

AN ALCTS MONOGRAPH



THE LIBRARY'S GUIDE TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

The Light

During the seventh grade I was shown the light by a good friend. The light of comic book goodness. That summer, I had spent several days at my friend's house playing Dungeons & Dragons and board games. It was on one of those days that he decided to show me his comic book collection. This was no small feat, since back then comic books weren't as popular with the general public, or as embedded in popular culture as they are today. He was taking a big chance showing me his collection because he didn't know how I would react to a person who read comics. For most people, their comic book collections are deeply personal. Just as you remember where you were when historic milestones occurred, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Challenger disaster, you remember what your first comics were (mine being Amazing Spider-Man #252 and Uncanny X-Men #184), what stage in life you were at when you collected a certain run of comics (I spent my rebellion stage collecting Hellblazer), and even where or which store, yard sale, or convention you bought them at. So for my friend to show me a piece of his life's work was a personal thing.

Of course, I didn't think of it that way at the time. I was just 13 or 14, and I thought it was cool how many comic books he had. Maybe it was the latent librarian in me, but the sight of all those comics kindled the first slow-burning embers of my love for them. I also admired how my friend's comic books were organized. The books were in bags and boards specifically sized for comics, and he had homemade dividers between the major titles. He had alphabetized his comics by publisher and then further alphabetized them by title within the publisher. I didn't understand all the nuances then of collecting such a medium, but I began thinking the art in the books was cool, and there looked to be a little bit of a story in them. With a gentle nudge of peer pressure, my friend suggested that I should try reading them. So I picked up two comic books

the next time I was in the mall at Walgreens. As the embers in my soul grew hotter and brighter, I started to have moments of sheer joy running through that same mall to Walgreens and heading for the newsstand rack. Seeing a new issue on the rack brought an exhilaration that I hadn't felt before with any other hobby. That same friend told me about the local comic book shop, and I convinced my parents to drop me off there one Saturday. This opened up my world, since now I had the opportunity to see all the titles being published, not just those by Marvel and DC. As I scanned the store the first time I went in, I saw in the middle of the store . . . back issues. Little did I know that comic book stores could keep back issues, years of them, and that I could purchase them one at a time, slowly becoming a completist hoarder.

And then it happened. I took the chance of asking the local comic book store owner that I had been going to for the last five years if he was hiring. I can't remember if he said yes on the spot or let me know the next time I was in, but he said yes, and now I had the coolest job on earth: working at a comic shop.

I continued to work at the shop through college, learning the craft and the customers of the business, and I tackled the back issues section of the store. I learned customers' buying habits, readers vs. collectors, speculators vs. casual drop-ins, and Marvel vs. DC vs. independent publishers. In this way, I learned the business side of comics. Moreover, I worked at the shop at a time of heightened speculation, which almost resulted in the collapse of the comic book market; but this was also a time when some of the most revered classics were produced in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*.

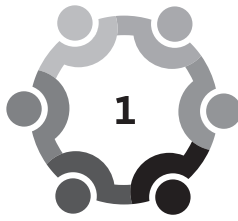
This is all to say that comic books, learning about them, immersing myself in them, and collecting them have been part of my life for almost thirty-five years now. And as a librarian who has had the opportunity to build graphic novel collections at two different academic libraries (Southern Illinois University's Morris Library and Texas A&M University's Evans Library), I am and always have been baffled by the quickly changing landscape and marketing of graphic novels. The ways that graphic novels are packaged, marketed, and released have completely changed, and the books themselves continue to morph into different creatures based on customers' buying habits and corporate marketing strategies.

And if I was having trouble determining if a graphic novel was duplicative content or part of a series I was developing for our collection; and if I was amazed at how rapidly the expansion of international comics was occurring, and how graphic novels were now being used in such fields as medicine, literature, and visualization; and if I was struggling with the question of what to buy with

a collections budget that was usually very small—then most likely every person, whether a librarian or patron, was in the same situation. And that’s the purpose of this book; to help unravel the complexities of acquiring, collection-building, cataloging, and using comic books and graphic novels. While some of the chapters in this book are aimed at those who work in academic libraries, many of the contributing authors’ thought processes, discoveries, workflows, and insights can be transferred to those who work in public libraries. I think you’ll find the authors in this book to be both passionate and knowledgeable, and we have all truly enjoyed providing information that will help you map out some of the history of this medium, acquire and catalog graphic novels in practical ways to help your patrons, and discover tools to help build, assess, and market your graphic novel collection. Enjoy.

