

COMIC BOOK NATION

The Transformation of Youth Culture
in America

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Confronting Success

Comic Books

and Postwar America,

1945–1950

Early in 1950 a story appeared in Fawcett's *Captain Marvel Adventures* entitled "Captain Marvel and the American Century." It opens by reminding readers that "during the first half of this century, America has led all civilization in enormous strides forward toward the ideals of freedom, democracy, and peace." As the whimsical tale unfolds, Captain Marvel foils the sinister Dr. Sivana, who plots to replace the "American Century" with the "Sivana Century." The hero preserves the American Century and receives personal congratulations from President Harry Truman, who then tells the boys and girls of America, "the next half of the American Century from 1950–2000 is yours! In your hands rests the fate of America, of democracy, and of freedom! It is a sacred trust!"¹

A rather silly story, even by comic book standards, it nevertheless nicely captures the triumphalism of postwar America. The comic book industry had its own cause for self-congratulation in these years. The *New York Times* reported that DC Comics alone sold over 26 million comic books in the first quarter of 1946, up almost 30 percent from the year before.² Business watchers noted comic books' undeniable popularity not only with children but also with young adults. The war had played a key role in expanding the market by creating a large "captive audience" in uniform. In November 1945 the weekly U.S. Army newspaper *Yank* reported that comic books at PXs across the nation ex-

ceeded the combined sales of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Readers' Digest* by ten to one. The article added that "it's no news to anyone who has ever killed a Sunday sprawled on his sack in a barracks that GIs go for comic magazines in a big way." *Yank* cited the estimates of the Market Research Company of America, which found that about 70 million Americans—roughly half of the U.S. population—read comic books.

The report found that the comic book audience comprised approximately 95 percent of all boys and 91 percent of all girls between the ages of six and eleven, 87 percent of boys and 81 percent of girls between twelve and seventeen, 41 percent of men and 28 percent of women aged eighteen to thirty, and 16 percent of men and 12 percent of women over thirty.³ Comic book advertising gave further evidence of an audience that spanned genders and generations, encompassing the market for Keds sneakers, baseball gloves, Daisy rifles, female hair-care and weight-loss products, hospital insurance, and correspondence courses in radio technology.⁴

As promising as the comic book business appeared, problems loomed. Like other American companies that had prospered during wartime, publishers faced the threat of a glutted postwar market. The same encouraging conditions that had propelled the industry's growth now threatened to curtail it. The end of wartime production controls opened the door for new publishers and a flood of new titles. With more publishers producing more comic books than ever before, supply might easily outstrip demand. Postwar demobilization also threatened to cost the industry much of its adult audience. Would adults who had passed the time with comic books in the barracks continue to do so after they had returned to their families and civilian lives? And would the superheroes who had spoken to Depression and wartime audiences have anything to say in the postwar era? Or would they prove to be a fad that had run its course? If the superheroes faltered, would comic books follow them into oblivion?

Sales indicators suggested that superheroes alone would no longer be able to carry the industry. No successful superhero characters were introduced after 1944, and poor sales compelled publishers to cancel most superhero titles by the end of the decade. The top-selling title of the war years, *Captain Marvel Adventures*, suffered declining sales every year after 1945. By 1949 it was selling at only half its wartime rate. During the war, over 90 percent of the comic books published by DC had featured superheroes. By the end of the decade, just over half of them did so. Major characters like Superman and Batman continued to

sell well, but wartime favorites like Captain America, the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, Green Lantern, and the Flash slumped to cancellation in the postwar market.⁵

The solution was product diversity. As publishers gained a greater understanding of how to produce their own comic books, most chose to employ and oversee artists and writers directly rather than purchase finished material from the shops. As the assembly-line shops declined, distinctive and diverse house styles emerged among the publishers. DC Comics and Fawcett Publications continued to dominate the market in superhero comic books. Dell enjoyed perennial success with its licensing rights to the Disney and Warner Brothers cartoons, among other properties. Gilberton Publications cornered the market in "classic comics"—comic book adaptations of classic novels—which purported to be educational, were usually sold separately from other comic books, and became popular with students seeking a shortcut to their book reports. MLJ Publications dropped its lackluster superhero titles after the war and devoted most of its line to lighthearted teen humor based around its most popular character, a freckle-faced teenager named Archie. The Iger shop continued its exclusive publishing relationship with Fiction House, specializing in heavily formulaic jungle comics and an inordinate number of leggy heroines in short skirts and leopard-skin bathing suits. Lev Gleason Publications pioneered the controversial genre of crime comic books, featuring lurid and remarkably graphic tales of notorious killers. Each of these publishers found a substantial audience in the highly diverse and expanding postwar market.

Some in the comic book industry perceived what few other entertainment producers seemed to notice: adolescents constituted an emerging consumer group with tastes that ran more to the adult than the juvenile. In his article published in the February 1951 issue of *Writer*, comic book writer Warren Kuhn claimed that there was "good money" to be made in the comic book field, with publishers willing to pay beginning writers generous rates of five to ten dollars per page. And the highest demand, he added, was for stories that dealt with "bizarre off-beat scenarios." He advised prospective comic book writers to remember that today's "youth . . . is a vast jump ahead of an earlier generation. They were weaned on jet-bombers and boo at a western movie that is corny and unreal." Because these young people tended to reject anything that seemed to condescend to them as juveniles, Kuhn urged prospective writers to "write *up* for them."⁶

Comic book makers who underestimated the maturing tastes of

postwar youth denied themselves an increasingly lucrative market. Those who did "write up" to their audience challenged traditional assumptions about the innocence of children and drew fire from critics who feared the changes in youth culture that comic books came to represent. Such was the dilemma confronting the industry during its era of greatest success.

Superheroes and the Postwar Liberal Vision

Superheroes after World War II had far less to say about their world than ever before. To some extent, they succumbed to the triumphalism of postwar America. Victory ushered in an era that seemed to fulfill all that superheroes had fought for: a powerful federal government committed to positive domestic and foreign intervention, a consumer economy of abundance that could alleviate gross social inequalities, and an internationalist order codified in the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Conference. A recovered economy, government assistance programs like the G.I. Bill, and the mass construction of affordable suburban homes made a middle-class lifestyle possible for millions. By appearances at least, the helpless and oppressed who had cried out for Superman in 1938 now lived comfortably and contentedly in the suburbs. Superheroes animated by the crusading spirit of the New Deal and World War II seemed directionless and even irrelevant now that those victories had been won. In a vague sense, the decline of the superheroes reflected a postwar public mood that had grown conservative and weary of reform.⁷ More specifically, it reflected editorial policies grown conservative and wary of innovation.

Once the leader in producing comic books relevant to contemporary issues, DC Comics adopted a postwar editorial direction that increasingly de-emphasized social commentary in favor of lighthearted juvenile fantasy. Formerly a spirited crusader against social ills and political corruption, the Green Lantern now sparred with clownish criminals in half-baked plots that paved the way for his cancellation in 1949. The impact of DC's editorial retrenchment was dramatically evident in the changes surrounding Batman. His bleak and menacing world became a bright and colorful fairyland with none of the shadows and disturbing ambiguities that had made the series so daring when it first debuted. No longer the mysterious vigilante who stalked the gloomy nights of Gotham City, Batman now worked fully within the law and took on paternalistic qualities—especially in his relationship with Robin, an "A" student who respected his elders and mowed the lawn,

like all good boys should. Even the Joker, once a singularly homicidal madman, became just another goofy crook with a predilection for slapstick gags.⁸

No superhero retreated further from his initial premise than Superman. Having launched his career as a crusading champion of social justice and a militant antifascist, by the end of the war Superman had assumed his befitting role as the conservative elder statesman among comic book heroes, above the political and social concerns of the day.⁹ In Superman's case the break with the past was made all the more real by the departure of his creators from the series. In 1947 Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster sued DC Comics, seeking to regain the rights to their character and recover the five million dollars that they claimed Superman should have earned them over the nine-year period. Citing the release form that they had signed in 1938, the court ruled that the two creators had no property rights to the character. Siegel and Shuster ultimately settled with DC, receiving a one-time sum in exchange for their agreement to forego any future claims to Superman and all related characters. Superman would continue to sell a record number of comic books and generate hundreds of millions of dollars for his company but not for his creators.¹⁰

Under the creative direction of senior DC editor Mort Weisinger, Superman's comic books developed into a fantastic mythos that owed less and less to any standard of reality. Superman's powers, daunting enough to begin with, grew to staggering, godlike dimensions. Siegel and Shuster's original character was a powerful specimen, but he had been content to leap tall buildings, outrun speeding locomotives, and bend steel in his bare hands. Over the years, Superman had picked up more powers: flight, X-ray vision, faster-than-light speed, unlimited physical strength, and invulnerability to nearly anything except kryptonite. The extent of his powers peaked during Weisinger's tenure, by which time it seemed that there was nothing the character could not do. Weisinger's Superman flew through suns at the speed of light, pushed planets through space, and traveled through time. Weisinger added elements to Superman's self-sustaining fantasy world, including a bottled Kryptonian city of Kandor, a Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic where the hero keeps an endless supply of Superman robots to fill in for him in emergencies, and various colors of ubiquitous kryptonite, each of which have a different effect on Superman.¹¹

After DC's writers had exhausted ideas for plots to put the invincible hero through, they resorted to "imaginary" stories, wherein Superman could marry, have different powers, or even die. As the series

veered ever further into flights of unreality, so too did its ability to work within a social context. Whereas the original series created by Siegel and Shuster had been a modern social fantasy, the Weisinger series amounted to a modern fairy tale. While the stories produced under his editorship are the ones that baby boomers recall so fondly as the definitive Superman, this latter-day Man of Steel really bore little resemblance to his Depression-era predecessor beyond the red cape and the trademark S.

