

# The Most Valuable Authors in Vintage Paperback

By Bruce Black

Just as in collecting their hardcover counterparts, numerous factors lead to collectibility in vintage paperbacks. First printings are more valuable than later ones. Collectible authors and themes obviously add to value. And condition is perhaps even more critical than in hardcovers. It is practically impossible to read a paperback without damaging it to some extent, and depending on the care of the readers, a volume can easily go from “Near Fine” to “A Poor Reader’s Copy” after only having been used a couple times.

Scarcity is obviously the factor that drives value. The most popular authors’ books are usually not the most valuable simply because printing runs were larger and more of their volumes exist. For that reason, works by Agatha Christie, Earl Stanley Gardner, Rex Stout, John Dickson Carr, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Ellery Queen, Dorothy L. Sayers, George Harmon Coxe, Brett Halliday, Mickey Spillane, Erskine Caldwell, etc, while *collectible*, are not generally more *valuable*, i.e. more expensive today.

The exception obviously occurs when scarcity comes into play. Due to relatively small printing runs at Pocket Book, a first printing of a book such as Pocket Book 228, *The Bigger They Come*, by A.A. Fair (Erle Stanley Gardner), is worth a bit more than Gardner’s other books (it was the first in his popular *Bertha Cool/Donald Lam* series, most of which were later reprinted by Dell). The best example, however, is Pocket Book #5, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, by Agatha Christie. ALL of those first ten first printings of Pocket Books in 1939 are very collectible (the runs were small, and only released in New York City), and this one is exceedingly valuable today. (The picture shown on this page is a fifth printing, but the first printing is identical.)

However some authors are valuable in general. A discussion of the *most* valuable vintage paperback authors follows.



Pocket Book # 5, Pocket Book 228, Avon (nn) 20, Detective Book D1 (Jonathan)

Relatively valuable books (due to scarcity) by popular authors.  
 (“Ellery Queen” is a pseudonym for cousins Frederic Dannay and James Yaffe.)

# Dashiell Hammett

Of particular interest to vintage paperback collectors were the pulp magazine authors, and especially the hardboiled mystery authors in publications such as *Black Mask* and *Dime Mystery*. Hammett was not the first in the genre, but he was definitely the most famous. His five novels were reprinted by Pocket Book, and while extremely collectible, the printings were too large to make most of them very high-priced today (the one big exception is shown below). It is the collections of his pulp short stories that are currently more valuable. One of his most popular characters was never named; he was only identified as an “operative of the Continental Detective Agency,” and was therefore dubbed “The Continental Op.” Two of his other main characters are still very famous today: Sam Spade (*The Maltese Falcon* and other works) and Nick Charles (*The Thin Man*).



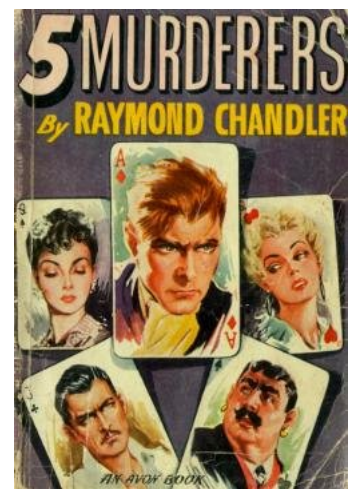
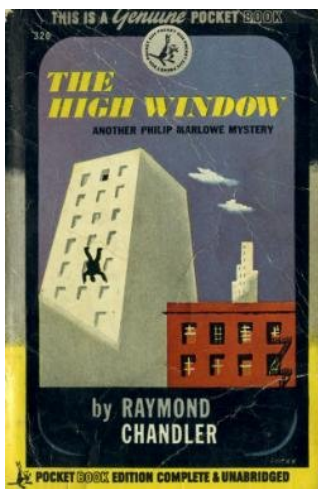
Pocket Book 268 (3<sup>rd</sup> prtng in rare dust jacket), Dell 154, Dell 421, Jonathan J36



