
by

Lily Martin Gould
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Timeline

**March 1924:** Waterbury Republican in Waterbury, CT purchases a Goss International single-width press for color printing

**1928-1930:** Eastern Color publishes 36 issues of tabloid-format comics periodical called The Funnies for Dell Publishing

**April 1933:** Eastern Color begins printing a four-page full-color comic magazine called Gulf Comic Weekly for Gulf Oil Company. Soon after they began to print similar magazines for Standard Oil, Procter & Gamble, and Shell Oil

**1934:** Gaines sells his first comic magazine independent of its promotional sponsor: Famous Funnies, Series One #1, issued in partnership with George Delacorte

**1941:** Eastern Color acquires a seventh printing press and a new plant, Curtiss-Way, in Meriden, Connecticut

**August 1928:** Eastern Color Printing Company officially incorporated with William B. Pape as vice president and principal executive officer

**1929:** Eastern Color becomes the first major printing company in the U.S. to perfect an engraving process that permitted the addition of color to black-and-white comics. Eastern Color prints Sunday comics section from most Newspapers in the Northeast

**Spring 1933:** Eastern Color employees Harry Wildenberg and Maxwell Gaines invent the first modern-format comic book, Funnies on Parade. Later in the year Eastern Color would publish two other promotional comic magazines: Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics and Century of Comics

**July 1934:** Famous Funnies #1 premieres. First issue loses Eastern Color over $4,000, sixth issue finally turns a profit, and by the twelfth Famous Funnies nets Eastern Color about $30,000 each month

**August 1940:** Eastern Color debuts a new comic magazine, Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics, which features the superhero strip Hydroman. At issue #16 the name is shortened to Heroic Comics and the content becomes largely war-related
April 1941: The titular superheroine of Russell Stamm’s *Invisible Scarlet O’Neil* appears in the 81st issue of *Famous Funnies*.

November 1941: Due to wartime paper conservation efforts, publishing companies switch from the previous 64-page format to a 52- or 48-page format. After issue #88, *Famous Funnies* begins to feature original strip work rather than reprints.

March 1945: *Hydroman* leaves *Heroic Comics* at its 29th issue.

September 1946: The title of *Heroic Comics* is lengthened to *New Heroic Comics*.

1946: Addition to Eastern Color’s Commercial Street plant is finished.

March 1948: The strip *Bobby Sox* premieres in the 164th issue of *Famous Funnies*.


March 1949: The cover of the 176th issue of *Famous Funnies* includes a seal of approval from the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP), an American industry trade group that acted as a self-censoring institution for the comics industry.

1954: The Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) creates the Comics Code Authority, the most widely-used form of self-regulation in the industry.

May 1955: Eastern Color features the CMAA’s seal on the cover of their 217th issue of *Famous Funnies*.

June 1955: The Comics Code Authority accuses Eastern Color’s *Heroic Comics* of contributing to the juvenile delinquency crisis. Eastern Color discontinues the series in the same month.

July 1955: Eastern Color ends the publication of *Famous Funnies* in its 218th issue.
A Note on Comic Form

Throughout this thesis I will refer frequently to the varying forms that the comics assume. To a general audience, distinctions between these formats may not be entirely intuitive. Thus, to avoid confusion, I will provide a brief definition of the two comic forms with which this work most heavily engages: the comic strip and the comic book.

**Comic strip:** A comic strip is a short sequence of drawings, each of which represents an individual scene and fits in a single panel, often accompanied by some form of speech bubble or text caption. The panels develop in a narrative fashion and usually do not take up more than a page. Comic strips often appear in newspapers, but they may also be incorporated into advertisements, posters, comic books, etc. While serialized, most strips do not worry about narrative continuity from one week to another.

**Comic book:** A comic book, also often referred to as a comic magazine (especially in its younger years) is a self-contained pamphlet comprised of any number of comics. It differs from the shorter comic strip namely in length, as American comic books usually extend from around twenty-two to sixty-four pages. Reprints of the comic strips featured in Sunday newspapers comprised the majority of the earliest comic books. Today, comic books include either a collection of original or reprinted comic strips, or one extended comic narrative that ranges the entire issue. Unlike standalone comic strips, the stories presented in comic books often exhibit narrative continuity from one issue to the next.
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Introduction: Pop Culture Nation

Reclining with the newspaper on a Sunday afternoon and giggling at the antics of Mutt and Jeff, at the droll adventures of the “Peanuts” gang: these were some of my grandmother’s fondest childhood memories. Born in 1938, her younger years were spent in a nation that was at once mourning the losses of World War II and anxiously confronting the emergent realities of the Cold War. This thesis, a study of comic strips and comic books in the United States in the years between 1929 and 1955, devotes itself to a period not generally regarded as light-hearted, but rather as rife with fear and despair. Yet desperation alone did not define the 1930s, nor wartime America, nor the postwar years. Life went on in the United States despite those anxious times. Indeed, the adverse circumstances of the era inspired many extraordinary attempts, at the hand of a multitude of artistic and cultural movements, to cheer up the American population.

Comics epitomized this search for entertainment and distraction. Time and time again, as my grandmother remarked after I told her of my ideas for this project, the “funnies” provided Americans from all walks with a reason to laugh. They became a rallying point of amusement in the mid-twentieth century, yet did so in a way that also conceded the tragedy and sorrow that so heavily marked the era.

In this thesis, I aim to showcase this form of popular culture through a critical study of a Waterbury, Connecticut-based publisher of comics called the Eastern Color Printing Company. This pioneering company, with its unusual attentiveness to evolving national attitudes, offers an image of mid-century America that a study of other, more main-stream comic companies might not accomplish.
American comics began in 1842, when Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer’s *Les amours de Mr. Vieux Bois* was published in the United States under the English title *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck.* Töpffer’s “text comic” (sequential pictures accompanied by written captions) introduced the comic form to American newspapers. The next major development came in 1896, with the introduction of Richard Felton Outcault’s “The Yellow Kid” into Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper *New York World.* With “The Yellow Kid,” a strip about a young bald boy with flap ears and an iconic yellow nightshirt, text had moved from below the image to within it, and the classic speech bubble was born.

The appearance of “The Yellow Kid” in *New York World* on its own might not have been enough to jumpstart the genre, but placed in the midst of a heated rivalry between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, whose newspapers were locked in a competition for popular attention in the late nineteenth century, the strip became of great consequence. As one of the earliest comic historians, Colton Waugh, posits, “It was because the first comics functioned as highly important weapons in this war that they became imbedded in the American consciousness so deeply that it seems as if no one will ever be able to dig them out.” After Outcault’s pioneering comic came Rudolph Dirks’ prolific “The Katzenjammer Kids” (1897), published in the Sunday supplement of Hearst’s *New York Journal.* By the turn of the century, the newspaper comic strip had come into its own. The next significant development in the

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16 Ibid., 11.
medium would not come until the outset of the Great Depression, when advertisers found potential in the comic as a commercial tool, and nervous audiences began to hunger for refuge in the genre’s whimsical, imaginative stories.

The years from 1929 to 1955 proved to be the heyday of comics in America, and Eastern Color was no exception, but a history of the company has yet to be written. Since the 1940s, however, much scholarship on the comics in general has of course surfaced. The first attempts were the products of fans, directed toward other fans. These histories, for the most part, became adulatory tributes to the medium rather than true scholarly histories.\(^{18}\) Martin Sheridan’s *Comics and Their Creators* (1942), for example, provides a collection of biographical sketches and interviews with artists and writers, but little more. An immediate successor of Sheridan’s book, Colton Waugh’s *The Comics* (1947), similarly reveals the author’s affection for newspaper strips of the 1930s and his striking distaste for the more recent comic form, the comic book, which made its debut in the early 1940s.

A myriad of studies have arisen in the years since then. In a comprehensive bibliographic essay that appends his historical study of comic books, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (2009), French cultural historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet observes that the literature dedicated to the individuals—particularly the creators—involving in comic book production constitutes the majority of the existing scholarship on the comics.\(^{19}\) Jerry Bails’ *Who’s Who of American Comic Books* (1973), Alex G. Malloy’s *Comic Book Artists* (1993), Don And Maggie


Thompson’s *Comic-Book Superstars* (1993), Gerard Jones’ *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* (2004)—these studies and others provided detailed accounts of the publishers and creators of noteworthy comic books. Although useful resources, these basically hagiographic accounts frequently neglect a true study of the medium itself.

More serious aesthetic analysis emerged in the 1950s. These works, which attempt to define and investigate the formal properties of comics, include studies such as Stephen Becker’s *Comic Art in America* (1959); Thierry Groensteen’s 2007 book *The System of Comics* (2007), which takes a systematic approach to the semiotics of the comic; and R.C. Harvey’s *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (1994). Such analytical investigations contribute much to our understanding of the artists, but fail to relate comics to the societies and cultures that bore them.

It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that a true history of comics began to take root. This change in scholarship arose around the time that both social history and popular culture studies were only just emerging as disciplines. By the 1970s, according to scholar Paola Pugliatti, neo-Marxist cultural historians started seriously examining the cultural power of “post-industrial commercial phenomena.” Consequently, historians first began to represent comics as just that: material goods, commercial pieces of popular culture that needed extensive documenting. Books such as comics historian Maurice Horn’s *A History of the Comic Strip* (1968), prolific popular culture historian Ron Goulart’s *Comic Book Culture: An Illustrated History* (1980), and Martin Williams and Bill Blackbeard’s *The Smithsonian Collection of

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Newspaper Comics (1977) dealt with the comic as a sort of material relic. These historians produced straightforward, encyclopedic histories of the comics that relied on large amounts of data and very little cultural or historical analysis. For instance, Gabilliet’s 2009 book Of Comics and Men—a fact-filled and valuable resource for this project—provides a synoptic look at the production, distribution, and audience reception of comic books: one of the first major scholarly overviews of the evolution of the American comic book industry.

Amidst those encyclopedic histories, and becoming much more numerous in recent years, are the cultural histories of the comic that have proved invaluable to my research. Many historians working within this framework began to see the comic as a loyal representation of American culture, devoid of social critique. William Savage, Jr., in a bibliographical note at the end of his historical study Comic Books and America: 1945-1954, mentions the familiar argument, developed by Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak in The Fifties: The Way We Really Were, and by Peter Biskind in Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us To Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties, that “popular culture supported consensus and conformity.”

Ron Goulart, for instance, in his 1990 volume Encyclopedia of American Comics, posits that family-centric strip Hi and Lois, which debuted in 1954, “is a realistic depiction of the world it affectionately represents and has remained a faithful mirror of changing times through the years.”

More recent studies, however, have awarded the comic a more active role in the shaping of cultural beliefs and societal practices.

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22 Ron Goulart, Encyclopedia of American Comics (1990), 185.
(2009) and Bradford Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001) both represent the comics as molders of culture. Hajdu casts the censorship debate over comic books that arose in the early 1950s as a prelude to the cultural battle over rock music, whereas comics historian Bradford Wright pays careful attention to comic messages “that were easily perceived by audiences, clearly intended by producers, or suggestive of broad historical developments and cultural assumptions.”

Wright discusses how superhero comics displayed patriotic, anti-Nazi sentiments even before the U.S. became directly involved in the war, and the subversive ways in which they may have questioned social systems and the corruption of local politics.

While this thesis will follow in that tradition, even the best of those works often fail to provide the context needed to truly understand the writers, artists, publishers, and readers of comics in their heyday. This is the gap that I aim to fill in this thesis. To do so, this project endeavors to examine the subtler ways in which narratives shape our beliefs and values.

The bulk of the thesis relies on primary sources from the Eastern Color Printing Company, and the comics produced and distributed by the firm. Using these resources, this study provides a publisher’s history and a cultural history, and investigates ways in which the company mirrored, adapted to, or challenged the dominant cultural trends of mid-century America.

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As its title suggests, this thesis will also revolve heavily around the concept of “reality.” Consequently, a working definition of this slippery term becomes vital. Beyond a general demarcation of the concept, where reality is defined as “the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them,” we also require a closer inspection of how the term applies to particular societies. In the vast and diverse setting of mid-century America, whose “state of things” do we take to be reality? Here, Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s theory of collective consciousness and social reality provides a useful point of departure. The Gramscian argument hinges on “the fact that social reality expresses and contains something more than the organic projection of the dominant, ruling elite…” In other words, the philosopher offers a holistic vision of social reality that considers the workings of communities both dominant and subaltern. This is the reality—one that considers the whole of society rather than its individual parts—that this thesis will refer to.

Using the scholarship, primary sources, and concepts laid out above, this thesis will argue that, as the decades progressed, commercial, political, and cultural pressures drove Eastern Color Printing Company to produce content that increasingly diverged from both the prevailing comic trends and American social reality. This departure, which would eventually spell the end of the company’s original publications, contributed to the ongoing cultural construction of the romanticized and widely-accepted myth of an invulnerable, invariably democratic—yet always white—America.

Chapter I shows how, during the years between 1929 and 1939, Eastern Color Printing Company conformed to national trends in the industry, which made the gag humor comic strip into a sort of socially realist jester that attempted to alleviate the worries of the moment. Chapter II follows America through the war years and traces the emergence of the superhero comic book back to the nascent American fear of global conflict. It also demonstrates how Eastern Color at once employed dominant industry themes that tapped into both wartime truths and national myths, while also responding to intellectual pressures with a wave of nonconforming, yet ultimately conservative content. Chapter III details the development of mature, often violent genres of comic book that, with their morbid interest in the anxieties of the Cold War era, promoted a sharp critique and eventually censorship. The third chapter also follows Eastern Color’s unique response to emergent realities—including the company’s ultimate abandonment of industry trends and social reality in favor of romanticized scenes of suburban bliss: an imagined, conflict-free America.
Chapter I: Finding the Funnies, 1929–1939

In 1929, as the infamous narrative tells, the United States stock market crashed and the country dipped gradually into economic depression. The foul taste of breadlines, Hoovervilles, and irremediable unemployment distressed the American populace, who slowly but surely came face-to-face with widespread malaise and a highly diminished American morale. Despair was unavoidable—or so it seemed. In the unlikely decade of desperation and destitution, an influx of robust artistic talent also pierced the American cultural landscape. “The crisis kindled America’s social imagination,” cultural historian Morris Dickstein writes, “firing enormous interest in how ordinary people lived, how they suffered, interacted, took pleasure in one another, and endured.”

This outpouring of creativity affected not only high art, but also popular culture—including, of course, the comics. Rapidly gaining popularity in this decade was the domestic comic strip, and Eastern Color Printing Company would emerge as a faithful representation of this broader trend. Far from a sidekick to other forms of art and culture, the domestic comic strip developed in the 1930s into an antidote to the despair of the Great Depression that both represented and influenced practically all social strata. Rather than isolating the American people from national realities, as various other forms of popular culture attempted to do, the domestic strip indulged in them, making light of and in a way alleviating the commonplace and colloquial burdens that accompanied national bankruptcy.

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National Attitudes and Their Influences

To fully understand the role that Eastern Color comics—and culture more broadly—played in forming, questioning, or responding to national attitudes of the time, a general consideration of the social landscape of the 1930s becomes necessary.

“Most of us think we know,” writes Dickstein, “what the thirties were about. Its iconic images remain with us: apple sellers by their pushcarts, tenant farmers in their shacks, families trudging through dust clouds swirling over parched land. Like the 1960s, the thirties belong not only to history but to myth and legend.”28 These emblematic representations, of course, had roots in reality. Inevitably, the Great Depression kindled a deep sense of frustration and uncertainty within the American population. Historian Harvey Wish comments on this national concern, writing that “Americans who had counted upon the wisdom and initiative of the dynamic businessman were rudely shaken by Senate revelations that too many bankers and industrialists had shown neither wisdom nor integrity in the role they played in the events leading up to the great crash of 1929.”29 Americans were beaten, discouraged, defeated; Breadlines, Hoovervilles, unemployment, “the spectacle of people grubbing over garbage cans for food, and the obvious frustration of youth—the true Lost Generation—all contributed to the general disillusionment.”30

Americans were also frightened. Uncertainties about the future loomed large in the national consciousness. Ira Katznelson’s volume, Fear Itself: The New Deal

28 Dickstein, Dancing, 3-4.
29 Harvey Wish, Society and Thought in Modern America (1950), 489-490.
30 Wish, Society and Thought, 490.
and the Origins of Our Time, explores this American anxiety. He begins the third section of his introduction with the following paragraph:

“Fear,” one informant told Studs Terkel when the latter conducted an oral history of the 1930s, “unsettled the securities, apparently false securities that people had. People haven’t felt unfearful since.” Another reported how “everyone was emotionally affected. We developed a fear of the future that was very difficult to overcome…there was this constant dread. . . . It does distort your outlook and your feeling. Lost time and lost faith.” Hope proved elusive. The rumble of deep uncertainty, a sense of proceeding without a map, remained relentless and enveloping. A climate of universal fear deeply affected political understandings and concerns. Nothing was sure.31

Americans were uncertain, they were scared, and in some cases they were even starving; a recipe that seemed unlikely to stimulate creativity or imagination, and even less likely to cultivate a sense of enthusiasm among the American people. Yet creativity and imagination did not flounder. Riding one wave of cultural production—what some historians would label the “escapist” wave—was Hollywood; the Radio Music Hall; the light-footed, whimsical figures of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers; the fanciful songs of Cole Porter; the breathtaking sets and choreography featured Busby Berkeley shows—all of those pieces of American culture that forged a highbrow, carefree world in which the Depression became nothing more than rumor. “It was more than the need for distraction and escape,” wrote historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his memoir A Life in the Twentieth Century. “It was the need for reassurance and hope. With the republic struck down by circumstances beyond individual control, people longed for some vindication of individual identity, for restoration of the sense of individual

potency.” Films, music, and musicals, with their seductive and fantastical images of romance and elegance, quickly came to satisfy this longing.

Yet, the same uncertainty and fear that motivated these Hollywood fantasies also engendered a deep sense of social self-awareness in many producers of American culture, most notably in the left-wing artists of the decade. I argue that, in the 1930s, Americans developed a profound understanding of their social realities, thus kindling a wave of social realism among some segments of the American populace. That is to say, artists, writers, filmmakers, and countless other agents of cultural production began to generate faithful and gritty representations of the American social landscape that directly addressed the themes of hard times.

This realism’s most prominent expression came in the form of the arts. An artistic movement from the thirties called Social Realism, for example, aimed to both represent and critique the hardships suffered by common people during the Great Depression. Painters, filmmakers, writers, and musicians began producing stark portraits of Depression-era America and the adversity it had bred. Social realist photography also reached its peak during the Great Depression years, featuring the work of iconic photographers such as Dorothea Lange (one of the socialist artists of the period) and Walker Evans (Figure 1).

Critics thus hail the 1930s as the end of innocence, as the close to an era in which optimistic faith in simplistic solutions ruled the populace. “These same critics,” argues historian Warren Susman, “greeted a

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33 James F. Cooper, “Art and Culture in Hard Times,” *American Arts Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2010).
newer ‘realism’ with considerable enthusiasm.”34 In the wake of the 1929 stock market crash and the desperation it engendered, 1930s America could no longer subscribe to a blind faith in the American economy or to the idealized and romanticized culture that dominated the previous decade of the roaring twenties. Under these circumstances, much of the American populace thus turned instead toward a national culture interested in the specific and authentic hardships of everyday life.

In order to cope with their social realities—precisely because they had such a deep understanding of them—I argue that Americans began to yearn for the power of childlike imagination. When confronting different forms of media, especially Great

Depression media, cultural historians often create a dichotomy between escapist pieces and realist ones. I argue, however, that the lines between these two categories are blurred, and in some cases even nonexistent. Such a profound recognition of the misfortunes that constituted everyday Depression life took a toll on the American psyche, and the populace hungered for ways to understand and face this reality. One of these coping mechanisms, it turned out, was an indulgence in the carefree imagination of youth—a cultural tendency that borrowed simultaneously from the whimsy of the Astaire-Rogers trend and from the austere works of social-realist artists. In short, Americans turned to popular entertainment—what some deemed “childish” stories of parallel worlds and storybook characters—to immerse themselves in the caricatural, burlesque, and lighthearted representations of American reality.