While DC's superheroes increasingly functioned in fantasy worlds of their own, the comic books did not completely ignore the world in which their readers lived. The major difference in the postwar era was that DC comic books now tended to speak to contemporary concerns quietly—through educational or "public-service" features instead of in the superhero stories themselves. These messages tended to disseminate the same basic liberal values that DC had extolled since the New Deal era. They further served to promote DC's desired image as a conscientious publisher striving to educate as well as entertain children. For several years DC even published *Real Fact Comics*, an educational comic book modeled on *Parents' Magazine's True Comics*, featuring "fun" lessons in history, science, and civic responsibility taught by DC superheroes. Like most such pedantic efforts, it folded after several years.

Educational features sold poorly to children when marketed on their own merits, but they could still be inserted into more commercial comic books. One of the most intriguing of these series was "Johnny Everyman." Produced between 1944 and 1948 in cooperation with the East and West Association, a liberal organization of educators and authors later targeted by red baiters as a "Communist front," "Johnny Everyman" educated readers on the virtues of tolerance, inclusion, and "furthering understanding between the peoples of the world."¹²

Perhaps the most daring message of "Johnny Everyman" was in a feature called "Room for Improvement." Published in 1946, the story opens in Russia with a boy named Nikky on trial for the theft of a piece of cloth. Nikky admits to the court that he did indeed steal the item, but only because his family has no money. He dreams of the toys, games, and consumer products that he has seen in an American magazine and complains that in Russia, "life . . . is so hard—with so much hard work! And mostly black bread and cabbage soup to eat!" The judge tells him that consumer luxuries are not bad, but "before there are luxuries in Russia there must first be necessities." Johnny Everyman then arrives and explains to Nikky that "although America is far ahead



Comic Cavalcade



Another East and West Story in the next issue of Comic Cavalcade

of Russia in production, not everybody in America possesses the things you saw advertised in that magazine . . . and in the second place, everyone in your country produces necessities now so as to have the nicer things later." Johnny praises the Russians for working hard and cooperating to improve their nation, telling Nikky that "because your comrades have learned to live together and respect one another, you will be assured of a fair opportunity to buy your share!"¹¹

After having extolled the virtues of Russia's cooperative society, Johnny turns a critical eye towards American society. He tells the dark-complexioned Nikky that everyone is treated equally in Russia, but "to some people in America, the color of your skin would make a great deal of difference—and if you were black, it would make more!"¹² To make the point, Johnny takes the Russian boy on a rather depressing tour of America. White Americans look at Nikky with prejudice and hostility, and an employer refuses to hire him because of his dark complexion. Nikky protests, insisting that he is a good worker and reminding the employer that Russia was America's ally during the war, but Johnny tells the boy not to bother with such bigots. "Sorry—but those things often happen in America," he shrugs. Nikky sees that "America is rich and beautiful," but wonders, "where is the democracy they talk about?" Johnny answers, "There's a lot of it, Nikky, but not as much as there should be." Both Russia and America are great in their own ways, but both have "room for improvement." Johnny concludes that both Russia and America have much to learn from each other and, "only by learning and working together can they create a better world for all!"¹⁴ This was a remarkable position for any mainstream publication to take in 1946, much less a comic book. Expressing the kind of arguments one would have expected from ultraliberals like Henry Wallace, "Johnny Everyman" would not survive the emerging Cold War. But for preaching messages of tolerance and cooperation, the series won some rare praise from the *New Republic* and the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, publications not noted for their endorsement of comic books.¹⁵

DC disseminated similar messages in the low-key but enduring forum of Jack Schiff's public service pages. Although his primary respon-

From "Meet Charley Wing," *Comic Cavalcade* 12 (DC Comics, fall 1945). Created in cooperation with the East and West Association, "devoted to furthering understanding between the peoples of the world," DC's Johnny Everyman extolled a liberal vision of tolerance and inclusion in postwar America. Script and art by John Daly.

sibility was the editorial direction of the popular and apolitical Batman comic books, Schiff was also a liberal who took pride in writing a series of one-page public service features on behalf of the National Social Welfare Assembly. Schiff served as DC's representative on the organization's advisory committee, which also included representatives from the Child Study Association, the Health Insurance Plan of New York, the Jewish Family Association, the National Committee on Unemployment, the Camp Fire Girls, the Boy Scouts of America, and the National Association of Social Workers. Beginning in 1949, under Schiff's supervision, DC agreed to publish one page per month in all of its comic books on committee-approved topics like tolerance, cooperation, community service, civic responsibility, social welfare, and internationalism. Even at the height of the Red Scare, Schiff never produced a public service page that attacked or even mentioned Communism. Instead, these educational features underscored inclusive and liberal social values.¹⁶

Not everyone on the DC staff shared Schiff's political views. Alvin Schwartz, a DC staff writer at the time, recalled that Schiff's politics actually led fellow editor Mort Weisinger to accuse him of being a Communist during the McCarthy years. Weisinger reportedly warned DC's editor-in-chief that Schiff's liberalism was going to get the company in trouble.¹⁷ Such conflict behind the scenes helps explain, perhaps, the inconsistent messages in the comic books. For even as DC's superheroes functioned within a benign mythic fairytale free of social concerns, controversies, and fears, the publisher's educational features consistently pointed out the need to improve society through liberal solutions.

One page published in 1951 entitled "Know Your Country" features Superboy urging readers to respect people of different races and ethnic backgrounds because "no single land, race, or nationality can claim this country as its own!" Another page, printed in 1952, opens with an African American youth courageously helping to keep an escaped circus lion at bay until the authorities arrive to recapture it. The circus owner then thanks a nearby white boy, whom he presumed had performed the service. Superman arrives and says, "Wait a minute! How do you know it wasn't the other lad?" gesturing to the black youth. The circus owner can only stammer, so Superman answers for him, "Because of his color? As a matter of fact, he *was* the one! You just jumped to a conclusion because of a common prejudice." The man admits his mistake, thanks the boy, and says, "This should serve as an example to a lot of people like me who have gotten some wrong notions

in their heads!" Superman then warns readers not to judge anyone on the basis of their color or beliefs.¹⁸

As well-meaning as these educational features were, DC failed to heed the spirit of its own messages by including nonwhites in its comic book stories. Superman may have spoken eloquently about the problem of racial prejudice in one-page features, but he remained conspicuously silent on the issue in his own comic books. There were no African Americans anywhere in Metropolis or Gotham City—not as heroes, villains, or even passers-by. As the leading and most respected comic book publisher, DC was uniquely qualified to advance progressive educational messages, and it did so more often than most of its competition. But by failing to integrate racial minorities into its comic books, DC betrayed the limits of its liberal vision, missing an opportunity to do for comic books what Jackie Robinson did for professional sports.

Like DC, Fawcett Publications largely turned away from politics and social relevancy after World War II. At least one Fawcett series had quite a bit to say about the postwar world, however. This was "Radar, the International Policeman," a peculiar series appearing in *Master Comics* that Fawcett writers conceived in consultation with members of the Office of War Information.¹⁹ Appearing towards the end of World War II, Radar worked as an agent for the "four great powers," a premise obviously mirroring Roosevelt's concept of the "four policemen" (the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China) who would patrol the postwar world. Even after Roosevelt's death, the end of the war, and the deepening Cold War in Europe and Asia had cast serious doubts on this vision, Radar continued to champion the International Police Force throughout the immediate postwar years.

