When the *New York Times* declared that Coca-Cola was no longer to be publically persecuted, it lacked the foresight to know that it was already over its largest obstructions. The WCTU, Dr. Wiley, the IRS, and imitators had fought with and lost to Coca-Cola. Because of these battles, Coca-Cola, armed with a new, tested formula, legal precedence, and an experienced public relations team was stable, experienced, and prepared for the future. Had it never had these confrontations it would have gone down amongst nostrums like Lezajskie Lecznicze Wine Elixir and XXX Tonic Pills[81]

On December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Coca-Cola was engrained as a part of American society. During WWII, Dwight Eisenhower told a congressional committee that more soldiers surveyed wanted Coca-Cola than beer. It was Coca-Cola that helped to remind the G.I.'s what they were fighting for.[82] The next market for Coca-Cola would be the international one to which they had already secured a foothold by 1941, but more importantly, Coca-Cola was ready for whatever lay ahead.

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[81]American Medical Association, 171 and 217.

[82] Brands, H.W., "Coca-Cola Goes To War," *American History* (August 1999), 31.

Caped Culture: A Brief Historiography of Comic Books in America

Wade Derek-Thomas Ellett

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In 1989 Joseph Witek released *Comic Books as History*, a review of the comic books of Jack Johnson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar. These comic book creators crafted works that were, "written as literature aimed at general readership of adults and concerned, not with the traditionally escapist themes of comics, but with issues such as the clash of cultures in American history, the burdens of guilt and suffering passed on within families, and the trials and small triumphs of the daily workaday world."[1] These comics, differing from perhaps the majority; they are serious discussions of the world.[2] Then again, are these comic books that different from their predecessors? Since the emergence of underground comics in the 1960s and of alternative comics in the 1970s, more and more writers and artists have chosen to express themselves in comic books, while the medium itself has reached for wider cultural acceptance.[3] That being the case, who is to say that comic books, since their creation, have not been making statements, in some form or another, about the United States? Comic books only became recognized as a respected literary form in the 1980s, but that does not mean that they have not been worthy of respect for a lot longer[4]

This paper examines the various views of comic books, and the arguments that circle around them. There are many different viewpoints, but none that seem to think that comic books are not worthy of study. They have, after all, been circulated for the better part of a century, and have represented a number of genres from horror to science-fiction, humor to romance, crime to the beloved superhero. The various historians and writers disagree on many points, but they all agree that comic books say

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[1] Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*
(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 3.
[2] Ibid., 4.
[3] Ibid., 5.
[4] Ibid., 11.

something about America and its culture, and thusly are worthwhile to study.

Comic Books as Cultural History

M. Thomas Inge, in his *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture*, describes comic books as "part of the reading habits of more than one hundred million people at all educational and social levels in the United States."[5] Additionally he notes that comic books have heavily influenced popular culture and the art world, are derivative of "popular patterns, themes, and concepts of world culture," and at the same time they, "also serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores, and they speak directly to human desires, needs, and emotions."[6]

In his book, *Comics as Culture*, Inge expands these ideas. Although the text focuses largely on comic strips, there is still a great deal of information on comic books. One idea that he puts forth is the notion that as a medium, comics are so largely consumed and play so large of an informing role that they clearly deserve study, for that reason alone.[7] This view makes sense; this medium clearly plays, though informally, an educational role for youth and adolescents, and because of this they serve as a method for understanding the thoughts and beliefs of the young.

Inge argues that comic books are reflections of larger social and cultural trends.[8] This leads to his continued discussion of superheroes as emerging from the heroes of folklore and mythology, which he views as a persistent and perhaps necessary part of American culture.[9] Superheroes exist as part of a greater cultural heritage and "tend to fit most of the classic patterns of heroism in Western culture."[10] Superman takes the role of the optimistic outsider, Batman takes on the role of the vigilante seeking justice, and Spider-Man acts as the trickster-hero.[11] As these popular heroes, Inge believes, in some form or another, fit into larger cultural patterns, it is evident that comic books maintain and further develop these patterns and inform readers of a larger cultural heritage.[12]