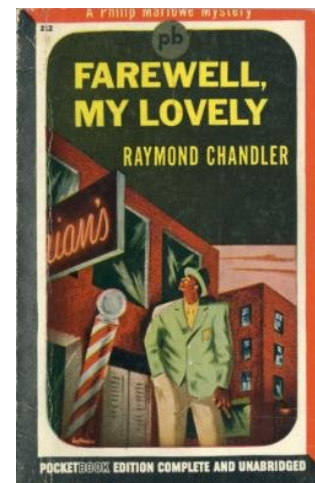
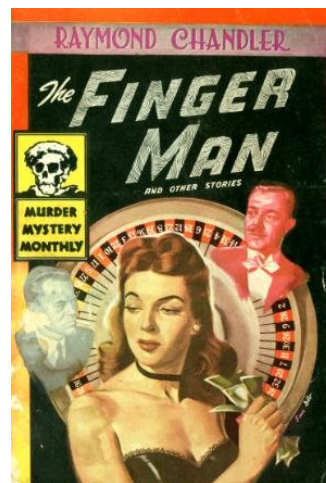
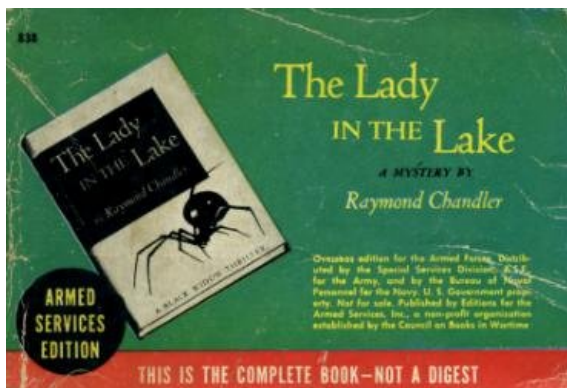
Bestseller B62, Bestseller B81, Dell 379, Dell 411

## Raymond Chandler

An immensely popular hardboiled author, Chandler didn't start writing until he was 45 years old. Chandler's earliest stories for *Black Mask* lacked some the panache of his later short stories and novels, and it's fun to see his unique talent evolve into the unrivaled use of tough-guy simile and metaphor (many, many writers have tried to duplicate it). His seven novels were all based around the same character, Phillip Marlowe. Marlowe was possibly America's best-loved PI, tough but sensitive, susceptible to a lady's charm, knew which cops were on the take and which judges were corrupt, and he was even known to turn down his fee if he discovered that his client was crooked.



Pocket Book 320, Pocket Book 846, Avon (mn) 38, Avon 63



Armed Services Edition 838, Murder Mystery Monthly 43, Pocket Book 212

## Cornell Woolrich (& pseudonym William Irish)

It's impossible to talk about "noir" in writing for books or film without mentioning Woolrich. All of his works were "dark," and some, such as *Deadline at Dawn*, were set completely at night. His personal life was a shambles, and he died a millionaire while living alone in a New York hotel room, a crippled alcoholic. One of his stories, *It Had to Be Murder*, was the basis for Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Rear Window*. You could never really be sure if his stories would end happily or not, but they were always written in such a way that you'd be forced to empathize with the main characters, who would struggle against psychologically crushing odds. Practically all of Woolrich's vintage books are highly collectible and valuable in today's market.



Graphic 108, Popular Library 137, Popular Library 431, Murder Mystery Monthly 27



Gold Medal 136, Avon 220, Dell 10¢ 26, Popular Library 473

## Fredric Brown

A prolific pulp magazine author for *Detective Tales* and *Dime Mystery*, Brown started writing crime novels in 1947, and then for some reason switched to science fiction in the late 50's. He is hugely popular in those genres, and collectors of both have kept his books in great demand. His works tend to have quirky endings that astonish and delight readers, and while other great authors tend to leave us contemplating great philosophical questions, reading Fredric Brown makes us think ... and it's also just plain fun.



