



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

By David Hajdu

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The story of the rise and fall of those comic books has never been fully told -- until *The Ten-Cent Plague*. David Hajdu's remarkable new book vividly opens up the lost world of comic books, its creativity, irreverence, and suspicion of authority.

In the years between World War II and the emergence of television as a mass medium, American popular culture as we know it was first created?in the pulpy, boldly illustrated pages of comic books. No sooner had this new culture emerged than it was beaten down by church groups, community bluestockings, and a McCarthyish Congress?only to resurface with a crooked smile on its face in *Mad* magazine.

When we picture the 1950s, we hear the sound of early rock and roll. *The Ten-Cent Plague* shows how -- years before music -- comics brought on a clash between children and their parents, between prewar and postwar standards. Created by outsiders from the tenements, garish, shameless, and often shocking, comics spoke to young people and provided the guardians of mainstream culture with a big target. Parents, teachers, and complicit kids burned comics in public bonfires. Cities passed laws to outlaw comics. Congress took action with televised hearings that nearly destroyed the careers of hundreds of artists and writers.

The Ten-Cent Plague radically revises common notions of popular culture, the generation gap, and the divide between "high" and "low" art. As he did with the lives of Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington (in *Lush Life*) and Bob Dylan and his circle (in *Positively 4th Street*), Hajdu brings a place, a time, and a milieu unforgettably back to life.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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

From Publishers Weekly

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

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From [Booklist](#)

The movies and rock 'n' roll have had brushes with censorship, but the comic-book industry was nearly wiped out in the 1950s by do-gooders concerned about their hypothesized detrimental effects on young readers. As Hajdu shows, comics were controversial right from their turn-of-the-century origins in newspapers, but the post-World War II development of lurid crime comic books depicting the exploits of violent gangsters aroused virulent opposition that intensified with the medium's next step—gruesome horror titles. The latter became the target of newspaper crusades, the psychiatric establishment (led by Frederic Wertham, whose 1954 screed *Seduction of the Innocent* became a bestseller), congressional hearings, and censorship boards in more than 50 cities. The industry, a refuge for ethnic minorities and other outsiders who reveled in the freedoms gained by working under the radar of adult audiences, survived only through self-regulation in the form of a Comics Code that stripped comics of much vitality. As a telling coda, Hajdu appends a list of nearly 900 creators who, after the crackdown, never worked in comics again. --Gordon Flagg

Users Review

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