

COMIC BOOK

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BO **NATION**

**The Transformation of Youth Culture
in America**

Bradford W. Wright

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Superheroes for the Common Man

**The Birth of the
Comic Book Industry,
1933–1941**

It's a simple story, as familiar as any in the English language. A doomed planet explodes. A scientist places his infant son in a rocket ship destined for Earth. An elderly couple, the Kents, adopt the boy and name him Clark. Growing up, the youth demonstrates awesome abilities. He can leap tall buildings, bend steel in his bare hands, and outrun speeding locomotives. Fortunately, he pledges to champion truth, justice, and the American way. To the unsuspecting world, Clark Kent may appear to be just another mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, but he is no ordinary man. He is, of course, Superman.¹

Superman may have arrived from a distant planet, but his real origins lay in Cleveland, Ohio. It was there in 1934 that two high-school students and aspiring comic strip writers named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the character. Lower-middle-class, second-generation Jewish immigrants, Siegel and Shuster believed in the American dream and embraced popular culture. Shy and unpopular in school, unsuccessful with girls, and insecure about their bespectacled appearance and physical abilities, they read body-building magazines, lost themselves in science-fiction magazines, and nurtured fantasies of power and success.² If only it could be as easy as removing one's glasses. The epitome of the modern adolescent fantasy, Superman was the ideal that spawned an industry.

The Origins of the Comic Book Industry

The American comic book industry is a twentieth-century phenomenon with origins in the late nineteenth century. While the juxtaposition of words and images is as old as language itself, the nearest precursor to comic books is the newspaper comic strip, which became a familiar daily distraction for Americans as early as the 1890s. Syndicated strips like *The Yellow Kid*, *Katzenjammer Kids*, and *Mutt and Jeff* satirized the foibles of domestic life, social relations, and ethnicity in the tradition of vaudeville routines. Because of their humorous qualities, they became known as comic strips or “funnies.” Even later, when newspaper strips and their offspring in magazine format featured serious narrative content, the term *comic* stuck. The first comic books perpetuated this trend with titles like *Famous Funnies*, *Funnies on Parade*, and *The Funnies*. However inappropriate it might be, the term *comic* has since referred to the medium of sequential art, regardless of the content.³

The earliest comic books derived directly from comic strips, but in many respects they owed more to pulp magazines. Most of the early comic book publishers, in fact, came from the pulp magazine industry. Popularly dubbed “pulp” magazines because of the cheap paper on which they were printed, these publications in turn have antecedents in the sensational dime novels of the Civil War era. Like newspaper comics, pulp magazines enjoyed great popularity during the early decades of the twentieth century, but, unlike the widely appealing comics, pulps often catered to more offbeat tastes. Most featured action, fantasy, adventure, and suspense tales written by low-priced talent. Although some pulp writers, like Edgar Rice Burroughs, Raymond Chandler, and Ray Bradbury, went on to achieve greater literary success and fame, they were the exceptions. Pulps delivered cheap thrills and made few intellectual demands on their authors and their audience. For ten to fifteen cents, readers could purchase one of as many as two hundred fifty pulp titles available at newsstands each month. Titles like *The Shadow*, *Captain Satan*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Startling Tales* sometimes went to considerable lengths in their appeal to the sense of the lurid, sadistic, and grotesque. Existing alongside the well-documented 1930s market for best-selling novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Gone with the Wind* was a less-heralded audience for pulp magazine tales like “Volunteer Corpse Brigade,” “Cult of the Living Carcass,” and “New Girls for Satan’s Blood Ballet.” The proliferation of such bizarre literature during the interwar years indicates that there existed a lucrative, and mostly young, market with tastes well outside of the mainstream.⁴

In January 1929, pulp fiction met the comics when the pulp heroes Tarzan and Buck Rogers debuted as newspaper comic strips, soon to be followed by other adventure strips like *Dick Tracy*, *Flash Gordon*, and *The Phantom*.⁵ Also in that year, the newspaper comic strip appeared for the first time in something resembling a pulp magazine format. Since the turn of the century, newspaper syndicates had periodically compiled hardcover collections of comic strip reprints for sale in bookstores. In 1929 Dell Publishing became the first to experiment with a weekly comics magazine distributed to newsstands. The tabloid-sized publication, called *The Funnies*, featured original comic strips, puzzles, and jokes. Dell canceled the series the next year, after thirty-six issues failed to sell very well. But this experiment inspired other entrepreneurs to explore the commercial potential of comics magazines.⁶

The Eastern Color Printing Company in Waterbury, Connecticut, handled the color printing for pulp magazine covers, newspaper syndicates, and Dell's *The Funnies*. In 1933 two sales employees at Eastern Color, Harry Wildenberg and Max Gaines, discovered that the standard seven-by-nine-inch printing plates, used to print Sunday comic pages about twice that size, could also print two reduced comic pages side-by-side on a tabloid-sized page. When folded in half and bound together, these pages would fit into an economical eight-by-eleven-inch pulp magazine of color comics. Gaines and Wildenberg proposed that the company print such magazines for manufacturers who could use them as advertising premiums and giveaways. Eastern Color agreed to support the effort and printed 10,000 copies of *Funnies on Parade* for Proctor and Gamble. After this venture succeeded, Eastern Color followed with larger print runs of two comic books featuring reprints of syndicated comic strips like *Mutt and Jeff* and *Joe Palooka* for Canada Dry, Kinney Shoes, and other youth-oriented manufacturers. In 1934, Eastern Color printed a half-million copies of *Skippy's Own Book of Comics* for Phillips Toothpaste, which gave them away to listeners of the *Skippy* radio show.⁷

Max Gaines suspected that comic books had market potential beyond these limited ventures. Though he was an aggressive and resourceful salesman, he had fallen into financial difficulties during the early 1930s and saw in the comic magazines an opportunity to lift his family out of the Depression. He persuaded Dell Publishing to finance Eastern Color's printing of 35,000 copies of *Famous Funnies, Series I*, a sixty-four-page collection of comic strip reprints distributed directly to chain stores for sale at ten cents an issue. The issue sold out, but Dell remained cautious. Surveys of potential advertisers revealed skepticism

about the new comic magazines. Dell approached the American News Company, a national distributor based in New York City, about possible newsstand distribution. American News showed little interest, however, so Dell withdrew from the deal with Eastern Color and released its option to the name and concept of *Famous Funnies*.⁸ Gaines and Eastern Color continued the project anyway, and the American News Company, encouraged perhaps by recent newspaper stories about the popularity of "the funnies," cautiously agreed to distribute 250,000 copies of *Famous Funnies, Series 2*. The first issue, cover-dated July 1934, lost Eastern Color over \$4,000. The sixth issue finally turned a profit, and by the twelfth *Famous Funnies* was netting Eastern Color about \$30,000 each month.⁹

Eastern Color's monopoly in the comic book field ended as soon as other publishers noticed its success. By 1938, an embryonic comic book industry comprised half a dozen publishers, most of whom were packaging reprints of newspaper comic strips. Dell Publishing reentered the comic book business in 1936 with titles like *Popular Comics*, *The Funnies*, and *The Comics*. From his new job at a printing company called the McLure Syndicate, Gaines supplied Dell with comics like *Dick Tracy*, *Little Orphan Annie*, and *Terry and the Pirates*. A businessman, not an artist, Gaines seemed to have little interest in the aesthetics of the medium that he was pioneering. His young editor Sheldon Mayer recalled that "it was a schlock operation . . . we bought the [comics] material for practically nothing and slapped it together."¹⁰

By 1936, newspaper syndicates that had been content to sell the printing rights to their strips for only five to seven dollars per page began to publish their own comic books. William Randolph Hearst's King Features Syndicate put out a line of comic books featuring characters like Popeye and Flash Gordon. The United Features Syndicate entered the field with reprints of its leading humor and adventure strips, *Li'l Abner* and *Tarzan*. Backed up by large capital, enjoying established distribution channels, and using characters with demonstrated market appeal, these publishers initially enjoyed the industry's highest circulation. Yet the field's future belonged not to the syndicates but to those entrepreneurs who suspected that comic books could be more than just repackaged comic strips. The future resided in the imagination and business instincts of individuals determined to somehow make comic books into a distinct entertainment medium.

