



Ferenc Morton Szasz. *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear World*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2012. xv + 179 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87417-874-6; ISBN 978-0-87417-879-1.

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Cashbaugh on Szasz, *Atomic Comics*

As much of the scholarly discourse surrounding the Cold War argues, the terrifying, yet awe-inspiring, reality of atomic power and weapons affected nearly all aspects of American popular culture. In *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear World*, historian Ferenc Morton Szasz demonstrates the ways comic books, comic strips, and cartoonists tackled this reality. He argues that the oft-maligned and sometimes forgotten cultural form created a space for ordinary citizens to wrestle with the complexities of the atomic age in the twentieth century. As he writes, “All cartoonists share one thing in common: with a few strokes of the pen, they can simplify complex issues for the average reader” (p. 4). Comics helped make the nuclear age explicable to a curious public overwhelmed by the reality of atomic power and weapons. In three chronologically arranged sections, he describes how this occurred throughout the twentieth century. While Szasz’s claims regarding the reception of these comics are relatively unsupported, *Atomic Comics* nevertheless nicely conveys the myriad ways popular culture negotiated the ideological landscape of the Cold War.

In part 1, “Before Hiroshima,” Szasz describes how comics between 1900 and 1945 introduced the public to a “completely different way of comprehending the universe” (p. 4). Chapter 1 details how science fiction and comics writers easily dramatized the unseen world of atoms through the adventures of characters like Buck

Rogers and Flash Gordon, championing the world such science promised to bestow, as scientists and science writers struggled to explain the complexities of atomic science to curious audiences. Chapter 2 focuses on the content of comics during World War Two, when such utopianism waned as atomic weapons became a reality. The government censored most public discussion of atomic weapons, but the lowly status afforded to comics allowed them to explore such issues with minimal restrictions. Though more interested in entertainment than education, Szasz suggests that comics of this era “correctly introduced the basic outlines of the atomic era” when they described weapons “of unlimited power that could destroy cities in an instant,” something artists and writers were all too happy to point out in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (p. 37).

Part 2 examines the ways comics approached the atomic age inaugurated by the bombings with a combination of enthusiasm and anxiety, celebrating atomic possibilities in an attempt to contain the very real threat they posed. In chapter 3, “Coming to Grips with the Atom,” Szasz identifies how comics editors and writers initially sought to educate youth via didactic narratives that laid out the stakes of the nuclear age. For instance, popular characters Dagwood and Blondie appeared in *Dagwood Splits the Atom* (1949), wherein the central characters “shrank to atomic size to explain nuclear fission through a combination of illustration and rather dense text” (p.

51). Because these were largely unpopular with readers, publishers turned to adventure stories with new and established characters—such as Atoman, Captain Marvel, and Superman—who fought villains who used atomic power towards nefarious ends. Chapter 4 explores common atomic-themed subgenres, such as the spy narrative, linking the world of atomic power to Cold War political concerns.

Part 3 examines the long-range impact of the nuclear world on comics, highlighting the emerging critique of atomic power and weapons that Szasz suggests first appeared in the 1960s. Chapter 5 explores the various antinuclear comics that emerged between the 1960s and 1980s, identifying how “underground comix,” political cartoons, and Japanese manga conceptualized antinuclear positions. For instance, underground comic *Forbidden Knowledge* (1977) graphically depicted “atomic carnage” with images of “melting flesh” and “women impaled by flying glass” (p. 90). In this chapter, Szasz importantly broadens the American focus of the book and thinks transnationally, exploring the antinuclear comics of Japanese writers and artists. He looks specifically at Osamu Tezuka’s *Astro Boy* (as manga in 1952 and on Japanese TV in 1963) and Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* (1973-85 and as live-action films in 1976 and 1980 and anime in 1983 and 1986), and analyzes the ways they grapple with the Japanese experience of nuclear trauma and violence at the hands of the American military. Chapter 4 brings readers to the contemporary era, and identifies traces of atomic culture in well-known series and characters, such as Spiderman, whose power derives from an atomic spider bite.

Atomic Comics is a short book, with 179 pages including the index, but provides an exhaustive account of the ways the “nuclear world” crept into the illustrated

panels of comics and cartoons, and how artists and illustrators chose to represent this world. The author thoroughly engages his primary sources, clearly supporting his claims regarding comics’ treatment of nuclear issues. However, his claims regarding the ways the public actually used comics warrant further development. For instance, in chapter 2 he suggests that with the scant attention granted to atomic issues in the mainstream press during World War II, popular culture necessarily filled the gap, citing a single statistic: “20 percent of adults read comics avidly” (p. 40). Such claims would have been much more persuasive had he drawn upon evidence pertaining specifically to comic audiences. Explicit engagement with secondary literature that makes similar claims would have also been helpful. Paul S. Boyer’s classic *By the Bombs Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985) comes to mind, as Szasz’s work fits into the history scholars like Boyers have mapped out. Such references appear in his footnotes, but Szasz’s claims regarding audiences could have been much stronger had he brought his broader cultural historical framework to the foreground of his text.

Despite this, *Atomic Comics* is a useful text, serving as a lucid introduction to the various intersections of popular culture and social issues during the Cold War. In a more general sense, it clearly identifies the ways all manner of popular cultural forms express the ideological conditions of their historical moment, thus serving as a succinct introduction to the study of popular culture and history. Szasz’s prose is accessible and jargon-free, friendly to both undergraduate and general readers, and the text is filled with images of the works he describes. It could fruitfully appear on undergraduate syllabi in American studies, history, and popular culture courses.

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