Bradford W. Wright in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, argues that comic books, since their inception in the late 1930s, have been an important part of youth culture. Wright

focuses mainly on the superhero, crime, and sci-fi genres and ignores more childish comics such as Walt Disney and Archie type comic books, because they "possess a certain timeless and unchanging appeal for young children that makes them relatively unhelpful for the purpose of cultural history."[13]

Wright's study of comics has no interest in the aesthetics of comic books, and does not focus on the subject as an art-form but rather as a "cultural representation."[14] He pays particular attention to stories that succeeded commercially and were often imitated. Wright's view was that comic books provided youth with an image, even if oft distorted, of American life. War, politics, the economy, and well known institutions were all portrayed on the pages of comic books. In this way, the youth of America were presented with stories that commented on their society.[15]

Wright also believed that there are intellectual pitfalls in analyzing a medium such as comic books. It would be quite easy to read more into them than was actually there, so for his study, Wright looks only at meanings that he felt were easily observed by readers, clearly intended by the creators, or suggestive of historical developments and cultural assumptions.[16]

Wright is not alone in his views, and in fact owes much of his argument and interpretation to William W. Savage Jr. In his work *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, he argues that comic books were, "an artifact of popular culture in the first decade after World War II."[17] Postwar America was a country that had many confusing elements; adjustments to life after the war, fear of communism, the possibilities and problems of living in the atomic age, and all manner of issues ranging from the rising divorce rate, homosexuality, and juvenile delinquency that people feared would destroy the American family institution.[18] People searched for ways to explain the world around them. Savage views comic books as one of many potential vehicles of explanation.[19] All elements of popular culture had this potential, but comic books were of particular importance to the young. Comics had the benefit, for a time, of being a medium that was less confined; radio could offer sound but no imagery, and while films could offer both they were limited by the technology available.[20] Comic books, however, were limited only by the artist's ability, and, for a time, they

[5] M. Thomas Inge, "Comic Art" in *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture*, ed. M. Thomas Inge, (Westport, CT:
Greenwood Press, 1982), 73.
[6] Ibid., 73.
[7] M. Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), xi.
[8] Ibid., xxi.
[9] Ibid., 141.
[10] Ibid., 142.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

[13] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins
University Press, 2001), xvii.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., xv-xvi.
[16] Ibid., xvii.
[17] William W. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), ix.
[18] Ibid., ix-x.
[19] Ibid., ix.
[20] Ibid., 7.

"escaped consideration according to aesthetic criteria established by adults for the evaluation of media offerings intended for the grown-up world. They were for children, and they enjoyed a certain freedom."[21] The sky was the limit in comic books, and it is easy to see why children and teens would spend what little money they had on these books.

Savage believes that comic books provide a mirror in which the "concerns, preoccupations, and beliefs of American society during the post-World War II decade," were reflected back upon the reader.[22] He acknowledges that at times the mirror might warp or distort the image, and this is certainly true, but he asserts that, "the distortion was never so great as to obscure the proper identification of the object at hand."[23]

The main thrust of Savage's argument is that an analysis of comic books as a form of popular culture provides another window through which the historian can look to see the past from a different perspective. In his analysis it becomes clear that the views portrayed in comic books and those of the medium's readers existed in sort of an unusual conversation; the views of the artists and writers were rendered in the comic narrative, but were informed by the views of the readers. Examples that Savage points out include the reinforcement of the American vision of the atomic bomb in the late 40s, the encouragement of American ideals through depicting the flaws and faults of communist states, cells, and individuals, and the shared pessimism regarding the Korean War, "reflecting the difficulty that Americans had in working up enthusiasm for the sort of limited conflict that the Bomb had supposedly rendered obsolete."[24]

All of these examples circle around Savage's main point; that comic books from 1945 to 1954 mirrored America's attempt to evolve in response to the changes that were occurring in the world.[25] They reflected society's benefits, but also its ills, and in doing this, most authors agree, they illustrated the world around them. Unlike Savage and Wright, Mila Bongco, in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, argues that it is not necessarily the comic books doing the reflection. Instead, she argues that the changes in America's reaction to comics reflect the changing ideas and thoughts about culture and the 'popular.'[26] Savage had said that comic book readers influenced comic book writers and that the opposite was also true, but Bongco takes the argument of interaction further. Bongco believed that one function of comic books was to present socially dominant views. She argues:

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 112.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 23, 37, 113.

