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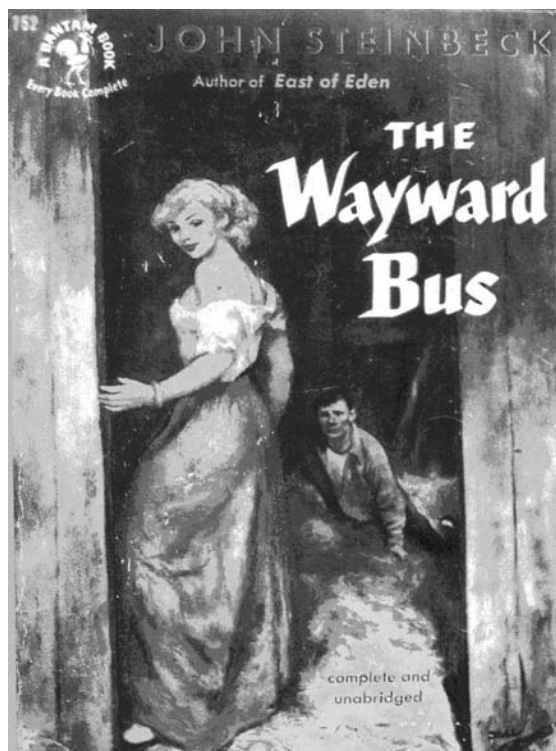
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STEAMY STEINBECK: PAPERBACKS: 1947 - 1957

RICHARD HOFFSTEDT

PAPERBACKS, AS THEY ARE REFERRED TO TODAY, have a long and interesting history. Early on, they were referred to as penny dreadfuls, yellowbacks, dime novels, and cheap libraries. Book historians trace the paperback to the beginning of the 16th century. Thomas L. Bonn's *Undercover: An Illustrated History of American Mass Market Paperbacks*, states: "Historians of the book industry have identified the classics of Greek and Roman literature issued at the start of the sixteenth century by Venetian publisher and printer Aldus Manutius—the Aldine classics—as the earliest ancestors of today's paperbacks. Intended for students and scholars, they were small volumes (roughly 5 3/4" x 8"), well designed and inexpensive. Four hundred fifty years later their handsome anchor and dolphin printer's mark inspired the logo of one of the first American trade paperback series, Anchor Books" (Bonn 26-27). The Aldine Press is credited with inventing a script that is now known as italics.

Softcover editions of the works of British and American authors first appeared in 1841. Baron Christian B. von Tauchnitz published them from his offices in Leipzig, Germany. These books were the pocket size of 4 1/2" x 6 1/2." The Tauchnitz editions had the field mostly to themselves until 1931 when *Albatross Books* began to give them some competition. Three years later (1934) Albatross acquired the Tauchnitz imprint and approximately five thousand titles. One of the original partners in *Albatross Books*, Kurt Enoch, later managed the American *Penguin* branch and eventually co-founded the *New American Library*. In 1935, a man by the name of Allen Lane began publishing *Penguin*

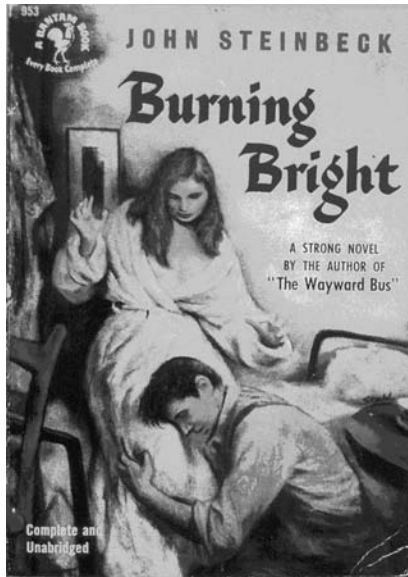
paperbacks in England. This flock of “*Penguins*” was vilified by the English book trade. Their big break came when the English Woolworth chain agreed to carry them at a price of sixpence (about twelve cents.) The British reading public accepted them wholeheartedly and their future was assured. For more than 25 years, Lane pointedly refrained from using elaborate artwork on his covers. This eventually changed as Lane began to use some illustrations if he thought the title suggested it.