This embrace of a carefree national attitude and the turn toward popular forms of media can be seen in a sociological survey called “Middletown in Transition,” conducted in the mid-1930s by Robert L. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd. The researchers analyzed the impact of the Great Depression in relation to free time and leisure of the citizens of this ‘typical’ middle American city: “What they found was that the individuals hit hardest by the crisis, particularly the workers, having taken a forced retreat from the 1920s discourse about the benefits of personal sacrifice and labor, attached a new importance to leisure.”³⁵ Americans turned away from politics and philosophy and toward popular culture and recreation. They turned toward more whimsical, feel-good, and perhaps even childish forms of media. A 1933 article

³⁵ Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men, 195.
entitled “The Art of Making Laughter” offers a poignant piece of advice in this regard: “Perhaps…we should go back to the plays that amused us as children for the preliminary sketch of what amuses us as adults. Too often we fail to recognize that which still remains of the infantile in the greater part of our pleasures.” Games, movies, radio, magazines, and comics—all of those things that recalled carefree childhood pleasures resurfaced in 1930s America. Americans dove into the imaginative worlds of farcical forms of media and leisure, and in them they found mirror images of themselves.

At first glance, this species of cultural movement may present as a sort of fluffy escapism, not at all in line with the social realism that emerged in the same era. The dichotomy between the two forms of culture, however, may not be as rigid as the dominant narrative dictates. As Dickstein explains in Dancing in the Dark, there are two rival clichés about Depression-era culture. One paints it as authentic, aimed at capturing American life as it really was. Another saw it as escapist, fantastical, and socially ignorant. In an interview with Dickstein conducted by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the author explains, “….I discovered that those two sides of the culture were not that different. There was plenty of melodrama, plenty of escapism, even on the socially critical side. . . . And the fluffy, fizzy side, I noticed, was rife with Depression themes. Take the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals, Busby Berkeley musicals or screwball comedies like My Man Godfrey, and you find

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37 Dickstein, Dancing, 9.
references to the Depression in every other line.”

In any form of Depression-era cultural expression, in other words—even in supposedly escapist fare that rested on the artist’s imaginative power—a deep understanding of the social landscape endured, indeed often proved necessary. Historian Stella Ress, in an article about Little Orphan Annie during the Great Depression, similarly writes that “By reading Little Orphan Annie on a regular basis, adults allowed themselves the chance to integrate their fascination of youth (a remnant of the carefree days of a bygone decade) with the reality of their dire Depression-era circumstances.”

Such was the case, I believe, with the general American population. They took the social self-awareness cultivated during the decade and blended it with youthful humor and buoyancy, creating a complex reserve—epitomized, as we will soon see, by the comic—of a socially-alert and highly imaginative popular culture.

Even today this interpretation of the not-so-dichotomous relationship between realist forms and whimsical forms of cultural expression endures. In a 2008 New York Times article by A.O. Scott titled “Reality Can Be Escapist, Too,” the journalist and film critic posits that “Audiences want to be lulled by romance or tickled by comedy, but they also have a hunger to see reality depicted. Above all there seems a universal appetite to see the rawness of the world given the shapely and soothing order conferred by familiar genres.”

Self-awareness, then, becomes the very sentiment that drives a culture to escapism, and even much of the so-called escapist work

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thrive—indeed depends—on social truths. The American people in the thirties saw “the rawness of the world,” but they hungered to understand it, to see themselves depicted on the dazzling big screen, in the headless voices of radio personalities, in the playfully-drawn forms of the comic characters.

Thus, fear and despair did not entirely define American culture during the great Depression. The imaginative tendencies that accompanied such social self-awareness provoked also a sense of anticipation that began to push at this hard, austere surface. As prominent intellectual of the decade Josephine Herbst comments, there was an “almost universal liveliness that countervailed universal suffering.” Americans recognized the political and social realities that underpinned the decade, but they also did not give up hope. They tuned into caricaturized depictions of social misery to ease the fear and uncertainty, and in doing so recognized an unbending determination to persist. If they were able to laugh, they could endure the crisis.

Popular culture—and the comics in particular—helped Americans to understand themselves and their realities, because it presented American culture in a way that was both palatable and matter-of-fact. “If there was an increased awareness of the concept of culture and its implications,” Susman writes, “as well as a growing self-consciousness of an American way or a native culture of value, there were also forces operating to shape that culture into a heightened sensitivity of itself as a culture.” These forces, of course, were many. They did not originate in one singular form or articulation of national influence such as government or economy. But art,

literature, and media certainly constituted one major branch of these culture-shaping forces. New media, in particular, contributed to America’s nascent cultural self-consciousness. Although not entirely new in the 1930s, mass media—the photograph, the radio, the movies—bloomed during the Great Depression, creating a society of sight and sound that brought a heightened sense of self-awareness to the American people. This new media also made Americans more sensitive than ever to the agents of cultural production, those who would mold culture and thought. These figures would include the photographers, the filmmakers, and the on-air personalities of the era. It would also, however, be the cartoonists, the comic artists, and the publishing companies—those who were able to reach mass audiences—that would shape the American psyche and culture.

Disillusionment, fear, hope, and self-awareness: such were the sentiments that constituted the chaotic national attitudes of 1930s America. Yet, as we will soon see, all of these feelings in ways both emerged from and contributed to the rich literary, artistic, and cultural landscape of the decade.

**Comic Strip Production and Readership**

The comic strip, as we have seen, had existed for decades before the onset of the Great Depression. Never before, however, had the American people needed it so intensely. This craving for the power of youthful imagination that we discussed in the previous section, the cultural turn toward whimsical, farcical representations of reality, often materialized in the comic strip. Because of this cultural trend, as well as

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43 Ibid., 230.
the strip’s burgeoning commercial value, the 1930s saw a surge in comic strip production and readership.

Eastern Color Printing Company’s incorporation occurred in August 1928, when William B. Pape, the owner of the local paper, the Waterbury Republican-American, acquired a Goss four-deck press. Pape named himself vice president and principal executive officer of the company. Over the next couple of years, headquartered at 61 Leavenworth Street in Waterbury, Eastern Color became one of the few firms to print color covers for pulps, or inexpensive fiction magazines printed on cheap wood pulp paper. From 1928 to 1930, Eastern Color published 36 issues of a tabloid-format comics periodical called The Funnies for Dell Publishing. The Funnies contained original comic pages in color—the first four-color comic newsstand publication—and sold for ten cents every Saturday.\(^{44}\) Dell Publishing and its owner, George Delacorte, would in the future develop a close relationship with many of the Eastern Color publications.

Around 1929, Eastern Color underwent another crucial technological advance: it perfected an engraving process that permitted the addition of color to black-and-white comics. It became the first major printing company in the U.S. to hone the process, thus proving hugely valuable to the newspaper syndicates that had just begun to produce full-page Sunday comics. From then on, Sunday newspaper strips were printed in both black-and-white and color, and by the mid-1930s most newspapers in the Northeast hired Eastern Color to print their Sunday comics section.\(^{45}\) Swiftly after


its inception, Eastern Color began a relationship with the comic medium that would, in the years to come, evolve into its very own publication and an imperative force in the comics world of the thirties.

Eastern Color’s quickly growing role as color printer for numerous newspaper syndicates would not have been possible without a corresponding development in the comic strip industry. The rapid growth of the comic strip business could be attributed to the advertising industry’s establishment of the comic strip as a commercial tool. As historian Ian Gordon argues, the restricted Depression market allowed advertisers to discover the potential of comic art to sell products, and by 1931 comic-strip-style advertising had become a frequent feature of the Sunday comic supplements of William Randolph Hearst’s papers.⁴⁶ Eastern Color also recognized the advertising potential of the comic, and in the first years of the decade, advertisements for toys and gadgets began to crowd every other page of almost every issue of one of the company’s first original publications, Famous Funnies, which began in 1934. A 1936 issue even reminded its readers, in one of its letters from the “Famous Funnies Family,” that “advertisers spend large sums of money to tell you about toys, etc., which they think you will be interested in, so don’t forget to read the advertisements.”⁴⁷ Perhaps audiences found the comic content itself far more intriguing than the promotions included, or perhaps the Eastern Color family included this reminder merely due to the novelty of such advertising techniques. Either way, advertisements indeed played a significant role in the rise of the comic strip.

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Yet it was not exclusively their promotional power that brought the comics such popularity during the Great Depression. In the same 1937 article from the *Los Angeles Times*, the author contended that “cartoons not so many years ago were just the stepchild of the publishing business. They have reached their majority now.”

The popularity of the comic strips, then, extended far beyond their promotional usages. By 1936, only two of the 2,300 daily newspapers in the United States, the stodgy *New York Times* and the *Boston Transcript*, did not publish comic strips. A 1936 article in *Literary Digest* claims that comic artists’ fan mail increased during the worst months of the Depression, and a poll from the early 1930s by George Gallup showed that among the 25,000 people recorded, more read the comics than the front page banner stories. In another survey conducted at a convention of 200 editors in New York, researchers discovered that 29 percent of the readers followed the sports news, 46 percent read editorials, 18 percent were interested in financial news, and “90 percent to 100 percent were reading comics or cartoons.”

The comic strips reached international audiences as well. Eastern Color’s *Famous Funnies* often featured letters from their international readers. Letters all the way from China, Brazil, and Great Britain arrived at the company every month and

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52 Ibid.
were promptly published in the comic magazine. Of the publication, customer John Simopoulos of London wrote:

Dear Family:

Please send me your magazine ‘Famous Funnies’ for one year—1 copy each month from January, 1936 to December, 1936 inclusive, for which material you will find a check for $2.00 enclosed.

I ask this because I find your charming magazine so non-vulgar—and vastly entertaining. Many of my friends here in England say to me ‘Do let’s have a look at it!’

By the mid-1930s, the comic strip phenomenon had taken hold of the majority of the American populace and had begun to grasp the attention of readers beyond the American border, too. It became an “$8,000,000-a-year industry to 200 cartoonists,” who were said to have a “larger popular following than any other creative artist.” If it began as a child of the advertising industry, it transformed rapidly in the third decade of the twentieth century into its own piece of American culture.

But what sections of the American populace made up this voracious comic readership? Many believed at the time that the comics belonged exclusively to the American youth. The first researchers to turn their attention to the question of comics readership were psychologists by the names of Harvey C. Lehman and Paul Witty. In their study “The Compensatory Function of the Sunday ‘Funny’ Paper,” published in 1927, they equate comic readership with children. In other words, they assumed that the popularity of the comic strip was most logically measured through child readers; the possibility of an adult fan base was not

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54 “Funny Strips,” Literary Digest, 18.
considered. They sampled five thousand children from Kansas and Missouri aged eight and a half to fifteen and a half, and found that reading Sunday comics was the preferred activity regardless of age, race, sex, or season.\textsuperscript{55} Journalists, too, were prone to use phrases such as “the mental food of American children”\textsuperscript{56} to describe the comic strip.

It would be 1930 when George Gallup published the first study of comic readership that did not limit its analysis to children. He discovered that the comics page was the most popular and widely read section of the newspaper—regardless of age.\textsuperscript{57} Other reports from the 1930s reiterated these findings. A survey published in \emph{Fortune} in 1937 stated that less than one-third of adults regularly read an editorialist but more than half had a favorite cartoonist.\textsuperscript{58} Many Americans were poorly educated; all, however, could enjoy the comics. Thus, the comic strip audience extended far beyond the realm of children, and the popularity of comic strips among adults and children alike suggests that by the 1930s they had become an ingrained feature of American life.

Despite an ample and diverse comic strip audience, critics and intellectuals of the thirties continued to label the strips as childish and low, a culturally and intellectually vapid form of entertainment. In a 1937 article titled “Do You Read the Comics?” the author comments, “If the increasing number of cartoon strips appearing in newspapers daily and Sunday and the amazing rise of Walt Disney cartoons and

\textsuperscript{56} “Funny Strips,” \textit{Literary Digest}, 18.
\textsuperscript{57} Gabilliet, \textit{Of Comics}, 193.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 194.
others in the movies are any indication, the vogue of the comic strip is increasing. Yet there are a number of diehards who still consider themselves intellectually superior to such pictorial material for escape.” Here, we see how elitist critics indeed considered the comics a form of escapist media. They saw it as the “fluffy, fizzy side” of culture that Dickstein describes in his interview, rather than the high-brow paintings and literature of the Social Realist movement.

In the 1936 *Literary Digest* article, a research graduate from Teacher’s College, Columbia University, Dr. Howard Langford, similarly comments that “Readers of comic-strips, young or old, do not want to think—they want emotional satisfaction without mental anguish.” This became the most common critique of the strip in the thirties: it was mentally unstimulating, it transformed the brains of adults and children alike into a lethargic mass. Even Bradford Wright, a cultural historian well-versed in the evolution of the comic, argues that, “For the most part, they are the domain of young people, who inevitably outgrow them, recall them fondly, and then look at the comic books of their own children and grandchildren with a mixture of bewilderment and, perhaps, concern.” Comics proved (and perhaps still do), to some, something to outgrow, a form of cultural expression that belonged to youngsters, that adults could not and should not appreciate. Critics commonly described the comics as infantile, low, convenient, mere entertainment. They rarely saw the economic and social realities, the harsh truths, that the comics began to reproduce as the Great Depression raged on.

60 “Funny Strips,” *Literary Digest*, 18.
61 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, xiii.
The Birth of the Comic Book

Meanwhile, a new development in the comics world emerged: the comic book format, a brainchild of a couple of Eastern Color employees. The premise of a comic magazine was not entirely unheard of in the comic book industry. In 1900, the New York publisher Blanchard released a collecting of original comics called *Vaudeville and Other Things*, and between 1904 and 1912 R.F. Outcault participated in the production of several booklets containing original *Buster Brown* strips.⁶² Yet none of these attempts left a lasting impression. Not until the 1930s did the comic magazine truly take root, and when it did it took the initial form (as had the comic strip) of a commercial tool.

In 1933, Eastern Color essentially reinvented American comics after a salesman at the company, Harry I. Wildenberg, suggested printing comics as part of promotional advertising giveaways. In April of that year Gulf Oil Company approved the idea and began distributing a four-page full-color comic, printed by Eastern, known as the *Gulf Comic Weekly*. Gulf dispensed the 10.5 x 15 inch comic magazines at service stations, and distribution soon rose to three million copies a week. As *Gulf Comic Weekly* began to gain momentum, other companies followed suit. Standard Oil, Procter & Gamble, and Shell Oil came out with *Standard Oil Comics, Funnies on Parade*, and *Shell Globe*, respectively.⁶³

At around the same time as the advent of these advertising premiums, Eastern Color also began printing small comic broadsides for the Ledger and Bell-McClure

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syndicates of Philadelphia on 7 x 9 inch plates. According to the popular narrative, Wildenberg and a few of his coworkers—one of them a salesman named Maxwell Gaines—realized that two such plates would fit on a tabloid-sized page. In the spring of 1933 they jointly fathered the first modern-format comic book, Funnies on Parade, an eight-page long newsprint magazine that reprinted in color several comic strips licensed from the McNaught, Ledger, and Bell-McClure syndicates. Eastern Color printed 10,000 copies and sent them as advertising premiums to Procter & Gamble.\footnote{“Funnies on Parade,” Greatest Comics, accessed September 19, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20030224164555/http://www.geocities.com/mbrown123/greatest_comics/funniesonparfun.html.}

The promotion worked, and the comic proved so popular that, soon after, Eastern Color printed 100,000 copies of Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics, an advertising premium for Kinney Shoe Store, Canada Dry, Milk-O-Malt, and other clients. Due to the success of the first comic magazine, these same companies ordered another book from Eastern Color, and the hundred-page-long Century of Comics was born.\footnote{Gabilliet, Of Comics, 9.}

The comic magazine soon evolved from a promotional device into its own cultural entity. According to what French historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet labels “a probably apocryphal anecdote,”\footnote{Ibid.} Gaines allegedly stuck “ten-cent” labels on numerous copies of Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics and left them at newsstands to see if the magazines would sell. Two days later, he found that they had sold out, and the comic magazine became an official competitor with the “Big Little Books” (BLBs) that had been published by Whitman starting two years prior, in 1932. BLBs, which were aimed primarily at children, contained a few hundred pages
of wordless comic panels and were extremely successful from the start. The advent of Eastern Color’s comic magazine as a commercial product, however, would present a challenge to Whitman’s monopoly.

Three books of the same name, Famous Funnies, would be published by Eastern Color. The first, Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics, proved that there existed a readership willing to pay for Eastern Color’s comic magazines. The second, Famous Funnies, Series One #1, Eastern Color issued in early 1934 in partnership with Dell publisher George Delacorte. With this book, Eastern Color aimed to further test the market for comic strips as a product. The book consisted of reprints and approximately 40,000 copies were printed and sold in chain stores for ten cents each.

The third book of the same name, Famous Funnies #1, would become one of Eastern Color’s most popular publications in the coming decades. It premiered in July 1934 and, like its predecessors, contained newspaper comic strip reprints, but it started adding original filler material, as well. As historian Randy Duncan points out, “With this book, Eastern Color Printing Company went beyond merely packaging and printing books of comics and established itself as the first major comic book publisher. When the second issue of Famous Funnies came out, it was the first product that looked like the modern comic book to be sold monthly on the newsstands.” The comic book had become, largely through Eastern Color’s efforts, more than an advertising premium. By the mid-1930s, Eastern Color had arranged for national sales through the American News Company, and the comic magazine had

67 Ibid.
come into its own. In the 21st issue of *Famous Funnies*, for example, Eastern Color writes:

Do you realize that never before have so many comics been printed in full colors in magazine form and offered to our faithful readers at such a small sum as 10 cents a copy? We certainly are happy to be able to offer you such a monthly publication to bring you so many hours of enjoyment, and clean wholesome fun. Here’s hoping that we continue to make the magazine better and better, for our real fun comes in seeing that you get more and more enjoyment for your money.70

There was a large market for the comic book, Eastern Color realized. And by the end of 1935, with the publication of Delacorte’s *Popular Comics*, other companies would begin to produce their own comic magazines. King Features’ *King Comics* appeared in 1936 and United Features’ *Tip Top Comics* followed shortly after.71 Comics were no longer a commercial tool, but their own highly-desired and widely-read piece of the American cultural landscape.

**Social Authenticity in the Domestic Strip**

As we have established in the previous sections, the comic magazine in the thirties largely published reprints of newspaper comic strips. We can thus assume that the strips I will discuss throughout this section appeared both in newspapers and in Eastern Color (as well as in other company’s) comic magazines. Since we have just considered the American cultural turn towards whimsical representations of social realities, the growth in comic readership and production, and the inauguration of the comic book format in the early 1930s, the question remains: what made the comic the perfect manifestation of this cultural trend? Why, in other words, did such a large chunk of the American populace find solace in the comics?

Before we answer these questions, it is important to mention another genre of comic that emerged during this era to which many scholars have given ample attention: the adventure strip. The adventure strip, often drawn more realistically than the “gag” strips that preceded it, frequently featured a single protagonist, along with a cohort of sidekicks or other secondary characters, that would embark on a series of “adventures.” Science fiction and fantasy critic Don D’Ammassa, in the Encyclopedia of Adventure Fiction, defines adventure as “…an event or series of events that happens outside the course of the protagonist's ordinary life, usually accompanied by danger, often by physical action. Adventure stories almost always move quickly, and the pace of the plot is at least as important as characterization, setting and other elements of a creative work.”

This definition applies nicely to the adventure comic strips of the thirties.

The adventure strip during this time marked a new development in the evolution of the American comic. As historians David Manning White and Robert H. Abel argue, “adventure and fantasy invaded the field in large doses during the 1930s…” The strip Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century, which first premiered in the comic section of newspapers in January 1929 and soon became a regular installment of Eastern Color’s Famous Funnies, quickly gripped the attention of comic readers nationwide. It followed Buck Rogers, the titular protagonist, who woke up in the year 2419 and became a space hero. The story soon invaded other forms of media—a radio program and later a T.V. show of the same name. After members of the Buck Rogers radio show cast offered to sign autographs in a Brooklyn department

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72 Don D’Ammassa, Encyclopedia of Adventure Fiction (2009), vii-viii.
store in 1933, for example, “a near riot started.” Fantasy and adventure strips like *Buck Rogers*, then, of course had their place in the comic culture of the thirties.

