

THE TEN-CENT PLAGUE

THE GREAT COMIC-BOOK SCARE
AND HOW IT CHANGED AMERICA

DAVID HAJDU

PICADOR

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Prologue

Sawgrass Village, a tidy development about twenty-five miles east of Jacksonville, Florida, is named for the wild marsh greenery that its turf lawns displaced. It has 1,327 houses, each of them pale gray on the outside. On the inside, the one at 133 Lake Julia Drive is a dream shrine—a temple not to the past, like many other homes of retirees, but to a life imagined and denied. All the walls in its eight rooms, as well as the halls, are covered with framed paintings by Janice Valleau Winkleman, who moved there from Pittsburgh with her husband, Ed, in 1982, when he ended his four-decade career in sales (first, chemicals, then steel products). She had been painting almost every day for nearly thirty years. Having shown artistic talent at an early age, she had taken some formal training in fine art and illustration, and, at age nineteen, she began working professionally, drawing for Quality Comics in Manhattan. Then, one evening eleven years later, she came home from work and never went back.

For more than fifty years after that, Winkleman made no mention of the fact that she had had her artwork prominently published as Janice Valleau. Her daughter Ellen grew up reading comic books without knowing that her mother had once helped create them.

In 2004, the Winklemans' living room held seventy-four paintings—vigorous watercolor seascapes with violent waves, rendered in heavy blues and blacks; an acrylic of two seagulls suspended in flight, positioned upright in a golden-brown sky and surrounded by other gulls darting about them in every direction; watercolor after watercolor of old sailing ships, moldering in dry dock; a few abstracts with angular shapes and patterns done in pastel; portraits of exotic, alluring young women, one of them topless, with her face either unfinished or painted over. The images—at once lovely and tortured, and skillfully done but madly varied—could occupy a graduate art student or a psychoanalyst for some time.

At age eighty-one, Winkleman was a fragile woman, weakened by age and illness, though she still painted when she felt up to it, usually one or two days each week. “I like art—it’s important to me,” she said in a small but firm voice. Her eyes were bright behind grand, squarish glasses that covered most of her face. She sat straight-backed in a thin-cushioned metal chair that went with the desk in a half-room that also had her easel and taboret, a few boxes of art supplies, and a tea set. Her hands formed a teepee on her lap. She wore a pressed linen house dress and well-used tennis shoes, and she kept her legs crossed tightly with her calves angled back under the chair, as if to hide the shoes. Hanging in a frame on the wall to her right was the original pen-and-ink art to the first page of a *Blackhawk* comic-book story drawn by one of her old studio mates, Reed Crandall. In the days when they were working together, Winkleman had sneaked the page home in her portfolio, because she admired Crandall’s dynamic compositions and sure line.

“I wanted to be a magazine illustrator, but I loved comics, too,” she said, pointing her teepee toward the *Blackhawk* page. “I would have been happy being in any kind of art at all.”

Why, then, had she stopped working professionally half a century earlier? The paintings all over her house show that Winkleman had the skill and the versatility to have done commercial illustration. She had the experience in comics and the affection for the medium to have continued in that field. With the imagination she applied to some of her canvases, she might even have pursued fine art professionally. Why not?

“My God,” she said. She separated her hands and slapped them on her lap, then slowly brought them back together. “I couldn’t go back out there—I was scared to death. Don’t you know what they did to us?”

In the mid-1940s, when Janice Valteau was thriving as an artist for Quality Comics, the comic book was the most popular form of entertainment in America. Comics were selling between eighty million and a hundred million copies every week, with a typical issue passed along or traded to six to ten readers, thereby reaching more people than movies, television, radio, or magazines for adults. By 1952, more than twenty publishers were producing nearly 650 comics titles per month, employing well over a thousand artists, writers, editors, letterers, and others—among them women such as Valteau, as well as untold members of racial, ethnic, and social minorities who turned to comics because they thought of themselves or their ideas as unwelcome in more reputable spheres of publishing and entertainment.

Created by outsiders of various sorts, comics gave voice to their makers' fantasies and discontent through the brash vernacular of cartoon drawings and word balloons, and they spoke with special cogency to young people who felt like outsiders in a world geared for and run by adults. In the forties, after a sense of the idea of youth culture as it would later be known—as a vast socioeconomic system comprising its own modes of behavior and styles of dress, music, and literature intended primarily to express a desire for independence from the status quo—had not yet formed; childhood and young adulthood were generally considered states of subadulthood, phases of training to enter the orthodoxy. Comic books were radical among the books of their day for being written, drawn, priced, and marketed primarily for and directly to kids, as well as for asserting a sensibility anathema to grown-ups.

Most adults never paid much mind until the comics—and the kids reading them—began to change.

During the early postwar years, comic books shifted in tone and content. Fed by the same streams of pulp fiction and film noir, many of the titles most prominent in the late forties and early fifties told lurid stories of crime, vice, lust, and horror, rather than noble tales of costumed heroes and heroines such as Superman, Captain Marvel, and Wonder Woman, whose exploits had initially established the comics genre in the late thirties and early forties. These unprecedented dark comics sprouted from the cracks in the back corners of the cultural terrain and grew wild. Unlike the movies and the broadcast media, comic books had no effective monitoring or regulatory mechanism—no powerful self-censoring body like the film industry's Hays Office, no government authority like the FCC imposing content standards. Uninhibited, shameless, frequently garish and crude, often shocking, and sometimes excessive, these crime, horror, and romance comics provided young people of the early postwar years with a means of defying and escaping the mainstream culture of the time, which was providing the guardians of that culture an enormous, taunting, close-range target. The world of comics became a battleground in a war between two generations, delineating two eras in American popular culture history.

“Comic books are definitely harmful to impressionable people, and most young people are impressionable,” said the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, author of an incendiary tract, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which indicted comics as a leading cause of juvenile delinquency. “I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry.

“The time has come to legislate these books off the newsstands and out of the candy stores.”

Churches and community groups raged and organized campaigns against comic books. Young people acted out mock trials of comics characters. Schools held public burnings of comics, and students threw thousands of the books into the bonfires; at more than one conflagration, children marched around the flames reciting incantations denouncing comics. Headlines in newspapers and magazines around the country warned readers: “Depravity for Children—Ten Cents a Copy!” “Horror in the Nursery,” “The Curse of the Comic Books.” The offices of one of the most adventurous and scandalous publishers, EC Comics, were raided by the New York City police. More than a hundred acts of legislation were introduced on the state and municipal levels to ban or limit the sale of comic

Scores of titles were outlawed in New York, Connecticut, Maryland, and other states, and ordinances to regulate comics were passed in dozens of cities. Soon, Congress took action with a set of sensational, televised hearings that nearly destroyed the comic-book business. Like Janice Valleau, the majority of working comics artists, writers, and editors—more than eight hundred people—lost their jobs. A great many of them would never be published again.

Through the near death of comic books and the end of many of their makers' creative lives, postwar popular culture was born.

Page-one news as it occurred, the story of the comics controversy is a largely forgotten chapter in the history of the culture wars and one that defies now-common notions about the evolution of twentieth-century popular culture, including the conception of the postwar sensibility—a raucous and cynical one, inured to violence and absorbed with sex, skeptical of authority, and frozen in youthful adulthood—as something spawned by rock and roll. The truth is more complex. Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry added the soundtrack to a scene created in comic books.

It is clear now that the hysteria over comic books was always about many things other than cartoons: about class and money and taste; about traditions and religions and biases rooted in time and place; about presidential politics; about the influence of a new medium called television; and about how art forms, as well as people, grow up. The comic-book war was one of the first and hardest-fought conflicts between young people and their parents in America, and it seems clear, too, now, that it was worth the fight.

1.