At a time when fears of spreading Communism became a pervasive concern in the West, Radar warned that right-wing extremism remained the chief threat to world peace. He apprehended fascist war criminals, helped democratic forces overthrow dictatorships, and ensured the safe delivery of United Nations humanitarian aid by foiling right-wing corporate profiteers.²⁰ During World War II, Radar urged readers to remember that "victories against the fascists on the battlefield are pointless unless we also clean out all home front fascists! And a fascist as the American Vice-President Henry A. Wallace said, is anyone whose lust for money and power makes him ruthless in his use of deceit or violence to attain his ends!" Radar remained true to this cause after the war. In "The Death-Dealing Playboy," a wealthy American who is also an admitted fascist supplies an international right-wing organization with weapons to aid in the fight against democratic govern-



ments, explaining, "The people must learn to accept dictatorships." Radar smashes the plot and encourages cooperation between the United States and its democratic allies to pursue other fascist conspirators.²¹ Radar also underscored the importance of free trade for peace in the postwar world. One story printed near the end of the war opens with a German businessman and Nazi sympathizer named Krug paying a visit to the leader of a peaceful Balkan nation. Krug proposes that they form a chemical industry cartel, in which the Balkan leader would serve as director, "unofficially of course," and Krug would enjoy exclusive trading privileges in his country. The prime minister balks at this outrageous suggestion, exclaiming, "That would ruin the small businessman! You know cartel agreements of this kind are unlawful, Krug! Get out!" Frustrated but determined to pursue his greedy scheme, Krug meets secretly with revolutionary anarchist leaders and proposes to finance their insurrection in exchange for the anarchists' guarantee that his chemical combine will enjoy "sole trading privileges" under the new anti-democratic regime. "You see," says Krug, "the little businessman has to go! The Krug chemical combine already spreads over three European countries... soon it will swallow the world!" After the anarchists have launched the revolution, the "Big Four" send Radar to arrest Krug and help restore order. The International Court of Justice sentences Krug to life imprisonment "as an example to other monopolists who with cartels would choke free enterprise—the cornerstone of democracy." A wonderful indictment of fascism, leftist revolution, and corporate monopolism all at once, this Radar story manages to combine these foremost obstacles to American interests into a single sinister conspiracy.²²

The virtues of free trade reappear in "The Border Incident," in which Radar goes to South America on a mission to heal strained relations between the neighboring countries of "Roliwia" and "Teru." Here, violations of free-trading practices between the nations threaten to provoke war. The crisis began when the president of Roliwia imposed a tariff on imported bricks from Teru, which justifiably upset the Teruvians. Radar meets with the leader of Roliwia, who defends his tariff by claiming, "It's for the benefit of my people! I must protect our new

From "The Red Cross Mystery," postwar vision to be found in and extremists of all kinds. *Writer Master Comics 72* (Fawcett Publications, September 1946). Radar comic books. The embodiment of Roosevelt's internationalism, and artist unknown. Radar policed the world, apprehending dictators, monopolists, the purest expression of the liberal

brick company.” Radar appeals to him, “But, Mr. President, Terra can retaliate by putting a tariff on your goods! This will hurt both countries.” Unimpressed, the president orders Radar to get out, adding, “These whole problem ees none of your business!” As an international policeman, Radar insists that it *is* his business. He investigates the matter further and discovers that the Bolivian president is secretly the owner of the brick company that the tariffs protect, and he stands to profit from the policies that hurt the people of both nations. The crooked president laughs, “What do I care if Bolivians have to pay more than the bricks are worth! In no time I will be a millionaire!” After Radar has exposed the corrupt leader, the new president repeals the tariff and reestablishes peaceful free trade between the two nations.²³

While Radar clearly represented American interests, those interests were presumed to be synonymous with democracies throughout the world. Radar was consistent enough in his appeal for democracy to call for tolerance and inclusion within America as well. In “Arsenal of Hate,” the United Nations instructs Radar to investigate the distribution of hate propaganda in the United States. At the Lincoln Memorial he discovers scattered leaflets propagating race, ethnic, and religious hatred with inflammatory slogans like “The White Race Must Wipe Out the Negroes,” “Protestants against Catholics,” and “Gentiles against Jews.” Radar discovers that this is part of an international plot, aided by a traitor within the U.S. government, to divide and conquer the people of America. The fascist conspirator claims, “When citizen is fighting citizen in the U.S. . . . labor against capitol [sic]—Gentile against Jew—White against Negro—great fascist leaders now exiled will step in and seize the government!” Radar puts an end to this scheme and prevails upon others to beware of those who would pit one American against another.²⁴

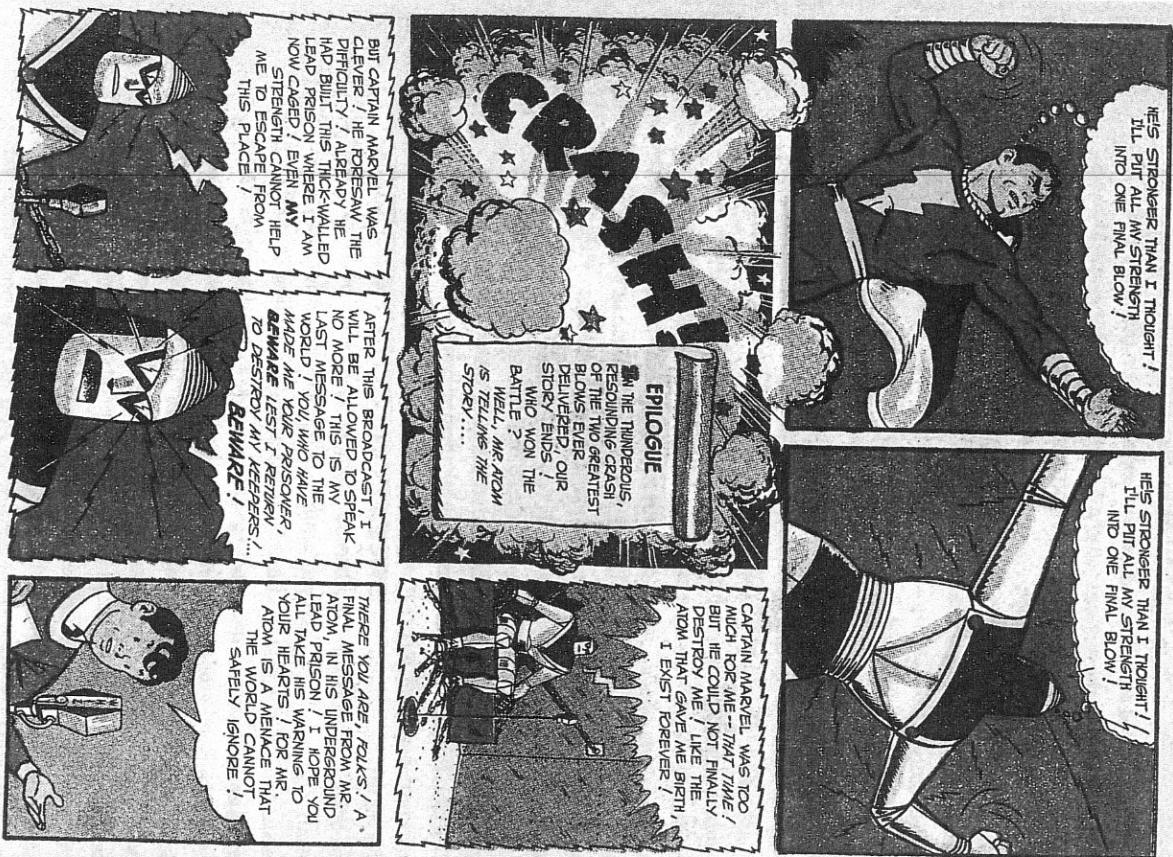
“Radar” was the most political comic book series of the immediate postwar years, but it was not very popular. Too often, the series sacrificed action and adventure for the sake of political education. Far more compelling as a historical document than successful entertainment, “Radar” ceased publication in 1948, joining the long list of postwar superhero casualties.

Fawcett disseminated liberal messages with more subtlety in its popular and whimsical Captain Marvel comic books. A tale called “Captain Marvel and the Imperfect Perfection” portrayed a town called Perfection, where conformity has been “carried to evil extremes.” All citizens must conform to community standards for appearance and behavior. “Undesirable” people are not tolerated. When townspeople no-

tice a “disgusting freak with purple hair” walking on the street, they beat him up. The head of the Perfection Civic League explains, “We don’t want misfits like that in our wonderful town.” Captain Marvel ends this discrimination and advises readers to beware of “snobs and bigots” who hold to unfairly distorted standards of “perfection.”²⁵

“Captain Marvel: Citizen of the Universe” further illustrates the consequences of intolerance. It opens with an alien from another planet arriving on Earth. Although ugly in appearance, the alien is actually friendly, and he has come to invite the people of Earth to join an interplanetary organization called the “Citizens of the Universe,” dedicated to promoting peace and brotherhood among peoples everywhere. The alien explains to a sympathetic Captain Marvel that “if all the people of all worlds sign up as citizens of the universe pledged to eternal peace with each other, then no scheming dictators or munitions makers could ever start a war of worlds!” But when Earth people encounter the alien, the results are sadly predictable. Reacting to the alien’s threatening appearance instead of his benign message, a mob attacks him. Then, as if the point was not clear enough, a second alien ship arrives, carrying handsome aliens, whom the citizens greet enthusiastically. These aliens, of course, turn out to be evil and bent on world conquest. Captain Marvel clears up all the confusion and drives the nasty aliens away, but the whole affair reflects poorly on the citizens. Deeply disappointed, the friendly alien departs Earth, having concluded that people here are not sufficiently enlightened to join the community of planets.²⁶

