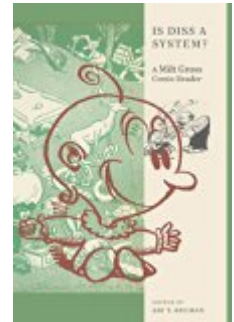


Ari Y. Kelman, ed.. *Is Diss a System? A Milt Gross Comic Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. ix + 293 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-4823-7.



Reviewed by Frederic J. Krome

Published on H-Judaic (June, 2010)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

In the standard histories of American Jewish humor Milt Gross (1895-1953) has “often fallen through the cracks” (p. 44). His absence is somewhat puzzling, for the heyday of his success coincided with some of the formative moments in American Jewish life in the twentieth century. Gross’s family came to the United States in the late nineteenth century during the era of mass migration, which reshaped American Jewish demography, and his work was part of an era in which American Jews successfully integrated themselves into the mainstream of popular culture. Gross effectively utilized a variety of formats during the communications revolution of the early twentieth century, working as a comic artist for the daily press, and later adapting his work for radio. Gross was one of a number of American Jews who established a distinctive Jewish humor based around comic images and language, thereby influencing the shape of American popular culture. If his work was recognized during his lifetime, why then is he largely forgotten today?

In a succinct and informative introduction to this reader of Gross’s best-known works, Ari Kelman (American Studies, UC Davis) provides a biographical sketch of the life, times, and legacy of this largely forgotten figure. More important than merely rescuing Gross from obscurity, however, Kelman provides important context for Gross’s work, and in the process reminds us that history has more than a written and visual dimension.

According to Kelman, a study of Gross’s humor highlights a level of ambivalence among Jewish immigrants towards America and its opportunities during the first half of the twentieth century. That some Jews embraced Americanization while others sought to hold onto ethnic distinctiveness is part of our conventional historiography. Yet in Gross’s work we see how some humorists confronted this ambivalence head on, mocking Jewish anxiety about being different while at the same time satirizing classics of Americana that immigrants were expected to inculcate as part of their education as Americans.

Gross's earliest career was in the pre-World War I Hearst newspapers in New York City, illustrating stories for the sports page. Although he served in the U.S. Army during World War I he did not see combat; indeed, like almost two million American servicemen he was never even deployed overseas. While military service was seen by some as a method of Americanization, Gross used the time to hone his illustration skills. Tellingly, his wartime cartoons did not contain any ethnic stereotypes, such as the use of Yiddish accents that characterized his later work. After the war, according to Kelman, Gross's work began to develop its tell-tale use of accents and satire. It was also at this time that Gross, who was now working for Hearst's arch-rival Pulitzer, was introduced to a national audience through syndication. In the immediate postwar era Americans continued to live diverse lives geographically; however, thanks to newspaper syndication and nationally distributed periodicals, a common American popular culture began to coalesce.

Gross began his career at a time when comic strip characters created by American Jews were used as a vehicle for helping Jews acculturate to American society and Americans to see Jews as fellow Americans. For example, Harry Hershfeld (1885-1974) created Abie the Agent to counteract anti-Semitic tropes found on the comic pages in many American newspapers. Characters such as Abie the Agent were not demonstratively Jewish, in terms of stereotypical looks, jobs, or religious observance. Their ethnicity was expressed in accents and names. When faced with ethical dilemmas, often caused by farcical scenarios, the hero responded in an honest and forthright manner, thereby demonstrating the virtues expected of American citizens.

Compared to Hershfeld's comics, which sought to create noble, or at least positive Jewish characters, Gross confronted stereotypes from the other direction. As Kelman adroitly points out, Gross utilized English words and Yiddish gram-

mar and while reading Gross's work could be an exercise in frustration, speaking it aloud made it possible to get the joke. Kelman points to a significant oversight in our conventional understanding of pre-radio/film/TV humor: it had a strong audio dimension. Despite the use of a superficial Yiddishkyte, Gross's characters were, like Hershfeld's, not demonstratively Jewish in terms of religious observance or even occupation. Kelman makes a compelling argument that Gross's work cannot be understood as a document of immigrant life, and the accommodation of Jews to the American scene. Rather his work is a satire of both immigrant life and American popular culture. This is evident in many of the examples of Gross's work produced in this anthology. For example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem "Song of Hiawatha" (1855), a staple of American popular culture, became Gross's satirical Hiawatha (1926) in which Gross "somehow managed to hold onto Longfellow's characteristic rhythm while still translating the story into broken, Yiddish-inflected English" (p. 187). Reading "Hiawatha" out loud, even today, is a poignant reminder of Gross's milieu. Generations of American school children (including this reviewer's mother) learned to recite Longfellow's original poem by heart. If we use our historical imagination we can juxtapose an American family listening to one of their children recite the nineteenth-century classic, with someone reciting Gross's satirical piece. In the days before twenty-four-hour television and the Internet, people found other means to amuse themselves, and this one is still humorous today.

It is in fact his vision of America that comes from his use of language as a mechanism for satire that helps explain Gross's obscurity today. Like many satirists Gross was both popular and reviled during his lifetime. The radio and TV actress Gertrude Berg created her quintessential American urban family, the Goldbergs, as a direct counter to Gross's depiction of Jewish life. Berg's characters had a lasting impact American popular

culture, appearing first on radio and then during the early days of television. It is, therefore, ironic that Gross's greatest influence was not the direct result of his popularity. In seeking to neutralize his influence, especially what was felt to be an overdrawn utilization of slang Yiddish, American Jewish comedians homogenized their characters to better fit in with their Americanized audience.

As students of history we are exhorted to go back to the primary sources, and Kelman has done yeoman's service in introducing a new generation of readers, and listeners, to Milt Gross. The bulk of the editor's introduction takes up the first third of the book, while each of the selections also contains a brief introduction setting the stage for the specific reading. A collection such as this also reminds us that what we think of as classic literature and humor today is not necessarily what people read or listened to in a previous age.

o

,

ng

that

then

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Frederic J. Krome. Review of Kelman, Ari Y., ed. *Is Diss a System? A Milt Gross Comic Reader*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29315>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.