In 1935, a forty-five-year-old former U.S. Army Major and pulp magazine writer named Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson started up a

small operation in New York *Comics*, featuring artists. The result avoided the in-cates. Remember a charlatan, Wheeler-Nicholson, having sufficient van, recalled man. . . . We v

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small operation called National Allied Publishing. From a tiny office in New York City, Wheeler-Nicholson launched *New Fun* and *New Comics*, featuring original comic material created by freelance cartoonists. The results generally resembled standard newspaper funnies but avoided the increasingly expensive licensing fees charged by the syndicates. Remembered by his associates as an eccentric and something of a charlatan, Wheeler-Nicholson started his publishing venture without having sufficient capital or business acumen. His editor, Vincent Sullivan, recalled that Wheeler-Nicholson "wasn't a very good businessman. . . . We were struggling all the time."¹¹

Advertising for freelance contributors willing to work at a rate of five dollars per page, Wheeler-Nicholson attracted young, untried cartoonists hoping to break into the comic strip field as well as experienced but unemployed illustrators needing temporary work. Despite the enthusiastic and occasionally accomplished efforts of these cartoonists, the titles sold poorly. Distributors were still loathe to handle them, vendors did not want to give them valuable newsstand space, and readers seemed wary of gambling their ten cents on a collection of unfamiliar funnies. As bundles of comic books returned to his office unsold, Wheeler-Nicholson fell increasingly into debt to his staff and, more importantly, to his distributor, the Independent News Company. In 1937, Independent's founders, Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz, entered into partnership with Wheeler-Nicholson and contributed the capital to launch a third title, *Detective Comics*. From this title, the company later took its new name, DC.¹²

As the title promised, *Detective Comics* differed from the "funny" comic books that had come before it. Announcing itself loudly on the newsstands with a sinister Oriental face leering from the cover, *Detective Comics* signaled a new direction for the industry. It featured adventure and mystery series like "Speed Saunders and the River Patrol," "Buck Regan, Spy," and "Claws of the Dragon," derived not from newspaper funnies but from movie serials and pulp fiction. Visibly more adventurous than other comic books, it contained more inventive page lay-outs, larger panels, and heavier shading to create atmosphere. Most importantly, *Detective Comics* signaled a new formula for comic books. Humor was giving way to crime-fighting.¹³

In 1938 Donenfeld and Liebowitz bought out Wheeler-Nicholson's interests in the company. Under their sound management, DC grew into a more viable publishing operation. Liebowitz managed business affairs in their New York office, while editor Vincent Sullivan supervised the work of freelance writers and artists. Their control of the

Independent News Company allowed Donenfeld and Liebowitz to circulate their own comic books and establish connections to build a solid national distribution network. The sales of their comic books, still without a marketable “star,” remained unspectacular for the time being, but their investments would soon yield results far beyond anyone’s expectations.¹⁴

To accommodate the fledgling publishers, several comic art studios—or “shops,” as they were called within the industry—opened up. Staffed with editors and freelance cartoonists, the shops sold completed comic book stories to publishers who lacked the resources or knowledge to produce their own material. One of these studios was the Universal Phoenix Syndicate, or the Eisner-Iger shop, established by Will Eisner, an accomplished cartoonist in his early twenties, and S. M. Iger, an amateur cartoonist, entrepreneur, and editor of a failed entertainment magazine. Both had been struggling financially, and, according to Eisner, the two men financed the entire operation with fifteen dollars. They promptly attracted a number of clients, including a pulp magazine publisher called Fiction House and Everett M. Arnold, an entrepreneur from the printing business. Shops like this one filled a crucial function in launching the comic book industry, because, as Eisner recalled, “Most of the publishers had no way of knowing whether or not they could even produce the material; they didn’t even understand how to produce it.”¹⁵

Comic book production in the shops was a collaborative process, much like a creative assembly line. “We made comic book features pretty much the way Ford made cars,” Eisner recalled. “I would write and design the characters, somebody else would pencil them in, somebody else would ink, somebody else would letter.” This process contributed to the visual sameness and formulaic stories of many early comic books. After selling the completed stories to publishers and paying the freelance staff, Eisner and Iger split a net profit of \$1.50 per page. It made for a small but relatively profitable business during the Depression years. As Eisner later boasted, “I got very rich before I was twenty-two.”¹⁶

The shops attracted young cartoonists fresh out of art school and self-trained enthusiasts with little experience beyond doodling. Also on the shop staffs were older, more experienced illustrators and cartoonists who needed whatever work they could find in lean economic times, even if it meant stooping to draw crude “funny-books.” Comic book work for freelancers was neither prestigious nor profitable, and it was for the most part an anonymous affair. Few artists received credits or

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bylines for their work, and those who did frequently used pseudonyms anyway. Publishers generally preferred their freelancers to remain anonymous so that readers would not easily notice inconsistencies resulting from staff turnover.¹⁷ The work-for-hire system, in which the publisher claimed all rights to the characters created for its titles, further encouraged this anonymity.

Artists often did not want to be publicly associated with their comic book work in any case, fearing it would damage whatever professional reputation they hoped to achieve in other fields. In the artistic profession, comic books ranked just above pornography. Eisner recalled that the comic book industry was "a kind of artistic ghetto in which people with authentic, if offbeat talents had to suffer the disdain of the mainstream." Many of the artists approached the field "as kind of a stepping place . . . dreaming of becoming a syndicated cartoonist for the newspapers, or going into book illustration." While Eisner and his colleagues generally enjoyed their work, they did not suspect that comic books had much of a future.¹⁸ Indeed, they may not have had, were it not for the arrival of a savior from the planet Krypton.