Not until the late 1930s and early 1940s, however—an era which we will later examine in Chapter 2—did the adventure strip truly take off and find its place in American culture. Until then, it remained “escapist fare…at a time when bread lines and WPA working crews were symbolic of an all-time low in American morale.”

To illustrate this point more clearly, we can look at the two most popular adventure strips of the 1930s: *Buck Rogers*, which we have already briefly discussed, and *Tarzan*, a story about a boy adopted and raised by a tribe of apes. *Buck Rogers* represented America’s dream of the future—of escape to other planets and the world of 25th century. *Tarzan*, on the other hand, looked backward, and reflected a nostalgic yearning for the “simpler times” of the past. In other words, rather than working to create palatable interpretations of national realities, the adventure strip often took its readers away from their contemporary social landscape. Not until the next decade, when it was able to engage with the real-world action of World War II, would the adventure comic begin to truly take an interest in profound and pertinent cultural and social questions.

In the 1930s, however, most strips took place in homelike settings and dealt primarily with family sagas and other everyday situations. They were very rarely serious—almost never as grave as the adventure strip of the 1940s—and often used “gag”-like humor. But the domestic strip dominated the Sunday comic pages of

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countless newspapers, and for more reasons than their mere ability to entertain: they had “the important role,” contends a 1937 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, “of presenting in graphical dramatization the significant trends of life.”76 Abel and White similarly contend that “Granting the intellectual and sophisticated content of a few strips throughout the history of the medium, it has been the homely, lifelike stories of families which have formed the mainstream of the successful art of comic strips.”77

The domestic strip indulged in the social realities of the Great Depression. It faithfully depicted the economic preoccupations, the transforming familial dynamics, and the skewed gender relations typical of America in that era. The everyday effects of the nation-wide crisis permeated the genre, providing it with a great deal of narrative, artistic, and thematic inspiration. The domestic strip, unlike the adventure strip, did not flee from insecurities caused by economic depression; instead, it served as a mirror of them.

This socially-realist trend in the domestic strip proved a nation-wide tendency in comic culture. Many scholars have pointed to the increasingly self-conscious representations of the comics, and especially of the domestic strips, during the 1930s. In her discussion about Harold Gray’s highly successful strip, *Little Orphan Annie*, historian Stella Ress contends that Gray’s incorporation of realism into *Little Orphan Annie* represented a much more universal socially realist trend in domestic comics.78 Abel and White similarly maintain that the reader had an “unconscious acceptance of the reality of the comics.”79 As we have discussed, the comic audience enjoyed the

76 Burtnett, “America Grew Up With Cartoons.”
78 Ress, “Bridging the Generation Gap.”
79 Ibid., 17.
strips for more than their entertainment value: “Readers find the comics ‘true to life,’” argue Abel and White, “mirroring life as they understand it, far more than they themselves may realize.”

Earlier issues of Eastern Color’s *Famous Funnies* also often contained a section called *Vignettes of Life*: humorously drawn, single-panel comics that depicted commonplace, seemingly trivial situations typical of 1930s America. These vignettes continued to show up in issue after issue, apparently a valued series to the *Famous Funnies* audience. Americans, it seems, cherished the increasingly realistic qualities of the domestic strip. They sought relatable portrayals of their everyday lives, and the domestic strips delivered.

Of course, the strips would not have been able to play such a reflective role if their creators had not steered them in that direction. In endeavoring to reach the broadest audience possible, comic creators consistently imitated the thinking, the preoccupations, and the habits of their audience. Creators of the domestic strips often lived similarly to their audience members. Over 68 percent of comic artists in the thirties, for example, had two or more children. Since families had become the most prevalent comic strip subject, firsthand knowledge of the domestic sphere became useful for the comic writer and artist. In a 1937 *Hartford Courant* article about comic strip culture, journalist Martin Sheridan maintained that “Most important of all factors in the comic artist’s success is his knowledge of people, places and things. He is expected to please everybody.” And please everybody they did—or as much of

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80 Ibid., 24.
81 Ibid., 25.
the population as they could. The comic artists of 1930s America used that social self-consciousness developed during the Great Depression—that which we discussed earlier in the chapter—to create a pop culture mirror of society in the domestic strip.

Eastern Color’s comic magazine, the *Famous Funnies*, exemplified many of these socially-reflective qualities, one of them being the widespread economic preoccupation that came with depression. A regular domestic strip of the comic magazine, *Good Deed Dotty* (depicted above in Figure 2), portrays a “typical” American family ravaged by poverty. They all wear ragged clothes and live in a desolate house. The father declares, “I done my best by I can’t keep the wolf from th’ door!” as the mother puts her head in her hands and the children gather around the empty table. The “wolf” was a common metaphor for the Great Depression.

Similarly, in a frequent *Famous Funnies* feature called *Simp O’Dill*, one strip from a 1935 issue is titled “Simp’s Got A Lot To Learn About Banks” (Figure 3). The strip centers entirely on Simp’s inability to pay off a ten-dollar check that he had written to a friend. The bank, the economy, and personal finances—key social concerns of the decade—all become the main focus of the narrative.

Another strip, *Nipper*, which is largely forgotten today, followed a young boy of the same name as he split his time playing with friends and looking for work to
earn some money. Nipper’s mother worked as a maid. Although questions of starvation never arose for the Nipper family, the young boy exhibited a constant preoccupation with money, and never seemed to have enough to complete normal, daily tasks. In both of the *Nipper* strips featured below, for example (Figure 4, 5), Nipper seeks different ways to earn a dime or two—in the first strip for a birthday party, and in the second strip just to have. In Figure 4, Nipper hasn’t “a cent to buy her a present,” and his friend reminds him that he won’t have time “to earn enough to buy her anything decent.” The rest of the strip in Figure 5, not pictured here, details the various ways that Nipper attempts to obtain a small job for the day, and the strip in Figure 4 similarly goes on to follow Nipper as he endeavors to sell some of his belongings in order to afford a “decent” gift for his friend. Whatever he does, however, Nipper seems constantly low on funds, and constantly searching for ways to remedy his shortage.
Another Famous Funnies strip, *The Bungle Family*, also frequently employed themes of financial obsession. In the particularly poignant strip pictured on the following page (Figure 6), one man rowing a boat witnesses the potential drowning of another man. To convince the man in the boat to help him, the struggling swimmer offers “$10,000 in cash” to the person who saves him. The rowing man dives in to save him, and the formerly drowning man continues to offer money—in decreasing amounts—to his savior for further help. By the time he reaches the boat and climbs in, after theoretically offering a total of $15,100 to his rescuer, he exclaims, “Saved! Give me your name and the first thing in the morning and I’ll send you a check for $10…” The rescued man promptly realizes, however, that the boat is smaller than he had thought, and proceeds to refuse entry to the man who saved him, practically
leaving him to swim to shore on his own. The comic, titled “A Lesson in Life-Saving,” thus closely links money with survival. It establishes an incredibly unstable image of the dollar; money loses more and more value as the strip goes on, and in the
end debts are left unpaid. The dollar, in other words, proves at once omnipresent and useless. It is the preoccupation of all and the savior of none (the rescuer, it seems, would have saved the drowning man bribe or no bribe), and never manifests as more than a concept.

The unemployment and economic hardship that so defined the Great Depression also caused a general psychological change in much of the male population. Although an increasing number of women went to work as the 1930s advanced, traditional conceptions of gender roles for the most part prevailed; society continued to expect men to support their families. As a result of their inability to provide for their families, unemployed and underemployed men began to cultivate a sense of inadequacy and failure. Historian Pisiak Roxanna posits:

In the Depression, threats to the role of provider constituted threats to men as individual beings and served to intensify a pre-existing tendency to perceive them only within the parameters of their labor. The pressures on men to succeed as breadwinners were intense; a man’s work determined not only his social and familial role, but also the social status, well-being, and very survival of his family.83

The rising unemployment rates and the reduced wages that so plagued Depression-era America made it extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the head of a family to continue bringing in a consistent and plentiful income. Since a man’s success as breadwinner practically defined his worth, the image of the American man lost power in the thirties. In many ways—both in his mind and in the general cultural opinion—he turned into a humiliated, incompetent fool.

The inadequate man of the Great Depression quickly found his way into the comics. In almost all of the domestic strips featured in the Famous Funnies,

the husband or father figure does not present as strong and infallible. He is not so much the head of the family as he is the butt of the joke. In a strip called “Rudy Buys A Turkey” from the The Nebbs series (Figure 7), for example, the father attempts to obtain a turkey for the family to eat. He accuses his wife of not running the family economically enough (here, we once again see the financial fixation of the family) and endeavors to take on the challenge himself. He proudly returns home with what he believes to be a cheaply-bought meal for his family, only to discover that he had been tricked. The “turkey” turns out to be a block of wood attached to a bird’s head, and in place of the sturdy provider, the husband becomes the inept clown. Famous Funnies published another strip called The Bungle Family. The strip’s title, of course, already suggests that the readers can expect a certain amount of incompetence from the cartoon family. “Bungle,” after all,
means to perform or carry out a task clumsily or incompetently. And the men of the Bungle family, notably more so than the women, bungle frequently. In one of the strips, titled “Oh, Dr. Bungle!”, Dr. Bungle finds his neighbor in need of medical attention, and concocts a remedy to cure him. He returns home to his wife, satisfied by his expertise. The last panel, however, reveals the true results of Dr. Bungle’s attempts: “I’m worse…much worse,” the neighbor complains, “Oh if I don’t moan I’ll go mad and if I do moan, Bungle will come over again.” Once again, Dr. Bungle has fumbled the situation, and the man of the house has become ineffectual, inadequate.

Another popular feature of Eastern Color’s Famous Funnies was Mutt and Jeff, a widely-read strip that followed the friendship of a get-rich-quick enthusiast, Augustus Mutt, and his small-framed friend, Jeff. In a 1920 Boston Daily Globe article, Mutt and Jeff creator Bud Fisher explained the two as follows: “Mutt is a big, simple-minded boob who is always trying and always blundering. The great majority of people like Jeff much more than they do Mutt; but Mutt always has been my pal and friend. Mutt is trying, and making mistakes, just like the rest of us, and he is a tough worker at times. People like Jeff because he is smaller, and almost every person in the world is for the little guy against the big one.” The Mutt and Jeff audience may have had their personal preferences between the two titular characters, but each man displayed his masculine inferiority in his distinct ways. Mutt, “a big, simple-

minded boob,” stumbled through life, “always trying and always blundering.” Jeff, although slightly more competent than his friend, often contributed to the errors and misadventures of Mutt.

Furthermore, as Fisher notes, Jeff was also small. In the comics, physical stature became another technique that cartoonists used to aesthetically depict a man’s importance. Many comic husbands and fathers, in other words, started shrinking in the 1930s. They became shorter and shorter, thus reflecting their shrinking significance in the American social landscape.

Another recurring strip in the Famous Funnies, Honeybunch’s Hubby, reflects this trend. Pictured on the right (Figure 8) is a panel from one of the Honeybunch’s Hubby strips that demonstrates the notable size difference between husband and wife in the series. Honeybunch is twice the size of Hubby, and towers over him—a symbol of his implicit lack of sexual power. Hubby is also shaking with fear because of a burglar he has spotted, while his wife remains unphased. In yet another Famous Funnies strip, Somebody’s Stenog, the male boss was short and stout, while his female stenographer was tall, slim, and beautiful. Although not set in the home, Somebody’s Stenog did focus much of its attention on the commonplace realities of the era, and thus in several ways conformed to the domestic strip genre. The stenographer often outsmarted and deceived her boss, and his identification as “Somebody” in the strip’s title also did not lend him much authority. Like Hubby, Jeff, and countless other

![Figure 8. “Hunnybunch’s Hubby,” Famous Funnies #3, October 1934, 22, Grand Comics Database, https://digitalcomicsmuseum.com/index.php?did=23758.](image)
domestic strip male figures, the boss became little more than a small man incapable of doing his job, a failure in the eyes of Great Depression America.

This examination of the inadequate man in the comics of the thirties also points us to another social outcome of the Depression: the compensatory rise of the social status of the housewife. As we saw earlier, unemployed and underemployed men often found themselves spending more time in the home, which thus became an even more frequent setting for the everyday activities of families. With an increasing amount of time spent in domestic settings, wives and mothers were in turn given the ideological power (and responsibility) to alleviate the burdens of the Great Depression. In her 1933 book *It’s Up to the Women*, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt maintained that “we are going through a great crisis in this country and...women have a big part to play if we are coming through it successfully.”\(^{86}\) The social power of the woman indeed grew in the thirties, but this power was often limited to the domestic sphere and the woman’s fulfillment of the housewife role. Roxanna argues that “In the 1930s, the figure and role of the mother were revered almost desperately. Much as the roles of male worker and provider were reified, so too was that of motherhood, to the point that the role possessed more power and influence than did the individuals who fit or were made to fit it.”\(^{87}\) Housewives, then, in many ways came to dominate the working man in the social landscape of 1930s America. They took over the clownish male and became the managers of the domestic sphere.

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\(^{86}\) Eleanor Roosevelt, *It’s Up to the Women* (1933), vii.

\(^{87}\) Pisiak, “It Strikes Home,” 140.
The authoritative housewife, like the inept man, quickly found its place in the domestic strip. We saw the beginning of this trend in the *Famous Funnies* strip, *Honeybunch’s Hubby* (Figure 8). In both demeanor and physicality, Honeybunch takes the dominant role here, as she leans over her small husband, forcefully demanding an explanation for his fearful behavior. Even the title of the strip suggests a possessive quality to the relationship, where Hubby belongs and answers to Honeybunch. This physical dominance—the counterpart to the physical subservience of the male figure—reappeared throughout various strips in the publication. In an installment of a section called *Goofie Gags*, for example, the image to the right appears (Figure 9), in which the small, ineffectual man offers his exaggeratedly large boat-mate an undersized life preserver. Even the workplace turned into a domestic space in the strips. The strip pictured on the following page (Figure 10), for instance, centers on the slim, smart stenographer’s supervision of her petite boss’ diet. When all her boss can do is stare at a painting of Napoleon rather than eat regular meals, the stenographer attempts to convince him to eat. Instead, the boss collapses, and she moves him to a nearby chair in an image not unlike that of a mother carrying her small child. The stenographer in *Somebody’s Stenog*, then, rarely played the role of subservient employee. Instead, she became the worried caretaker of an incompetent boss, filling a role closer to mother or wife than to stenographer. And so the comic
housewives, both symbolically and through their actions, came to reflect the rising importance of the domestic woman in Depression-era America.

Many of the social realities that defined Great Depression America remained glaringly absent from the comics. The rise of prostitution, the starvation, the high suicide rates—the majority of the harsh, morbid effects of the Depression do not appear in Eastern Color’s *Famous Funnies*, or in any of the funnies, for that matter. As we have seen, however, cartoonist and publisher were “expected to please everybody.”

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88 Sheridan, “Serious Funny Business.”
comic artist and publisher alike had to steer clear of the more vulgar representations of Depression-era social realities. Neither the young nor the old comic strip reader sought images of famished bodies or attempted suicides when they opened their monthly issue of the Famous Funnies. Thus, the cartoonists of the thirties learned to toe the line between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Yet that did not prevent Eastern Color and other comic magazine publishers from leaning into many of the decade’s painful, uncomfortable, and startling realities. They continued to engage with many of the insecurities and uncertainties that permeated American society, and in doing so created a mirror of domestic American life in each panel.

**Whimsy, Caricature, and a Palatable Truth**

Despite the domestic strip’s attention to these social anxieties, however, readers enjoyed and even looked forward to the monthly publication of new issues of the Famous Funnies. This is because the domestic strip not only faithfully represented these harsh realities—it made light of them. If we recall the cultural turn to childlike imagination and caricatural forms of media in the 1930s, this approach makes sense. By using humor, parody, and whimsy to set the tone of the domestic strip, cartoonists could in a way alleviate the social burdens of the thirties. They transformed the widespread uncertainties of the Great Depression into farcical, bubbly cartoons that attempted to relieve some of the tensions that plagued the nation.

The entertainment value of the comics, after all, remained a vital magnet for the comic strip audience. Abel and White write that “Asked why they follow comics, most respondents will cite the reason most obvious to them: entertainment, meaning enjoyment. This ‘enjoyment,’ in turn, is generally attributed to the following qualities
of the comics: ‘interesting,’ ‘easy to read,’ ‘exciting or suspenseful,’ ‘humorous,’ ‘convenient,’ etc.—all factors connected either with the ease or pleasure associated with following the funnies.”

The humor, the excitement, the pleasure of the comics—all of these factors proved integral to the success of any particular strip. Thus, to maintain this enjoyable and lighthearted tone, cartoonists made their grave social references just a bit more palatable.

From more overt demonstrations of gag humor to subtler parodies of these social insecurities, cartoonists always found a way to lighten the situation. In reviewing many of the strips discussed in the previous section, these satirical elements become clear. In the Good Deed Dotty strip, for instance, the young girl’s misunderstanding of the situation—her literal understanding of the threat of a “wolf”—transforms the scene from dismal to amusing. In fact, the comical mix-up or misinterpretation proves a useful tool in many of the strips we have examined, such as The Nebbs strip, the Simp O’Dill strip, The Bungle Family strip, and the Somebody’s Stenog strip. In one of the Famous Funnies’ installments of Vignettes of Life, titled “Everyday Thankfulness” (Figure 11), the cartoonist parodies poverty by “looking on the bright side” of the situation. The sardonic message of the cartoon becomes: the hitchhiker may be poor and without a means of transportation, but at least he doesn’t have to pay for gas. Even the simple bright colors, exaggerated figures, and lighthearted attitudes of the bulk of comic strip characters worked to mollify the comic’s potential heaviness.

Thus, entertainment value, as with any form of media, of course constituted an enormously important component of the comic strip. Indeed, cartoonists strove to make their strips as imaginative and whimsical as possible. But the domestic strip also did something else in Great Depression America; it reflected the everyday life of the reader, the burdens so characteristic of the decade. And in doing so, the domestic strip gave comfort to its audience. Perhaps these realities cannot be escaped, it said, but they can be made just a bit less severe.

Dr. Mehran K. Thomson of the McClure syndicate, in a 1936 piece from Literary Digest, stated, “The comics reveal the absurdity of taking life too seriously. . . . They furnish a real outlet to the desire for the grotesque and outlandish.”

Similarly, in discussing one of the most widely-read domestic strips of the era, Blondie, historian Arthur Asa Berger comments, “Blondie is the most popular comic strip of domestic relations in America, and one reason for this is that the readers can see beneath the humor and recognize their own patterns of behavior being acted out, even if this is done in a highly exaggerated and zany manner.”

Or, perhaps, it is because the strip represents these patterns of behavior in such a highly exaggerated manner.

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90 “Funny Strips,” Literary Digest, 19.
exaggerated and zany manner that readers could digest it. Perhaps the comic strip’s ability to make light of any situation—including the dire realities of Depression-era America—became its key to success in the disillusioned, innovative, and expectant national climate of the thirties.

**The Culturally Leveling Effects of the Strips**

Along with the rise of social realism in the domestic strip, I argue that the popularity of the comics during the thirties also sprouted from the medium’s unique ability to both render and address virtually all social strata. Unlike forms of high-brow art like the novel or the painting, the comic strip was accessible, affordable, and easily legible. It catered to, as we have seen, both adults and children—but also to business executives and dishwashers, the middle class and the poor. The cartoonists who worked to create these strips came from a diverse array of regions, castes, religions, and social backgrounds. They knew that they had the power to create a genre of popular art that everybody could enjoy, and they welcomed the opportunity. In turn, much of these cartoonists’ creations became reflections of an array of social classes. In its recognition of Depression-era social realities, the comic strip depicted not just the well-off, but also the down and out. The strip became, in more senses than one, a culturally leveling form of popular media.

