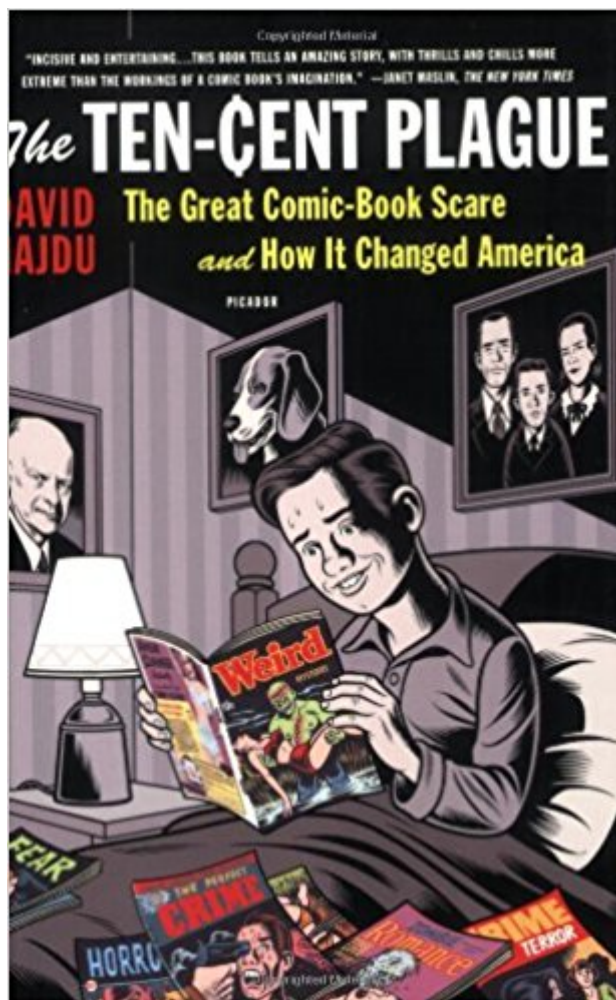


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The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare And How It Changed America



Synopsis

The story of the rise and fall of those comic books has never been fully told -- until *The Ten-Cent Plague*. David Hajdu's remarkable new book vividly opens up the lost world of comic books, its creativity, irreverence, and suspicion of authority. In the years between World War II and the emergence of television as a mass medium, American popular culture as we know it was first created in the pulpy, boldly illustrated pages of comic books. No sooner had this new culture emerged than it was beaten down by church groups, community bluestockings, and a McCarthyish Congress only to resurface with a crooked smile on its face in *Mad* magazine. When we picture the 1950s, we hear the sound of early rock and roll. *The Ten-Cent Plague* shows how -- years before music -- comics brought on a clash between children and their parents, between prewar and postwar standards. Created by outsiders from the tenements, garish, shameless, and often shocking, comics spoke to young people and provided the guardians of mainstream culture with a big target. Parents, teachers, and complicit kids burned comics in public bonfires. Cities passed laws to outlaw comics. Congress took action with televised hearings that nearly destroyed the careers of hundreds of artists and writers. *The Ten-Cent Plague* radically revises common notions of popular culture, the generation gap, and the divide between "high" and "low" art. As he did with the lives of Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington (in *Lush Life*) and Bob Dylan and his circle (in *Positively 4th Street*), Hajdu brings a place, a time, and a milieu unforgettably back to life.

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Customer Reviews

Significant Seven, March 2008: I may be alone here, but when I read Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a whole strata of American artists came to life for me. Ever since then I've been waiting for a book like David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague* to come along and show me the contours of this world. Anyone who remembers *Positively 4th Street* will recognize in this new book Hajdu's peerless ability to weave first-person recollections with an acute perspective of America at a pivotal moment in its cultural timeline. The rise of comics as a mode of expression, an outlet for entertainment, and, rather tragi-comically, as a target for censorship, couldn't be more compelling in anyone else's hands. In deft narrative strokes Hajdu creates a colorful, character-driven story of our first real--and lasting--counterculture (if the burgeoning popularity of graphic novels is any indication) and shows why we embrace it still.--Anne Bartholomew --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Starred Review. After writing about the folk scene of the early 1960s in *Positively 4th Street*, Hajdu goes back a decade to examine the censorship debate over comic books, casting the controversy as a prelude to the cultural battle over rock music. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, the centerpiece of the movement, has been reduced in public memory to a joke--"particularly the attack on Batman for its homoeroticism"--but Hajdu brings a more nuanced telling of Wertham's background and shows how his arguments were preceded by others. Yet he comes down hard on the unsound research techniques and sweeping generalizations that led Wertham to conclude that nearly all comic books would inspire antisocial behavior in young readers. There are no real heroes here, only villains and victims; Hajdu turns to the writers and artists whose careers were ruined when censorship and other legal restrictions gutted the comics industry, and young kids who were coerced into participating in book burnings by overzealous parents and teachers. With such a meticulous setup, the history builds slowly but the main attraction--"EC Comics publisher Bill Gaines's attempt to explain in a Senate committee hearing how an illustration of a man holding a severed head could be in good taste"--holds all the dramatic power it has acquired as it's been told among fans over the past half-century. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