Society Iss Nix

The first mission of the funny pages was to convoke the lower classes. Near the end of the nineteenth century, decades before the rise of comic books, more than thirty daily newspapers were competing for the allegiance of New York's reading public, and publisher Joseph Pulitzer decided to experiment with his populist *New York World* to increase its appeal to the public that did not read, at least not in English. He purchased one of the few printing presses capable of mass-producing full-color pictures on newsprint and introduced the Sunday color supplement: a four-page, seventeen-by-twenty-three-inch carnival of illustrated stories on ostensibly exotic and titillating subjects (Paris! Ballerinas! political cartoons, and what quickly became America's first comics sensation and licensing bonanza, a cartoon series published as *Hogan's Alley* but popularly known by the nickname of its leading character, a bald little boy in a yellow nightshirt. Written and drawn by Richard Felton Outcault, a former technical illustrator, "The Yellow Kid" was set in the gutters of Manhattan's Lower East Side and depicted the rowdy antics of a gang of young scruffs. The Kid himself, whom Outcault and no one else called Mickey Dugan, was a crude but strangely endearing caricature of the immigrant poor—barefoot, ugly, inarticulate, concerned only with base pleasures, and disposed to violence. He rarely spoke, and then did so in a marginally intelligible pidgin jumble of ethnic clichés: "De phonograph is a great invention—nit! I don't think—wait till I git dat foolish bird hom. I wont do a ting te him we say!" His pals, much the same, were all vulgar stereotypes: oil-smearing Italians throwing tomatoes; Negroes with gum-bubble lips, snoozing or cowering in fear; scowling Middle Easterners in fez; and waving scimitars—comrades in egalitarian minstrelsy. Some scenes included a goat who fraternized companionably with the kids. Apart from occasional adult trespassers such as cops or dogcatchers—tokens of civil order who would be duly subjected to horrific abuse, the residents of *Hogan's Alley* were juveniles delinquent in many ways.

Within a decade, the popularity of the Yellow Kid led to the creation of dozens of newspaper cartoons and strips, including a duplicate Kid in the *New York Journal* when William Randolph Hearst bought the paper, a color press of his own, and most of Pulitzer's staff, including Outcault and his feature. (The *World* continued to publish *Hogan's Alley* with the Yellow Kid and his crew drawn by another artist, to the confusion of both papers' readers and the enrichment of their attorneys.) The best of the strips lingered around the Lower East Side: *Happy Hooligan*, which followed a gleeful lout through his travails with the law, and the *Katzenjammer Kids*, in which a pair of immigrant German twins, Hans and Fritz, incited havoc in all quarters of society. As one of their favorite victims, "Detective Inspector," noted: "Society iss nix" in the Katzenjammers' hands. (This time, Hearst commissioned an artist on his staff, Rudolph Dirks, to create a strip on the model of *Max und Moritz*, a series of illustrated stories published in Germany, and the artist came up with the Katzenjammers, Hans and Fritz; in time, Dirks jumped over to Pulitzer with the Kids, and Hearst hired a mimic to continue the strip anyway, resulting again in look-alike comics with the same characters, done by different artists for two papers.) *Happy Hooligan* was essentially the Yellow Kid with clothes on, a few years older and more delinquent; Hans and Fritz were the Kid doubled and made more juvenile.

In their earthiness, their skepticism toward authority, and the delight they took in freedom, ear

newspaper comics spoke to and of the swelling immigrant populations in New York and other cities where comics spread, primarily through syndication (although locally made cartoons appeared in newspapers everywhere). The funnies were *theirs*, made for them and about them. Unlike movements in the fine arts that crossed class lines to evoke the lives of working people, newspaper comics were proletarian in a contained, inclusive way. They did not draw upon alleys like Hogan's as a resource for refined expression, as Toulouse-Lautrec had employed the Moulin Rouge, nor did they use Hooligan clashes with the law for pedagogy to expose the powerful to the plight of the underclass, as John Steinbeck would utilize Cannery Row. The comics offered their audience a parodic look at itself rendered in the vernacular of caricature and nonsense language. The mockery in comics was familiar—intimate, knowing, affectionate, and merciless.

Comic strips were just beginning to sprout when some protective citizens noticed this unclassified species from Lower Manhattan and set out to uproot it. Articles censuring the various hooligans in the Sunday supplements began appearing in national magazines—that is, in a stratum of publishing the commonly regarded as more responsible than the mass-circulation newspapers; after all, unbridled sensationalism made Hearst and, to a lesser degree, Pulitzer, as notorious as the Yellow Kid with whom their brand of journalism would be associated. In a snorting critique published in the August 1906 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Ralph Bergengren called the supplements “humor prepared and printed for the extremely dull” and “a thing of national shame and degradation.” Chastising cartoons such as the *Katzenjammer Kids* for their vulgarity and crude draftsmanship, Bergengren ranted: “Respect for property, respect for parents, for law, for decency, for truth, for beauty, for kindliness for dignity, or for honor, are killed, without mercy ... Lunacy could go no farther than the pandemonium of undisguised coarseness and brutality ...”

The criticism echoed already familiar charges against the dime novels of the late nineteenth century, which had delivered short, readable doses of blood and thunder to a working-class readership thereby imperiling Victorian propriety. Comic strips essentially supplanted the dime novels and, through their accessibility to nonreaders in the immigrant population, surpassed the books in popularity. The watchdogs of American esteem in the early post-Victorian years, the earthy and raucous pages of the Sunday funnies threatened to devalue the United States' emerging status as a civilized world power. Magazine articles derided comic strips as infantile, brutal, unsophisticated, and subliterate; and the funnies were all that, though by design—a possibility lost to critics applying the standards of other forms of art and literature created for one class to a new form invented for another class. Indeed, much of the early criticism of newspaper comics condemned them as lower-class, as if that status alone were cause for condemnation. Even the charge of juvenilia was entwined with class bias in a day when people of low social rank, like those of color, were often conflated with children.

Ladies' Home Journal, in an article titled “A Crime Against American Children,” published in January 1909, tore the Sunday supplements apart for undermining literacy and glorifying lawlessness and savagery:

Are we parents criminally negligent of our children, or is it that we have not put our minds on the subject of continuing to allow them to be injured by the inane and vulgar “comic” supplement of the Sunday newspaper? One thing is certain: we are permitting to go on under our very noses and in our own homes an extraordinary stupidity, and an influence for repulsive and often depraving vulgarity so colossal that it is rapidly taking on the dimensions of nothing short of a national crime against our children.

Other magazines, including *The Nation* and *Good Housekeeping*, found the Sunday supplements more offensive because they were published on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. When Hearst introduced the color section of the *Journal*, he promoted it as “eight pages of polychromatic effulgence that make the rainbow look like a lead pipe!” How could Sunday school compete with the thing that topped the rainbow? The supplements transformed Sunday in millions of American homes, Christian and otherwise, and not only for children. At a time when the newspapers were not only the primary form of mass communication but the only form (notwithstanding the mail) in many households, the leap in distance from gray sheets of type, dotted with tiny line drawings, to pages filled with bold colors was a vast one greatedened by the sordid, anarchic content of those pages. If Pulitzer and Hearst could not steal the day from the God of Christ, they certainly made it hard for His people to keep holy.

A few newspapers around the country responded to this criticism with gestures such as shifting the arrangement of their comics features so one more temperate—say, Carl Schultze’s *Foxy Grandpa*, an anomaly among early strips, in which a family elder regularly outwitted the prankster tots—would appear before the woolly stuff. But papers running strips ignored the dissent from another sphere. By 1914, the events of the Great War came to dominate the news in magazines and newspapers across the world. This was not the time for a war over comics.

