

2015

Decoder Ring--The Digital Comic Museum

Jerry Spiller

Art Institute of Charleston, yeri.spiller@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spiller, Jerry (2015) "Decoder Ring--The Digital Comic Museum," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 4, Article 46.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7164>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Decoder Ring — The Digital Comic Museum

Column Editor: **Jerry Spiller** (Art Institute of Charleston) <yeri.spiller@gmail.com>

I want to introduce you to a dangerously wonderful thing: the **Digital Comic Museum (DCM)** at <http://digitalcomicmuseum.com>.¹ It's clearly wonderful, because it's full of scans of old comics from yesteryear that are in the public domain. Dangerous? Because someone had to do the painstaking research to ensure that these works really are in the public domain. The archivists know what I'm talking about.

DCM is a pretty grassroots effort. The header on every page of the site proclaims "We are the best site for downloading FREE public domain Golden Age Comics. All files here have been researched by our staff and users to make sure they are copyright free and in the public domain." DCM's FAQ explains² that they make careful checks using UPenn's *Catalog of Copyright Entries*³ before publishing entries for user submitted scans.

DCM also lists in its FAQ titles and publications that are not acceptable for upload as they are not in the public domain.⁴ These include obvious choices such as DC, including its absorbed rival *All American Comics*, as well as *Marvel*, including its previous incarnations as *Timely* and *Atlas*. Similarly, and just as obviously off limits, are mainstays like *Archie Comics*, *Mad Magazine*, and anything owned by **King Features** or **Universal Features**. Also not to be plumbed are the many classic horror stories of **EC Comics**, some of whose titles like *Tales from the Crypt* and *Weird Fantasy* are currently available in reprints from Dark Horse under the "EC Archives" moniker (a few different publishers have had a crack at the EC vaults over the years, with varying levels of quality in scans and recoloring work).

What you will find on DCM is more than enough to hold your interest. This is a treasure trove for researchers and fans alike. Some of the DCM archives are strips of pre-1923 origin like *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *Gasoline Alley*. The bulk of the material is from the Golden Age of the late 1930s through the 1950s, however, and seems to land in the public domain via lack of copyright renewal. This isn't surprising given the frenzied pace of creation in what was then a very ephemeral medium, and the subsequent chaos of publisher

name and ownership changes, mergers, and closings. The interests of the period, when superhero comics were just in their ascendancy, mean there is representation for genres like war, romance, Westerns, and detective books from publishers like **Charlton**, **Dell**, **Hillman Periodicals**, **St. John**, and **Ziff-Davis**.

Publications of the U.S. government are, of course, in the public domain. DCM has some good scans in this category as well, including many issues of the now legendary Army rag *PS Magazine: Preventative Maintenance Monthly*, created in 1951 and for many years by the legendary **Will Eisner**. Sadly, the uploads for this title start with issue 85 from 1960. 1951-1959 issues are not currently represented, nor is the magazine's predecessor *Army Motors*. More complete runs of *PS Magazine*, from 1951 to 1971, are available from **VCU Libraries Digital Collections**.⁶

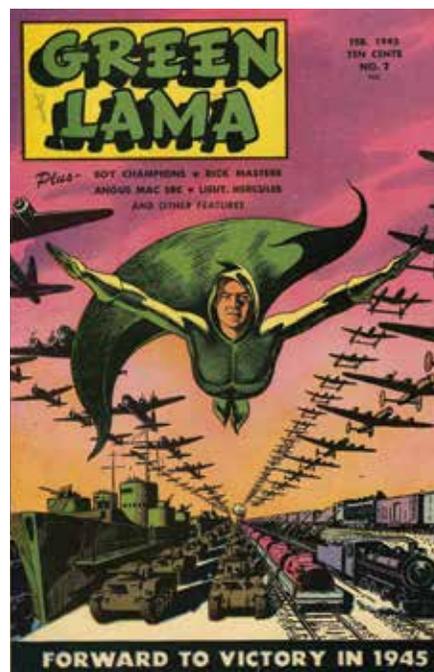


Figure 2: Cover to *Green Lama* No. 2, Feb 1945, art by Mac Raboy. Image: Public domain via DCM.⁷



Figure 1: Fiction House's horror comic *Ghost* featured stunning cover art by Maurice Whitman. Image: Public domain via DCM.⁵

appeared first in 1940 in a serially published novel in *Double Detective Magazine*, later reprinted by **Altus Press**. Although the original publisher of these stories, the **Frank Munsey Company**, went belly up, **Crossen** kept the copyrights when they did. Whether **Crossen** simply retained ownership all along or had signed the rights over to Munsey with an agreement that they would return to him I'm unclear.

The *Green Lama* comics put out by **Prize Comics** in 1940-1943 and **Sparks Publications** in 1944-1946 were derivative works that were authorized at the time; in fact, **Crossen**

himself wrote them. The copyrights to the comics were not renewed. Marketing new derivative works based on those stories would violate the original copyright. Those rights are still held by **Crossen's** daughter **Kendra Crossen Burroughs**, herself an author whose works include an annotated edition of the Bhagavad Gita (along with translator Shri Purohit Swami) as well continuations of the adventures of another of her father's pulp detective creations, Manning Draco. The *Green Lama* is trademarked by **Argosy Communications** in agreement with the **Crossen** estate. There have been authorized and unauthorized publications featuring the *Green Lama* in pulps and comics over the years. But the 1940s comics do appear to be in the public domain. DCM is not marketing anything new in offering up the original scans of the comics, so it would not seem to be in violation of **Crossen's** copyright here.

Needless to say, society benefits from a robust public domain. Without it the *Green Lama* and friends would not have been able to take on *Frankenstein's Monster* in 1943.

You must register to be able to both upload to and download from DCM. The registration process features no fewer than three bot checks. Comics available for download are compressed into CBR, CBZ, or CBT formats (variations on RAR, ZIP, and TAR files, respectively), so readers will need a digital comics reader like Comix or CBViewer to read the files.⁸

Readers can donate to help DCM cover their server costs and other operating expenses. This reader plans to do so. 🐼

endnotes on page 85