Captain Marvel was among a number of postwar superheroes who expressed hope for international cooperation. Making such cooperation all the more imperative was the specter of atomic warfare. During the brief period when the United States enjoyed a monopoly on the bomb, comic books portrayed atomic energy as a force for peace that must not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands. The first comic book to explore the ramifications of the atomic age was an extremely short-lived superhero title called *Atomax*. Published in 1946 by a small company called Spark Publications, the comic book asked metaphorically, “Who is this new man whose body generates atomic power? Whose muscles give him the colossal might of the universe? . . . How will Atomax use his strength? Will it be for good or for evil?” The hero is secretly an atomic scientist who has acquired his powers while working on the Manhattan Project. Upon discovering his new powers, he asks himself, “What am I to do with my power? I can use it for good . . . or selfishly keep it for my own profit.” He decides to use the power to help mankind because, as he puts it, “Atomic power cannot belong to one



man . . . or group of men . . . or even one nation! It belongs to the whole world!" Asserting that atomic power "must be used to help all people . . . regardless of race or creed or nationality," Atoman concludes, "I am strong . . . therefore it is my duty to help the weak." Accordingly, he supports the scientists of the Atomic Institute, who agree that "the secret of atomic power must never be permitted to fall into greedy hands."²⁷ In his initial adventure, Atoman defeats a corporate executive who tries to steal the secret atomic formula. "Atomic power is too dangerous to be controlled by one man or one corporation," says Atoman. "All the people should benefit from it!" Expressing a remarkably liberal argument for internationalization of the bomb, *Atoman* offered a vision for the atomic age which encompassed the cooperative spirit of the New Deal and the triumphalism of the Allied victory over fascism. Also, *Atoman* made no impression whatsoever in the comic book marketplace, folding after only two issues, while deepening Cold War tensions quickly doomed the hero's hopes for the bomb.²⁸

Other comic books revealed serious anxieties about the dawning atomic age. Captain Marvel encountered the atom bomb on a number of occasions, and he emphasized the peaceful uses of atomic energy. One story predicted that atomic energy would be able to supply power to the entire world by the year 2053. But other cautionary tales illustrated the frightening consequences of atomic energy beyond responsible government control. In the ominously titled "Captain Marvel and the End of the World," a mad Asian scientist builds a proton bomb that is even more powerful than the atomic bomb, and Captain Marvel tries to prevent him from detonating it. He is too late, and the bomb explodes and destroys the world. Only at the end of the story does Captain Marvel reveal to readers that this horrifying event actually occurred on another planet, not on Earth—this time.²⁹

It did not necessarily take a madman to unleash the dangers of atomic energy. In "Captain Marvel and the Missing Atom," the hero must capture a "master atom" that has leaked from an atomic reactor. Scientists warn that if the master atom comes into contact with a solid object it would result in a massive atomic explosion. Captain Marvel ultimately does return the atom safely to the power plant but only after

From "Captain Marvel Meets Mr.

anxiety over the atomic bomb and

Atom," *Captain Marvel Adventures*

the fear that its destructive power

78 (Fawcett Publications, November

might be beyond even the ability of

1947). Captain Marvel's encounters

superheroes to contain. Script by

with Mr. Atom reflected popular

William Woolfolk. Art by C. C. Beck.

the world narrowly escapes what could have been its first peacetime nuclear disaster.³⁰

In the atom bomb, mighty superheroes like Captain Marvel finally met their match. Here they encountered a danger that could not be conquered or adequately explained away. They would continue to try, but the results—much like the falsely reassuring explanations coming from more official sources—proved to be distorted, contradictory, and ultimately unsatisfying. Comic book makers accustomed to dealing in simple solutions frankly did not know how to deal with the reality of the atomic age any better than the rest of the population did. This raised some serious questions about the continuing ability of superheroes to speak to the concerns of their audience. Their shortcomings on this matter were symptomatic of their general failure to reach young readers in the postwar era.

Teen Humor and Jungle Queens

The declining interest in superheroes opened the door for publishers to test the market with other genres. Features put out by Archie Comics represented one avenue open to publishers. Formerly called MLJ Publications, Archie became the leading publisher specializing in light-hearted teenage humor. Producing work in marked contrast to the urban and violent worlds of the superheroes, Archie Comics placed its characters in the placid suburban community of Riverdale. The featured cast drew from familiar high-school character types: freckle-faced Archie himself, billed alternatively as “America’s favorite teenager” and “America’s typical teenager”; Jughead, the class clown who fears girls; Reggie, the arrogant jock; Betty, the blonde sweetheart; and Veronica, the rich snob. The stories centered on the most benign aspects of middle-class adolescent concerns—dates, cars, school, and parents. The Archie stories struck a commercially sensible middle ground by exploring elements of teen culture while always affirming conformity and respect for authority. Predicting the formula of family-oriented television sitcoms, Archie comic books dealt with problems so trivial and so completely resolvable that they gave an impression of unchanging suburban bliss. Their style, in fact, became so standardized and formulaic that those published in the 1990s look virtually the same as those published forty years earlier.

Archie Comics was the first publisher to tap heavily into the pre-teen female audience. It offered an idealized, tranquil, and nostalgic vision of high-school life primarily for boys and girls who had not yet experienced it. Although Archie was ostensibly the star of the comic

books, many stories revolved around the boy-chasing exploits of Betty and Veronica. While hardly sophisticated characters, they have enough individuality to demand respect from their boyfriends and often seem to be brighter than most of their male classmates. All the characters had enough charm to make the comic books a perennial favorite among young children. Yet the tone of the series betrays the judgmental outlook of adult supervision. America’s “typical teenager” never uses teen slang, never fights, never smokes or drinks alcohol, always obeys his parents in the end, and betrays only the vaguest hint of his libido. In other words, he is typical only of the kind of teenager that most adults want to have around. Archie offered young readers a safe glimpse into teen life, while carefully observing the rules of adult society.³¹

Other publishers pushed comic books in more controversial directions. After the sales of superhero titles dropped, some comic book makers tried to seduce male readers with sexy images. Marvel superheroes like the Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch began to share space with shapely blonde characters like Namora and the Asbestos Lady. Captain America’s teenage sidekick, Bucky, was shot and hospitalized in one issue, only to be replaced by the Golden Girl in the next—a change apparently to the Captain’s liking, since Bucky never returned. Not to be outdone, publisher Victor Fox made sexy women like the Phantom Lady stars of his comic books, featuring them prominently on the covers, often in bondage.³² No publisher, however, played to male libidos more frequently or effectively than Fiction House. Women with short skirts, long slender legs, and exaggerated breasts adorned the covers of Fiction House’s comic books, while the stories prepared for the publisher by the Iger shop (where much of the material, interestingly, was written by women) beckoned randy young males with sexually suggestive and sadomasochistic images. Women in bondage and women placing men in bondage, dominating men with whips, or trampling men with high heels played to common male fetishes.³³

When this sort of material appeared in Fiction House’s ubiquitous jungle comics, the results took on powerful racist and imperialist—as well as sexual and sadomasochistic—overtones. Throughout the postwar era the jungle formula essentially remained what it had been before World War II: white lords, kings, queens, and princesses ruled over jungles populated by childlike, superstitious, and mischievous brown people in need of paternalistic guidance.³⁴ In one story, a white trader masquerades as a “bird god” in order to frighten the natives into attacking his trading rivals. The scantily clad jungle queen, Camilla in this instance, reveals the false god to the natives, who, like children

ARCHIE'S A PIOT IN "CAMPAIGN IN THE NECK"

No. 75

The Myth
of a Nation



Archie

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having been scolded by a parent or a teacher, sheepishly apologize to Camilla, "These misguided ones ask thy forgiveness, O Jungle Queen!"

Camilla imperiously grants them forgiveness but admonishes the tribe to remember that "traders are their friends."¹⁵ In another story, Sheena, the Queen of the Jungle, orders an African tribe to abolish their "cruel burial customs." The tribal chief responds dutifully, "We hear, O Sheena, we obey!"¹⁶ Jungle queens also commonly installed desirable governments for the natives. When Sheena deposes the evil leader of the "elephant tribe" and chooses a new ruler for the people, the African natives similarly grovel before her and chant, "We hear! We obey, O Sheena!"¹⁷

The Fiction House comic books sold well throughout the 1940s and spawned a number of imitators who sometimes took the sex and racism to even greater extremes. Collectively, they did little to advance the public image of comic books. Moreover, in the context of the growing civil rights movement and increasing sensitivity to the equality of white and nonwhite peoples, these hideous images seemed anachronistic. Nevertheless, by highlighting the perils of local nationalism, self-government, and hostile foreign exploitation in undeveloped lands, they tacitly underscored the contemporary arguments for U.S. intervention in the affairs of undeveloped countries.

