

# The Comic Book Kids

Athenaeum Society

February 5, 2009

*Times 1922-2003 (41 minutes)*

George H. Byars

## THE COMIC BOOK KIDS

Gentlemen, before I begin my paper I will share with you that this will be a combination book report and trip down memory lane offering. As usual I will not be sharing my sources, and I will not be giving anyone due credit for the plagiarized material that was lifted straight from the sources.

My grade-school years were spent in the 1940's and 50's in a quiet downtown neighborhood in Bowling Green, KY. It seemed a safer and slower paced time, when going on an out-of-town trip simply required locking up the house with a five-cent skeleton key. Times were simpler and my safe, limited world was contained within a three-block area of town. It was three blocks to school; three blocks to church; three blocks to the movies; three blocks to Woolworths dime store; three blocks to Mr. Keister's Corner Market, and three blocks to the CDS drug store and soda fountain.

Each week I was awarded a shiny silver quarter for completing my chores. Each week I had to make serious decisions about how to best spend this windfall. The Saturday morning twelve-cent movie was always a tempting option. A candy bar and a cherry coke at the drug store soda fountain were always considered a good investment. But, the most alluring temptation for this eight-year-old boy always seemed to be the ten-cent comic book carefully chosen from the myriad of choices on the newsstand at Mr. Keister's market.

I had to choose wisely; there were so <sup>Many</sup> ~~my~~ choices, and such limited resources, and Mr. Keister watched very closely. I was partial to the super hero comics. You know-- Superman, Batman, The Flash, Hawk Man, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Aqua Man, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, Amazing Man, The Whip, Hour Man, Roy the Super Boy, Bullet Man, Johnny Quick, The Green Lantern, Sheena, the Jungle Queen, just to name a few.

I guess that my favorite comic was Batman and Robin, with Superman placing a close second, and Wonder Woman coming in a slow third. Batman has an interesting history. Back in 1941 a new superhero with flying powers was born, Birdman, but Birdman didn't fly well at the newsstand, so his creators had to go back and recreate this character,



making the slightly more exotic, Batman. Needless to say, Batman did very well at the newsstands.

My two older sister would make occasional ventures into the world of comic books, but their taste in comics was questionable at best. Gooney romance comics, Little Lu Lu, Nancy and Sluggo, Archie, Jughead, Veronica and Betty were hardly anything to get excited about.

Now Superman was a real comic, and something a real comic book aficionado could appreciate. Superman comics had hit the streets in 1939, two years before Batman. By the end of the 1940's Superman comics were selling over 1, 250, 000 copies per month.

The genesis of the comic book had been set during the early depression years when a group of starving, out of work, New York newspaper comic strip artists and writers began printing their own unpublished strips in serial form groupings, and these were sold at local newsstands for a few cents each. These crude offerings would evolve into the quality products of the 1940's and 1950's.

There were 150 different comic book titles being published in 1937, but this number ballooned to 700 by 1940. Two of the major reasons for their growing popularity among the young were that, first, parents considered comics as worthless; therein lay their true worth to kids. Secondly, comics were capital in the social economy of childhood, and had no value in the adult world.

All of the super heroes had their own special powers and talents. You remember-- Superman could jump really high, had incredible strength and was impervious to small caliber bullets. Originally, superman was endowed with x-ray vision, but in 1955 he was brought up on peeping -Tom charges for undressing a young lady with his gaze. It seems that not even Superman could escape the temptation to abuse his powers. Superman had to promise to give up this power.

Batman, too, had many special talents and crime-fighting tools: the Batmobile, Bat Boat, Bat Cave, Bat Plane, Bat Utility belt, Bat Guano, and the list goes on and on. You may have noticed that the more recent Batman movies do not include Robin the Boy Wonder, Batman's youthful ward.

2

Batman lost custody of Robin in Gotham City Family Court when he was charged with abuse and neglect for exposing his ward to the criminal element and other harmful dangers.

Now Wonder woman has never, to my knowledge, gotten into scrapes with the law. Wonder Woman is, however, well noted for several crime fighting inventions. I am referring, naturally, to her bullet deflecting bracelets and her golden lasso of truth. Wonder woman's most famous invention, of course, the Wonder Bra. This explains in part her popularity among impressionable young boys.

In addition to the super hero comics, there were a number of other comic book genre that were popular in the 1940's and 50's. There were horror comics, crime comics, Western comics, romance comics, jungle comics, and kiddie talking animal comics.

