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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bradford W Wright. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 352 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6514-5.

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Comic Book Nation by Bradford W. Wright is a compelling history of American comic books since its roots in the 1930's. Much like William W. Savage Jr.'s *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, Wright uses comic books as a primary historical source of the values and ideology of a time period. Wright suggests that comic books had strong messages of many serious issues of the time and they affected the youth of America to become consumers.

Wright mainly describes the history of the super-hero genre from the 1930's to today. He also incorporates the romance, war, crime, and horror genres when those genres impacted the medium. Wright finds that super hero comic books before World War II dealt with issues that the common man dealt with like corrupt police and corrupt politicians. In fact, the super hero comic books advocated Roosevelt's New Deal "by portraying local politicians as self-serving tyrants and the federal government as the common man's chief benefactor" (pp. 25-26).

Truly the highlight of the book is Chapter 5: Reds, Romance, and Renegades. In this chapter, Wright explains how "Romance and anticommunism were two of the most common and successful themes exploited by comic book makers during the early Cold War years" (p. 110). These comic books, contrary to the messages in Depression era comic books, expressed conformity to the nuclear family. However, Entertaining Comics (EC Comics) continued to produce stories that assaulted "the prevailing mores of mainstream America" (pp. 136-7). EC, which was known for its graphic content, also presented stories that attacked racism and corruption in the government. Wright's analysis on EC with support from specific comic books is one of the best analyses on EC that I've seen.

For some reason, Wright overlooked the Western genre in comic books. This would have been an interesting to see whether messages in Western comic books gave a more liberal or conservative message. Also, Wright does not include the underground comic book movement, which he explains justifiably because he researched comic books that reached a mass audience and underground comic books did not. Finally, his research only makes it to the early 1990's and the resurgence of the vigilante type super hero. Today, comic books are a lot more graphic and violent as they were in the past, but the audience is also a lot more older.

Overall, this is an exceptional book on how historical events affected comic books and how much comic books affected American culture. This book is necessary in anyone's collection of books on comic books or 20th Century American history. Also, I would suggest this book as a historical textbook on comic books, especially if you are teaching the super hero genre.

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