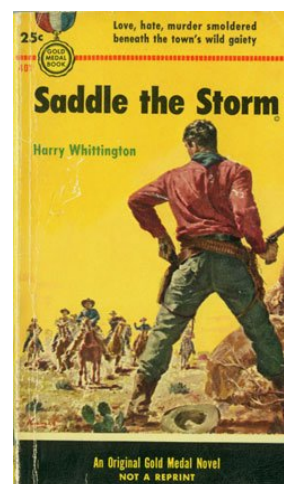
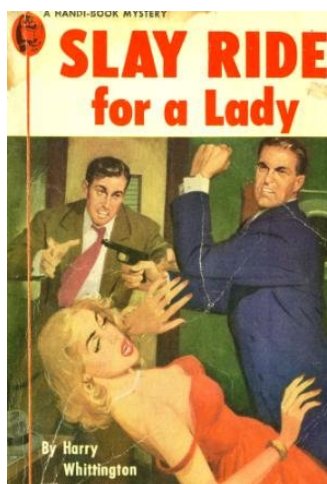
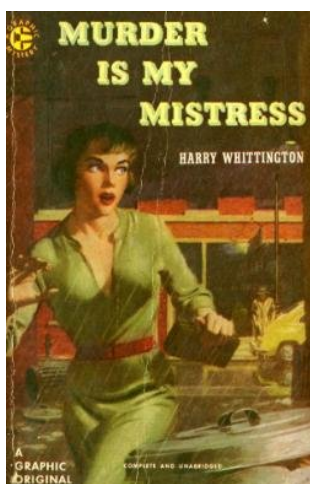
Bantam 302, Bantam 831, Pennant P59, Dell 1<sup>st</sup> Ed 2E



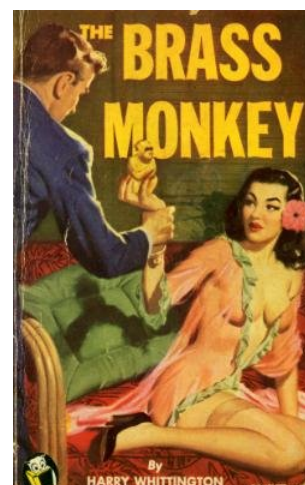
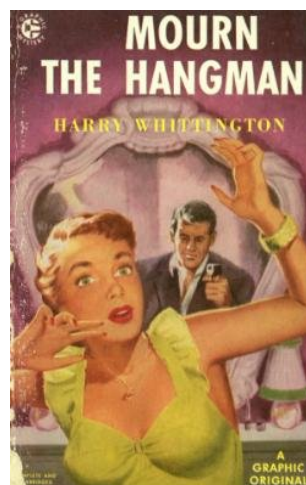
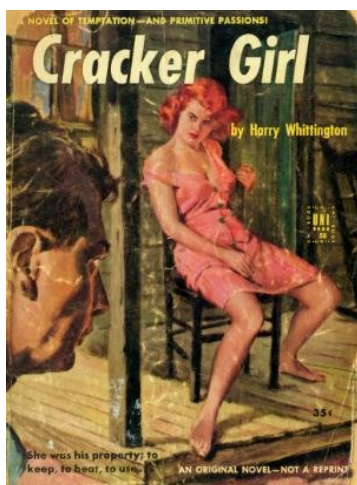
Bantam 990, Bantam 835, Bantam 1077, Bantam A1546

## Harry Whittington

Whittington was an immensely popular writer of action novels (mystery, western and “sleaze”) who wrote in true pulp style. His stories are exciting, the characters’ situations seemingly impossible, and the pace often leaves the reader breathless. In his novel “You’ll Die Next!” an average fellow gets up in the morning, kisses his wife goodbye, steps outside and is beaten to a pulp by a guy that warns him to stop messing with a fellow he’s never heard of. He spends the whole book trying to figure out who his antagonist is and what it is he’s being threatened about. That’s typical Whittington. He published more than 200 novels, and he has such an avid fan base that practically all of his vintage books are very valuable.