In terms of both affordability and accessibility, the comic strip proved a highly democratized form of media in 1930s America. The daily press, of course, existed as a cheap, widely-available form of news and entertainment for many Americans. Gabilliet argues that “As illustrated books, comics benefited from a visibility that crossed social classes by way of the culturally unifying element of the
The comic became visible to all social classes due to both its physical attainability (its presence in the daily press and cheap comic magazines) and its image-based content. In the *LA Times* article “America Grew Up With Cartoons,” the author explains, “In the hand of the cartoonist the pen has always been the mightiest weapon. All may not be able to read, or interpret what they read, but all can understand a picture. The cartoonist has been the translator of erudite editorials into forms that everyone can grasp. In a superbusy age, when few care to take time to read or digest editorial fodder, the cartoonist stands supreme in making ideas palatable and agreeable.” The wider public saw the cartoonist as a sort of translator, converting the news and social commentary of the highly-intellectualized editorial into a universally-understandable medium: the picture. The image became known in the thirties as one of the most widely-accessible forms of culture. Even those who could read, according to this journalist, often preferred not to. They gravitated toward the more digestible form of the comic strip, making it an ideal medium of entertainment for all strata of society.

In this way, it becomes clear that the comic strip audience also reflected a diverse and broad cross-section of the American populace. The 1930 Gallup survey showed that “Bankers, university presidents, professors, doctors and lawyers read comics as avidly as truck drivers, waiters or day laborers.” All of the socio-professional categories, in other words, read the comics with passion. The comics appealed to all levels of society and the daily strips even enjoyed a higher readership

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93 Burtnett, “America Grew Up With Cartoons.”
than almost any other feature of the newspaper. A 1937 article from *The Hartford Courant* titled “Do You Read the Comics?” posited, “Different sections of the country may prefer strips that relate to life in that region, but it cannot be definitely said that one economic group reads the comics more than another. Sixty percent of salaried executives queried by Fortune have a favorite comic character; 64.9 percent of salaried workers.” Unlike other expensive or high-brow forms of culture, the comic strip captivated more than just the intellectuals and the artists. It reached those of various ages, professions, and socio-economic status, often regardless, as we saw in the Lehman and Witty survey earlier in the chapter, of race.

The creators themselves recognized the potential of the comic form to reach enormous and diverse audiences. In an early interview with *Mutt and Jeff* creator Bud Fisher, the cartoonist commented:

> There is another reason for the success of Mutt and Jeff: When I determined to make them my fortune for me—which I did as soon as I saw the public liked them—I decided on one thing, and that was never to play the small time. By that I mean that I determined to make them appeal to everyone—high-brow, low-brow, man, woman, and child. . . . The great majority of comic artists, writers, comedians, and others who depend upon public favor for their success, make a big hit with a small class. But I figured that if Mutt and Jeff appealed to everyone, the value to me would be much greater. . . . I discovered that the idea of certain things appealing to certain classes is bunk, the high-brow sense of humor does not differ much from the low-brow. I discovered that what appeals to a kid will not hit his mother or father. So I worked out a scheme which I have followed ever since. Mutt and Jeff do something one day that will tickle the women; the next day the kids; the next day I try to give the old man a laugh. If Mutt hits Jeff across the face with a fish, father says, ‘That isn’t funny!’ Mother sniffs and looks away without a grin. But the small boys yell. The next day mother gets the laugh. And finally I squeeze a grin out of father. After a while it gets to be a habit.96

The distinction between “high-brow” humor and “low-brow” humor, according to Fisher, was practically nonexistent. The comedy of the comic strip hit all strata of society equally, even if perhaps mothers, fathers, and children found different

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95 “Do You Read the Comics?”
96 Fisher, “Bud Fisher Is Serious For Once.”
panels the most humorous. It was in the cartoonist’s interest to attract the widest audience possible. He or she thus weaved in themes, humor, characters, and content that would—at least as a whole—satisfy a wide range of the American populace.

The actual content of the comics in the thirties—at least regarding social class, region, and profession—also presented a reasonably heterogeneous image of the different cross-sections of society. The strips featured in Eastern Color’s Famous Funnies, for example, offered characters of a wide variety of occupations and backgrounds, from a myriad of different regions. They depicted the Westerner, the Easterner, the urbanite, and the ruralist. The strip Connie, for instance, gives us an

![Image of comic panels](https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php?dlid=23772)

**Figure 12.** “‘Mescal Ike,’” Famous Funnies #10, May 1935, 2, Grand Comics Database, https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php?dlid=23772.

![Image of comic panels](https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php?dlid=23774)


![Image of comic panels](https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/index.php?dlid=23772)

image of the wealthy urbanite (Figure 13), “Mescal Ike” shows us the rural Westerner (Figure 12), and Figure 14 (part of an installment of Goofie Gags) presents a lower-class laborer. The strips discussed earlier in the chapter, too, rendered a diverse array of Americans, from Good Deed Dotty’s impoverished family to Vignettes of Life’s green-suited hitchhiker, from Somebody’s Stenog’s working class lady and all the way to Nipper’s scruffy, rural boy.

Mentions of wealth and social distinctions were not altogether absent from the strips—see, for example, the elegant clothing of the wealthy woman in Figure 13—but even those that did depict a higher class of citizens often characterized the comic figures in a way that at least attempted to deemphasize social strata, situating them all on an ideologically level playing field. Historian Arthur Asa Berger, for instance, describes Fisher’s Mutt and Jeff like so:

Locked in a struggle for dominance with Mutt is his runty little friend Jeff, nicknamed for Jeffries. Jeff’s name and top hat suggest something of the aristocrat. Moreover he is also a fool, and first met Mutt in an insane asylum. Jeff is a symbol representing the basic equalitarianism in the American psyche. Top-hatted upper-class types are fools, just like people from the lower classes. And making him a little person adds to the leveling effect.97 Although Jeff, or Jeffries, represents a somewhat aristocratic tier of society, he is also, as Berger points out, a fool. Despite their quarreling, he is best friends with Mutt—a “low” being even just by name—and constantly stumbles and bumbles around, just like his friend. He is physically small, an element that perhaps addresses not only the decline of the male figure but also, it seems, the triviality of Jeff’s high-class upbringing. Jeff, just like lower-class Mutt, proves a dimwitted buffoon, and the social and individual value attached to class begins to collapse.

97 Berger, The Comic-striped American, 49.
Of course, the comics of the thirties certainly did not fit the modern definition of “diverse.” At least those featured in the more widely-read newspapers of the era, which were almost exclusively manufactured by whites, rarely included people of color, and when they did they usually exploited racist stereotypes to use as the butt of a joke, or else they depicted them as savages, barbarians, and less than human. The physically and mentally disabled received even less representation, and in any of the appearances they did make they often faced the same, mocking fate that blacks and Native Americans did. And, again, the more destitute folk—those hit hardest by the Great Depression—also rarely materialized on the pages of the funnies. Their fate proved, perhaps, entirely indigestible, and even the cartoonist’s versed hand did not have the power—or the willingness—to on their own bring visibility to the overlooked, the historically ignored and exploited sectors of society.

But refusing to call the comics of the thirties diverse for these reasons would qualify as a rather presentist view. For the mid-twentieth century, and compared to much of the art that came before it, the comic proved a rather revolutionary form of entertainment in this sense. The poor, the rich, the urban, the rural, the white-collar and the blue-collar—all of these communities had their place in the American comic. All of them had the opportunity to see themselves—flaws, insecurities, bankruptcy and all—reflected in the popular culture of their era. In this way, the comics indeed retained a critical edge. Yet they also had the power to represent these critiques through a whimsical, even childlike lens. And by virtue of this imaginative power, the comic was able to provide some degree of fleeting relief for the fear engendered by the people’s confrontation with the harsh Depression-era realities. If the comic could
not remedy the crisis, it could at least give its audience a smiling, goofy, familiar face to open up to every once in a while.
Chapter II: Between Reality and Reverie, 1939–1945

“Except for an occasional feature,” ranted a March 1941 piece in Parents’ Magazine, “the comics do not pretend to be funny. They dish up fantastic excitement and portray impossible, often grotesque characters who achieve their hearts’ desires no matter what the odds.”98 Indeed, the comics of the 1940s no longer relied on gag or slapstick humor, nor did they probe and caricature the realities of everyday life. Instead, as the United States entered the world war, fear engendered a new genre: the action and superhero comic book. The superhero comic brought with it authentic themes that acknowledged the war-torn realities of the era while also working to create alternate, idealistic outcomes based on the indestructible power of the superhero and an apparently equally immortal Americanism. While comics published by the Eastern Color Printing Company generally adhered to this broader trend, they also began to depart from the industry’s norm. In order to at once satisfy the American populace’s craving for action-packed patriotism and sidestep intellectual criticism, the company produced an abnormal assortment of fantasy and nonfiction, thus demonstrating an acute sensitivity to criticism.

Culture on the Homefront

After Nazi Germany’s attack on Poland in September 1939—the spark that ignited European involvement in the Second World War—American attention rapidly shifted from economic depression to the menace of fascism in Europe. Although the United States did not officially enter World War II until after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the social, cultural, and political influences of

the war had spread to the States much earlier. In the years between the German invasion of Poland and Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt began preparations for a conflict in which he saw American participation as unavoidable. He fought against the powerful political force of isolationism, revising the Neutrality Act in 1939 and seeing his Lend-Lease Act passed in March 1941. By the time of America’s entry into the war in December of 1941, then, the U.S. was already largely aware of the coming of a new phase in American culture and society. As hundreds of thousands of people found jobs in the defense industry, the destitution created by the Great Depression subsided and new preoccupations about the risk of fascism and global war took its place. With U.S. entry into the Second World War a new environment, both at home and abroad, emerged.

Just as fear permeated American minds during the Depression, so too did it spread through America during the war. Ira Katznelson argues that as it confronted images of mass violence, the public became obsessed with national security and fear came to inform politics both domestic and international. Anxieties about warfare and violence became inextricably linked to the American consciousness.99 Fear of starvation had afflicted the Depression-era population, and fear of bloodshed and fighting took its place. The U.S. government even began exploiting these fears to boost morale and engage the American people in the war effort. Two propaganda posters from 1942-1943, for example, draw directly on this sense of physical fear plaguing the American populace. The poster on the left, from circa 1942 (Figure 15), features the slogan, “It can happen here! –unless we keep ‘em firing!” with an image

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of a recently-destroyed car and home, while the 1942 poster on the right (Figure 16), states, “Warning! Our Homes are in Danger Now!” with the familiar “Our Job: Keep ‘Em Firing” printed in the bottom righthand corner. The image also includes a snarling Nazi and Japanese soldier holding weapons over the United States. Propagandists learned to create images like these that capitalized on an American fear of death and danger in order to maintain popular support for U.S. involvement in the war.

Alongside this pervasive environment of physical distress, and in some ways counteracting it, stood another form of national anxiety: the growing influence of totalitarian values and ideology all across Europe. The authoritarian powers that the Allies fought against during the Second World War presented

![Figure 15. It Can Happen Here! Unless We Keep ‘Em Firing! produced by General Motors Corporation, between 1942 and circa 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/534318.]

![Figure 16. WARNING! Our Homes are in Danger Now! produced by the General Motors Corporation, 1942, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/warning/images_html/our_homes_in_danger.html.]

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profoundly anti-democratic principles that threatened the American ideals of freedom and representation. So while Americans hesitated to send their sons and husbands overseas and cowered at the prospect of homegrown violence, many also looked equally warily at the spread of anti-democratic regimes, most notably Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. According to Herbert J. Spiro, the word “totalitarianism” was first popularized during World War II through anti-Nazi propaganda.\textsuperscript{100} It soon became associated also with Communist practices (the Soviet Union proved problematic allies even during the Second World War) and, as historians Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson argued, morphed into a distorted propagandistic term that lumped together American fears of distinct anti-democratic ideologies.\textsuperscript{101} However distinct they might have been, the authoritarian governments that rapidly gained power in the late 1930s and early 1940s deeply frightened the American people. In his midcentury memoir, \textit{The Crusade Years}, Herbert Hoover even labeled Nazi-Soviet totalitarianism as an “infection of Democracy, a gradual perversion of true liberalism.”\textsuperscript{102} To many, the authoritarian menace became an “infection,” a virus that had already poisoned much of Europe, and that had the potential to undermine American democracy, as well.

The overwhelming American response to this ideological threat, at least in the post-Pearl Harbor period, came in the form of a renewed and urgent sense of democratic patriotism. Cultural historian Harvey Wish explains that, in the face of

the totalitarian challenge to democracy, Americans began to rediscover traditional values and apply them to their modern anxieties. While many Europeans accepted the totalitarian ideals of a dictatorial democracy, the more optimistic, post-Pearl Harbor American populace, which had been graced in the previous years with robust democratic leadership, took their freedom and equality to the battlefields. Americans learned to recognize the dangers—the tyranny and enslavement—that defined totalitarianism. And, in doing so, they also began to present these dangers in opposition to their own democratic ideals. They reaffirmed their own traditional American ideals and cultivated a renewed sense of patriotism.

The rekindling of this patriotic spirit in the face of global violence and tyranny manifested itself in various ways. Many American artists and writers, for example, began to reassert their democratic fervor in a continuation of the socially realist art and the social consciousness that arose during the Depression. Rather than examining the internal structures and hardships as they had done in the decade prior, however, American artists turned outwards to attack the Nazis and the Japanese. Wish labels much of the writing that came out of the period as “literature of social protest,” citing authors and poets such as Ernest Hemingway and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Modern artists, both American-born and refugee, also integrated anti-Nazi messages into their work. Voices called for more and more representation, even in existing democracies, and highlighted the virtues of equality and justice. In 1943, for example, Norman Rockwell painted a visual

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103 Wish, *Society and Thought*, 531.
104 Ibid., 534-540.
representation of F.D.R.’s “Four Freedoms” (“Freedom of Speech,” “Freedom of Worship,” “Freedom from Want,” and “Freedom from Fear”), clearly emphasizing the importance of freedom and democracy in the face of global totalitarian trends. Thus, even the social realist movements of the era worked within a traditional American framework, drawing on the conventional tools of Yankee optimism and democracy.

But this patriotic response to wartime fears was not limited to painting, poetry, and fiction. It also materialized in more fantastical, what some called “escapist” forms of cultural production. In a 1940 issue of Boxoffice, for example, American film producer Walter Wanger wrote that “America is afflicted with escapism, refusal to face realities. Oh, yes, I know that Hollywood is the chief carrier of the disease, the chief disseminator of make believe…”106 In films—as well as in the comics—Americans sought fantasy and illusion. But, contrary to Wanger’s complaints, the war proved inescapable, and thus surfaced a plethora of romanticized, fantastical cultural products that idealized the contemporary realities of warfare and tyranny. Many films even began with an animated cartoon—one such as “Japoteurs” with Superman (1942), “Der Fuehrer’s Face” with Donald Duck (1943), and “Confessions of a Nutsy Spy” with Bugs Bunny (1943)—that caricatured the harsh realities of enemy violence and wartime truths.107 This “escapist” fare, in other words, proved not as entirely

disconnected from reality as critics claimed. It was instead a sentimentalized, removed version based on the recognition of these very truths.

From these romanticized representations of democracy emerged an all-powerful, at times blind trust in the power of American ideals. Katznelson maintains that, in order to prove the power of democracy, America began to act as a flawlessly unified unit. It behaved as if it were a company that effortlessly controlled the massive mobilization of economy, society, and military.\textsuperscript{108} I believe that the American yearning for imagination, for an escape from the harsh realities of the era, only heightened with the onset of global war. Yet war, impossible to avoid, instead became part of a fantasy in which the American Armed Forces became democratic superheroes—invincible and righteous. Even the imaginary worlds of “escapist” pieces of cultural production—comic books among them—paralleled and used as inspiration the very real, very visceral truths of the fear and anxiety felt during World War II.

\textbf{The Comic Book Craze}

Perhaps the most emblematic of the fantastical cultural goods of World War II America was the comic book. A brother of the comic magazine, the comic book featured one original narrative rather than various strip reprints. It departed from the gag-oriented subjects found in the funnies of the decade prior and instead became almost entirely adventure-themed, each issue following the same character through his or her heroic exploits. And, notably, many of them featured an all-powerful, all-American superhero.

\textsuperscript{108} Katznelson, \textit{Fear Itself}, 342.
In addition to the cultural and political factors discussed in the previous section, economic factors, too, nourished the success of the comic book industry. The defense spending of the war years all but put an end to the economic uncertainties of the Great Depression years, as millions found work again and regained disposable incomes which they could in turn spend on commodities and entertainment. As a result, the late 1930s also allowed for the expansion of American industries—particularly the entertainment industry, of which comic book production became a vital part. According to a December 1943 issue of *Newsweek*, due to “the well-filled pockets of the nation’s school children” and “the war-developed market of American servicemen,” comic books had become one of the most prosperous forms of American mass entertainment.\(^\text{109}\)

Children continued to comprise a large portion of comic book readership. In a 1941 study titled “Children’s Interest in Reading the Comics,” Paul Witty remarks that the exploits of the comic book characters “seem to satisfy the middle grade child’s desire and need for experiences that are adventurous and exciting. These elements seem much more important than the item of humor…”\(^\text{110}\) He cites *Superman, Batman,* and Eastern Color’s *Famous Funnies* as the favorite comic books regardless of age.\(^\text{111}\) The fantasy worlds offered by the American comic book found an eager audience of youthful readers. But in the years after Pearl Harbor, they also found a significant audience in a new section of the American population. Historian

\(^{109}\) “Escapist Paydirt,” *Newsweek*, December 27, 1943, 55.


\(^{111}\) Ibid., 103.
Jacqueline Foertsch notes that, beyond their juvenile audiences, comic books also became popular with soldiers overseas. The comics satisfied the servicemen and servicewomen’s cravings for cheap and exciting distractions, and some comic books even became instructional handbooks for the Armed Forces. Adult readership of the genre thus saw a considerable increase during the war years.\(^{112}\) Soldiers could read comic books quickly and with minimal effort; graphic-oriented action stories were exactly the fare that soldiers needed to remove them from the drudgery of military life.\(^{113}\)

The numbers comics drew were astounding. It is no wonder that historians refer to the late-1930s as the birth of the Golden Age of Comic Books. According to Maxwell Gaines in a 1942 issue of *Business Week*, approximately 120 comic magazines titles were on sale that year—“around 40 monthlies, 30 bi-monthlies, 35 quarterlies and a lot of one-shots. They sell some 15 million a month, to an estimated 60,000,000 readers. They have tripled the output of some paper mills, of 6 newsprint rotary color printing plants and other printing and binding establishments.” He reported that by 1942 eight engraving plants—one of them being Eastern Color itself—specialized in creating color plates for the comic books, half of which were created specifically for this purpose.\(^{114}\) By 1943, comic book sales had reached twenty-five million copies a month, collecting nearly $30 million in retail sales.\(^{115}\) The comic book had become a nation-wide phenomenon.

\(^{112}\) Jacqueline Foertsch, *American Culture in the 1940s* (2008), 164.
\(^{115}\) Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31.
But the success of the medium likely would not have been so considerable without the advent of the superhero. There were heroes in the comics before the birth of this genre, but the superhero which emerged in the late 1930s was different from its predecessors, who had neither superpowers nor alter egos. The superhero, on the other hand, engendered a cultural phenomenon—in part because it emerged at just the right time. The formidable threats posed by the Nazis and the Japanese could be conquered by none other than an extraordinarily powerful hero. Superheroes like Superman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel—invincible figures who could fearlessly face any foe—became those all-encompassing powers that Americans required.

Foertsch contends that the comic book did not fully blossom until Jerry Siegel and Joe Shister, two Cleveland-based strip artists, introduced Superman to DC Comics in 1938. The hero quickly became much more than a comic book character; he became one of America’s most popular citizens. Discussing the figure of Superman, a 1942 article in Publishers Weekly reports,

In 1940 he went on air and is heard 3 to 5 times a week from 85 radio stations in the U.S. and Canada. He is the subject of 24 animated technicolor cartoons by paramount, while over 60 articles of merchandise, to say nothing of an Army tank corps, are named for him. Superman day at the New York World’s Fair drew enormous crowds and his appearance in the Macy Thanksgiving Day parades and in newspaper and magazine feature articles have added to the phenomenal publicity.

