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Animated by the stories of some of the last century's most charismatic and conniving artists, writers, and businessmen, *Men of Tomorrow* brilliantly demonstrates how the creators of the superheroes gained their cultural power and established a crucial place in the modern imagination. "This history of the birth of superhero comics highlights three pivotal figures. The story begins early in the last century, on the Lower East Side, where Harry Donenfeld rises from the streets to become the king of the 'smooshes'-soft-core magazines with titles like *French Humor* and *Hot Tales*. Later, two high school friends in Cleveland, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, become avid fans of 'scientifiction,' the new kind of literature promoted by their favorite pulp magazines. The disparate worlds of the wise guy and the geeks collide in 1938, and the result is *Action Comics #1*, the debut of Superman. For Donenfeld, the comics were a way to sidestep the censors. For Shuster and Siegel, they were both a calling and an eventual source of misery: the pair waged a lifelong campaign for credit and appropriate compensation." -*The New Yorker*

Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book Details

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Gregory says

I read quite a bit of non-fiction, usually to satisfy my curiosity about a subject, and I rarely have high expectations for the writing itself. So I was very pleasantly surprised to find this such a (forgive me) good read. Jones tells the story of the birth of the comic book deftly, with some real verve and snap to his prose--better yet, he gets all of his facts right and revealed a few facts I didn't know (and I'm quite a comics geek). Anyone who enjoyed Chabon's *The Adventures of Kavalier and Klay* will revel in the source material here. Bravo.

Eric says

A mind-blower, and an essential one. One of the great history books I've read; not just a "comic book book" or a book on "media/popular culture" as the back cover itself asserts (tho it is that also), but an exhaustively researched, masterfully written, searing saga of the 20th century as it only could have unfolded in beautiful, brutal America. From the streets teeming with immigrant children literally fighting their way thru childhood to the corporate conglomerates & mega mergers of the '60s & beyond, Jones wields his pen like a scalpel eliminating all that is unnecessary & uncovering the pure gold of a history whose various threads in the realms of the economic, social, psychological, political & private merge into a single focused narrative that delivers epiphany after epiphany of insight & connectivity. Following the stories of various important players in the creation of the popular art form, from the creators to the distributors to the enemies that tried to bring it down, Jones brilliantly constructs his story out of the lives of these flawed, fascinating characters, trying to understand them & remarkably withholding judgment, finding the common humanity in them all. Never straying to indulgence or sentimentality & with a keen eye for irony & symmetry, Jones keeps the potentially messy & epic tale lean & riveting. An amazing achievement, & an absolute must not only for comic book fans but students of human nature & the history of our crazy, corrupt & contradictory country.

Heather says

In the depths of the Depression, out of the crowded tenements of New York and Cleveland, the comic book superhero leapt into being. Out of a mix of geekiness, science fiction, and outsider yearning, a crew of young men from working-class Jewish neighbourhoods and shady backgrounds created a series of blue-eyed, chisel-nosed crime fighters and adventurers who quickly captured the imaginations of young and old. Within a few years their creations had spawned a new genre that still dominates youth entertainment seventy years later.

Gerard Jones' book is exhaustive in its portrayal of the origins on the comic book industry, starting with the childhoods of those pivotal in the movement, through to and beyond their deaths.

Anyone remotely interested in comic books will likely know the rough story of Superman's creators being shafted monetarily for their creation, but to read it in such brutal detail is really sad. It's not just a venture through the characters, nor does it focus specifically on one person (though, Jerry Siegel admittedly

dominates, through his refusal to give up).

Aside from being ridiculously interesting, well-written and researched, it's just kind of depressing. It's a bit of a warning for people to own their own work in creative fields. It's not even one-sided, where you'd expect the artists to be the victims entirely, Jones will highlight their own faults and problems, whether it be attitude or perceived talent at different points in their career.

Interested in comic books and their history? An excellent, comprehensive read on their origins. But it will probably make you sad to see quite how badly certain creators fared over the years.

Nezka says

A very pulp-y style tell-all of the lives of the earliest superhero comics creators, with quite a few dashes of sexism thrown in; women in comics are barely mentioned and mostly villified as demanding wives and mistresses to whom the comics creators had to work so hard to support.

