



**Jozef Pecina**

**EC COMICS:  
THE PIONEERS OF SHOCK AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY**

**STIMUL  
2024**



**FACULTY OF ARTS**  
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DEPARTMENT OF BRITISH  
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## **EC Comics: The Pioneers of Shock and Social Commentary**

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# INTRODUCTION

This textbook is an exploration of EC Comics — one of the most influential and provocative publishers in the history of American comics. Known for its bold storytelling, stylistic innovation, and willingness to shock, EC Comics set itself apart from the competition in the early 1950s with titles like *Tales from the Crypt*, *Two-Fisted Tales*, and *Shock SuspenStories*. These comics were visually groundbreaking and engaged readers with complex moral questions, dark humor, and sharp social commentary, challenging the norms of their time. This book draws directly from my own research into the rich history and enduring legacy of EC Comics; some of it has been published in scholarly journals.

EC Comics emerged during the Golden Age of Comics, and, under the leadership of William (Bill) Gaines and the creative vision of artists like Harvey Kurtzman and Al Feldstein, the company took a radically different approach than scores of other publishers. Rather than relying on superheroes, EC focused on horror, crime, war, and science-fiction stories, often characterized by their morally complex and unsettling narratives. This shift revolutionized the comics medium, and it continues to resonate with modern creators and scholars alike.

My goal is to offer students and readers an in-depth understanding of how EC's work entertained readers while also reflecting the anxieties of Cold War America. From the brutal realism of Kurtzman's war stories to the subversive social messages in the "preachy" stories of *Shock SuspenStories*, EC's comics pushed the boundaries of what the medium could achieve. A central feature of this book is the integration of hyperlinks, providing readers with the ability to access each discussed story. These links offer a direct connection to the comics themselves, allowing students to engage with the original works. This feature is intended to enrich the learning experience, making it easier for students to see firsthand how the art and narratives of EC Comics evolved and continue to influence the genre.

The aims of this book are twofold. First, it seeks to deepen the reader's understanding of EC Comics' role in transforming the comic book medium from simple entertainment to a platform for artistic and social experimentation. EC's stories did more than just thrill their readers; they offered a mirror to society's contradictions, challenging preconceived notions of issues such as war, justice, and race. Second, this book aims to present a comprehensive

study of the specific genres and themes that EC popularized. From war comics that questioned the heroism of soldiers to horror comics that dug deep into domestic fears and societal taboos, each chapter focuses on a different genre that EC pioneered, offering close readings of selected stories. These analyses cover the narratives and discuss the visual techniques employed by the artists, the narrative structures used to captivate readers, and the editorial decisions that shaped the content.

In the first chapter, I briefly focus on the company's history. The second chapter explores the horror comics that defined EC's legacy; *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *The Haunt of Fear* shocked readers with their graphic imagery while also carrying deeper critiques of social norms, often using irony and moral twists to deliver biting commentary. This chapter examines the "ghoulish" narrators, the trademark O. Henry endings, and the groundbreaking work of artists like Johnny Craig and Graham Ingels. The third chapter is devoted to EC's crime comics, including *Crime SuspenStories* and *Shock SuspenStories*, where the notion of poetic justice is central. I also focus on how EC's comics subverted the idyllic image of suburban life, exposing the dark undercurrents of jealousy, betrayal, and domestic violence. The fourth chapter is dedicated to EC's "preachies" – stories that tackled social issues, such as racism, anti-Semitism, and mob mentality. They were groundbreaking in their willingness to address topics that were largely ignored in popular media at the time. The fifth chapter explores EC's war comics and analyses Kurtzman's unique approach to depicting the gritty realities of war. Rather than glorifying combat, these stories reveal the futility of violence and the psychological toll it takes on soldiers. The concluding chapter discusses the growing opposition toward comics. The infamous Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings and the rise of the Comics Code Authority, which contributed to the eventual downfall of EC, are examined within the context of censorship.

With their tales of ghouls, scheming wives, and tragic soldiers, the stories and characters that populate EC's pages may seem fantastical at first glance; however, they often carried a powerful critique of mid-20th-century American culture. The war comics reveal the disillusionment and complexity of warfare, while the horror and crime comics exposed the darker sides of suburban life and societal norms. This book is ultimately a study of EC Comics as a cultural artifact. By tracing its history and analyzing its stories, I hope to shed light on how a small publisher in post-war America became a symbol of artistic excellence and cultural controversy, radically pushing the boundaries of what the medium of comics can achieve.

I would like to express my gratitude to my reviewers, Michaela Weiss and Ivan Lacko, for their invaluable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced this work. I am indebted to Lucia Grauzl'ová for her exceptional work on the cover design and typesetting. My deepest thanks also go to Peter Barrer, my proofreader, whose meticulous attention to detail ensured clarity and precision.

## CHAPTER 1

# EC COMICS: A SHORT HISTORY

Among comic book fans and scholars, the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s is known as the Golden Age of Comics. Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, and Captain America were all created; the conventions of the comic book medium were laid down; and comics enjoyed enormous sales and popularity. The Golden Age of Comics began when regularly published comic books first appeared in 1938. It culminated in the first half of the 1950s, when television was in its infancy and rock and roll music was still some years away. Comics were the most popular entertainment for American youth, selling hundreds of millions of copies per month. Never before (or since) in the history of popular entertainment in the United States had so many comic book titles been available to young Americans. The Golden Age of Comics ended in 1954, when a campaign by members of the American public who were concerned about the harmful effects of comics on children and adolescents forced most comic book publishers to shut down.

Maxwell Gaines (1894–1947) was an entrepreneur who played an instrumental role for the development of the comic books in the medium's early years. As a salesperson for the Eastern Color Printing Company,<sup>1</sup> in 1933 he helped to produce *Funnies on Parade*, a precursor of comics, and even laid claim to inventing the comic book as a format. In 1938, he advised DC to print *Superman*. As the principal of All American Comics, he then published comic books that introduced such superheroes as Flash, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman. (This is despite the fact that he never liked superheroes and believed that comics should primarily be used for educational purposes.) In 1944, Gaines founded Educational Comics. The titles it produced (*Picture Stories from American History* and Gaines' pet project *Picture Stories from the Bible*) were intended for children and teachers.<sup>2</sup> The name of the company, however, was eventually changed to Entertaining Comics.

Never an outdoor enthusiast, Maxwell Gaines went speedboating on Lake Placid in August 1947 and had a fatal accident. He left behind a publishing company which was

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1 Interestingly, the company was founded by a man named George Janosik.

2 A former employee commented that it was a strange thing for Gaines to be publishing "all these Bible stories about love and kindness, and he was the nastiest son of a bitch on the face of the earth" (Hajdu).



100,000 dollars in debt. Bill Gaines, his 25-year-old son, who at the time had been studying at NYU to become a chemistry teacher, inherited the company. Bill did not know much about the comic book industry. He himself wrote that “in the beginning, I hated the business so much that I visited the office only once a week to sign the payroll checks” (von Bernewitz and Geissman 10).<sup>3</sup> After several years of stagnation, Gaines hired a number of young talented artists and eventually transformed it into one of the best-known comic book companies of the decade. The first of those young talents was 22-year-old Al Feldstein, who wandered into Bill’s office one day in February 1948. The two immediately struck up a long friendship that would develop into one of the most productive creative collaborations of the era.

The spring of 1950 was a turning point in the history of EC, when Gaines and Feldstein launched what they called the “New Trend” line of comics. This began a five-year period of publishing that would produce what both comic book fans and scholars consider to be some of the most prominent works of the Golden Age of Comics. The line included war comics (*Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*); horror comics (*Crypt of Terror* [later renamed *Tales from the Crypt*], *Haunt of Fear*, and *Vault of Horror*); science-fiction comics (*Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy*); and a crime title called *Crime SuspenStories*. An EC “sampler” titled *Shock SuspenStories* was added in 1952, and a year later so was *MAD* magazine, which would become the mainstay of American humor for decades to come. As Bradford Wright points out, in the subsequent years, EC “produced remarkably innovative and distinctive comic books that challenged the creative standards of the industry, attacked the façade of America’s Cold War consensus, and considerably raised the stakes for control of youth culture” (135).

The New Trend comic books significantly changed the comic book landscape in the United States. Thanks to the talents of artists such as Johnny Craig, Wally Wood, Jack Kamen, and Jack Davis, they featured extremely innovative and high-quality artwork. Their stories were tightly plotted and often included gallows humor, puns, inside jokes, and endings with ironic twists – the O. Henry endings – which became the company’s trademark.<sup>4</sup> These endings were usually (but not always) connected to notions of poetic justice, and their purpose was to shock the reader. Furthermore, the scripts of individual stories were customized according to the artists’ styles. Feldstein explained the process as follows:

We tried to have an artist in mind when we were planning a story – it helped us picture the story and gave us a better result ... For instance, we would start out and say, ‘Hey, what about something for Jack Davis?’ He had a very strange, very cluttered, rural or rustic style that wasn’t really like comic book art. That would tell us how the story should go – ‘Okay, we’re in a swamp ...’ And we had to have a weird, hairy creature for Jack to draw, with big feet and [opportunities for] all that hatchwork Jack loved to do. (quoted in Hajdu)

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<sup>3</sup> The EC offices were located on the periphery of Little Italy neighborhood on lower Manhattan in New York City.

<sup>4</sup> O. Henry [1862–1910] was a short story writer whose works were well-known for their surprise endings.

EC revolutionized the industry by encouraging readers not to have an attachment to a particular character (as was the case with superhero comics) but rather to a particular artist's style.

EC's artists were paid some of the highest rates in the comic book industry.<sup>5</sup> They also always signed their stories, which was not a common practice in the early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Finally, several stories known among fans as "preachies" (discussed in detail in Chapter Four) addressed some of the most pressing issues American society faced in the 1950s and challenged the assumptions of readers about racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice (Whitted 5).

In terms of the creative process, EC's artists were encouraged to innovate their styles while working within the limitations imposed by the writers – e.g. Gaines and Feldstein – in terms of panel layouts, caption placements, lettering, and speech balloons. The production began with Gaines or Feldstein (or both) laying out the panels, caption boxes, and balloons, and only then would the artist draw the images. This practice led to the dominance of text on the page (Kunka 111).<sup>7</sup> EC's stylistic achievements have been nicely summarized by Thomas Inge:

Drawing on the popular culture of their time and place – motion pictures, radio, pulp fiction, detective novels, and science fiction – and giving the artists unprecedented freedom in their work with more editorial encouragement than control, the talented staff proceeded to carry the comic book into new frontiers of artistic accomplishment. Among innovations the EC staff brought into comic book art were the use of highly literate and stylistically effective narrative captions, realistic dialogue which permitted characters to use blasphemy (though without obscenity or cursing), an engaging plot line which always concluded with an ironic twist or a surprise ending, and some of the most distinctive visual effects ever produced for the pages of comic books. Here was creativity of the first order, an inspired blending of the visual and literary media possible only when artists and writers are free to pursue their own standards of excellence. (Inge 117)

EC's comics were some of the most original of the early 1950s, but they never enjoyed the enormous popularity of giant publishers such as National (DC), Dell, and Fawcett. EC was a modest-size publisher with just nine titles and a far weaker distribution network. But it did enjoy a disproportionate commercial success, and the more outrageous the story it produced, the better it sold (Wright 149). Histories of American comic books have traditionally presented 1950 to 1954 as the age of EC. Never was a such a niche publisher so closely associated with a period (with the exception of Marvel and the renaissance of superheroes at the start of the 1960s) (Yezbick 25).