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118 Foertsch, American Culture, 163.
After only two years as part of the American cultural landscape, Superman—who embodied much of the population’s hopes for the America’s future and represented the nation’s best self—had practically gained a cult following. He was unstoppable.

He was also not alone. Following Superman came Batman (Bob Kane, 1939) and Wonder Woman (William Moulton Marston, 1941), both produced by DC, and soon after appeared the wildly popular Captain America, a creation of Marvel’s Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Captain America, as fans know and as his title implies, was America’s patriotic mascot. Author and cartoonist R.C. Harvey has even labeled him a “super-patriot.” The first issue, released in March 1941, featured a cover image of the superhero delivering a punch to the one and only Adolf Hitler (Figure 17). Other heroes of the era included Hydroman, The Spirit, Star Spangled Kid, Catwoman, and countless other super-figures that would snatch the attention of Americans both young and old and grow into their very own series. For comic book companies, the establishment of a new superhero or superheroine became a dependable means of conquering the entertainment industry.

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120 Ibid., 164.
121 Foertsch, American Culture, 165.
Eastern Color Follows Suit

As Depression turned to war and the comic book industry evolved, Eastern Color Printing developed right along with it. In the early 1940s, along with publishing its own comic books and continuing to print the Sunday funnies for a number of newspapers, Eastern Color printed for various other publishers in the comic book field, including the prominent Marvel Comics. In 1941, to keep up with its own success, the company acquired a seventh press and a new plant in Meriden, Connecticut called the Curtiss-Way plant. The next year Eastern expanded once again, building an addition to its Commercial Street plant that would be finished four years later, in 1946.122

Eastern Color also had to adapt to the changing environment triggered by the start of the war. In particular, the advent of war forced the publishing industry to conserve paper. Publishing companies began to change the previous 64-page format to a 52- or 48-page format, and many syndicates decided to reduce the size of the Sunday strips. The shrinkage of the strips in turn made it difficult for Eastern Color to include newspaper reprints in their most popular publication, Famous Funnies. After Famous Funnies #88, the company thus began to feature original strip work rather than reprint material. The majority of the artists whose work had been part of the Famous Funnies universe agreed to stay on with Eastern Color to create new material for the publication, strips that would never appear in the newspaper.123

The superhero, of course, also found its way into the Eastern Color gamut. In August 1940, the superhero found an unlikely home in the company’s new comic

122 Hoknes “Eastern Every Year.”
123 Ibid.
magazine, *Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics*. *Reg’lar Fellers*, created for the purpose of promoting a youth recreation organization, Reg’lar Fellers of America, to the nation’s children,\(^{124}\) at first glance does not seem apt for the superhero. It was based originally on the title of an earlier comic strip by Gene Byrnes, *Reg’lar Fellers*, which followed a gaggle of suburban children through their everyday lives and misadventures. By issue #16, however, the name of the series had changed to a shortened *Heroic Comics*, which offered war stories in comic book form, and in September of 1946, in the 38\(^{th}\) issue, Eastern Color changed the name once again to *New Heroic Comics*.

Despite its original namesake, the various iterations of Eastern Color’s *Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics* featured predominantly adventure strips, war stories, and—indeed—superhero titles such as *Flyin’ Jenny*, *The Purple Zombie*, *Man O’ Metal*, and the unexpectedly heroic *Music Master*.

The series also featured what would become a considerably widely-read superhero title, *Hydroman*. The character of Hydroman—not to be confused with Marvel’s superhero of the same name, Hydro-Man—made his first appearance in the debut issue of *Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics* in mid-1940. Hydroman was a creation of the soon-to-be widely-known cartoonist named Bill Everett, and demonstrated the power of being able to turn any part of his body to water at will. According to comic historian Blake Bell, *Hydroman* became Everett’s most polished, most impressive series during the first stage of his career.\(^{125}\) Hydroman remained a regular feature of *Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics* for its duration, and in the series’ 14\(^{th}\) issue in September of 1942 he even gained his own sidekick, Rainbow Boy. When *Reg’lar

\(^{124}\) Ibid.

Fellers Heroic Comics became Heroic Comics after the 15th issue, Everett left but Hydroman remained, despite being replaced on the majority of the series covers by World War II soldiers. His final appearance in Heroic Comics came just before the official end of the war, in March of 1945 (issue #29).\textsuperscript{126} Around this time many of the 1940s superheroes had already lost a significant amount of popularity among American audiences, making Hydroman one of the more successful superheroes of his era.

The original Eastern Color production, Famous Funnies, also changed its tune with the superhero craze. In the 81st issue of the series in April 1941, Eastern Color introduced Russell Stamm’s Invisible Scarlet O’Neil, one of the industry’s earlier superheroines. This addition marked a significant transformation in the tone of the series. As comic historian Ron Goulart remarks, until around 1941 the covers had taken on a silly, whimsical mood. Issue #81, however, which featured Scarlet O’Neil rescuing a young child from a fire (Figure 18), introduced a more serious tone to the publication. The following nine covers would also depict serious scenarios starring characters like Buck Rogers, Scorchy Smith, and Dickie Dare, and the


stories within would match that tone.\textsuperscript{127} Although there had appeared other female action heroes before the introduction of \textit{Invisible Scarlet O’Neil}, such as Will Eisner’s \textit{Lady Luck} (1940) and Richard E. Hughes’ \textit{The Woman in Red} (1940), Scarlet’s debut in the Chicago \textit{Times} in June of 1940 would become America’s first encounter with a superpowered female character.\textsuperscript{128} Ten months later Scarlet would find her way onto the front page of Eastern Color’s \textit{Famous Funnies}, where she became a frequent installment.

Eastern Color itself even acknowledged the changing tone of their original publication. In a November 1941 issue of \textit{Famous Funnies} (issue #88), the “Famous Funnies Family” wrote to their readers, “We understand that thousands of you are now reading FAMOUS FUNNIES and enjoying it thoroughly. We are sure that due to the additional space we have given to new features in our publication as well as the old favorites you will find it more interesting from month to month.”\textsuperscript{129} Most of the “new features” appearing in the publication were made up of superhero and other action strips, marking the series’ switch from gag humor to adventurous fare—a switch that apparently brought the company’s readership numbers up to the thousands. A reader who wrote in from Guam in the same issue similarly remarks, “In Guam FAMOUS FUNNIES is considered the best magazine. It is preferred by young and even older people. The things that thrill us most are the adventures of its heroes.”\textsuperscript{130} This \textit{Famous Funnies} customer—and likely many others—greatly

\textsuperscript{127} Ron Goulart, \textit{Over 50 Years of American Comic Books} (1991), 23.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
appreciated the blossoming adventurousness of and growing number of action-packed pages included in the publication. The comic audience, it seems, no longer so enthusiastically craved the slapstick fumbles of *Mutt and Jeff* or the misadventures of *Good Deed Dotty*. America wanted daring, exploit, and peril.

Through the introduction of various superheroes and other action titles, Eastern Color attempted to keep up with the evolving interests and preoccupations of wartime America. With their shift away from gag humor and toward adventure-oriented fare—both in the production of a brand new action comic book, *Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics*, and the transforming content of the previously humor-heavy *Famous Funnies*—the printing company showed an awareness of the changed American comic industry and a willingness to conform. But they also showed a glimmer of nonconformity, a slight divergence from national comic trends that would only expand in the postwar era.

**A Touch of Wartime Truth**

“For a variety of reasons,” concludes historian Jacqueline Foertsch in her overview of American visual art of the 1940s, “World War II is more tangential to the field of 1940s visual art than to any other cultural mode examined in this study.” In this chapter, in which Foertsch prominently features the superhero in a section entitled “The Decade of the Comic Book,” the historian seems to understand the superhero craze as unrelated—tangential, at most—to the realities of the war. Just like many other historians who came before her, she essentially classifies the superhero comics of World War II-era America as escapist, linked only in the basest, most

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romantic of ways to the cultural realities of the era. These comics may indeed have
been romantic in their view of the war, but they also may yet prove more complex
than merely a piece of escapist fare amid a raging global conflict. In this section,
through an examination of various Eastern Color titles, I will attempt to complicate
this idea of the purely escapist adventure and superhero comic of the 1940s.

Before narrowing our focus to exclusively Eastern Color content, it is valuable
to briefly examine the influences and war-based subject matter of many of the most
popular superhero comics of the decade. The character and narrative of Captain
America, for one, emerged directly from the tide of World War II. Comic historian
Bradford Wright, referring to the superhero’s famous first cover issue in which he is
depicted punching Hitler in the face, argues that Captain America’s debut was an
attempt to nudge the nation into global intervention. “By the spring of 1941,” he
writes, “as the U.S. mobilization was well underway, comic books had already gone
to war.”\footnote{Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 31.}

In a 1981 interview with Joe Simon, one of the creators of Captain
America, conducted by Carole Kalish, Simon remarks that the superhero was a
conscious political device, because “the opponents of the war were all quite well
organized. We wanted to have our say too.”\footnote{Joe Simon, interviewed by Carole Kalish, “The American Dream…Come True,” \textit{Comics Feature} 10 (July 1981): 26.}

In other words, Simon and his partner
Kirby used their “super-patriot”\footnote{This term comes from Robert C. Harvey in \textit{The Art of the Comic Book} (see footnote 100).} Captain America as a political statement that
pushed against the isolationist majority of pre-Pearl Harbor America. As
interventionists, they craved to be heard—as did many other comic book creators.
The propagandistic tone of the superhero comic book scene during this era thus did not issue exclusively from government pressure. In fact, the greater number of comic book artists and writers of the forties fell under the same political beliefs as Simon and Kirby, and many revealed these leanings in their work. Historian Christopher Murray maintains that the war-centric themes and mobilization efforts of popular culture did not spur exclusively from government pressure. Instead, the producers of popular culture made their own decision to use their products as a platform for interventionism. Eventually, of course, these two worlds collided, and the government and producers of popular culture worked side by side to goad the nation into war.  

Comic book creators, like many of the leftist and interventionist cultural players, strongly pushed America to take up arms against the Axis powers. And, notably, they were predominantly Jewish. Countless Golden Age superheroes had Jewish creators behind them. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman; Bob Kane and Bill Finger created Batman; Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America; Will Eisner, The Spirit; Mort Meskin, Vigilante; Lou Fine, Black Condor; Gil Kane, Scarlet Avenger; Irving Novick, The Shield; Irwin Hasen, Green Lantern; Sheldon Mayer, Scribbly; and Hal Sherman, Star Spangled Kid. Jews dominated the comic book publishing and production scene, as well. And many of the Jewish comic book creators held these same leftist beliefs, imbedding them into the narratives of their work and, in doing so, entreating American mobilization.

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135 Christopher Murray, Champions of the Oppressed: Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda During World War II (2011), 53.

Jewish and interventionist influence certainly commanded much of the comic book industry, bringing war swiftly and definitively to its pages. Eastern Color, in many ways, exhibited a similarly typical acknowledgment of these war-torn realities. Its president, George Janosik, and head salesman, Harry Wildenberg, were both Jewish, and the company’s superhero comics, such as Hydroman and Invisible Scarlet O’Neil, harnessed the war-specific vocabulary, national attitudes, and social norms created by World War II. Although the particulars of the front and the nuances of the politics were perhaps absent from superhero stories, an equally important reality—the cultural one—saturated them. And in this way Eastern Color made the conflict, whether overtly or covertly, a focal point of the superhero universe.

Eastern Color’s Hydroman, for one, channeled the American-constructed—and oftentimes highly simplified—vision of the enemy and the happenings of the war itself. While Hydroman’s version of World War II may not have aligned with the particular, detailed realities of the conflict itself, the superhero provided its readers with a recognizable metaphor for much of the American public’s own understanding of the war and its players. What the public saw as the most imperative or compelling
elements of the war—the enemy, the intrigue, the lingo—became the subject of the series. Hydroman and his allies, for example, constantly drop World War II buzzwords such as “blitzkrieg” and “Fifth Column” (Figure 19, 20), the phrase used to describe a group of people working for an enemy nation from within. From 1941 until 1945, this enemy nation was often Germany or Japan. The superhero reveals a handful of his enemies as members of this very covert operation, and an even greater number of his adversaries are outright German or Japanese, often sporting according “accents” (Figure 21, 22). Comic scholar Blake Bell comments that “Asian invaders are the main antagonists in the series and verbal assaults such as “Out of my way, Yellow Dog!” and “Here I am, Chinaboy!” paint a picture of a much different time in American history…” Aside from the overt racism attached to the language—a matter that I will address in the following section—the proliferation of Asian and German foes in the series echoes America’s preoccupation with defining the opposition. The Axis powers, and both the imagined and real methods of crime that they practiced, became a common thread throughout the many issues of Hydroman.

137 Bell, Amazing Mysteries, 129.
Although boiled down to the most basic of representations, real elements of the war indeed existed in, and often defined, the superhero’s adventures.

Although she rarely fought Nazi spies or Japanese soldiers like Hydroman or the majority of the other World War II-era superheroes, Eastern Color’s Invisible Scarlet O’Neil roots the series in America’s realities through another cultural allusion: the role of the woman. Scarlet represents the realities of 1940s womanhood in more ways than one. Aside from the obsession with female beauty—one installment of “Let’s Get Into a Huddle” describes Scarlet O’Neil as “a beautiful girl” and a “natural person” before praising her abilities,\textsuperscript{138} and the narrative featured in Famous Funnies #85 focuses entirely on a beauty contest and female jealousy—the series also deals with other, more relevant and specific realities of the era. Namely, Invisible Scarlet O’Neil mirrors the new roles of women workers during the war symbolized by Rosie the Riveter.

Besides having Scarlet join the ranks of men in her work as a superhero, thus perhaps encouraging a similar mobilization of women into the workforce, the authors also include various more overt manifestations of the social trend. In one of the earlier installments of the series, another character, Jenny, secretly puts her son in daycare and returns to work in order to ease some of the financial burden that her husband, who works in a cement shop, has heretofore managed (Figure 23). The decision is depicted as a brave and selfless one, and when Jenny struggles to keep up with her work, Scarlet even uses her invisibility to help the woman finish typing her

letters. Whereas the male superhero was expected to use violence to defeat his foes, just as American men were expected to dedicate their bodies to the Armed Forces, Scarlet worked behind the scenes (literally invisibly) to selflessly help the greater good. In this way, the feminine social norms that characterized World War II-era America became a driving force of both the tone and content of *Invisible Scarlet O’Neil*. Cultural and social realities, from Fifth Column obsession to the woman worker, became key elements of Eastern Color’s wartime comics. But the printing company also brought war-related content beyond the confines of the superhero genre, channeling perhaps even more authentic cultural and social realities than Hydroman—or even Captain America—ever did.

While *Famous Funnies* took a turn from gag to action, it also began to feature explicit mobilization efforts, even before America’s official entry into the war. Every issue of *Famous Funnies* contained a letter from the “Famous Funnies Family” that announced new features of the publication or simply broadcast the company’s opinions and sentiments. One installment of this letter from November 1941 included a header that read “Uncle Sam’s Boys Read Famous Funnies” and matter-of-factly declared that “FAMOUS FUNNIES FAMILY desires to salute the new members of the Army, Navy and Air Forces.” Another of these letters presented a section entitled “Plea to Help the Red Cross,” and a few covers even featured a small image of Revolutionary War-style American soldier next to the words, “For Victory Buy United States Defense Bonds and Stamps” (Figure 24).

Yet Eastern Color also did something that most wartime comic book companies did not. Along with the *Famous Funnies* propaganda, Eastern Color also came out with their new publication, *Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics*. In January of 1943, when the title changed to *Heroic Comics*, the magazine became entirely about

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140 “Let’s Get Into a Huddle,” *Famous Funnies* #82, 10.
the war. Each cover featured an image of American soldiers in action, announcing that the issue would present “Outstanding Heroes of This War” or “Heroes in Action.” Titles such as “Private First Class Wallace Wynn,” “Colonel Richard Carmichael,” and “Bazooka Miracle Gun of World War II” dominated the pages of the publication, and unlike the Famous Funnies or superhero mobilization efforts, such titles paid close attention to the specifics of on-the-front warfare. Eastern Color’s Heroic Comics, with its focus on the technologies, strategies, and politics of the Second World War, engaged with American realities that went beyond the cultural.

World War II technologies, for example, became a frequent feature of a multitude of the Heroic Comics titles. The soldiers, generals, and colonels in the comics constantly reference grenades, snipers, blimps, dive bombers, and pillboxes, sometimes even going so far as to identify a bomber plane as something as specific as the North American B-25 Mitchell. Various issues even included a four page-long section dedicated to explaining the workings of a certain piece of technology. One of these tutorials, entitled “What Do You Know About ‘Torpedoes,’” is featured below (Figure 25). It details the price, technological workings, and war-specific usages of the weapon, and even provides a diagram of its different parts. Characters discussed war strategies like “frontal attacks” and leapfrogging (the island hopping strategy that the United States used to make their way to Japan), and often referenced specific Armed Forces, such as the Marine Corps or the Navy. The majority of the issues also featured a public service announcement reminding its readers to conserve paper. An activity page from the 29th issue of the series (Figure 26), for example, depicts one of
Eastern Color’s lesser-known superheroes, the Music Master, reminding kids to turn in waste paper so that the government may “destroy the two objects on this page…”

Once the dots have been connected, the two objects reveal themselves as a swastika and the Japanese flag. In these ways, Eastern Color brought to Heroic Comics an
image of war in action. If *Famous Funnies* and its superhero titles echoed the realities of national attitudes within the confines of the country, *Heroic Comics*’ war stories took the reader beyond the Homefront and harnessed—often in extraordinary detail—the gritty, authentic specifics of on-the-front warfare.

Together, the specifics and particularities of warfare and the cultural norms that Eastern Color evoked in their publications fixed the company, at least to a certain extent, to its contemporary social and political realities. Entirely escapist, then, perhaps the comics were not—especially not the Eastern Color ones. Referencing such norms made the comic books compelling and relevant to wartime society. In fact, it is possible that the fantasies so prevalent in these comics depended on their counterparts, the realities, to connect with their readers. War was everywhere, and not even the comics could escape it.

**Alternate Realities of the Superhero Universe**

When their creators were not grounding superhero comics in reality by channeling elementary war truths or the social norms and attitudes of the era, the superhero comic indeed found itself assuming a certain level of creative invention, in both style and content. While they did have “average man” alter egos, the superheroes
themselves were fantastical creatures not confined to natural law. As Jerry Robinson, Michael Chabon, and Jules Feiffer argue in their jointly-authored book, *The Zap! Pow! Bam! Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books 1938-1950*, the extreme angles, the striking colors, the enthralling action, and the magical world in which wondrous heroes performed unbelievable deeds—all of this was inexhaustible content. Each element of the comic superhero aesthetic embedded the universe it created deeper into an idealistic, hyperbolized version of the real world.

Yet this sentimentalized universe arose from more than just fantastical superpowers and bright colors; it was a product of ideology, too. Comic books became couriers of American pride, using patriotic superheroes to espouse what Bradford Wright calls “a loosely-defined Americanism synonymous with lofty ideals like democracy, liberty, and freedom from oppression,” and pitting them against the invariable evils of fascism—with a one hundred percent success rate. Historian Christopher Murray maintains that as the war went on, comic books contained more and more impassioned attacks on the Axis powers. They had to work to satisfy the new American reader, who now desired propagandistic myths that lauded the valiant American soldier and invariably condemned the evil enemy. The comic book created a fantastical world in which a righteous and indestructible America handily conquered a vicious foe. This righteous America stood on the values of liberty, equality, and national unity—values which, in the comic book, never wavered. Yet this vision of America, as Wright points out, depicted a more integrated society than

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142 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 42.
143 Murray, *Champions*, 65.
the nation itself enjoyed. And comic books became the perfect medium through which to preserve this attractive patriotic fantasy.\textsuperscript{144} At the point when the facts—however basic they were—of war and culture were complemented by lofty claims about the unwavering goodness of America, the comic book began to veer away from reality and into a fantasy world in which freedom and patriotism reigned.

