

Michael Goodrum, *Superheroes and American Self Image: From War to Watergate*. London: Ashgate, 2016. 264pp.

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Comic books matter only in childhood. Like our GI Joes and Barbies, comics go into the garage or attic or trash can once we move toward adulthood. So there's not much to say about the comics. Right?

Wrong. In this well researched and clearly written work, Michael Goodrum of Canterbury Christ Church University, argues that superhero comic books have since the 1930s not only reflected American society but have influenced it as well. The study ends in the 1970s, leaving open the question whether comics and culture still influence one another.

Superheroes appeared late in the Depression and early in World War II – Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman. By definition superheroes were capable of saving the day, but real world problems persisted regardless of Superman's super powers and Batman's sophisticated methods of fighting crime. Writers had to tread carefully in creating realistic scenarios that avoided the truth that fictional characters do not solve real world problems.

If Superman and Captain America were as invincible as portrayed, then why did war take so many GI lives? Superhero plots steered clear of wartime reality, focusing instead on make believe enemies, preferably off planet. Batman stayed home policing Metropolis. Superhero plausibility took a hit during the war.

After the war the superhero comics took one hit after another. The Cold War, McCarthyism, the crusade against comics as a promoter of juvenile delinquency, and when the fifties were done so were adult comic books. The comic code of the middle fifties killed the adult comics, leaving behind sappy romances and talking animal or baby comics. Superheroes were still alive, but they were not special. In the mid-sixties Batman turned from dark hero to farcical slapstick caricature. Superheroes were getting dangerously close to Wonder Dog and Mighty Mouse.

In the late sixties and early seventies, comic writers attempted to deal with the pressing issues of the times – Vietnam, civil rights, women's rights, and the like. By then there were two major suppliers of superhero comics – DC with the old favourites and Marvel with heroes more often than not quirky if not maimed either

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physically or psychically, products of backfired experiments or extreme accidents. Spider Man and the Incredible Hulk are prominent examples.

But even as characters evolved or at least changed with the times, they rarely were able to push boldly into the mainstream of an era's controversies. Comic books were a business owned by corporations interested more in the bottom line than changing the world. Controversy hurt sales, so Wonder Woman's liberation was mild to marginal. The first black character in a superhero comic was a lot closer to Robin than to Batman, to Bojangles Robinson than Shaft. And the first black superhero was African not American. The first African American superhero was a sidekick. Women and minorities might still needed saving by a white superhero. Half stepping characterized the comics more often than not. And that pesky code limited those already inclined to self-limit rather than risk lost sales. But even relaxation of the code in the 1970s did not end the constraints set by the bottom line. Mainstream superhero comics were slightly edgier than in the 1950s, but the oddball material was in underground comics or mainstream crime and horror series.

Goodrum began this study as a dissertation, and the level of scholarship as a result is impeccable. Where but in a scholarly work would one find a bibliography listing issue after issue of all the superhero comics for a 35-year period? Who but an academic would take on the mind numbing drudgery of not only reading and analysing each issue but likewise reading and analysing the letters sections? By doing so, Goodrum has produced an interesting study not only of the comics as the product of writers but of the ways in which changing the writer altered the nature of a character (so the superheroes displayed different traits as circumstances and writers changed – Batman going from dark to camp to relatively light over the years, for example) and what Goodrum does that other historians of comics do not, at least not as much, is emphasize the material in the letters sections of the comics, bringing to the fore reader influence on both writers and characters.

Goodrum may not win any major historical prizes for this work because the scope is limited and the argument does not overturn all that much pre-existing scholarship. Even so, he has provided a lucid and compelling narrative of the evolution of one subgenre of the comic book genre and how it interacted with American society and culture over a significant span of American history.