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5 They received \$25 per page when the usual rate was \$15 to \$20 per page (Hajdu).

6 Other publishers enforced anonymity. Note the artists' signatures placed usually in the bottom corners of the opening "splash" pages of the stories discussed in this book.

7 Note the way how many of the stories discussed in this book are over-narrated and heavy with words.

During its heyday, EC's staff included some of the most talented comic book artists of the era. Most of them were lower middle-class New Yorkers. **Al Feldstein** was the company's chief writer, despite having no previous writing experience. He was known for his murderous tempo, and, contrary to **Harvey Kurtzman**, who wrote stories for EC's war titles, he was able to deliver one complete story per day. **Jack Davis**, who died in 2016, created art with "a gritty, naturalistic quality and a gift for anatomical distortion" (quoted in Duncan and Smith 229–230) which was well suited to EC's horror comics. Davis had the ability to bring the right combination of terror and comedy, and he could draw the most gruesome scenes and make them somehow tolerable. **Jack Kamen**, who was originally hired to draw romance comics, excelled at drawing femmes fatales and had a special talent for drawing big-eyed, seemingly innocent children. **Johnny Craig** began his career in the comic book industry in 1940 at the age of fourteen. He had a realistic style resulting from his attention to detail, lighting, and composition that made him EC's go-to artist for crime stories. Craig was a slow and methodical artist, often finishing just one story per month instead of the three which EC expected him to do (Benton 44). He also drew some of the most famous covers, including the one for *Crime Suspense Stories* 22, which is discussed in the third and sixth chapters. **Graham Ingels** was probably the greatest of EC's horror artists. He drew most of the covers for *The Haunt of Fear*, signing his works as "Ghastly." His spidery renderings of decaying mansions and old crones were truly nightmarish (Goulart 177). **Wally Wood**, who drew almost all of EC's "preachies," had a meticulous approach to detail; he became famous for his trademark curvaceous and full-lipped "Wood women" in space outfits.<sup>8</sup> He continued to be a major presence in the industry in the 1960s and 1970s, and he made important contributions to the revival of superheroes. All in all, EC's artists were creatively stimulated by mutual affection but also envy. As Gaines recalled:

They had a tremendous admiration for one another. Wally Wood would come in with a story and three artists would crowd around him and *faint*, just poring over every brushstroke and every panel, and, of course, Wally, who's getting this adulation, sits there and loves it. Next time around it's his turn to adulate someone – Williamson comes in with his story and Wally Wood faints. And everybody tried to outdo each other, which is one of the reasons we got such incredibly good art. They were all in a friendly competition to see who could make everybody faint more than the other guy. (quoted in Hajdu)

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<sup>8</sup> Wood was known "to drive himself beyond exhaustion with twenty-hour stretches of work, boxes of Marlboros, and gallons of coffee" (Kitchen and Buhle 56).

## CHAPTER 2

# PIONEERS OF FEAR: EC COMICS' HAUNTING LEGACY

Although Gaines once claimed that he had in fact started horror comics in the United States, this is not the case. The fact is that horror had been a staple of “shudder” pulp magazines – such as *Dime Mystery Magazine*, *Uncanny Tales*, and *Spicy Mystery Stories* – and of Hollywood films.<sup>9</sup> Publishers of comics took inspiration from all trends in popular culture, and horror stories had been appearing on the pages of comics since 1940. The first magazine dedicated entirely to horror was *Spook Comics* in 1946, and this was followed by *Eerie* in the same year. But with a tame approach to blood and gore, they were a far cry from what was to appear later. Ghosts and witches also featured in ACG’s *Adventures into the Unknown*, first published in 1947. This was the moment when horror comics began to appear on a regular basis. The first of EC’s experimental horror stories appeared in late 1949 in *Crime Patrol* and *War Against the Crime*. After receiving positive reactions from readers, in April and May 1950 Gaines simultaneously launched three horror titles: *The Vault of Horror*, *The Crypt of Terror* (later renamed *Tales from the Crypt*), and *The Haunt of Fear*. These titles would become flagships of the company and its longest-lasting legacy. David Hajdu notes that the timing for starting the horror titles was apt, as the USSR had tested its own atomic bomb just a few months earlier. For Americans, the Cold War was no longer just a political abstraction but now posed the threat of gruesome devastation. Ghouls and zombies with tissue peeling off their bones could not have been that far removed from young Americans’ mental pictures of their own fate in a nuclear holocaust (Hajdu).

As for the idea of publishing horror comics, Gaines recalled:

Feldstein and I were working along, putting out this crap, and suddenly talking – because we talked a lot, of course – realized that we both had similar interests in suspense and horror stuff. I grew up on horror pulps and *The Witch’s Tale* on the radio and things like that, and at that point they had things on television like *Suspense*, *Lights Out*, *Inner Sanctum*, so we just started doing that kind of story in our crime books. (quoted in Goulart 174)

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<sup>9</sup> *Frankenstein* with Boris Karloff and *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi (both from 1931) remain cherished to this day.

Besides television, Feldstein was inspired by the short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce. EC's innovative approach to horror writing and the company's publishing philosophy can be seen in an advertisement for contributions published in *Writer's Digest*:

You should know this about our horror books. We have no ghosts, devils, goblins, or the like. We tolerate vampires and werewolves, if they follow tradition and behave the way respectable vampires and werewolves should. We love walking corpse stories. We'll accept an occasional zombie or mummy...Virtue doesn't have to triumph over evil. (quoted in von Bernewitz and Geissman 192)

As Richard J. Hand observes, such an approach deliberately shifted away from "the ghosts, goblins, and devils of the nineteenth-century tradition of horror and the supernatural" (215).

### **The Horrors Within**

What distinguished the authors of EC's horror stories from scores of writers and illustrators in the field was not just the innovative artwork but also their cynicism, readiness to defy convention, and willingness to shock. They made a specialty of intimate and domestic terror, where the real monsters were scheming, abusive, and murderous wives. Marriage and family life were sources of unbearable suffering (Hajdu), and this is certainly true for a story titled "[Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes...](#)" Jake Watson is a violent husband who constantly sucks moonshine from his earthenware jug. When drunk, he either beats his wife or sexually abuses her. But, as the narrator points out: "To those passing by, it was nothing out of the ordinary. The cries...the thuds of hard fists on soft flesh...were a time-honored custom among the mountain folk..." Betty, however, has a lover, who is coincidentally a moonshiner who supplies Jake with his favorite liquor. They come up with a plan on how to get rid of Jake – the lover pushes him into the moonshine still, lets him drown, and then pours lye into the still for the body to decompose. What they do not expect is that during the night, a strange liquid starts dripping from the vat: "Slimy and viscous. It did not soak into the earth as an ordinary liquid would. It lay there...shimmering...quivering...and then, toward dawn, it moved..." Jake, in the form of a slimy substance, then kills both Betty and her lover.

Horror stories in *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *The Haunt of Fear* included all kinds of classic characters and settings well-known from 1930s horror films. There were werewolves, zombies, ghouls, vampires, cemeteries, mortuaries, and haunted mansions; however, there were also occasional characters that would become prominent in the horror genre much later, with "the evil hillbilly" being one example.<sup>10</sup> The tale closest to this stereotype is "[Country Clubbing!](#)" with artwork by Davis. Set in Okefenokee Swamp, it follows the story of an escaped convict who, in search of food, clubs an old woman to death.

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<sup>10</sup> Evil hillbillies appear in films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, and the 1972 cult classic *Deliverance*.

He is then surprised by a hideous creature – the dead woman’s husband. In panic, the convict runs across the swamp, followed by the club-waving creature. He runs into quicksand and is attacked by a possum, an alligator, and a cottonmouth snake before being bitten by mosquitoes. He finally gives up, waiting for the hillbilly to kill him. The creature approaches and hands the convict his club, saying, “Uh...here’s your club mistuh! Ya fergot an’ left it way back at muh house.” The last panel depicts the convict as a crazy raving maniac holding the club. As Hajdu points out, in many of the stories, EC’s authors sought to “engender sympathy for misfits, underdogs, and exiles of every breed – human, animal, fish, alien, living, dead, undead, and combinations thereof” (Hajdu).

Sometimes, the evil characters in EC’s horror stories did not need to look evil at all. [“Death of Some Salesmen!”](#) tells the story of Stuart Thatcher, a traveling salesman whose car breaks down on a mountain road during a rainstorm. He finds shelter in an old and weather-beaten house that is inhabited by a nice, elderly, corn-cob pipe-smoking couple. Thatcher is surprised to see all kinds of modern appliances in their household. He is told that the couple had bought a fridge from a salesman but that they had been cheated and that the fridge did not work. Ever since, they had “vowed that if any other salesman tried to sell us anything... we’d make sure it worked first!” Thatcher is then shown a freezer with “a frost-covered blue skin body” of a salesman stored inside. Then “a brown-crust well-roasted corpse” of another follows in an electric oven. Then there is a body hanging “head down...swinging back and forth! A pendulum...HUMAN pendulum!” in a grandfather’s clock. On top of that, there is a charred face in a television set and a human vacuum bag. The old man then brings the product Thatcher has been selling, and the last panel shows the sweating face of the salesman and the couple holding “Mother Jackson’s little housewife helper...the handy-dandy meat slicer!” There were few places in 1950s popular culture where sadism, unpunished murder, and the triumph of evil were so welcome.

A creepy old couple also play a macabre role in a story named [“The Strange Couple!”](#), which has a great eerie atmosphere intensified by the second-person narrative mode often used by Feldstein. One of the EC writers’ stylistic innovations, this narrative mode placed the reader directly into the position of both perpetrator and victim. In the story, the unnamed protagonist’s car gets flooded in the middle of a severe storm. He seeks help in an old house nearby, which is inhabited by a creepy couple. The wife warns him that her husband is a vampire, and the husband warns him that his wife is a ghoul. Having no other option than to spend the night at the house, he blocks the door of his room to protect himself. But, in the middle of the night, a panel in the wall slides open and both husband and wife attack him. He wakes up behind the wheel of his car to find out that he had fallen asleep and had had a bad dream, but his car is still flooded. He seeks help in an old house nearby that looks very familiar. He knocks on the door only to find out that the house is inhabited by the same eerie couple from his nightmare.

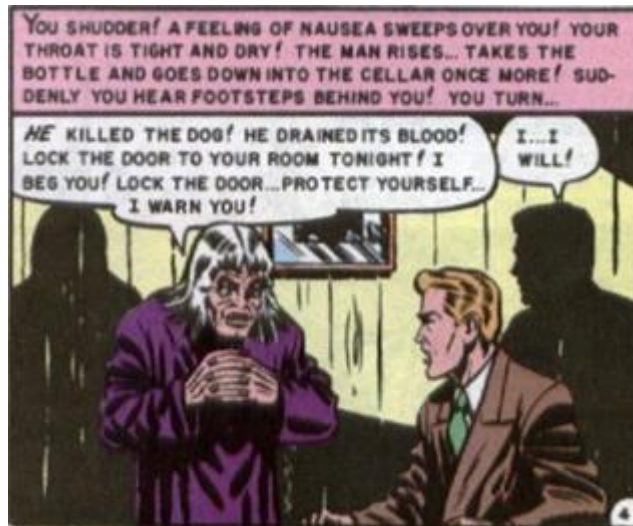


Figure 1. Second-person narration in "The Strange Couple!" From *The Vault of Horror* no. 3.

