



## Gerald Jones

*Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*  
384 Pages. Basic Books (2004). Hardcover \$26; Paperback \$15.

## Review by Aaron Ragan-Fore

The United States is a society that celebrates its ruggedly individualistic streak, a land in which the common sentiment of strength through diversity is repeatedly championed. It is no surprise that such a society would spawn distinct subcultures based on taste and the shades of individual preference, or that some of these would appeal to the outer fringes of the acceptable. So it is that grown men of the 1930s, aficionados of a new type of junk literature known as science fiction, would create their own pet industry from scratch, in order to avoid consigning themselves to lives of drudgery in factories, offices, and military service.

The rise of that industry, the comic book field, is detailed in Gerard Jones's *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). Jones is the author of several books on popular culture themes, including television violence and the American sitcom. Formerly a successful comic book writer himself, with stints at the "Big Two" comic book companies Marvel Comics and DC Comics, Jones uses *Men of Tomorrow* as a springboard to return to a medium that launched him, now uniquely positioned to comment upon the culture it has birthed. (Indeed, this scholar first became acquainted with Jones's inventive prose while reading early-1990s issues of *Green Lantern* and *Justice League of America*.)

Jones explains how the disaffected American youth of the third decade of the 20th century pooled a collective interest in the fantastic to create a new industry, and ultimately, a new American cultural zeitgeist. Jones establishes his themes early on, noting that, "this was the first generation to grow up with access to an alternative universe provided by commercial entertainment. It was the first to

grow up understanding that the very nature of experience and perception could be transformed by machines and artifice, rendering the 'make-believe' as palpable and dignified as the 'real.'" (35-36) This generation, teenagers in the 1920s, funneled their passions into an economic force as they purchased cheap pulp magazines featuring heroes such as the Shadow and Doc Savage, and distributed crude fan publications to showcase their own work. As Jones notes, "The Twenties generation was also the first to grow up in a developed consumer culture that encouraged people to define their identities by what they bought." (36)

The youth who understood these new truisms to best effect were overwhelmingly young Jewish men, overwhelmingly second- or third-generation Americans, and overwhelmingly urbanites. The social experimentation in art, music, organized crime, and sexual morays that followed the World War fueled their passions. Jones writes of the charismatic Harry Donenfeld, a Romanian Jew from a newly-American family, who joined gangs as teenager in New York in the 1910s and 1920s to rebel against the preconceived lower-middle class options left open to him, eventually ousting his brothers from, and assuming control of, the family printing business. An inveterate drinker and womanizer, Donenfeld and his operation were partially funded by mob boss Frank Costello, trading the legitimacy of his printing business as a means of laundering and bootlegging, for the opportunity to enjoy the perquisites and notoriety of the gangster lifestyle. Along the way Donenfeld hired increasingly disgruntled Jewish attorney Jack Liebowitz away from his Socialist-tinted law practice, where he habitually represented the labor unions beloved of his stepfather, to the decidedly capitalistic endeavor of managing the accounts of Donenfeld's fledgling comic book

printing business.

Early contenders in this realm of fantasy as livelihood included Jerome Siegel and Joseph Shuster, two bookish Jewish teens from Cleveland, who collaborated to create a newspaper comic strip submission starring an ultra-powered strongman known as Superman. With Siegel as writer and Shuster at the drawing board, the team incorporated themes of loneliness, alienation, and the immigrant experience into their creation. Siegel's father was murdered in a robbery when he was a boy, and both of the creators were withdrawn and picked on in school. Through Superman's championship of the disenfranchised, his outsider status as an alien force, fantastic origins harkening back to Jewish legend as a sort of cosmic Moses, and assimilation through secret identity as the ultimate American immigrant, the reader observes in Superman the attempts of Siegel and Shuster to mass mediate their own experiences and culture.

The young collaborators reconceived their newspaper character as a comic book for the Donenfeld publishing empire, bolstered by a brand-new fandom community with the power "to encourage keeping one's core in that other world [of fantasy] even when school or work demanded the presence of one's outer self." (36) In 1938, Donenfeld's *Action Comics # 1* took a chance on the Superman character as a cover feature, and the rest, for author Jones at least, is history. *Men of Tomorrow* proceeds to chronicle the rise of the comics industry through two major vehicles, the creation of Superman, and the career of Siegel. Biographical interludes of Siegel's life intercut the larger narrative of the creation of the comic book medium.