Over the first two decades of the twentieth century, the funnies deepened through experimentation. They grew wilder, freer, and more varied in subject matter and style, infusing the huge pages on which they were printed, as well as the kitchens in which they were read, with the spirit of adventure. Working in a young field with few traditions or conventions and little supervision other than that of editors satisfied with good newsstand sales, talented artist-writers pushed comics forward by pulling them in every direction. Winsor McCay, a grade-school dropout with staggering capacities of inventiveness and prolificity, concocted a string of fanciful strips for *The New York Herald*, culminating with *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, a majestically crafted amalgam of art nouveau design and surrealistic story content first published in 1904, the year Salvador Dalí was born. George Herriman, a “colored Creole” from New Orleans who allowed others to mistake him for Greek, took comics further into the realm of dreamscape with his poetic valentines to sadomasochism between the species, *Krazy Kat*, created for the Hearst syndicate in 1911. E. C. Segar, a modestly talented draftsman from rural Illinois who had a knack for storytelling, explored the narrative potential of comics, entwining humor, suspense, and adventure in *Thimble Theater*, which began in 1919 for Hearst and took on a second life ten years later, when Segar brought an odd new character into his troupe of comedic grotesques, a fist-happy hooligan named Popeye. These artists’ work, along with that of other important comics innovators such as C. W. Kahles (*Hairbreadth Harry*), James Swinnerton (*Little Jimmy*), Harry Hershfield (*Desperate Desmond*), and Percy Crosby (*Skippy*), brought newspaper strips into creative maturity by tapping their childlike determination to play where they weren’t supposed to go.

Like jazz and film, popular arts that also took form around the turn of the century, newspaper strips were not well received in the cultural establishment until the years after the First World War, when a new perception of the United States as having some parity with Europe helped spark a surge of interest in American culture. At the same time, serious critics were thinking about modernism, and some began to veer into disreputable neighborhoods of the arts with eyes (and ears) open to native modes of expression concerned more with novelty than with tradition. Gilbert Seldes discovered *Krazy Kat*. The high-spirited intellectual, Seldes was the editor of the venturesome literary journal *The Dial*, for which he published “The Waste Land” and hired Eliot, Mann, and Gorky as foreign correspondents. In 1924, while vacationing in Paris, he completed his book *The Seven Lively Arts*, a manifesto of criticism

democratization that challenged (as it defined) aesthetic elitism, arguing the intrinsic merits of popular entertainment such as the movies, ragtime, vaudeville, popular song, and the comics. As Seldes wrote,

With those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic. The qualities of "Krazy Kat" are irony and fantasy—exactly the same, it would appear, as distinguish *The Revolt of the Angels*; it is wholly beside the point to indicate a preference for the work of Anatole France, which is in the great line, in the major arts. It happens that in America irony and fantasy are practiced in the major arts by only one or two men, producing high-class trash; and Mr. Herriman, working in a despised medium, without an atom of pretentiousness, is day after day producing something essentially fine. It is the result of a naive sensibility rather like that of the *douanier* Rousseau ... In the second order of the world's art it is superbly first rate.

An explorer, rather than a liberator, Seldes had no intent to take comics off the streets of their provenance, the aesthetic turf of *Hogan's Alley*, but to show that low places are not always as bad as they look from the outside.

After nightfall on Saturdays, when their Sabbath had passed, the Eisner family often spent the late hours of the day together at the dining table of their four-room railroad flat in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx. Shmuel Eisner—Sam, since he had arrived in New York from Vienna in the first month of the Great War—would bring in the bulldog edition of the *New York Journal*, and he would read the stories about love nests and robberies to his wife, Fannie, who had grown up poor on the Lower East Side and had never learned to read. William—Willie (later Bill, and finally Will)—the older of the two sons, would lay out the funnies, unfold a sheet of brown wrapping paper saved from the groceries, and try to replicate the drawings in pencil. By the age of eight, in 1925, he could make the simple, big-foot characters in E. C. Segar's *Thimble Theater* well enough to upset both parents. His father, a failed landscape painter who ended up working as a furniture "grainer," simulating wood-grain patterns on white-metal beds, disapproved of his son's indifference to realism, and his mother feared that drawing cartoons would keep the boy from learning practical skills.

Will Eisner, recalling those evenings many years later, said, "The comic strips in the newspapers of the time were everything to me, as they were for every other kid I knew then. They made me want to be an artist, and that was a cause of great concern to my parents, because my father was an elitist at his heart, and my mother was a peasant and a very practical woman. I turned out a little like each of them, so I would always have that internal struggle. My dream from the time I was quite young was maybe someday to be a newspaper cartoonist." He was a "cocky and frustrated" boy, by his own account, a kid whose skill at a form of entertainment for children made him impatient for adulthood. "The comics were something I felt was within my grasp, something I knew that was a part of my world, but something also that could maybe take me out of that world and take me out of the ghetto."

The Sunday papers were art class for innumerable children of the Depression years, and some skill at drawing cartoon characters imparted social status in every schoolyard. (Ronald Reagan, another child of the twenties, also could emulate Segar, as he demonstrated in the doodles he made

meetings during his presidency.) For poor kids with strong artistic inclinations, moreover, the funnies often represented the near whole of their exposure to art. “They were full of vivid drawings, the Sunday supplements, and they were all the art I saw when I was young,” said Creig Flessel, an artist born in 1912 and raised on a five-acre farm in central Long Island. His father, a blacksmith, catered to the horse and buggy trade. “They also had great stories about the French underground and murderers and rape and arson and everything. They provided quite an education. I wasn’t a good student at school, but I could draw. What I learned about art when I was a kid, I learned from those wonderful and free color drawings on Sundays. I saved them and stared at them all week.”

Between 1929 and 1934, as Will Eisner and tens of millions of children of early-century immigrants were coming of age, newspaper comics shifted in tone and style. They drew more explicitly from the pulp magazines of the time, such as *Amazing Stories* and *Dime Detective Magazine*, whose formulaic, sensational adventure stories, dynamically told, had proven appealing to the adolescent boys and working-class men who were also core readers of the comics pages. Chester Gould’s *Dick Tracy* appeared as a daily strip in 1931, within a few years of Harold Foster’s *Tarzan*, Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon* (a superior response to *Buck Rogers* of 1929), and Milton Caniff’s *Terry and the Pirates*. Their tales of extravagant heroism, physical prowess, and wild gave opulent expression to the fantasies of male adolescence, and the bold but essentially realistic (or literal) artwork of Foster, Raymond, and Caniff conferred upon the comic strips a new kind of legitimacy. If the adventure strips were lacking the cryptic visual poetry of *Little Nemo* or *Krazy Kat*, they represented something with more currency to many comics readers: a working-class ideal of skilled craftsmanship in the service of manhood.

A generation of young artists took Harold Foster, Alex Raymond, and Milton Caniff as idols. “I started out copying the big three, the three giants, when I was only seven or eight,” said Everett Raymond Kinstler, a hungry, ambitious kid from Upper Broadway who quit school at sixteen to do comics. “I admired them, because they could draw well—Milton Caniff, especially. He worked in the medium of imagination, but he made it realistic—he made it real, through great draftsmanship.”

Will Eisner, likewise, regarded Caniff as an elevating figure. “He had drama and adventure, and his storytelling was so lucid and clear—it had heft, it had cohesion,” Eisner said. “His characters were real people to me, and that made him an artist to me.”

Eisner attended DeWitt Clinton High, an all-boys school in the Bronx, where he demonstrated a deft touch with the various visual media young art aspirants try, as well as with cartoons; and, at fifteen, he had his first publication, in the school paper: a cluttered but vigorous pen-and-ink sketch of a tenement block whose fortunes were beginning to turn. (It ran over the headline “Bronx’s ‘Forgotten Ghetto Revealed; ‘Is School for Crime,’ Doctor Says.”) He applied to Syracuse University and was accepted with a scholarship to study fine art, but he left high school near the end of his fourth year, in the spring of 1935, without graduating. “My father had finally given up trying to work in any area of art, even wood graining, which was close to the bottom rung, and went into business—the furniture business,” because of some family connections there, Eisner recalled. “He was a terrible businessman. We were wiped out, and my mother took me aside, and she said to me, quietly, ‘Look, your father can’t make a living. You’re the head of the family now.’” As he considered what kind of job to look for, Eisner thought of the Saturday evenings he had spent with his parents. His father, perennially hoping to find better work, would end the night’s reading with selections from the help-wanted ads, and his voice would drop whenever he hit a word that appeared in descriptions of some of the best jobs: “restricted.”