Feldstein pioneered a new kind of horror comic not based on myth and fantasy but rather on simple and banal horrors that could be taking place behind the closed doors of any American home. This fact made the titles appealing to adolescents. The value systems of EC's characters had no ambiguity – the good people were totally good and the evil people were consistently evil (Goulart 178). "[Grounds...For Horror!](#)" best illustrates this value system. Samuel Bricker is a butcher who has issues with his stepson Artie; he locks him in a closet without supper for even the smallest infraction. There, in the closet, Artie often talks to Hozir, his imaginary friend, who, however, is able to punish Bricker. At first, Bricker loses his balance on a step; then, some panels later, he accidentally cuts off his finger. Finally, in one of the most brutally illustrated endings of all of EC's horror stories, Bricker ends up as a pile of ground meat.

One of the more unusual features of EC's horror comics was their narrators, who were the only recurring characters in the stories. Each of the three horror titles had its own repulsive host. These were the Old Witch, the Vault Keeper, and the Crypt Keeper – affectionately known as the GhouLunatics. They appeared on the splash page to introduce the story, and they showed up in the last panel to add the appropriate ironic conclusion, which was often heavy in puns and wordplay. Sometimes they even appeared in the middle of the story to quicken up the pace or add some detail. They would even cross over into each other's comics, competing to tell the most horrific story.

EC's horror titles were an immediate success, and soon hordes of horror comics from other publishers appeared on the newsstands, making the early 1950s the heyday of horror in the United States. These new comics, however, were only crude imitations trying to replicate the success of EC, which was based on the combination of Feldstein's innovative approach to horror writing and the talent of the company's artists. By the end of 1952, nearly 150 titles – almost one third of all published comics – were devoted to horror and terror. Hajdu observes that with all the generic titles (examples include *Chamber of Chills*, *Tomb of Terror*, and *Weird*

*Thrillers*),<sup>11</sup> horror comics offered little to keep their readers loyal and return to the same title month after month. (This is in stark contrast to superhero titles with recurring characters.) Publishers had to compete for the same readers, and the solution was adding more shock and gore. Eventually, with EC included, horror comics became caught in an upward spiral of gruesomeness (Hajdu).

## **Crossing the Line**

Gradually, EC horror stories broke almost every imaginable taboo of the comic book industry. [“Marriage Vow”](#) from 1954, with art by Graham “Ghastly” Ingels, is one of the company’s most bizarre and disgusting tales. It features a scheming husband, a depiction of married life as torment (in a really perverse way), and a zombie. It also gives another meaning to the phrase “till death do us part,” which is repeated throughout the story. Martin Saunders lives in a house that “even a Tobacco Road family would spurn in disgust.”<sup>12</sup> The house is rat-infested and “permeated with the foul fetid odor of rot and decay” because Martin has killed his lovely wife to inherit all her money. But she comes back from the dead and lives with him in a bizarre parody of marriage. Now he is a stereotypical hen-pecked husband who is not allowed to go out, but he cannot leave her because either she or the police would always find him. Interestingly, the story has a strong sexual overtone because the zombie wife requires from him his marital “duties,” making the story even sicker: “You sit on the bed, and you hide your head in your hands. You can’t stand this, can you, Martin? Every night, the ritual. You can hear her rustling her drab-infested clothes...” It seemed that the individual artists in the company tried to outdo one another in producing the most gruesome story.

The winner in this contest was probably Davis. [“Tain’t the Meat...It’s the Humanity”](#) is one of his more memorable stories. It is the story of a butcher who, during the hard times of rationing in World War II, secretly sells good meat to wealthy customers and horse meat, stale meat, and even tainted meat to the poor. Several people die of food poisoning; one of the victims is the butcher’s own son, who ate the meat at a friend’s house. When his wife discovers his practice, she loses her mind. The last panel shows her in the shop, selling her husband cut into pieces on display on the counter. In their graphic portrayals of the forbidden, EC’s horror stories revealed to American youth disturbing images that abide in the mind. Kendrick observes that “few American children in 1954 had entered the crypt or a burial vault; fewer yet had seen a rotting corpse” (quoted in Hand 218). The revolting trend established by EC was summarized by Boatner:

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<sup>11</sup> It needs to be emphasized that in the comic book industry, imitation was a legitimate business strategy.

<sup>12</sup> This is a nod to readers acquainted with Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, a 1932 novel about a dysfunctional “white trash” family living in Georgia.



EC horror opened new vistas of death from sources previously unimagined by the reader. Victims were serial-sectioned by giant machines, eaten by ghouls, devoured by rats – from inside out – pecked by pigeons, stuffed down disposals, skewered on swords, buried alive, dismembered and used as baseball equipment, hung as living clappers in huge bells, made into sausage and soap, dissolved, southern-fried, hacked by maniacs in Santa Claus suits, and offed in unusually high percentages by their wives and husbands. (quoted in Goulart 178)

Simply put, the pre-code horror comics were more graphic than Hollywood films or television in the 1950s would have dared to be.

It was just a question of time before EC would step over the line with its repulsiveness. [“Foul Play”](#) was the symbolic beginning of the end, not only for EC horror titles but also for the good times the industry had been enjoying in the previous few years. Again illustrated by Davis, it is the story of a crooked baseball player, who, in order to win a game, poisons his opponent by sliding into him while wearing poisoned spikes. The victim’s teammates discover who is responsible, and the last page shows a truly disgusting scene. A midnight game is played in which the murderer’s intestines mark the baselines, the catcher wears his torso as a chest protector, and other parts of the murderer’s corpse are used as bases, bats, and balls. Stories like “Tain’t the Meat ... It’s the Humanity” and “Foul Play” certainly did not uplift the reputation of the medium, which was already suffering from massive criticism. Two panels from “Foul Play” were used as an insert in Dr. Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (more about Wertham and this infamous book is given in the last chapter), and Davis felt humiliated when finding out. Much later, he recalled: “That business with that book, that was awful. Bill [Gaines] and Al [Feldstein] wrote the story, and I thought it was all kind of funny and no big deal, and then, when it came out in that book, I wanted to bury my head. I wished I never did it” (quoted in Hajdu).

Although there had been some horror comics before, EC really elevated the genre to the heights of popularity. After establishing the highly successful line of horror comics, Gaines turned his originally small and ailing company into one of the most influential players in the industry. The combination of good story writing and the diversity of its artists’ styles put EC horror titles two steps ahead of the competition. Unfortunately, after crossing almost every imaginable boundary of the medium, the company brought about its own downfall, and Gaines became one of the scapegoats of the anti-comics crusade. Nonetheless, the EC legacy would live on. Characterized by graphic depictions and ironic twists, their stories left a mark on popular culture, inspiring countless creators in comics, film, and television. EC horror comics have been held in high esteem by comic book fans and critics up to the present day, and, contrary to the comics published by their competition, they have been frequently reprinted.

- 1) Discuss the impact of EC horror stories on the broader comic book industry during the 1950s. What trends did they inspire or amplify?
- 2) How did EC horror comics challenge the societal norms and taboos of the time? Can you identify specific stories that were particularly provocative?
- 3) What role did irony and dark humor play in the storytelling of EC horror comics? Provide examples from the chapter.
- 4) Analyze the portrayal of family dynamics and domestic terror in EC horror comics. What commentary were the creators making through these themes?
- 5) In what ways have EC horror stories influenced modern horror in comics, films, and other media? Can you draw parallels to contemporary works?
- 6) What is the significance of the story "Foul Play" in the context of the chapter, and why is it considered a turning point for EC horror comics?
- 7) Discuss the ethical implications of EC Comics' approach to horror. Do you think they crossed the line, or were they simply ahead of their time?
- 8) Reflect on the lasting cultural impact of EC horror comics. What elements have endured? Why do you think they continue to resonate with audiences today?

## CHAPTER 3

# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN EC COMICS

Crime comics emerged as a distinct genre in the early 1940s, surpassing even superhero comics in popularity by the decade's end. According to Mike Benton, crime comics are "America's most notorious contribution to the field of mystery and detective entertainment" (1). The origins of crime comics can be traced back to the early 1930s with the first crime comic strips appearing in American newspapers. Among these early strips, the square-jawed detective Dick Tracy quickly became a household name. During this period, the American public, caught in the Great Depression, was captivated by the exploits of notorious criminals such as Machine Gun Kelly, John Dillinger, and Pretty Boy Floyd, as reported extensively by newspapers. Organized crime seemed pervasive, and J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the newly created Bureau of Investigation, whose task was to stop organized crime from spreading, considered crime comic strips to be a "highly important influence in creating a public distaste for crime" and derived "a keen inward satisfaction from seeing their flinty-jawed heroes prevail over evil" (Hajdu).

A pivotal moment in the history of crime comics occurred in 1942 when Lev Gleason, a publisher known for *Daredevil* comics, introduced a new magazine titled *Crime Does Not Pay*, which established a successful template for crime comics. This magazine drew inspiration from true-crime pulp magazines like *True Crime* and *True Detective Mysteries*, and gangster films like *Scarface*, which had been popular in the 1920s and 1930s. *Crime Does Not Pay* adapted the exploits of real-life criminals, from Billy the Kid to Pretty Boy Floyd, into comic book form based on newspaper and historical accounts, but, as Kunka points out, the historical accuracy of many of the stories was doubtful (106). As in the pulp magazines and Hollywood films, lawbreakers rather than crimefighters were the real protagonists; this stirred certain sympathies for them among readers, just like it does among audiences of modern Netflix crime shows such as *Narcos*. *Crime Does Not Pay* was written by Charles Biro and Bob Wood, and it was illustrated by various artists. It revolutionized the portrayal of crime in popular media by depicting graphic violence including stabbings, shootings, burning bodies, and copious amounts of blood. As Hajdu aptly observes: "All that was missing, from Biro's first cover onward through the comic's first several years, was restraint." Unlike the above-mentioned Hollywood

films, whose content had been regulated by the Hays Code since 1934, there was no regulatory authority during the magazine's heyday that would have censored the content of comic books; therefore, the creators of *Crime Does Not Pay* had virtually no limits regarding the depiction of violence.

After 1945, and as the popularity of superhero comics waned, *Crime Does Not Pay* saw its sales soar. The magazine's initial issues in 1942 sold about 200,000 copies per month; this rose to nearly a million copies by 1948, making it one of the best-selling comics in the country (Hajdu). The popularity of crime comics was closely associated with the popularity of the crime genre across other media in the post-war United States, particularly those of film-noir<sup>13</sup> and hard-boiled detective fiction.<sup>14</sup> For several years, *Crime Does Not Pay* dominated the crime comic market, but its success soon led to numerous imitators. Titles like *Crime Can't Win*, *Crime Must Pay the Penalty*, and *Lawbreakers Always Lose!* flooded the market in the late 1940s. By the end of the decade, crime became the most popular comics genre and entered its own golden age. Between 1948 and 1949, over one hundred different crime titles became available, and a staggering 160,000,000 copies of crime comic books were sold (Benton 45).

