For a brief period in the 1950s and early 1960s, the subgenre of lesbian pulp fiction enjoyed enormous success in the US and, to a lesser degree, the UK, with works by the likes of Ann Bannon, Vin Packer and March Hastings selling millions of copies and spawning numerous series and imitations.¹ This chapter turns its attention to a related, but less famous, textual archive: the non-fiction lesbian pulp of this period – what we might term ‘pulp sexology’ – which exists on a continuum with mass market pulp fiction and ‘proper’ postwar sexology and which seems as significant for the history of lesbianism as the better-known (and arguably more easily recuperable) pulp fictions. In the 1950s, non-fiction pulps allowed current and contentious discourses about sexuality (particularly ‘taboo’ sexualities such as lesbianism) to be disseminated in a highly marketable, highly accessible format. Reading these texts now offers insights into an era that was less conservative and censorious – or at least more conflicted – than it is usually represented as being, as evidenced by its appetite for the new, the scandalous and the shocking (an appetite that pulp avidly stimulated and supplied). As Michelle Ann Abate argues, the existence of pulps suggests ‘that the 1950s was also a decade of dissident desires and alternative value systems’.² Reading non-fiction pulps also reveals the significance of sexuality as a major focus of epistemological enquiry, alarmist fantasy and political paranoia in this period, and the significance of the 1950s as a crucial decade in the development of sexual knowledge and forms of sexual regulation. As the brief flowering of pulp so amply demonstrates, the narrative of
the development of homosexuality between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first century is by no means one of straightforward emancipation and liberalisation; furthermore, pulp shows us that attempts at the containment and control of supposedly ‘perverse’ sexualities have frequently involved the most ambiguous of motives and produced the most counter-intuitive of outcomes. Ultimately, it is the very tension between mass-market motive and counter-cultural desires that make an analysis of the pulp genre so productive for examining the complexity of debates about lesbianism in the 1950s.

The non-fiction lesbian pulps of the 1950s and early 1960s presented themselves as more or less serious analyses of lesbian identity and lifestyle, employing case study type scenarios, and engaging in dialogue with the sexological and psychoanalytic writings of the early twentieth century, whilst frequently presenting their ‘findings’ in a recognisably lurid, salacious, pulp style and boasting covers which rendered them largely indistinguishable from pulp novels. Jennifer Terry has suggested that by the 1950s, homosexuality had become ‘a national obsession’ in the US, stating that, ‘at that moment, the saliency of medical and scientific debates about homosexuality in society, as well as the prominence of lesbian and gay identities and subcultures, reached a critical intensity and visibility.’ This peculiarly (although not uniquely) American ‘obsession’ is marked by the popularisation – even the spectacularisation – of the discourses around sexuality, helped in part by the publicity surrounding the Kinsey reports, in part by the popularity of pulp novels with a homosexual theme, and in part by the increasing availability of Freud’s work in English and by the consequent dissemination of forms of popular Freudianism. American sexological writings of this period are also distinguished from their European counterparts, Terry claims, by their ‘valorization of individualism and identity’, as will become evident in my analysis of particular works from this period.

Whilst much of this pulp sexology (like the pulp novels of the period) treated lesbianism as ‘A Problem That Must Be Faced’, to use the tagline of one work, there also existed the series of non-fiction works on lesbianism by self-identified lesbian author Marijane Meaker (author of Spring Fire), under the pseudonym Ann Aldrich. Like pulp novels, these non-fiction pulps are now beginning to receive some critical attention, with Martin Meeker recently claiming that such ‘subjective non-fiction accounts of homosexuality’ contributed to the emergence of a ‘sustained and highly articulated politics of representation’. In fact, I want to suggest that Aldrich’s writing, like that of her male heterosexual counterparts, both installs and problematises the very notion of ‘lesbian identity’, and that