marc Brody” thrillers have fun with the hero’s role as a crime reporter — *Dame on the Deadline*, *Her Column’s a Killer*, *The Lady’s Out of Circulation* — but the humour in these stories tends to reinforce rather than challenge the genre stereotypes of susceptible tough guys and dangerous dames:

Robin St Claire opened the door. She was wearing an evening frock. It wasn’t much to describe — I mean, what there was of it. But what there was of it, on Robin, looked good. Or maybe it was Robin that looked good!²⁶

The “Larry Kent” series (written by several authors for the Sydney publisher Cleveland from 1954 to 1983) also obeyed the conventions. No matter how dire the situation, Larry always has time to admire, and fluster, the nearest female:

‘We were expecting you, Mister Kent,’ she said. A smile played along her pink lips. She wore little make-up and her hair was corn yellow, soft looking. She had big blue eyes and a nice structure.

‘I wasn’t expecting you, honey,’ I said. That flipped her for a moment. Then she smiled wider.²⁷

For “Carter Brown” heroes, life tends to be a little more complicated:

[Terry] snuggled close to me in the car. ‘My hero!’ she said. ‘Rescuing a damsel in distress and everything!’

‘Just common or garden everyday routine for a private eye,’ I said. ‘Nothing at all, really.’

‘Oh, but it was!’ She snuggled closer still. ‘And, my darling,’ her voice was deceptively sweet, ‘how clever of you to

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hide Mrs Brooke in our shack without anyone knowing — including me! Did you visit her often?

'Only once or twice,' I said hastily, 'and always in the daytime!'

...

Four days later a cheque for six thousand dollars came in the mail.

I didn't mention it to Terry.²⁸

Even with its occasional clumsiness, and dated humour, this is much craftier writing than the standard pulp of its day — mocking the "knight errant" model of the private detective, and perhaps echoing the defensive tones of a schoolboy caught reading a lurid, quasi-adult thriller.

By the 1970s Yates was living in London, his Australian publishers Horwitz were moving their operation to Hong Kong and the cover art had descended into soft-core pornography. The very elements that had made for their success — the snappy Americanised dialogue, the deliberately non-specific locales, the coy suggestiveness of the sex scenes — now made them seem dated, even puerile. They were sold in variety stores and newsagents and airports, alongside and largely indistinguishable from cut-price, mildly titillating, British and American paperbacks. (The 1970s also saw the end of another post-war publishing phenomenon, the once daring *Man* magazine, its risqué cartoons no match for the explicit photographs and hedonistic fantasies of *Penthouse* and *Playboy*.)

Peter Corris's Cliff Hardy novels were crafted for a very different audience: they were serious-minded explorations of crime and corruption in contemporary Sydney, with realistic, identifiable locations and an appealingly old-fashioned, wisecracking hero. The sorts of readers who relished Cliff Hardy in the early 1980s would scarcely have glanced twice at the latest "Carter Brown". The semi-nude model on the cover was not suggestive of high art. "Carter Brown" thrillers cannot be claimed as neglected masterworks of our national literature, but they and their kind are a significant part of Australia's

NOTES	
1. <i>Horse or Blacksmith?</i> London, Routledge, 1897, pp. 7–8.	13. "The Bleeck Collection", < http://www.nla.gov.au/collect/bleeck.html >, viewed 24 March 2000.
2. Stephen Knight, "Real Pulp at Last: Peter Corris's Thrillers", <i>Meanjin</i> 45(4), 1986, pp. 446–452.	14. "Two Westerns by Next Thursday", <i>National Library of Australia Gateways</i> , No. 22, July 1996, < http://www.nla.gov.au/ntwkpubs/gw/22/22.html#westerns >, viewed 24 March 2000.
3. Graham Flanagan, <i>Australian Vintage Paperback Guide</i> , New York, Gryphon, 1994. John Loder, <i>Australian Crime Fiction: a bibliography 1857–1993</i> , Port Melbourne, D. W. Thorpe, 1994. Juliet Flesch, <i>Love Brought to Book: a bio-bibliography of 20th-century Australian romance novels</i> , Clayton, National Centre for Australian Studies, 1995. Paul Collins, ed., <i>MUP Encyclopedia of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy</i> , Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1998. Annette Sheill, ed., <i>Bonzer: Australian Comics 1900–1990s</i> , Red Hill, Elgua Media, 1998.	15. Alan Yates, <i>Ready when You Are, C.B.!: the autobiography of Alan Yates alias Carter Brown</i> , South Melbourne, Macmillan, 1983, p. 27.
4. Steve Holland, <i>The Mushroom Jungle: a history of postwar paperback publishing</i> , Westbury, Wilts, Zeon, 1993, p. 128.	16. Yates, p. 31.
5. Holland, p. 135.	17. Yates, p. 32.
6. Carol Mills, <i>The New South Wales Bookstall as a Publisher</i> , Canberra, Mulini Press, 1991, pp. 24–25.	18. John Hetherington, "This is the House that Paperbacks Built", <i>The Age</i> , Melbourne, 13 April 1963, p. 22.
7. Mills, p. 9.	19. Hetherington, p. 22.
8. Mills p. 17.	20. Stuart Coupe, "Pulp Friction", <i>Mean Streets</i> , No. 16, February 1996, p. 37.
9. Mills, p. 29.	21. Yates, p. 49.
10. Graeme Flanagan, "Phantom Books: the Australian Series", <i>Mean Streets</i> No. 1, October 1990, pp. 48–51.	22. <i>Bird in a Guilt-edged Cage</i> , Sydney, Horwitz, 1963, p. 8.
11. Flanagan, p. 51.	23. <i>The Bump and Grind Murders</i> , Sydney, Horwitz, 1965.
12. Piet Schreuders, <i>The Book of Paperbacks: a visual history of the paperback</i> , tr. Josh Pachter, London, Virgin Books, 1981, p. 128.	24. "Death of a Doll", Carter Brown Collectors Series No. 1(20), 1958.
	25. <i>Come Die with Me</i> , Sydney, Horwitz, 1965, p. 36.
	26. <i>Murder — Extra Special</i> , Sydney, Horwitz, 1955, p. 70.
	27. <i>Calling Larry Kent</i> , Sydney, Cleveland, [early 1960s?], p. 10.
	28. "Blackmail Beauty", Carter Brown Collectors Series No. 1(20), 1958, pp. 176–177.

publishing history. They were made to be judged by their covers — to stand out in the clutter of a railway station newsstand — and it was their packaging and promotion that created both commercial success and critical disdain. ♦

Ian Morrison is the Curator of Australiana, at the Archives and Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library.