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Up, up and away—the rise and fall of comic books

By **LESLIE A. FIEDLER**

I read my first comic book on a school playground in Newark, N. J., sometime in the late 1920's, with a sense of entering a world not only forbidden but magical, like the world of my most unconfessable dreams. It was an "eight-page Bible" slipped to me by the class Bad Boy: a pornographic burlesque of the comic strip "Tittie the Toiler" in which she and her usually impotent admirer, Mac, performed sexual acts beyond the scope of my unaided 12-year-old fantasy. That they had bodies at all under the conventional garb they never shucked in their daily adventures seemed to me wondrous enough, and that they had usable genitals as well at once blasphemous and miraculous.

I have, however, recently looked at a scholarly collection of such erotic travesties once bootlegged across the border from sunlit Tijuana, where all was permitted, to darkest Newark, where all was forbidden; and I have been appalled to discover how ill-drawn, perfunctorily plotted and anaphrodisiac they now seem. Yet neither the magic nor the threat of subversion has wholly departed from me, either from those Bibles themselves or indeed from the whole genre to which they introduced me.

True, comic books had to make a somewhat more respectable second start in the late 1930's before they were accepted as fit for children in whose innocence parents were still pretending to believe. Moreover, the children themselves demanded more than parody of the daily scripts in which sex was absent and violence trivialized; they yearned for a new mythology neither explicitly erotic, overtly terrifying nor frankly supernatural, yet essentially phallic, horrific and magical. Such a mythology was waiting to be released in pulp science fiction, a genre re-created in the United States in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback, who published the first magazine devoted entirely to the genre. He did not invent the name, however, until 1929, just one year be-

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"Superman." © National Periodical Publications, Inc.

The World Encyclopedia of Comics

Edited by Maurice Horn.

Illustrated. 785 pp. New York: Chelsea House. \$30.

Origins of Marvel Comics

By Stan Lee.

Illustrated. 254 pp. New York: Simon and Schuster/Fireside. Paper, \$6.95.

Son of Origins of Marvel Comics

By Stan Lee.

Illustrated. 249 pp. New York: Simon and Schuster/Fireside. Paper, \$6.95.

The Apex Treasury of Underground Comics

Edited by Don Donahue and Susan Goodrick.

Illustrated. 192 pp. New York: Links. Paper, \$4.95.

fore a pair of 16-year-olds, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, reviewed Philip Wylie's "Gladiator" in one of the earliest s.f. fanzines—journals dedicated to amateur criticism of fiction ignored by the critical establishment.

Out of that novel, at any rate, emerged the first and most long-lived of all comic book characters, Superman, whose adventures Siegel and Shuster were already trying to peddle in 1933, though not until 1938 did they persuade a publisher to buy the rights to Superman's name and legend for \$130, thus launching the series with which the classic comic book began. Other mythological figures have moved through such publications in the four decades since, ranging from Donald Duck to Dracula. But at its most authentic and popular, the form has belonged always to the avatars of Superman, beginning most notably with Captain Marvel, Batman and Wonder Woman and toward the end including the Fantastic Four of Stan Lee's Marvel Comics.

Yet it required the imminence of World War II before the super-guy dreamed up by a pair of Jewish teenagers from Cleveland in the Great Depression could reach an audience of hundreds of millions starved for wonder but too ill at ease with Gutenberg forms to respond even to science fiction. Only then did the paranoia that is their stock in trade become endemic—the special paranoia of men in cities anticipating in their shared nightmares the saturation bombing that lay just ahead and the consequent end of law and order, perhaps of man himself. The suffering city, Metropolis, which under various names remains the setting for all subsequent Superheroes, is helpless before its external enemies because it is sapped by corruption and fear at its very heart.

But the old American promise of an end to paranoia is there, too, the equivocal dream that had already created the Ku Klux Klan and the vigilantes and the lynch mob, as well as the cowboy hero and the private eye—the dream of a savior in some sense human still, but able to know, as the rest of us cannot, who the enemy really is and to destroy him as we no longer can—not with technology, which is in itself equivocal, but with his bare hands. Small wonder that those who went off to war and in most

Continued on Page 9

Comics

Continued from Page 1

cases found only boredom, machine-tending, paper shuffling, meaningless drill and endless waiting made the comic books their favorite reading. To them, the dream of meaningful violence was a fantasy as dear and unreal as to any they had left at home.