Horror comics and crime comics were noted for their graphic blood, gore, violence, and their shocking story lines. Some of the more popular horror comic titles were: *Terror Tales*, *Horror Stories*, *Tales of the Supernatural*, *The Crypt of Terror*, *The Vault of Horror*, *Spook Comics*, *Eerie Comics*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Haunt of Fear*, *The Crypt Keeper*, *The Old Witch*, *Nightmare*, *Chamber of Chills*, *Tomb of Terror*, and *Out of the Night*, to name a few.

I was never a big fan of horror comics. Every time I purchased and read one of these creepy books, I would have a hard time getting a good night's rest. I kept seeing that Crypt of Terror in the darkness beyond my bedroom closet door.

But many others must have been braver than I because by the end of 1952, nearly one third of all comics on the newsstand were devoted to the macabre. Examples of horror comics graphics might include throats being slashed, decapitations, human heads being used as bloody bowling balls, or a woman roasting her husband's body parts on a barbecue grill.

Crime comics also had their share of blood, gore, and violence. Crime comic titles included: *Crime Does not Pay*, *Justice Traps the Guilty*, *Criminals on the Run*, *Crime Must Pay the Penalty*, *Death is the Referee*, and *The Killer Who Hated Death*.

4

Although crime and horror comics were very popular and made a lot of money for the industry, they would ultimately prove to be the undoing of the whole industry. But I get ahead of myself, for you see by the early 1940's comic books were under attack by numerous moral pillars of the community.

An article appeared in *The Chicago Daily News* in May of 1940 entitled, "A National Disgrace and a Challenge to American Parents." The article declared that, "Virtually every child in America is reading color comic magazines -- a poisonous mushroom growth of the last two years. Ten million copies of these sex-horror serials are being sold every month. One million dollars are taken from the pockets of America's children in exchange for graphic insanity. The bulk of these lurid publications depend for their appeal upon mayhem, murder, torture and abduction--often with a child as the victim. Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded "Justice" and cheap political propaganda are to be found on almost every page. The feature went on to say that, The old dime novel in which an occasional red skin bit the dust were classic literature compared to the sadistic drivel pouring from the presses today. Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed -- a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems -- the effect of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder makes the child impatient with better, though quieter stories. Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the "comic" magazines. But, the children must be furnished a good substitute of proper reading materials."

The *Chicago Daily News* article ended by declaring that, "The shame lies largely with the parents who don't know and don't care what children are reading. It lies with unimaginative teachers who force stupid, dull twaddle down young throats, and of course, it lies with the completely immoral publishers of the "comics" -- guilty of cultural slaughter of the innocents. But the antidote to the comic magazine poison can be found in any library or good bookstore. The parent who does not acquire that antidote for his or her child is guilty of criminal negligence."

5

Within twelve months of this *Chicago Daily News* ' article, "A National Disgrace" being published, some forty newspapers across the country had reprinted the article.

In March 1941 the National Parent-Teacher Association's magazine published an article entitled, "The Antidote to Comics" The NPTA article asserted that, "Comics Magazines are furnishing a Pre-fascist pattern for the youth of America through emulation. The chances of Fascism controlling the planet diminish in direct proportion to the number of good books the coming generation reads and enjoys."

Libraries were early to respond in outrage over the comic menace. In June of 1941 the *Wilson Library Bulletin* criticized the highly-colored enemy, comic books, mainly for not being printed in black and white, and for being written in objectionable vernacular language.

But, by the end of 1941, American families were absorbed with dangers clearer and more present than comic books, World War II dampened the debate over comics before it caught fire. In fact, the idea of super heroes began to be seen as acutely patriotic. The super hero gave up fighting traditional crime and began helping with the war effort. Hitler appeared on the cover of no fewer than fifty comics. Captain America punched out Hitler himself. The Submariner battled Nazi submarines. Batman, Superman, Daredevil -- they all waged war on the Germans and the Japanese. Once the war was over, however, the war on comics experienced a resurgence as the comic critics marshaled their troops once again.