If you are really interested in the details of how the creators worked and fought together, this is for you.

Richard says

I really enjoyed this book! It's a history of comic books in America, and although it covers comics all the way through the late 1990s, its primary focus is on the early origins, the creation of Superman and other aspects of the Golden Age. By the time the narrative reaches the end of the Second World War, the story accelerates and moves away from the detail that the earlier years received. The Silver Age is covered from a high-level overview, and the years following the Silver Age receive even less detail. But that's okay. Other books and other authors can cover comics of the 1980s. I would, however, have liked author Gerard Jones to have delved more into Frederic Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* and its impact on the industry, but by the time that came around the story was already speeding up.

The stories of the early days were really interesting. I was familiar with the sad story of Siegel and Shuster, and how they were squeezed out of receiving the fame and money that should have been due them for creating a character as popular as Superman, but I was less familiar with many of the details. Jones also tells the story of Batman, and Bob Kane doesn't come out looking good at all. Kane is portrayed as a vain creator who consistently took credit for the work of others, with the primary victim of this being Batman's co-creator Bill Finger. Kane didn't only neglect to credit Finger, but took active steps to hide Finger's contributions.

I think the best thing about this book is that Gerard Jones treats his subject as something worthy of serious consideration, but doesn't pretend that it's more important than it is. He makes some strong and interesting arguments about how world events and societal trends influenced comic books, but doesn't try to make any dubious claims that comic books affected society or the world at large. He tells us that comic books were popular, and fun, and have been a significant part of American popular culture, not only in the comics themselves but in other media as well. (In recent years, Hollywood has definitely picked up on this in a big way.)

Gerard Jones has written a few other books about pop culture. I'll have to give one or two of them a try.

Nicky Wheeler-Nicholson says

I have read *Men of Tomorrow* a couple of times and use it for research and a starting point for my own research. What I like best about the book is that it is not only easy to read and very well written but I love the fact that Gerard places the history of comic books within the larger frame of historical events. It makes so much of the history more compelling and understandable. I know Gerard because there is information about my grandfather, Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson in this book. The info about "the Major" in this otherwise wonderfully written book is almost completely wrong bordering on the absurd. That's how I met the author. Upon seeing the evidence he was quick to make most changes in the 2nd edition and plans to do a complete revision based on my research for the 3rd. I appreciate that and consider him a scholar and a gentleman. This is an excellent book for anyone interested in comics history and modern culture.

catechism says

More like 4.5, but I'm in a good mood today and rounding up. This is basically the nonfiction version of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. It's easy to read and I think Jones and Chabon are friends. And so I kept having these weird flashbacks of "wait, where do I know this story from???" and many of the vignettes in *Kavalier & Clay* are things that really happened. Anyway, if you couldn't get through that one for stylistic reasons but are interested in the subject, I'd give this one a shot. It's also way more Jewish (in a historical sense, I mean -- much about the early immigrant experience, alienation & a sense of belonging, the war as perceived by American Jewry, etc). In some ways, it is a fantastic prequel to *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB's: A Secret History of Jewish Punk*. Also! Mob connections, and I do love me some mob connections. (One downside is the lack of women, but that's endemic to comics in general and probably a subject for a different book entirely.)

Johnny says

Growing up in the so-called "Silver Age" of comic books ('50s-early '60s) and being such a geek that I attended San Diego Comic Con *before* it moved to the convention center, it's a wonder I didn't read *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* before. This history rings true for the limited information I have on comic book history (reading Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* many years ago, working for a company which briefly published comics (Ziff-Davis), devouring my autographed copy of Will Eisner's *Shop Talk* interviews, reading about the Kefauver hearings and the end of EC comics, and studying a bit about Stan Lee and Jack Kirby—I didn't say I was a scholar on this) and it definitely rings true for my experience in periodicals publication and distribution. Not since I read *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* have I seen the relationship between printing, pulps, comics, paperbacks, and magazines fit together so nicely. And, since I dealt with specialty shops in distributing my game magazines, it doesn't surprise me when I read about Harry Donenfeld's pre-National Periodicals days of distributing Margaret Sanger's birth control devices and information along with his skin magazines via burlesque theaters and involvement with Frank Costello (and other Mafiosi).