My second exposure to the form came in 1942 as I too moved toward that war and discovered that the Indian boy who accompanied me on the first leg of my journey carried in his paper valise nothing but a spare suit of underwear and half a hundred comic books. Moreover, each time our train stopped, some concerned old lady would thrust into my hands a pack of cigarettes; a candy bar and the latest issue of "Superman" or "Captain Marvel"—tokens of condescension and good will, the last of which I must confess disconcerted me a little, since I was by then, despite my sailor suit, already a professor of literature. But I could not resist reading material pressed on me in much the same spirit as I had been pressing T. S. Eliot and Henry James on my equally reluctant students. I had actually not looked at any comic books since my days in the schoolyard, and this time around the appeal of the tabooed was gone. But I was determined to find out why such kid stuff satisfied large numbers of men moving perhaps toward death, as the high literature whose apostle I then was, did not.

And in fairly short order I was hooked, though I scarcely confessed the fact even to myself. What I discovered behind the seemingly artless style—more grunts and exclamations than words, more image than idea—was old-fashioned plot, right down to the O. Henry "hook" that I had taught my students was destroyed forever by Chekhov and Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway. But by virtue of that very fact, perhaps, there was also a sense of wonder able to compel even in me an ecstatic lifting up of the heart and a kind of shameful excitement in the gut, prompted this time not by sex, which I had grown enlightened enough to think desirable, but by unbridled violence, which I had learned to fear as my parents and teachers had once feared erotic porn.

But I found pathos as well in the double identity of the hero, that Siegel and Shuster invention, product of God knows what very Jewish irony undercutting what it seemed to celebrate. He was a man of

steel in one guise, but in the other a short-sighted reporter, a crippled newsboy, an epicene playboy flirting with a teen-age male companion. Phallic but impotent, supermale but a eunuch, incapable of consummating love or begetting a successor; and, therefore, he was a last hero, doomed to lonely immortality and banned by an ultimately inexplicable taboo from revealing the secret that would make it possible at least to join the two halves of his sundered self and thus end his comic plight of being forever his own rival for the affection of his best beloved. Ultimately, therefore, the Siegel and Shuster Superman turns out to be not a hero who seems a shlemiel, but a hero who is a shlemiel. If this is not essentially funny (and none of the men who read comic books beside me throughout a long war could be persuaded it was so), it is because the joke was on all of us and there was no one left to laugh—not even when the war was over and it had become clear that what it had achieved was the end of heroism rather than of paranoia.