Shopping on avenues where he expected no obstacles, Will Eisner applied for a position as the art director of a new magazine called *Eve*, sponsored by Tetley Tea and “Dedicated to the Modern American Jewess.” He was hired, at eighteen, on the merits of his portfolio of felicitous illustrations.

in a variety of modes, and let go, two months later, because the editor considered the drawings of ~~vamps and prizefighters that Eisner contributed (under his own name and pseudonyms) lowbrow~~. “They wanted classy, WASPy *Vanity Fair* kind of things, to make the readers feel like they were assimilating,” Eisner said. He turned to the printing trade, a field in which Jews had progressed rapidly in the early twentieth century, and took an apprenticeship at a small outfit, Bronfman Press on Varick Street in Lower Manhattan, to bring in money while he worked on ideas for original newspaper comics. By year’s end, Eisner had created and shopped samples of two strips: *Harry Carey*, a lighthearted detective series rendered in the Segar vein, and *The Flame*, a stylish adventure featuring about a suave crime-solving mystery man much like Leslie Charteris’s pulp hero, The Saint. Neither sold.

These were the glory days of unsold comic strips, however—an auspicious time to be rejected by the newspaper syndicates. A great many creatively inclined people under the comics’ thrall, including kids younger than Will Eisner, were inventing characters, writing, and drawing sample stories in rows of comics panels, and mailing them to the syndicates listed in *Writer’s Markets and Methods*. The process, like that of making cold submissions in every arm of publishing, kindled young hopes and incinerated them efficiently, until 1935.

In February of that year, Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, a professional eccentric and small-time entrepreneur, opened a secondary market for unsuccessful comics ideas in the form of a magazine called *New Fun*, a thirty-six-page, black-and-white, tabloid-size (ten-by-fifteen-inch) collection of previously unpublished comics created with newspaper syndication in mind; it was a hodge-podge of kiddie stuff such as *Oswald the Rabbit* and adventure stories about cowboys and swordsmen geared for children. Some of the material was old goods, dating from the twenties; some of it new; some, fun. Although *New Fun* had a ten-cent cover price and was sold on newsstands through the distributors *McCall’s*, Wheeler-Nicholson created it not to attract ordinary readers but to impress newspaper comics syndicators, in hopes that they would buy the rights to the characters from him. *New Fun*, then, was a comic book made as a sales kit for a brokerage operation. As Wheeler-Nicholson wrote to Jerry Siegel, a teenager in Cleveland who had been working with a high-school friend to develop ideas for the syndicates, “I see these magazines more or less as brochures to interest the newspaper syndicator in an idea. It’s much easier to sell a comic strip if you can show it in already published form.”

Wheeler-Nicholson had made specialties of guile and stealth in packaging a far more unlikely product: himself. A writer for pulp magazines such as *Thrilling Adventures* and *Argosy* in the twenties and early thirties, he had earned his living by spinning tales of his own extraordinary, otherwise undocumented adventures as a military hero and lothario. A few highlights: As a major in the U.S. cavalry during the First World War, he had commanded secret missions beyond the Western Front; he had been shot in the head and survived; he had been a leader in the United States’ undisclosed alliance with the Russians to repel the Bolsheviks; having uncovered a Prussian conspiracy in the ranks of his superiors, he had alerted the president, only to find himself court-martialed on a false charge; while in Russia, he had been seduced by a lady-in-waiting to the king—or was it a duke?—who arranged the passage to America, where they were married.

Wheeler-Nicholson ran the *New Fun* operation out of three airless rooms in the rear of a building full of garment dealers on Fourth Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street, and he marched about it with an air of grand burlesque. He invariably wore a long gray double-breasted cloak, yellowing spats, and a tattered, black wide-brimmed beaver hat. He carried a walking stick and used a cigarette holder. His face was round and pale, his nose broad and red, and his teeth green. When he met a new artist or writer or, for that matter, a new messenger boy, he removed his hat and bowed.

“The major was very quiet and polite—he had almost a European, English manner, and he couldn’t be trusted to tell you the time,” recalled Creig Flessel, who worked under Wheeler-Nicholson. “He had

this wonderful idea to take comic strips that kids were sending in to the newspapers and publish them to give them exposure, so he never had to pay for anything. That was good, because he didn't have any money. But he ran out of samples [of newspaper strips] and started asking the kids to do new comics just for him." Jerry Siegel and his partner, Joe Shuster, submitted *Henri Duval of France*, *Famous Soldier of Fortune* and *Dr. Occult, the Ghost Detective*, the first rendered on brown paper, the second on the back of wallpaper.

New Fun had some antecedents. Popular newspaper comics had been reprinted in various kinds of books and magazines from time to time since the Yellow Kid, and samples of unsold newspaper strips had found their way onto news racks as early as 1929 (in a tabloid put together by George Delacorte, the founder of Dell publishing). Most of those reprints had been produced as giveaways: *Buy so many boxes of such-and-such cereal, and receive a free funny book*, the precise contents of the latter left as vague as those of the cereal. Comic strips, having been created for an intrinsically disposable medium, were thought of as worthless after they were printed; they derived their value from their freshness, like produce and journalism (and, to a degree, works of modernism). Accordingly, a reprint collection that would come to be regarded as the first comic book, *Funnies on Parade*, from 1933, was never intended for sale but was used as a free premium for Procter & Gamble. Someone working at Eastern Color, the printing company that handled the presswork for most of the Sunday supplements in the Northeast—perhaps Maxwell Charles Gaines, a commission salesman, perhaps Harry Wildenberg, his sales manager—figured out how to produce a small, cheap promotional item by (a) printing eight pages on each sheet of standard newsprint and (b) doing so on the shop's third shift, during the press downtime. Its success as a sales gimmick led later that year to a second book of newspaper reprints, *Famous Funnies*, which Gaines marketed as a radio-show promotion for Wheatena, Canada Dry soft drinks, Phillips' Dental Magnesia, and other products. The next February, Gaines put a ten-cent price sticker on an edition of *Famous Funnies*; he arranged for national sales through a major distributor, American News Company, and started producing issues monthly. Comic books were on the newsstands, though they still contained old material until *New Fun*.

Such was the making of a tenuous new form of American popular art: a vehicle for giving away used goods of diminished value became a forum for selling discarded goods and new goods by people who could not compete with the makers of the used goods when they were new. "It was wide open—nobody knew what they were doing," said Joe Kubert, a Polish-born son of a butcher, who was ten years old in 1936 when he took the subway to Manhattan from Brooklyn, walked into the offices of an early comic-book studio, and was given work as an artist. "If you wanted to do comics and you had a little bit of talent—hell, even if you didn't have any talent—there was work for you. Maybe you had a lot of talent but you had a different kind of style, something unique and different, that the art directors in the slick magazines didn't like. You could be a genius, you could be a nobody, a little kid from Brooklyn like me, or some kind of nut. The doors were open to any and all."