[25] Ibid., 113.

[26] Mila Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books* (New York:

Garland Publications, 2000), 20.

The unquestioning patriotism of superheroes unashamedly fighting for Uncle Sam while remaining assured of recurring and unfailing victory against the enemies of the country and society provides any example of a social text worthy of examination. The representation of enemies and villains in these comicbooks is highly dependent on the social and cultural relations of the United States at any one time, as well as the prevailing ideas of unity and conformity.[27]

Bongco argues, however, that this is not the only function. Comic books, while constitutive of American ideas and mores, serve to rebel against the same.[28] "At any one time readers are cognizant of a hegemonic or dominant mentality and accordingly, comics are perceived as either rebelling against or catering to this mentality."[29] Comic books do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a world where there is perpetual feedback. Bongco states, "We must not forget that whatever the effects of comicbooks are, it cannot be assumed that the environment is otherwise stable in that it only receives without re-acting…The truth is that the audience affects books just as books affect the audience, because consumers affect the product just as products affect consumers."[30] The relationship between the comic books and their readers is a circular one, both interacting with the other.

Frederic Wertham and Criticism of Comic Books

No serious discussion of comic books would be complete without a discussion of Frederic Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham was a psychiatrist who served as a consultant for the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency as it conducted an investigation of the comic book industry in 1954.[31] While working at the Larfargue Clinic, he began studying the effects that comics had on children, "using detailed case histories to draw general conclusions."[32] Unlike most psychiatrists, who "focused on individual rather than social causes," in their work with juvenile delinquency, Wertham believed that there were wider causes and that Americans needed to focus psychiatry towards society.[33] He was actively critical of comic books prior to the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, publishing articles and testifying in court cases as an expert

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[27] Ibid., 21.

[28] Ibid., 26.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., 31.

[31] Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

1998), 54.

[32] Ibid., 90.

[33] Ibid., 91.

witness, but it was really the publication of his book that had the most impact.[34]

Seduction of the Innocent, "while it drew on his research, was not intended to be a scholarly presentation of his ideas.[35] Instead, it was a non-objective vehicle intended to mobilize public support for his proposed ban on the selling of comic books to children.[36] Wertham disapproved mostly of horror and crime comics, which as a genre were particularly bloody and violent; however, he defined crime comic books as those that depict any kind of crime in any setting, and thusly almost every comic book came under his purview.[37] Wertham cited examples from his work as a psychiatrist and from these he 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."[38]

Additionally, according to Wertham, comic books contributed greatly to illiteracy because "children were not apt to read the text of comics but rely on the imagery, thusly preventing detection of reading disorders and fostering poor reading habits.[39] Even those children who could read were damaged by reading comics, since they kept their readers from learning to appreciate what he felt was "good" reading material."[40]

The advertisements found in comic books were also unhealthy for children and adolescents, according to Wertham, who stated:

> Comic-book stories teach violence, the advertisements provide the weapons. The stories instill a wish to be a superman, the advertisements promise to supply the means for becoming one. Comic-book heroines have super-figures; the comic-book advertisements promise to develop them. The stories display the wounds; the advertisements supply the knives. The stories feature scantily clad girls; the advertisements outfit peeping Toms.[41]

In Wertham's eyes the imagery, stories, and advertisements worked together to transform a healthy, law-abiding, respectful child into a delinquent.

In general, response to Wertham and *Seduction of the Innocent* has been negative. Savage refers to Seduction of the Innocent as, "pompous, polemical, biased, and poorly documented."[42] He also believes that Wertham ignored anything positive that could be found in comic books, and that he "tarred all comic books with the same broad brush."[43] In the end, however, he asserts that Wertham failed; he may have wrought change in the content of comic books for many years, and greatly reduced the number of comic books available, but he could not gain enough support for the government regulation that he had proposed, nor was he capable of suppressing the medium.[44]