The Industry That Superman Built

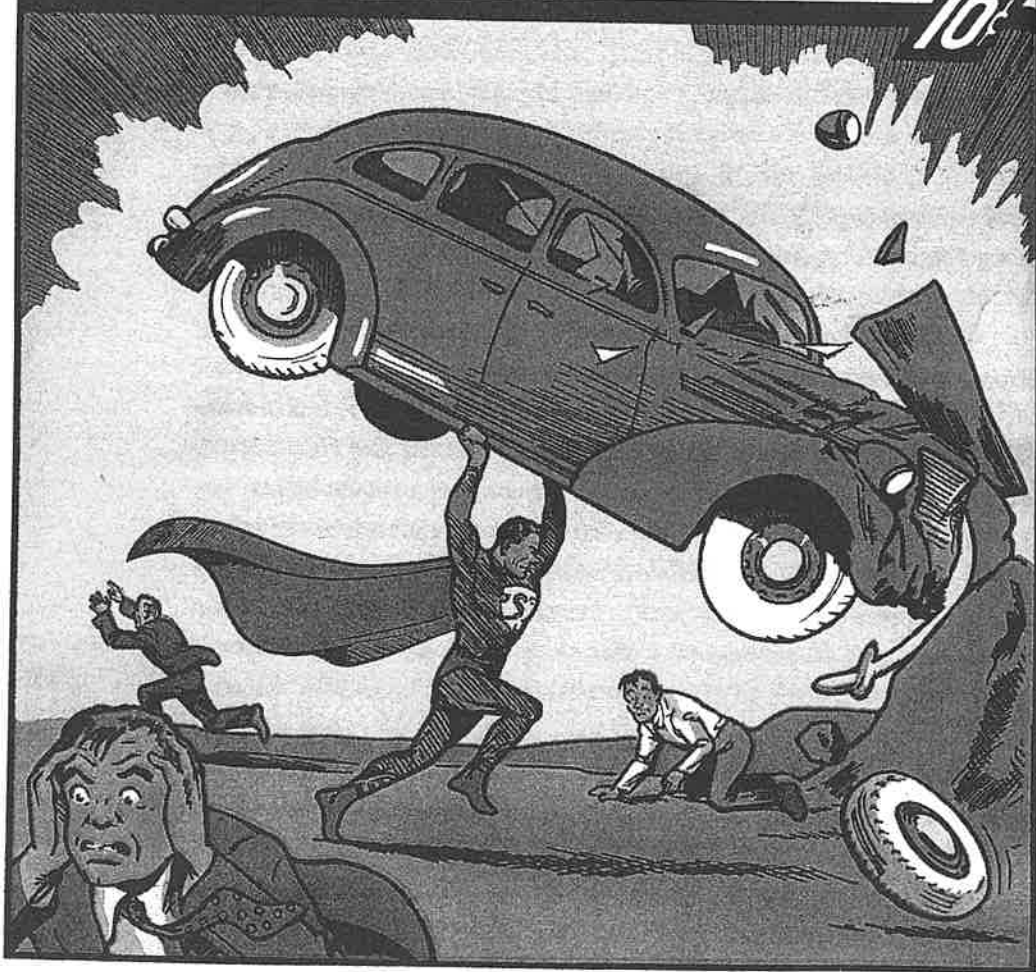
Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had devised a concept destined to be popular with young readers, but the middle-aged men who ran the newspaper syndicates failed to see the appeal of Superman. The young cartoonists saw one company after another reject their proposed comic strip. To get by in the meantime, they did freelance work for the new comic book publishers. They sold adventure features like "Slam Bradley" to DC but held back Superman, still hoping to launch him as a newspaper strip.¹⁹ In early 1938, a copy of the Superman strip was in Max Gaines's office at the McLure Syndicate, where it was about to be rejected once again and returned to the authors. Gaines's young editor, Sheldon Mayer, liked the strip but could not persuade his employer to accept it. On Mayer's recommendation, though, Gaines sent the strip to his associate Harry Donenfeld, who, with Liebowitz, was about to launch a new DC comic book title called *Action Comics*.²⁰ Their editor, Vincent Sullivan, proposed they use Superman as the lead feature. DC asked Siegel and Shuster if they would be willing to cut and paste the sample strips into a thirteen-page comic book story and accept payment at the rate of ten dollars per page. Having all but given up hope of ever seeing Superman in newspaper comics, Siegel and Shuster accepted the offer. As part of the deal, they signed a standard release form giving sole copyright ownership of their idea to the company. It was

No. 1

JUNE, 1938

ACTION COMICS

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an unhappy prospect would see him in went to work on

The first issue of Superman on the cover. Menfeld grew confident in the red-and-blue color head. "He really believes it; that it will sell 200,000 copies per issue. The print run for *Action Comics* was 100,000. I remembered the surveys revealed that so in 1939 DC decided to a single character.

Audiences were attracted to that Superman. Siegel and Shuster were a wise guy, similar to the other became popular. He was fighting with the mob and humiliated. The artwork evinced a quality to the character that the man had little to do with. He was a female killer who tries to shoot her wrist. Although Superman's romance with Lois was contemporary, she put her faith in Clark Kent and his alter ego, Superman, on the cover. The allure of the character was to be captured.

Cover of *Action Comics*, June 1938, an important comic book published, DC

...NE, 1938



an unhappy prospect, but as Siegel shrugged, "at least this way [they would] see him in print." So they sold Superman to DC for \$130 and went to work on his first comic book adventure.²¹

The first issue of *Action Comics*, cover-dated June 1938, featured Superman on the cover and in the lead story. According to Mayer, Donenfeld grew concerned when he saw the cover image depicting the red-and-blue costumed Superman holding an automobile above his head. "He really got worried," Mayer recalled. "He felt nobody would believe it; that it was ridiculous—crazy." Jack Liebowitz cautiously had 200,000 copies printed but received dealers' requests for more. He kept the print run small until the fourth issue sold out. By the seventh issue, *Action Comics* was selling over half-a-million copies each month. Mayer remembered that "the reader response was immediate," and newsstand surveys revealed Superman to be the most popular feature in the title.²² So in 1939 DC launched *Superman*, the first comic book title devoted to a single character.

Audiences familiar with the rather stiff and morally upright character that Superman later became would be surprised to discover that Siegel and Shuster's original character was actually a tough and cynical wise guy, similar to the hard-boiled detectives like Sam Spade who also became popular during the Depression years. Superman took to crime-fighting with an adolescent glee, routinely taking the opportunity to mock and humiliate his adversaries as he thrashed them. Shuster's crude artwork evinced a childlike exuberance, giving an added adolescent quality to the stories. It was a distinctly masculine fantasy, too. Superman had little use for women. When in his first adventure an attractive female killer tries to seduce him, he does not waver. Then when she tries to shoot him, he crushes the gun and threatens to do the same to her wrist. Although arguably a profeminist character of sorts, Superman's romantic interest, Lois Lane, had few admirable qualities from a contemporary male perspective. While physically attractive and spunky, she put her career ahead of romance with the kind but boring Clark Kent and pined after Superman, whom she could never possess. Superman, on the other hand, was too strong and self-assured to succumb to the allure of a beautiful woman. Inevitably, Lois's chief function was to be captured and await rescue by her hero.²³

Cover of *Action Comics* 1 (DC Comics, June 1938). The most important comic book ever published, DC's *Action Comics* 1

introduced the world to Superman.
Art by Joe Shuster.

Siegel and Shuster, however unconsciously, had created a brilliant twentieth-century variation on a classic American hero type. The most pervasive myth in American culture is that of the Western frontier hero, who resolves tensions between the wilderness and civilization while embodying the best virtues of both environments himself. Twentieth-century popular culture has adapted the Western and frontier metaphors to meet contemporary tastes and concerns, but the explicit problems and solutions expressed in the Western myth are historically most relevant to American civilization before the twentieth century.²⁴ Postindustrial American society raised new tensions. Whereas heroes of the previous centuries, like Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, and Wyatt Earp, could conquer and tame the savage American frontier, twentieth-century America demanded a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven, and anonymous mass society.

The distance between the American dream and reality seemed particularly large during the Great Depression. Pervasive scarcity and unemployment frustrated consumption and called into question the Victorian middle-class axiom that success follows hard work. The old heroes seemed out of touch with the suffering millions. The self-made men of yesterday, the Herbert Hoovers and Horatio Algers, had become the greedy fat-cats and "economic royalists" of the Depression. Where were the new heroes to be found? They did not emerge—as they did in other nations—from the political extremes, despite the efforts of leftist intellectuals working to forge a radical community vision and right-wing elements enamored with European fascism. Instead, the new heroes in Depression America turned out to be the American people themselves.²⁵

From Depression-era popular culture, there came a passionate celebration of the common man. The idea that virtue resided within regular, unassuming Americans found expression in the novels of John Steinbeck, the films of John Ford and Frank Capra, and the compositions of Aaron Copland, as well as in the everyman qualities of Warner Brothers' Bugs Bunny cartoons and integrated big-band swing music. Folk singer Woodie Guthrie wrote new national anthems for the poor and forgotten Americans. Gangster movies of the early 1930s usurped the Victorian myth of the self-made man and perverted it into a gloriously self-destructive revenge narrative for the common man. Even real-life gangsters like John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde captured the imagination and vicarious sympathy of dislocated citizens

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who appreciated the criminals' assault on financial institutions. Despite their subversive implications, all of these cultural narratives and icons actually worked to fashion a new and more inclusive concept of American identity. They served therapeutic, patriotic, and even conservative cultural ends. For why would the common man rise up to take something that he felt was already in his possession? Franklin Roosevelt's most ardent admirers credit him with forestalling a domestic revolution during the Great Depression. But much of the credit must also go to the powerful sense of shared national purpose forged by the creators of popular culture.²⁶