In the spring of 1936, Will Eisner was picking up minor commercial-art jobs around Pelham Bay—a poster for the tailor shop, an ad for the dry cleaner—when he bumped into a friend from DeWitt Clinton High, Bob Kahn. The two had palled around as teenagers under an unspoken pact of mutual exploitation. Kahn, who loved cartooning and dancing, had shown talent at the latter, and Eisner had been shy with girls; Kahn had set Eisner up on double dates, and Eisner had involved Kahn in school art projects, often helping him with the drawing. Affable, energetic, and unimpeded by awareness of his limitations, Kahn was quick to pursue the new comic-book field and sold a few gag cartoons about a hillbilly character, Hiram Hick, to a monthly hybrid called *Wow What a Magazine*, under the name Bob Kane. "Bob was a very vapid kind of guy, and his talent was quite limited," Eisner said. "The best thing he was working on at that time was a thing called *Peter Pupp*, which was an imitation of Disney. That was the limit of his capacity. But he was very aggressive, and he had an immensely leathery skin."

so that no matter how much humiliation he suffered, it didn't even register with him." Eisner, who had a folder of unsold ideas for newspaper strips, asked his old friend if he thought *Wow* might be interested in his work.

"Of course," said Kahn/Kane, as Eisner recalled. "They buy from everybody."

Eisner brought a portfolio of his comics samples to the magazine's offices, which were a pair of rooms on one floor of a garment-center factory that made men's shirts, in addition to *Wow*, rendering literal the scrappy young comic-book business's reputation as a rag trade. Eisner had trouble getting the attention of the editor, Samuel Iger, who called himself Jerry. Iger, rushing out of the building to attend to an emergency at the magazine's printers, several blocks south on Fourth Avenue, told Eisner to tag along and show him his artwork as they walked. At the printing plant, Eisner drew upon his apprenticeship at Bronfman Press and solved the emergency by cleaning some burrs off the engraving plates with a burnishing tool. Back at the shirt factory, Iger agreed to buy a four-page story about a rugged adventurer Eisner had created, "Scott Dalton." Or so went the story of Eisner's entry into comics as he liked to tell it—as an Aesopian fable of casual heroism, hidden virtue, and vindication through the lessons of hard experience.

Wow published *Scott Dalton*, followed by revised versions of Eisner's *Harry Carey* (now *Harry Karry*) and *The Flame* before going under with its fourth issue. New comic books were popping up so quickly, however, that Eisner saw an opportunity to satisfy both the artist and the breadwinner with his own. "Most comic books were publishing compilations of daily strips, rejects, or new material so poor I wouldn't put it in my trash can," Eisner said. "I thought, well, pretty soon they're going to run out of old material, and they're going to need good new stuff. So I called Jerry Iger." Over lunch at a doughnut shop near the *Daily News* building on Forty-second Street, which Eisner thought of as the epitome of big-time publishing, Eisner proposed starting a manufacturing partnership: a studio to produce ready-to-print comic-book stories for publishers looking to try the comics business without worrying about the craft, an idea derived from the model of sweatshop subcontractors common in the piece-goods trades. Similar comics studios were opening around the same time, including one run by Harry Chesler, a former advertising man out of Chicago who was supplying pages to Comic Magazine Company, an outfit begun in 1935 by two former employees of Major Wheeler-Nicholson. Eisner said he could bankroll the company, although he had only fifteen dollars to his name—the payment for an advertisement he had done for a grease solvent—and he said he was twenty-five, although he was nineteen. Iger was thirty-two, but broke from a divorce in progress, his second one, and he was hungry.

The Eisner and Iger Studio opened in the first weeks of 1937 in a ten-by-ten-foot, fifteen-dollar-a-month room in a brown, formerly red, brick office building on Forty-first Street and Lexington Avenue, a block south of Grand Central Terminal. It was occupied mainly by bookmakers, number operators, and miscellaneous transients. Iger handled the sales and the lettering of the dialogue in the word balloons, while Eisner did the writing and artwork—at first single-handedly (except for a few contributions from Iger, who could do simple children's cartoons); in time, with a staff of artists and writers under him. As with many good partnerships, the principals appeared to be ill suited. Eisner was bigger than he seemed, thick all around and slumped from too many hours at the drawing table. His face was long and sober, though he could laugh heartily, if not easily, at himself. He wore gray Scotch-tweed suits and smoked a pipe, and he never brought up his unfinished education or his age. Some artists who worked under him at Eisner and Iger, such as Chuck Mazoujian and Bob Fujitani, found him aloof. None described him as less than brilliant at what he was doing—or just learning to do at the same time he was trying to teach it to his staff.

"Will Eisner treated what he did very seriously, like a serious art form, from the very beginning," remembered Bill Bossert, an artist who worked at Eisner and Iger and later became an art instructor.

and watercolorist. “He never looked down on comics. Of course, most people did, and I did, too. It seemed a little weird to me that he wanted us to put so much effort into comic books. I’d say he was compensating for his age, but we were all kids.”

Jerry Iger was a feisty, small-framed man with a pencil mustache and well-tonicked black hair. He had an underbite that thickened his speech when he was upset, which was often. Iger was comfortable with women and men of every station, a trait that Eisner envied. “He was something of a blowhard—very, very aggressive,” Eisner said. “Jerry thought of himself as a ladies’ man. He was always at nightclubs every weekend. Monday morning, there was always some babe that would show up in new stockings, and she’d say, ‘I met your partner. He gave me a job.’ He was that kind of guy—he would walk up and see anybody. I was in awe of the fact that he would go up and see Randolph Hearst, if necessary.” In emulation of Hearst, he started going by the name S. M. Iger.

“The camaraderie in that studio was really lovely,” said Lee Ames, an artist at Eisner and Iger. “We were all bound by the fact that we denigrated Jerry. He was a swarthy little asshole of a guy who had no interest in anything but the bottom line. I could never understand how he and Will could have been together for any reason. The contrast between them was wonderful.”

Like every port in the uncharted comic-book business, the Eisner and Iger Studio harbored a flotilla of artists and writers of many flags; they drifted in and found the place welcoming. Comic books, even more so than newspaper strips before them, attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them: immigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts, as well as some like Eisner who, in their growing regard for comic books as a form, became members of a new minority. “I wanted to be a fine artist,” said Nick Cardy (Nicholas Viscardi), a scrappy Italian-American from the Lower East Side whose first artwork was miniature sculpture, crafted with the small blade of a broken pen knife from discarded broom handles and other pieces of wooden trash. When Cardy was fourteen in 1934, a mural of athletes he had painted for his school, Forsyth Junior High, was reproduced in the *New York Herald Tribune*. “I found, first of all, that I couldn’t afford the oil paints. To buy oil paints they were very expensive, and I couldn’t afford the canvas. Then I thought I could go into illustration. There was some beautiful illustration, excellent work being done in illustration in the 1930s—Harold von Schmidt, Dean Cornwell, Howard Pyle. Good artists—not Degas, but good. That was a step down from fine art, but that would be all right, but I realized that I couldn’t do that, either. I didn’t know what to do or where to go. I didn’t have a suit to wear to see anybody, and I think those shops were pretty closed. I didn’t think I had a chance at breaking in, and I needed to make a living. I needed money—right away, to live. So I went into comic books, and I liked it there.”

The Eisner and Iger Studio, the Chesler shop, and others to follow applied the industrial method to the creative process, producing comic-book pages by assembly line. Eisner (or, sometimes, Iger or someone else in the studio) would hatch an idea for a character—say, Sheena the Jungle Queen, who both Eisner and Iger would lay claim to creating. Eisner would usually design the character, then pass on the development of that character and the crafting of a story to his chief writer, Audrey “Tony” Blum, a would-be short-story writer who came to the studio soon after her father, Alex Blum, a portrait artist from Philadelphia who had found his clientele diminished after the Depression. Then another artist—often Eisner or Bob Powell (Stanley Pulowski), a brusque, combative Polish-American with a keen design sense—would take the typed story and “break it down” into comics panels roughed out as simple sketches. Another artist—perhaps Alex Blum or Chuck Mazoujian, a high-spirited young Armenian artist with a delicate illustrative style—would take the “breakdown” and make tight pencil drawings of the main characters. Another—Andre LeBlanc, a quiet, gravely serious artist with a lyrical approach, born in Brazil (where he later returned to become a much honored illustrator)—would pencil the secondary characters. The next—Bob Fujitani, a Japanese-American teenager ju

starting out, or Jack Kirby (Jack Kurtzberg), a cocksure New York kid who had attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn at the age of fourteen and loved comics—would pencil in the backgrounds. Finally, an inker—Powell, back for double duty, or Lou Fine, a meticulous draftsman (whose legs were crippled from polio) so versatile and deft that he could work in pen or brush without pencil sketches—would render all the pages of the story in ink, bringing to them some unity and a patina of personal style. When he handled the penciling, Fine used a mechanical pencil with no eraser. Someone outside the studio, often a technician at an engraving plant, would add the colors, usually but not always using color guides provided by Eisner. He liked to describe his operation as “an Egyptian galley going down the Nile,” a charming image, its slavish implications notwithstanding.