Exploring the Underworld

Despite their obvious genre and political differences, the superhero, teen-humor, and jungle comic books all basically affirmed the triumphalist culture of postwar America. All expressed moral certainty about American virtues, confidence in the nation's institutions, and optimism for a new age of affluence. Such enthusiastic self-congratulation was understandable in a nation that had prevailed so recently and completely in crises of economic depression and war. But undercurrents of profound doubt and anxiety shaped postwar culture as well. Even as Americans regarded themselves as the virtuous leaders of the "Free World" and the vanguard of the "American Century," they persisted, and even indulged, in a much darker self-image. Amidst widespread celebration of the American dream were masochistic expositions of

Cover of *Archie Comics* 75 (Archie teen-humor genre for young comic life, Archie's comic books affirmed Comics, July-August 1955). Billed book readers, especially preteen the values of suburban America. Art as "America's typical teenager." girls. With their unchanging benign by Bob Montana. Archie and his pals defined the image of small-town high-school



American failures. This was the dark side of America glimpsed in film

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CONFRONTING
SUCCESS

noir, the novels of Norman Mailer, and even the scholarly writings of Reinhold Niebuhr and Richard Hofstadter. Yet these negative self-images attracted an enthusiastic audience as well. As cultural historian Warren Susman observed, "When men or women saw themselves in the mirror as alienated, weak, and anxious, they cherished that feeling every bit as much as they did while characterizing themselves . . . as heroic and self-sacrificing."³⁷ American culture, in turn, reflected this willful hypocrisy. And in young people's comic books the morbid fascination with depravity and self-destruction became a lucrative cottage industry.

Crime comic books emerged as one of the most popular and culturally explosive trends in postwar youth entertainment. The genre debuted quietly in comic books in 1942 when publisher Leverett Gleason hired creators Charles Biro and Robert Wood to edit and revitalize two of his lackluster superhero titles. As an added incentive, Gleason promised them a share of the profits earned from their work, an unusually generous proposition in this business. Thus encouraged, Biro and Wood scrapped the superhero series and launched in its place a groundbreaking title called *Crime Does Not Pay*. Inspired by an MGM documentary series of the same name, the comic book featured "true crime" stories about notorious gangsters and killers like "Machine-Gun" Kelly, John Dillinger, and "Pretty Boy" Floyd. Narrated in a documentary, sometimes confessional style, these lurid tales delved into violence, brutality, and sadism to a graphic degree never before seen in comic books—in some instances, never before seen anywhere in mass entertainment.³⁸

Beatings, shootings, stabbings, burning bodies, gruesome torture, and sickening varieties of dismemberment were some of the more predictable images found in these comic books. It all appeared within the rather transparent guise of moral cautionary tales about the perils of breaking the law. Yet in actuality these stories offered vicarious guilty pleasure for readers, who followed the criminal protagonist through ten pages of mayhem and murder, only to see it all end in self-destruction on the last page—and often not until the last panel. The fact that the criminals always meet an unhappy end in prison, in the

Cover of *Jumbo Comics* 90 (Fiction House, August 1946). Fiction House was best known for its jungle comics and its leggy heroines. Covers like this vied for the attention of young males in the crowded postwar market. Artist unknown.



electric chair, or in a hail of gunfire barely concealed the glorification of their hedonistic and sadistic lifestyles. The message was clear: crime may not pay, but it is highly entertaining.

Crime Does Not Pay sold moderately well during the war years, but not as well as most superhero titles. Retailers may have been unsure of how to display the unusual publication—was it a comic book to be placed alongside the likes of *Superman* and *Donald Duck*, or did it belong with pulp magazines and adult crime fiction? In a deliberate pitch to older teenage and adult readers, Lev Gleason billed the title as “The Magazine with the Widest Range of Appeal.” It was not until after the war, however, that Gleason’s innovative marketing began to pay off. Postwar changes in the publisher’s creative staff improved the look of the comic books and helped them to better fulfill their promise. The underdeveloped cartoon styles of amateur artists hired during the war years had sometimes undermined the deadly serious tone of the series. At times the crude artwork had given the disturbing impression that these tales of graphic brutality were scrawled by a deranged child. But after the war, talented artists like Dan Barry and George Tuska brought to the series more accomplished and illustrative styles better suited to the gritty subject matter. The postwar look and tone of *Crime Does Not Pay* clearly set it apart from the superhero titles, and it avoided their sagging commercial fate. Gleason’s sales rose steadily. When it had premiered in 1942 the title had sold 200,000 copies per issue. By 1946 monthly sales figures had risen fourfold. In 1948 it sold over a million copies each month.³⁹

Those kind of numbers commanded the attention of the entire industry. Beginning in 1947 the competition saturated the newsstands with flagrant imitations of *Crime Does Not Pay*. Titles with comically derivative names like *Gangsters Can't Win*, *Lawbreakers Always Lose*, *Crime Must Pay the Penalty*, and *Justice Traps the Guilty* closely aped the appearance and formula of Lev Gleason’s successful series and threatened to squeeze it off the shelves. In 1948 Gleason himself added a second crime title called *Crime and Punishment*. Even DC bowed to the obvious popularity of this violent genre and published its own relatively

From “Camilla, Jungle Queen,” and the postwar years, Camilla *Jungle Comics* 29 (Fiction House, commonly topped corrupt native May 1942). One of many formulaic white jungle queens who of grateful African populations. Writer and artist unknown.

CRIME DOES NOT PAY THE WILD SPREE OF THE LAUGHING SADIST— HERMAN DUKER



ART BY
FRED GUARDINEER



mild *Gang Busters*, a series based on a radio program of the same name and revolving around policemen instead of criminals.⁴⁰

Typical of the crime comic formula was a tale published in the November 1947 issue of *Crime Does Not Pay* called "The Wild Spree of the Laughing Sadist—Herman Duker." It is a graphic biographical sketch of "one of those queers who robbed and killed out of sheer pleasure—experiencing delight in others' terror and agony." The story illustrates how Duker betrays his sadistic tendencies early by torturing canaries and setting cats on fire. When his father tries to discipline his monstrous son, the youth slugs him and runs away to New York City. There, Duker graduates to homicide. At one point, he is arrested and goes to trial, but the judge grants him leniency on account of his youth. After a brief thirty-one month stay in a juvenile reformatory, Duker returns to society and immediately begins to kill again. Finally, after years of senseless brutality and murder, his reign of terror comes to an overture end in the electric chair. The tale ends, as always, with the solemn warning, "Crime Does Not Pay!"⁴¹

Other "true crime" stories promised essentially the same: psychopathic personalities, self-destructive lifestyles, killing aplenty, and inevitable, though usually belated, retribution. In the case of "Carlos Barone, the Murderous Bully," the killer again indulges his terrible passions at an early age. As a schoolboy he hurts a snowball packed with a rock at a little girl's face, blinding her. He pushes a young boy down a flight of stairs, crippling him. He robs his father, beats his girlfriend, and extorts money from his classmates. Somehow, he achieves all of this while evading any kind of prosecution. As an adult, Carlo works as an enforcer for the mob. Several times he is arrested but only serves a few months in jail. Finally, after years of unrestrained brutality, culminating in a vicious killing spree, the authorities catch, convict, and execute him.⁴²

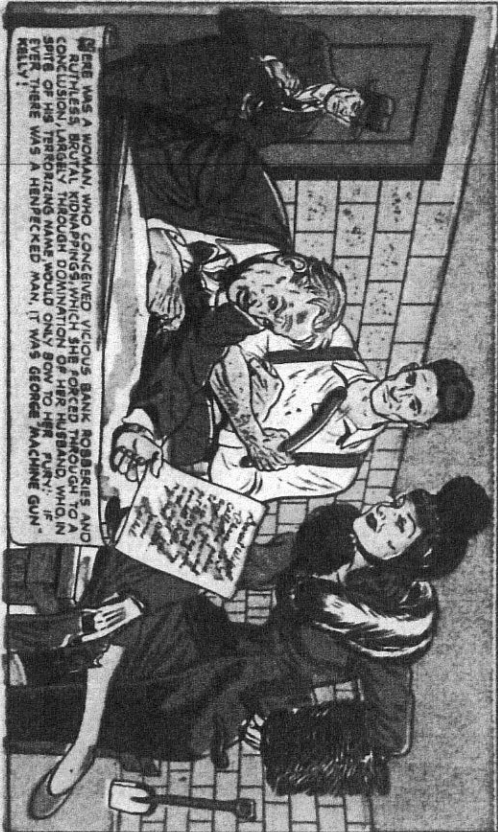
Crime comic books could be sickeningly graphic. In "The Woman Who Wouldn't Die," two migrant farm workers return to rob the home of their former employer. The grisly scene that follows could not have appeared in even the most lurid of Hollywood B-movies. The two men kill their employer and his little boy. Then they shoot the mother,

From "The Wild Spree of the Laughing Sadist—Herman Duker," *Crime Does Not Pay* 57 (Lev Gleason Publications, November 1947). In presenting the lurid tales of criminals like Herman Duker, crime comic books like Lev Gleason's *Crime Does Not Pay* offered some of the bloodiest and most sadistic images in visual entertainment. Script by Bob Wood and Charles Biro, art by Fred Guardineer.