EC joined the crime comics craze in 1948 with *War against Crime!* and *Crime Patrol*, but it was the New Trend magazines titled *Crime SuspenStories* and *Shock SuspenStories* that cemented the company's place in the genre. What made them unique was not just the talent of the artists but also the shift from gangsterism to crimes committed in American homes. Gaines and Feldstein, who plotted and wrote almost all the stories, moved crime off the streets and into the bedrooms. The closest inspiration for them was James M. Cain, the author of novels such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). In most cases, the criminals in Feldstein's stories were neither lowlifes, bank robbers, nor kidnappers but rather jealous lovers, plotting business partners, or abused children. Contrary to *Crime Does Not Pay* and the suite of its imitators, EC stories did not purport to be based on truth, nor did they typically deliver justice within their narratives. If justice was delivered, it was not through the legal system; it was a sort of poetic justice that became a trademark of EC narratives. As Feldstein pointed out: "There was a kind of underlying morality. The formula was somebody had to get his just desserts, and whether he was a practical joker or a guy who screwed his partner, or who screwed his partner's wife, everyone had to get punished" (Benton 43). If the perpetrators were imprisoned and executed, it was usually for crimes they did not commit rather than for the ones they got away with (Kunka 108).

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13 A genre characterized by its dark themes, fatalism, and morally ambiguous characters; it was usually shot in black-and-white. Examples include *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*.

14 A genre where tough, sharp-tongued cynical detectives battle organized crime with a detached attitude in a corrupt world. Examples include *I, the Jury* and *Kiss Me, Deadly* by Micky Spillane.

## EC Redefines Crime

In the popular American mind in the 1950s, it was the city that conveyed the image of fear and danger and which was identified with crime, drugs, and decay. Murders took place in Detroit, Memphis, and New York City, not in the new suburban places called Pleasantville or Levittown. According to those who moved there after World War II, the suburbs offered safety, tranquility, and order; yet in the EC universe, the exact opposite was true. In several crime stories, Feldstein employed the suburban setting. "[Hatchet Killer](#)" drawn by Craig, EC's premier crime artist, begins with a paranoia-inducing caption: "The sleeping suburb of Westfalls lies huddled under a drenching torrent of rain...hushed...tense, expectantly awaiting the light of day, that is but a few hours hence. People restlessly toss and turn in their beds, and the raindrops sound like a million softly falling footsteps that herald the approach of death!" The splash page depicts a frightened woman, holding a newspaper announcing that a killer with a hatchet is still at large. Behind her stands a large housemaid with an ominous look in her eyes. The story features the Norths: a young, attractive couple living in a suburban house. The husband leaves for work, and his frightened wife stays at home with Hilda the maid. As the day progresses, the wife learns that the killer has hacked two more people to pieces in the neighborhood while they slept. The storm outside rages on, and the six o'clock news announces that the killer could either be a man or a woman of considerable size and strength, which is a description that perfectly fits the housemaid. Mrs. North's paranoia increases, and after seeing Hilda lift a couch and hold an ax, she gets more suspicious about her. Hilda tells her that she is going to stay because of the storm. Mrs. North tries to call her husband, but the line is dead. She is now sure that Hilda is the hatchet killer, so she keeps a kitchen knife with her. When Hilda picks up an ax again, Mrs. North hacks her to death. Soon after that, Mr. North returns home, telling his wife that it was him who had asked Hilda to stay with her. In the last panel, in typical EC fashion, he tells his wife that the police had caught the hatchet killer two hours earlier and that she had murdered an innocent woman.

Suburban domesticity became the new modern American ideal after World War II, and marriage and family values became central to suburban consciousness. They were supported by house magazines and, in the 1950s, by television series that presented the image of an efficient and hard-working housewife who stabilized family life (Clark 173).

The tales in *Crime Suspense Stories* constantly subvert such values. The households are never happy, and family life is seldom stabilized. Failed marriages are the norm, and marital dysfunction is settled by murder instead of divorce. As Kamen, one of the EC artists, pointed out:

I would dress the women well in elegant clothes, and the men would have beautifully tailored suits, and they would be living in a nice house somewhere, and they would go out for a nice walk and she would push him in front of a truck.

There were no happy couples, except for the girl and the truck driver in the end, and something terrible would happen to them, probably. (quoted in Hajdu)

[“When the Cat’s Away”](#) is a typical subversive EC story. Emma is a nagging wife with a weak heart, and every time she argues with Jay, her husband, he spends the night at the house of his best friend, Dick. One night, Jay finds out that Emma is actually cheating on him with Dick. Jay then devises a plan that would punish his unfaithful wife and his deceitful friend. He pretends to leave on a business trip, knowing that she will invite her lover over; he returns early, telling Emma that he saw Dick being killed in a traffic accident. Jay then unscrews the lightbulb in the kitchen and waits for Dick to appear. When he does, Emma, believing that she is seeing a ghost, suffers a heart attack and dies. Jay then shoots Dick dead. The last panel shows him smiling, reporting an accident to the police, explaining that he mistook Dick for a burglar because the light was not working. Commenting on EC’s subversion of suburban domesticity, Gaines himself observed that “we got a lot of mileage out of scheming wives and vengeful husbands” (quoted in Hajdu).

*Crime SuspenStories* 22 features one of the most iconic (and most controversial) comic book covers in the history of the medium. Drawn by Craig (who did the majority of the covers of the title), it depicts the lower part of a female body lying on the floor while next to it there stands a male figure holding a severed woman’s head in one hand and a bloodied ax in the other. It was this cover that initiated a discussion between Senator Estes Kefauver and Gaines regarding good and bad taste (which is discussed in Chapter Six). The cover depicts a scene from [“In Each and Every Package,”](#) where a husband named Norman kills and dismembers his wife. Reed Crandall, who drew the story, realistically portrays Norman’s grisly effort. Contrary to other EC stories that could be sickeningly graphic in their depictions of various horrors, Crandall focuses largely on the details of Norman’s face as he chops up the body to avoid explicitly showing the process of dismembering. Norman then buries the hacked pieces all over his backyard and leaves to meet Sally, his mistress, who has undergone plastic surgery in order to look like his wife. They meet in New York, where they get tickets to a quiz show called “Treasure Hunt.” They succeed in the quiz, and they become eligible for the hunt itself. In the last panel, in the typical O. Henry fashion, the host tells them that as they are speaking, the show’s team are burying the treasure in the backyard of their house. In short, married and family life in the EC world was a source of torment.

### **Subverting Innocence and Community**

Homes were no safe haven for children in EC stories. [“The Orphan”](#) exposes the hidden horrors of the American family, a recurring theme of EC’s crime and horror stories. It opens with a caption narrated by 10-year-old Lucy:

Well, it's ALL OVER NOW. EVERYTHING worked out SWELL. But for a WHILE back there, it looked PRETTY BAD. I was AWFULLY UNHAPPY. I used to CRY MYSELF to sleep at NIGHT. Golly, there were times when ALL I wanted to do was to CURL UP AND DIE, I was so miserable...It was my PARENTS. They were AWFUL to me. You see, MY DADDY was an ALCOHOLIC...

Besides having a drunkard father who beats her, Lucy has a mother who never shows her any love. The only caring person is her aunt. She is willing to adopt her, but the father will not let that happen. Lucy finds out that her mother is having an affair with a man named Steve, who is much nicer to her than her father is. She hopes for a better future, but she is awfully disappointed when she learns that her mother wants to run away with Steve, leaving her with the drunkard father. Eventually, she shoots her father dead and frames her mother and Steve for the murder. The story ends with the mother and Steve being executed in the electric chair. Lucy is put into the custody of her aunt, and the last panel shows her winking her big eye at the reader. As Quiana Whitted observes, the satisfaction of the shocking twist relies on assumptions about childhood innocence that clash with the reader's awareness of troubled marriages (42). In the stories drawn by Kamen, the big-eyed children were never innocent. Wright aptly summarizes that such stories:

[...] invited young readers into a world where parents, teachers and other adult authority figures were clearly unwelcome. They stood as a challenge to consensus entertainment and marked a major stride toward the autonomy of youth culture. Here was a widely available source of entertainment that sold not despite but *because of* its willfully antagonistic cultural stance. EC comic books appealed to young readers with material that would shock and outrage everybody else. (Wright 149, emphasis in the original)

The story expectedly stirred quite a controversy, and it was used during the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings as an example of irresponsible publishing. The members were concerned with how child readers would react to a story where a ten-year-old girl got away with the murder of her father. Gaines defended the story, claiming that many of EC's stories had surprise endings: "No message has been spelled out there. We are not trying to prove anything with that story. None of the captions said anything like, 'If you unhappy with your [mother], shoot her'" (quoted in Nyberg 36).



Figure 2. Jack Kamen's big-eyed children were never innocent. From *Shock Suspense Stories* no. 14.

The image of a harmonious community of friendly neighbors was another ideal subverted by EC's artists. A tale named "[The Fixer](#)" deals with the issue of exclusion from a suburban community. In the 1950s, hundreds of thousands of Americans left the cities to escape from negative aspects like crime, poverty, and overcrowding, and, by excluding these negative attributes, they hoped to create better lives for their families. Eventually, the exclusion extended to individuals whose race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or economic status differed from the majority (Coon 109). The story begins with two homicide detectives calming down Billy, a ten-year-old boy. The bodies of his parents are seen lying on the floor. The boy then starts talking. Immediately after his not-quite-well-to-do family moved to the neighborhood, Billy's father started sensing that they were out of their neighbors' league. The neighbors' kids refuse to play with Billy because of his shabby clothes, calling him a "poor dope." In a butcher's shop, he overhears people saying that "It is a SHAME when people like THAT move into a DECENT NEIGHBORHOOD." During their first evening in the new home, a stone is thrown through their window. His father wants to move out right away, but the mother claims that they have a right to stay there. As the family suffers more abuse, the father starts drinking, disappearing for whole nights. One night, a neighbor is murdered. When the father comes back and learns about the murder, he claims that he would like to "see 'em all dead, the rotten pack of snobs." Every time he disappears for the night, a new corpse is found in the morning, all of them stabbed. The mother gets suspicious and confronts the father with a bloodied knife from a kitchen drawer. He claims that he had never killed anybody, and, as they wrestle for the knife in front of Billy's eyes, she falls on the knife. Desperate, the father stabs himself with scissors. The last two panels show the detectives and Billy who, sobbing, does not understand why they had to die since he was "fixing things for them" so they could again be happy. In a typical ending with a twist, Billy confesses to all of the murders.

Not all the crime stories had an urban or suburban setting. "[Cadillac Fever!](#)" is set in a rural region and is the only EC story written completely in hillbilly dialect (the "eye dialect").



