

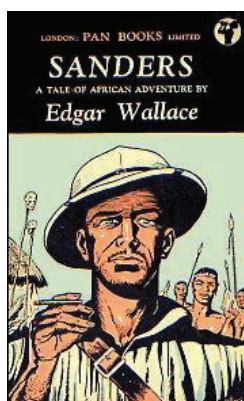
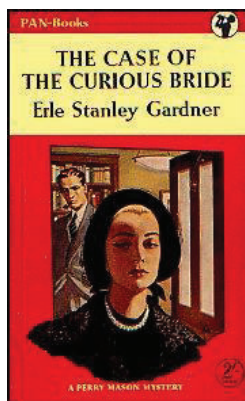
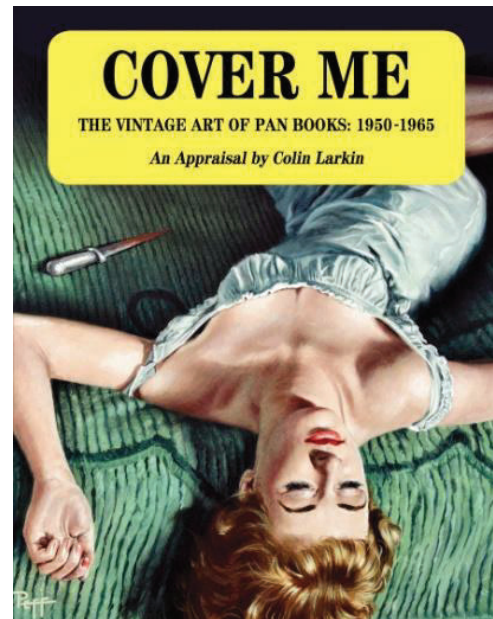
## The Golden Age of Pan Cover Art

by Colin Larkin

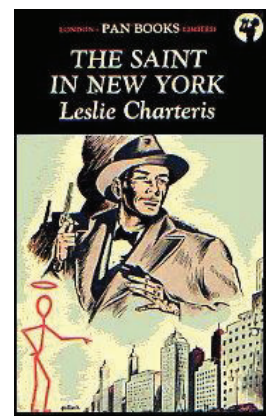
The general consensus in the history of paperbacks is that Penguin was the benchmark. There was also a perception that they appealed to a more literate audience than the sleazy pulp paperbacks of the 1940s and early 1950s. While their often-iconic covers were strong on typography, they were sometimes visually dull. Pan Books ultimately pressed the perfect button, as they entered the decade of post-war recovery. Their visually appealing 'pulp-lite' covers were like comic books – they enticed the reader with seductive artwork. My new book about Pan cover art between 1950 and 1965 provides detailed coverage of the era that for me and many others was its golden age. The yellow panel Pans have become widely collected in recent years well beyond their former cult status.

By the mid 1950s the covers evolved into a brand that matched Penguin in recognition. Alongside Alan Bott's maverick leadership from 1947 this owed much to the great pioneers of the art department, Edward Young and especially George Kamm. With no disrespect to Panther, Corgi and the rest it was Pan and Penguin which grabbed the space at the station bookstalls.

Both Bott and his successor Aubrey Forshaw had an uncanny knack of picking the right titles, and more importantly, they smelt the public's thirst for the genres that would sell. Crime fiction was clearly their strong leader, but closely followed by World War II exploits, romance, horror and film tie-ins. As austerity declined the Cinema continued to boom – and Pan was always first in line.



My obsession with Pan book covers began from a very early age. I realised that the covers were often similar to the comics I was hooked on and obsessively collected: *Hotspur*, *Wizard* and, from the USA, DC and EC comics. In my early teens (before graduating to James Bond titles) I moved on to acquiring dozens of Pan crime titles by Leslie Charteris, Erle Stanley Gardner, John Creasey, Edgar Wallace and Peter Cheyney at second-hand market stalls.



In 1966 I became an apprentice commercial artist, attempting to follow in the footsteps of my older brother David, who was by then art director at Panther, I fell far short of his natural talent but understood the sheer complexity of preparing the covers – especially in this period of transition from hand lettering to Letraset. Even the artwork I did freelance for Panther, and later for Pan in the 1970s, was a breeze compared to the daunting process in preparing a Pan cover up until 1965. By 1972 even Letraset was virtually obsolete as phototypesetting on film overlay made the illustration process so much easier.

Not only were the curved panels hand lettered with Indian ink and cut and pasted on; the spines and the logo were often done by hand. Imagine white gouache on a red spine. It really happened and I describe this jaw-dropping process in detail in the book. The graphic artist today using InDesign or Quark would surely be amazed at the complexity and the length of time it took. Additionally there was the required reference on which to base the actual cover illustration – further painstaking work, often using photography and hired models; only one or two artists were deemed important enough to be allowed their own research photography with others often just given a reference photo to use.

