



PULP CONFIDENTIAL

* WORDS Peter Doyle

From February next year, vintage Australian 'pulp' cover art, illustrations and manuscripts will be on display in the Galleries. The works are drawn from the papers of Sydney publishing house Frank Johnson Publications. Peter Doyle, crime writer and curator of *Pulp Confidential*, introduces this treasure trove of 'resolutely low-rung' Australian pulp.

EXHIBITION

In February 1960, the Deputy Mitchell Librarian formally wrote to the estate of a recently deceased Sydney publisher, Frank C Johnson. Thirty years earlier a young Johnson had founded the literary magazine *Vision*, and had gone on to publish poetry collections, including his friend Kenneth Slessor's *Five Bells* and *Darlinghurst Nights*. The librarian offered her condolences and enquired whether there might be any personal papers suitable for the collection?

In 1965, Johnson's daughter contacted the Library to say her father had in fact left some papers and she was open to discussions about their future. A manuscripts librarian duly trooped out to her house in Carlingford, where he found a sprawling array of letters, manuscripts, artwork, cover designs, scrapbooks and ephemera, rat-gnawed and in poor condition, stored in a shed.

The items were not representative of Johnson's early literary career, but rather the last 20 years of his life, roughly 1940–60, when he had been a hard-grafting but resolutely low-rung publisher of comic books, crime paperbacks, humour and cheesecake magazines, boxing and racing fiction, adventure stories, bush tales and anything else that might move a few units in newsagents and on railway station bookstands. It wasn't high literature but pure pulp, of the quick and dirty sort.

After a little negotiation, the papers were acquired (for the not inconsiderable sum of £250) by the Mitchell Library. It was a good call. Back then there was zero prestige associated with mass pop culture. Now, half a century later, the Frank Johnson papers are a treasure trove. The lurid original magazine cover art, with its urgent, almost violent brushwork, and the hasty but free and flowing pen and ink drawings and washes — all so outré and low brow in the 1960s — now present as extraordinarily energetic and surprisingly modern. In the later decades of last century, that same pulp aesthetic would come to be highly valued, and rehabilitated as a major driver of pop culture, cinema and even fine art.

The lively (and sometimes inadvertently amusing) illustrations are mostly rendered on good quality rag paper or Bristol board. Around the smudged and dog-eared edges we see pencilled notes, suggestions, corrections and amendments, reminding us that this stuff came out of a well-organised production process. There's much correspondence there too, from authors and artists, which is often hurt and angry in tone — there are complaints about a short payment here, a



late payment there, or a plain and simple *non*-payment somewhere else. Yet other bits and pieces — postcards, sketches, private cartoons, decorated notes and letters, often referring to fondly remembered drinking sessions — are affectionate and comradely in tone.

It's also noteworthy just how *Australianised* the material is. At a time when US and British cultural exports were consistently swamping nascent expressions of Australian identity, Johnson's detective stories, true crime yarns, bush tales, comics, cartoons and even the westerns are often determinedly Australian in subject and setting. And of course there are generous (all right, let's say contrived) helpings of sex and violence. The Johnson house style?: 'Sexed-up local.'

The Frank Johnson papers are an exceptionally rich collection of classic early 'pulp' art, and at the same time provide a fascinating glimpse into the everyday workings of a small but resilient player at the hard-scrabble end of the Australian publishing industry.



Peter Doyle is a Sydney-based crime writer, curator and researcher.

**On display in the Galleries
7 February to 10 May 2015**

ABOVE: BOOKPLATE (DETAIL) CARICATURE OF FRANK JOHNSON, C. 1945 © LOCK. PX'D68/ VOL.10/ F.37

OPPOSITE: COVER GRAPHIC, *THE TASTE OF DEATH*, C. 1942, PX'D68/5 F.439