

H-Net Reviews

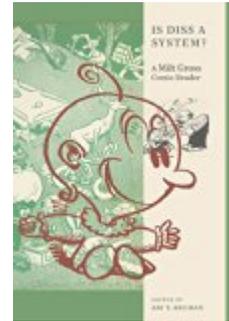
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ari Y. Kelman, ed. *Is Diss a System? A Milt Gross Comic Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. ix + 293 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4823-7.

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Published on Jhistory (August, 2010)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



Milt Gross Revisited

Milt Gross, storyteller extraordinaire and cartoonist of quality, lived and worked in a day and age much simpler than the one we currently experience. As Ari Y. Kelman, editor of this recently released work on Gross's life and times, notes, he could be considered as a person of linguistic ingenuity or one who painted the pictures of derogatory stereotypes. No matter how one looks at the peak of his career in the 1920s and 1930s, he was a creator who was most sensitive about the world in which he lived and worked. However, there is certainly a shadow of a doubt as to whether his many stories in the dialects he loved to use would be greeted with the same amount of warmth that seemed to occur with his every issue. One of the more identifiable Jewish characters of the period, Gertrude Berg of "The Goldbergs" radio fame, spent much of her career pointing out what she felt were the faults in Gross's depiction of Jewish life in New York City. Yet, as Kelman notes, she too was guilty of creating a stereotype, just a fairly different one. Still, let it be said that no one interested in exploring the many cultural layers of early twentieth-century Jewish urban culture that originated in the immigrant experiences of the times can easily dismiss the richness of Gross's aural and visual humor. It could prove to be a serious oversight.

Berg detested Gross's vision of Jewish life because "an awful lot of rot was written about the Jews; that the broken dialect and smutty wise cracks of the Jewish comedians wasn't all the way they talked really; and the gushing sugar coated sentimentalities of many of the good willers were just as far away from the Jews I knew"

(p. 40). Berg eventually made her point with her Jewish colleagues. Comedian and actor Sam Levinson wrote an article in the publication *Commentary* in August 1952 in which he decried not only the world vision of Gross but also the rest of the comic world that used dialect as a source of humor. So, just what was it that Gross did that perplexed Berg? For the answer to that question, we need a review of the major works that he published in both dialect and visual content.

Following a somewhat lengthy fifty-six page introduction, Kelman turns his attention to five major Gross works: "Nize Baby," "Dunt Ask!," "De Night in de Front from Chreesmas," "Hiawatha," and "Famous Fimmales." Added to these is a short, visual-only contribution in the chapter "Assorted Milt Gross Images." (The final chapters in Kelman's book have a considerably large collection of Gross cartoons. I was hoping to see more from Gross in the first two chapters.) Another challenge is translating from English to whatever dialect he chose to use, thereby placing a singularly difficult onus on the reader. In fact, Kelman suggests that one not try to read the work as one would normally consume a piece of literature. His argument that the reader could best obtain the maximum experience by reading aloud is not far from the truth. For example, in "Famous Fimmales" in 1928, Gross presents the most famous women in the world, including the world's first woman, the apple loving Eve. Here is what Gross had to say about her. Read it out loud: "So de foist human bing wot it axeeded was entitled 'Heddem.' So Heddem leaved gradually in a plaze wot it was

de Godden from Iddin. So in de Godden from Iddin was extrimmingly gudgeous, wot it was dere hall kinds from fency fruits witt wadgetables with hall kinds from boids from de aire witt bists from de fild” (p. 228).

The adventures of Adam and later on of Eve were followed by a Gross interpretation of the foibles of Hylan From Troy. As if he were reading to a very young child, this tale like many others began with “Wance oppon witt a time.” From that point on, Gross maintains the image that he wanted to create, namely, a Jewish version, from the immigrant point of view, I should add. His world speaks a language that cannot easily be slotted into any form of eastern European Yiddish or working-class tongues of any sort. That seems to be the role of the culturing process that integrated the newcomer with the established community, in particular in large urban areas such as New York City.

The dialogue in this work is not for the faint of heart. Yes, reading can be a struggle, but the contents give us an insight into the Jewish culture of the period, or, I should say, a portion of it. In spite of the fact that Berg did not care for the scripts and pictures created by Gross, one must not forget the period in which Gross created some of his more well-known scenarios. The 1920s in America, in spite of Prohibition, was a lively place. Gross in many ways saw the typical Jewish immigrant family as one with humor accompanied by an easygoing approach to life. He successfully made the bridge when disaster struck in the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent rise of fascism in Europe. His work was the work of deflection, never at one point reflecting the concerns

of the period.

To this point I have concentrated on the words that were written by Gross. I would be remiss if I did not have at least a comment or two on his illustrations. In many respects, they reflected the Jewish culture that one finds in the dialogues. Yet they were not as pointed. One can see the influence of the early comic characters who appeared in the newfound art of animation. Anyone who remembers Krazy Kat, the Katzenjammer Kinds, the early Pop-eye the Sailor Man, and the many works of Max Fleischer cannot help but see where many of the influences originated. These oft-remembered characters were as much creatures of the 1920s as was the work of Gross.

Those of us who work in the world of comic art and editorial cartooning owe a debt of gratitude to Kelman, who has brought the world of Gross back to us. In assessing Gross’s contribution to the country in those fateful years of the 1920s and 1930s, one lesson should never be lost: the analysis of such works must examine the periods in which this kind of creativity takes place. For the most part, Gross’s characters were accepted in the period in which he had the most influence. To analyze him from the perspective of the early twenty-first century would be a colossal error. Mercifully Kelman avoids this trip, which makes his book well worth struggling through. And while I have the last word, the book’s publisher, New York University Press, should do a better job of proofing its work. Pages 56 and 69 are virtually unreadable due to a production problem. But let this not detract from a valuable exercise in scholarship.

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Citation: David Spencer. Review of Kelman, Ari Y., ed., *Is Diss a System? A Milt Gross Comic Reader*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

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