The work produced at Eisner and Iger was, at its best, violently stylish. In features such as *Muss 'Em Up*, a noirish, black-and-white one-shot about a trench-coated vigilante, and *Hawks of the Seas*, a swashbuckler series set in the seventeenth century or thereabouts (and produced in black and white for sale to publishers overseas who thought they were buying reprint rights to a successful American newspaper strip), Eisner betrayed his debts not only to the much imitated adventure strips of Raymond, Foster, and Caniff, but also to film, especially the Warner Bros. gangster pictures and Errol Flynn adventures of the period. Muss 'Em Up Donovan, the titular hero, administers justice with the cavalier brutality of James Cagney or George Raft. (“Send an ambulance for Mike and his pal Donovan says in one frame. “They were resisting an officer—so I sort of MUSSED 'EM UP!!”) The drawings were composed like camera shots, with sharp, expressionistic angles and deep shadow effects that mirror the way the lens, not the eye, registers depth of field and light. Jules Feiffer, the cartoonist and playwright, was struck deeply by *Muss 'Em Up* as a boy. “*Muss 'Em Up* was full of dark shadows, creepy angle shots, graphic close-ups of violence and terror,” Feiffer wrote as an adult. “Eisner’s world seemed more real than the world of other comic book men because it looked that much more like a movie ... When one Eisner character slugs another, a real fist hits real flesh. Violence was no externalized plot exercise; it was the gut of his style.”

At some point in 1937, Creig Flessel could not recall exactly when, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson began keeping unlit butts in his cigarette holder. As the end of the year approached, there would sometimes be nothing in it, until the major found an ashtray with a salvageable piece of cigarette. Wheeler-Nicholson was broke; despite having kept expenses down by buying cheap art and paying his artists and writers late, if at all, he could not keep up with his printing bills and begged the printer, Harry Donenfeld of Donny Press, for a break. Donenfeld, a brash publisher of girlie magazines such as *Juicy Tales* and *Hot Tales* as well as a printer, was a crafty deal-maker. He had floated Wheeler-Nicholson in the past in exchange for pieces of his business. He understood the major’s predicament, having played a key role in creating it, and responded by buying him out. Donenfeld and a partner, Paul Sampliner, took over the publication of Wheeler-Nicholson’s comics, including the major’s new title, *Detective Comics*. “I believe they call that ‘the old squeeze,’” said Flessel. “I never saw the major again.”

Among Wheeler-Nicholson’s items of unfinished business was a new book, *Action Comics*. The major had prepared only a dummy issue for the purpose of registering the title for copyright, and both of its stories were lifts from the first issue of *Detective Comics*: “The Murders of Cap’n Scum,” written and drawn by Flessel, which was featured on the mock-up cover—a close-up image of a ghoulish, hooded killer holding up a long knife dripping with blood; and “The Streets of Chinatown,” an adventure about Slam Bradley, a two-fisted detective conspicuously similar to Roy Crane’s “Captain Easy” of the newspaper comics. Bradley was another contribution by the Cleveland partner Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, whom Wheeler-Nicholson had been using regularly. The major may o

may not have been planning to run Siegel and Shuster's unusual new character, "Superman," in *Action Comics*; independently, however, Sheldon Mayer, a clever young artist-writer working for the publishing jobber M. C. Gaines in newspaper syndication, noticed samples of Superman on Gaines's reject pile and passed them on to *Action's* new editor, Vincent Sullivan, who had been a writer on Major Wheeler-Nicholson's staff. "I thought it was good," Sullivan said.

Superman, the man of steel in the guise of the mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, was not a wholly original creation sprung from the depths of adolescent dreams; he merely seemed their fulfillment. Developed primarily by Siegel, who read science fiction and pulp magazines as well as comic strips, Superman was a mix of ideas swirling around the soup of junk culture in the 1930s: the super-strong protector of lesser creatures (Burroughs's Tarzan, publishers Street and Smith's Doc Savage—the "Man of Bronze" with the first name Clark); the hero with the secret identity (Zorro in the movies, the Shadow and the Green Hornet on the radio, the Spider in the pulps); and the costumed crime fighter (all of the heroes with secret identities, including the Phantom, Lee Falk's newspaper-strip character who wore a purple leotard). He had dozens of distant ancestors in classical mythology, of course, as well as a prominent one among the religions to follow. There was obvious precedent for the basic story of Superman, in which a wise and mighty father in the heavens sends his only son to Earth where he performs miraculous feats for the benefit of mankind.

Siegel and Shuster, both of whom were Jews, were tapping multiple traditions and theologies. According to Bob Oksner, a contemporary of theirs who fell into comics after getting a master's degree in education at Columbia, "There's no question in my mind that Jerry saw Superman as a kind of projection of his own self-image or his own fantasies about himself. Jerry was Jewish, like I am—like a lot of people in comics in those days—and the rest were Italian. Superman was the story of an unfairly denigrated person who knows that he had the ability to prevail in the end, whoever that person may be." A viable metaphor for Jesus, Superman was also Jewish.

Portrayed in Siegel's early stories as the "Champion of the Oppressed," avenging battered wives and vindicating the unduly punished, Superman spoke directly to survivors of the Depression; he was an immigrant (from another planet) himself, and he embodied the Roosevelt-era ideal of power employed for the public good. Children found special satisfaction in Superman, a fantasy adult who, unlike other adults, perfect in his childlike purity, who wields amazing powers to undo the wrongs in the grown-up world and who treats the doing like play. With his debut on the cover of the premier issue of *Action Comics*, published in June 1938, Superman distinguished comic books not only from newspaper funnies but from all the major forms of entertainment then popular—magazines, radio, and the movies.

We find Superman on that first cover, unidentified, hurling an automobile onto a boulder which sends several men run in fright; it is not clear until the inside pages if the fellow in the colored tights is a hero or a villain. Pulp stories in magazines and on the radio had told of fantastical doings in words and sounds, but did not show them unraveling in pictures; and movies had brought larger-than-life heroes such as Tarzan and Zorro to audiences in black and white, although the technology of the day made superhuman heroics prohibitively difficult and expensive to depict. Whatever Jerry Siegel could imagine and Joe Shuster could draw or suggest with a few brushstrokes—a man leaping over skyscrapers, outracing a locomotive, towing an airplane on his back, snuffing a time bomb in his hands—kids could now see, and in full color. The special effects in *Action Comics* No. 1 cost Joe Shuster about a dollar and a half, the going price of a kit of cartooning supplies.

Superman caught on fast. After a few months, a survey by National Periodicals (later known as DC) as in *Detective Comics*) found children asking news sellers for its Superman character by name, and the editors started promoting him on every issue of *Action*; by its nineteenth issue, *Action* was selling some 500,000 copies per month, more than four times as much as any other comic. In 1939, National

started publishing a comic book named *Superman*, and the company spun off a syndicated Superman strip. By 1940, *Superman* comics were selling 1,250,000 copies per month, and the daily strip was appearing in three hundred cities. Newspapers were following the comic books' lead.