—*John Ballestro*

August 3, 2019



BETWEEN THE PANELS

A Cultural History of Comic Books and Graphic Novels

Joshua Everett

In recent years, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has become the most profitable motion-picture franchise of all time, doubling the total gross profit of the second most profitable franchise, *Star Wars*.¹ With success on that level, one would be hard-pressed in America today to find anyone who doesn't know who the Avengers are. The same could be said of many of the spandex-suited superpeople in the films. Many viewers today can provide, at the drop of a hat, the given names (in addition to their superhero pseudonyms) and history of these characters' origins and how they obtained their supernatural powers and abilities. Few people, however, would be able to recount the true origin of their favorite superhero characters—not the ones depicted on the page or the screen, but the ones which started with just a writer, an artist, and an idea. Moreover, while poetry, fiction, theater, journalism, screenwriting, and the visual arts are all taught and discussed at an academic level, comic books have only recently been treated with the same level of seriousness and respect. It is only in recent years that comics have begun to be treated as an art form on a par with literature and the visual arts, which have long been considered essential pieces of the cultural landscape.

For librarians and information professionals, what might be called the “mainstreaming” or even the “coming of age” of comic books and graphic novels raises a number of interesting questions regarding the place of these works in the library. However, before these questions can be addressed, we need to gain an understanding of what comic books and graphic novels are, and what their relationship to culture has traditionally been. Utilizing comics as our texts, it is possible to review the history of the comic book industry as it relates to the zeitgeist of American culture throughout different periods of time.

COMICS AS CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

Comic books are more than just stories or storytelling devices. Just as a sculpture or painting can depict one story while also informing the viewer about the techniques, materials, and ultimately the culture that produced it, comics can tell us one story with their content and another regarding the cultural context in which they were created. Comics are cultural artifacts that allow readers insight into not just the stories they tell, but also the world around those stories and the culture from which they sprang.

With comics as a text, we can learn much not only about the authors of a particular work, but also a great deal about the time, place, and circumstances of the work’s production. In 1948, amid the Golden Age of comics, the literary and social critic Irving Howe noted that “mass culture is an urban product.”² His statement is attested to by early comics—comic books were born in urban environments, and the issues raised in those early publications were representative of the issues faced by the comic creators and city dwellers of that time. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in elaborating his approach to the interpretation of culture, wrote:

Anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second- and third-order ones to boot. (By definition, only a “native” makes first-order ones: it’s his culture.) They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are “something made,” “something fashioned”—the original meaning of *fictiō*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely “as if” thought experiments.³

In applying this concept to comic books as *de facto* anthropological writings, we can say that comic creators provide first-order interpretations of the

world around them. In seeking to create stories that can resonate with and appeal to audiences, comic writers try to write something familiar, something with which readers can identify. As such, they might cover the familiar with a veneer of “otherness.” By using the conflicts around them, whether with tyrants, criminals, landlords, or corporate powers, as their inspiration for supernatural villains bent on world domination, organized crime syndicates, invading alien hordes, and paranormal ninjas, comic creators provide both first-order interpretations for analysis and an emotional catharsis for their readers. “To look at the symbolic dimensions of . . . art . . . is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotional iced forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them.”⁴

WHAT IS A COMIC BOOK?

Comics, a name held over from the era in which they were purely comedic in nature and were run as strips in newspapers, are easy to identify, but difficult to define. People understand that, in spite of the presence of illustrations, books like *Winnie the Pooh* or the works of Dr. Seuss are not comic books. Similarly, people do not mistake *The Count of Monte Cristo* as a comic book due to the fact that it was published serially rather than as one work. The works of Charles Dickens were both serialized and often included illustrations but to describe them as comic books would be a misrepresentation. So, what then is a comic book? Depending on who is asked, the answer will vary drastically and will focus on a particular defining characteristic. The comics legend Will Eisner used the term *sequential art* as the defining characteristic of comics. Sequential art, as the name implies, requires a series of consecutive images to tell a story—a sort of slow-motion film reel. The comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud took this idea a step further in his seminal work *Understanding Comics* (1993). According to McCloud, the term *sequential art* can only be applied to comics if it is elaborated to show that the sequential art is juxtaposed in space (such as on a printed page) rather than in time, as one would find in an animated film or on a film reel.⁵