Into this cultural exchange entered Superman. Siegel and Shuster's comic book stories affirmed the young, alienated, and dispossessed "Clark Kents" of society in their desire to commit to an inclusive national culture. The young creators cast their superhero as a "champion of the oppressed . . . devoted to helping those in need!" In his initial episode, Superman saves a falsely accused prisoner from a lynch mob, produces evidence that frees an innocent woman on death row, and defends a woman about to be beaten by her husband. In the second issue of *Action Comics*, Superman crushes a conspiracy involving a U.S. senator, a lobbyist, and a munitions manufacturer who wish to embroil the United States in a foreign war. He then ends the fraudulent Latin American war by informing the belligerents that they have been manipulated by greedy American industrialists. Echoing the Nye Committee's conclusion that "merchants of death" had conspired to involve the United States in the Great War, Superman warns that moneyed self-interest remained a menace to the national welfare.²⁷

Morality tales attacking the evil of greed dominate the first several years of Superman's adventures. One early story opens with Superman rescuing a miner trapped in a cave-in. The injured miner later tells reporter Clark Kent that the mine tragedy could have been avoided if the owner and foreman had heeded warnings about unsafe working conditions. Kent then interviews the mine owner and asks him if he has arranged compensation for the injured miner. Indignant, the owner answers, "Certainly not!" When Kent inquires about the allegedly faulty safety devices in the mine, the owner retorts, "There are no safety hazards in my mine! But if there were . . . what of it? I'm a businessman, not a humanitarian!" Later, Superman traps the owner in a cave-in and lets him experience the misery that the miners have to endure. The owner discovers that the safety devices he had boasted of fail to operate. In tears, he laments his own callousness and failure to

appreciate the plight of his workers. Superman finally extricates the owner and applauds his pledge to make his mines "the safest in the country" and his workers "the best treated" in the land.²⁸

Other Superman stories explore the conflict between corporate greed and the public welfare. One finds Superman crushing a plot by wealthy American financiers working for a foreign power to manipulate the stock exchange and plunge the nation into another depression. His mission accomplished, Superman assures readers that "the nation is once again returning to its march toward prosperity!"²⁹

In many cautionary tales Superman appeared as a sort of progressive "super-reformer." In a crusade for automobile safety nearly thirty years before anyone heard of Ralph Nader, Superman destroys a car factory after finding that the owner has been using "inferior metals and parts so as to make higher profits at the cost of human lives!" Later, after investigating the collapse of a subway tunnel and the murder of a municipal safety inspector, he discovers that the president of the tunnel construction company has been grafting off of the city by using cheap and unsafe building materials.³⁰

In another story, Superman encounters a pair of wealthy and murderous stockbrokers who sell worthless stocks to hundreds of clients, some of whom commit suicide after losing their life savings. Superman, not content to simply turn the crooks over to the police, first devises a complex scheme to swindle them out of all of their cash and investments so that they must endure the humiliating poverty that they had inflicted on others. Once the brokers are themselves broke, Superman delights in their misery and advises them to stop selling stock and start selling shoelaces instead.³¹

Superman also championed social reform and government assistance to the poor. One story opens with an adolescent being arrested and tried for assault and battery. The boy's mother asks the judge for leniency. "He's only like all the other boys in our neighborhood," she pleads. "Hard, resentful, underprivileged . . . he might have been a good boy except for his environment!" Observing the trial, Clark Kent agrees and considers the judge's sentence of two years in reform school too harsh. As Superman, he tells the neighborhood boys, "It's not entirely your fault that you're delinquent—it's these slums—your poor living conditions—if there was only some way I could remedy it!" And remedy it he does, by demolishing the slums himself in defiance of the legal authorities, even fighting off the police and National Guard when they try to stop him. Where the hesitant and inefficient legal process fails, the one-man wrecking crew succeeds. In place of the demolished

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tenements, the government constructs splendid, shining public housing to give the underprivileged children a healthier and safer neighborhood.³²

Superman's crusade against greed and injustice sometimes led him into conflict with the legal and political establishment. While he fought rigorously for social justice, traditional authorities appeared slow, inefficient, and occasionally even corrupt. In one episode, Superman cracks down on city authorities for not dealing effectively with the problem of motorist safety: the police are accepting bribes from speeding drivers instead of ticketing them. Even the mayor flaunts the laws by driving recklessly until he receives an angry visit from Superman. In another story, Superman uncovers a gambling racket involving the commissioner of police.³³

Superman's America was something of a paradox—a land where the virtue of the poor and the weak towered over that of the wealthy and powerful. Yet the common man could not expect to prevail on his own in this America, and neither could the progressive reformers who tried to fight for justice within the system. Only the righteous violence of Superman, it seemed, could relieve deep social problems—a tacit recognition that in American society it took some might to make right after all. Author and cartoonist Jules Feiffer called Superman's world a "fantasy with a cynically realistic base." These stories offered an escape but remained within the reader's frame of reference. For, as Feiffer cynically observed, "once the odds were appraised honestly it was apparent you had to be super to get on in this world."³⁴

Superman won a large audience very quickly. At a time when most comic book titles sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue, each issue of *Action Comics* (featuring one Superman story each) regularly sold about 900,000 copies per month. Each bimonthly issue of the *Superman* title, devoted entirely to the character, sold an average of 1,300,000 copies. The Superman phenomenon transcended comic books. The McLure Syndicate, having earlier turned down the opportunity to be the first to publish Superman, paid DC for the rights to print a Superman newspaper strip, which debuted in January 1939. Siegel and Shuster wrote and drew the strip, thus fulfilling their long-time dream.³⁵ Beginning in 1939, the adventures of Superman could be heard on a nationally syndicated radio program opening with the memorable lines: "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!" Between 1941 and 1943,

the Fleischer animation studio also released a series of lavishly produced Superman cartoons for Paramount. And Superman's licensed image sold a myriad of products ranging from toy "Krypto-Rayguns" to, literally, sliced bread.

A later spokesman for DC Comics claimed that "Superman literally created this industry." It is difficult to overstate the importance of the character. Superman established the essential vocabulary of comic books. As Sheldon Mayer later explained, "Jerry [Siegel] was way ahead of us on what was right for comics."³⁶ Costumed superheroes became the defining fantasy of comic books, largely because it was a fantasy that this medium could indulge better than any other. As William W. Savage Jr. observed,

Comic books could carry heroes beyond the limits of possibility imposed by radio (sounds without pictures and thus without depth or significant personification) and film (sounds with pictures, but constrained by technology). Radio, short on data, gave the consumer's imagination too much latitude, while film, rife with data, refused to give it enough. Comic books, however accidentally, managed to split the difference. They could show whatever the artist could draw, their lines and colors directing imagination, their balloon-held texts defining time and space. Comic book artists and writers could produce that which could be conceived, which was more than the creators of motion pictures and radio programs could claim.³⁷

Superman became the comic book industry's first "star," and DC Comics had him. By 1940 DC enjoyed healthy national distribution for all of its titles and average sales of 800,000 copies per issue, nearly 300,000 more than its closest competitor. According to a 1941 article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Superman* title alone grossed \$950,000 for DC in 1940. For the time being, Siegel and Shuster also shared in some of the wealth earned by their creation. The *Post* reported that they each earned thirty-five dollars per page for their comic book work at DC—the highest rate paid in the industry—and five percent of all other revenue earned from Superman. Their position was by no means secure, however, since DC was under no obligation to retain their services in order to keep Superman.³⁸

Superman had a strong residual impact on the rest of the industry, which expanded as new publishers entered the field and flooded the market with various imitations of him. Pulp magazine publishers and opportunistic entrepreneurs entered the comic book business looking for quick and easy profits with little financial outlay. Publishers could purchase the stories inexpensively from newspaper syndicates, from