It is a tale of Pa, a poor hillbilly man who desperately craves to drive a Cadillac. It is narrated by Ruthie, his daughter. He thinks about nothing else and saves every dollar he earns, hiding it from Ma. But she always “sniffs it out like an ol’ hound dog trackin’ a possum,” spending it on bonnets and dresses. Ruthie seems to be the only person to understand Pa’s desire. Finally, Ma is found dead with a hole in her body, and Pa is the main suspect. He is charged with murder and sentenced to the electric chair thanks to Ruthie’s testimony. As Ruthie arrives at the funeral, she observes a big black car: “An then I heard it...the hum of the engine...coming down the road...coming from the state prison...Bringin Pa. And then I saw it...And I was glad! Pa was finally getting’ his ride in a Cadillac...A Cadillac hearse!” In a typical O. Henry ending, reminiscent of the ending in “The Orphan,” it turns out that it was Ruthie who had shot Ma dead and then framed Pa so he could finally get his desired ride.



Figure 3. Eye dialect in “Cadillac Fever!” From *Shock SuspenStories* no. 18.

EC Comics took the genre of crime comics to unprecedented heights with their New Trend magazines. By shifting the focus from public crimes to intimate, domestic ones, they subverted the idyllic image of post-war suburban life. Their stories often depicted jealousy, betrayal, and moral ambiguity within the American home, challenging the conventional norms and values that were being propagated through other media at the time. In addition to entertaining, the brutal realism in EC’s crime comics provoked significant controversy and led to public outcry and government scrutiny. EC’s crime comics encapsulated the anxieties and contradictions of their time, bringing the dark undercurrents of the American Dream to the forefront.

- 1) How did the absence of a regulatory authority for comic books in the early 1950s impact the content and success of crime comics compared to other media?
- 2) In what ways did EC Comics' approach to crime stories differ from earlier crime comics such as *Crime Does Not Pay*?
- 3) How did the shift from public crimes to domestic crimes in EC Comics reflect broader societal anxieties of post-war America?
- 4) How did Bill Gaines and EC Comics respond to accusations that their stories promoted juvenile delinquency?
- 5) Analyze how stories like "Hatchet Killer" and "When the Cat's Away" reflect or contradict the popular image of suburban life in the 1950s.
- 6) Discuss the ethical implications of depicting graphic violence and morally ambiguous characters in media aimed at young readers.

## CHAPTER 4

# COMICS WITH AN AGENDA: EC'S PREACHIES

"I think your *Shock SuspenStories* do a lot of good for the American public, and I hope that you continue putting out stories of such high quality." This quote, taken from a fan-mail section of *Shock SuspenStories* 6, does not praise "Foul Play," "The Orphan," or any other horror or crime story which hardly did any good for the American public. (Actually, they did a lot of harm for the comic book industry.) The fan's praise was directed at comics which – in EC's lingo – were known as "preachies." These were stories that confronted issues which few other popular culture outlets of the 1950s dared to confront or even acknowledge. They delivered didactic messages on racism, false patriotism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism; the EC artists also did not shy away from topics that would become prominent much later, such as rape, drug addiction, and mob mentality.

Most of the preachies were drawn by Wally Wood, and all of them were written by Gaines, who considered himself an extreme liberal, and Feldstein, the EC's chief writer. When asked by a fan about the ideas for preachies at a convention in 1972, Feldstein replied:

Being socially conscious is not relegated only to today's times. We came out of World War II, and we all had great hopes for the marvelous world of tomorrow. And when we started writing our comics, I guess one of the things that was in the back of our minds was to do a little proselytizing in terms of social conscience. So Bill and I would try to include, mainly in our science fiction, but I think we did it in the horror books too, what we called 'preachy' stories – our own term for a story that had some sort of a plea to improve our social standards. (quoted in Whitted 3)

By offering commentary on issues such as racism and bigotry, Gaines and Feldstein used their comics to foreground progressive, socially conscious themes and expose the darker side of American culture (Kunka 107). Contrary to EC, mainstream publishers such as Dell and National were afraid of alienating readers, parents, and distributors; hence they limited their discussion of racial issues to nonfictional biographies of historical figures (Whitted 62).

When compared to other New Trend titles, such as *Crypt of Terror*, *Weird Science*, and *Frontline Combat*, which were all launched around 1950, *Shock SuspenStories* was a relative

latecomer with the first issue cover-dated February-March 1952. It was intended to serve as an “EC sampler” offering a crime, a horror, a sci-fi, and a war story; however, in the second issue the war story was dropped and substituted with “The Patriots!” – EC’s first preachy. The magazine also included “Shock Talk,” a fan-mail section which became an important outlet for both the editors and readers to exchange their opinions on published stories. When a reader in the third issue asked about the war story being dropped, the editors explained: “[W]e want Shock to not only contain crackerjack yarns in EC’s CHOSEN fields, but to also contain occasional ‘off-the-beaten-path’ stories that we feel are worthwhile...stories that do not fall into the categories of horror, s-f, suspense or war, but that still retain the SHOCK motif!” Altogether, eighteen issues of *Shock SuspenStories* were published until the Comics Code put an end to the New Trend magazines after 1955. As to the term “preachies,” Whitted notes that it was not used in any official capacity. Rather, it was a tongue-in-cheek pun originally coined by Gaines and later circulated by EC fans (19).

[“The Patriots!”](#) was the only preachy illustrated by Davis; it was published in April 1952 at the height of McCarthyism. It starts with a parade of Korean War veterans in a small town. The focus quickly shifts to the bystanders; one particular man, dressed in patriotic colors, scowls, and later sneers, as the veterans march by. Patriots standing nearby are offended by the man’s seeming lack of respect and start to comment on his appearance: “Look at his nose! He must be a foreigner!” As the man fails to remove his hat when the American flag comes around. They conclude that he must be “one of them lousy Reds,” and one of them assaults him. The crowd then proceed to beat the man, shouting “Traitor!”, “Subversive!”, and “Red Rat!” in order to “teach him a lesson in Americanism he will never forget.” The ironic twist comes in the last two panels when the assailants learn that the man they had accused of being a traitor and had beaten to death was a wounded and blinded Korean War veteran who had come to the parade to greet his old unit.

In nearly every panel, cheering crowds can be seen, and, by the end of the story, they are transformed into a deadly mob. Whitted notes that in “The Patriots!” and other preachy stories that followed, EC was deeply critical of crowds that used fear and ignorance to sanction acts of violence and intolerance; the more anonymous the gathering in a particular story, the more the preachies emphasized the visual signifiers of a disorderly mob swept up by base emotions (92). Fans reacted positively, as the following letter published in the subsequent issue proves:

In these hysterical times, when everybody is calling everybody else names, I think it’s important that we be careful not to accuse without proof...The Patriots well illustrated this dangerous trend which is choking our democracy! An incident such as the one illustrated could very well happen today I’m afraid! I have the greatest respect for you and your staff! It takes great courage to publish such a story!

## Confronting Racism

In the early 1950s, it probably took greater courage to print stories challenging racial prejudice. Some of the most important events of the Civil Rights Movement were still years away; the *Brown. Vs. Topeka* ruling which desegregated schools had not yet been delivered, and it would take two more years for Rosa Parks to board that bus. The first such story, [“The Guilty!”](#), was published in *Shock SuspenStories* 3. But here I am going to focus on [“In Gratitude!”](#), which Burns considers to be “the most masterfully crafted preachy of them all” (184). For an EC story, “In Gratitude!” is quite exceptional since it includes no crime or any act of unjustified violence related to racial prejudice. There is no shocking ending with ironic twist. It begins with Joey, a wounded Korean War veteran receiving a hero’s welcome from a small town crowd as he returns home. Later in the day, he is to be honored at a rally. Before the rally starts, Joey wants to visit the grave of his buddy Hank, who sacrificed himself by throwing his body on a grenade in order to save Joey. Since Hank had no family, Joey sent the body home to be buried on his family plot; however, he learns that his parents “couldn’t bring themselves to do it” because they had “pictured him so different.” The reason is that Hank was black, and the entire town had pressured them to bury him at a segregated cemetery. At the rally, Joey, the town’s hero, stands up before the community and lectures them: “I had a buddy in Korea. We ate together...slept together...we fought together. We fought for democracy together. He gave his life for that cause...” He goes on to say that his body was not good enough to be buried at the cemetery because the skin was not of the right color, but the grenade that killed him did not care whether Hank was white or black. He concludes his speech, shouting: “You say you’re proud of me! Well, I’m not proud of you! I’m ashamed of you...and for you!” The last two panels show the crowd sheepishly and silently leaving the auditorium with Joey left alone, sobbing.

There is only one panel showing Hank. It depicts him jumping on the grenade, and, since it forms a part of Joey’s flashback, it is drawn in brown, red, and yellow so that it is impossible to tell what color Hank’s skin is. The reader learns about Hank only indirectly, through white characters, so he can easily be mistaken for a white man, just as Joey’s parents had assumed from Joey’s letters (Whitted 63). Stories like “In Gratitude!” condemned racism as the betrayal of the nation’s democratic ideals, particularly in an era when the United States had cast itself as a standard bearer for democracy. As Joey says to his audience, the country had “sent me to Korea. They said I was fighting for democracy...Helping to turn back the tide of slavery that threatened to overrun Europe and Asia...I gave my right hand defending FREEDOM and EQUALITY. And I was PROUD of it.”



Figure 4. The only panel showing Hank in "In Gratitude!" From *Shock SuspenStories* no. 11.

Two issues later, another racial prejudice preachy, titled "[Blood Brothers](#)", was published. It opens with a splash panel showing the charred remains of a cross on a front lawn and a body on a stretcher being carried out of a typical suburban house. Sid, the man in the front of the panel, claims that it was suicide and that he had only wanted Henry, the victim and his former friend, to move away. Sid confesses to the coroner that he could not accept the idea that a black family was going to move into the neighborhood. Sid goes door to door, telling the other occupants of the suburb the news, claiming that "If a NEGRO FAMILY moves into the neighborhood, there'll be others following, and then the REAL ESTATE VALUES WILL DROP TO NOTHING." Henry, Sid's friend and neighbor, tells him that he is part black, to which Sid reacts with shock and later with anger: "IMAGINE! My OWN NEIGHBOR! My friend with NEGRO BLOOD IN HIS VEINS!" He claims that it was "a rotten trick" from Henry not to tell anyone that his grandmother was black. Sid sets on turning the entire community against Henry. Soon children stop playing with Henry's son, Henry is fired from his job, and his wife falls sick and dies since he is not able to pay her medical bills. All of this is skillfully illustrated in several panels as Sid's flashback to make it clear that Henry's suicide, which comes after Sid lights a cross on Henry's front lawn in true Klan fashion, is a result of a collective effort by the community instead of the doing of a sole racist. Sid justifies his actions to the coroner: "Henry had negro blood in him doc! Can't you understand?" The coroner chastises him that all human blood is the same and goes on to tell Sid about a little boy who many years earlier had got his hand caught in a thresher, losing a lot of blood. The only person available who had the same blood type as the boy was a black hired hand. The shocking twist arrives when the coroner points to the scar on Sid's arm, proving that he had actually been that little boy and telling him that "'NEGRO blood' pumped into YOUR VEINS snatched YOU from the JAWS OF DEATH!" In the final panel, Sid contemplates in disbelief what he has done, but it is very unlikely that he will be prosecuted for his actions. It is important to emphasize that nowhere in racial prejudice preachies do the white characters suffer any legal consequences. In addition to the anti-racist

message, “Blood Brothers” also subverts the image of the suburb as a harmonious community of friendly neighbors. In the popular mind, the suburban space offered safety, tranquility, and order. But in the EC universe the exact opposite was true.