It is important to recognize that comics are a separate and distinct medium—that is, a mode of artistic expression or communication—rather than a mere genre characterized by a particular subject matter. In my life I have heard all too many people say, “I don’t read comics because I don’t like

superheroes.” To say this is the equivalent of writing off all motion pictures because you didn’t care for *Avatar*, or giving up on reading books altogether because you don’t like romance novels. Comics, as a medium, are a vehicle for telling stories, be they fiction or nonfiction, horror or romance, biography or history. In his book *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, the journalist and comic critic Douglas Wolk writes: “Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of a prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties.”⁶ Understanding this fact is key to understanding the fight for legitimacy that has existed throughout the history of comic books. The author Michael Chabon has written this about comic books:

Almost from the first, fitfully in the early days, intermittently through the fifties, and then starting in the mid-sixties with increasing vigor and determination, a battle has been waged by writers, artists, editors, and publishers to elevate the medium, to expand the scope of its subject matter and the range of its artistic styles, to sharpen and increase the sophistication of its language and visual grammar, to probe and explode the limits of the sequential panel, to give free rein to irony, tragedy, autobiography, and other grown-up-type modes of expression.⁷

This higher aspiration for comics as a medium has often been frustrated by public opinion, the tension between commercial and artistic pursuits, self-censorship, and the whims of creators and publishers. Even in the face of the enormous popularity of comic-book heroes when transferred to the silver screen, comic books themselves still struggle on the periphery to be taken seriously by the general populace. However, with a proper understanding of the history of comics and their place in American culture, these unique works might rightfully claim their place in American literature as well as popular culture.

PROTO-COMICS

A variety of cultural artifacts might be considered as comics, from cave paintings, to hieroglyphics, the stained-glass windows of cathedrals, and so many more. Watching the development of literature since the printing press in parallel

with the development of the earliest proto-comics is a bit like watching the water of two streams running independently, only to come together to create a river that is unique from its source materials.

In the English-speaking world, proto-comics came in the form of chap-books and broadsheets. These popular and inexpensively printed works, with their abundant illustrations, were a new medium whose diverse contents were designed for mass culture and consumption. Their foreign equivalents, *pliegos de cordel* in Spain, *literatura de cordel* (or *cordeis*) in Brazil, *papeles volantes* in Portugal, and *Volksbuchen* in Germany, are other examples of proto-comics. While they do not qualify as comics due to their lack of reliance upon sequential art as the medium of storytelling, these illustrated publications, which were printed cheaply and sold affordably for popular consumption, can be seen as forebears of the comic strips and comic books that would come later.

Broadsheets and chapbooks, like their comic book descendants, were a medium rather than a genre and their diverse contents were designed as a manifestation of mass culture. Elsewhere, great works of literary renown were being serialized and published in segments (“installments”) by newspapers and magazines before appearing in book form. Among these serialized works were the classic novels of Charles Dickens and the early science-fiction novels of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, among many others. This type of serialization blazed a trail, setting a precedent for serialized works that were produced at affordable prices in order to reach a wide audience.

The turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of two unique mediums that would later meld together in the form of comic books: newspaper comic strips and pulp magazines. Beginning with *The Yellow Kid* in the final years of the nineteenth century, newspapers recognized the popularity and selling power that comic strips brought to their publications. Suddenly myriad comic strips were being published in a weekly supplement to the newspaper. Characters such as Popeye, Little Orphan Annie, Krazy Kat, and Little Nemo all captured the imagination of Americans on a large scale. Out-and-out bidding wars erupted between the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, each angling to get the characters—and the creators behind them—that readers, and more importantly subscribers, followed.⁸

Yet, in spite of their popularity, comic strips were seen as guilty pleasures at best, and shameful indulgences at their worst. The poet Ralph Bergengren described comic-strip readers as “extremely dull” and, in reference to comic creators, said, “there seems to be every reason why the average editor of the

weekly comic supplement should be given a course in art, literature, common sense, and Christianity.”⁹

Conversely, some prominent intellectuals and writers praised the comic strips for presenting a new voice and medium of expression. E. E. Cummings went so far as to write the introduction for a collection of *Krazy Kat* comics. The cultural critic Gilbert Seldes, commenting on *Krazy Kat*, extolled the comics and stated: “Such is the work which America can pride itself on having produced, and can hastily set about to appreciate. It is rich with something we have too little of—fantasy. It is wise with pitying irony; it has delicacy, sensitiveness, and an unearthly beauty. The strange, unnerving, distorted trees, the language inhuman, un-animal, the events so logical, so wild, are all magic carpets and faery foam—all charged with unreality.”¹⁰

Regardless of their broad reach and great popularity, comic strips remained something of a pariah. The writer and satirist Dorothy Parker only confessed her love of comic strips after prefacing it by saying: “For the bulky segment of a century, I have been an avid follower of comic strips—all comic strips; this is a statement made with approximately the same amount of pride with which one would say, ‘I’ve been shooting cocaine into my arm for the past twenty-five years.’”¹¹

Capitalizing on the popularity of their comic strips, newspapers in the early 1930s began repackaging their regular comic strips into magazines that could be purchased at newsstands. Starting in approximately 1935, original material was being produced for these magazines, which constituted what can be considered the first comic books.