While in many ways Eastern Color’s acknowledgment and reproduction of wartime culture strayed from the national comic book norm, grounding their content in reality perhaps more than other publishers, their comics also simultaneously espoused the same propagandistic utopia as the rest of the comic book universe. In order to at once effectively engage with war realities and assuage the fears that these themes presented, such as both the ideological and physical threats that pervaded the country at the time, the comic book needed also to create a sense of hope. To do so, Eastern Color and many of its comic companions used the indestructible superhero, and the undeniably good America it represented, to create an ideal world in which democracy always won. In the face of these romanticized versions of American ideals, war and its fascist instigators became that much less intimidating. The superhero upheld American morality, and this morality became a superpower in itself. In the world of the comic book both were immortal, and both were invariably good.

For both Hydroman and Scarlet O’Neil—and virtually every other superhero from that generation—only their superhuman powers allow them to escape certain death and the Axis powers. The first issue of\textit{Famous Funnies} to include Scarlet O’Neil, for example, advertises her in the following way: “Be sure to follow

\textsuperscript{144} Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 35.
INVISIBLE SCARLET O’NEIL’S thrilling, breath-taking story every month in FAMOUS FUNNIES. You will want to see SCARLET combat evil and frighten bullies with her phenomenal power.”145 The bullies, in this case, are not to be feared due to Scarlet’s “phenomenal power.” Something otherwise frightening becomes child’s play in the face of such power. Hydroman’s superhuman abilities prove just as important to his success. In one issue of Heroic Comics, the superhero is on the brink of death until sprinkled with water: “A single drop of water is enough to put Hydroman in control of his amazing powers. The human geyser lunges forward…for him neither bars nor doors exist”146 (Figure 27). In another issue, Hydroman transforms into a full-blown wave (Figure 28). The presence of the Nazis only strengthens his powers as he obliterates one of their ships, and one superhuman man’s fantastical powers effortlessly finish an entire squadron of enemy soldiers. The Nazi threat is annihilated with the ship; with invincible superpowers, the reader enters an alternate universe in which the realities of war and the Axis threat become that much less terrifying.

145 “Let’s Get Into a Huddle,” Famous Funnies #82, 10.
Yet, on top of his or her powers, the American superhero also required another element to reach such an impregnable status: American pride. Without a fiery drive to uphold American ideals of liberty and democracy, and to reassert the nation’s strength, the heroes’ superpowers would be practically futile. Scarlet, for example, constantly uses her powers to protect the weak, to champion American diversity, acceptance, and unity. In a few issues, she carefully watches over a blind child named Mike, and persistently stresses how important it is to defend all Americans, regardless of age, race, gender, or ability. Many of her stories even end with other characters reiterating Scarlet’s patriotic beliefs. One, from the 93rd issue of Famous Funnies, concludes with an image of a man with dual citizenship who had previously worked


with fascist spies, who now proclaims: “I’m going to take out my citizenship papers! And I want to be in the army too!”

Over and over again, Hydroman similarly draws on the strength of his own patriotism when defeating enemies of the nation. In Figure 29, he punches out an “Asian invader,” declaring, “Not so fast, chum! I’m an American, and so are my people—and Americans just won’t be whipped!” In another issue, he surveys his work for the day, saying “Well—looks like it’s ‘finis’ for that traitorous bunch! They think they can run our country, do they? Not while Hydroman’s still alive!” In connecting his invincible powers with his unshakable patriotic spirit, the superhero gives Americanism its own mythicized invulnerability. Eastern Color’s war comics subscribed to this same romanticized Americanism. They frequently channeled the power of patriotism and went out of their way to illustrate the egalitarian American, such as in Figure 30 where a chieftain of a native tribe receives an American soldier.

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“graciously and provides him with a piece of cloth to cover his nakedness—native style…”

Despite their differences, the soldier and the natives miraculously get along effortlessly and have developed a mutual respect: American equality and acceptance at work. In this way, to maintain its audience, Eastern Color again latched onto national trends in the industry, using as inspiration the liberal Jewish vision of an America whose inarguable justness made it utterly egalitarian and entirely invincible.

Of course, the integrated and democratic America represented in the comic book was a far cry from the America that many lived in. As historian Allan M. Winkler explains, both outsiders and American minorities alike observed a certain amount of hypocrisy in popular images of a democratic and egalitarian America.149 The Jim Crow system, for example, continued to keep races apart in the South and the Armed Forces, and the North saw a similarly segregated society enforced by housing patterns and other societal factors. Only 240 of the 100,000 employees of the aircraft industry were black (most janitors) and the United States Employment Service frequently allowed employers to hire “whites only.”150 Mexican Americans found attaining employment just as difficult, if not more so, as it was for black Americans,


150 Ibid., 66.
and poverty was common. One young Mexican American named Alfred Barela, for example, wrote to a municipal judge in May 1943: “Ever since I can remember I’ve been pushed around and called names because I’m a Mexican. . . . I don’t want anyone saying my people are in disgrace.”151 Italian Americans, Chinese Americans, and Native Americans faced similar discrimination, but the Japanese Americans had it worst. After Executive Order 9066, signed in February 1942 in order to evacuate the Japanese from the American West Coast, hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were moved to internment camps in states like Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho. Even after their release in 1945, social discrimination of the group persisted.152 Lived America, then, remained much less equal and united than the comic book claimed.

Even the comics themselves, without acknowledging their own hypocrisy, undermined the sentimentalized America the writers worked to create. Racist and discriminatory representations of ethnic minorities permeated the pages of Eastern Color’s, and many other company’s, publications. In the third issue of Reg’lar Fellers Heroic Comics, for example, various characters call an Asian man “Chinaboy,” the “yellow man,” and “my chrome-colored captive,” all within a few pages.153 Another issue gives two Asian foes stereotypically broken English accents while Hydroman continues to call them names such as “my slant-eyed chums.”154 A comic called Skyroads also often featured in Heroic Comics gives a black woman a stereotypical

152 Winkler, Home Front, 86.
African-American accent and depicts her as naïve. As did many other minorities or outsiders portrayed in the comics, she becomes a figure to mock more than an actual, plot-driven character (Figure 31). In some instances, the firm itself also perpetuated this ethnic and racial discrimination. In an interview with a former Eastern Color employee, Stan Horzepa, the interviewee relates the following:

My last name’s Horzepa. We’re Polish on both sides. When my father went for a job right after the war, when he got out of service in 1946, he went for an interview. And the guy interviewing him…asked my father, ‘Are you Italian?’ At that time they wouldn’t hire Italians, much less blacks or Hispanics. I don’t think they hired a black person in the press room until the 1970s.155

Despite attempting to create an idealistic America in which all men really are created equal, Eastern Color’s own practices and content inadvertently hinted at what lived America really resembled: not an utterly unified national at all, but rather one that mocked and discriminated against ethnic minorities.

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155 Stan Horzepa, interview by Lily Gould, November 10, 2018, transcript.
The fantastic powers, the unbelievable strength, and the unwavering nobility of the superheroes that crowded the pages of the nation’s comic books indeed brought readers into an alternate universe. But the heroes’ superhuman abilities made up only part of the fantasy that the World War II-era comic book created. The more dangerous fantasy, that which represented a real break from reality, and one which Eastern Color in particular would latch onto even more firmly in the postwar years, was that of the liberal, inclusive, equal America that the comics constructed within their pages. The war happened in superhero comics—there was no escape from it there—but it happened in an alternate universe in which America could do no wrong. The American follies of the Great Depression funnies were gone, and America had begun its escape from reality.

**Comics Under Fire**

This sensationalism that saturated the World War II-era comic book did not go unnoticed by scholars and academics of the period. Intellectuals and parents sensed the encroaching idealism of the comic book world and began to launch attacks on the medium, questioning the lack of realism in both aesthetics and content. They pushed for more realistic narratives that relied not on superpowers or idealism, but on true-to-life stories about history or politics. For the first time since their advent, the comics faced a wave of criticism—one that I believe Eastern Color attempted to avoid with a careful balance of truth and sensationalism, of attention to both reader demand and academic critique.
The comic book was considered a low art at that time. While comic strip creators signed their strips and were often regarded as philosophers or novelists, the comic book gained much less renown as an art form. In May of 1940, for example, in a piece for the Chicago Daily News called “A National Disgrace and a Challenge to American Parents,” a prominent writer from the period named Sterling North calls comic books “a poisonous mushroom growth of the last two years” and “sadistic drivel.” He argues that “Superman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded ‘justice’ and cheap political propaganda were to be found on almost every page. . . . 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.” For North, both the romanticized America depicted in the comics and its sensational style proved an affront to art and literature, entirely unfit for “young eyes.”

And North did not stand alone. Psychologist Paul Witty reported in a 1941 study that the majority of adults endorsed North’s article, and that some parent-teacher organizations even banned the sale of comics. Both parents and other academics had similar issues with the action comic books of the decade. A 1941 article in conservative journal American Mercury titled “The Sad Case of the Funnies” condemns the comic book’s disregard of natural rules and processes:

Though the villains get it in the neck, as ever, and the heroes act from noble motives, neither category has any respect for ordinary laws. They live and struggle on a nihilistic level of colossal crimes, supreme scoundrels and supernatural avengers without the faintest respect for conventional rules of conduct or physics. . . . You can’t go through an issue of a

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156 Foertsch, American Culture, 163.
158 Witty, “Children's Interest in Reading the Comics,” 100.
‘comic’ magazine without realizing that the lawful processes of police and courts have disappeared and that only the heroism of superheroes keeps us from being annihilated by diverse disasters and crimes.159

The comic book’s dependence on superhuman abilities to resolve supernatural problems, according to this writer, trivializes and ignores the importance of real conflicts and players. The author takes issue with the disappearance of law, courts, police, and all of the other elements of real-world crime and conflict. The sensationalism that so defined the comic book, in other words, became its most contentious element.

For many, the solution to the comic book crisis became a reworking of the genre into a more educational, realistic form of entertainment. One way this remedy manifested was in the form of a comic book called True Comics published by Parents’ Magazine. A 1941 article in the Wilson Library Bulletin explains the new publication in the following way:

An attempt to provide an antidote for these objectionable publications is now being made by the publishers of Parents’ Magazine, who have just launched a new magazine called True Comics. In format True Comics resembles its predecessors, but it differs radically in subject matter and editorial treatment. Instead of depicting the sensational adventures of grotesque and impossible creatures who seem to have crawled out of a cheap underworld of the imagination, True Comics deals with exciting events of past and present history.160

Rather than the “cheap” content of the ordinary comic book, True Comics focused on history or current events. The magazine’s editor was a historian named David T. Marke, and each issue presented a new educational story, from the biography of Winston Churchill or Simón Bolívar to the origins of the Olympic Marathon or the first naval submarine. An article in Parents’ Magazine itself gives the publication

similar praise: “It is of the same size, the same general appearance as the other comic magazines. There are the same 64 pages of bright-colored pictures, the same patches of text. The difference is in the subject matter, which deals with current and past history. . . . Every page in this new comic magazine is filled with action and excitement. But the heroes are not impossible creatures. They are real.”

While still maintaining the classic comic book format, then, *Parents’ Magazine* managed to resolve the parental and academic complaints about the other-worldly superhero and its unrealistic adventures. Constructive, informational content—an image of the world in which they lived—became the preference of many parents and academics.

Although enmeshed within the broader trends of the fantastical, sensational comic, Eastern Color displayed a certain awareness of the critical response to the superhero. Besides the adventures of Hydroman, Scarlet O’Neil, and other Eastern Color superheroes like Man O’ Metal or the Music Master, the war comics of Eastern Color’s *Heroic Comics* made up a significant chunk of the company’s subject matter. The realistic narratives, illustrations, and themes of *Heroic’s* war comics answered many of the comic book critics’ concerns. *Heroic’s* dedication to the details and everyday realities of the war fought against the “nihilistic” superhero comics that solved fantastical problems with supernatural powers. Even Scarlet O’Neil in ways attempted to strike a balance between truth and fantasy. A promotional piece in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, for example, described the comic as “Action—without blood and thunder! Adventure—exciting but human! Fantasy—but with a humorous twist!”

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161 “What to Do about the ‘Comics,’” 27.
162 Heintjes, “Not Seen but Not Forgotten.”
The equilibrium that this announcement advertises—excitement with a foot firmly in reality—also characterized Eastern Color’s approach to their entire business in the 1940s. As soon as pushback arose from outside of the industry, Eastern Color responded promptly to assuage it. The company at once kept pace with the popular trends and sidestepped academic and parental critique, thus demonstrating a considerable awareness of and concern with public opinion that many other comic book companies did not.

Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, it becomes clear that even the war stories of the educator-sanctioned True Comics or Eastern Color’s Heroic Comics espoused just as much idealism as the superhero comics of the era. From their concentrated patriotism to their sensationalized visions of America, they hardly avoided the romanticized tendencies of their fantastical counterparts. The infectious idealism inspired by World War II became almost entirely widespread, and the actions, adventures, and nationalism of the comics could not help but emulate it. Nevertheless, they did tap into on-the-ground realities of war in a way that superhero comics never managed to, and in this way succeeded in warding off angry parents and academics who scoffed at the outlandish world of the superhero. As it came to recognize both the romantic attitudes of the era and the criticism it provoked, Eastern Color Printing Company became particularly talented at navigating the two in order to gratify as much of the public as possible. They weaved between realism and fantasy with an eclectic mix of superhero, action, war, and humor comics, successfully toeing the line between profit and outrage. Because of its keen regard for public attitudes, Eastern Color began to build a new role for itself within the ever-
changing comic community. With the onset of genuine criticism, the 1940s saw Eastern Color begin its departure from industry norms—a departure that would only become clearer with the end of the war and the onset of the Communist threat.
Chapter III: Stuck in the Suburbs, 1946–1955

Not long after World War II ended and the Nazi menace faded into the background, Americans faced two new threats: Soviet aggression and the atomic bomb. As the Cold War began, great changes occurred in national attitudes, as well, which of course engendered developments in popular culture and, indeed, in the comic book industry. For the majority of the industry, which engaged in a morbid fascination with the anxieties of the age, mature content in the form of romance, crime, and horror stories took the reins, triggering in turn the first wave of genuine comic censorship. Yet Eastern Color’s reaction to attitudes of the age—regarding both the Soviet threat and the government attacks on the comic industry—took its own distinctive form. It reverted back to the gag comic genre and made a final break with both the prevailing direction of the industry and the reality of the mourning and Red-fearing age. The Eastern Color gamut began to lure readers into an embellished sense of domestic security, painting images of what America longed to be rather than what it was.

**Panic in Postwar America**

As World War II came to an end, American society experienced a wave of phenomenal economic growth. Public policies like the 1944 GI Bill of Rights, which provided affordable mortgages for returning servicemen and servicewomen, accompanied a huge housing boom. The automobile industry flourished, and new industries arose beside it. Gross national product skyrocketed, the postwar “baby boom” created new consumers, the middle class grew, and the United States began consolidating its position as the world’s richest country. For many Americans, the post-World War II era looked a promising new age.
Yet postwar economic prosperity did not itself dominate American society in the years following World War II; the wounds of the war had barely healed when new anxieties sprouted for the American people. The brief tolerance for communism that arose because of America’s necessary wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, for one, did not long endure after the close of the battle against Nazism.¹⁶³ Fears that had been in hibernation for half a decade, along with some entirely unfamiliar ones, began to infect postwar American life. As historian and political scientist Clinton Rossiter wrote in 1949, two months after the detonation of the first Soviet atomic bomb in Kazakhstan, “There is much to fear in the atomic age, and our fear is the more naked because it touches on the unknown.”¹⁶⁴

Much of this fear, especially that surrounding the communist threat, originated within the American government. Beginning soon after the 1945 defeat of Hitler, various wars with communist influences—the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia and blockade of Berlin in 1948, or the Communist takeover in China and Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949—forced American lawmakers to settle on a foreign policy decision. And by 1946 much of the government believed the Soviet Union to be staunchly set on worldwide expansion—a position that Washington was all but obligated to vigorously resist.¹⁶⁵ Thus, in the wake of these considerations, on March 12, 1947, President Harry S. Truman defined American foreign policy with the Truman Doctrine. With the doctrine, which promised political, military and economic assistance to all democratic nations under communist threat, Truman intended to

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¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 465.
¹⁶⁵ Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, 17.
counter Soviet expansion with active interventionism. From here American containment policy was born, and a new enemy of the nation—communism—was officially identified.

With the help of one of the most effective agents of anti-Communist rhetoric, Senator Joseph McCarthy, debates over the communist menace would soon explode. “Five years after a world war has been won,” he announced in a 1950 speech, “men’s hearts should anticipate a long peace, and men’s minds should be free from the heavy weight that comes from war. But this is not such a period—for this is not a period of peace. This is a time of the ‘cold war.’ This is a time when all the world is split into two vast, increasingly hostile armed camps…”

McCarthy went on to claim that the U.S. State Department was “thoroughly infested with Communists,” marking the beginning of his ongoing crusade against Communist subversion within the United States government. And, despite his sometimes outlandish and often unfounded claims, McCarthy’s crusade fit in well with the anti-Soviet sentiments that already gripped much of the American populace. By 1952, anti-Communism had become so entrenched in American society that when Senator McCarthy all but accused the chief of staff of the U.S. Army in World War II, General George C. Marshall, of having communist ties, not one person publicly reprehended him.

A postwar paranoia had taken hold of Washington, and its infestation of the American public was not far behind. With the media as its partner, the U.S.

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167 Ibid., 261.
government had no trouble disseminating the demonized view of the Soviet Union
held by the Truman administration.\textsuperscript{169} For the general population, many of whom had
never come into contact with a member of the Communist party, Washington’s
distorted perception of an internal threat was entirely plausible.\textsuperscript{170} Historian Carl
Degler even maintains that the Great Fear of the early postwar period was
characterized by an irrational terror similar to the one that gripped French peasants in
1789.\textsuperscript{171} Acting on this fear, the public too began to develop their own hawk-eyed,
suspicious gaze. In June 1948, for example, the University of California threatened to
fire any of its faculty who refused to swear that he or she was not a communist. The
following year the university followed through, and 157 employees were let go. In
September of 1948, in a small town in New York called Peekskill, a violent anti-
communist riot broke out. Most likely inflamed also by racist motives, an angry mob
attacked a group of admirers of black singer and known Soviet sympathizer Paul
Robeson. Around 145 people were injured.\textsuperscript{172} Thus, by the late 1940s, this fear of an
international communism that was at once highly abstract and acutely dangerous—a
menace whose agents could strike from anywhere at any time—was not contained to
government offices. It had begun its infection of the American people.

Like the worries that beleaguered World War II-era America, these new
nationwide anxieties also took two forms: ideological and physical. The ideological
threat, of course, was composed of concerns about Soviet subversion, or the
crumbling of the nation’s democratic foundations by communist creed. This was the

\textsuperscript{169} Schrecker, \textit{The Age of McCarthyism}, 20.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{171} Carl N. Degler, \textit{Affluence and Anxiety, 1945 – Present} (1968), 36.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 38.
fear that both McCarthyism and Washington consistently nourished. As historian Ellen Schrecker contends, the acute ideological anxieties that dominated public opinion in the postwar era mimicked those that fascism had spawned during wartime.\(^{173}\) Urgent concerns about Soviet brainwashing, espionage, and even invasion—as outrageous as they may sound to the modern ear—gripped the American populace. The core of American values, democracy, had once again been put in peril.