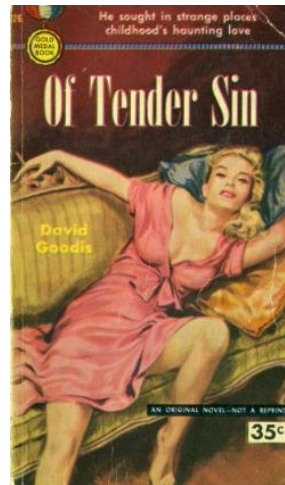
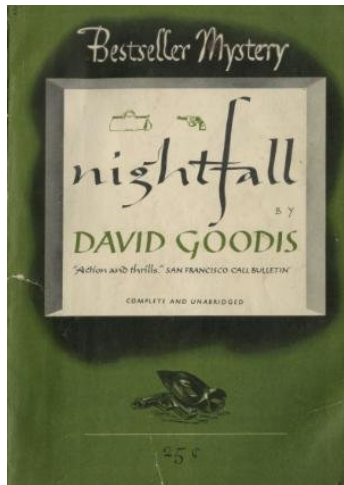
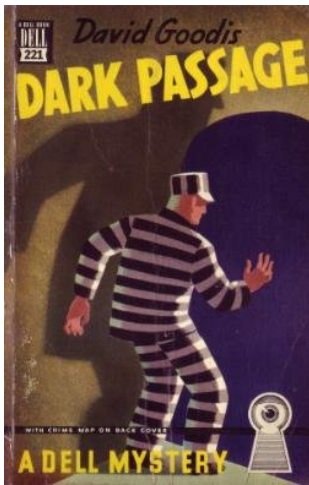
Graphic 41, Ace D-63, Handi 120, Gold Medal 401



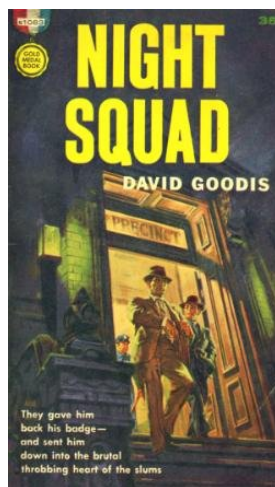
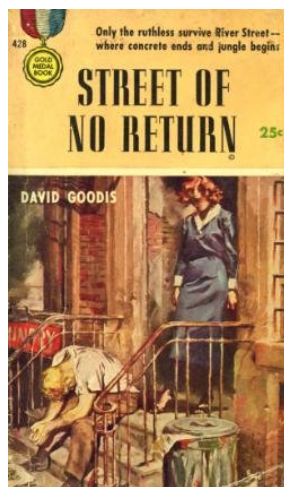
Uni 58, Gold Medal 740, Graphic 46, Handi 138

## David Goodis

Goodis appears to be one of those writers that achieved success not just through talent, but also through hard work, churning out hundreds of works for pulp magazines while remaining a virtual unknown. Then he wrote *Dark Passage*, which was an instant success, and was almost immediately made into a movie with Bogart & Bacall. But instead of riding the wave created by his achievement, he slid back into the pulps, or at least the “pulp novels,” i.e. the paperback originals that were most commonly published by Gold Medal and Lion. It’s as if he lived to struggle, and his noir creations seemed to reflect that. David Goodis was not a happy man. After his death in 1967, his works went out of print altogether until Black Lizard revived them. He is now one of the most collectible of all vintage period authors, and his books are ALL extremely valuable.



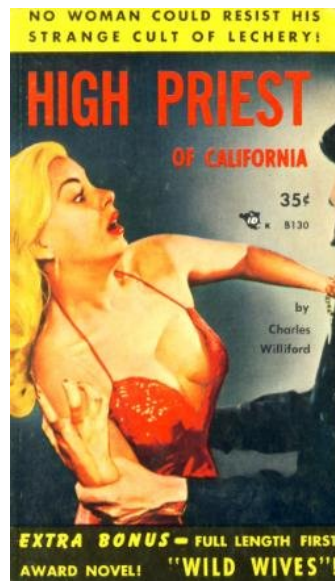
Dell 221  
Bestseller B121  
Gold Medal 226