Wright's view is also critical, although less harshly so. According to him, Wertham, "offered parents a highly visible scapegoat to explain what adults regarded as disturbing changes in youth behavior."[45] While it is easy to see that Wertham made a powerful argument, Wright also argues that, "his evidence was highly contentious. The flaws in his arguments were obvious."[46] It would make sense that many of the troubled children and teens that Wertham interviewed would have read comic books, considering approximately ninety percent of children and adolescents did, but he failed to account for the great number of youth who did read comic books yet did not fall into delinquency.[47]

Inge is brief in his description of Wertham, but incredibly critical. He refers to him as, "the 'Joe McCarthy' of the comic book purge," and refers to Seduction of the Innocent as, "single-minded and scientifically unsound."[48] To the contrary of Wertham's argument, Inge believes that many comics of the time were, "devoted to the serious treatment of social problems and the human condition… They provided food for thought… They made a contribution to understanding seldom matched by the other mass media of the 1950s."[49] He goes on to say, "despite Dr. Wertham's concerns that they would make us social deviants, they actually helped make us better human beings."[50]

Bongco's view of criticism of comic books is mixed. She spends little time criticizing Wertham himself, and spends more time discussing the implementation of the comics code. She does refer to Wertham's book as "unsound reasoning," and points out that there were significant, "gaps between his premises and conclusions."[51] Still, she sees Wertham's charges

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954), vi.
[38] Ibid., 10.
[39] Ibid., 141.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 217.

[42] Savage, 96.
[43] Ibid., 96-97.
[44] Ibid., 102.
[45] Wright, 96.
[46] Ibid., 96.
[47] Ibid., 96.
[48] Inge, *Comics as Culture*, 117-118.
[49] Ibid., 128.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Bongco, 32.

as being part and parcel of a time of uncertainty, and his claims about comic books, because of their link to children were validated partly because of the potential threat that they could provide to the ideal American family structure.[52] However, Bongco is more interested in the comics code, than in Wertham, and she has a somewhat contrary view of the code. On one hand, she believes that the introduction of the comics code was "a setback for the art... which was forced into essentially infantile patterns when its potential for maturity had only begun to be explored."[53] She believes that the code led to comics with, "oversimplified conflicts that led to thematic and generic stagnation."[54] Yet, unlike others, Bongco blames, not Wertham or other critics, but the industry itself; pointing out that the comics code was self-imposed by the industry itself, not by the government.[55]

Of course, Wertham was not the only critic of comic books in America. David Hajdu, in *The Ten-Cent Plague*, reviews comic books as a controversial chapter in American history. This controversy over comics, he argues, was really a battle over deeper issues like class and money, traditions and politics, and generational changes.[56] Hajdu argues that comic books were really a forum for people that felt like outsiders, be they the ones making the comics or the ones reading them. This medium interacted with young people without speaking down to them, instead they, "spoke cogently to young people as they struggled to come to terms with adult society."[57] It was a media that existed for youth, and that instilled an intrinsic value to comic books. They were of great value to children, because they were of no value to adults, making it something that children and adolescents could claim as their own.[58] Ultimately, Hajdu argues that:

> Comic books were a peril from within.... The line dividing the comics' advocates and opponents was generational, rather than geographic. While many of the actions to curtail comics were attempts to protect the young, they were also efforts to protect the culture at large from the young. Encoded in much of the ranting about comic books and juvenile delinquency were fears not only of what comic readers might become, but of what they already were – that is, a generation of people

developing their own interests and tastes, along with the determination to indulge them.[59]

This view carries significant weight. Comic books were representations of a new generation that might not share the views of their parents. The funny books were not just a threat to children; the children were a threat to the worldview of older generations.

