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William W. SAVAGE, Jr. *Comic Books and America*, 1945-1954 (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990,151 pp., ISBN 0-8061-2305-2).

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phers, social anthropologists and sociologists. I think it is safe to say that this book will become a model for others to follow, but Gerald Pocius has set a high standard for those who might aspire to emulate his work.

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William W. SAVAGE, Jr. *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990, 151 pp., ISBN 0-8061-2305-2).

In quantitative terms of production and consumption alone, comic books must be considered a socially significant medium of popular culture. During the postwar, "golden age" decade of comic books in the United States, it is estimated that 500 to 650 comic book titles were issued each month for an astounding total production of sixty million copies monthly (xi). As cultural artifacts, however, they present complications that plague the analysis of many sectors of popular culture and folklore, and such factors may have contributed to their general disregard by academics. These include: their ephemerality and the problems this poses in accessing and publishing data; a confusion of medium and content; the dilemmas of analyzing a complex media conflation; their low-brow status; their association with children's culture; and their reputation as a cause of social problems.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, several folklorists have examined comic books, and their cousins the comic strip and the cartoon, from various viewpoints: in a comparative frame with the folktale (R.W. Brednich, Harold Schechter); from a feminist outlook (Kay Stone); as being structurally analogous to myth (Ellen Rhoads); and as influencing narrative performance (Sylvia Grider). In addition, Martin Barker's thoughtful and provocative case studies in *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) should be mentioned along with folkloristic approaches because of his use of the structuralist methodology of Vladimir Propp.

While there have been few sociocultural surveys of these materials (exceptions being M. Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990] and Randall Harrison, *The Cartoon: Communication*

to the Quick [Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981]), in the last two decades, the examination of mass-mediated graphics for content reflecting ideology, social temperament and national character during particular historical periods appears to be gaining momentum amongst students and devotees of popular culture. For Canada, a popular account consisting largely of wartime reprints, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1971), has been produced by Michael Hirsh, Patrick Loubert, and Walter Alan. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattleart have written a sobering ideological interpretation of the imperialistic effects of Walt Disney comic books in Chile - *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1971; New York: International General, 1984). The relation of comic strips to the history of social ideas has been provided by William G. Young, Jr., "The Serious Funnies: Adventure Comics During the Depression, 1929-1938" (*Journal of Popular Culture* 3.3 [1969] 404-27). An impressionistic, but sometimes astute examination that focuses on the relation of first generation comic strips to the psychology of American national character is Arthur Asa Berger's *The Comic-Stripped American* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974).

In a similar vein, but largely condemnatory of the low scholarly standards of earlier works, historian William W. Savage now appraises *Comic Books and America*, 1945-1954. Unlike Joseph Witek whose recent work *Comic Books as History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989) pursues the historical visions of particular comic book artists, Savage's ambitious aim is to "enhance our understanding of the cultural context of a postwar generation of young readers that has long since come of age", thereby contributing "to our understanding of who we were, and, it follows, who we are" (x). The postwar period chosen is known as the "golden era of comics". It ended in 1954 when the public campaign against comic books for fostering juvenile delinquency, a cause fomented by Dr. Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1954), "drove most comic-book publishers out of business" (x). Savage maintains that this "resulted, until about 1980, in a sanitized, if not sterile, product that avoided social commentary as if it were the plague" (x). In this regard, Savage inexplicably ignores the iconoclastic "underground" comic books which began with full force in the 1960s (see Mark James Estren, *A History of Underground Comics* [San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974]).

Although Savage's study does little to advance the interests of folklorists and those pursuing cultural studies who are concerned with audience perspectives, what he does accomplish is not insignificant, for in scrutinizing comic books that have been outside the orbit of mainstream humorous fare against the backdrop of official history, he delves into unchartered waters. Thus he depicts: the "mythic vision of the Bomb" which readers of *Atomic-Age Combat* and *Atomic War* encountered in the late 1940s; the "bad guy" portrayals of Cold War Communists in *Kent Blake of the Secret Service*, *Spy Fighters*, and *Spy Cases;* the confused accounts of the amorphous Korean conflict in *Battle*, *War Combat*, and

Two-Fisted Tales; the "cowboy as detective" theme of *Roy Rogers Comics;* the demeaning representations of women in *Jungle Comics* vis à vis the "consistently and assertively feminist" *Marge's Little Lulu*; the sexism, racism, and ageism of *Archie Comics;* the "grim views of society in general and of domesticity in particular" promoted by horror-suspense comics such as *Crime Suspenstories* and *The Vault of Horror.* These discussions are visually supported through the small but readable reprinting of five complete comic book stories. It is surprising, however, that none of these derive from Entertaining Comics ("EC"), a comic book production company which Savage judges as remarkable not only for the quality of its content ("a richly detailed and beautifully rendered literature" [81]) but also because it repeatedly provided alternative readings of American society, some of which were the prime targets of Fredric Wertham's criticism.