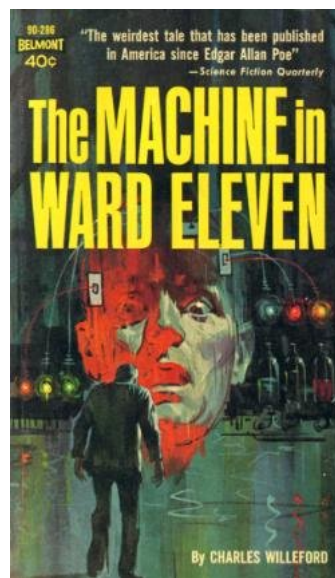
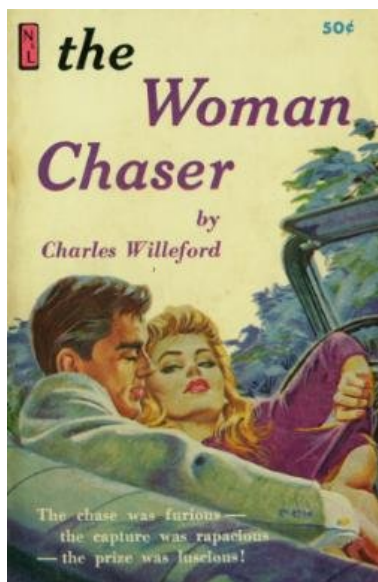
Gold Medal 256  
Gold Medal 428  
Gold Medal s1083

## Charles Willeford

If I had to pick just one of the authors in this article that is THE most valuable (at least at this point in time), it would probably have to be Willeford. His writing is down-to-earth, gritty, intriguing, and his characters are so real that they're downright scary. He was on active duty in the military, then in and out of odd jobs throughout most of what I call the "vintage paperback era," and he released only about a dozen titles in the 50's and 60's. He created his best know character, Hoke Moseley, much later, in 1984 (*Miami Blues*). His first novel, *High Priest of California*, printed as half of a Royal Giant in 1953, barely sold a third of its only printing. It was reprinted later, also by the Universal Publishing Company, under the *Beacon* label ... but they misspelled his name on the cover! Most of his works during the vintage period were released by adults-only publishers, and then were re-released later as hardboiled mystery/suspense by Black Lizard.



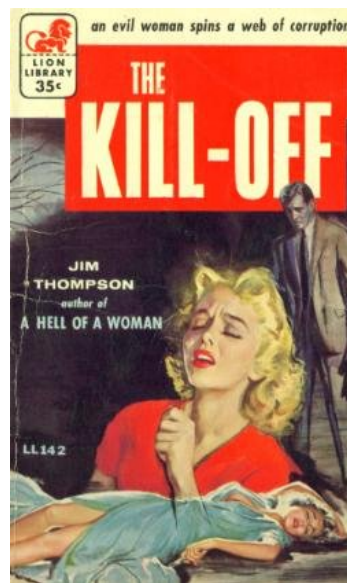
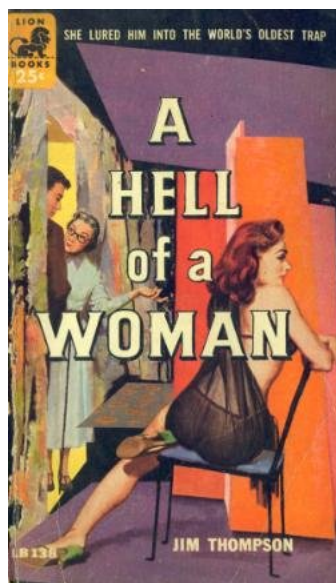
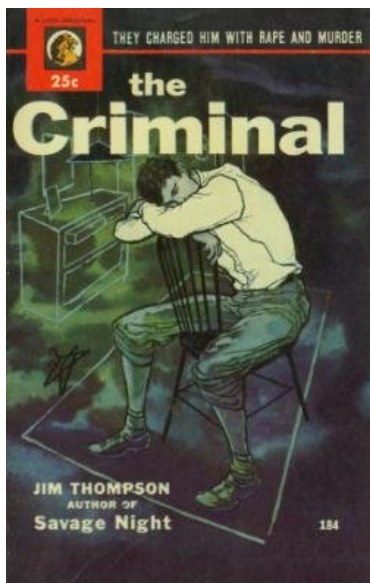
Royal Giant 20, Beacon  
B130, Newsstand Library  
U137, Belmont 90-286