There are fascinating stories in this history of the comic format. The relationship between the strips syndicated in newspapers, comic strip collections, and comic books was clarified for me as never before. I

always preferred the latter and it was only in adulthood that someone (probably an interview with Neal Adams or a conversation overheard when one of my magazines commissioned an illustration from his studio in the early '90s) clarified that the strip creators usually kept control of their characters while the “work for hire” comic book work didn’t allow people like Bill Finger or Jerry Siegel to benefit from their previous work.

I particularly like the fact that *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* took the time to tell some of the stories of the business guys and distributors, as well as the creators. However, I was disappointed that this was primarily the story of Siegel and Shuster and the house that Jack Leibowitz built. It occasionally mentioned the brief history of EC Comics, Lev Gleason, Charlton, Archie, Timely, Ziff-Davis, Quality, Dell, Warren, Image, and All American (though it later became part of National), but I feel like a lot of the stories behind those publishing groups still need to be told. I liked the part about Martin Goodman, but the volume was very light on Marvel Comics’ ancestral publisher and didn’t really deal with the “rest of the story” sufficiently after Jack Kirby left Marvel [I wanted to know about the short-lived Jack Kirby Comics line just before he died.].

The truth is that I was fascinated by this history, but like any fan boy, I wanted more. I wanted to know about Roy Thomas, Marv Wolfman, and Warren Ellis. The brief description of Steve Ditko’s rise was fascinating, but I was disappointed not to read more about Gardner Fox, Archie Goodman, both Romitas, and the origin of Dark Horse Comics. In spite of my interest in the subject matter, I learned a lot from this volume. I’ve even recommended it to my local comic book guy.

Bryan Cebulski says

Phenomenally well-written book. Beyond disappointing to learn that so many iconic characters were mostly the composite result of decades of greed though. Yet such may be the very nature of trash: Meaningful material developing only after way long bouts of money-grubbing, ignoring original creators, failing to compensate writers, etc.

Wes Freeman says

Smart, concise history of how comic books became a thing and doesn't leave out any of the good stuff. Re-emphasizes the argument that all American forms of mass entertainment media in the 20th century are on permanent loan from the street culture of New York City -- a place that seems to own stock in every American cultural enterprise this side of the Civil War and will always get the big chair in the shareholder's meetings, even if the product under discussion isn't their own. Author is here to tell you that comic books were made by pornographers, chiselers, and tough guys of every stripe working in sober collaboration with geeks, zealots and psychopaths to turn their most private desires into pictures of dudes wearing tights and speaking in bubbles. Manages to distill that same hustling, pre-war optimism *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* did, but its way grimmer and even more zany. Protagonists are, ostensibly, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (the creators of Superman) and Harry Donenfeld and Jack Leibowitz (the original publishers of DC Comics), but behind every name author drops (Jack Cole, Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Gardner Fox, Gil Kane, Art Spiegelman, Charles Biro) there is surely a biography worth reading. As book isn't 1200 pages long, author has used apposite discretion in what he picks and chooses. Keeps the pace fast and in disciplined

ratio to the inherent dorkiness of the story. (His perspective on the latter is another reason to read book.) The characters at the center of book, Jerry Siegel and his arch-nemesis, Jack Liebowitz, are compelling to watch - author wisely sidesteps the temptation to characterize them as one-dimensional, big-chinned characters in a meta-comic -- as the respective heart and head of the first comic book boom. When the excitement abates, they find themselves in direct opposition to each other and the excellent chapters that follow the first comic book bust are as revealing about the nature of entertainment and the industry that supports it as any other book I know. A great book about young Americans.