CRIME DOES NOT PAY

TRUE MACHINE-GUN KELLY

A BULLY WHO WOULD KILL AT THE DROP OF A HAT—WAS MEEK AS A LAMB WHEN THE SHRILL VOICE OF HIS WIFE GAVE A COMMAND!



HERE WAS A WOMAN WHO CONCEIVED VICIOUS BANK ROBBERIES AND RUTHLESS, BRUTAL KIDNAPPINGS WHICH SHE ORDERED THROUGHOUT CONCLUSION, LARGELY THROUGH DOMINATION OF HER HUSBAND WHO, IN SPIES OF HIS TERRORIZING NAME WOULD ONLY BOW TO HER FURY. IF EVER THERE WAS A HENPECKED MAN, IT WAS GEORGE MACHINE GUN KELLY!

ONE NIGHT IN 1922, OUTSIDE THE HOME OF CHARLES AND KATHRYN THORNE, IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS:

OF COURSE IM DRUNK WHY SHOULDNT I GET DRUNK! WHAT VE I GOT TA LOOK FORWARD TO ALL WEEK-ENDS! NOTHING BUT AN EMPTY HOUSE! I SEE YOUVE GOT WELL 60 ON DO-OR-FRIS THE DONT BOTHER TO COME BACK!

STOP SHOUTIN AT ME YOU DRUNKEN IDIOT! WHAT DO YA WANT TO DO WITH ME! IVE BEEN AROUND THIS TOWN IS SO DEAD, IT STINKS!

EXCEPT THE WEEK BEFORE LAST, WHEN I FOUND THE MANNERY YOU'D THINK CHARLIE WOULD BE GLAD TO LET HIS MISSUS GO AWAY EVERY WEEK-END!

THESE GO THE HIGH PARK, ITS SO SOBER, ITS THE SAME THING!

EVENING, KATHRYN, OFF FOR YOUR WEEK-END AGAIN, I SUPPOSE. DO YOU WANT ME TO FILL ER UP AS USUAL?

YEAH, AN' JAKE I WONDER IF YOU'D DO ME A LITTLE FAVOR, DO YOU HENPECK ME IN AN' SEE HOW CHARLIE WHEN I LEFT, AN' WE HAD A LITTLE SPRT, I KNOW BUT IM KINDA WORRIED ABOUT LEAVIN HIM THIS TIME!

WHA, I WONDER WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF IT? DOCT.

DEAD ABOUT THERE, HOURS, SHERIFF COULD BE SUICIDE OR MURDER, BUT THAT IS UP TO AN PRODUCT AT THE CORONER! ALL I CAN SAY IS THE WOUND SHED THAT AT CLOSE RANGE.

I CANT LIVE WITH HER OR WITHOUT HER, HENCE I AM DEPARTING FROM THIS WORLD! CHARLES THORNE



douse her and the two bodies in kerosene, and laugh as they set the family on fire. But the woman does not die. She bites her lip to keep from screaming, waits for the killers to leave, drags her burning, bullet-ridden body past the bloody, sizzling corpses of her husband and son, and crawls to a neighbor's house for help. That the killers are eventually caught and executed for their heinous crimes hardly suffices as a happy ending to this gruesome tale.⁴³

As the competition among crime comic book publishers intensified, so did the violent imagery in the stories. In one tale appearing in a 1948 issue of Junior Books' *Crime Must Pay the Penalty*, twenty-three of the fifty-eight panels depict someone being shot. Victor Fox issued some of the crudest and most mean-spirited comic books, with shamelessly exploitive titles like *Murder Incorporated* and *Crimes by Women*. Magazine Village's *True Crime Comics* included the notorious "Murder, Morphine, and Me," which featured within the space of a few pages images of narcotics sales, drug injections, machine-gunnings, burning bodies, and a hypodermic needle poised to pierce a woman's eye.⁴⁴ With so many crime titles on the newsstands, it was a buyers' market for sadism and killing.

Easily the most violent comic books available, the crime titles also ranked among the most misogynous. Most comic books catered to male fantasies, but the crime comics were set in an especially macho world rife with sexual tensions. Women appeared as cheap sex objects, fodder for male sadistic urges, or scheming murderous gold-diggers who corrupted men with their sexuality. *Crime Does Not Pay's* account of "Machine-Gun Kelly" characterized the notorious killer as "a bully who would kill at the drop of a hat [but] was meek as a lamb when the shrill voice of his wife gave a command!" She was "a woman who conceived vicious bank robberies and ruthless, brutal kidnappings which she forced through to a conclusion, largely through domination of her husband who . . . would only bow to her fury." For all of Kelly's crimes, his most inexcusable seems to have been his submission to the whims of a domineering woman.⁴⁵

"The Short but Furious Crime Career of Irene Dague and Her Yes-Man Husband" virtually tells the story with the title. It is the sort of

From "Machine-Gun Kelly," *Crime Does Not Pay* 65 (Lev Gleason Publications, July 1948). A common theme in crime comic books found gold-digging and sadistic women corrupting weak-willed men with their sexuality. According to this story of "Machine-Gun" Kelly, the notorious killer was actually a henpecked weakling who bowed to the fury of his domineering wife. Script by Bob Wood and Charles Biro, artist unknown.

tale of a ruthlessly ambitious woman who pushes her weak-willed husband to commit crimes so that he can afford to buy her the luxuries that she demands. In "Mike Alex," a convicted criminal is released from prison only to be goaded back into crime by his girlfriend, whom he calls a "dirty gold-diggin' louse." Likewise, in the *Crime Does Not Pay* story of Bonnie and Clyde, Bonnie Parker stands revealed as the truly vicious killer, while Clyde Barrow is only a meek fool who slavishly appeases her bloodlust.⁴⁶

There were few positive role models in the crime comic books for males or females. Police rarely figured prominently in the stories, and their dutiful service to the law was almost always overshadowed by the exciting criminals who flouted it. The grinding wheels of justice appeared slow, inefficient, and susceptible to manipulation by criminals with only average intelligence. In one story, an arrested Arkansas serial killer exploits legal technicalities to avoid incarceration, leaving him free to kill again. The story of outlaw Albert Judson relates how this resourceful bank-robber evaded the law for years while leading an arrogant upper-class lifestyle. In each of these cases, the law only caught up with the criminals after they had allowed themselves to be distracted by women.⁴⁷

Whatever might be said about their moral virtues, these crime comic books marked an important stage in the evolution of the industry and youth culture. By demonstrating that successful comic books need not be confined to juvenile adventure stories, fatuous teen humor, and talking animals, they expanded the creative possibilities of the medium considerably. More significantly, they broke from the unwritten code that said comic books had to offer fulfillment, affirmation, and conflict resolution to their young audience on terms established by a supposedly virtuous and progressive society. The crime comic books put forth a remarkably perverse and horrifying image of the affluent society turned upside down. And unlike the superheroes, the freckle-faced teenagers, and the jungle queens, the crime comics offered no way out. Their collective deconstruction of the American dream promised no easy answers, only more of the same. They affronted the triumphalism of postwar America, and young readers bought it up by the millions.

Publishers like Leverett Gleason claimed that a large percentage of their audience were adults—but obviously, the rest were not. The advertising in Gleason's own crime comic books suggested a diverse audience, broad enough to encompass a market for kitchen knives, medical insurance, and "Dick Tracy" toy Tommy guns.⁴⁸ This was no small marketing achievement, and it pointed to lucrative possibilities

for the comic book industry to reach ever greater audiences. As far as most people were concerned, though, comic books were still strictly for kids. When parents discovered comic books dealing in graphic subject matter often exceeding what was deemed appropriate even for adult entertainment, they were horrified. When they then learned that the industry supplying their children with such material was the least regulated of all mass entertainment, they were outraged. If concerned citizens wanted this industry controlled, they would have to initiate action on their own. And more than a few were prepared to do just that.

See You," *The Boy Commandos* 5 (DC Comics, winter 1943-44), in which Satan takes the form of a businessman and makes a deal with a Nazi for his soul, and "Catastrophe," *Star Spangled Comics* 29 (DC Comics, February 1944), wherein an industrialist accepts a defense contract from the government and then sabotages his own plant—it turns out he is a Nazi sympathizer and former member of the American Bund.

36. John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 9; for some transparently racist and hateful examples, see "The Terror of the Slimy Japs," *All Winners* 4 (Marvel Comics, spring 1942); "The Slant Eye of Satan," *Green Hornet Comics* 25 (Family Comics, July 1945); "Funeral for Yellow Dogs," *Green Hornet Comics* 22 (Family Comics, January 1945); "Terror in the Trees," *Star Spangled Comics* 39 (DC Comics, December 1944); "The Gruesome Secret of the Dragon of Death," *Captain America Comics* 5 (Marvel Comics, August 1941); "The Justice Society of America," *All Star Comics* 11 (DC Comics, June-July 1942); and "Airboy," *Air Fighters Comics* 2 (Hillman Periodicals, November 1942).