Most of the fan letters printed in Shock Talk praised EC for their social message stories, but there were also exceptions, such as the reactions to “Blood Brothers” that were printed in issue 15. One letter warned the editors that “those stories are going to lose you a lot of costumers [sic]” and told the writer “to spend a vacation in the Congo!!!!” Another reader wrote:

I’m crying my eyes out for the poor nigger after reading Wood’s latest pro-negro hogwash...You expect me to swallow that?...What I learned about the negro I learned while in the army and most of it stunk...I don’t associate with them or have them live in my neighborhood. Live and let live, but let them live somewhere else.

Contrary to “Blood Brothers,” where the only repercussion for Sid is his feeling of shame, in [“The Whipping”](#) Feldstein and Wood showed how bigots are destroyed by their own hatred. Gaines considered it to be one of the best stories he ever published. A Mexican family moves into the neighborhood, and Ed, a middle-aged man, tries to turn the entire community against them, using the same argument as Sid had in “Blood Brothers” – the whole neighborhood will be ruined. With two other neighbors, they form a vigilante group patterned on the Klan, but initially they fail to get the entire community on board. Ed’s worst fears materialize when his daughter falls in love with Louis, the Mexican family’s son. Ed eventually succeeds in recruiting the local men by fabricating lies about Louis trying to rape his daughter. They put on white sheets and hoods, break into the Martinez house, throw a sack over the boy, and drag him out. Ed then beats his victim to death. The beating takes place across four panels. Instead of focusing on the strikes of Ed’s belt, Wood emphasizes Ed’s wide eyes full of rage; however, in the penultimate panel, Louis darts toward the hooded men. Ed then realizes that the person they had dragged from the house was his own daughter. There is very little actual violence depicted in the story; the blows of the belt are suggested rather than shown, and the violence is invoked by the text in the captions accompanying Wood’s drawings: “The strap...the weapon of his delusion...the revolver of his hate...the punctuator of his fiction...rose and fell...again and again...bringing down upon his fantasy a reality of pain...”

“The Whipping” is also an interesting story to look at from a formal viewpoint in terms of a narrative strategy. Instead of dialogues and images, it is the narrator’s voice in the captions that carries the anti-racist message. It is the narrator who speaks directly to the reader and offers a running commentary on the racist actions taking place in the neighborhood (Whitted 42). As the hooded men approach the Martinez family house on page 6, the narrator stops being merely descriptive. The tone of the captions becomes accusatory, and the narrator becomes openly critical of Ed’s actions:

They are the delusions of the bigot...the exaggerations of those who desire to exaggerate...the conceptions out of darkness of those who would throw us INTO darkness as these men now probe in darkness...searching for their fantasy enemies...the olive skin...the dark hair...the accent.

Kunka claims that in dialogues and images, the EC preachies showed an America plagued by bigotry, injustice, and racism, whereas the anti-racist alternative America was presented through the narrator's captions; racist America was entrenched through authority figures like fathers, and the anti-racist vision came from outside mainstream culture (109). Speaking about the authority figures, Amy Nyberg observes that the fact that the evil was perpetrated by a father, a figure who children had been taught to respect, made "The Whipping" objectionable to the adults who read it. She also notes that the story had an incestual subtext (which might have been lost to young readers) which is another aspect of it attracting criticism (Nyberg 73).

One of the most outspoken critics of "The Whipping" was Dr. Wertham, an anti-comics crusader who used the story during the Senate subcommittee hearings mentioned above in order to show how comic books promoted racial hatred and corrupted the nation's innocent youth. Wertham began his summary by claiming that Hitler was a beginner compared to the publishers of comic books, who taught children racial hatred even before they could read. He particularly objected toward the use of the epithet "spick," and in his interpretation of the story he asked: "What is the point of the story? The point of the story is that then somebody gets beaten to death. The only error is that the man who must get beaten to death is not a man; it is a girl" (quoted in Whitted 32). Taking panels and dialogues out of context in order to illustrate a point was a well-known tactic by critics of comic books. Gaines, also present at the hearings, objected that the opposite was true and that the story's message opposed racism.

## **A Futuristic Lens**

Interestingly, EC's best-known preachy story was not published in *Shock SuspenStories* but rather in the company's science-fiction magazine called *Weird Fantasy*. Written by Feldstein and illustrated by Joe Orlando,<sup>15</sup> "[Judgment Day!](#)" features Tarlton, an astronaut dispatched from Earth to a robot-inhabited planet called Cybrinia. His mission is to evaluate (or judge – hence the pun in the story's title) whether their society is "worthy of inclusion in Earth's great Galactic Republic." He sees that they have made significant technological and political progress, but he also learns that there are actually two groups of robots – orange ones and blue ones. The robots with orange sheathing receive all of society's benefits, while the blue robots are destined to be second-class citizens. Construction-wise, both groups are of the same design; the only difference is the orange or blue outside covering given to them at the sheathing stage

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<sup>15</sup> EC's go-to artist for science-fiction stories. Note the well-crafted details of the robots and various machinery in the story.



in the factory. As Tarlton's guide in a blue-robot factory points out, it is the color of the sheathing that "limits us to menial jobs...sends us to the rear of mobile buses...places us in different recharging stations...forces us to live in the special section of the city." Seeing the segregated society of Cybrinia, Tarlton decides that the planet is not yet ready to join the great Galactic Republic. His orange robot guide asks him whether there is hope for them to join, to which Tarlton replies: "For a while, on Earth, it looked like there was no hope! But when mankind on Earth learned to live together, real progress first began! The universe was suddenly ours." He boards his ship, removes his helmet and, in a trademark EC twist, it is revealed that Tarlton is black.

For the six pages of the story, Tarlton's facial features are completely hidden by his helmet. But the reader knows that Tarlton is a "man of unquestioned power" (Whitted 107) who has been sent from Earth with an important mission; for the robots, both orange and blue, he is an honored representative of their original creators. Yezbick observes that:

Rather than learning to negotiate the twentieth-century injustices and inequalities of widespread racism and organized segregation, Tarlton, whose Earth has been ethically and scientifically galvanized by the extinction of such prejudice, must wrestle with the dubious privilege of monitoring a developing civilization's persistent urge to generate damaging hierarchies of power and culture rooted in physical or ethnic differences as artificial and random as the color of their robotic shells. (30)

Whitted notes that these features of respectability were not matched with black faces for the predominantly white readers, and the revelation of Tarlton's racial identity might have been unsettling. "Judgment Day!" was published in early 1952, and, as mentioned above, all the landmark civil rights movement events were still years away. In an era when Jim Crow still loomed large over the lives of African Americans, EC was the only comic book publisher to openly attack racial segregation. After "Judgment Day!" was published, EC received dozens of laudatory letters, including one from Ray Bradbury, an acclaimed science-fiction writer, who wrote that the story should be "required reading for every man, woman, and child in the United States. You've done a splendid thing here and deserve the highest commendation" (quoted in Yezbick 20).



Figure 5. Tarlton removes his helmet. From *Weird Fantasy* no. 11.

Other notable preachies include “Hate,” a story told from a second-person perspective<sup>16</sup> which addressed anti-Semitism, and “The Monkey,” which focused on the consequences of drug addiction (quite a progressive theme in the early 1950s). The last preachy, “Master Race,” was published after the Comics Code in a short-lived title called *Impact* in 1955, and it is notable for being the first comic book representation of the Holocaust (Weiss 165–6).

EC’s preachies were groundbreaking for their time, offering sharp critiques of social issues, such as racism, xenophobia, and mob mentality. Through their daring narratives and striking artwork, these stories challenged the status quo and confronted the darker sides of American society. The courage and progressive vision of Gaines, Feldstein, and their talented artists set EC Comics apart from other publishers of the 1950s, leaving a lasting legacy in the world of comic books. EC’s preachies would shatter the American Dream and prove that the medium of comics had a capacity to convey complex ideas to the American public. For a medium associated with superheroes and talking animals, and blamed for causing juvenile delinquency, it was quite a feat.

- 1) What were preachies in the context of EC Comics, and what kinds of social issues did they address?
- 2) Analyze the story “The Patriots” and its commentary on McCarthyism. How does the story use irony to convey its message about patriotism and mob mentality?
- 3) Discuss the role of the narrator in “The Whipping.” How does the narrative strategy contribute to the anti-racist message of the story?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

<sup>16</sup> As already mentioned, this was a mode of narrative often employed in stories by EC that placed the reader directly in the position of perpetrator/victim.

- 4) What were some of the criticisms raised against EC's preachies, particularly "The Whipping," during the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings? How did Bill Gaines defend the stories?
- 5) Explain how the visual and narrative elements in "Blood Brothers" subvert the idealized image of suburban life in 1950s America.
- 6) Evaluate the impact of EC Comics' preachies on the comic book industry and American society in the 1950s. How did they challenge the norms of popular culture at the time?
- 7) How did the historical and cultural context of the early 1950s influence the themes and reception of EC Comics' preachies?



## CHAPTER 5

# BEYOND HEROISM: WAR COMICS

The genre of war comics emerged during World War II. The war proved advantageous for comic books, as it marked a rare convergence of interests between publishers, creators, government policy, and readers. Even before Pearl Harbor, new patriotic superheroes were depicted punching Hitler in the face, much to the dismay of American isolationists. Introduced in March 1941 by Timely Comics and created by two legends of the medium, Joe Schuster and Jack Kirby, Captain America was among the best-known superpatriotic characters. As to the origin of one of the most memorable comic-book characters, Jack Kirby said that “Captain America was created for a time that needed noble figures. We weren’t at war yet, but everyone knew it was coming. That’s why Captain America was born; America needed a superpatriot” (quoted in Goulart 117). By the time the United States entered the war, the genre was well established. In the months that followed, dozens of titles flooded the market. Like the broader medium of comics at the time, war comics primarily existed for entertainment. They often softened the harsh realities of war that might be deemed unsuitable for children, discouraging for military enlistment, or simply uninteresting to readers (Rifas 183).

The war helped the comic book industry. When American troops were deployed abroad, comics were shipped to them as easy, portable entertainment. For servicemen, they offered a brief respite from the boredom of military life, and the U.S. military distributed thousands of comic books in order to entertain troops around the entire world. One interesting statistic illustrates how popular comic books were during the war – almost one third out of all the printed matter mailed to American troops during 1942 were comics (Petersen 153). These were passed around in foxholes and traded to locals, inspiring new readers and helping spread the medium around the world. The Korean War, which began in June 1950, rekindled interest in the war genre, leading to the release of over 100 war titles, including *G.I. Joe*. In some of these comics, Chinese and North Korean soldiers were depicted as subhuman, much like the Japanese had been depicted during World War II. The American forces always triumphed, suffering minimum casualties, and the war in Korea was often portrayed as an exciting adventure.