On August 29, 1949, the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb in Kazakhstan, and the national security crisis reached a new level. If we had used the bomb on an enemy nation—what would stop the Soviets? To many, the frightening answer was, most likely, nothing. With this development, the Cold War brought with it the danger of a violence much more sinister and potentially much closer to home than that of World War II, whose brutality never truly threatened to reach American shores. The atomic bomb, which the United States had developed during World War II and which it had used to end the Pacific theatre of war with the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had fallen into the hands of the Soviet enemy. Celebrations of such an impressive new weapon soon morphed into a wave of terror that ran across the American populace. Even before the Soviets’ first test bomb, American scientists warned of the dangers of atomic energy. In a 1948 article entitled “International Control of Atomic Energy,” for example, American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer remarked that after the first uses of atomic weapons it became “quite clear that with nations committed to atomic armament, weapons even more terrifying, and perhaps

\(^{173}\) Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, 17.
vastly more terrifying, than those already delivered would be developed . . . . It seemed unreasonable to suppose that any future major conflict would leave this country as relatively unharmed as had the last two wars and as totally unscathed by strategic bombardment.”\textsuperscript{174} In theory, the atomic threat terrified people. In practice, this terror only grew, and acute physical anxiety joined the already pervasive ideological concerns of the era to create a national climate rife with fear.

Of course, fear did not alone govern the postwar culture. Economic prosperity endured, adults went to work, children went to school, and life went on at a relatively normal pace for much of the American populace. Yet, thanks especially to the media’s and popular culture’s constant engagement with Cold War themes, everyday life also did not exist in isolation from these national anxieties. Whereas the United States had been geographically distant enough from the threats of World War II to use patriotism and pride to fight home-brewed fear, the postwar menace was, at least domestically, both more acute and more immediate, and the cultural and political coping mechanisms would have to be more pointed, more intense, and more restricting than before.

\textbf{Angst in the Comic Book Teen}

Because of these fears, comic books flourished during those years. The war market, for one, had brought a level of success to the comic book industry that made companies optimistic for future sales. In 1945, in an article in America’s weekly U.S. Army newspaper, \textit{Yank}, Sergeant Sanderson Vandebilt cited the Market Research

Company of America to report that 70 million Americans, almost half of the entire U.S. population, read comics. Moreover, readership was relatively diverse. *Yank* noted that 95 percent of all boys and 91 percent of all girls between 6 and 11, 87 percent of all boys and 81 percent of all girls between 12 and 17, 41 percent of all men and 28 percent of all women between 18 and 30, and 16 percent of all men and 12 percent of all women 31 or over regularly read the comics. Level of education, too, proved fairly arbitrary in determining comic readership. Whereas 25 percent of elementary school-educated adults read comic magazines regularly, 27 percent of high school-educated adults read them just as fervently, and 16 percent of college graduates enjoyed the comics, too.175 “So you can see that if you happen to be one of those who have been bit by the bug,” Sanderson remarked, “you’ve got plenty of company.”176

Thus, prospects for the comic book industry looked promising at the end of the war. And, in the immediate postwar years, the success of the medium did not falter. In 1948, 80 million to 100 million comic books were purchased in America monthly, earning the industry at least $72 million a year.177 Yet this prosperity would not have been possible if the medium had not changed with the times. As Bradford Wright argues, despite 1945’s encouraging statistics, publishers in the postwar years feared a bored postwar audience.178 With the absence of World War II to encourage the sale of Nazi-slaying superheroes, these previously-popular superheroes threatened

176 Ibid.
177 Hajdu, *The Ten-cent Plague*, 112.
178 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 57.
to become irrelevant. Indeed, no successful superhero characters were introduced after 1944, and due to poor sales, many publishers decided to cancel their superhero titles by 1950. In the latter year, for example, *Captain Marvel* sold for only half that which it had sold for during the war.¹⁷⁹ A February 1951 article in *The Writer* that offered advice to prospective cartoonists similarly announced that “The super-scientific series hero with flaming arms and fish-like tail is waning…”¹⁸⁰ Along with the Axis forces, comic book superheroes became the losers of World War II, and the writers and artists of the medium would have to develop a new hook to engage their audiences.

As American realities changed, in other words, American culture of course would have to transform along with them. In this era, that meant working to make sense of and mitigate the frightening realities that arose with postwar society. And one way for popular culture to engage with these realities, it turned out, was to indulge in them. Many Americans—especially the youth who composed the bulk of the readership—coped with the concerns that society dealt them through a morbid fascination with these very anxieties. In turn, the majority of the comic book industry began to rely on mature content to drive their sales. Publishing houses introduced an onslaught of spy, crime, and horror stories featuring violence, gore, and sexual themes to address their readers’ morbid fascination with the anxious depravity that came with postwar society.

For producers, significant impetus for this decision came from a survey of their postwar readership. Whereas in 1945 comic readership had been fairly varied, as

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¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 58.
comic books became a staple of military life for soldiers overseas, the end of the war and the return of servicemen and servicewomen diminished this adult audience significantly. The postwar era thus saw a considerable concentration of adolescent readers, many of whom had grown up reading superhero comics, and producers began to recognize these adolescents as an emerging consumer group with notably adult tastes. In a 1951 article in *The Writer*, for example, journalist Warren Kuhn reminded his readers to “Remember you’re writing for a youth that is a vast jump ahead of an earlier generation. They were weaned on jet-bombers and boo at a western movie that is corny unreal. Write up for them.” And for most of these maturing youth, undercurrents of fear and confusion permeated their postwar experience and self-image. As cultural historian Warren Susman argues, “When men or women saw themselves in the mirror as alienated, weak, and anxious, they cherished that feeling every bit as much as they did while characterizing themselves…as heroic and self-sacrificing.”

In their focus on the violent, the inappropriate, and the depraved, the comics became a haven for this kind of attitude. Despite Kuhn’s warning to “Avoid the gory and the bloody, the too savage and the cruel” because of the “many social societies watching the comics with sharp, censor-lidded eyes” (a piece of advice that would prove prescient), the comics indeed became a cradle for violence and gore, reproducing the adolescent obsession with the perversion and disorder that they saw ruling American society.

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181 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 58.
184 Kuhn, “Don’t Laugh at the Comics,” 47.
Some of these comics directly addressed the communist threat, like the espionage titles that worked as mediums for the endorsement of containment ideologies, or the extremely violent titles that dealt with the Korean War. American Comics Group’s *Spy-Hunters*, for instance, debuted in 1949 and the *G.I. Joe* comics, published by Ziff-Davis starting in 1950, constituted some of first and most fanatical Korean War titles. The cover of *G.I. Joe* #10 (actually the first issue in the Ziff-Davis series), depicts Joe violently knocking out a Korean Communist with the butt of his rifle and a subtitle that reads: “Exciting Battle Action: Red Devils of Korea!”

Most publishing houses, however, focused on relatively unrelated themes. As Kuhn remarked, the greatest number of comics published around 1950 lay “in the western, crime and general adventure brackets, and, for the new writer, offers the best possibilities of breaking into the field.” The crime comic, in particular, proved extremely popular. Lev Gleason’s *Crime Does Not Pay*, for example, featured “true crime” stories that frequently delved into sadism and brutality at a level rarely seen before in mass entertainment. When the title premiered in 1942 it sold 200,000 copies per issue, and by 1947 it was selling over a million copies each month and bearing a banner across the top that read “More than 5,000,000 Readers Monthly.”

More violence and adventure could be found in the jungle-themed titles such as Fiction House’s *Jungle Comics*, which featured the “savage” horrors of the jungle

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187 Kuhn, “Don’t Laugh at the Comics,” 46.
in stories titled “Terror Trail of the Cannibal Caravans!”\textsuperscript{189} and “The Death-Man of Angola.”\textsuperscript{190} Needless to say, these titles also often relied on racist depictions of aggressive, naïve, or malignant native tribes that depended on a benevolent white ruler to “tame” them. And amidst their invocation of the morbid obsessions of America’s youth, almost all of these genres also catered to what they assumed to be a prurient interest among male readers: sexy women. Whether protagonist or peripheral character, the sexy woman had her role in the majority of these action comics, posing prettily with long hair, long legs, exaggerated breasts, short skirts, and, as comic historian William Savage noticed, “proclivities rather more emotional than intellectual.”\textsuperscript{191}

As it came to replace the superhero titles that had taken off during wartime, the crude content of postwar comics also attempted to satisfy a youth caught up in the anxious realities of the transforming American social landscape. And, if the numbers tell us anything, these publishing houses were not mistaken in their thematic decisions. The adolescent readership avidly consumed the crime, the sex, and the violence that the industry produced. But not everyone was satisfied with the comic industry’s new look; while it attracted the readership it required, it also incited considerable disapproval among the parents, educators, clergy, and government officials of the nation—a surge that would eventually turn into a full-blown campaign against the comic industry.

\textsuperscript{191} Savage, \textit{Comic Books and America}, 78.
The Campaign Against Comics

By the time censorship reached the comic book industry, governmental repression had already become a household theme in America. The pressing threats of communist takeover, espionage, and destruction moved government agents to act fast in establishing both defensive and preventative measures. Such urgent pressures called for extreme reactions, which would eventually take the form of a state of repression and censorship. As early as March 1947, for example, President Truman ordered that, on threat of dismissal, all federal employees confirm that they have no affiliation or sympathy with the Communist Party. The government next set up a permanent board that dealt with charges of disloyalty among federal employees, and in 1951 Congress established the Internal Security Act, which demanded that all Communist and Communist-front groups register with the government and label all of their mail as Communist. Most potently, in the case of a national emergency, the new law allowed the government to place all Communists in concentration camps.192 “Disloyalty” soon came to mean more than admitted or even proven communist relations as authorities began to interpret simply unusual or extremist ideas as signs of communist affiliation;193 deviation from the mean had become evidence of treachery within the United States. Civil liberties had come under threat, and speech had become significantly less “free.”

Popular culture became a frequent target of this censorship. As Bradford Wright posits, the war had proven mass media’s ability to influence public opinion. This power now posed a potential threat to the U.S. government, for in the enemy’s

192 Degler, Affluence and Anxiety, 39.
193 Ibid., 37.
hands the media could potentially turn Americans against fellow Americans.\textsuperscript{194}

Moreover, juvenile delinquency—which would become the alleged threat of various forms of popular culture—had become a more urgent concern in the postwar years. With fathers overseas and mothers going to work, the war had disrupted the American family as it reduced parental supervision for a whole generation of children.\textsuperscript{195}

Throughout much of American history, adults have found ways to blame popular culture for their children’s objectionable behavior, and this moment in history would be no different.

The comic book received the brunt of the responsibility. Whereas the more internationally-focused concerns of the World War II era had mostly limited critique of the comic book to the academic sphere, postwar America’s urgent concerns with an assortment of social issues created an opportune environment for more serious accusations.\textsuperscript{196} At a time when Washington already feared subversion and deviation from the norm, juvenile rebellion only added to its alarm. Thus, the comic books that satisfied the evolving, mature interests of their teenage readers—interests deemed unfit for youth—evoked animosity from critics who dreaded these changes in youth culture. The medium came to be regarded as a threat to the nation’s very social fabric and the origin of a nation-wide wave of juvenile delinquency.

It did not take long for both the government and the media to act. Countless newspaper articles addressed the issue, publishing op-eds from angry parents and educators. A 1951 article in Parents’ Magazine, for example, cited an indexed rating

\textsuperscript{194} Wright, Comic Book Nation, 87.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{196} Savage, Comic Books and America, 95.
of over a hundred comic books organized by the Cincinnati Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books during that summer. The committee rationalized their rating system in the following way:

Most of the books that receive low ratings from the standpoint of children’s reading are so rated because of the undesirable effect they might have on children. Among the effects are bad dreams, fright and general emotional upset. In evaluating comic books for adolescents the committee has rated those comic books objectionable which portray crime or other social phenomena not in keeping with wholesome living.197

The article classified the comic books into four different groups: an A meant “no objection,” a B meant “some objection,” a C meant “objectionable,” and a D meant “very objectionable.” 198 Only those rated A or B were “considered suitable for children and young people.” 199 Almost all crime, horror, Western, and jungle comics received a C or D. And, while the press planted the seeds of alarm, the publication of a 1954 book by psychologist Fredric Wertham called *Seduction of the Innocent* caused a full-fledged panic. The title of this biting critique of the medium practically says it all; in an almost 300-page volume, Wertham argued that “…this chronic stimulation, temptation and seduction by comic books, both their content and their alluring advertisements of knives and guns, are contributing factors to many children's maladjustment.” 200 Wertham, whose work rested on a huge mass of data, provided statistics that, despite being largely superficial, succeeded in alarming already wary parents of the capacity of the comic book to entirely overturn the social fabric of America’s youth. 201

198 Ibid., 33.
199 Ibid.
201 Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 96.
Beginning in the late 1940s, Congress began a parallel crusade against the medium. In 1949, for example, the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics convened and began issuing annual reports the following year.\textsuperscript{202} And in 1954 the United States officially put comics on trial with the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, a set of hearings during which the government collected testimony that gave insight into whether comics contributed to juvenile delinquency and thus required government regulation.\textsuperscript{203} Comic artists, writers, and publishers present at the hearings fought back, citing an unsubstantial amount of evidence supporting the connection between comics and delinquency and arguing that delinquency or violence could be a product of many influences outside of the comics, but to no avail. Too many powerful Americans had already made their decision: the comic book needed censorship, and soon.

Statistics from the era did not support the growing alarm about surging juvenile crime, but the many forces of the era that believed in this social phenomenon nevertheless enhanced public anxiety about the matter.\textsuperscript{204} Although the hearings did not establish any legal restrictions on comic book content, unfavorable press coverage resulting from the hearings prompted self-regulation by the industry, or what came to be known as the Comics Magazine Association of

\textsuperscript{202} New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics, \textit{Interim Report}, Legislative Document No. 35 (1950), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015019807422;view=1up;seq=3.


\textsuperscript{204} Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 88.
America. The Comics Code Authority, an industry-based authority that defined acceptable comic book content, was thus established in 1954. Member comic book companies sent their magazines in before publishing them to be verified as appropriate, after which the comic books received a seal of approval that went on their front cover.\textsuperscript{205} The juvenile delinquency that did exist at the time of course did not disappear with the regulation of the comic book, and its heightened presence in the postwar period is questionable, at best. So perhaps the relationship between youth rebellion and comic books was a false one, but its effects certainly proved real. Even before the decisive moments of 1954, the public concern conceived by the media, the government, and a few concerned adults threw the comic industry into a pit of unease and threatened to put publishing companies across the board—including Eastern Color—out of business.

**Eastern Color on the Defensive**

Alongside the morbid fascination found in much of the comic book industry and the heightened state of repression brought about by government forces, another response to the panic of the postwar era emerged in the form of social conservatism. Historian Anna G. Creadick, in her book *Perfectly Average: The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America*, postulates that, although not a standard particular to the Cold War years, normality became an entrenched ideal of American life in the postwar period, as it “functioned to soothe wartime and emergent Cold War anxieties through the construction of a new ‘ideal for which to strive.’”\textsuperscript{206} Many Americans had perceived World War II as a kind of snafu, or a departure from normality. After the

\textsuperscript{205} Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 99.

war, then, a pervasive need to return to this regularity arose, and normality became, as Creadick argues, an American “keyword,” penetrating cultural realms all the way from science to popular culture.207 Domesticity, for example, became a central Cold War theme. Preservation of the traditional family and prescribed gender roles came to be seen as techniques with which to fend off communist influences. Women focused on motherhood and housework whereas men were hastened out of the home and into the workforce to satisfy the role of solitary breadwinner.208 From these expectations, the suburban ideal of postwar America—the oft-cited “Man in the Gray Flannel Suit”—was born.

Simultaneously, and perhaps motivated by the proliferation of the suburban in American culture, the humor strip reemerged after a short wartime hiatus during which adventure and superhero titles had dominated the comic industry. Comic historian Jerry Robinson maintains that this revival came about due to the postwar period’s accentuated emphasis on realism and social awareness,209 whereas another scholar posits that the humor strip simply took advantage of the void left in the industry after the demise of the superhero.210 I believe, however, that much of the impetus for the humor strip renaissance came in the form of its historically culturally conservative themes, which helped the genre both mirror the cultural movement towards social conservatism and successfully circumvent the controversial, mature themes that had begun to crowd the industry. The evaluation of comic books discussed in the previous section supports this theory, as it awarded an “A” rating to

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207 Ibid.
208 Arnold and Wiener, Cold War, xi.
210 Gabilliet, Of Comics and Men, 35.
many of the humor comics popular in the 1930s, such as *Lil Abner, Krazy Kat, Mutt & Jeff*, and *Joe Palooka*. Humor became a safe theme within the comic world, one that many publications took advantage of in the postwar years.

And, in some of its manifestations, the humor strip proved desirable fare. One popular iteration of the humor comic, for example, became the teen humor strip, which was monopolized in the postwar era by the teenage misadventures of a popular redhead named Archie Andrews. The *Archie* comics, which focused heavily on relatively trivial, middle-class adolescent concerns such as school, dates, and family, originally debuted in 1941, but garnered an extensive following among teenage comic readers of the early 1950s. As Bradford Wright argues, by at once incorporating facets of teen culture and remaining within the conformist structure of domesticity—by refraining from mature content that might be accused of provoking rebellious behavior in its adolescent readers—these stories struck what Wright calls a “commercially sensible middle ground.” As they dealt principally with benign, quotidian questions, in other words, the *Archie* stories and teen humor in general worked both to satisfy the interests of their adolescent audience and reinforce the nascent image of an American suburban utopia.

All this to say that, while ultimately less successful than genres like teen humor, Eastern Color Printing Company’s response to the attitudes and threats of the age indeed had roots in other cultural movements. In keeping with the general cultural trend toward conformity, Eastern Color attempted to mitigate Cold War anxieties and avoid the mushrooming attacks on the industry that came from both governmental

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211 Murrell, “How Good are the Comic Books?” 32 & 135.
212 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 72.
and intellectual agents by taking refuge in themes of suburban normalcy. Starting in
the late 1940s, the company all but abandoned the adventure strip and replaced it with
whimsical content that centered around domestic subject matter that, unlike the
successful teen humor comic, did not quite keep up with the particular adolescent
concerns of the new generation. Seeking to protect itself from both cultural anxieties
and censorship threats by finding security in a domestic utopia, Eastern Color also
embarked on its final departure from the prevailing, popular genres of the comic
industry as it forged its own—albeit somewhat recycled—species of comic.

**Eastern Color’s Farewell to Reality**

Through its construction of this suburban utopia, Eastern Color Printing
Company also contributed to the cultural production of an alternate American reality,
thus marking the company’s final separation from social actualities. If its Depression-
era content had depended on the publishing company’s faithful depictions of hard
times and the lifestyles they brought about, and wartime superhero titles
acknowledged and drew on the political and social realities of the war while also
fabricating a romanticized American identity, Eastern Color’s postwar content
completed the company’s evolution. By the mid-1950s, the company’s focus on
domestic subject matter began to isolate it from other, more controversial realities.
Rather than representing American society, as popular culture often does, Eastern
Color’s products created their own. In the postwar years, the company began to paint
images of what America longed to be rather than what it was, using the suburban
utopias depicted in the company’s comics—especially those in their classic
publication, *Famous Funnies*—to lure its readers into an embellished sense of
domestic security.
Alongside their longstanding Famous Funnies, the company came out with a myriad of publications in the postwar era, some of which attempted to conform to the leading trends of the industry. Eastern Color’s Movie Love and Personal Love, for example, endeavored to adopt themes applied by other romance titles that had arisen alongside some of the other mature genres of the era, but garnered very little readership interest. The only other lasting publications of the period were Heroic Comics and Jingle Jangle Comics, the former of which had remained fairly unchanged since the war and the latter of which contained fantasy-based strips aimed at younger children. Both proved slightly more popular than Eastern Color’s romance titles, but the former lost much of its appeal with the end of the war, and the latter failed in attracting the attention of the most prominent demographic within the comic audience: the teenager. Famous Funnies, however, a classic since the explosion of the comic in the 1930s, showed more promise than the other titles. Audiences had followed the publication for over twenty years; all Eastern Color had to do was maintain interest.