The comic makers were not innocent, however. Those that came under the greatest scrutiny, producers of horror, romance, and crime comics were, as Hajdu refers to them, "propagandists of a sort," and, "cultural insurgents."[60] They expressed and inspired in young readers, "a disregard for the niceties of proper society, a passion for wild ideas and fast action, a cynicism toward authority of all sorts, and a tolerance, if not appetite for images of prurience and violence."[61] Where once all forms of entertainment had served a role of boosting war efforts, and comics especially in their zealous attack of fascism, comics had come to inform, if not create, a dominant postwar popular culture that did not always conform to traditional mores.[62]

Amy Kiste Nyberg takes a different approach in *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Nyberg is infinitely more sympathetic to the critics and criticisms of comic books than most other sources. This view challenges the arguments of other works, and is one of few dissenting viewpoints. Nyberg argues that, "Wertham's role in the crusade against comics has been largely misinterpreted by fans and scholars alike, who dismiss his findings as naïve social science, failing to understand how his work on comic books fits into the larger context of his beliefs about violence, psychiatry, and social reform."[63]

Additionally, she argues that despite the view that other writers, like Inge, hold that the comics code nearly destroyed the comic book industry and that the implementation of the code was only one of many problems faced by the industry that led to its near downfall, such as the loss of distributors and competition from television that marginalized the comics industry.[64] Some comic book publishers did go out of business, but it was from this cocktail of factors, not simply the creation of the comics code, and Nyberg asserts that, "there was never any real danger that comic books would cease to exist."[65] Ultimately, Nyberg feels that the implementation of the code was beneficial to the comic book industry. She argues that it silenced all but the staunchest critics of comic books, forced the industry to

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 34.

[54] Ibid., 4.

[55] Ibid.

[56] David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 7.

[57] Ibid., 36.

[58] Ibid., 37.

[59] Ibid,. 112.

[60] Ibid., 330.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 55, 330.

[63] Nyberg, xiii.

[64] Ibid., x-xi.

[65] Ibid., 157.

reorganize, and did not impose blanket censorship on the medium.[66] This is debatable, however. Hajdu argues that the comics code, "was far more rigid and puritanical than the earlier ACMP comics code, FCC guidelines, or the Hays Office standards for motion pictures."[67] He continues to say that the artists and writers working on comic books at this time thought that the comics code was just fine, so long as they did not have to actually follow it. If they were expected to produce comic books to the specifications provided by the code, they felt that the industry was essentially finished.[68]

Nyberg has something of a revisionist view of Wertham. She acknowledges that his critics are accurate when they note his lack of evidence and poor scientific methodology, but she argues that his goal was not to create a scientific text, but rather that he aimed to understand the ways which comics might influence children.[69] Her position on Wertham, is more fleshed out than that of other writers. Her statement that when Wertham's views were not backed by medical colleagues that he "took his campaign… to the public, capitalizing on the comic book controversy as a way of furthering his agenda for addressing issues of violence in society," is a sensible one.[70] This is especially true in light of her continuing, "despite his efforts to frame the debate over comic books as a mental health issue, the legislation he pushed for was clearly censorship… he used comic books as a way to advance his social agenda, recognizing that a medium perceived by the public as catering to children… would make an easy target."[71] While others have portrayed Wertham as a villain, and the code as censorship, Nyberg portrays him as a man with an agenda, be it good or bad, and the code as a logical and even beneficial change for the industry.[72]

Comic Books in Popular History
There is a tremendous amount of work done in other genres regarding comic books. There have been some rich literary studies, and a number of popular histories on the subject. These popular histories range in the quality of their treatment of comic books. Some are well written and well researched, while a great many are just fan devotion. Most, however, are simply chronicles and encyclopedias of comic book characters and writers. Many of these popular histories are chronological surveys of developments, changes, and major events of the comic book industry. That is not to say that they are not well researched or well written. Mike Benton's *The Comic Book in America* and Ron Goulart's *Great History of Comic Books* are excellent examples of such texts. Both are well written and give a detailed account of

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[66] Ibid., 156.
[67] Hajdu, 291.
[68] Ibid., 292.
[69] Nyberg., 85-86.
[70] Ibid., 156.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.

the comic book industry, but neither of these authors makes any arguments regarding the subject matter. They simply retell how the industry evolved. They are all fact, with no interpretation.