Savage assesses the sociopolitico response of the "Wertham Assault" to the horror-suspense genre as "one phase of a cyclical phenomenon affecting popular culture" that develops when new technologies or new applications of old technologies accompany social disorders — "it is simple enough to blame the technology for the disorder" (102-3). Although he makes excellent points regarding Wertham's rhetorical tactics, the author fails to examine the central issue of censorship and art (a controversy which at the time involved the opposing arguments of folklorist Gershon Legman) as fully as Martin Barker *(The Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* [London: Pluto Press, 1984]).

Interestingly, Walt Disney and Warner Brothers comics, the sector of the comic book industry most neglected by Savage during the period he covers, were extremely successful survivors of the Wertham onslaught. No real rationale is offered for this omission.

Overall, this book is a thoughtful interpretation, not of comic books and America so much as *selected* comic book texts in America, and importantly these choices have been made by an historian who was a comic book "fan" in his youth. Unlike the candid and insightful fan approach of folklorist-popular culturist Harold Schechter *(The Bosom Serpent: Folklore and Popular Art* [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988]), however, the author does not reveal his early personal commitment to comic books until the end of the book when he confesses that his involvement with the medium derived from an intellectual turning point when he was a child. Perhaps it was this event and its aftermath that prompted the writing of this book. At age eleven Savage read a copy of *Two-Fisted Tales*, one of William Gaine's Entertaining Comics group, and found one story about the French military failure in Indo-China, "Dien Bien Phu!", to be deeply "troubling" because of its representation of war as a pointless bloodbath. Later, as a young adult, he considered the advent of Vietnam, as hopeless for the United States because "repeated readings of 'Dien Bien Phu!' a decade before had led me to conclude that the United States did not have a ghost of a chance to win a war —

any war — in Vietnam". Recently Savage re-read a copy of this same comic book story and interpreted it differently: "it was as much an early plea for American involvement in Indo-China as it was an antiwar tract" (118).

From the viewpoint of a folklorist interested in the small group use of mass-mediated materials, this account of alternate decodings of a comic book narrative text reveals the prime weakness of this work. While Savage maintains that he is exploring the "cultural context of a postwar generation", he simply analyzes the texts of postwar comic books from the perspective of an *adult* historian. He assumes that he understands the aesthetics of comic book audiences of the period in question and has no qualms in speaking for them. For example, without providing evidence regarding their "appeal", he maintains that "comic books that displayed military high jinks in a decidedly patriotic context" had more appeal to servicemen than comic books which "attempted to explore a lighter side of military life", such as The Sad Sack and Beetle Bailey (58). It may be contented however, that observations concerning comic book reading experience, the social contexts of comic book usage, and the cultural scenes generated by comic books must be arrived at through *interviewing participants* and perceiving their comic book activities and aesthetics. It is then and then only that one possesses the data for this kind of cultural reconstruction. This is precisely why Savage's first-person account of his own comic book experience is of such value. His recent re-reading of "Dien Bien Phu!", like his reading of all the comic books that he gathered to write this book, is a distortion, for it is clouded by the fog of adulthood. Savage's training as an academic historian is of little assistance in this regard. His frustration at having to deal with an expressive medium at two levels (historian dedicated to "facts"; fan absorbed in nostalgic emotional experience) prompts him to lament in exasperation "... there were so many comic books in the postwar decade, *they must have meant something*... [my italics]" (120), as well as to denounce the cultural elitism of the library of his choice that refused to accept his offer of housing his comic book collection (148).

In spite of these problems, Savage has exhibited academic courage in writing a compact, worthwhile account of a complex, neglected area of popular culture. His bibliographic notes are particularly valuable. Hopefully a comparable serious analysis of the sociocultural significance of comic books in Canadian history will be forthcoming.

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