Elsewhere, pulp magazines had begun to eclipse the popularity of dime novels and other popular and affordable reading options. Pulp magazines—amalgamations of the chapbooks, dime novels, and serialized stories of the previous century—utilized steam-powered printing presses, rough “wood pulp” paper with untrimmed edges, and low-paid writers and artists in order to keep their prices low while offering a large quantity of material. These lowbrow publications were a safe haven for lurid and racy content and for fictional genres—murder mysteries, science fiction, horror stories—that were frowned on at the time. Like the comic strips, pulp magazines were largely shunned by the more respectable segments of society for their exploitative and sensational stories, despite their popularity. Some of America’s most renowned authors either got their start in or wrote for “the pulps.” Among these authors

were Edgar Rice Burroughs, Raymond Chandler, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Frank Herbert, and countless others.

The pulp magazines enjoyed their peak of popularity in the 1920s and '30s when their low price, high page count, vividly imagined stories, and salacious content allowed them to thrive in the Great Depression, when expendable incomes were almost nonexistent. The pulps' exploration (and exploitation) of new fictional genres helped plant the seeds of alternate universes, super-powered strongmen, and heroes and villains in the rich imaginations of the up-and-coming generation of comic-book creators.

THE RISE OF THE SUPERHEROES

The Golden Age of Comics (Approximately 1938-1955)

A couple of pulp magazine fans who would go on to reshape comic books and, arguably, American culture and mythology were two teens in Cleveland, Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Siegel and Shuster were two Jewish teens cut from the same cloth. Attending high school together, they developed a friendship based on their mutual interests: pulp magazines, adventure stories, and science fiction. As teens they began publishing their own fanzine, aptly entitled *Science Fiction*, a project that would allow them to hone their skills and develop concepts that would later be used in their professional work. After breaking into the comics industry at what would eventually become DC Comics, Siegel and Shuster produced shorter work for magazines that compiled shorter comic strips for publication.

When given the opportunity in the late 1930s, Siegel and Shuster poured their own experiences and concepts into a new character. One of these concepts came from their earlier work as teens. This concept, the Superman, had originated in the form of a bald, telepathic supervillain, a figure that gained little acceptance. Consequently, Siegel and Shuster reimagined Superman not as a villain, but as equal parts mythic superhero and everyman. Their new Superman was not dedicated to the subjugation of Earth, but to what would eventually be summed up as "truth, justice, and the American way."

In the process of re-conceptualizing Superman, the duo put elements of themselves and the world around them into the story. Yes, the story of Kal-El—which was Superman's birth name on his home planet of Krypton—can be

seen as the wish-fulfillment of two bookish teenagers, but to the discerning eye there is much more to it. In the story of Kal-El, Siegel and Shuster embedded pieces of themselves and their experiences, as well as elements of the culture that surrounded them. In the words of Clifford Geertz, Siegel and Shuster provided a first-order interpretation of their cultural upbringing. Kal-El's escape from the dying Krypton mirrors not only the story of Moses' escape from the Egyptians, but the experiences of Siegel and Shuster's own parents, Jewish immigrants from Europe who had escaped anti-Semitism and the rise of fascism and arrived in the United States, where they could pursue "the American way." In the early *Superman* comic books, the superhero wasn't doing battle with space tyrants or intergalactic baddies. Instead, he started off fighting corrupt politicians, abusive landlords, criminals, and exploitative bosses—all problems that would have been familiar to city-dwellers in Depression-era America. Superman can plainly be seen as a wishful response to a culture that was rife with economic injustice and struggle.

The success of Superman brought about a sea change in what constituted the comic book industry of the time. No longer were comics merely meant to be reprints of short-form comic strips. Readers were hungry for new material, new characters, and new heroes—and they were hungry for new supermen. Publishers were all too happy to oblige. In the year following the debut of Superman in *Action Comics #1* (1938), dozens of superheroes were created and pumped into the market, to the glee of comics fans.