Some of these simple surveys, however, have worthwhile ideas and arguments tucked in their pages. One example of this is Fuch and Reitberger's *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Media.* These two authors, having grown up with comics, track the industry from infancy to the 1970s, with little interpretation, yet the few moments of such are insightful. For instance, they say:

> Comics, together with the other mass media, are a substitute for genuine folklore and culture and have developed into a self-perpetuating institution, an integral part of the American Way of Life. Of all the mass media, comics mirror the American Collective Subconscious most faithfully, and we know…that comics in turn manipulate and exploit the subconscious.[73]

This reference to comic books as a substitute for folklore is an interesting view, similar to that of Inge. Fuch and Reitberger also reference superheroes corresponding to mythical figures. They equate the Flash with Mercury, the Green Arrow with Robin Hood, and Superman with Samson and Hercules.[74]

They say that such heroes "express in today's idiom the ancient longing of mankind for a mighty protector, a helper, guide, or guardian angel who offers miraculous deliverance to mortals."[75] This idea of comic book superheroes as modern folklore is of interest considering the roles that such characters have played. Comic books have served to reinforce war efforts and cultural mores in America through the guise of entertainment.[76] Entertainment was always an important function of folklore, but not the only function.[77] It also served other purposes such as validating culture, reminding the target audience of reason and order.[78] Another primary function is education as each folktale story imparts some kind of moral or lesson.[79] Lastly, folklore can also serve to exercise societal control to press

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[73] Wolfgang Fuchs and Reinhold Reitberger, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium* trans. Nadia Fowler (Boston: Little
Brown and Company, 1972), 7.
[74] Ibid., 100.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Wright, 34-36.
[77] William R. Bascom, "The Four Functions of Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs,
NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), 290.
[78] Ibid., 292.
[79] Ibid., 293.

for conformity.[80] These are all functions that comic books have fulfilled during their tenure as an entertainment medium.

Fuchs and Reitberger argue that comic books are useful research material for historical, as well as sociological and literary research.[81] Extrapolating from this, there is a clear view of why comic books are worth researching for historians studying culture, as they hint at depictions of the reader, the nation, and the world at large. Considering that hundreds of millions of comic books are sold yearly, and the intimate relationships that exist between readers and their favorite characters, it becomes difficult to argue that this media is not worth research.[82]

Les Daniels, in *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America*, echoes this idea when he says, "it would be futile to deny the idea that they have helped to shape the American scene."[83] He also seems to agree that comic books, despite an apparent "surface irrelevance" address significant ideas and issues; that the incredible characters and stories are reflections of desires and ideas that are at work in the minds of comic book readers.[84] "Whether their effect has been positive or negative is open to debate… There can be little doubt, however that the comic book is a positive success as an art… And fluctuations in the style and content of these periodicals serve to mirror changes in the attitudes of both artists and audience."[85] Despite such statements, Comix, like other similar popular histories, only retells the story; it is not within the authors' scope to interpret much of the tale. This is not the case, however, of other works in popular history that address comic books.

One popular history that goes beyond simply chronicling the evolution of comic books as a medium is Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans, written by Jeffrey A. Brown.[86] To the author, comic books present much of popular culture's imagery of heroism, but it is also, "one of the most obvious examples of unequal representation."[87] Brown traces the history of racial bias, "blaxploitation," and attempts at the

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[80] Ibid., 294.

[81] Fuchs and Reitberger, 8.

[82] Ibid., 155.

[83] Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1973), ix.

[84] *Ibid.*, 180.

[85] *Ibid.*, ix.

[86] To a certain extent, referring to this work as a popular history is not entirely accurate. Milestone Comics had ceased circulation only four years prior to its publication, and at the 2008 Comic-Con, DC Comics announced that the characters from Milestone would be re-launched within the continuity of the DC comic books. However, it has been included due to the author's broad discussion of minority superheroes in the history of comic book publishing.

[87] Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

2001), 2.