Soon after the end of World War II, Eastern Color employees took note of the declining popularity of the superhero and Famous Funnies’ covers stopped featuring adventure or superhero characters. The titles associated with these characters, such as Invisible Scarlet O’Neil, Scorchy Smith, Buck Rogers, and Dickie Dare, took slightly longer to phase out. Yet the publishers shortly realized that the continuation of these titles was nothing more than a desperate attempt to extend the popularity of an expiring genre, and gag strips rapidly returned to the publication and soon outnumbered the action titles that had dominated during wartime. By the 168th issue
in 1948, Scarlet O’Neil disappeared for good from the comic magazine, and the extinction of some of the other action titles followed soon after. Even as a handful of adventure strips survived in the company’s repertoire during the postwar years, Famous Funnies’ monthly letters to its readers, the ads it included, and the new titles it featured revealed the path to which Eastern Color’s publishers directed their products: a suburban utopia filled to the brim with flawless families, an all-white population, rigid gender roles, and, most importantly, a complete absence of the atomic threat or the Soviet menace.

Only a few months after the war had ended, in a short-lived feature called “Extra Junior News,” Famous Funnies declared the following to its readers: “With the ending of World War II and the beginning of a new era of World cooperation, and the important discovery of Atomic Power, the outlook for the next generation is very promising. A bright new and better civilization is in the making.”213 Despite the challenges and anxieties that would soon come to overwhelm these hopeful prospects, the optimistic and idealistic tone that the magazine adopts in this column did not subside. In various forms—exhibited through the ads, original pieces, and, namely, one title called Bobby Sox—this contrived vision of the nation found its way into the very essence of the publication.

Images and evocations of the suburban town became one way that the artists and writers, publishers and salesmen of Eastern Color constructed this alternate reality. The text stories in Famous Funnies that had previously centered around the thrilling adventures of war heroes or explorers, for example, now instead told tales of

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small-town dilemmas. These stories often concentrated on high school sports events, and included titles such as “The Last Sprint,” a narration of a high school boys’ qualifying track race;\textsuperscript{214} “Swimming Through,” a similar story but featuring a swim meet rather than a foot race;\textsuperscript{215} and “The Unexpected Handicap,” a tale about an important high school football game.\textsuperscript{216} The magazine’s letter to its readers, “Let’s Get Into a Huddle,” drew on similar themes in its postwar period. Each month it commented on the recent weather, the season, or some other arbitrary fact of existence, always amending the remark with a reminder for children to behave, or teenagers to listen to their parents, or kids to stay active. One installment of the letter from April of 1947, for example, reads: “Spring is just around the corner, and we know that all the loyal boosters of the Famous Funnies Family will be happy to greet this most interesting season of the year. We do hope, however, that it will not get the best of any of you, but that you will continue with the good work you have been doing all winter in school. Have a lot of fun, but do not forget that homework.”\textsuperscript{217} High school sports games and well-behaved children thus became prominent themes within the *Famous Funnies* pages. The preservation of the typical American social structure within the suburban town, it seems, had become a priority for the Eastern Color publishers.

With such an intense focus on the standard American town, inevitably also came evocations of the ideal suburban family. Many installments of “Let’s Get Into a Huddle” centered also on these family-centric ideals. One of these letters from 1950 reads “REMEMBER HIM” in large, bold font, under which is written: “Don’t forget that Father’s Day is in the month of June.”

*Bobby Sox*, a title that often took up almost a quarter of the pages of each *Famous Funnies* issue beginning with its 164<sup>th</sup> in March 1948, also focused entirely on the suburban American family. Written and drawn by one of the only female cartoonists employed by Eastern Color, Marty Links, *Bobby Sox* followed the antics of an adolescent girl named Bobby as she navigated school, social life, and family in a quiet town filled with picket fence houses and infinite identical families. In this way, *Bobby Sox* built a universe in which the only habitants were domestic mothers, hardworking fathers, and shrewd yet ultimately obedient, loyal children. The white suburban family became the unit of the American town, which, according to *Famous Funnies*, represented a microcosm of the whole of American society.

Of course, in order to maintain images of the typical, unvarying American family, the prescription of strict roles to each of its members also became fundamental. Naturally, gender roles played an enormous part in the construction of these particular characters, and after nearly a half a century of expanding opportunities for the American woman, gender roles of the 1950s became considerably more restrictive. Any social tendencies that challenged these conventions—the restlessness of the working woman who had been forced to return

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home, the teenage girl who had to confront her own moral obligations in an increasingly sexual teenage landscape\textsuperscript{219}—were stifled by the pursuit of complete normality that this white, domestic suburbia epitomized.

In keeping with the ideal image of the domestic mother, both \textit{Bobby Sox} and other \textit{Famous Funnies} segments depicted the modern woman as fashion-forward, family- and home-oriented, and otherwise unoccupied. A great deal of the comic magazine’s ads, for instance, promoted female beauty standards. One, presented next to a large image a woman flaunting flawless skin, read: “Advice to comic readers for bad skin: stop worrying now about pimples, blackheads and other externally caused skin troubles. Just follow skin doctor’s simple instructions.”\textsuperscript{220} A piece called “Famous Funnies Patterns,” which had become a feature of every issue, included fabric prints for girls of all ages that each cost around twenty-five cents to order (Figure 32). The segment clearly targeted women, as it depicted almost exclusively dresses and skirts to be


sewn together at home. Thus, not only did the page encourage the postwar woman to preoccupy herself with her appearance, it also assumed that she had both children and ample time to sew clothes for herself and her family.

*Bobby Sox* presented a similar image of the woman. Bobby had a constant obsession with her appearance, frequently purchasing new clothes and spending hours on end getting ready for special events (and sometimes even just for school) or consulting her friends about fashion choices. One particular panel from the series exemplifies this mania nicely, as Bobby races up the stairs, listing off the tasks she has to complete before going on a date. She throws her purse in the air and exclaims, “Gotta do my nails—set my hair—press my dress…” (Figure 33). Bobby’s mother, too, had a keen interest for fashion. Yet, even more importantly, she practically lived in the home. She could be habitually found wearing an apron and happily completing menial domestic tasks, such as washing the dishes, cleaning, cooking, and sewing Bobby clothes. These tasks were, without fail, her top priority. In instances where she was forced to leave home for a few days, Bobby’s mother left detailed instructions for her daughter about how to manage the house while she was away. In Figure 34, for
example, as she prepares to go on a short trip, she writes a list of household chores to complete while she is away: “Now remember to defrost Wednesday morning—Daddy wants 2 eggs for breakfast—take your nice dress to the cleaners…” In Bobby Sox, like in many other corners of the Famous Funnies universe, the woman became an appearance-preoccupied, diligent housewife who had very few concerns—least of all political ones—outside of her looks and the home.

The man as represented in Famous Funnies fit a similarly strict gender role: that of the hardworking breadwinner. In Bobby Sox, although repeatedly shown in the home (this would have been difficult not to do, as almost all of the action occurs within the house), father figures were never shown performing housework. Links invariably drew the fathers of both Bobby and her friends with their work clothes on, appearing as if they were either about to leave or had just arrived home. In one installment of the title, depicted on the following page in Figure 35, Bobby has just returned home for a weekend from boarding school and begins to wreak havoc on the otherwise tidy house. Bobby’s mother scrambles around, cleaning up after her daughter, while Bobby’s father appears on the periphery of each panel, observing. Each time he dawns a different office outfit, and even as his wife entreats him to help her with some of the chores, the performance of this housework by Bobby’s father is never shown. The place where the man spent most of his time in this suburban utopia, after all, was in the office; the father’s presence in the home merely acted as proof of his existence as part of the Sox family. Sometimes the fathers of this series reminded readers of their income-earning role, as well. Through occasional comments about the
economy and happenings in the office, or, in one case, through an appreciation of his son’s sales skills (Figure 36), the men of Bobby Sox revealed their true functions as reliable wage-earners.

The biggest problem in the Bobby Sox world, as well as in the broader Famous Funnies world, became ensuring that the dishes were washed before the night’s end, or that an adolescent girl had an outfit for a dance, or that a hardworking father got his breakfast prepared for him exactly as he liked. Yet even those issues contributed to the charm of the postwar domestic lifestyle depicted in the Eastern Color publication. This all-white, carefree, suburban utopia proved a relatable lifestyle for some, indeed, but only for a very small percentage of the American population. And even then, it was a highly romanticized version of the various factors that made up their everyday lives.


As comic historian William W. Savage remarks, “In part, comic books functioned to maintain (if not to boost) morale in the face of a few unthinkable things, including atomic war and/or Communist takeover of the United States; and to that end, comic books told some truths and a great many lies.”

This statement applies heavily to the content produced by the Eastern Color Printing Company in the ten years following the end of World War II. Even Creadick posits that the obsession with normality that arose during the Cold War years represented not reality but rather an “ideal for which to strive.” While the majority of Americans indeed strove desperately for complete normality, none would reach it, for perfect regularity—which demanded the impossible fusion of both the typical and the ideal—was an unattainable standard. So too with the suburban comic; although many indeed craved the simple, cheerful lifestyle manufactured by Bobby Sox and her family, the postwar world proved a much more complicated and conflicted place.

Aside from the postwar anxieties that the utopias of the Eastern Color comics neglected, fluctuations in the country’s social fabric were also underway. At the apex of World War II, for example, tens of thousands of black Americans migrated from the hostile Jim Crow South to the industrial North in search of war-related jobs. Those who remained through the postwar years saw divisions grow between the new, spacious, modern suburbs and the densely populated inner city—a novel complication for America’s social fabric. At the same time, the postwar decade saw a renewed civil rights movement among black Americans. During the Korean conflict,

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221 Savage, Comic Books and America, 74.
222 Creadick, Perfectly Average, 2.
beginning in 1948, Harry S. Truman began to integrate the Army; *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* became the landmark civil rights case of 1954; and starting in 1947, when black baseball star Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, the gradual integration of Major League Baseball was underway. Sensitivity to the equality between white and nonwhite Americans, in other words, had grown somewhat by the early 1950s. And yet, judging by Eastern Color’s representations of the era (and typical of white culture at this time), the civil rights movement—and black Americans in general—did not exist.

Other social movements also unsettled the prevailing formation of American society, as well. Organized labor, for example, had become far stronger than in previous decades. The Steelworkers and the United Auto Workers held huge strikes around 1946, and from the years 1945 to 1950 prolific organized labor leader John Llewellyn Lewis led periodic nation-wide coal strikes with the United Mine Workers of America.224 As the postwar government began to make changes in its immigration policy, the number of immigrants in the U.S. rose slightly, too. The 1945 War Brides Act allowed foreign-born wives of U.S. veterans to immigrate, the recruitment of temporary agricultural workers from Mexico led to an influx of Mexicans, and the refugee policies formulated by the government welcomed a great deal of Europeans to America.225 653,019 new immigrants—including 48,712 Italians; 20,693 Latin

Americans; and 7,542 Chinese—entered the U.S. between 1945 and 1949.\textsuperscript{226} Ethnic and racial diversity, while not erupting, was certainly on the rise.

Thus, although not nearly as revolutionary a period as the 1960s would be, the late 1940s and 1950s nonetheless brought seeds of change to the American social fabric. They may have been handily ignored by the majority, but they all the same became important parts, along with the anxieties that accompanied Communist and atomic threats, of American reality. Not all products of popular culture that emerged in the decade following the close of the war decided to ignore these realities. In August 1950, for instance, Fawcett Comics debuted a revolutionary yet short-lived series called \textit{Negro Romance}, which featured well-educated, middle-class, black protagonists and was illustrated by the first black man hired by the company, Alvin Hollingsworth.\textsuperscript{227} Of course, this sort of radicalism in the comic industry was remarkably rare at the time. Yet Eastern Color’s disconnect from the period’s realities, both social and political, proved more extreme and more isolating than that of the average publishing company. In search of refuge from national anxieties and censorship threats, the company created a fantasy world in which the bomb, the communist, the union worker, the restless woman, the Italian, the Mexican, the black American—none of them existed. It was a fantasy world that, on paper, perhaps seemed a safe way for the publishing company to avoid heavy themes or biting critique. Yet it also proved their final, fatal creation.

\textsuperscript{227} Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson, \textit{Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation} (2013), 37.
The End of an Era—and Eastern Color

For a while, Eastern Color’s profits looked fairly promising. Their attempt to avoid criticism, with Famous Funnies in particular, proved moderately successful. The magazine received a “B” rating from the Cincinnati Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books, which meant the committee only had “some objection” to the content—a much better assessment than the majority of the action, crime, or horror comics received.\textsuperscript{228} Starting in March of 1949 with issue #176, the publication also received a seal of approval from the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP), an American industry trade group that formed in the late 1940s as a precursor to the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), which would create the Comics Code Authority in 1954. The ACMP’s early version of this code, the ACMP Publishers Code, served as a similar form of self-regulation. Famous Funnies received this seal of approval, which read, “Authorized A.C.M.P.: Conforms to the Comics Code,” until May of 1955 when, for its last two issues, it featured the alternate industry code of approval, the CMAA Comics Code Authority seal.

Sales of the magazine during these early years also looked encouraging. A 1950 article in The Hartford Courant even specifically cited the company in a review of the Connecticut print trade, reporting:

Connecticut has become an important publication center for special newspaper features, currently popular color comic books, and fine magazines. The Eastern Color Printing Company, Famous Funnies, Inc., of Waterbury and Curtiss-Way, Inc., of Meriden are representative of mass production operations. Eastern Color Printing Company does one of the biggest mass printing production jobs of the east. Although not generally known, the ‘funny’ supplements of most newspapers in this area, including ‘The Courant’ are printed here. Press runs are 1.5 million weekly, 75 million a year. Twenty newspapers are regularly supplied. The text includes the drawings of popular cartoonists. The big production job of this company, however is the book portion of the popular Famous Funnies. About 225 million copies are printed annually. Regular press runs of the Eastern Color Printing

\textsuperscript{228} Murrell, “How Good are the Comic Books?” 32 & 135.
Company include comic tabloids printed in the Spanish language. They are translated editions of popular American comics. Thirty-five newspapers in 10 Latin American countries are supplied regularly. Editions run one million weekly.\textsuperscript{229}

With sales at 225 million copies per year, Eastern Color pulled in a reasonable profit from their most popular publication. For the moment, the company’s comics also seemed safe from government or intellectual indictment. In 1950, all appeared relatively calm for the Waterbury-based printing company. Yet the near future would have turbulent changes in store.

To begin with, the juvenile delinquency criticisms only heightened in the early 1950s. As the controversy intensified, all genres came under attack. Many citizens learned to see the comic book industry as a subversive organization plotting to corrupt the minds of American youth, and desperately sought some means of cultural containment.\textsuperscript{230} This containment manifested in the form of both self-regulation (the Comics Code Authority) and the enactment of anti-comic book legislation in various states. Censorship reached its culmination in 1955, by which time thirteen states had laws curbing or banning the sale of crime and horror comic books.\textsuperscript{231} In February of that same year the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency concluded that “this country cannot afford the calculated risk involved in feeding its children, through comic books, a concentrated diet of crime, horror, and violence.”\textsuperscript{232}


\textsuperscript{230} Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 88.

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 174.

Four months later, in June 1955, Eastern Color finally came under fire. The culprit was *Heroic Comics*, Eastern Color’s war publication that had remained fairly unchanged since the close of World War II. The Comics Code Authority claimed that the magazine contributed to juvenile delinquency by promoting violence among its readers. Eastern Color made a brief attempt to defend the title as an illustrated magazine of military history, but soon gave in and ended publication with issue #97, in June of 1955.²³³

As censorship increased and television arose as a new, competing source of entertainment, the comic book market began to decline. Between 1954 and 1956 the number of titles published in America dropped from about 650 to some 250.²³⁴ Faced with these grim prospects, and distributing fare that misjudged the interests of the majority of comic book readers, Eastern Color ended the publication of *Famous Funnies* in July of 1955 and began to phase out the rest of its original magazines, as well.²³⁵

The company did not go out of business with the end of their original comic magazines. It acquired revenue by printing more advertising circulars and continuing to print comic supplements for Sunday newspapers. Yet the extinction of its original publications marked also a complete transformation in the character of the company. It was no longer Eastern Color Printing Company, pioneer of the comic magazine and offspring, mirror, producer of American culture; by 1955, it had become Eastern Color Printing Company, the unknown manager of the color

²³³ Hoknes, “Eastern Every Year.”
²³⁵ Hoknes, “Eastern Every Year.”
ink that went into ads for acne cream or back-to-school clothes. In the midst of an attempt to remove itself from the daunting realities of the postwar period—to create a new world in which only white suburbia existed—Eastern Color isolated itself too from its primary audience, thus leading itself straight into its own demise.
Conclusion: The Might of the Media

By the late 1940s, only one of the two Eastern Color salesmen who had once proudly called themselves inventors of the comic book was still alive to observe his creation’s legacy. Maxwell Gaines had passed away in 1947, but Harry Wildenberg, at sixty-two years of age, long retired from the comic business, continued to watch from a distance as the comic book evolved and flourished. In 1949, however, Wildenberg was brought back to his days in the industry when a journalist for The Commonweal, a weekly Catholic opinion journal, sat him down for an article titled “How the Comic Book Started—and How the Originator Looks on It Now.”236 In the years between 1933 and 1949, Wildenberg’s pride in the invention had, to say the least, vanished. In fact, he had been delighted to hear of a Los Angeles County ordinance that outlawed the sale of controversial comic books, he said, and equally pleased to hear about instances of children burning them. “I don’t feel proud that I started the comic books,” Wildenberg remarked. “If I had an inkling of the harm they would do, I would never have gone through with the idea. I’m glad parents and educators are waking up to the menace of the comic books.”237 With hindsight, we can see how labeling comics as a “menace” to society was perhaps hyperbolic. Yet Wildenberg’s disgust, similar to the fear that provoked many of the attempts at comic censorship, contained also a seed of truth: comic books had grown into a social and cultural force capable of shaping the ideals and self-perceptions of its audience.

236 Hajdu, Ten-Cent Plague, 142.
Because of the company’s increasing sensitivity to the changing social landscape, Eastern Color provides us with a picture of America that a study of other comic companies perhaps could not achieve. From its inception in the 1930s to its demise in the 1950s, Eastern Color Printing Company reacted to the changing political, cultural, and social climate by publishing content that became increasingly disconnected from industry trends and, importantly, from a holistic representation of social realities. In doing so, the company’s comics became more than a pop culture mirror of American society; they became a force behind the fabrication of a national myth in which America saw itself as indestructible, conflict-free, and uniformly white. As it “escaped” from reality, the Eastern Color Printing Company attempted also to build a new America—one that accorded perfectly with the idealistic version presented in its comics.

This is not to say that the world represented within the pages of Eastern Color’s comics was utter fantasy. Fantasy does not claim to embody social truths. Instead, the company took small portions of reality—economic prosperity, domestic bliss, white suburbia—that they craved to be representational of the whole, and attempted to erase the rest of it. Class conflict, the questioning of gender roles, racial tension—these realities never made it to the America of the Eastern Color comic.

In light of these findings, it becomes clear just how necessary a holistic definition of social reality, of “society,” really is. Without it, along with a cultural erasure of the conflicts and practices that we fear or deplore, an erasure of certain individuals also occurs. The underrepresented, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the feared are ignored, and their rejection as part of the social landscape is confirmed
by the idea that pieces of popular culture—like the comics—are a complete, representational mirror of the society that produces them.

Following this, we must also come away with the knowledge that the power of popular culture does not always derive from its representational qualities. In a way, those like Wildenberg or the parents and teachers spearheading the crusade against comics had a point. Even if direct links between the reading of comic books and juvenile delinquency were never established, perhaps adults were right to worry. For the comics indeed wielded the power to shape youth culture. Mass media, with its wide scope and almost universal accessibility, has the astounding ability to contribute to the creation of new strains of culture, of a new social reality. As the case of the Eastern Color Printing Company has revealed to us, as different mediums of popular culture develop, as genres grow and as companies come into their own, each becomes increasingly capable of bending the beliefs, self-conceptions, and values of its audience.

And, in periods of crisis—whether economic, political, or social—the influence that the media exerts on society and culture becomes even more powerful. In the current age, when questions of “fake news” proliferate and media rules, and as we slide into what some might call a political crisis in the United States, it becomes imperative to understand the historical implications of media during past eras of instability. Even comics, these seemingly harmless tokens of popular culture, have the potential to quietly yet revolutionarily alter the world around them—and it is high time we start paying attention.
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