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Men Of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, And The Birth Of The Comic Book



Synopsis

Animated by the stories of some of the last century's most charismatic and conniving artists, writers, and businessmen, *Men of Tomorrow* brilliantly demonstrates how the creators of the superheroes gained their cultural power and established a crucial place in the modern imagination. "This history of the birth of superhero comics highlights three pivotal figures. The story begins early in the last century, on the Lower East Side, where Harry Donenfeld rises from the streets to become the king of the 'smooshes'-soft-core magazines with titles like *French Humor* and *Hot Tales*. Later, two high school friends in Cleveland, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, become avid fans of 'scientifiction,' the new kind of literature promoted by their favorite pulp magazines. The disparate worlds of the wise guy and the geeks collide in 1938, and the result is *Action Comics #1*, the debut of Superman. For Donenfeld, the comics were a way to sidestep the censors. For Shuster and Siegel, they were both a calling and an eventual source of misery: the pair waged a lifelong campaign for credit and appropriate compensation." -The New Yorker

Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Basic Books (October 11, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465036570

ISBN-13: 978-0465036578

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

By Gerard Jones's own admission this book is a biography and not a bibliography, it's more about the real world Golden Age players than their brightly costumed alter egos. It should technically be described as a comparative social biography of Superman's creators (Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster) and Superman's publishers (Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz). The introduction is dynamite and really sets the scene for where Jerry Siegel was on the day *Superman The Movie* was announced.

The first act paints a broad picture of 1920s and 1930s New York and Cleveland, and illustrates how different social conditions shaped the lives of very different groups of immigrant Jews. The dense, dangerous world of early 20th century New York is perhaps the most emotive and Jones expertly draws the reader into the world of the street gangs and Prohibition era alliances that gave birth to the Jewish dominated New York mob. His portrait of Harry Donenfeld is as an opportunistic, if charismatic, rogue and he portrays Liebowitz as a humourless straight man - a real-life double act. By contrast Cleveland comes across as an icon of suburban American life and we get a real sense of Jerry Siegel's childhood - including the revelation that Siegel's father had been murdered. Of the four leads Joe Shuster remains the most enigmatic. Woven through these histories are the side stories of the elder and younger Gaines, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Julius Schwartz, Mort Weisinger, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Will Eisner, and a host of other names. Most of them were from the same generation, most of them were Jewish and most of them were drawn to New York by a powerful new medium. Something Jones doesn't do is to carry the sense of the Jewishness much further.

"Their relationships with masculinity, sexuality, power, individuality, violence, authority, and the modern fluidity of self were so tangled and so heartfelt that their work spoke to the anxieties of modern life more sympathetically, more completely, more acutely than they could have foreseen in their most inflated summer daydreams. With the passage of time, their creations become only more relevant. They forecast and helped shape geek culture. They laid the template for the modern concept of the entertainment franchise. They created the perfect packageable, marketable fantasy for the culture of consumer narcissism. They spawned artistic subcultures. All without quite knowing what they were doing. All by rushing frantically forward, trying to stay a step ahead of the wolves, satchling at the cultural scraps they found around them on the Lower East Side and in Glenville and the Bronx and shaping them into something that could be sold quick and cheap. All by banishing yesterday from conscious thought and dreaming of the score they would make tomorrow." That's the concluding paragraph from the Prologue to Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. It pretty much sums up the thesis of the book--that the men who created comic books (and he includes the businessmen and editors as much as the writers and artists) created much that we think of as modern popular entertainment.

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