creation of legitimate black characters within the comic book industry. His ultimate goal is the discussion of Milestone Media. Formed in 1993, Milestone was a comic book publishing company that was owned, controlled, and operated by African-Americans whose goal was to provide African-American characters that were fully enriched, not simply black.[88] Milestone was actually quite overdue. Since the superhero comic had emerged as a genre, it had really always been white superheroes saving the day. It was not until the 1970s that racial issues really began to be expressed in the pages of superhero comics.[89] On the pages of *Green Lantern* #76, Hal Jordan is questioned by an elderly black man as to why, despite his intervening on foreign planets for the rights of alien species, he had never done anything to aid African-American struggles on earth. Hal swears to explore social injustice on his own planet, and later on in his career he turns over the mantle of Green Lantern to John Stewart, an African- American.[90] Brown sees such discussions within the pages of comic books as a positive change, but that much of the social impetus of the 1970s in comic books was centered on a blaxploitation genre, much as in film.[91] Brown argues that Milestone, despite being decades later than such activities, was the first real attempt to sever the association of black characters with this earlier usage.[92] Ultimately, the experiment would fail, at least partly due to the perspective of Milestone as 'the black comic book company.'[93] The idea that the company might be political swayed a lot of readers from becoming fans, and gave many the impression that these were not new heroes, but simply the same heroes rendered black.[94]

In the end, Brown's assessment is narrow, but valuable. He is accurate in his argument that African-Americans had been under-represented, or at best poorly represented, in comic books since their inception. Milestone's characters were "black characters clearly aligned with the established conventions of the genre."[95] Beyond the discussion of race in comic books, however, Brown addresses the larger context of the medium. "The world of comics is a particularly unique medium… no other mass entertainment industry has ties which are as closely knit between the producers and the consumers as the comic book industry does."[96]

Another popular history that goes beyond simply charting the changes that have taken place in the comic book industry, though much different than Brown's work, is Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing*

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[88] Ibid., 4.

[89] Ibid., 18.

[90] Ibid., 18-19.

[91] Ibid., 19.

[92] Ibid., 27.

[93] Ibid., 193.

[94] Ibid., 194.

[95] Ibid., 195.

[96] Ibid., 201.

a Cultural Icon. This work is a stunning example of research, interpretation, and analysis of not only one of the world's most popular heroes, but also how that character has influenced and interacted with the world at large. This text is an excellent example of a blending of scholarship and appreciation. Brooker is a self-admitted fan, but successfully separates his love for the character from his research and analysis. His work, obviously, centers on Batman, but he ties this character to a long tradition of certain cultural icons, like Robin Hood or Dracula, who are recognizable even to those who do not partake of the medium in which such characters are usually presented.[97] These figures offer interesting windows which to look through, as their associations have not remained static, instead changing over time. These changes have often been the result of changing mediums or as responses to new social contexts, "adapting with the historical moment as certain aspects of their iconic personae are foregrounded and others pushed back."[98]

Brooker takes a chronological approach, from Batman's emergence in 1939, to changes in the 1940s, all the way to modern readership.[99] He addresses the criticisms of Wertham, which when it came to Batman and Robin, centered on the threat of homosexuality. Wertham was not the only, or first, critic to see homosexual themes in Batman comics, however he is the most well known. Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent says of the dynamic duo:

> At home they lead an idyllic life... They live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases, and have a butler, Alfred. Bruce is sometimes shown in a dressing gown. As they sit by the fireplace, the young boy sometimes worries about his partner... it is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together.[100]

Brooker, somewhat surprisingly, does not attack Wertham. He does include a number of pages regarding others who have, but Brooker himself takes the view that Wertham should not be judged upon the standards of modern culture.[101] Essentially, he feels that Wertham, at least in his worries of homosexual readings of Batman comics, were made in a "tone of reasonable concern," for young readers, "in a climate where homosexuality is a great taboo."[102] Brooker's treatment of Wertham might even be kinder than Nyberg's, as he notes that Wertham, "detested racism," attacked

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[97] Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 9.
[98] Ibid., 9-10.
[99] Ibid., 34, 99.
[100] Wertham, 190.
[101] Brooker, 110.
[102] Ibid., 111.

advertisements that injured children's self esteem, and even defended a nudist magazine in the 1940s, and thusly should not be accused of blanket censorship.[103]

Conclusion: Comic Books and New Views

Comic books being a product of, as well as major contributor to, popular culture have oft suffered an inequity of not being taken seriously by the academic community at large. This has occurred for a number of reasons. The first is lack of availability. It can be difficult for a researcher to gain access to a large number of comic books to study, as many of the older issues are now under lock and key, held hostage by collectors.[104] Additionally, comic books are still considered by many to be products for children.[105] This might be true for the early comic books, but it is worth questioning; if comics were thusly consumed and were a cultural and political window for children and teens, as these individuals aged and stepped into adulthood, were the influences of their comic book reading days still with them? That question cannot be fully answered, but it is possible to say that given popular research like that of Brooker, that comic books have informed and influenced the actions of adult men and women. As more studies of mass media are conducted and more scholarship done on popular culture, works regarding American comic books will surely seem more important and worthwhile. Further, as digital archiving becomes more readily available and there continues to be a preponderance of comics being reproduced in bound form, the problems of reviewing multiple issues of early comic books will be relieved.