## Harvey Kurtzman Takes Command

The mastermind behind both of EC's war titles, *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, was Kurtzman, who joined EC in 1949. During World War II, he had been drafted, and he trained as an infantryman, but he never left the United States. Like many other artists, his creative talents were utilized by the military for making posters and illustrating instruction manuals.<sup>17</sup> Some considered him to be “the greatest creative force to grace that (war) subgenre” (Duncan and Smith 226). He was originally hired to do artwork for science-fiction and horror books, but eventually Kurtzman was given his own titles. Later he recollected that:

*Two-Fisted Tales* was one of the first really exciting things that I got involved in. This was my first title that I'd invented. The concept was that we were going to do blood-and-thunder tales and rip-roaring high adventure. My schtick was always authenticity, adventure stories that went back to some kind of authenticity. It had something to do with history and historical dates and places, and processes. (Cochran 42)

The first issue of *Two-Fisted Tales* contained “blood-and-thunder tales” about conquistadors, mercenaries, and spies set in different historical periods, but they were a far cry from the war stories that made the title famous a couple of months later. What changed the course of the title from an adventure to a war story was a yarn named simply “War Story!” It was written by Kurtzman and illustrated by John Severin and Bill Elder, and it appeared in the second issue. The company received hundreds of letters praising it and insisting on more of this genre. The success of the war stories in *Two-Fisted Tales* (after the first Korean War tales, letters lauding the stories began arriving not just from children but also from U.S. troops deployed in Korea), inspired EC to launch its second war title, *Frontline Combat*, with the first issue being published in July 1951. Kurtzman would write most of the scripts and pencil and ink at least one story in virtually every issue of both titles. Similarly to EC's other comics, both war titles were sold for ten cents, they were published bi-monthly, and they contained four stories in each issue.

[“War Story!”](#) begins in a trench somewhere in Korea, where a veteran sergeant tells a story to a fresh recruit about his experiences of fighting the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II. He talks about two brothers: Dave, a nice, harmonica-playing guy, and Duke, a mean fellow who enjoyed killing the Japanese with his knife. Dave is wounded and transported to a field hospital along with a wounded Japanese colonel. Despite the colonel being a prisoner protected by the Geneva Convention, Duke is obsessed with killing him, exclaiming “I never got me a Jap officer.” Eventually, he sneaks into the hospital tent in the dark of night and

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<sup>17</sup> Will Eisner, for example, created educational comics and posters about the preventive maintenance of military equipment, while Stanley Lieber (Stan Lee) was assigned to draw posters about the risks of sexually transmitted diseases.

stabs his brother, mistaking him for the Japanese officer. The sergeant in the Korean trench concludes his recollections: “You see...There’s a moral! War’s a tough deal! We kill men not because we wanna, but because we gotta! It’s a dirty job we have to do...but doesn’t mean we have to enjoy doing it!” What surprised the readers about “War Story!” was not just the war setting but also the character who was too eager to kill. Such a theme was not a popular one, and it was a rather daring subject for Kurtzman to choose for his first war yarn. The primary impetus behind “War Story!” was the Korean War. When the conflict broke out in June 1950, Kurtzman naturally turned to it for material, and Korean War stories became a mainstay in both of the EC titles he edited. Kurtzman later recollected that “whoever started that war, it was his fault that we did the war books” (quoted in Hajdu). As far as the imaginative response to that conflict is concerned, comics were the first medium to react, and, for a long time, they were the only medium to do so. While the Korean War was a very popular subject for comic books, the literary legacy of this war has remained rather faint up to this day. Literary scholars note that “the literature of the Korean War is slight in both volume and quality, a situation probably explained to a large degree by the absence of a national commitment to that war” (Jason and Graves 207). Contrary to other wars in American history, the fiction of the Korean War remains unfamiliar outside the scholarly community. The same can be said about film and television production. With the exception of M.A.S.H., films and television series set in the war are also “slight in both volume and quality.” When compared to other media, comics exploited the topic of the Korean War to the greatest extent.

Kurtzman’s aim was to dismantle the myth that war was a glamorous endeavor, a myth perpetuated by World War II comics and the scores of comics published in the early 1950s. He simply wanted to present war in its essence. In a 1980 interview, Kurtzman said:

When I thought of doing a war book, the business of what to say about war was very important to me and was uppermost in my mind because I did then feel very strongly about not wanting to say anything glamorous, and everything that went before *Two-Fisted Tales* had glamorized war. Nobody had done anything on the depressing aspects of war, and this, to me, was such a dumb – it was a terrible disservice to the children. In the business of children’s literature you have a responsibility, and these guys feeding this crap to the children spend their time merrily killing little buck-toothed yellow men with the butt of a rifle is terrible. (Kurtzman 76)

In his comics, “gallant American knights who marched through most war comics gave way to jittery, ambivalent G.I.s, sympathetic enemies who felt pain when they were shot, devastating losses, and pointless victories” (Hajdu). Many of his stories touch on the most profound elements of war, life, and death. In [“Big ‘If.’”](#) Kurtzman explores the randomness of death in war. He focuses on incidents in a soldier’s life when fate descends upon him. A mortally wounded G.I. sits by the roadside after a stray mortar shell explodes nearby,

contemplating how his life might have gone differently if he had made different choices in the previous few hours. In the last panels, the doomed soldier looks upon himself in the third person, reflecting on how he might have narrowly escaped death. In the final panel, as his lifeless body lies on the road, the caption states: “And the man’s destiny goes marching on!”

A notable feature of both *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* was their adherence to a historical detail. Kurtzman spent hours in the New York Public Library, researching uniforms, military equipment, and settings. In his stories, everything down to a soldier’s buttons had to be authentically drawn, which sometimes drove other EC artists crazy. Notable examples of historical details include the padded overcoats worn by Chinese volunteers in stories set during the Korean War and the clackers which were used as a warning against gas attacks in the trench warfare of World War I. In a story named “Devils in Baggy Pants!” set during the invasion of Normandy, the paratroopers jump from their planes with the authentic war cry “GERONIMO!” in the dialogue balloons. Even the slang of American troops is historically accurate; they use terms such as “gizmo” (a term used for an unidentified item in the U.S. Marine Corps) and “eight ball” (someone who is constantly in trouble).

Interestingly, there is no blood and gore in EC’s war titles. There are panels with images depicting the violence of war, explosions, and bodies flying in the air accompanied by sound effects typical for the medium, but these images contain no gruesome details of severed limbs or bleeding wounds. Instead, Kurtzman leaves much of the suffering to the readers’ imagination. Contrary to EC’s horror books, which transgressed every possible taboo, Kurtzman’s war stories were surprisingly sober. It cannot be claimed that Kurtzman wanted to spare his adolescent readers the bloody details of warfare, since the same adolescent readers purchased EC’s horror titles. The reason is that the grimaces and postures of the dying soldiers are much more effective in portraying the violence when the blood and guts are missing.

### **The Humanity of the Enemy**

Endings with an ironic twist were not limited to crime or horror comics. [“Air Burst!”](#) was a story that Kurtzman was particularly proud of. It is narrated from the Chinese (i.e., enemy) perspective, and Kurtzman treats the Chinese soldiers with the same humanity as the G.I.s. In no way are the Chinese vilified or dehumanized, as Asian characters often were in war comic books. Just like the G.I.s, they have names and friends, and they experience terror when being shelled by artillery. During the retreat of a small Chinese squad, a character named Lee sets a booby trap for the pursuing American troops. The squad is decimated by the American planes, with only Lee’s best friend, nicknamed Big Foot, surviving. Unable to endure the bombing, Big Foot decides to surrender, but as he walks toward the American lines, he triggers the booby trap set by his friend.

Kurtzman frequently focused on the fate of individual soldiers rather than telling stories of regiments and armies. This is evident in [“Corpse on the Imjin!”](#), one of his finest Korean

War stories. As in “Big ‘I’,” war is stripped down to its most fundamental essentials. In the story, a solitary G.I. observes corpses floating down the Imjin River, musing about how they met their fate. Suddenly, a North Korean soldier springs from a bush, and the two engage in a brutal hand-to-hand fight that lasts three pages. The G.I. ultimately prevails by drowning the enemy in the river, adding one more corpse to those floating downstream. There is no hatred for the enemy; the narrator exclaims, “Have pity! Have pity for a dead man! For he is now not rich or poor, right or wrong, bad or good, don’t hate him! Have pity...” Kurtzman’s depiction of the realities of war had nothing in common with the gung-ho war comics published by EC’s competitors. He explained that:

In my war comics, I avoided the usual glamorous stuff of the big, good-looking G.I. beating the ugly little yellow man. I was reading the news of the Korean War along with everybody else. It struck me that war is not a very nice business, and the comic book companies dealing in the subject matter of war tended to make war glamorous. That offended me. (Hajdu)

The World War I story [“Zero Hour!”](#) is one of Kurtzman’s best crafted anti-war stories. It depicts a young, overeager recruit who is caught in barbed wire during a charge through no man’s land between the Allied and German trenches. His fellow troops take cover in a trench and are pinned down by enemy machine-gun fire, powerless to help him. The sequence with the dying recruit crying for help goes over four pages of the story. Especially powerful is a tier of four panels with the images of individual soldiers who are in various stages of despair caused by the recruit’s loud cries. The dialogue balloons with his cries for water and for his mom are connected and carried across the panels. It is the desperate cries in the balloons that dominate the page over any visual elements. It is clear that because of these cries, the troops in the trench are on the brink of breaking down. Three of them are killed in futile attempts to bring him back; to prevent more casualties and his men from losing their minds, the sergeant of the platoon then decides to act. The last six panels of the story show him pointing his gun and firing, with the following captions: “I had to do something! What kind of a thing was this war where grown-up men called for their mommas? Where men cry like women! War! What and ugly name! The ugliest disease we men were cursed with!” The effect is similar to a cinematic zoom-in. The very last panel shows a detail of the sergeant’s face with a tear in his eye.





Figure 6. Young recruit's desperate cries carried across panels. From *Frontline Combat* no. 2.

EC was famous for producing sophisticated narratives with highly innovative artwork. [“Atom Bomb!”](#) is a remarkable example of this. The story focuses on an ordinary Japanese family living in Nagasaki. The father, held captive in a Soviet POW camp, writes a letter asking about his wife and children, unaware that the city was vaporized in the nuclear blast. The grandfather, reading the letter aloud, vividly describes the fates of the individual family members on that fateful August day. Wood’s brilliant artwork, combined with the use of color and high contrast, creates a sense of sheer horror. Particularly effective are the black-and-white panels depicting the characters at the very moment of the atomic explosion. “Atom Bomb!” remains one of the most powerful depictions of nuclear holocaust in comics, far more frightening than any of the EC’s horror stories.



Figure 7. Wally Wood’s macabre drawing of the nuclear blast in Nagasaki. From *Two-Fisted Tales* no. 33

Some of the stories were inspired by classical literature. The splash page of [“Bomb Run!”](#) displays a U.S. Air Force bomber flying over an island in the Pacific with the large nickname ‘Odyssey’ painted on its fuselage. The tier at the bottom of the page contains four panels, each introducing one member of the plane’s crew. (The introduction of members of

a tank or aircraft crew, or a platoon, in separate panels was Kurtzman’s favorite device.) After a successful bomb run, Arturo, the plane’s engineer, talks to the crew about Odysseus, who had to experience all kinds of weird adventures on his way home, including an island inhabited by beautiful girls who lured ships onto the rocks. Shortly afterwards, the plane is damaged by Japanese Zeros, and it limps to an emergency airstrip. As the plane tries to land, the pilot finds out that it is not an actual landing field but actually a strip of canvas laid over rocks by the Japanese to confuse the air crews. The plane hits the ground and ends in a flaming fireball. The crew had been lured by fake radio messages just like Odysseus had been by the Sirens in the classical tale.