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comic art shops, or directly from freelance artists. They needed only a small office, wherein an editor, or sometimes the publisher himself, could select and package the features and send them to a printer. The printed comic books would then be shipped to regional distributors and wholesalers who sent them on to newsstands, chain stores, and other outlets selling popular magazines. A publisher usually sold his comic books to a distributor for 5¼ cents per copy; the distributor would sell them to wholesalers for 6 cents each. A retailer purchased the issues for 7½ cents each and put them on newsstands with a standard retail price of 10 cents. Retailers had the option to return any unsold issues to publishers for a refund, but in these booming years refunds averaged less than 30 percent. Joe Simon, who worked as an editor and writer for several publishers, recalled that since national distributors were willing to advance most of the capital to publishers and printers were always eager to back a line of comic books in order to keep their presses rolling. "It was not unusual for a publisher unfamiliar with the comic book business to take a fling at the field, fail, and come out with a profit."³⁹

One of the first to exploit Superman's appeal was Victor Fox, a Wall Street businessman and accountant for Harry Donenfeld at DC. When Fox noticed Superman's rising sales figures, he set up his own publishing operation at an office in the same building as DC's and contracted with the Eisner-Iger shop for a series of comic book stories. Fox asked Will Eisner to create a costumed superhero very similar to Superman. The result, Wonderman, was in fact too similar, and DC filed a lawsuit for copyright infringement. Fox, who reportedly liked to pace the floors of his office smoking a cigar and boasting, "I'm the King of Comics," promptly canceled the series but remained in the business and prospered.⁴⁰ As Fox's editor-in-chief, Joe Simon faced, as he put it, "the bleak prospect of turning out dozens of monthly comic books with a skeleton crew of novices." He recalled that "the art work was bad enough, but the best that one could say about the stories was they were illiterate."⁴¹ Nevertheless, Fox promised readers superhero fantasies, and that was apparently enough to sell more of his comic books than their aesthetics merited.

DC itself was also quick to exploit the Superman formula. Vincent Sullivan asked a young cartoonist named Bob Kane to create a second costumed superhero for the company. Earning around forty dollars per week at the time, Kane became very interested in the proposition once he heard that Siegel and Shuster were each earning eight hundred dollars a week from Superman. Kane and writer Bill Finger designed a character inspired by pulp fiction heroes like the Shadow and Doc Sav-



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age, Hollywood adventure films like *The Mark of Zorro*, and an obscure silent picture called *The Bat*.⁴²

Batman was a worthy follow-up to Superman. Like his predecessor, he wore a costume and maintained a secret identity, but Batman possessed no superhuman powers, relying instead upon his own scientific knowledge, detective skills, and athletic prowess.⁴³ His alter ego, handsome millionaire socialite Bruce Wayne, was not as essential to the character as Clark Kent was to Superman. But the explanation for Wayne's crime-fighting career is particularly intriguing and disturbing. As a child, he sees his parents brutally murdered by a petty burglar. The severely traumatized Bruce inherits his father's fortune, trains his mind and body to the pinnacle of perfection, and devotes himself to a personal war against crime. He dons the frighteningly bizarre Batman costume to strike fear into the hearts of cowardly evildoers everywhere.⁴⁴

The early Batman stories achieved a uniquely surreal quality. Finger's scripts drew heavily from lurid pulp fiction as well as Universal horror films and Warner Brothers gangster movies. Kane's inventive artwork made use of unusual angle shots, distorted perspectives, and heavy shadows to give the series a cinematic and almost expressionistic look. The comparison may be a bit much for some, but the early Batman series had the kind of cutting-edge aesthetic qualities that made it the *Citizen Kane* of comic books.⁴⁵ Originally cast as a vigilante, pursued by the police even as he preyed upon criminals, Batman further demonstrated the appeal of a crime-fighter operating free of procedural and institutional restraint. As Batman himself once put it, "If you can't beat them 'inside' the law, you must beat them 'outside' it . . . and that's where I come in!"⁴⁶ Set in a claustrophobic netherworld, his adventures benefited from some of the most grotesque and memorable villains ever created for comic books: the Penguin, Two-Face, Catwoman, and, of course, the Joker—a wonderfully deranged homicidal maniac with a white face, green hair, and a ghastly grin who quickly became a favorite of Batman's creators and readers.⁴⁷ The brooding series lightened a bit in 1940 with the addition of a teenage sidekick named Robin, a character with whom young readers could supposedly identify.⁴⁸

In the comic book industry, imitation was not only a high form

SUPERHEROES
FOR THE
COMMON MAN

From "Batman," *Batman* 1
(DC Comics, spring 1940). Batman
was the first superhero to follow
successfully in the wake of
Superman. Here is one of his

earliest encounters with his most
popular nemesis, the Joker. Script
by Bill Finger, art by Bob Kane and
Jerry Robinson.



of flattery, it was company policy. Most publishers took the successful examples of Superman and Batman literally and flooded the nation's newsstands with stories of outrageous, brightly colored costumed heroes. A few succeeded without such characters: Dell Publishing scored a licensing coup by securing the comic book rights to the Walt Disney and Warner Brothers cartoon properties. With the likes of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bugs Bunny, and Porky Pig in their stable, Dell secured a solid market for decades. Fiction House contracted material from the Iger studio and thrived without the benefit of costumed heroes, opting instead for scantily-clad females like Sheena, a shapely blonde heroine who patrolled the African jungles in her leopard-skin bathing suit. In an industry flooded with costumed superheroes, though, Dell and Fiction House were the exceptions.

More common was the approach taken by a young pulp magazine publisher named Martin Goodman, who in 1939 launched an enduring enterprise called Marvel Comics. Goodman purchased comic book stories from the Funnies, Inc. shop before setting up his own staff. He put the project under the editorial direction of his teenage nephew, Stanley Lieberman, who wrote comic books under the pseudonym of Stan Lee. Marvel's chief entries into the burgeoning superhero market were the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner. The former, created by Carl Burgos, was actually not a human but an android with the rather terrifying ability to burst into flames and set objects ablaze. The Sub-Mariner, created by Bill Everett, was the son of an American sea captain and a princess from the lost underwater kingdom of Atlantis. He possessed superhuman strength, the ability to breathe both air and water, and, unlike his superhero peers, harbored a fierce antipathy towards the human race, thereby demonstrating that superheroes could, despite obvious genre similarities, maintain some discrete character traits.⁴⁹

Fawcett Publications entered the comic book business in 1939 and one year later launched a superhero whose popularity came to rival that of Superman himself. The ingeniously simple premise behind Captain Marvel, conceived by writer Bill Parker and artist C. C. Beck, was a boy named Billy Batson who became a superpowerful adult merely by speaking the magic word, "SHAZAM!" (the letters stood for Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury). Captain Marvel, who looked like a husky Fred MacMurray in a red-and-gold costume, became the best-selling character of the early 1940s, outdoing even Superman for a time. DC responded to Captain Marvel's popularity by suing Fawcett for alleged copyright infringement of Superman. While they may have shared some apparent similarities, Captain Marvel was,

in fact, very different. The assuredness and confidence of an overgrown child about their Superman and Batman, DC's Marvels, Bill Everett's Marvels, and the ethically accountable publisher's reputation for work. Among the heroes who could shrug off a hero who could not imagine a hat, and mask, Eisner seemed to be of his peers, plausibly and unusually sophisticated techniques. Eisner's greater influence on his own contemporary stories.⁵¹

Despite increasing competition from publishers, DC remained dominant in the industry. Superman's success, and the success of other superheroes. Bill Everett, in 1940, as did the other superheroes sprang from the comic book writing profession days, who created the grin and nearly omnipotent hero, his own death and Green Lantern, derived his power. Heroes included Hourman (who was Atom (a short time well)).⁵³

In 1941 DC introduced Wonder Woman. Perhaps

in fact, very different from Superman. Whereas Superman evinced self-assuredness and control, Captain Marvel seemed more like a bumbling overgrown child, and his adventures had a distinctively whimsical quality about them.⁵⁰ Despite its dubious merits, the legal battle between Superman and Captain Marvel dragged on into the 1950s, and, inevitably, DC's Man of Steel won, as he always did.