Batman arrived on the scene soon afterward, in 1939. Batman, like Superman, dealt with issues that were familiar during the Depression: violent crime, the death of parents, and organized crime during the Prohibition era. Captain Marvel (1939) appealed to young readers by providing a hero who not only belonged in our world but was a boy himself, not unlike the typical readers of comics. The fact that Captain Marvel was a young boy himself who, with the utterance of the magic word "Shazam!" became a superhero akin to Superman, allowed young male readers to identify closely with the character. Blue Beetle, the Atom, Flash and Doctor Fate, and even the Justice Society of America, an association of superheroes, sprang to life in the year (1939–40) that followed.

In their efforts to reflect the world around them and to resonate with readers, comic-book creators looked for inspiration in the surrounding environment and beyond. The creators of comic books, many of whom were Jewish Americans, soon began to take aim at the rise of European fascism and Japanese

expansionism in Asia. Before the United States had even joined the fighting overseas, American superheroes had already joined the war effort.

The first comic book to openly portray Nazi villains was the second issue of *Top-Notch Comics* (January 1940), with others following suit as quickly as possible. In a 1940 copy of *Look* magazine—before America had even entered the war—Superman himself snatched Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin and carried them to the League of Nations, where they could be tried for their crimes. According to the author of *Take That, Adolf!* there were as many as 1,500 to 2,000 comic-book covers that depicted superheroes fighting Hitler during World War II.¹² On the cover of *Captain America* #1, the titular character can be seen landing a savage right hook on the jaw of Hitler himself. In other covers Hitler, Mussolini, and Japanese Prime Minister Tojo are lassoed and imprisoned, banished to hell, or generally assaulted by the masked American heroes.

Aside from patriotism, another primary motive for comic books to focus on the war was that the U.S. military was one of the largest purchasers of comic books. Millions of U.S. servicemen became hooked on comic books, which provided diversion from the boredom and dangers of war. Moreover, the superheroes in them were depicted doing all sorts of things to help the war effort. Thus, throughout the war, superheroes fought alongside U.S. infantrymen in both the European and Pacific theaters. Superman helped to deliver mail, peel potatoes, clean up camps, and mediate lovers' quarrels. Captain America and his Howling Commandos led raids and fought alongside the average soldier. These superheroes paid their respects to the American fighting men and took a back seat to their expertise in the field of combat. They all fought side by side and, like their real-life counterparts, lost friends and loved ones along the way.

Comic books also filled an important propagandistic role both at home and abroad. As an embodiment of the American spirit, superheroes and ordinary soldiers were shown working together to support the American war effort. Men and boys coming of age saw the glory to be had in the war and wanted to do their part like the superheroes they read about. Readers felt encouraged by the depiction of America's military victories in the pages of the comics. In their pages, those on the home front were encouraged to do their duty by participating in scrap drives for paper and metal, buying war bonds, supporting the USO, and more. Overseas, comic books were part of CARE packages and were made readily available to the U.S. fighting men. In fact, the U.S. government even went so far as to commission new comic books to be created specifically

for soldiers. They were intended to boost morale and instruct soldiers about why they were fighting in the war.

As the war drew to a close, however, many readers no longer needed the superheroes. “In 1945 the comic book industry seemed to be on the verge of a recession because of a double loss: the war, which provided the backdrop to most titles, was coming to an end; and the army, its largest customer, no longer needed millions of comic books shipped to GIs as priority supplies.”¹³ In response, publishers knew that they needed to shift their focus to the domestic consumers who had supported them all along: children and teens. The strategy put forward to appeal to young readers consisted of a number of techniques. The most notable of these were to include juvenile characters alongside their favorite heroes, to include humor in the comics, and to insert educational content into the comics.

In an effort to satisfy a form of wish fulfillment for their young readers, publishers gave their characters young companions and sidekicks. Superman—always the pioneer—was the first to introduce a juvenile foil to the man of steel, Jimmy Olson. Not long after, Dick Grayson (Robin) lost his parents only to be taken under the wing of the infamous millionaire and superhero Bruce Wayne (Batman). Captain Marvel was himself a young boy who could take the form of a superhero, although he still had a young sidekick of his own. Elsewhere, Bucky Barnes joined Captain America, Speedy accompanied Green Arrow, Toro fought alongside the Human Torch, and other sidekicks entered the fray.