Other people were trying to get started in paperback publishing, such as *Little Blue Books* out of Kansas and the Boni Brothers, Charles and Albert. Bonn tells us:

Reminiscent of the publications of the London and Boston Useful Knowledge libraries of the early 1800s were the much-loved “Little Blue Books” series of Kansas publisher Emanuel Haldeman-Julius. Aimed at spreading culture to the masses, his “University in Print” began publication in 1919. The soft cover booklets were generally sold at five cents a copy, though prices ranged between three cents and twenty-five cents. The Blue Books measured 3 1/2” x 5”. Estimates credit the company with selling over 500 million booklets, mostly through the mails, before it ceased publication in 1964. (Bonn 32)

Regarding the Boni Brothers, Bonn states, “If the Kansas-plain Little Blue Books were antidesigned, Boni paperback volumes introduced in 1929 were quite the opposite. Roughly quarto size, the handsomely made softcover titles had sewn bindings wrapped with soft covers designed by some of the leading illustrators of the day.” Bonn states that Rockwell Kent “designed and illustrated the early volumes in the Charles Boni Paper Books series. Aimed at the retail trade was a second series, Boni Books, started in 1930 and priced at fifty cents.” Both paperback series went down with the markets after the crash of 1929, and in 1931 the Bonis stopped offering their reprints (Bonn 32-33).

Most of these companies struggled or ceased to exist during the 1930’s depression. One such company was Modern Age Books, which had a short life from 1937 to 1942. It did some things that other companies would emulate later in the 1940s and 1950s in the area of production, promotion, and marketing. One cause of the company’s failure was its relatively uninspired



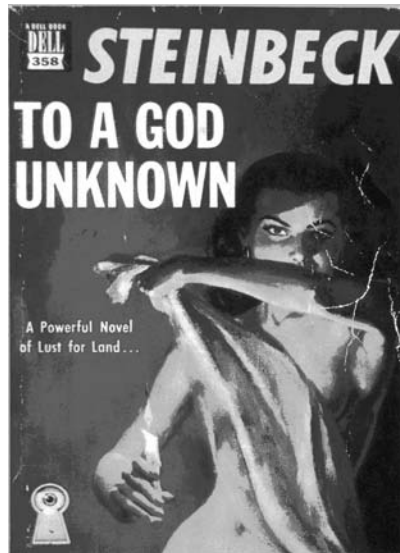
editorial selection, and very significantly, the design of its physical format. Their titles tended to be too literary for the average reader; the books themselves were too large (usually $5\frac{1}{2}$ " x $7\frac{1}{2}$ ") and heavily bulked — a 300 page book could be an inch thick. The paperback in the late 1930s was competing on newsstand racks with more and more colorful magazines like *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the very daring pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Spicy Detective*.

Let's look briefly at the pulps. Their bold covers laid the groundwork for the paperback covers that are the focus of this article. Doug Stewart's article "Guys and Molls," published in the August 2003 issue of *Smithsonian* says, "Pulp fiction magazines — or the pulps, as everyone called them — were monthly or biweekly collections of stories printed on the cheapest wool-pulp paper that could run through a press without ripping. Their covers, however, were reproduced in color on more expensive coated stock because the gripping, often steamy, artwork sold the magazines" (Stewart 54). Stewart goes on to say, "A successful pulp artist mixed vivid imagination and masterful technique to create images about as subtle as a gunshot" (57). Lee Server's *Danger Is My Business* offers additional information on those pulp covers. "The covers were printed on coated paper and featured three-color painted illustrations, most in the notorious

pulp tradition of bright hues and flamboyant action, displaying brawny men and half-dressed women, figures frozen in a moment of maximum impact” (Server 10).

The pulps were dying in the late 40s. Many of the cover artists with twenty-plus years at the pulps began to switch over to the thriving paperbacks. After World War II paperbacks started coming into their own. Avon, Penguin, Popular Library, and Dell began to thrive. In 1945, Bantam Books entered the paperback market. Their very first paperback edition was Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, illustrated by H. Lawrence Hoffman. They then set out to publish selected works of some of the twentieth Century’s best writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John O’Hara, and John Steinbeck. One of Bantam Books’ principal partners was the Curtis Publishing Company, which also owned the *Saturday Evening Post*. Many *Post* artists such as Steve Dohanos, Robert Doares, Hy Rubin, and Bernard d’Andrea switched over and did some of the early Bantam covers. Other Bantam artists in the 40s and 50s were Norman Saunders, Hy Rubin, Mitchell Hooks, and Lester Kohs. Lester Kohs did the cover work on the 1947 Bantam Edition of *Cannery Row*.