Michael says

I read this as background for Michael Chabon's The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay. Research soon turned into fascination with the true story of the origins of the comic book and the superheroes that made the genre a cultural phenomenon. Well written and documented, Men of Tomorrow is an important social history of the comic book in America. Jones has done a fine job of interweaving the stories of the creators (writers and artists) and the publishing entrepreneurs who made the comic book successful and took advantage of the underpaid and often anonymous talent to earn their fortunes. The book is dense with names, especially since many of the Jewish authors and artists with Eastern European names took one or more pen names during their careers in order to appear less "foreign" to the American public. I felt at times that I needed to make charts to keep up with the large cast of characters. The work is thoughtful, and the reader comes away with real insights into the complicated relationship between social changes in America and the roller coaster history of the comic books and those who created and marketed them. The book is illustrated with interesting photographs of several of the principal movers and shakers as well as with reproductions of representative covers and panels from significant comic books. Reading it made me want to revisit the superhero comics of my youth.

Dan says

I read this a few months before I read The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay and I think I benefited from it. This book is the "real life" version (inspiration) of Chabon's novel - essentially following Jerry Siegel (and to an extent, Joe Schuster), all through the Golden Age of comics and beyond. Along the way we get stories from all of the major workhouses in New York, including some great anecdotes about Will Eisner (like his marathon run to finish a comic with his bullpen in the middle of a blizzard). Jones' timeline and narrative is excellent, and you really see how the industry grew, fell, and almost collapsed all together. I was able to read Kavalier & Clay and find myself picking out who was supposed to represent whom, and who was an amalgamation of others.

Also, Bob Kane was a real prick.

Greg Dyer says

Let me start with a couple of caveats. The focus of this book is not for everyone. It will likely be of some interest to those generally interested in popular culture and 20th century history. Its primary audience, however, consists of the geeks alluded to in the subtitle. (I count myself as a geek wannabe.)

Organized primarily around the evolution of Superman, *Men of Tomorrow* branches out to consider the cultural influences and the interpersonal relationships that shaped the growth of the comic book industry. Fans and readers of comic books will learn some interesting tidbits related to the creation and development of some of the industry's most iconic characters. However, I find Jones's book most interesting as lens illuminating the larger cultural shifts taking place during the 20th century. While the book sometimes falls into passages of industry-specific details that seem a bit tiresome, Jones generally does a very nice job of providing those details within a structure that generates interest and engagement on the part of the reader. The central thread of Superman's evolution--and the ups and downs confronted by his creators--ultimately provide an emotional weight and significance that makes this book more than simply a chronicle of historical minutia relevant only to the geeks.

Tim Pendry says

It is hard to praise enough this detailed (perhaps an edge too much so in the very first chapters), well researched, well sourced, well judged and readable account of the creation of the comic books industry.

Jones balances the human, creative and business stories and makes a convincing case for this being a peculiarly Jewish-American phenomenon grounded initially (though not today) in a particular milieu.

Comic book production in New York in the 1940s was a classic case of an urban centre of excellence feeding off its own pool of talent and networks.

And if you see a non-Jewish name (Kane, Kirby, Lee), don't be fooled, these are just second generation Jewish immigrants coming to terms with assimilation.

The American comic book is a Jewish invention to all intents and purposes and Jones has some important insights as to why that should be.

Creatively, comic books might be seen as a Jewish re-translation into fantasy of the dialectic between Protestant America and the attempt to configure a new identity.

The book should be read as much as a history of the creation of American capitalism as anything else, with a three-way struggle between anarcho-socialism, unregulated capitalism and regulated capitalism.

The role of organised crime (aka unregulated capitalism) and the Jewish mobsters as they shift into legitimate business is an essential part of this story and explanatory of much American exceptionalism.

One of the reasons America is in trouble today in the wider world is that the necessity of regulation and moral fervour has become a habit, upsetting peoples that really require neither.

Screwing over Swiss and French bankers is just an extension of WASP determination to tame the new immigrants into good conduct and moral conformity. It's just how they are.

As for the books themselves, they should be studied in and for themselves but the psychological origins of some key characters such as Superman are well argued for.

It is fun to read again the polyamorous sado-masochistic origins of Wonder Woman but the personal hurt behind the creation of Superman and Batman is very real and well argued by Jones.

The characters, with exceptions such as Stan Lee, are not very attractive. There is a disproportionate number of neurotic losers and outright unpleasant bastards but that's American capitalism for you.

Invaluable social history, this book is highly recommended.

Bettie? says

<http://www.sfgate.com/crime/article/C...>