# Jim Thompson

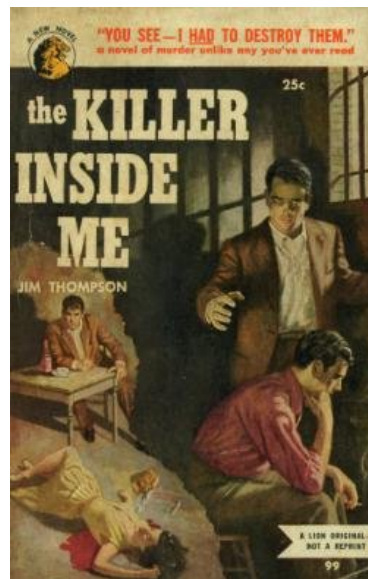
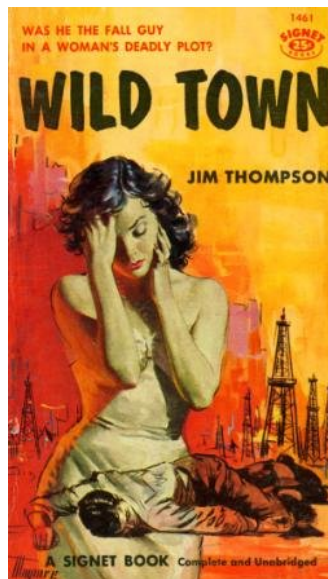
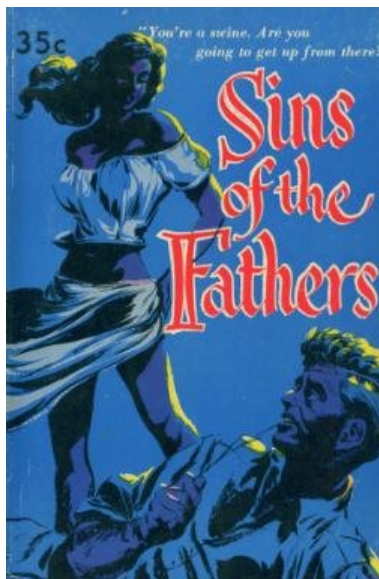
If Willeford's characters were scary, then Jim Thompson's were downright terrifying. Thompson wrote about disturbed people that were so realistic, so plausible, that you are forced to believe the folks you see on the evening news talking about a neighbor that "seemed like such a nice, average guy." Every Halloween, some literary critic writes about "the scariest books ever written," and Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* is always at or near the top of the heap. The people in his books invariably start out by taking a course of action for very logical reasons, and then things just get more and more complicated until they're entirely out of control. Thompson once said that there was only one real plot in literature: nothing is as it seems. And all of his books have a "twist" at the end. Jim Thompson's vintage paperback originals are ALL extremely valuable.



Lion  
184

Lion  
LB138

Lion  
LL142



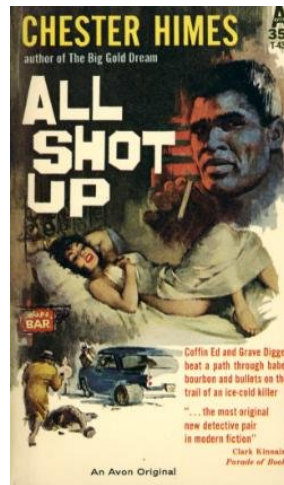
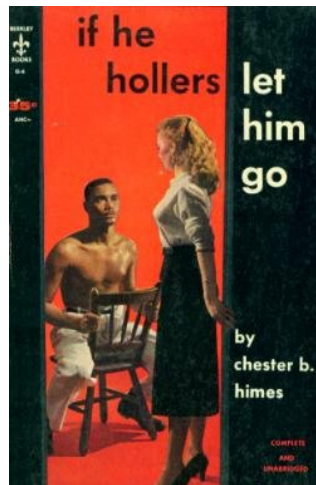
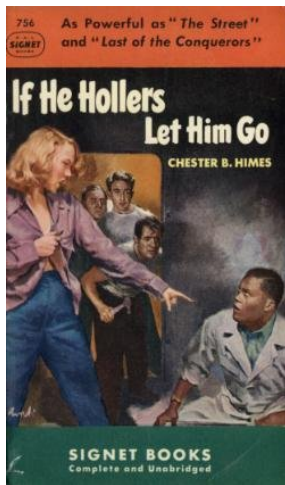
Studio  
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Signet  
1461