Everett M. Arnold's Quality Comics put out some of the most aesthetically accomplished comic books of the time, thanks largely to the publisher's reputation as a fair employer who paid good rates for good work. Among Quality's successful characters were Doll Man (a hero who could shrink to the size of his namesake), Plastic Man (a comical hero who could mold his body into any kind of shape that his artist could imagine), and the Spirit (a masked avenger dressed in a blue suit, hat, and mask, wearing shoes with no socks, created by Will Eisner). Eisner seemed to take his comic book work more seriously than many of his peers, placing the Spirit in a gritty noir setting and developing unusually sophisticated characters and innovative sequential art techniques. Eisner's path-breaking work on the Spirit proved to be a far greater influence on future comic book artists than on most of his own contemporaries, who continued to grind out formulaic superhero stories.⁵¹

Despite increasing competition from these and other smaller publishers, DC remained the top-selling and most influential publisher in the industry. Superman and Batman were the cornerstones of the company's success, but joining them were many other cleverly conceived superheroes. Billed as "the fastest man alive," the Flash debuted in early 1940, as did the winged Hawkman and the mystical Dr. Fate. All three sprang from the imagination of Gardner Fox, a lawyer who took up comic book writing because, as he put it, "the law, back in those Depression days, was not something at which to get rich."⁵² Jerry Siegel created the grim Spectre, the ghost of a slain policeman who is given nearly omnipotent powers by a mysterious deity so that he can avenge his own death and wage a ruthless war against crime and injustice. The Green Lantern, developed by writer Bill Finger and artist Mart Nodell, derived his power from a mystical green ring. Other, less popular DC heroes included Dr. Mid-Nite (who had superpowers only at night), Hourman (who had superpowers for only one hour per day), and the Atom (a short tough guy who had no superpowers but could fight well).⁵³

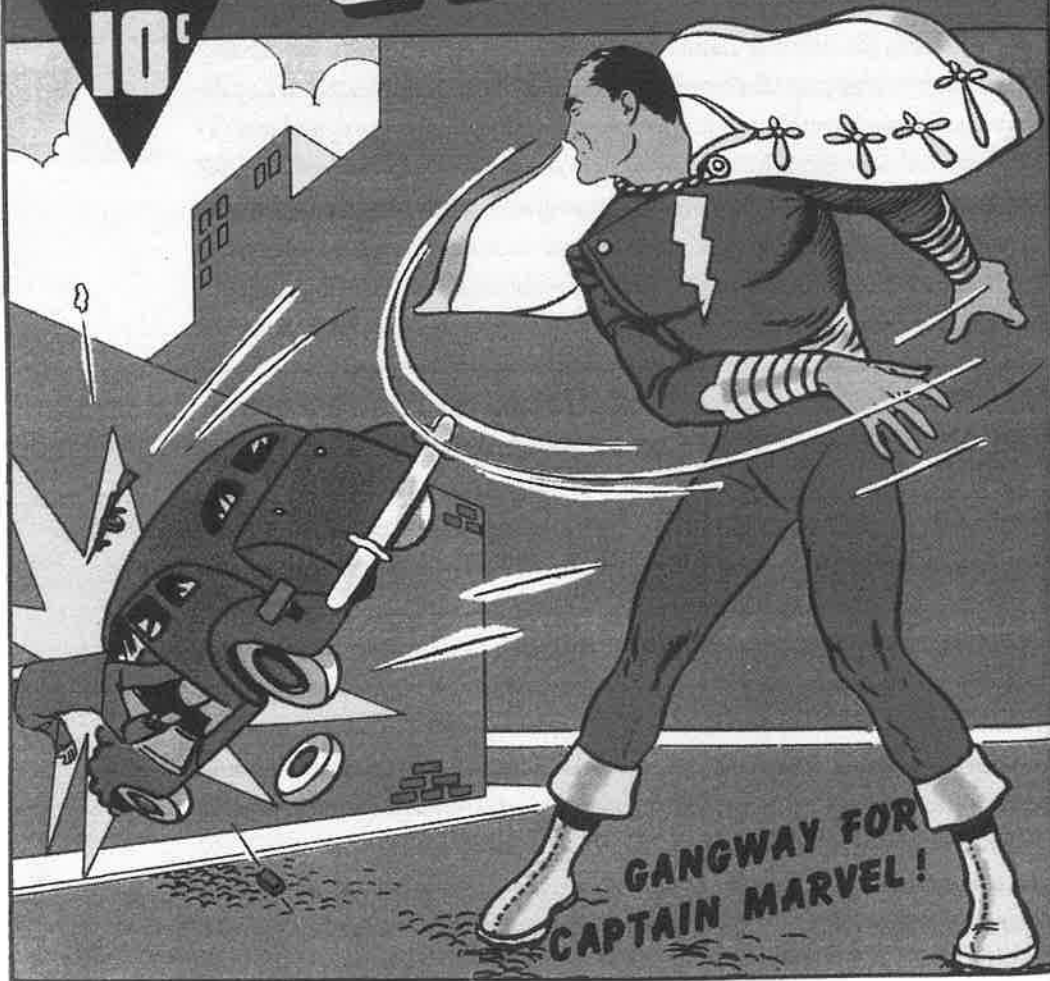
In 1941 DC launched another groundbreaking superhero, Wonder Woman. Perhaps the unlikeliest of comic book writers, William Moul-

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ton Marston was a middle-aged psychologist and author with a Ph.D. degree from Harvard and connections in the advertising industry. He became interested in comic books through his association with Max Gaines. Marston conceived a female superhero who, he believed, would appeal to both girls and boys. The results were—and remain—controversial. Later feminists have praised Wonder Woman as a progressive gender image for young girls. Yet, while the character was indeed powerful and the series featured more prominent female characters than any other, Marston's stories often underscored the Victorian assumption that superior female virtues like compassion and empathy were best applied as a restraining influence on aggressive men, not as a means to female self-sufficiency. Billed as a heroine "fighting fearlessly for down-trodden women and children, in a man-made world," Wonder Woman was rooted more in the gendered tradition of progressive social work than in modern notions of feminist self-fulfillment.⁵⁴

Of course, that characterization in itself set her apart and made her far more interesting than most of the otherwise irrelevant female characters in comic books, and it did offer a compelling image of a strong woman playing a positive role beyond the domestic sphere. But there was little in Wonder Woman's stories to suggest that women could or should compete equally with men in the working world. As Wonder Woman she was an Amazonian superhero, but in her common identity as Diana Prince, she was a secretary. One typically whimsical storyline did postulate that the world would be a better place if it were ruled by compassionate women instead of aggressive men, but it also suggested that it would take a thousand years before that would ever happen.⁵⁵

On the other hand, there was a lot in these stories to suggest that Wonder Woman was not so much a pitch to ambitious girls as an object for male sexual fantasies and fetishes. The stories were rife with suggestive sadomasochistic images like bondage, masters and slaves, and men groveling at the feet of women. Wonder Woman herself had a tendency to become enslaved by other women and forced to endure gratuitous humiliations. Revealing, perhaps, was her chief weapon: a magic lasso that compelled those it ensnared to obey her every command. Marston

Cover of <i>Whiz Comics</i> 2 (Fawcett Publications, February 1940). DC Comics sued Fawcett Publications for allegedly infringing on DC's copyright to Superman with Captain	Marvel. For several years in the early 1940s, Captain Marvel eclipsed Superman as the best-selling superhero in the comic book industry. Art by C. C. Beck.
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himself explained the appeal of his character by asserting that men secretly longed to submit to women. Writing in the *American Scholar*, he commented, "Give . . . [males] an alluring woman stronger than themselves to submit to, and they'll be *proud* to become her willing slaves!"⁵⁶