I only became aware of all this after I had acquired a huge archive of original Pan artwork in 1990, and embarked on the research that ended up taking 30 years. This long gestation enabled me to speak with many of the 1950s artists as well as key people at Pan, including the wonderful Stan 'Boz' Boswarva (see Tony Whitehorn's article in Newsletter 12). The details of my acquisition are explained in the book but had

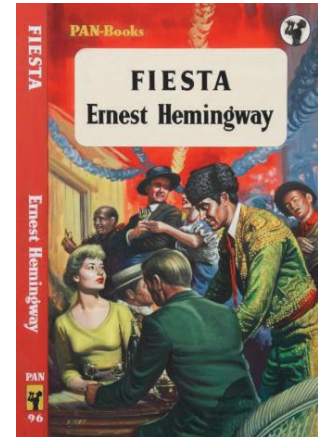
nothing whatsoever to do with having a brother who later became art director of Pan. Indeed he was never a fan of the era covered by the 'golden age' and he never understood my obsession with an era he considered 'old hat' in comparison to Pan's phenomenal growth in his time.

By contrast, I was only interested in the earlier era, especially the 1950s long before London became 'swinging'. Over the years I researched and found out so much about the many artists that Pan used and why some of them fell by the wayside as fashions changed. These artists, apart from a select few, were well down the food chain in terms of acceptance: they were sometimes unfairly regarded as hacks, as they often combined work doing comic book covers and film posters. Sadly many of them did not recognise how good they were – and consequently saw no value in the 550 pieces that I now own – at least 300 of them reproduced in the book.

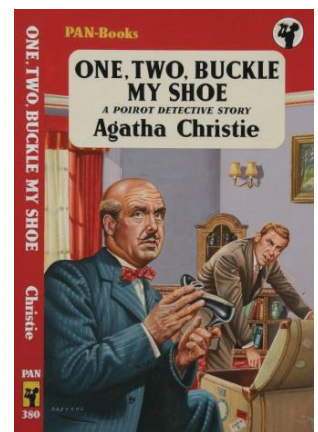
The most remarkable thing that continues to impress me is that the originals were always twice or sometimes three times their size in the final product and the artist had to consider carefully the effect of reducing their illustration to an A-format paperback - often using a reducing lens to gauge how it would look when printed. For their other commissions, whether comics like *Eagle* or *Look and Learn* or film posters, the finished article is so much larger than a 180mm x 110mm book cover. That skill, even from today's artists is remarkable, even though B-format gives a tad more leeway.

The other notable quality is that the original Winsor & Newton gouache colour has not faded or lost any of its pristine quality and, as I note several times in the book, the difference between these originals and the finished printed covers is considerable. And yet the paperbacks are loved and collected for their colourful impact and visual quality to this day.

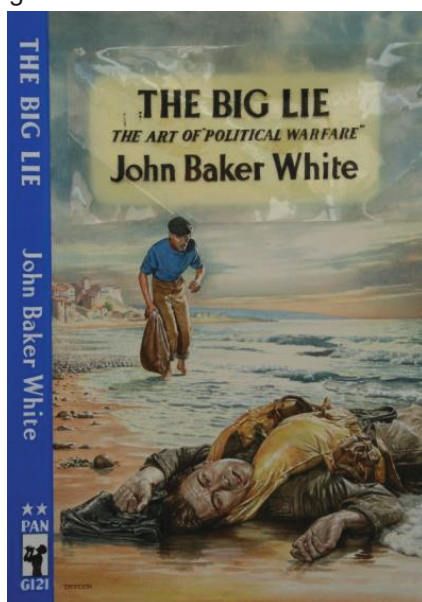
It was a huge boost for me to discover a fellow collector in 2004, Tim Kitchen whose website for Pan paperback collectors [tikit.net](http://tikit.net) has a huge following and fortuitous in that Tim was able to help me recover over 30 items that had been stolen. His consistent enthusiasm has spurred me on to finish this project. In researching the artists that Pan used between 1947 and 1965, much has been revealed. There were countless unsung heroes of the sable hair brush including Carl Wilton, Bruce C. Windo, Derek Stowe, Rex Archer, Rudolph Sax, Henry Fox, Gordon C. Davies, Hans Helweg and S. R. Boldero. Others who did manage a degree of widespread recognition notably included Cy Webb (Reginald Heade), Josh Kirby, Val Biro, Sam 'Peff' Peffer and James E. McConnell.