Stiff competition caused paperback companies to look in new directions and to spice up the first thing the consumer saw, the cover. Each year, the covers became more lurid and also brought about many attempts at censorship. Even the U.S. House of Representatives jumped into the battle with the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials in 1952. The hearings amounted to little but did point out the ignorance of certain publishing executives about the relationship between content and cover design. Many serious writers were having their books printed with covers that had nothing to do with their writing. It also appears that many of these writers had no control over these



covers. Perhaps they didn't care or possibly they even liked them because they punched up sales.

The paperback novels of John Steinbeck from 1947 through 1957 form part of this interesting history. Seven of the most provocative covers from this period have been chosen for discussion. The artists for these covers have been difficult to find. In most cases, for unknown reasons, their names do not appear on these covers. A couple of exceptions are *Burning Bright* and *The Wayward Bus* where the name of Stahl (Ben) does appear.

Ben Stahl (1910-1987) was born in Chicago and started exhibiting his work at the Chicago Art Institute in 1930. In 1939 he did his first illustration for the *Saturday Evening Post* and eventually did over 750 story illustrations for the *Post* along with *Esquire* and many other magazines. He won 25 national artistic awards and did the cover for the 25th anniversary edition of *Gone With The Wind*. *The Wayward Bus* was published in January 1950 and *Burning Bright* in December 1951, both by Bantam Books.

Probably the most provocative cover, *Cup of Gold*, does not have the name of the artist shown. Claire Hunsaker of the Viking Penguin Editorial Staff, wrote to me in April 30, 2002, stating that Alibris, an on-line rare and used bookseller, lists Rudolph Belarski as the cover artist for *Cup of Gold*.

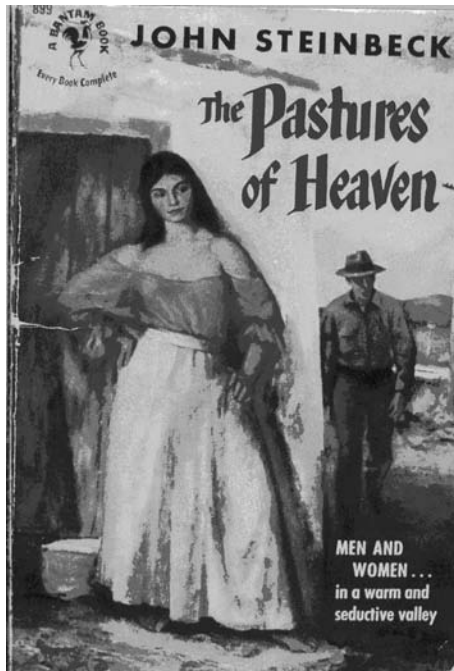
Frederic B. Taraba's article, "Rudolph Belarski: Paperback Master," which appeared in a 1994 issue of *Step-By-Step Graphics* magazine says,

In an article published in *Paperback Forum* in 1984, Piet Schreuders acknowledges the power that Rudolph Belarski held over readers and publishers. Referring to Belarski's work for Popular Library, he writes: "They have an individual charm which transcends the obvious 'sexiness' that was required in the late-40s. Pulp magazine clichés, like a giant hand threatening a half-naked girl, are treated in a way that makes them stand out as personal. The lack of finish in the paintings keeps them from becoming slick."
(110)

Some of Belarski's work may look formulaic or hackneyed today, yet much of what we think of as typical of the pulp and paperback genres was instigated by a group of remarkably creative artists who were generally given ample freedom to capture the attention of newsstand browsers" (110).