In the early 1940's a committee of Catholic bishops had gotten together and chartered, manned, funded, and announced the National Organization for Decent Literature. Their mission was to ban and boycott all literature that was offensive to their standards. Wonder Woman was one of the first super hero comics to be banned by the NODL. Her critics pointed out that she was just barely clothed and extravagantly endowed, and was all about sexual dominance and submissive men. Bishop Gibbons of Albany, a member of NODL, called for bonfires and boycotts of comic books. Bishop Gibbons related that, "Comics portray indecent pictures and

6

sensational details of crime. This evil is particularly devastating to the young, and I call upon our people to boycott establishments which sell such literature. “

In 1944 the *St. Anthony Catholic Messenger* ran a story entitled “Parents must Control the Comics.” The following is a brief piece from the article: “The comic book practice of flourishing half-clad men and women before youth as examples of heroism is a threat both to the appreciation and the attainment of our standard.” “It is over-emphasizing sex ... the total effect is to people young imaginations with mental associations that endanger strict sex control. Wisely enough, parents exclude barely clothed individuals such as these from their homes in real life. On what score can their presence be justified in the medium of loud-colored print?” There is anti-American, dictator propaganda in the glorification of these wrong-fighting fascist supermen. If our youth get the notion that it is heroic for a private person to take over in matters of public order, we are ready for a Hitler. Remember, Hitler took over Germany when his followers had been persuaded that he was a superman with a mission to right the wrongs of the German state.”

After the fervor of the war effort had diminished a bit, and young families began once again to have some extra money for such frivolities as comic books, in an attempt to assuage the ire of the many comic book critics, the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers formulated a self-governing comics code that all publishers needed to follow. The new code required that:

- Sexy wanton comics should not be published
- No drawing should show a female indecently or unduly exposed, and in no event more nude than in a bathing suit commonly worn in the USA.
- Crime should not be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy against law and justice or to inspire others with the desire for imitation
- No comics shall show the details and methods of a crime committed by a youth
- Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions should not be portrayed as stupid nor ineffective, or represented in such a way as to weaken respect for established authority.
- No scenes of sadistic torture should be shown

- 7
- Vulgar and obscene language should never be used. Slang should be kept to a minimum and used only when essential to the story.
  - Divorce should not be treated humorously nor represented as glamorous or alluring.
  - Ridicule of or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.

By the end of 1948 only fourteen members out of the thirty-five publishers had agreed to follow the code. The Association of Comic Magazine Publishers never had much chance to fulfill its charter, and its code went little noticed by comic book makers, their readers, and the authorities hovering over them all.

In Cleveland, Ohio, in 1949 a city ordinance was passed to outlaw the sale of comics depicting the attempted commission of the crimes of arson, assault, burglary, kidnapping, mayhem, larceny, manslaughter, murder, rape, prostitution, sodomy, or extortion. Conviction would result in a fine of fifty to five hundred dollars and/or up to six months incarceration in the city work house. Similar laws that basically outlawed all crime and horror comics were being passed in Los Angeles County, Milwaukee, Sacramento, St. Louis, Baltimore, and in numerous smaller towns.

By March 1949 fourteen states had legislation pending to regulate comics published for minor readers. In 1952 New York state passed a bill which would make it a misdemeanor to publish or sell comic books dealing with fictional crime, bloodshed or lust that might incite minors to violence or immorality. By 1955 the following states had passed restrictive comic book legislation: New York, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Washington, and Pennsylvania.

Before the lawmakers were through, 37 states and 100 major cities and towns had passed some form of comic book sales restriction law.

You may ask, but what about the First Amendment? Freedom of Speech? Freedom of the Press? The Constitution? Well, if you remember your history, this was the season for censorship, and there was little



attention given to any of these in regard to comic books; not in the halls of Congress, in the State Houses, the city halls, the judicial system, nor in law enforcement.

We comic-book kids were going about our business, enjoying our comics in blissful ignorance of the movement afoot to deprive us of our precious comics.

In 1950 the first nationally televised Congressional hearings were held. The hearings, chaired by Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, were to investigate crime in interstate commerce, and were chartered to study the nature and effects of racketeering across state lines. This special committee devoted several days to the issue of juvenile delinquency, the root causes of juvenile crime, and of course -- comic books.

Over 100 witnesses were called to testify: psychologists, child development experts, law enforcement, comic book publishers, educators, and judges all gave expert testimony. The hearing committee announced that it had an interest in the frequently-heard charges that the recent increase in juvenile delinquency had been stimulated by the publication of the so-called crime comic books.