Cover artwork by Josh Kirby above and Derek Stowe below



But, there was one final diamond in the mine that I discovered – in my opinion unquestionably the greatest of all the Pan artists of this golden era. While the populist Pan cover art of the legendary 'Peff' is widely appreciated, as is the undeniable quality of James E. McConnell's paintings, it is inexcusable that Dave Tayler (1921-1985) has so far eluded the eyes of the world. It did not help that a Wikipedia entry written by Marion Ellis, a longtime friend, containing important factual background information about him was for some inexplicable reason cruelly deleted by another Wikipedia editor.



Stan Boswarva recalled to me that over the nine years he dealt with the remarkable Dave Tayler, he would only occasionally deliver his work by hand and disliked coming in to the busy city from his home in Dorking. Boz vividly remembered on one bizarre occasion when he turned up at the Pan office to deliver his latest artwork wearing his pyjamas under his jacket. Unlike many of the other Pan artists he often used himself or his wife Delma as a model for his artwork. She would photograph him in various scenes and vice versa. They would use Brighton beach for some of the scenes and Boz confirmed that Delma photographed Dave on the beach for the illustrations of one of his very best Pan covers, John Baker White's *The Big Lie*; a war story published in 1958. Using himself as a model, this cover displays all his formidable talent - his use of light



on the sea, perfect figure painting, superb detail, mood and atmosphere all combine to produce a stunning illustration. This piece could grace the walls of any decent art gallery, let alone on the front cover of a 2/6d paperback.

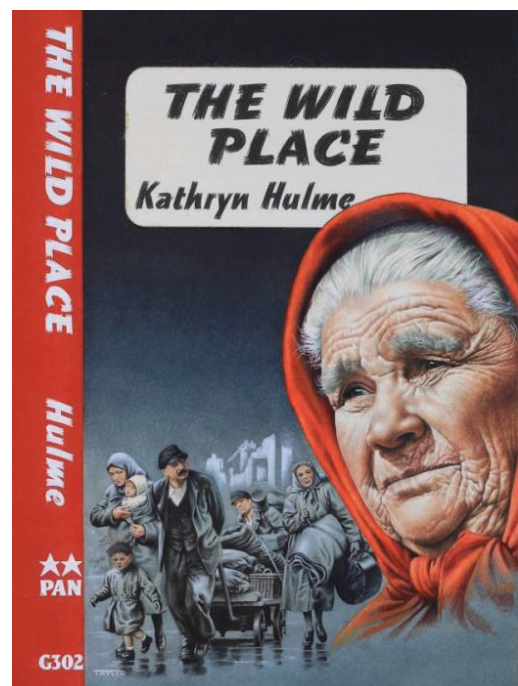
His ability to paint real actors was also flawless, and the cover for Ross Lockridge's *Raintree County* depicts Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift (from the 1957 movie) with uncanny photographic accuracy.

Ultimately it is his war cover art that strikes the highest note. His second commission for a Kathryn Hulme war novel *The Wild Place* (1959) is probably his greatest accomplishment in terms of technique. The composition against a grey background shows Polish refugees on the move with a wise old head-scarfed female in the foreground. But, it is the incredible detail of her wrinkled skin and grey hair that is so impressive.

However, Tayler's meticulous attention to his brushwork technique ironically ultimately cost him his livelihood. Because of the painstaking and scrupulous detail he put into his Pan covers, he was unable to produce his work fast enough. Whereas other artists, such as the prolific Peff, were able to 'churn out' covers at the rate of more than one a week (sometimes three), Tayler often took three to four weeks on one commission.

Bearing in mind his fee over the years would have been between 25 and 40 guineas per cover, less the agent's 20% commission, this would not have been much of an income. Later on, as Pan realised his timing problem, they tried to remedy this situation by allowing Tayler to produce his artwork half-up and Boz recalls that one or two were even done at same-size! He was forced eventually to abandon his Pan commissions in late 1966, and according to Boz - one of his biggest fans - became a postman in Dorking.

Commercial art, and especially paperback art, truly found its way in the 1950s and early 1960s as it monitored taste, fashion, entertainment and cultish extremes. I feel blessed to have been both viewer and apprentice to savour it all.



A sad postscript is that my dear Pan friend Ken Hatherley died last May, before the book was published, and my brother David in December having been anyway unable to read the book on account of his macular degeneration. My passion for these covers remains, and although research has been thorough, I know there must be more information on the artists that neither Tim Kitchen nor I have unearthed so any recollections or corrections would be gratefully received!

Colin Larkin's book *Cover Me – The Vintage Art of Pan Books: 1950-1965* was published in November 2020 by Telos Publishing. Macmillan Together readers can get a 20% discount until 31 March by using the code COVERME21. To order a copy click [here](#). If you have any comments or further stories about Pan cover artists please write in to our correspondence page or click [here](#) to contact the author direct. Colin's obituary of David Larkin appears on page 7 of this issue.

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