During these early years, the sheer novelty of comic books and costumed superheroes was sufficient to generate strong sales. Writers and artists had little motivation to get very sophisticated in their storytelling, and they had compelling reasons not to. They assumed, probably correctly, that a superhero's appeal to juvenile readers depended, most simply, on how interesting his costume and powers were. This market consideration, along with low pay, the absence of royalties, incessant deadlines, and an assembly-line production process, meant that comic books became highly formulaic. Publishers valued comic book writers and artists more as producers than as creators. As one publisher reportedly liked to tell his staff, "Don't give me Rembrandt, give me production."⁵⁷ It followed then that comic books most often featured interchangeable heroes fighting against mad scientists, bank robbers, and other generic villains motivated by a simple imperative to be nasty. Yet comic book creators also incorporated real-world concerns into their fantasy tales, even though the limitations of the medium, the market, and the industry reduced these to exaggeration and formulaic predictability. The result was a distinctly "comic book" caricature of Depression-era America, sometimes absurd, always simplistic, yet often revealing.

Superheroes for the Common Man

The Roosevelt administration responded to the Great Depression with a series of initiatives broadly grouped under a reforming ethos called the New Deal. More than just a bewildering alphabet-soup of acts and administrations, the New Deal was a potent cultural idea that worked to knit together an inclusive and enduring liberal coalition for collective action and government intervention. Proponents of New Deal legislation made skillful use of symbols like the NRA Blue Eagle and President Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" to appeal to the sensibilities of common people.⁵⁸

Comic books implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, underscored key New Deal assumptions. Most often they did so by targeting the forces of corporate greed in stories that echoed Roosevelt's rhetoric against "economic royalists." In "The Tycoon's Legacy," the Green Lantern investigates the Jeffers Mortgage and Loan Company, which has been seizing the property of borrowers who meet with mysterious "acci-

dents" that leave them unable to repay their loans. Suspecting foul play, the hero meets with these victims and urges them to sue the company, but they cannot match the corporation's expensive and powerful legal team. The Green Lantern sympathizes and agrees that "most lawyers would be afraid to tackle a big corporation like Jeffers' outfit." So, in a typical Rooseveltian move, the hero intervenes and leads the citizens in collective action. He helps to organize a low-cost law clinic for the poor, funded by contributions from neighborhood citizens, to help otherwise powerless individuals against wealthy malefactors like Jeffers. The corporation retaliates by dispatching thugs to intimidate the community, but the Green Lantern redresses this imbalance of power with his fists, demonstrating that legal protection works best when backed by a healthy dose of righteous violence. In the end, the corporate criminals are brought to justice and convicted, and the Green Lantern takes satisfaction in another victory for the public welfare over corporate self-interest.⁵⁹

In another Green Lantern adventure, the hero comes to the aid of a working man abused by a shipping tycoon who has been luring unemployed men to a Caribbean island to perform slave labor. The worker appeals to the legal authorities and the corporate-owned press, but they refuse to believe that "one of the most successful businessmen in the country" could have committed such crimes. One radio executive, though sympathetic, refuses to air the charges against the tycoon because he fears being sued for libel. The Green Lantern listens and acts. His benevolent intervention finally brings the elusive corporate criminal to justice.⁶⁰

Superheroes repeatedly sounded the warning that business dealings free of public scrutiny and government regulation inevitably led to corruption and crime. Dr. Mid-Nite protected coal miners from an abusive mining company and ensured access for government safety inspectors. Adventurer Barry O'Neill prevented crooks in the urban transportation industry from sabotaging the city's plan to place the subway system under public ownership. Hourman ended an abusive child-labor racket and lobbied for closer government supervision of private reform schools.⁶¹

Will Eisner's "Smashing the Enemies of Free Speech" carries a particularly strong endorsement for government regulation. This tale, featuring the distinctly American superhero called Uncle Sam, opens with a U.S. senator introducing a bill to "protect the American public from unscrupulous manufacturers." The senator characterizes the progressive law as one that "would force food makers to use only tested materi-

als and print truthful advertising about their products." Uncle Sam applauds the bill because "a lot of candy factories use cheap unhealthy ingredients so they can earn bigger profits," and he praises activist government as "the real frontier of America . . . it is here where the real meaning of freedom and democracy is tested." A corrupt candy manufacturer illustrates the point by kidnapping the senator, trying to kill the consumer protection bill, and working to censor a newspaper exposé of his company's abuses.⁶²

Comic books rarely, if ever, questioned the integrity of the federal government or national political leaders. Local politics was a different matter, however. The young writers and artists who created comic books worked in New York City, and many had grown up there. Thoroughly familiar with stories of grafting politicians and organized criminals who ran urban neighborhoods as private fiefdoms, creators often spoke to these concerns in comic book stories that projected a more cynical perspective on the condition of American democracy. Even as comic books celebrated the common man, they evinced a more conservative warning about the perils of political corruption and populist demagoguery. For all of the common man's virtues, he still seemed woefully susceptible to deception and coercion by false benefactors. Yet this apparent critique of the egalitarian spirit embedded in New Deal culture still worked to underscore New Deal principles. By pointing out the failings of local government and the dangers of provincial demagogues, these comic books endorsed the need for outside intervention and tacitly stressed a common interest between public welfare and a strong federal government. In this context, superheroes assumed the role of super-New Dealers.

The Green Lantern reserved some of his greatest moral outrage not for the straightforward crooks that he routinely nabbed but for those self-styled local reformers and public servants who had only their own selfish interests at heart. In one adventure, he exposes the city's Commissioner of Public Works as a corrupt racketeer who accepts kickbacks from his pals in the construction industry. In another story, the Green Lantern exposes "Honest" John Logan, who claims to be a progressive reformer and sponsor of a municipal orphanage when, in fact, he is a crook who has conspired with the superintendent of the orphanage to pocket the public funds while the orphans starve.⁶³ Political corruption might even reach as high as the mayor's office. After a city bridge nearly collapses, the Green Lantern suspects that inferior construction materials may have been at fault. He confronts the building contractor, who confesses (after receiving a beating) that the mayor

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Although the political boss system was actually in decline in many American cities, this perennial villain still loomed large in comic books, personifying the conspicuous failure of local politics. His very existence begged outside intervention on behalf of the public interest. On one occasion, Hourman comes to the aid of citizens in a crime-infested city run by a political boss called "Big Benny." No local authority will confront him, because the mayor is also a crook and the police serve as the boss's personal bodyguard. Big Benny also employs thugs as storm troopers to harass and silence anyone daring to speak out against him. Hourman frees the people from the boss's tyranny, much as America itself was about to liberate Europeans from Nazi oppression.⁶⁵

When comic books explored why political corruption and organized crime continued to plague American cities, they sometimes faulted the citizens themselves. In "Suicide Beat," Batman and Robin investigate a crime-ridden neighborhood run by a mobster and a political boss whose goons routinely gun down police with impunity. The murderers cannot be apprehended because the neighborhood people shelter them. The police tell Batman that "a crooked politician runs that street . . . and he's a smart politician! He lends the poor people money, buys them food on Christmas, finds men jobs, etc. . . . and asks in return that they vote for him and protect his jackals!" Only after Batman and Robin have caught the political boss in the act of stealing from the neighborhood people do the citizens recognize him for the criminal that he is. In the end, they reject the patronage of corrupt political leaders and accept the police and Batman as their true benefactors.⁶⁶