Imitations and variants flourished in superabundance: Amazing Man, Wonder Man, Sandman, Doctor Man, the Flash, Master Man, Hawkman, the Whip, Hourman, Roy the Superboy (no relation), Captain America, Captain Marvel, Bulletman, Johnny Quick, Aquaman, and Wonder Woman, all published by the end of 1941. Bob Kane created a flying hero he called Bird-Man, whom he refined into Batman with considerable aid from an uncredited collaborator, Bill Finger. Imbued with gallantry, righteousness, physical strength, and patriotism, the bright, kinetic fabulism of superhero stories took the comics far from the tawdry chaos of the early funny pages. *Action* and its ilk were not so much outlets for the errant impulses of their artists, writers, and readers, or vehicles for them to challenge social convention or authority, as blunt credenda of virtue and testaments to the goodness of America. With Superman, the comics assimilated. As much as the Yellow Kid reveled in the immigrant experience, the red-and-blue man gloried in the American way.

2.

It Was Work

Harry “A” Chesler, Jr., the comic-book packager, applied the “Jr.” to his name or dispensed with it as he saw fit, and put quotation marks around the initial because he thought they were stylistically correct, and he had a point. When he was asked what the “A” stood for, he said, “Anything indiscriminate was his middle name. Stubby and gray-skinned, he dressed in striped shirts and a suit vest that often but not always matched the pants; he kept a derby laid flat atop his head, all day indoors; and he was usually smoking a cigar, proportionately stubby and also gray, with the label intact—a fancy label that could impress anyone who did not know much about cigars. Chesler, a stickler for efficiency, minimized the creative effort required of his artists to render him in caricature. He set up his studio in a long, open work-space, last used by a wholesaler of buttons and zippers for the garment trade, on the fourth floor of 276 Fifth Avenue, a ten-story, half-block-long building north of Twenty-ninth Street. Chesler filled the room with rows of used desks, which were cheaper than drawing tables, and he lorded over the shop as if it were a gangland fiefdom: Anyone arriving at work five minutes late would be docked an hour’s wages; and on payday, he would sit behind the desk in his office, summon the artists, one by one, and ask each of them, “How much do you need this week to get by?”

Late in 1939, Irwin Hasen joined Chesler’s staff. Hasen was just beginning to work professionally in art and, at twenty-one, was still living with his parents, who had had a furniture business go bankrupt and were rock-skipping from apartment to apartment in Manhattan to avoid going under. Hasen was an all-around artsy fellow who could have passed for Mickey Rooney’s more effervescent smaller brother. He had taken some drawing classes at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League, but abandoned his first aspiration, fine art, as impractical. He had a good compositional sense and applied himself to his assignments for Chesler, among the first of which was a detective story about a counterfeiting ring, published by *Timely*. Not long after Hasen stacked the pages and submitted them to his boss, Chesler walked over to his drawing table and told him, “Good work, kid! That’s a hell of a job you did! I’m going to play that up big!” At the end of the day, as Hasen cleared up his materials, he realized that he had inadvertently given Chesler only the top page of the story he had done. All the sheets of drawing board underneath it were blank.

“That’s when I learned something about the comic-book business at that point in time,” Hasen said. “It was going gangbusters, no matter what you did, and nobody was really paying any attention. Nobody cared what the heck was actually on the pages. It’s true—they could be blank, and nobody would notice. I wouldn’t be surprised if Chesler sent those pages to the printer.”

The ghetto of comics was becoming a boomtown. By 1940, the population of Americans eighteen and under had been growing steadily for years and was now at a record high of more than forty-five million. Superman and his costumed progeny bounded into the world at a good time, or the time that fostered their propagation. Young people were buying more and more comics every month—and not only the ones about superheroes, but books with adventures of every sort, as long as they were depicted in panels and word balloons: stories of cops and robbers, cowboys, spies, knights, flying ace jungle men and, in a mark of the medium’s benevolence toward adolescent males, jungle women. The

number of comic books published ballooned from about 150 in 1937 to nearly 700 in 1940, expanding in course the numbers of writers, artists, letterers, and others necessary to make the pages. Comics were in their gold-rush period, a frenzied era of speculation, experimentation, easy rewards, and a kind of aesthetic lawlessness, through the lack of clear, established standards and the limited accountability within the trade. The people creating and publishing comic books were competing by improvising, trying practically anything, rejecting almost nothing, in a freewheeling spirit of innovation entwined with opportunism born, for many, of desperation.

“It was a medium coming up, it was new, and I was new, and it would accept people like me because it didn’t know where the hell it was going, and I didn’t know what the hell I could do, either, and that made it easy and exciting,” said Tom Gill, a resourceful Canadian-born artist, raised mainly in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Gill had started drawing spot illustrations for the *New York Daily News* in 1931 and gravitated to comic books in the late 1930s. (He would go on to teach cartooning at the School of Visual Arts for decades.) “I couldn’t go be an illustrator and stuff like that—that was so set and everything was established. But here, it was a free atmosphere. There was room for you to grow and experiment.”

Some young comics artists, such as Jerry Robinson, an undergraduate at Columbia who did some ghosting for Bob Kane on *Batman* after class hours, exulted in the new medium’s freedom. “Basically we were kids ourselves, so we were writing what excited us, which our audience then related to,” said Robinson. “We were inventing the language as we went along, and some of us had an awareness of that. Every time we did something that we didn’t think had been done before, it was exciting—maybe something like the whole first page as a splash page to introduce the story or breaking out of the panel format. Really, what we were trying to figure out how to do was give a perception of time, cross-cutting, and setting the scene, and establishing character, and we had to break away from the conventions of newspaper comics to do that.”

Freshman artists and writers who found themselves working together in comics learned their craft over each other’s shoulders, and their primary gratification apart from the pay of \$15 to \$25 per page was self-satisfaction or the approval of their peers. “Oh, it was like a college class for me,” said Bob Lubbers, a comic-loving Long Island native who started drawing for the Centaur company in 1940, at age eighteen. “All I’d do is walk around and see what the other guys were doing. We all did that. We would catch some trick—somebody was using a Japanese brush or applying some different kind of light to light the scene, or different angles. Everybody had his strengths, and we rooted each other out and stole everything we could from each other. I thought Nick Cardy had the prettiest girls, Artie Safran was the best draftsman.’ I think Johnny Celardo had great compositions and did great animals, and then there was Joe Doolin, who was a cover man, and he was as tight as you could possibly be, but the covers looked posed—they sort of lacked a continuum of action in that he was so tight. We all took mental notes and robbed each other blind.”

Low expectations granted comics creators vast license. Sold next to the candy on newsstands and drugstore racks, comic books were generally thought of as another nutrient-free but essentially harmless confection for kids. They were not just infantile, but something less worthy of adult consideration: junk. “A lot of guys looked their noses down on comics—they thought it was kid stuff,” said Mickey Spillane, the pulp writer, who did more than a dozen manic cops-and-robbers stories for comic books, beginning in 1940. “So it was kid stuff? It was work. You can call it kid stuff, comic books, garbage, you name it—labels like that, guys put on things so they don’t have to think about them. That’s just the way I like it. Leave me alone—I’ll go about my business and do what I want. If it’s any good, somebody will pay for it, and a kid’s dime buys the same cup of coffee.”

A forum for artists and writers who were outsiders of all sorts, comic books spoke cogently to young people as they struggled to come to terms with adult society. “I decided when I was quite young

that there was a certain element of nonsense going on in the grown-up world—a lot of people who were supposed to be older and wiser but were really in a world of their own, and I developed an inability to accept nonsense from people just because they're older and supposedly wiser," recalled Art Jaffee, the cartoonist and writer, who, at age nineteen in 1940, started working for Quality Comics. Raised in Lithuania, Savannah, and the Bronx, Jaffee had first learned to use cartoons to satirize authority and conformity while a student at the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. "When I went into comics, the business was full of misfits like me. If you were inclined to point out the silliness of the world, as I was, nobody in the business was going to stop you." One of Jaffee's first creations was a big-foot hero, a caricature of comic-book heroes, called Inferior Man. Published in *Military Comics* by Quality, Inferior Man pointed to the comics' ability to defy the norms, including the just-forming conventions of the comics medium.

