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Taschen

Cover teasers of the men's magazines published in the 1950's, 60's and 70's often promised more revelation than the pulp fiction offered inside.

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Oh, Those Pulpy Days of 'Weasels Ripped My Flesh'

By JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

They were called "men's adventure" magazines, the "armpit school" of journalism, or "sweats." They had names like *Man's Life*, *Man's Exploits*, *Real Men* or just *Male*. Designed to snare the attention of the Average G.I. Joe settling back into humdrum civilian life after World War II, their gorgeously lurid cover illustrations routinely depicted buxom beauties in shredded tatters of clothes, writhing under the slathering jaws of savage beasts, wild savages or sadistic Nazis.

Cover teasers reiterated the promise of blood, sweat and sex with story titles like "Man Hungry Hussy of She-Devil Island!" "A Bonfire in Hell for the Nazis' Passion Slaves," "I Watched Myself Being Eaten Alive" and the classic "Weasels Ripped My Flesh."

It being the 1950's, that promise was never fulfilled in the magazines' pulpy pages. As with today's supermarket tabloids or *The Onion*, most of the creative juices flowed into those covers and outrageous story titles; in fact, the art and teasers were

John Strausbaugh, the author of "Rock 'Til You Drop," is writing a history of blackface in popular culture.

often created first, then the stories were written to match. Prim by today's standards, the copy mostly served to fill space among the ads for trusses, bodybuilding books and directories of "nudist colonies."

It's those stunningly garish covers that are prized today by collectors and fans of camp. Two big, beautiful coffee-table books have collected hundreds of them in full-color reproductions: "Men's Adventure Magazines in Postwar America," a new title from Taschen, a publisher of luxuriantly lowbrow art books, and "It's a Man's World" (2003), from the edgy small press Feral House.

Like the comic books of the era, the pulp magazines were cranked out at a prodigious rate by small staffs of underpaid, often anonymous writers and artists, working on a production-line model. Where men's glossies of the era like *Esquire* and the upstart *Playboy* were aimed at college-educated sophisticates, pulps like *Man's Action* and *All Man* sought the working man's coin, with cover prices of 25 or 35 cents and bold, simple depictions of rock-jawed he-men and bosom-heaving pinups. Certain themes were endlessly revisited. There was much steamy, sadomasochistic exoticism, with beautiful women preyed upon by Nazi prison camp commandants ("Soft Flesh for the Dungeon of the Damned"), Japa-

'Men's Adventure Magazines in Postwar America'

Edited by Jim Heimann and Nina Wiener
512 pages. Taschen, \$39.99.

nese torturers ("Hideous Secrets of the Mindanao Cave Monster"), African or Pacific tribesmen ("The White Girl, the Knife and the Witch Doctor") or the occasional Arab harem-builder ("The 1,000 Sex Slaves of the Whip-Mad Sheikh"). On the other hand, male characters who found themselves shipwrecked in the Pacific usually ended up as sex slaves of lusty island girls, in stories like "Forbidden Orgy of the Naked Pearl Girls!" In the 60's, rampaging bikers and sex-crazed beatnik chicks added a more topical flair.

In another genre, writers and artists wracked their brains to turn animals of all species into vicious killers — not just lions and pythons, but ants, turtles, "flying rodents," "mad monkeys" and "cannibal crabs." A disturbing hint of eroticism often crept into these tales; as Bruce Jay Friedman, who edited scores of the publications, recalled in a 1975 memoir reprinted in "It's a Man's World," "Even the rhinos were nymphos." World War II was refought over and

over again in the pulps' pages. When writers like Mario Puzo had mined the war's actual battles to exhaustion, the pulp authors simply invented new ones. Interestingly, the grim Korean conflict and hellish Vietnam War proved less exploitable; even Puzo said they were "no fun" wars.

Although their names are not honored beyond a cult of collectors, most of the artists were gifted draftsmen, and a few — Mort Künstler, Norman Saunders and Norm Eastman — were true geniuses of a populist hyperrealist style. Though painted at factory-output speed, their covers positively vibrate with detail. A single bead of sweat glistens like a glass pearl on a Communist torturer's scarred cheek; you can almost smell the scented powder of a geisha's shadowed cleavage. Lushly tinted and viscerally kinetic, Künstler's masterpieces, as Adam Parfrey, the author of "It's a Man's World," notes, look like heroic Soviet Socialist Realism kidnapped and forced to serve the most feverishly deviant Western fantasies. Men's adventure magazines flourished in the repressed 50's and hung on through the 60's. But when *Penthouse* paved the way toward a more explicit era in the early 1970's, the coyly prurient pulps quickly vanished. Their tortured, campy legacy, however, is gloriously enshrined in these two collections.