37. "The Justice Society of America," *All Star Comics* 12 (DC Comics, August-September 1942).

38. *Ibid.*; see also "Captain Marvel" *Captain Marvel Adventures* 8 (Fawcett Publications, March 1942), which portrays Japanese Americans working against the United States because the Japanese government has threatened to harm their families back in the home islands; in "The Atom," *All-American Comics* 41 (DC Comics, August 1942), a Japanese spy working in the United States escapes after F.B.I. agents start rounding up "all the Japanese aliens in this country."

39. For a few of the many examples of Hitler and the Nazis caricatured, see "Meet the Squiffles," *Superman* 22 (DC Comics, May-June 1943); "Castle of Doom," *Captain America Comics* 38 (Marvel Comics, May 1944); and "Daredevil Battles Hitler" *Daredevil Battles Hitler* 1 (Your Guide Publications, July 1941); Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 281; two classic Nazi supervillains were Captain America's archenemy, the Red Skull, and Captain Marvel Jr.'s foe, Captain Nazi. See, respectively, "Meet Captain America," *Captain America Comics* 1 (Marvel Comics, March 1941); and "Captain Marvel, Jr." *Captain Marvel Jr.* 1 (Fawcett Publications, 18 November 1942).

40. Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, 281; "Skell the Ruthless," *Military Comics* 26 (Quality Comics, February 1944); "The Machine of Death," *Mystic Comics* 7 (Marvel Comics, December 1941); "The Biography of a Nazi," *Comic Cavalcade* 4 (DC Comics, fall 1943).

41. "Killers of the Bund," *Captain America Comics* 5 (Marvel Comics, August 1941); "Wings Wendall of the Military Intelligence," *Smash Comics* 7 (Quality Comics, February 1940).

42. "This Is Our Enemy," *All Star Comics* 24 (DC Comics, spring 1944).

43. "The Justice Society of America," *All Star Comics* 11 (DC Comics, June-July 1942).

44. For examples of American superheroes fighting alongside the Chinese, see "Commando Yank Defends the Great Wall of China," *Wow Comics* 16 (Fawcett Publications, August 1943); "Clip Carson," *More Fun Comics* 76 (DC Comics, February 1942); and "Dragons on the River," *Star Spangled Comics* 40 (DC Comics, January 1943); the specific reference to Chiang Kai-shek's regime appears in "Mother Wong," *Captain America Comics* 33 (Marvel Comics, December 1943).

45. "The Mallet Strikes," *Daredevil* 11 (Comic House, June 1942).

46. "The Lesson of the Lotus," *Boy Commandos* 12 (DC Comics, fall 1945).

47. "Mission to Finland," *Smash Comics* 10 (Quality Comics, May 1940).

48. "Kuzna, Russian Hero," *Heroic Comics* 26 (Eastern Color, September 1944);

"The Siege of Krokka," *Detritive Comics* 69 (DC Comics, November 1942); see also "Mary Marvel and the Anxious Auctioneer," *Wow Comics* 12 (Fawcett Publications, April 1943), in which Mary Marvel organizes an auction for Russian War Relief; Airboy is sent to Russia to help ensure the passage of lend-lease supplies in "Airboy," *Air Fighters Comics* 3 (Hillman Periodicals, December 1943).

49. "Green Lantern in South America," *Green Lantern* 1 (DC Comics, autumn 1941).

50. "The Steel Mask," *Captain America Comics* 35 (Marvel Comics, February 1944); "The Justice Society of America," *All Star Comics* 9 (DC Comics, February-March 1942); see also "Senorita Rio," *Fight Comics* 20 (Friction House, August 1942), wherein Rio, a U.S. agent, helps the Argentine government combat the indigenous Condor Legion, described as the "vicious, black-shirted puppets of the Axis."

51. "South American Trap," *The Black Terror* 7 (Better Publications, August 1944); "The All-American Way," *Star Spangled Comics* 28 (DC Comics, January 1944).

52. "The Justice Society of America," *All Star Comics* 16 (DC Comics, February-March 1943).

53. "A Tale of a City," *Comic Cavalcade* 9 (DC Comics, winter 1944-45).

54. Examples of the latter could be found in virtually all jungle-adventure *Captain Marvel Adventures* 11 (Fawcett Publications, May 1942). Billy Batson's valet, named "Steamboat" and portrayed in the style of a blacked-out minstrel performer with oversized white eyes and white-trimmed lips, was a comical supporting character in the series; see also the Spirit's "faithful servant" Ebony, another recurring sidkick caricature in "The Spirit," *Police Comics* 25 (Quality Comics, December 1943); see Southern vernacular commonly associated with these caricatures, in "Kid Patrol," *National Comics* 16 (Quality Comics, October 1941).

55. "Here Come the Indians," *Spy-Snatcher* 1 (Fawcett Publications, fall 1941); see also "The Justice Society of America," *All Star Comics* 12 (DC Comics, August-September 1942), wherein Japanese agents incite Southwestern American Indians to attack a U.S. Army base, and "Empire of Exiles," *Green Lantern* 6 (DC Comics, winter 1942-43), in which various tribes throughout North and South America pledge to fight for their respective governments against the Axis. Unlike the stereotypes in the previous example, these Native Americans appear to be intelligent and cosmopolitan.

3 Confronting Success

1. "Captain Marvel and the American Century," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 110 (Fawcett Publications, July 1950).

2. *New York Times*, 25 June 1946.

3. Sanderson Vanderbilt, "The Comics," *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 23 November 1945.

4. "Cold Wave Permanent," advertisement, *Captain Marvel Jr.* 40 (Fawcett Publications, July 1946); "Do You Want Longer Hair?" advertisement, *Comic Land* 1 (Fact and Fiction Publications, March 1946); "Learning Radio," advertisement, *Friction Comics* 1 (Friction House, winter 1948).

5. Mike Benton, *The Comic Book in America* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1986), 57.

6. Warren B. Kuhn, "Don't Laugh at the Comics," *Writer*, February 1951, 48.
7. James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59-60.
8. For representative examples of the postwar Green Lantern, see "The Harlequin Haunts Green Lantern," *Green Lantern* 29 (DC Comics, December 1947-January 1948); and "The Impossible Mr. Paradox," *Green Lantern* 38 (DC Comics, May-June 1949); for examples of the postwar Batman see the stories reprinted in *Batman: From the 30s to the 70s* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971), 88-230; see also *The Greatest Joker Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 64-129; and *The Greatest 1950s Stories Ever Told* (New York: DC Comics, 1990).
9. For representative examples of postwar Superman stories, see those reprinted in *Superman: From the 30s to the 70s* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971), 174-265.
10. "Supersuit," *Newsweek*, 14 April 1947, 65; "Superseding Superman," *Newsweek*, 19 July 1948, 51.
11. Longtime Superman artist Curt Swan and writer Alvin Schwartz both recalled that Weisinger insisted upon strict editorial control over all Superman stories. Weisinger, according to Swan and Schwartz, would either ignore or ridicule their suggestions for story ideas. See Curt Swan, "Curt Swan: An Interview with Superman's Main Artist," interviewed by Rich Morrissey, Dwight Decker, and Gary Groth, *Comics Journal* 73 (July 1982): 75; and Alvin Schwartz, "Alvin Schwartz," interview, *Comics Interview* 117 (1993): 25-28.
12. "Filipinos Are People," *Comic Circle* 9 (DC Comics, winter 1944-45).
13. "Room for Improvement," *World's Finest Comics* 22 (DC Comics, July-August 1946).
14. *Ibid.*; in "Meet Charley Wing," *Comic Circle* 12 (DC Comics, fall 1945), Johnny Everyman depletes the unfavorable stereotypes held about Asian Americans; and in "The American Dream," *World's Finest Comics* 22 (DC Comics, May-June 1946), Johnny urges children to recall that America is a land of diverse ethnic and racial heritage.
15. Marya Mannes, "Junior Has a Craving," *New Republic*, 17 February 1947, 23; "Talking Shop," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 23 (November 1948): 257.
16. Jack Schiff, "Public Service," *Robin Snyder's History of the Comics* 2, no. 7 (July 1991): 75; *New York Times*, 18 August 1949.
17. Schwartz, "Alvin Schwartz," 27.
18. "Know Your Country," *Mystery in Space* 2 (DC Comics, June-July 1951); "People Are People," *Mystery in Space* 13 (DC Comics, April-May 1952).
19. Ron Goulart, *The Comic Book Reader's Companion* (New York: Harper, 1993), 135.
20. Nazi war criminals are the preeminent international villains in "The Brand of the Swastika," *Master Comics* 63 (Fawcett Publications, September 1945); "Viper's Nest," *Master Comics* 67 (Fawcett Publications, April 1946); and "The Butcher," *Master Comics* 71 (Fawcett Publications, August 1946), which finds Radar pursuing Nazis who are hiding out in South America. Radar oversees U.S. and UN humanitarian relief to Europe in "Guest for Death," *Master Comics* 78 (Fawcett Publications, April 1947); "The Food Train," *Master Comics* 84 (Fawcett Publications, October 1947); and "Food for Thought," *Master Comics* 75 (Fawcett Publications, February 1947); see also "The International Bank Mystery," *Master Comics* 68 (Fawcett Publications, May 1946), which finds the profiteering fascist leader of a European nation hoarding the money loaned to his war-ravaged country by the UN's International Bank.

