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Decoder Ring — Reprints and Refrigerators in “The American Comic Book (Critical Insights)”



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

I often lament that printed academic and scholarly works lag behind online sources in timeliness. To a degree, this is a simple necessity.

I was pleasantly surprised in this regard when reading through the **Salem Press** volume *The American Comic Book*, part of their Critical Insights series.¹ Edited by **Joseph Michael Sommers** of **Central Michigan University**, this collection of essays provides a wonderful overview of many facets of the comics medium from a roster of credentialed theorists. The chapters are consistently well researched and written, offering valuable insight into the world of comics and graphic novels both in print and in the digital era. I’ll highlight a few that really stood out.

Art historian, writer and curator **Kim Munson’s** second contribution to the book (her first focuses on censorship) “From the Mainstream to the Margins: Independent Comics Find a Voice” frames the rise of independent and alternative comics from the days of **Harvey Kurtzman’s** counterculture *MAD* and the underground comix of both **Denis Kitchen** and **Robert Crumb** to the present. She notes the importance of these often intentionally outsider works as a response to the homogeneity institutionalized by the team-based, “work for hire” production line model of the Big Two. **Munson** sees the founding of **Fantagraphics** in 1974 as being of importance. The publisher has been reminding the comics industry of its own history and diversity with a threefold approach. The first was purchasing the tabloid *Nostalgia Journal* and repurposing it for comics criticism as *Comics Journal* in 1976. Second, and perhaps the publisher’s bread and butter, is the many reprints it has published from previous eras, notably newspaper strips like **McCay’s** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, **Segar’s** *Popeye*, **Herriman’s** *Krazy Kat*, **Foster’s** *Prince Valiant*, and **Shulz’s** *Peanuts*. Third, **Munson** points out **Fantagraphics** early championing of new works that did not fit into the mainstream, such as **Chris Ware’s** *Acme Novelty Library* and the **Brothers Hernandez’s** *Love and Rockets*.

After **Fantagraphics**, **Munson** notes the rise of *Dark Horse*, which has enjoyed success with creator-owned series like **Mike Mignola’s** *Hellboy* at its spin-offs, and of **Image Comics**, born from a creator exodus from **Marvel** and **DC**. She also traces the importance of the independent and highly personal nature of the works of **Art Spiegelman** on present day creators such as **Alison Bechdel**, whose autobiographical and nonlinear *Fun Home* is held up as an example of the distinct and intimate works that resonate strongly with an increasingly diverse and personally invested fandom.

Editor **Sommers** notes in his introduction that **Munson’s** second essay marks a “medial shift” in the collection.² **Philip Smith’s** “From the Page to the Tablet: Digital Media and the Comic Book” is a great overview of changes to the form in recent years. **Forrest C. Helvie’s**

“Comic Fandom Through the Ages” sums up changes in readership and the relationship between readers, creators, and the tone and subject matter and tone. The changes in both fandom and creators detailed by **Munson** and **Helvie** work well together to set up **Katherine Whaley** and **Justin Wigard’s** final chapter, “Waiting for Wonder Woman: The Problematic History of Comic Book Women and Their Cinematic Doubles.” The pair note the categorization of women into three general types: ordinaries, superwomen, and supervillains.

At the time of the final essay’s writing, **Marvel** was preparing to announce that a female character would take up the mantle and powers of **Thor** in that title. **Whaley** and **Wigard** note that **Marvel’s** own publicity in pointing out that this would be the company’s eighth title led by a female character is perhaps blindingly admitting a serious problem in comics representation. The authors recount the 1938 origin of **Marston’s** Wonder Woman, an intentionally empowering feminist icon who carried tools associated with bondage and submission as she defended the wronged and advocated for the oppressed. They note the immediate departure from **Marston’s** intended ideal after his death in 1947 and the transfer of control to the creative team that gained control of the character. “Wonder Woman’s feminist agency was both denied and actively combated as she became subject to [boyfriend Steve] **Trevor’s** patriarchal ideology.”³ Such a large fall for such a strong icon presaged problems across the industry for years:

“The decline of Wonder Woman signified a decline for women in comics, a period of time when even their strongest icon was depowered, and the world waited for Wonder Woman to regain her footing as a hero for all people to look up to.”⁴

Whaley and **Wigard** list **Sue Storm’s** chief power of “not being seen” as a prominent example of the depowering and subjugation of women, so common as to be normalized and overlooked. They move from these problematic portrayals in print to incarnations of the same characters in **Marvel** and **DC’s** big screen franchises. They are particularly critical of **Mary Jane Watson’s** character in **Sam Raimi’s** *Spider-Man* films as a constant damsel in distress. Each film features **MJ’s** rescue in its final act. They also recount the 1999 coining by writer **Gail Simone** of the term “women in refrigerators,”⁵ a reference to the gruesome killing of **Alexandra DeWitt**, girlfriend of **Green Lantern Kyle Rayner**, in 1994.⁶ The villain **Major Force** murdered her and stuffed her body in **Rayner’s** refrigerator for him to find. Also noting the **DC’s** *Identity Crisis* crossover event was initiated by the rape and death of **Elongated Man’s** girlfriend **Sue Dibny**, the authors lament that “[i]n this manner, women are not seen as victims or survivors, but as plot devices.”⁷

The essayists also note the lack of credit and “larger than life” appeal afforded to even positively portrayed female characters, as any heroism or actual plot contributions they make are often simply forgotten or overshadowed by the acts of male figures. The importance of **Black Widow** in the **Marvel** Cinematic Universe is a cited example of a dynamic figure, a mover of the plot and as much a hero as her teammates, who is still rarely portrayed in merchandising in as heroic a light as her counterparts.

The fact that fans don’t have a solo **Black Widow** movie on the horizon, paired with the recent announcement that the **Captain Marvel** film has been pushed back twice now to 2019 to accommodate another **Spider-Man** reboot and an **Ant Man** sequel, show that we’re still waiting for **Wonder Woman**.^{8,9} By the way, the actual **Wonder Woman’s** 2017 solo film debut will be a prequel to *Batman vs Superman*.¹⁰

It is refreshing to see a print work that is so “in the know” as to reference thoughts of fans and creators such as **Kelly Sue Deconnick** and **Gail Simone** that one might be accustomed to seeing go by on their **Twitter** or **Tumblr** accounts. Such a combination of timeliness and rigor is a wonderful thing to behold. I really can’t recommend *The American Comic Book* enough to libraries looking for critical works in comics, film, or pop culture in general. As part of **Salem’s** Critical Insights series, purchase comes with access to the **Salem** Literature database.¹¹ 📖

Endnotes

1. **Sommers, Joseph Michael**, ed. *The American Comic Book* (Critical Insights). Har/Psc ed. Ipswich, MA: Salem Pr, 2014.
2. *The American Comic Book*, ix.
3. *The American Comic Book*, 201-202.
4. *The American Comic Book*, 202.
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6. *Green Lantern* Vol 3 #54. 1994.
7. *The American Comic Book*, 203.
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