

Book Review: *The Great Comic Book Heroes*

Reviewed by Ruel Denney

The Great Comic-Book Heroes. Compiled, Introduced and Annotated by Jules Feiffer. The Dial Press. 189 pp. \$9.95.

Between 1945 and 1950, I read quite a few comic books to our then-unlettered son. Most of them, as I remember, were the rhymed adventures of bug-people in a place called "Bugville." The plots were mild, calling to my mind the adventures of the "Brownies" by Palmer Cox that I used to read in bound copies of *St. Nicholas Magazine*. In the later part of that period, we also read together some of *Superman* by Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster, and *The Spirit* by Will Eisner. I liked *The Spirit* for what Feiffer calls Eisner's "expressionist touch." We read some of Bob Kane's *Batman and Robin* too. There were arguments going on about the possible bad influences of these publications. My own feeling was that as long as I read children's books of my own choice to my child, I ought also to read a few that he picked off the stands. Then, too, I figured that since I had a part in reading and commenting on the comics, I was playing a not insignificant part in providing my co-reader with critical grounds for outgrowing them.

Whether or not these reflections were adequate, I have not changed my mind about such questions after looking at Jules Feiffer's enjoyable sampling from the comic-book major-leaguers of that period, and reading his unusually interesting reflections on his own youthful life with comic-book heroes and heroines. This nine-by-twelve inch volume of

189 pages devotes about 130 of those pages to reproductions of typical episodes from thirteen of the most famous books, most of them in the color and size in which they first appeared. The balance is devoted to Feiffer's essay on the genre.

Back in 1955, Feiffer's rising star as a sophisticated satirical cartoonist impressed many of us, immediately enough, with its saturnine brightness. At the time, the Chicago school of postwar cafe and theatre comics—Elaine May and Mike Nichols and Barbara Harris and Shelley Berman and other, who quite frequently had come under the fruitful direction of Paul Sills—were already on their way to fame. It seems to me that their experiments in satirical *commedia dell'arte* improvisations were the right kind of training for perceiving what Feiffer was up to with his nervous India ink, his variable-pressure pen, and his wonderfully naked-looking balloonless dialogue. But it had never occurred to me that Feiffer, the creator of *Sick, Sick, Sick* and *The Explainers*, had come through the lesser comic-book factories (he calls them "schlock houses") as an apprentice. All the more reason that his impressive advancement of New York-style innovations in graphic comic style should have something to say about *Captain Marvel*, *The Flash*, and others.

By this point it will be seen that I have chosen a first-person style for this review. Any other would pretend to the possession of a great distance from American cartoon art than I can possibly command. I have been around long enough to

see Feiffer's couples and *Superman* against a receding perspective that includes Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff*, Heriman's *Krazy Kat*, and, at a farther distance, Winsor McKay's *Little Nemo*, T. E. Power's *Joys and Glooms*, and Tad Dorgan's barber-shop. And at an early age, just after World War I, I was an avid student of pretty complete runs of *Life and Judge*, 1880 to 1914, rescued from a flaming mansion by my fireman uncle. If I did not teethe on Nast and Oppen and Charles Dana Gibson, they once seemed as close to me as the bosun's whistle-with-cord that came with my early sailor-suits. At an age when I could have been mastering classical Chinese or Hebrew, I was already escaping from the Oz books to the literature of the Union News Co. If I could work my way objectively through and out of this paper castle of memories, then my name is not Clark Kent, but Harry Houdini.

Tarzan and Superman

I have questions in mind that Feiffer did not set out to answer. Is the draftsmanship of most of the period influenced, as I think it is, by the popularity among high school art departments of the dynamic anatomy of Percy Bridgeman? Wasn't the comic book a response, in part, to the discovery of superhero genres by radio of the late 1920's? Is it significant that *Superman* originated in

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the Midwest rather than New York? Did *Abie The Agent* and the success of Rube Goldberg encourage greater efforts by Jewish contenders for cartooning fame after World War I? Were Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan* and the movie performances of Johnny Weismuller in that role an important source of influence? Was there a conspicuous absence, in the 20's and 30's of talent devoted to writing "series" books for boys—or had these killed themselves off by hanging onto a suburban, private-school and Ivy-League milieu that was no longer recognizable to newer, wider audiences? Are some magazines, such as *Playboy*, translations into print and photo format of comic-book patterns of organization? Does a novel like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* employ hyperbole of comic-booy style—if not exactly for comic-book purposes—as a result of direct influence by the cartoon on this writer and his audiences?