Already, educational institutions are embracing collections of comic books. "A leader in this development has been Randall W. Scott who singlehandedly built the invaluable Russel B. Nye Popular Culture Collection at Michigan State University and assembled over 40,000 comic books with another 2,000 on microfilm."[106] Now comic book publishers automatically deposit their titles there.[107] Other schools also have significant collections, including: The Bowling Green State University Library, with more than 20,000 comic books; the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art, with 10,000 issues; and the libraries at Northwestern University and the University of Pittsburgh with over 8,500 issues each. Collections of between 1,000 and 2,000 comic books are found in the libraries of California State University at Fullerton, the Comics Magazine Association of

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[103] Ibid., 114.
[104] Savage, 143-144.
[105] Mike Benton, *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1989), 11.
[106] Inge, *Comics as Culture*, 156.
[107] Ibid., 157.

America, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, University of Maryland in Baltimore County, and University of Minnesota.[108]

Unfortunately, the Library of Congress has lost a great many comic books from its collection either through poor maintenance or theft, but, "they claim to own 45,000 titles and now have a program for their preservation."[109]

As comic books continue to be published and seen less and less as just for children, books such as *The Ten-Cent Plague and Comic Book Nation* will continue to be written, arguing how comic books have influenced and been influenced by the world we live in. Comic books are a rich part of that world, and the debate about what role they play will continue. Hopefully this will lead to even more scholarly research into this art form that has been part of American culture, and has arguably created a culture of its own. If that is the case, and the debate regarding comic books in relation to history continues, a greater understanding of how comics, their creators, and their readers interacted with the world will be attained.

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[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

Boys to Men: The Coming of Age of Illinois Farm Boys in the Civil War

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During the Civil War 360,222 Union soldiers perished in the conflict and would never return home; 34,834 of them were from and fought for the State of Illinois.[1] The American Civil War came about during a time when multiple issues troubled the Prairie State. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of the US Senate race of 1858 influenced and inspired Illinois men and boys to enlist in the U.S. Army to defend and preserve their Union. The state of Illinois played a major role in the Union's victory, and it is vital that we recall not only the happenings and sacrifices of the famous Illinois generals, officers, and other high profile soldiers, but also the forgotten boy soldiers of rural Illinois. Examining these soldiers' accounts presents a perspective of the war through their eyes, and how the Civil War shaped and controlled their overall personal growth and development. The pressures of their country and friends played a heavy role in the enlistment of these boys. These youth, as young as seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen at the time, could never have been prepared for, or imagined, the sights and sounds of the war that only a number of them would live to tell about. These small-town, rural farm boys from Illinois left their homes and families envisioning excitement, a pursuit of glory, and a sense of adventure fighting for their country. Through their experiences in battles, army life, and campaigning from Illinois into the South they were forced to undergo an incredible personal transformation from youth to manhood. Their journals, letters, and diary accounts written during or after the Civil War were written by Illinois farm boys who had never before ventured outside their state or even county. These soldiers were truly still boys at the start of the war, and it is this small and specific group of soldiers that are represented herein and show the process of growing into men through their Civil War experiences. There are only seven accounts remaining of the Civil War in regards to Illinois farm boys who served in the infantry and were transformed through their experiences into men.

All of the boys on this journey started off by enlisting in the U.S. Army. The 18-year-old age requirement placed by the Union should have turned away these boys. They were underage and should have stayed home to help out on the farm until they were legally old enough to go and fight for Uncle Sam.

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[1] Burke Davis, *The Civil War, Strange and Fascinating Facts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fairfax Press, 1982), 215. Victor Hicken, *Illinois in the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1991), xxi.