Erratic, inelegant, often clumsy, but boundlessly energetic and wide-eyed, early comic books appealed to youngsters as a kindred species. Kids recognized in comics something resolutely and gloriously unadult. The books were "less grown-up" than "everything, including the Sunday funnies," recalled Jules Feiffer, who, at eleven years old in 1940, was an avid comic-book fan and already writing and drawing stories of his own, for pleasure, though the work (pieces of which he would keep for the rest of his life) was as good as some published in comics at the time. "The rowdiness, the crudeness of drawing, the cheap printing, the fact that they were looked down upon—these are the things that made them attractive," said Feiffer. "There was practically nothing else that we thought of as ours in those days."

At ten cents a copy, comics, like sodas and candy bars, were among the few things children of the post-Depression years could afford to buy by saving the pennies they could pick up on the sidewalk or earn by running errands, and they instilled a pride of ownership rooted not in adult conceptions of value, but in their absence. Parents considered comics worthless; therein lay their worth to kids. "I really loved comics ... [and] I'd have to say that I probably loved comics so much, like I did, because my parents didn't give a damn about them," said Martin Thall, a New York City kid, ten years old in 1940, who, like Feiffer, was inspired by comics to become a cartoonist himself. "I went to the newsstand every day looking for new ones, and if they weren't there, I would stare at the old ones again, every day, like I would find something new [in them]. My buddies and me talked about them all day. If you didn't know about comics, you were a nobody." Comics were capital in the social economy of childhood, void among adults.

Nearly all young people—boys and girls, loners, athletes, scholars, and debutantes—read comic books, and most of their parents did not. To read comics was to belong to a vast yet exclusive club, one whose membership was restricted primarily by age. "Everything else was 'Ladies and gentlemen' and comic books were, 'Hey, boys and girls!'" remembered Ted White, who, as a boy in Falls Church, Virginia, began looking at comics before he could read. (White would grow up to be a major comic book collector.) There were two stores in downtown Falls Church that sold comics: Ware's Pharmacy at the main crossroads, and, a quarter-block from there, Murphy's Five and Dime. After school, White and a few of his friends would walk together, first to Ware's, where they would stand around the magazine racks, pretending to browse, rushing through as many of the latest comics as they could before they were shooed away for loitering; then they would head to Murphy's and pick up what they hadn't finished reading. By the time he was eight, White had read hundreds of comics, although he owned only about a dozen, all tattered and smudged, many with covers long molted and lost. "We all passed them around, like sacred objects, until they fell apart," White said. They kept their favorites—*All-Star Comics* were White's—in shoe boxes hidden in the backs of their closets and under the beds, hoards of illicit treasure.

Will Eisner so prospered in the factory production of this treasure that he moved with his parents into a sumptuous nine-room apartment on Riverside Drive on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a colony of Jewish affluence; still, a curiosity about the comic-book medium's creative capacity—combined with an illimitable confidence about his own ability to exploit it—led him to cash in his share of the partnership with Iger, so he could experiment more freely. By 1940, Eisner had accepted an offer from a venturesome publishing gadfly, Everett "Busy" Arnold, to produce a different sort of comic, a hybrid of newspaper strips and comic books that would be distributed as a supplement to Sunday papers served by the Des Moines Register and Tribune Syndicate, and he was promised creative independence. Since the newspapers had a readership of adults as well as children, Eisner reasoned the venture offered him a vehicle to transcend the juvenilia of the superhero craze.

"I made my bones, as my Italian friends put it, but I wanted to go on, and along came this opportunity to produce for another market, the newspaper market—adults," Eisner said. "I saw a future for me in the comic-book market, because I thought, well, I'd be doing the same thing again and again and again. Most comic books were very insipid, and that's all the publishers expected from us. Even the highly successful *Superman* and *Batman* had inane stories. Comic books then were regarded as a very cheap, low art form, and I was not proud of being part of it. I was always embarrassed to explain where I was working and what I was doing. To say you were a comic-book artist in those days was like saying, 'I sweep floors,' 'I'm a super.'

'At the same time, I felt comic books were underrated—I felt they had untapped potential, at that time. I thought that most of the guys in comics underestimated their readers. I think they wrote down. Remember, I was younger than everybody else in my studio, so I was living with this idea that, 'He don't underestimate me because of my age.' As a matter of fact, I got into a confrontation with the guys at Eisner and Iger over this. I said in an interview that, when I made the decision to do the Spirit, I thought that comic books could be an art form, a literary art form, and the guys in the shop said that was being uppity." Paraphrasing Eisner, *The Philadelphia Record* reported:

The comic strip, he explains, is no longer a comic strip but, in reality, an illustrated novel. It is new and raw in form just now, but material for limitless intelligent development. And eventually and inevitably it will be a legitimate medium for the best of writers and artists. It is already the embryo—Eisner apologizes a little for the trite phrase—of a new art form.

Sterling North, a grandson of Midwestern homesteaders, grew up during the first decades of the twentieth century in Edgerton, Wisconsin, a farm town that he evoked as a hammock daydream of heartland wonderment in a series of books for young readers. He attended the University of Chicago and worked for many years as a reporter and columnist for *The Chicago Daily News*, a literary independent paper, for which he wrote frequently on his main subjects of interest, childhood and literature. In the May 8, 1940, edition of the *News*, there was an article by North in the left column of the "Books and Authors" page; it combined a review of the spring season's offerings for children with a narrative of the delight in literature that he and his wife shared with their young son and daughter. North began the piece by introducing the family members and announcing that one of his own juveni-

books had sold 30,000 copies and that the most recent, *Greased Lightning*, had been selected for the Junior Literary Guild. He then provided a rapturously sensual account of how his family experienced newly published books:

The packing from around the new books is hastily thrown into the fireplace. We spread out all over the floor of the living room and the sunlight comes in through the many-paned windows. Then the fun begins—because new books are fun. Even the way they smell is delightful; the texture of paper and binding is exciting.

In the text to follow, North found much to praise in many of the season's titles, such as *That Mari* "the adventures of a lazy little boy of the Philippines," *Quest of the Cavaliers*, about De Soto and the Spanish explorers, and *Bill and the Bird Bander*, "a book about bird banding, bird migration and the curious habits of birds which should make more than one young reader wish to become a professional ornithologist."

To the right of this article, boxed and centered on the page, was a companion piece by North. It was headlined "A National Disgrace (And a Challenge to American Parents)," and this is what it said:

Virtually every child in America is reading color "comic" magazines—a poisonous mushroom growth of the last two years.

Ten million copies of these sex-horror serials are sold every month. One million dollars are taken from the pockets of America's children in exchange for graphic insanity ...

The bulk of these lurid publications depend for their appeal upon mayhem, murder, torture and abduction—often with a child as the victim. Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded "justice" and cheap political propaganda were to be found on almost every page.

The old dime novels in which an occasional redskin bit the dust were classic literature compared to the sadistic drivel pouring from the presses today.

Badly drawn, badly written and badly printed—a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems—the effect of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder makes the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories. Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the "comic" magazines.

But, of course, the children must be furnished a good substitute ... And never before in the history of book publishing have there been so many fine new books for children ...

The shame lies largely with the parents who don't know and don't care what children are reading. It lies with unimaginative teachers who force stupid, dull twaddle down eager young throats, and, of course, it lies with the completely immoral publishers of the "comics"—guilty of cultural slaughter of the innocents.

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