Consider it all as a question of inter-media competition. Before 1920, Jewish newspaper publishers, editorialists, and cartoonists were not overly in evidence. But even as early as 1920, Jewish entrepreneurs had begun to score in the movie business, all the way from nickelodeons to MGM in Hollywood. It was movie ideas and movie forms, I suggest, that made up an essential part of the inspiration for the "comic book" as contrasted with the news-

paper "comic strip." To some degree, this was competitive conquest of a part of the newspaper world by the spirit of the movie world—the comic-book printing press was taught to do the work of film, and by doing so it wrested from the newspapers a single youthful audiences. It was not surprising that some of the leaders in this chapter of intermedia competition should have been Jewish. Often enough they couldn't draw any better than the other non-Rembrandt-like ethnics who had preceded them. But this was not the point. They told a story in a new way. No wonder Feiffer says that all his friends thought that "The Spirit" was "really Jewish."

What I in my generation learn from this book is that Horatio Alger—as Feiffer explicitly argues—had gone bankrupt in the 1930's and needed replacement. This happens to fit almost too neatly with the speculation of one of my students that the influence of the Alger books did not end with the period of their publication (1880 to 1910) but continued up to 1930. What I also learn, going beyond Feiffer's thoughtful and modest memoir, is that the replacement took over in a way that involved a gradual shift in the meaning attached to the major theme of the comic books: an appeal to natural law and heroic virtue (Robin Hood) in the face of a sense of the debility of civil and positive law

(the Sheriff of Nottingham). The earliest dramatizations of this theme in the comic books emphasized a collapse of civil law within the United States akin to what happened during Prohibition. The later dramatizations of it increasingly emphasized the collapse of civil law in the totalitarian states of the period. By the time the "comic" *Übermensch* had been transmogrified into the spy-fighting "Mr. America" hero of 1943, the flourishing period of publication that Feiffer analyzes was ready to come to its end. Eisner, Feiffer, and others were on their way to war. Of course, from the point of view of most of their younger readers, including, as Feiffer says, Feiffer himself, this was not the issue. The issue for them was a solid weekly supply of the junk in order to supply fantasies that put the grownup world on the defensive. His emphasis, perhaps, is on the gigantic scale of the fantasy required to countervail the majesty of parental law in the Jewish Bronx; my own might be on the psychic mobility embodied in these hyperbolic capes and wings that enabled some Bronx boys to reach Manhattan's centers of publishing power faster than transportation via the El promised to take them. So, in any event, with *Superman* being the other father to the man, do we grow up. Or both try and try not to.

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friends. Ratty, Mole and Badger in that masterpiece of wit and fancy "*The Wind and the Willows*" and for the marvelous adventures of the immortal Alice and her Wonderland.

Appreciation of humor in good books is one avenue for children in their approach to the overall goals of personal enjoyment, satisfaction and understanding of important truths about life which may be achieved through experiences with literature. In her comments upon the values in children's literature, May Hill Arbuthnot calls attention to the fact that "human beings are endowed with a mechanism denied to animals, namely laughter, and it is good for man to use all of his endowments."

Within the realms of children's literature there are many types of humor. Some children enjoy the impossible, extravagant and sometimes zany fun found in fanciful and tall tales for all ages; some relish the forthright, vigorous everyday type of fun and gayety; some respond to quiet, gentle fun; and some children are attuned to the subtle and whimsical quality found in many fine books.

When all is said and done, however, there is no telling what each child will find amusing or hilarious. It evades adult analysis.

"There's glory for you! said
Humpty Dumpty
"I don't know what you mean by
glory, said Alice.
... "it means just what I choose
it to mean, neither more nor
less," replied Humpty Dumpty.

And so it is with children's taste in humor. It is what each individual child means it to be; what appeals to him as being witty, gay, funny,

or uproarious. . . . "and that," said Pooh, "is that".

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