The director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons spoke vigorously against comics, stating that, "It is clear that many such publications serve as sources of contamination of impressionable minds, provide explicit instructions in the methods by which criminals operate, and contribute to a weakening of the ethical values of the community." Most of those who testified offered only mild and qualified criticism of comics, however, and when J. Edgar Hoover appeared before the committee, he abandoned his earlier objection to comics, and shared that, "The lurid and macabre variety of comics may influence the susceptible boy or girl who already possesses definite anti-social tendencies. It is doubtful, however, that an appreciable decrease in juvenile delinquency would result if comic books of all types were not readily available to children." So, it appeared that when the results of the Kefauver hearings came out, the comic book industry had dodged a bullet, as the report largely exonerated the industry for creating crime and delinquency.

9

A few years later, however, Dr. Fredric Wertham, a New York psychiatrist, published a book entitled *Seduction of the Innocent* with the subtitle "The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth". In this lengthy volume, published in 1954, Dr. Wertham went to war with the comic book industry and took no prisoners. All comic books, according to Wertham portrayed some violation of legal, moral, or religious codes, and these would include romances, Westerns, science fiction, parodies, and jungle stories. Wertham had other problems with the remaining genre of books, such as teen humor and talking animal books in that these vulgar, ungrammatical, poorly drawn and cheaply printed comics were stunting children's intellectual growth and were bad for children's eyes.

Dr. Wertham maintained that his extensive research had proven a significant causative effect between crime comics and the more serious forms of juvenile delinquency.

Superhero comics were considered by Dr. Wertham just as dangerous as any of the others. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, Wertham saw as examples of fascism, homoeroticism, and sadomasochism.. Wertham wrote, "The contempt for law and police and the brutality of punishment in comic books is subconsciously translated by children into conflict with authority, and they develop a special indifference to it." Wertham said that, "Comic books appealed to readers with the brain of a child, the sexual drive of a satyr, and the spiritual delicacy of a gorilla."

And to think that poor little, skinny, ten-year-old George had by this time read dozens and dozens of these comics.

Wertham initially released his book in serial form in *Ladies Home Journal*. *Seduction of the Innocent* was immediately a successful best seller and was offered as a selection of the Book of the Month Club. Dr. Wertham, within a matter of months, was recognized as a leading expert in the root causes of juvenile delinquency and the terrible effects of comic books on America's youth.

More Congressional hearings were held later in 1954 again dealing with juvenile delinquency. This time two days were set aside to deal



12

exclusively with comic books. Unlike their earlier brush with congressional hearings, the comic industry would come out of these hearing beaten and bloodied. Fourteen witnesses were called, and chief among them was Dr. Wertham. He ended his testimony with this statement, "I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry. They get the children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of four, before they can even read."

These juvenile delinquency hearings came across as judicial proceedings rather than legislative inquiries. Comic books and their publishers were on trial. All manner of expert witnesses were called and literally hundreds of documents, news articles, medical research reports, examples of crime and horror comics and written descriptions of these same comics were presented to the hearing committee. On April 21, 1954 the following example of a horror comic was read into the hearing record. It was entitled "Bottoms Up."

This is a story to do with a confirmed alcoholic who spends all the money his wife can earn on alcohol. As a result, their small son is severely neglected. On the day the son is to start the first grade in school, the mother asks the father to escort him to school. Instead, the father goes to his favorite bootlegger and the son goes to school by himself. In route the child is struck and killed by an automobile. Informed of the accident, the mother returns home to find her husband gloating over his new supply of liquor. The last four panels show the mother as she proceeds to kill and hack her spouse to pieces with an axe.

The first panel shows her swinging the axe, burying the blade into her husband's skull. Blood spurts from the open wound and the husband is shown with the expression of agony. The next panel has a montage effect: the husband is lying on the floor with blood gushing from his skull as the wife is poised over him. She holds the bloody axe, raised for more blows. The background shows an enlargement of the fear-filled eyes of the husband, as well as an enlargement of the bloody axe. To describe the scene of horror, the text states that, "And how the silence of the Hendrick's apartment is broken only by the soft humming of Nora as she busies herself with the 'work'". She then cuts the body into smaller pieces and disposes of it by placing the various pieces into the bottles of liquor her husband had purchased. She then returns the liquor to the bootlegger and obtains a

refund. As she leaves, the bootlegger says, "Hmmmm, funny! I figured that rye would be inside Bob by now!" The story ends with the artist admonishing the child readers in a macabre vein with the following paragraph, "But if Westlake were to examine the remainder of the case more closely, he'd see that it is Bob who is inside the liquor! Heh! Heh! Sleep well, kiddies!" We then see three of the liquor bottles -- one contains an eye, one an ear, and one a finger.