Korean War and World War II stories did not prominently feature any specific historical events or characters, but, as time went on, specific historical information became prominent in some of the stories, mostly those set in a more distant past. The earliest example of a war story as a history lesson was “Massacre at Agincourt!”, where Kurtzman focuses on the long-bow as a decisive weapon in the early stages of the Hundred Years War. “Light Brigade!” opens and ends with stanzas from Tennyson’s famous poem, and the story in detail describes the tactical situation of the Battle of Balaclava, the decisions of the incompetent British commanders, and the charge and fate of the unfortunate “six hundred.” Eventually, stories set in various eras – from ancient times to the Middle Ages and World War I – would appear. EC even published special issues of both titles dedicated to the American Civil War.

*Frontline Combat* was dropped in January 1954 after just fifteen issues, and a similar fate awaited *Two-Fisted Tales* when the last issue was published in February 1955. Nonetheless, *both titles remain* the most critically acclaimed war titles from the Golden Age of Comics. They brought a higher level of artwork and writing to the medium and introduced comics to adults, since servicemen in the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps formed a large contingent of EC readers. They also had a significant impact on American popular culture, influencing Hollywood anti-war films such as *Apocalypse Now!* and *Platoon*. Although they sold only moderately well compared to EC’s horror and crime titles, they stand as some of America’s most self-critical documents in popular entertainment in the early 1950s.

- 1) How does Harvey Kurtzman’s approach to depicting war in *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* differ from earlier war comics?
- 2) Discuss Kurtzman’s rejection of war glamorization and his focus on the psychological toll of war on individual soldiers.
- 3) Why do you think Kurtzman avoided depicting gore in EC’s war comics, especially considering the graphic nature of EC’s horror titles?
- 4) How did Kurtzman and EC Comics innovate narratively and artistically within the war comics genre?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 5) How does Kurtzman humanize enemy soldiers in stories like “Air Burst!” and “Corpse on the Imjin!”?
- 6) What lasting impact did EC’s war comics have on the war genre and American popular culture?
- 7) Discuss how these comics reflect on the myth of heroism and the harsh realities of combat.



## CHAPTER 6

# THE END OF AN ERA

The early 1950s in the United States was a period gripped by numerous fears: fear of the atomic bomb, fear of Soviet infiltration, and fear of homosexual activities. This atmosphere was fertile ground for scapegoating, and comic book publishers became easy targets. As discussed in earlier chapters, many comics contained imagery that no responsible parent would want their child to see; however, as Gerard Jones points out, comics also became symbols of larger societal fears. In a society frightened of forces running out of control, the sheer unsupervised and what was seen by many as irresponsible information in comics was alarming in itself (222).

Concerns about comics had surfaced as early as in the 1940s. Organized groups, such as women's clubs and parents' associations, accused comics of corrupting their children and fueling juvenile delinquency (Weiss 74). In 1948, students from St. Patrick's School in Binghamton, New York, publicly burned thousands of comics under adult supervision. By the early 1950s, pressure on comic book publishers reached levels comparable to the anti-Communist witch hunts led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Publishers like Gaines found themselves under scrutiny from parents, religious groups, and even academics. Writing for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, John Mason Brown declared that comics were "the marijuana of the nursery; the bane of the bassinet; the horror of the house; the curse of kids, and a threat to the future" (quoted in Goulart 207–208).

The leading voice against comic books was Dr. Wertham, a German-born child psychiatrist. For many, he was the archenemy of comics and his crusade lasted for almost a decade. Based on interviews conducted with young patients over several years, Wertham concluded that comics encouraged patterns of criminal behavior. He argued that they were the most uncensored and unregulated form of media available, devoured by the nation's youth without any adult supervision. Though he opposed all genres, he was particularly antagonistic toward crime comics due to their violent content (Wright 93–94).

Wertham's campaign reached its peak with the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, and this infamous book became the *Malleus Maleficarum*<sup>18</sup> of all the opponents of

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<sup>18</sup> *Malleus Maleficarum*, or the *Hammer of Witches*, is an infamous medieval manual for witch-hunting.

comics. Some cultural historians suggest that the American comics industry never fully recovered from the damage caused by Wertham's accusations (Duncan and Smith 230). His book was sensational in tone, featuring provocative chapter titles like "I Want to Be a Sex Maniac" and "The Devil's Allies." He used lurid examples from "objectionable" comics, and explicitly mentioned "Foul Play" as one example. An excerpt from his book illustrates the hyperbole of his style:

The cultural background of millions of American children comes from the teaching of the home, the teaching of the school (and church), the teaching of the street and from crime comic books. For many children the last is the most exciting. It arouses their interest, their mental participation, their passions and their sympathies, but almost entirely in the wrong direction. The atmosphere of crime comic books is unparalleled in the history of children's literature of any time or any nation. It is a distillation of viciousness. The world of the comic book is the world of the strong, the ruthless, the bluffer, the shrewd deceiver, the torturer, and the thief. All the emphasis is on exploits where somebody takes advantage of somebody else, violently, sexually, or threateningly. (Wertham 94)<sup>19</sup>

Wertham's allegations culminated in the televised hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, where he was a key witness. The subcommittee was headed by Democratic senator Estes Kefauver, who had the ambition to become president. After an unsuccessful run for nomination in 1952, he needed a new platform in order to stay in the public eye, and he chose juvenile delinquency.<sup>20</sup> The hearings were held in New York in April 1954, and Gaines was the only comic book publisher invited to testify. In his introductory statement, he announced that:

I publish horror comics. I was the first publisher in these United States to publish horror comics. I am responsible. I started them. Some may not like them. That is a matter of personal taste. It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to a Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid. (Gaines 20)

Gaines defended his work against a hostile group of lawmakers, which led to a now-famous exchange about good taste:

**Senator Kefauver:** Here is your May 22 issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?

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<sup>19</sup> Wertham also claimed that boys collected comics in order to "use them for sexual fantasies, with or without masturbation" (181).

<sup>20</sup> Kefauver eventually won the vice-presidential nomination in 1956, but the election was won by Dwight Eisenhower, the Republican candidate.

**Gaines:** Yes, sir; I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.

**Senator Kefauver:** You have blood coming out of her mouth.

**Gaines:** A little.

**Senator Kefauver:** Here is blood on the ax. I think most adults are shocked by that. (Gaines 24)

Gaines' defense of what constituted good taste made the evening news, and he ended up widely perceived as an irresponsible publisher. The hearings did not lead to any specific legislation, but subsequently in October 1954 publishers agreed to form a new organization named the Comics Magazine Association of America to administer the Comics Code, a self-regulatory set of editorial guidelines whose purpose was to ensure that no harmful material was published. The reviewers employed by the association examined all the material submitted by publishers. If they found any content objectionable, they recommended revisions. Comics that met the strict criteria were awarded the Comics Code Authority seal, indicating they were deemed safe for America's children.

The Comics Code's "General Standards Part A" effectively ended crime comics. It outlined restrictions, such as:

- (1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
- (2) No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
- (3) Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
- (4) If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.
- (5) Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.
- (6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.
- (7) Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated. (Code 95)

It also spelled the end for EC's preachies, since it prohibited stories that could "create disrespect for established authority." Gaines and Feldstein could therefore not expose how both racism and corruption were endemic to those authorities (Kunka 112).

In a similar way, "General Standards Part B" eliminated all horror comics, since it prohibited all the material that had formed the staple of horror stories in comics. It became clear to everybody at EC that none of the comics published by the company would get through the code's administrators:

- (1) No comic magazine shall use the word "horror" or "terror" in its title.
- (2) All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
- (3) All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
- (4) Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
- (5) Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited.  
(Code 95)

After a series of disputes, EC Comics left the association, since Gaines believed that the whole aim of the code was to put his highly successful line of horror and crime comics out of business. He dropped his entire New Trend line of comics, with *Tales from the Crypt* being the last of its titles to fold in March 1955. This marked the end of one of the most significant eras in comic book history.

The establishment of the Comics Code was a pivotal moment in the history of American comics. While it was born from a climate of fear and moral panic, the code's strict regulations effectively stifled creative freedom and led to the decline of many groundbreaking publishers like EC Comics. The code erased much of the complexity and subversiveness that had defined the medium, leaving a legacy of censorship that would shape the landscape of comics for decades to come.

The Comics Code had a devastating impact on the industry. In 1954, there were 650 comic book titles published in the United States, but by 1956, that number had plummeted to 250, with ten publishers going out of business (Hajdu). Bill Gaines briefly experimented with a "New Direction" line of comic books, featuring "safe" themes such as knights, pirates, and aviators, but these failed to attract readers. He then attempted "Picto-Fiction," a series of illustrated magazines aimed at adults, but this venture also proved unsuccessful. Fortunately, Gaines still had Harvey Kurtzman's satirical *MAD*, which had recently transitioned into a magazine

format. In 1956, Al Feldstein replaced Kurtzman as editor, transforming *MAD* into a cornerstone of American humor for decades to come. Ultimately, *MAD* (in its modified form) became the only “New Trend” title to survive beyond the decade.

As Quiana Whitted observes, EC Comics helped “to usher the mid-twentieth-century debates over the social function of art into mainstream comic books” and demonstrated that “even the most disposable ephemera of American popular culture can have a lasting impact” (136). Through its mature storytelling, complex narratives, and incisive social commentary, EC Comics paved the way for the underground comix movement of the 1960s and groundbreaking graphic novels like Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in the 1980s. EC’s horror stories established enduring tropes for the genre, profoundly influencing filmmakers like George Romero, the director of zombie classics such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). In 1989, HBO adapted many of EC’s tales into *Tales from the Crypt*, a successful horror anthology series that ran for seven seasons.

- 1) What societal fears and concerns fueled the creation of the Comics Code, and how did these fears reflect broader anxieties in 1950s America?
- 2) Dr. Fredric Wertham argued that comic books were a significant cause of juvenile delinquency. How did his arguments and the subsequent Senate hearings shape public perceptions of comics? Do you think his claims were justified?
- 3) How did the establishment of the Comics Code impact creative freedom in the comic book industry? In what ways did it limit or control the content that publishers could produce?
- 4) Bill Gaines defended the controversial content in his horror comics as a matter of personal taste. How do you interpret his arguments? Was his stance on “good taste” valid or problematic?
- 5) The Comics Code’s restrictions were designed to protect children. Do you think self-regulation in the media (like the Comics Code) is effective in achieving this goal? Are there modern parallels to the Comics Code in today’s media landscape?
- 6) EC Comics, particularly under Bill Gaines, often used horror and crime comics to comment on societal issues like racism and corruption. How did the Comics Code silence these kinds of narratives, and what might have been the long-term cultural consequences?
- 7) In what ways did the Comics Code affect the broader development of comics as an art form?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



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