Lion  
99

## Chester Himes

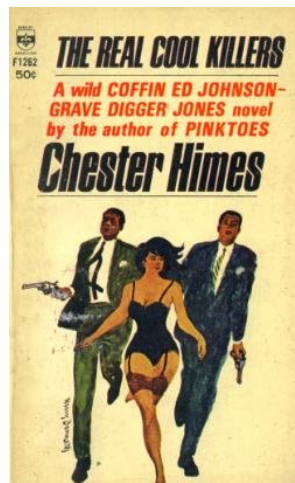
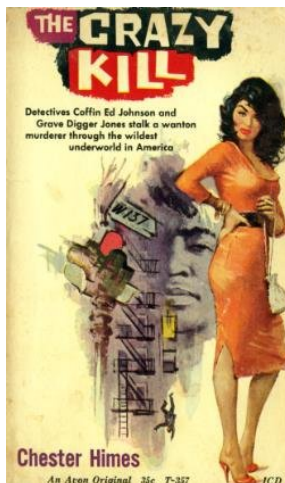
Chester Himes is most certainly a socially important author of the period, but he is less-collected than the others in our little study. He is enjoying a definite resurgence of popularity in recent years among vintage paperback collectors, at least in part due to a book by James Sallis, printed in 1993 by Gryphon Books, *Difficult Lives: Jim Thompson – David Goodis – Chester Himes*. Gryphon is the label of Gary Lovisi, who is probably THE biggest authority on the subject of collectible paperbacks today, so this made a lot of collectors sit up and take notice. Himes wrote about racism in the 50's and 60's, and his most famous early work was *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Later, he wrote a string of gritty, hardboiled novels about two Harlem detectives named Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave digger Jones. Those books did not do well in America for many years, and he was generally ignored until after his death. Himes' works enjoyed a resurgence when *Cotton Comes to Harlem* became a movie in 1970, and *A Rage in Harlem* in 1990.



Signet 756  
(cover by Avati)

Berkley G-6

AvonT-434

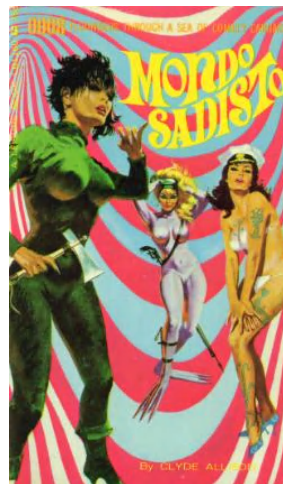
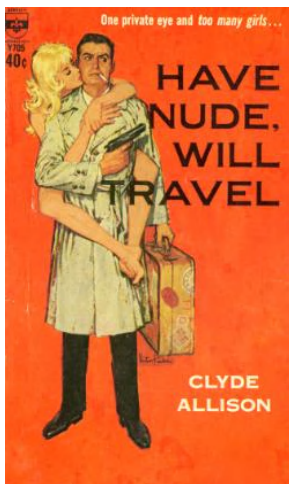