21. "Radar, the International Policeman," *Master Comics* 54 (Fawcett Publications, September 1944); "The Death-Dealing Playboy," *Master Comics* 79 (Fawcett Publications, May 1947); see also "The Sinister Smugglers," *Master Comics* 64 (Fawcett Publications, November-December 1945), in which an American businessman helps other American right-wingers smuggle Nazi war criminals into the United States in order to build an underground fascist army.
22. "The Carrels of Crime," *Master Comics* 62 (Fawcett Publications, July 1945); see also "The Red Cross Mystery," *Master Comics* 72 (Fawcett Publications, September 1946), wherein Radar brings to justice a foreign oil magnate and fascist named Francisco Perono, who has been using slave labor in his industry to help him under-sell the international market.
23. "The Border Incident," *Master Comics* 77 (Fawcett Publications, March 1947).
24. "Arsenal of Hate," *Master Comics* 65 (Fawcett Publications, January 1946); "Mein Kampf—Post-War Version," *Master Comics* 68 (Fawcett Publications, May 1946).
25. "Captain Marvel and the Imperfect Perfection," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 113 (Fawcett Publications, October 1950).
26. "Captain Marvel: Citizen of the Universe," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 111 (Fawcett Publications, August 1950); see also "Captain Marvel and the United Worlds," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 97 (Fawcett Publications, June 1949).
27. "Atom," *Atom* 1 (Spark Publications, February 1946); Fawcett's Radar also endorsed international control of the atom bomb.
28. *Ibid.* in "Mission to Calcutta," *Master Comics* 80 (Fawcett Publications, June 1947); an Indian scientist invents a bomb even more powerful than the atom bomb and trusts Radar to deliver it safely to the UN for responsible international control.
29. "Captain Marvel and the World of Mr. Atom," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 90 (Fawcett Publications, November 1948); "Captain Marvel and the End of the World," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 71 (Fawcett Publications, April 1947).
30. "Captain Marvel and the Missing Atom," *Captain Marvel Adventures* 104 (Fawcett Publications, January 1950).
31. Charles Phillips, *Archie: His First Fifty Years* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991); *Archie Americana Series: Best of the Fifties* (Manamontek, N.Y.: Archie Comic Publications, 1992); "The Old Home Town," *Archie Comics* 35 (Archie Comics, November-December 1948) explicitly underscores small town values; Archie affirms respect for parents and adult authority in "Pop's Tops," *Archie Comics* 58 (Archie Comics, September-October 1951); and "There Oughta Be a Law," *Archie's Pal and Gals* 3 (Archie Comics, 1954-55); Betty and Veronica chase boys in almost every issue, but a good example of their self-assertion is "The Low-Down Highbrow," *Archie Comics* 58 (Archie Comics, September-October 1952), in which Veronica explicitly values intelligence over typical male buffoonery.
32. See the cover of *The Sub-Mariner* 24 (Marvel Comics, winter 1947-48); "Golden Girl," *Captain America Comics* 66 (Marvel Comics, summer 1947); of *Platoon Lady* 17 (Fox Features Syndicate, April 1948).
33. Trina Robbins and Catherine Yronwode, *Women and the Comics* (Guernsey, Calif.: Eclipse Books, 1985), 52-57. For a few of the many examples of sadomasochism, see the adventures of Tiger Girl, who ruled the jungles of India with a whip in "Tiger Girl," *Fight Comics* 53 (Fiction House, December 1947); in "Space Rangers," *Planet Comics* 40 (Fiction House, January 1946) a cruel alien woman keeps her slaves in line with a whip; in "Kyo Kirby," *Fight Comics* 49 (Fiction House, April

1947) a female villain binds a male victim with rope and places her high-heeled foot on his head.

34. See William W. Savage Jr., *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 75-77.

35. "Camilla," *Jungle Comics* 96 (Fiction House, December 1947); see also "Camilla," *Jungle Comics* 74 (Fiction House, February 1946), wherein Camilla must pacify a hostile native uprising so that the jungle can be cleared for white traders.

36. "Sheena, Queen of the Jungle," *Jumbo Comics* 104 (Fiction House, October 1947); "Sheena, Queen of the Jungle," *Jumbo Comics* 149 (Fiction House, July 1951).

37. Warren I. Susman with the assistance of Edward Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States?" in Larry May, ed., *Reassessing America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 22-33.

38. Mike Benton, *Crime Comics: The Illustrated History* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1993), 19-21.

39. *Ibid.*, 33.

40. See for example, "Agency for Crimes," *Gang Busters* 1 (DC Comics, December 1947-January 1948); and "Warden of the Big House," *Gang Busters* 30 (DC Comics, October-November 1952), which undertook the formidable proposition of casting a prison warden as a hero.

41. "The Wild Spruce of the Laughing Sadist—Herman Duker," *Crime Does Not Pay* 57 (Lev Gleason Publications, November 1947).

42. "Carlo Barrone, the Murderous Bully," *Crime Does Not Pay* 53 (Lev Gleason Publications, July 1947).

43. "The Woman Who Wouldn't Die," *Crime Does Not Pay* 52 (Lev Gleason Publications, June 1947); discussed with illustrations in Benton, *Crime Comics*, 50-51.

44. "Bullet Man of the Bowery," *Crime Must Pay the Penalty* 2 (Junior Books, June 1948); Benton, *Crime Comics*, 42. For an example of the crude style of Fox's crime comic books, see "James Wayburn Hall—the Arkansas Butcher," *Murder Incorporated* 5 (Fox Features Syndicate, September 1948); "Murder, Morphine, and Me," *True Crime Comics* 2 (Magazine Village, May 1947).

45. "Machine-Gun Kelly," *Crime Does Not Pay* 65 (Lev Gleason Publications, July 1948).

46. "The Short but Furious Crime Career of Irene Dague and Her Yes-Man Husband," *Crime Does Not Pay* 57 (Lev Gleason Publications, November 1947); "Mike Alex," *Crime Does Not Pay* 67 (Lev Gleason Publications, September 1948); "Bonnie Parker," *Crime Does Not Pay* 57 (Lev Gleason Publications, November 1947). See also "Adam and Eve—Crime Incorporated," *Lazbriekers Always Lose* 1 (Marvel Comics, spring 1948); and "The Cleveland Vulture," *Crime Must Pay the Penalty* 7 (Junior Books, April 1949), wherein a domineering woman goes a small time burglar into committing more ambitious crimes for her.

47. "Mike Alex," *Crime Does Not Pay* 67 (Lev Gleason Publications, September 1948); "Albert Judson," *Crime Does Not Pay* 65 (Lev Gleason Publications, July 1948).

48. "New Hope for Bad Skin Sufferers," advertisement in *Crime and Punishment* 31 (Lev Gleason Publications, October 1950); "Redoo-U-Suit," advertisement in *Crime and Punishment* 36 (Lev Gleason Publications, March 1951); "Kitchen Knives" and "Mutual Hospitalization Insurance," advertisements in *Crime and Punishment* 35 (Lev Gleason Publications, February 1951); and "Sportsman Knives" and "Dick Tracy Tommy-Gun," advertisements in *Crime Does Not Pay* 53 (Lev Gleason Publications, July 1947).

4 Youth Crisis

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2. Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 44-46; Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 26-41.

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4. Reita I. Bean, "The Comics Bogy," *American Home*, November 1945, 29.

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8. Marya Mannes, "Junior Has a Craving," *New Republic*, 17 February 1947, 20-23.

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12. Legman, *Love and Death*, 41-50.

13. Legman, *Love and Death*, 41-50.

14. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, 94-95; "Psychiatry in Harlem," *Time*, 1 December 1947, 50-52.

15. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, 96; Fredric Wertham, "The Dreams That Heal," *New Republic*, 3 November 1947, 25-27.

16. Crist, "Horror in the Nursery," 22-23, 96-97.

17. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, 98.

18. "Puddles of Blood," *Time*, 29 March 1948, 66-68; Fredric Wertham, "The Comics . . . Very Funny," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 May 1948, 29.

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23. Fredric Wertham, "The Comics . . . Very Funny," 6-7.

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25. *Ibid.*, 27-29.

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