So you think you know comics? You might know Batman or Wolverine or Captain America. Maybe you know Superman. Or Casper the Friendly Ghost. What you don't know is the true evolution of comics and how they came what they are today . . . and it's not a pretty story. As this book details, comics and comic book creators (and publishers and distributors) were under siege from the very

beginning from various elements in our culture who worried that comics were turning our kids into gangsters or Communists or worse. This book not only is a thorough history of comics but it's also about how much money was made by the early practitioners of the art and how much they were hounded by the Do-Gooders of our country to stop having so much fun entertaining kids (and stop making literally tens of millions of dollars doing it). It got so bad that several comic producers were dragged before Congress, and this during the McCarthy hearings. I am one of those individuals who started reading comics in the late Fifties and learned, as time went by, thought I knew all there was to know about the Golden Age and the Silver Age. You think comics were all about superheroes? Think again. Mostly it was crime, horror, and nurses. (Wait until you read the chapter on how comics cracked the female/romance market and the scads of money that was made.) Then, of course, the talk of Batman and Robin's homosexuality, Wonder Woman's S&M allusions (she sure got tied up a lot). Mostly, this is an expertly told, somewhat scholarly story of how comics came to be and how the Puritans of our culture were always nipping at their heels until the industry created the Comics Code Authority, a self-imposed system of forbidden topics and depiction of women's bodies that wasn't broken until the Eighties. This is an important book that every comic book fan should read.

I was required to read this book for a class I was taking on the history of comics. This book is VERY informative, going through just about the entire history of the comic strips/books until the mid-1900's. Unfortunately, there are so many people the author talks about that I ended up getting lost on who was doing what and when. It was so incredibly lengthy and I started to fall asleep while reading it. Despite the length, it would have been nice to have illustrative examples (i.e. some of the comic strips mentioned) in order to really understand who was drawing which comics, etc. Overall, it's a very informative book, I just wish it kept me awake and interested.

Probably one of the greatest evils in society are the self-righteous moralists who want to rid the world of what they perceive as sinful, usually saying it's "for the children". Usually, the things they want to actually get rid of are merely items that encourage free thought or seemingly contradict their own narrow dogma. Thus today, we get those who want to ban Harry Potter books not because of any proven harm, but merely the fact that they don't fall into their own interpretation of good and evil. It's not enough to choose to ignore the items, but also to deprive others of their joy. David Hajdu's *The Ten Cent Plague* details one such situation that occurred in the early 1950s and focused on comic books. This was an era when comics were at a creative and commercial peak, dealing with not only the superhero genre, but also horror, crime, war and romance. While some of it

was over-the-top, it also provided entertainment and occasionally delivered a message as well. The main villain in this piece is Fredric Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book that alleged links between comic books and juvenile delinquency, links that were often weak at best, and completely fabricated in other cases. In this *Legion of Doom*, however, Wertham is merely the biggest name, but there are others as well, driven to hound the comic book industry out of existence. They would use book-burnings, boycotts and the police to get their way, and to a large extent, they would win. Due to their efforts, the Comics Code was instituted, resulting in comics that went from being fun (if edgy) to watered-down pap fit for only the youngest kids. It was like replacing Bugs Bunny and Homer Simpson with Baby Huey and the Care Bears. It would take decades for the comic books to get back much of the creativity they lost, and commercially, they would never be as dominant again. Yet there were still heroes in this era - most notably Bill Gaines - but they could never quite grasp the significance of Wertham and company until it was too late. Around the only positive that came out of this period was *Mad Magazine*, which Gaines was able to squeeze past the Comics Code by changing its classification from comic book to magazine. Hajdu's writing is always engaging. I would have liked a few more illustrations but that's a minor quibble. Overall, this is a good book of relatively modern history, not only giving a good look at another era, but also providing a valuable lesson that too many times, the ones who say they are protecting "the children" from evil may be doing the actual evil themselves.

Greetings & Salutations! I clearly remember when horror comics were under attack from men like Dr. Frederic Wertham in the early 1950s and how bootleg horror comics were sold under the counter of used book stores for 250¢ more than face value! Always saw them in a positive light as they were morality tales where the guilty were punished every time, no exceptions! They were not attacked on the police, lawyers, judges, clergy, etc., well, a few lawyers that were corrupted? The book is quite lengthy and takes time to go through, but it covers just about everything and then some. Hollywood films were also under attack and said to have created juvenile delinquents - the 1950s became a bland boring time and it seemed Sundays were strictly for going to Sunday school and church services, then an early dinner that left you hungry after evening services and early to bed as many towns allowed only one drug store, one gasoline filling station, one super market and one restaurant to remain open on the Sabbath and of course the highlight of church might be the burning of a stack of comic books turned over by parents of some unfortunate youth. Horror comics were the news a lot of the time and one had to hide them under the bed or in the closet. Dr. Wertham faded into history and seemed to be forgotten until this book hit the stand and book

stalls. Worth reading and an easy "A" on a term paper too! Respectfully yours, Sarge Booker of Tujunga

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