THE PULPS: PAPER HEROES

by Bryce Knorr

"The Case of the Editor's Envelope"? Secret formulas? Cardboard-hero good guys battling villains straight out of Saturday morning cartoons?

If *CRIMEFIGHTERS* sounds too corny to be true, remember this: The pulp heroes weren't life-sized characters when they were created in the 1930s, and the decades have done little to make them appear any more realistic.

Dave Cook's rules and his wonderfully two-dimensional scenario capture both the style and the spirit of these wonderfully two-dimensional protagonists and their genre.

The pulp heroes were the last hurrah of those mass-produced, formula-fiction factories known as the pulp magazines. Born about the turn of the century, the pulps — they took their name from the inexpensive paper on which they originally were printed — were usually of suspect literary quality, But besides inflaming the imaginations of millions of readers, the magazines provided a financial foothold for numerous writers who went on to create stories and books that are the great works that the pulps were (for the most part) not.

Ray Bradbury, Max Brand, Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, Stephen Crane, H.P, Lovecraft — the list of authors whose works appeared in the pulps is long. Long also is the list of styles that flourished between those covers that promised fantastic fantasy and thrilling thrillers: From the whodunit to the horror story, from the Wild West to the the moons of Mars, the pulps helped establish science fiction and fantasy in the literary experience of the 20th Century,

The pulp publishers were in it, of course, for the money (some things never change). Fortunes flowed from the promises of the sensational and the sleazy. With literally hundreds of competitors on the newsstands, the publishers constantly searched for the type of story that would sell. And, in the 1930s, they struck gold with tales of modern knights battling evil —the tales that provided the fodder for "Crimefighters."

The publishers could hardly help but notice that their largest-selling issues were ones featuring heroes — or villains — familiar to their audience, main characters developed in earlier editions. From that formula, it was a short alley-vault to continuing series based upon the daring exploits of a modern hero.

The first of these pulp heroes was The Shadow, the nemesis of the night born from the runaway typewriter of Walter Gibson in the early 1930s. The pulp business was no more imaginative then than television or Hollywood is today; soon, a host of heroes was spawned to capitalize on the success of The Shadow, from The Spider and The Octopus to Doc Savage and countless others,

"They'd do anything to sell," says Fred Cook (no relation to Dave), an Ohio-based collector and authority on pulp fiction.

"The authors realized they were not writing deathless prose (some things never change). I spoke to one who told me, 'I write for the people who move their lips when they read.'"

"The writers would be told, 'We need 80 pages on such and such,' and then they'd lock themselves in their rooms and knock out that number of pages on their typewriters."

Perhaps the pulp heroes were too successful. Within a few years comic books appeared, copying their hero-based formula, and the competition, coupled with World War II paper shortages, sent the periodical fiction business plummeting. A few of the pulps survived, mostly in name only, or in a different medium, like radio. But the pulps' skyrocket was locked in a tailspin from which it never really recovered.

Yet here we are, March 1981, stuffed with 20-pages plus of *Crimefighters.* The day of the pulp heroes was short-lived, but their impact remains.

"Doc Savage" is soon to be a movie; reprints of that series and The Shadow are still selling, and a first issue of The Shadow Magazine can fetch $600, $700 or more. That's not as much as an original Superman, but it's enough to make the pulps in Fred Cook's basement more an investment than a fire hazard.

The relative cost of pulps compared to other collectibles has sparked interest in the genre, says Cook, who runs FAX Collectors Editions as a sidelight. Although still a specialty, 150 to 200 pulp aficionados gather at their own convention each year, and the number is growing,

"I like to read them," Cook says, "I'm not that old — I was born in the early 30s — so I never got a chance to read the magazines when they first came out."

Cook believes the public —whether it knows it or not — has a strong appetite for the type of hero mold cast by the pulp heroes of the 1930s.

"Look at the James Bond Movies," he says, "He's a fantasy hero, with flying cars and evil villains. People love that stuff — it's nothing but a pulp magazine brought onto the screen."

Looking deeper, into the American character, Cook sees similarities between the social climate of today and that of the 1930s, parallels that may account for some of the renewed interest in pulps, as well as illustrate some good — and not so good — points about our society,

Besides a distressed economy, the U.S. spirit in the 1930s felt isolated in a world of fascism and foreign ideologies. There were villains aplenty, both abroad and at home.

"We're back to the same place," says Cook. "No one trusts THE GOVERNMENT, in capital letters, and everybody is looking for Ronnie Reagan to put on his robe and kiss his ring and to fly into the air and solve all the problems."

"In the early 1930s, everything was going to Hell," says Cook. "There were gangsters in Chicago and New York, and the police couldn't handle it. People were looking for the "hero" and then The Shadow came along. He took the law into his own hands and did what a lot of citizens wished they could do."

The country wanted heroes, he says, and heroes it got, not unlike the adulation that greeted the hostages upon their return to the U.S.

The Iranian tragedy has brought cries of "filthy Arabs" and "Nuke Iran," and the pulps here, too, may say something about our collective mentality — something not quite so nice as the good guys winning. Those pulp magazines and novels were filled with demeaning racial stereotypes, and not a little sadistic violence.

"The Spider," says Cook, "when he caught up with a villain on the top of a skyscraper, instead of knocking him out and coming down the 47 stories and giving him to the cops, he pushed him off the edge — after sticking him with a ring that left an impression to show that 'The Spider' did it."

The pulps didn't make it past World War II - because of paper shortages and comic books, sure. And maybe the fact that the war turned a lot of real, everyday people into heroes — heroes who were more than two-dimensional creations from a typewriter.