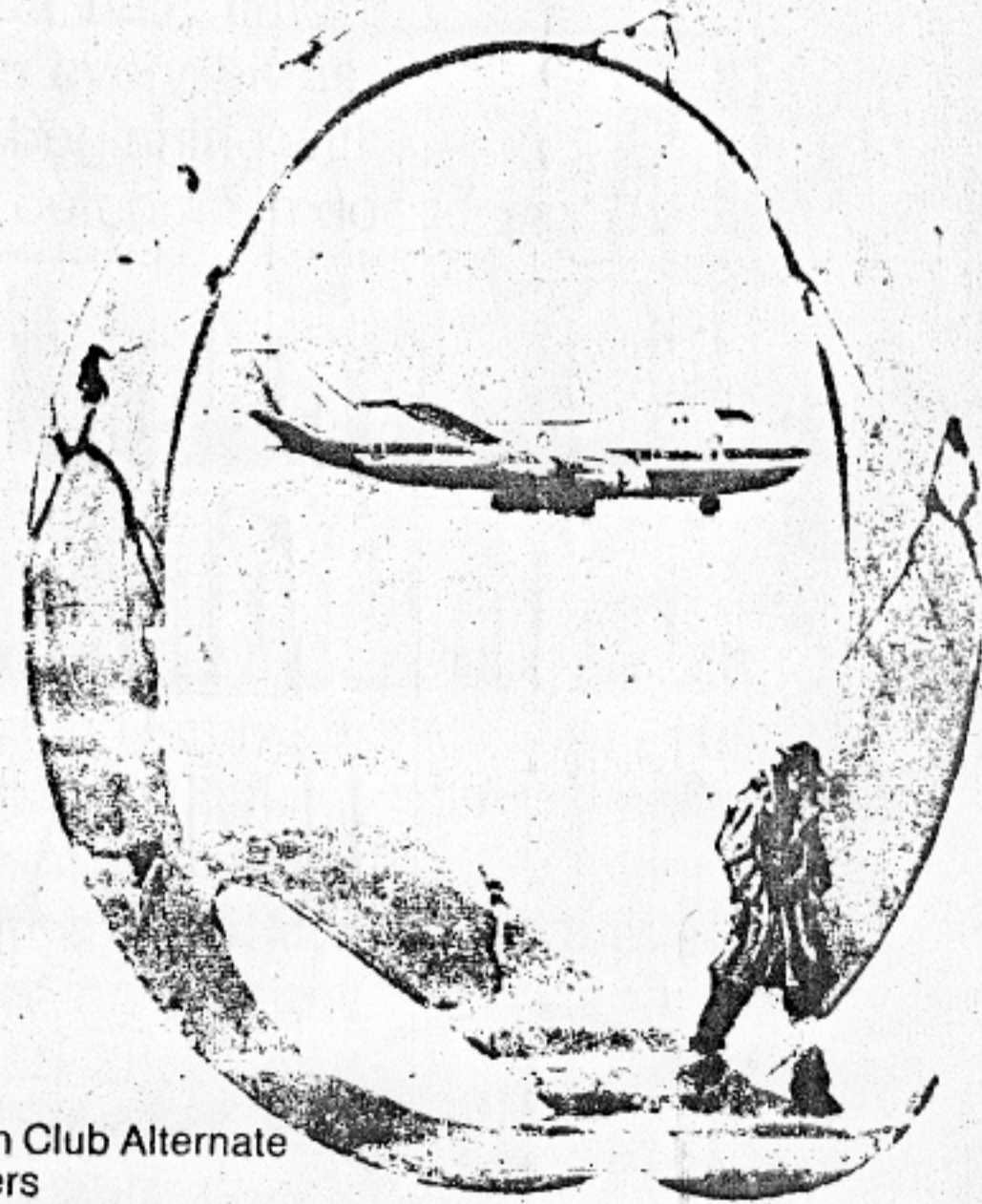
After all, that conflict was resolved not by hand-to-hand struggle but by the dropping (from an invisible machine) of a device contrived in laboratories by white-coated men indistinguishable from the hooked-nose eggheads against whom the Superheroes typically fight for the salvation of the city; and World War II was followed almost immediately by a contest between those forces, East and West, who for the duration were both labeled "good," not just for territory and power but for the exclusive right to that title.

Although the American comic book heroes continued to fight on behalf of the West as if nothing had really changed—substituting Commies for Nazis and, once the Korean War had begun, Chinks for Japs—somehow all conviction had departed. The images of bombed villages, raped and massacred civilians and especially the smashed-in, slant-eyed faces under the steel helmets satisfied for a while the hunger for apocalypse in those growing up at the moment when wartime ennui gave way to the boredom of back-to-school and work. But the world was no longer at war; only a handful of soldiers was engaged in a combat more dubious than mythological and heading toward inevitable stalemate. Besides, the notions of patriotism and heroism destroyed for intellectuals by World War I had begun to wear out for even the most naïve by the end of World War II—espe-

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cially for the young to whom the only uncompromised law seemed violence for its own sake and the real enemy, therefore, the forces of law and order who sought to make violence a monopoly of the state.

The old Supercomics had been too compromised by their espousal of official patriotism to satisfy the new hunger for unmediated violence and the new attempt to allay paranoia by identifying with the criminal rather than his victim or even the heroic crime fighter. What was needed was a new adversary literature, and once more the comic books proved resilient enough to respond. In the 1950's, E. C. Comics under the direction of William M. Gaines set the pattern by moving from priggish Superheroes at war to tales of war for violence's sake, to crime and finally to sado-masochistic fantasy. They found an audience particularly among the over-protected children of the white middle classes, for whom the crime in the street available to the poor and the black could be enjoyed only vicariously in a kind of unwitting dream rehearsal of the war against established society which their younger brothers and sisters would act out in the great demonstrations of the late 1960's, becoming the Commies and criminals threatening Metropolis as a new kind of paranoia overtook the adult world.