The early superhero comics had a certain earnestness about them that was appropriate for stories of costumed do-gooders who were fighting for justice. However, the inclusion of humor in these stories increased their accessibility to readers of all types. Superman himself had originally been imagined as a “humor-adventure comic strip.”¹⁴ For a time, the more light-hearted equivalent of Superman, Captain Marvel, actually outsold Superman, and was a favorite among America’s youth. At the same time, comics featuring funny animals spiked in popularity. The humorous comic books depicting Walt Disney’s pantheon of characters, and the characters from Warner Bros.’ stable of motion-picture cartoons, came to account for a large portion of the comics industry’s market share.

Poet Robert Warshow wrote of comics,

The tendency of the humor, in its insistent violence, is to reduce all culture to indiscriminate anarchy . . . Both the humor and the horror in their utter lack of modulation yield too readily to the child’s desire

to receive his satisfactions immediately, thus tending to subvert the chief elements in the process of growing up, which is to learn to wait; a child's developing appreciation of the complexity of good literature is surely one of the things that contribute to his eventual acceptance of the complexity of life.¹⁵

Finally, in response to the bad reputation that comics had among parents, some publishers began to skew their releases to include educational content, depict real events, or draw on classic literary works in an effort to win over parents. These comic books took a page out of publications like *Reader's Digest*, presenting condensed, illustrated versions of stories to their readers for ease of consumption. Comic book readers now had titles such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and many others to choose from. Other educational comics told the real stories of figures like Winston Churchill, described historical events, or even recounted biblical tales. These comics were an instant hit with the public.

Yet, despite their commercial success, comic books were still not winning over the gatekeepers of American culture. The writer Delmore Schwartz wrote: "The bottom of the pit has been reached, I think, in the cartoon books which are called *Classics Illustrated*, a series of picture-and-text versions of the masterpieces of literature."¹⁶ He went on to berate the various adaptations of classics that he had read (which he admitted was only three) for being "debased versions," "mutilations," and "dilutions" of the source materials.¹⁷

Regardless of their products' critical reception, comic book publishers' approach to courting young readers was successful. It was so successful, in fact, that it cemented in the minds of people to this day that comic books are "kid stuff." More significantly, the comics industry could not know it, but their strategies which saved them from a postwar recession had also planted the seeds of what would be the most crucial battle in the history of comic books.

SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT AND THE BATTLE FOR COMICS

In the face of the waning popularity of superheroes, publishers began to diversify their portfolio of titles. Western, romance, horror, science fiction, and true-crime comic books began to work their way to the forefront of the industry. One of the pre-eminent publishers of these kinds of works was a company called EC Comics.

Educational Comics (EC) was born from the merger between All-American Publications and DC Comics when Maxwell “Charlie” Gaines, an editor at All-American who retained the rights to a number of All-American’s titles, decided to start his own company. The concept of EC was to print “didactic and uplifting magazines presenting in comic-strip form the Bible, great events of American and world history, and, by and large, stories for readers of all ages.”¹⁸ This plan, however, was thwarted by the death of Gaines in 1947. EC would limp along for the next few years under the direction of the heir to EC Comics, Gaines’s son, William Gaines.

William Gaines attempted to keep his father’s vision afloat until, in 1949, he stumbled on to the tactic that would give EC Comics enormous success in the following years. A spike in sales was seen when a number of EC titles included horror and suspense stories in addition to their usual content.

The 1950s would see an explosion in EC’s popularity that coincided with a name change of the company from Educational Comics to Entertaining Comics, and with it the focus of the company. Instead of science, history, and religion, EC under William Gaines would publish horror, crime, and suspense. Comics such as *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, *Crime Suspensstories*, and *Weird Science* were unlike anything that had been published in comic books before. They were graphic, cynical, and dark. The beginning of the Korean War saw EC bring back war comics in EC titles like *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*. These war comics, however, lacked the patriotic and sterilized depictions of wartime glory of their predecessors. Instead they depicted the violence, loss, and destruction of war. EC replaced the family-friendly humor of the Disney and Looney Toons funny-animal comics with the savage satire of *Mad* and *Panic* magazines.

As cultural artifacts, EC Comics present an interesting picture. The patriotism and idealism associated with the Second World War had given way to a more sardonic and less naive tone in EC Comics. The heroes who fought for justice and the rule of law in the superhero comics were nowhere to be found in EC publications. The youths who had marveled at the early issues of *Superman* were now twelve years older and looking for something different. Likewise, the soldiers who had fought in World War II were home now, and the comic book depiction of war needed to reflect something more realistic. While the EC era is thought of as part of the Golden Age of comics which is popularly associated with World War II, EC can also be seen as a transition into the complex and distrustful period of the Cold War.

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