Some comic book heroes went to unusual lengths to combat political corruption. During his brief run in comic books, the radio hero Green Hornet (alias muckraking newspaper publisher Britt Reid) exposed a crooked state senator, apprehended politicians stealing from the Veterans Relief Bureau, broke up a crooked political machine, and even appealed directly to the civic responsibility of his readers in order to combat crime and political corruption. A full-page public service message narrated by the Green Hornet urged young people to fight the "racketeers and criminals who work within the law" by telling their parents to vote carefully for only honest politicians.⁶⁷

Real political machines, however corrupt they might have been, historically had met the needs of immigrants and the urban poor. Comic books served the New Deal by portraying local politicians as

self-serving tyrants and the federal government as the common man's chief benefactor. They took a similar approach with regard to labor unions, often presenting them as elaborate extortion rackets feigning support on behalf of misguided working men. At first glance, this unfavorable portrayal of unions seems at odds with the Roosevelt administration, which legalized the right to collective bargaining and passed the Fair Labor Standards Act. But comic book writers took their stories from the widely reported cases in which organized crime had, in fact, infiltrated labor unions. By emphasizing this particular failing of unionism, comic books lent further cause for workers to look beyond local means to the federal government for redress of grievances. President Roosevelt may have won admiration as the friend of labor, but he really preferred to improve the lot of workers through social reform legislation and always remained cool towards rising labor militancy.⁶⁸ Comic books echoed the president's own trepidation and still championed the cause of the common man.

Typical of this approach was a Green Lantern tale that opens with city taxi-drivers meeting to discuss proposed unionization. Suddenly three thugs force their way onto the platform. One of them is Plug Deagan, the notorious gangster. He urges the cabbies to join his union so that he can "help" them like he has "helped" workers in other cities. One driver retorts, "Sure . . . you got [the workers] higher wages. But you made them pay such high dues that they were worse off than before! You and your organization are nothing but racketeers! . . . Now get out!" The drivers resist Deagan, but he pressures them with a campaign of sabotage and violence. The honest drivers appeal to the Green Lantern for help, assuring him that they want to work with the cab companies and bargain in good faith. As the hero goes after Deagan, he discovers a still more sinister twist behind Deagan's scheme. The owner of the cab company turns out to be the gangster's silent partner in the labor racket. Together they have devised a clever scam, whereby the owner would pretend to pay the drivers higher wages, supposedly because of Deagan's bargaining prowess, when in fact the gangster and the company head would be splitting the high "union dues" extorted from the drivers. In the end, encouraged by the Green Lantern, the drivers form an honest union and win higher wages from the new, enlightened company president.⁶⁹

The Comic Book Menace

Comic books emerged at a critical moment in the evolution of youth culture. Progressive education reforms combined with Depression-era

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unemployment kept an increasing percentage of adolescents in high school during the 1930s. As young people spent more time in the company of their peers, they acquired new personal independence and a generational consciousness that struck some alarmed adults as evidence of diminishing respect for authority and declining traditional values. Critics attributed adolescents' irreverent and undesirable behavior to a variety of causes, including misguided "scientific education," family financial difficulties, intrusive New Deal policies, movies, swing music, and comic books.⁷⁰

Comic book publishers bypassed parents and aimed their products directly at the tastes of children and adolescents. This new trend in youth entertainment emerged from a growing sense among producers and some parents, probably furthered by parental guilt over deprived Depression-era childhoods, that young people deserved greater latitude to pursue their own happiness and means for self-expression. Toy manufacturers in the 1930s also began to appeal directly to children with fantasy toys that indulged the child's imagination with no claim to educational value. While toys generally escaped harsh critique, comic books reaped some remarkable condemnation.⁷¹

In his widely reprinted 8 May 1940 article in the *Chicago Daily News*, Sterling North branded comic books a "national disgrace," warning that "virtually every child in America is reading color 'comic' magazines—a poisonous mushroom growth." North accused the comic book industry of looting the piggy banks of children and offering in return an incessant barrage of "graphic insanity." He continued,

The bulk of these lurid publications depend for their appeal upon mayhem, murder, torture, and abduction . . . Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded "justice" and cheap political propaganda were to be found on almost every page . . . sadistic drivel . . . badly written and badly printed—a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems—the effect of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. . . . Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the "comic" magazine.⁷²

Publications like the *Wilson Library Bulletin* and *Parents' Magazine* echoed these concerns, albeit less hysterically. Taking a pragmatic approach, the publishers of *Parents' Magazine* issued their own comic book, *True Comics*, as an educational alternative parents could purchase for their children. Featuring "exciting" descriptions of "true-life" heroes like Winston Churchill, Simon Bolivar, and George Rogers Clark,

True Comics was a concept destined to be popular with parents and teachers at least, if not with kids.⁷³

Writing for the *American Mercury*, Frank Vlamos charged that comic books represented “the most dismaying mass of undiluted horror and prodigious impossibility ever visited on the sanity of a nation’s youth.” He saw disturbing cultural implications in the superhero comic books, noting, “You can’t go through an issue of a ‘comic’ magazine without realizing that the lawful processes of police and courts have disappeared and that only the heroism of superheroes keeps us from being annihilated by . . . disasters and crimes.” He observed that while the vigilante superhero’s “methods may be those of a bully . . . his alleged motives make him a hero.” By willfully defying the police, politicians, and other figures of authority, superheroes gave “all the arguments a child ever needs for an omnipotent and infallible ‘strong man’ beyond all law, the nihilistic man of the totalitarian ideology” to restore order in an “America tottering and overrun by criminals.”⁷⁴

Vlamos identified essentially what other intellectual critics would find most threatening about the new medium. Comic books had the power to indulge fantasies and create myths for a young audience hungry for empathy and easy explanations. Here was an entertainment industry catering exclusively to the tastes of the young and impressionable, controlled by urban young men with worldviews far removed from Victorian middle-class ideals and guided, above all, by the pursuit of quick profits. It was a combination that heralded a cultural and market revolution.

The emergence of the comic book industry marked a new stage in the twentieth-century advance of American consumer culture. In earlier decades, Hollywood movie makers also had come under attack from critics repelled by an industry controlled by immigrant men and patronized especially by working-class audiences. Implicit in this critique was a grudging awareness that movies had assumed an enormously powerful role in reshaping the nation’s culture and eroding the influence of traditional Victorian mores. By the late 1930s, however, Hollywood had itself become an entrenched American institution, and its lavish productions epitomized the triumph of consumer culture.⁷⁵ As Hollywood movies became synonymous with mainstream America, comic books filled a lucrative void at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy. To most of the public, they were a silly diversion for the kids at best and a cultural menace at worst. The characteristics of comic books that critics most deplored were the very qualities accounting for their unique appeal. In a national culture forged by adults for adults, how

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refreshing it must have been for young people to discover a source of entertainment that spoke directly to them as independent consumers. The fact that this cultural exchange was conducted in a language of violence, crudeness, and absurdity understandably unsettled more than a few adult observers. Children are the future, after all, and the youthful irreverence, vulgarity, and spectacular commercial success of comic books pointed to an American future that perceptive critics glimpsed with horror.

Few took the argument to its logical conclusion, but critics who bemoaned the readily available products appealing to base human desires implicitly warned of the long-term threat that consumer culture posed to moral authority. To comprehend the currently fragile state of morality in the world, they cautioned, one merely had to look at developments overseas. Writing in the *New Republic*, Slater Brown warned that if the boys and girls of America were drawn to "saviors" like Superman as part of a "symptomatic desire for a primitive religion," then the nation might be on a self-destructive course much like the Europeans who had already embraced a "vulgarized myth of [Nietzsche's] 'Superman.'"76

As if in answer, comic book makers were already mobilizing their cultural resources against the fascists. By 1941 New Deal rhetoric had given way to talk of war and foreign enemies gradually displaced the home-grown villains of corporate greed and political corruption. Whereas the Depression had demanded superheroes for common Americans, the war years needed patriotic defenders of national interests. On that score, comic books would not let the nation down.