Embattled bourgeois parents, of the 1950's, convinced by their shrinks that even the unexpurgated Grimms' fairy tales, on which they themselves had been reared, bred anti-social violence in the young, were appalled to find their children reading in such comic books accounts of ball games played with the severed head of a victim whose entrails had been used to make the baselines. Finding it impossible to believe that such atrocities were produced in response to something within their children themselves—whether an impatience with the very notion of childhood innocence or a lust for naked aggression in a world that had outgrown its old social uses—parents were ready to believe almost any conspiracy theory that exculpated their kids at the expense of someone else: a conspiracy of the masters of media to profit by deliberately corrupting the young (as argued by Frederic Wertham in "Seduction of the Innocent") or a cabal of homosexuals (a favorite theory in Gershon Legman's "Love & Death") against the straight world they resented and envied.

These parents embraced a

new kind of paranoia, not resolvable like the earlier ones by the comic books, since comic books themselves were the source of their illusive fears. Comics, therefore, had to learn to censor themselves or be suppressed by a new Puritanism disguised as an enlightened liberalism. What followed was the scandalous 1954 Comics Code, a "voluntary" set of restrictions that the publishers of comic books imposed on themselves as embattled parents, teachers and even Congressional committees closed in for the kill. No one was finally sent to jail, as Gershon Legman had continued to urge, but E. C. Comics, the most creative as well as the best drawn and plotted of the time, was driven out of business by the pious resolve of its less successful competitors to prove that the "medium . . . having come of age on the American cultural scene" could "measure up to its responsibilities by banning all scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed . . . depravity, lust, sadism, masochism" as well as discouraging the "excessive use" of slang and colloquialisms and promising to employ "good grammar" wherever possible.

It was at this point that I came out of the closet and defended the comics in public print. For this I was accused of being not only an enemy of high culture but also a crypto queer and a C.I.A. agent. The cultural cold war and the great repression that followed seemed to me at the time unmitigated disasters; but in retrospect it is clear that the comic books finally benefited by being thus reminded of their disreputable origins and their obligation to remain at all costs part of an adversary culture, colloquial, irreverent, and unredeemably subversive.

The kind of children who preserved behind the backs of their parents old copies of E. C. Horror Comics, identifying them with other forbidden pleasures like rock music, fairy tales, pornography and marijuana, later constituted an audience—unprepared ever to admit that they had grown too old for comic books, just as they had begun by refusing to grant that they were too young—for the new comics that emerged in the 1960's. These were, first, the psychedelic fantasies of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, which subverted the code from within, replacing the beautiful Superhero with a Superfreak, repulsive monsters with soap-opera hangups like the Hulk; then the autobiographical Head Comix of R. Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, in

which freaked-out characters, scarcely distinguishable from their dropout middle-class white authors, dedicate their life to pursuits, chiefly sex, sadism and dope, portrayable only by deliberately breaking every taboo of the Comics Code—which is to say bringing back porn "for adults only" more shamelessly than the "eight-page Bibles" ever dared and proffering models of violence more favorably than the ambivalent makers of E. C. Comics were willing to do.

But the 1960's are over and with them, it would seem, the heyday of the comic books that had served once as the scriptures of the cultural revolution at its height and have now become its most trustworthy record. Not that all such publications ceased—Marvel Comics continue to roll off the presses in New York and Head Comix off those in San Francisco and Berkeley where the cultural revolution has gone to die. Even Superman still appears, having survived a score of artists and writers as well as translation into a daily comic strip, radio, movies and TV.

But one does not have to consult the circulation figures, falling for Superman as for all comics characters, to know he will not survive the makers of anthologies, dictionaries, self-congratulatory retrospectives, encyclopedias and histories, which at the moment are piled so high on my desk I can scarcely see the shelves across the room that hold the handful of original comic books I have somehow managed to preserve. Why I agreed in the first place to review these great fat mortuary books I can no longer remember.

It is an absurd way to end a relationship that began in shame and passion, matured in the anguish of a great war and climaxed in an unfashionable defense of what the righteous had agreed to condemn in a time of repression. Yet I have been unable to resist becoming an accomplice in a process that threatens to turn what was once living myth into dead mythology. Perhaps I am writing in the hope of somehow mythicizing my own relationship to the form or even for one instant of magically transforming myself from a fat man with a gray beard who has just spilled a forgotten cup of coffee over his manuscript to the Superhero I have never ceased to be from the moment I realized he was also a Supershlemiel like me—as is only fitting for a fantasy bred by teenage paranoia and doomed to end in middle-aged scholarship. ■

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Twenty-five years ago (I was a publisher) I began to fat

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Nothing worked for long. I would be fat for the re

I had given up. Or almost. One day, an accident, I read about some Medical School (among other things) approach to weight reduction to practical use by Dr. R

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