Avon T-357

Berkley F-1262

## William Knowles (Clyde Allison)

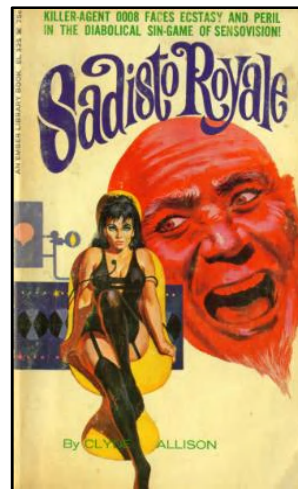
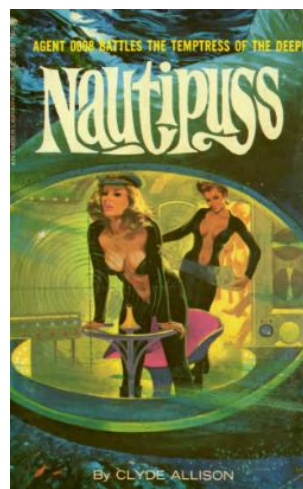
Everyone in our little study so far has had a well-defined niche in the world of U.S. vintage literature. Allison certainly had his, but there's a twist. While authors such as Goodis, Willeford and Thompson penned mystery & detective fiction, often dripping with existential undertones, that would sometimes find their way onto the "Adult Rack" in the bookstores and newsstands, Allison wrote purely adult-oriented books from the beginning, and there was never any doubt they were anything else. But they WERE different ... because Allison dealt in that realm of adult comedy so acerbically satirical, that it has to be placed in another category: the "Spoof." The books primarily make fun of hardboiled detective fiction. But the most pointedly fantastic of them all were the "Agent 0008" novels. This may all sound a little TOO tongue-in-cheek to you, but the books are enormously collectible, and they are ALL very valuable.



Berkley Y705

Ember Library EL333

Leisure Book LB1160



Ember Library EL317

Ember Library EL309

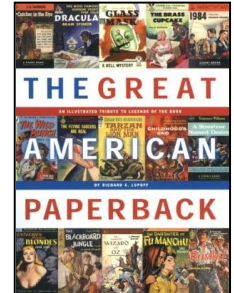
Ember Library EL325

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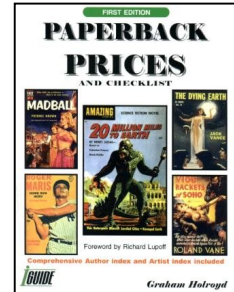
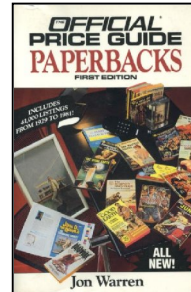
*Paperbacks, U.S.A.*, by Piet Schreuders.  
1981, Blue Dolphin.



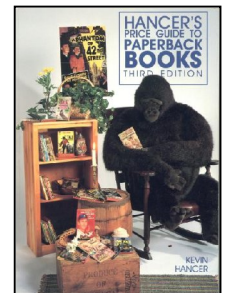
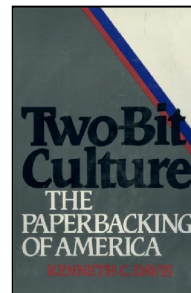
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*Paperback Prices and Checklist*, by Graham Holroyd.  
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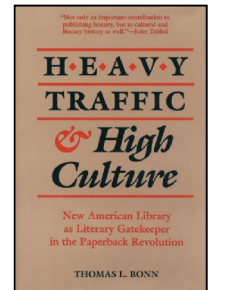
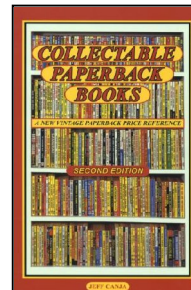
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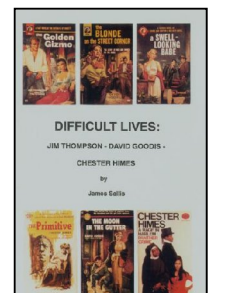
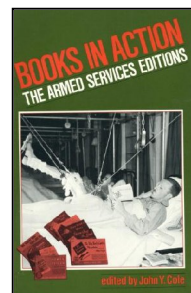
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by James Sallis  
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(2nd printing, 2000).