Rudolph Belarski (1900-1983) was self-taught, and his career began in the 1920s with pulp magazines with aviation themes being his favorite subject. He dazzled the newsstand browser with pictorial headlines of vital action scenes. His best-remembered subjects, however, came along with the crime story in the 1930s. Voluptuous women in distress, mixing it up with detectives and thugs were his favorites during this period. He did most of the covers for *Popular Library* and influenced the look of the entire industry. In 1957, he joined the staff of Famous Artists School and left the hectic world of free-lance art. Art editor Ken Stuart, of the *Saturday Evening Post* in the mid 1950s said that Belarski was the perfect paperback artist.

These Steinbeck covers are actually more outrageous than the covers of two of the most provocative novels of this period. They are Irving Shulman's, *The Amboy Dukes* and Mickey Spillane's, *I the Jury*. Even Erskine Caldwell's earthy, *God's Little Acre* had a very sedate cover. You'll notice that the artwork almost invariably shows a woman in the foreground sexily dressed with the men behind them and much smaller in scale. It is obvious as to who they want the browser to look at.



Besides the artwork, the blurbs on either the front, back, or inside did not truly reflect the content of the writing. *To A God Unknown*'s blurb says on the front, "a Powerful Novel of Lust for Land," showing a naked woman behind a gauzy cloth holding a candle. Did the writer think these two went together? On the back of *Tortilla Flat*, we find, "Lovable Sinners...by one of America's most famous writers, this pungent and earthy novel presents the raffish world of *Tortilla Flat* where men and women live and love with zestful abandon."

The inside highlights for *Tortilla Flat* are even longer and equally bad. *The Pastures of Heaven* blurb reads, "MEN AND WOMEN...in a warm and seductive valley." This edition was published in May 1951. The back of *Cannery Row* states, "The Main stem of a careless, lusty, carefree world that's CANNERY ROW." Inside there is an ad for the upcoming *Sweet Thursday*, which says, "Susie, who had all the right assets but the wrong ideas." It was published in September 1954.

Many years ago, Julie Lasky of the *New York Times Book Review* wrote,

Cannery Row, described by John Steinbeck in the opening lines of his novel of the same name as "a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream," was advertised on the 1947 soft-cover as "The Street Where Love Comes Easy." And if something was lost in the translation from cloth bound to paperback—something besides good grammar—then something else was gained: a woman sitting on the cover with her legs crossed, stockings rolled, neckline plunging. The picture, by the illustrator Ben Stahl, is exactly wrong, since *Cannery Row* celebrates a community of men and leaves the prostitutes in the background. Cover artists usually worked from plot summaries or directives to render the most lurid possible scene. (Lasky 67)

Regarding Steinbeck, these paperback covers never reflected the real story inside. Fortunately Steinbeck's stories were never abridged.



But *Cup of Gold* is one of the best. The cover says, “He sacked Panama for a woman’s kisses” and inside it says, SAINT OR DEVIL . . . Which was she? Men called her La Santa Roja. She was the lovely mystery woman of Panama. Every foul-mouthed buccaneer on the Spanish Main dreamed of possessing her. They drank to her in the brothels and grog shops of ancient Port Royal. But there were others who whispered that Ysobel was a devil! It was desire to take this woman that brought Henry Morgan, King of the Pirates, to Panama. With torch and cutlass he laid waste to the mightiest citadel in Spanish America. And he did it all for Ysobel. A lusty tail of an adventurer who rose from slavery to conquest of the Spanish Main. It is stark drama drawn from a bloody page of history by one of our greatest living novelists!

To quote Julie Lasky again, “And so it was that dozens of classic novels appeared in packages that were cartoonish, sordid or merely absurd.” (67) *Cup of Gold* was published by Popular Library (#216) in 1949.

The Steinbeck covers discussed in this article are probably all

that there are of that type. Publishing of all kinds has changed drastically in the past half century. We can take some solace that at least our classic writers such as John Steinbeck are now published in paperback form with covers and comments that more accurately reflect the story inside. It would have been interesting to hear John Steinbeck's comments about those early paperbacks of his. I hope he found them as amusing as we do today.



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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Illustrations from the covers of paperback novels in this article are by courtesy of Richard Hoffstedt. For those interested in further information on Ben Stahl and Rudolph Belarski, the following websites may be consulted:

www.freelaunch.com/museum/bio.html

www.illustration-house.com/bios/belarski_bio.html