At the conclusion of the hearings, Senator Kefauver concluded that, "All of our testimony from psychiatrists and children themselves show that it's very upsetting, that it has a bad moral effect, and that it is directly responsible for a substantial amount of juvenile delinquency and child crime. The "it" to which he referred, of course, was the publication of comics.

You know, I feel somewhat exonerated by Senator Kefauver's findings. All of my school-age anti-social behavior can now be easily explained. It wasn't my fault; it was the terrible influence of those awful comic books that left me ~~not~~ <sup>no</sup> choice but to exhibit delinquent behavior.

In 1955, a Gallup Poll determined that some 70 per cent of American adults said that they believed comic books deserved to be blamed for juvenile delinquency. It was no wonder then that this was the year of "Operation Book Swap." Throughout the Midwest hundreds of public events were held wherein children would bring their comic books in to be surrendered and traded for more respectable, wholesome, age -appropriate literature. The comics were then burned in fine fashion as denouncement speeches were made. These many events were sponsored by the American Legion Auxiliary, The Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, schools, churches, and other civic organizations. It is estimated that hundreds of thousand of comics had been burned in this "Book Swap."

Interestingly enough, these events occurred less than two years after Ray Bradbury's futuristic novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, was published. Bradbury's book was a vision of future extreme censorship wherein all books were confiscated by firemen and destroyed by burning them.

In a last ditch attempt to save the comic book industry and to get the courts ~~of~~ <sup>off</sup> their backs, the Comic Magazine Association of America comic

book code was enacted in 1954, about the same time as the second Congressional hearings were taking place. The new code demanded that

- Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented by such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
- No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime
- No magazine shall use the word “horror” or “terror” in its title
- All scenes of horror, excessive blood shed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, or masochism shall not be permitted
- All lurid, unsavory, gruesome, illustrations shall be eliminated
- Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires, and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited
- Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden
- Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions
- Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable
- Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities
- Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered
- The treatment of love romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage

These are but twelve of the code’s forty-one requirements for comic book imagery, text, covers, titles, and advertisements.

Those publishers who chose not to submit their comics for compliance inspection by the code officials found that their comics were being turned away by the distributors and newsstands as they did not carry the CMMA seal of approval on the cover. Church boycotts and police raids and arrests had the comic book distributors and retailers feeling very uneasy about the comic book industry, and they only wanted to deal with comic books that were in compliance with the code.

Publishers had no choice, all comics had to be submitted to CMAA for approval before they could be released to the public. The censors enforced the minutiae of the code fastidiously. Most all comics submitted were either rejected outright or sent back for modification. If a comic story's art work required for a character to have a knife or gun in his hand, the censor would send it back demanding that the gun or knife be painted out. This led to ridiculous situations where the artist might have to paint a bare handed knife fight. Censors also didn't like any form of body sweat. All beads of sweat painted in the artwork had to be removed. People in the know felt that this extreme censorship represented the most significant cause for the demise of the comic industry.

The comics business was collapsing under pressure not only from the schools, churches, and the legislatures, but also from the distributors and the industry's own desperate, overzealous attempts to regulate itself. By the end of 1955 all the crime, horror, and romance comics were gone. Between 1954 and 1956, more than half the comic books on the newsstands disappeared; the number of titles published in the United States dropped from 650 to some 250 by the end of 1955. More than 800 writers and artists found themselves out of work.

By the end of the crack down, few of these people found work as writers or artists elsewhere, as they were considered tainted by having been involved with the comics industry. The talking animal kiddie comics were still around and there were still sanitized super heroes comics who only battled cartoon-like evildoers that were code acceptable.

To close on a positive note, two of the larger horror and crime comic publishers managed to survive by starting a completely new product line. Harvey comics came out with new kiddie titles: Baby Huey, Little Dot, Casper, and Hot Stuff. EC comics also came out with a new product, a magazine full of satire, wit, and political parody that they named MAD Magazine. Because they published MAD as a magazine and not a comic book, they avoided all of the comic book laws on the books and published uninhibited.

The 1940's and 1950's represent the golden age of comic books. The grade school youth of that period experienced a not to be repeated wealth of comic book entertainment . We were the Comic Book Kids.