Beginning with Batman in 1939, the following year, the popularity of the Superman franchise quickly inspired a legion of imitators,

competitors, and homage, many of the derivative characters seeing print (and in some cases, billions of dollars) to this day; Within a year or two of its inception, the Superman franchise was blasted across the cultural landscape much like a rocket leaving a doomed planet behind in its jet stream, seemingly everywhere, accompanied by a phalanx of spandex-covered also-rans. Superman and his heroic cohorts fueled a shift towards a uniquely American printing medium, and an attendant subculture of childhood excess and excitement. Thrust under the noses of adults, too gaudy to ignore in loudly-hued tights, masks, and capes, Superman and the other superheroes represented the first coalescence of a junior-level Americanism, a culture catering to children, evident even today in the ubiquitousness of child and geek entertainment and marketing.

By the early 1940s, Donenfeld and Liebowitz were suckling at the great super-udders of a juvenile lifestyle cash cow, in the form of a Superman radio series, cartoon reels, live-action theatrical serials, toys and other merchandising, and of course, multiple comic book titles each and every month. Especially eager children could even mail in to join the Supermen of America, ostensibly a sort of Cub Scouts-lite, but covertly just one more cog in the Superman marketing juggernaut. Lest the reader judge the Supermen of America too harshly, of course, the club also represents a major stop along the train trestle of kiddie culture, as an early example of a members-only, nationwide society composed entirely of children. Jones marks the rise of geekdom, the nerd domain, from this juvenile skew in art and literature. He paints this science fiction following as a vital American subculture, now accounting for trendsetters and culture mavens spanning America's popular way of life. He explains

how the tastes and interests of geek lifestyle have moved from the periphery of national consciousness in the 1920s, to social prominence and cultural ascendancy in the 1980s, to total integration in the 2000s. Jones credits the rise of comic book nerd whim as a driving engine in the societal shift that spawned much of America's popular culture, marketing, and mass media, drawing for the reader a direct line from the birth of the superhero to the primacy of video games, genre literature such as the work of Stephen King, and heavyweight science fiction "popcorn" franchises including *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*. In a concluding chapter, Jones summarizes his thesis thusly:

In the days of the computer, the global village, the ascendant consumer industry, suburbia, the celebration of diversity, and cultural, moral, and philosophical relativism, the preoccupations of geekdom had become the culture's preoccupations. The geeks knew the joy and power of organizing useless information before anyone. They knew before anyone else the joy of bonding over manufactured totems, the inadequacy of old gender types, the desire to glorify and caricature the body, the need to throttle aggression and diffuse it into flights of cartoon fantasy. The 1980s marked the triumph of the geek. (327)

Sadly, the consistent upward swing of Superman's impact in popular culture from the 1930s to the 1970s, and the rising tide of the paper pushers and tough guys who held the character's super-purse strings, is in direct and inverse relationship to the arc of Siegel's own popularity, career, and enfranchisement. There is great injustice inherent in the tale of the compensation paid (or rather, not paid) to Superman's creators, who toiled away for years at minimal artists' wages on

their own creation, before their complete, unofficial ouster from the company. The reader identifies with Siegel as a protagonist, and fumes along with Jones as he details how the young writer and his partner Shuster were never truly compensated for their creation, until a campaign of shaming negative publicity surrounded the 1978 release of *Superman: The Movie*. Siegel and Shuster had plenty of company, unfortunately, and were soon joined by ranks of peer creators crying into their beers over the raw deals they received during the early days of the comic book industry.

The outrages do not end with the technicalities of intellectual property ownership, however. Harry Donenfeld was an overt pornographer before whitewashing his image and jettisoning such erotically-charged pulp titles as *Spicy Detective* in favor of his more lucrative superhero complex, though he usually remained one step ahead of public decency codes enforced by the district attorney. More damning was Donenfeld's decades-long association with the Genovese crime family headed by Frank Costello. Crates of printer's paper imported from Canada allowed effective smuggling avenues for bootleg liquor during Prohibition, and, as a concern in which Costello held financial interest, Donenfeld's publishing house cut breaks on campaign literature printing costs for politicians on the take.

Jones presents his reader with a major irony, in that the inception of fictional superheroic exploits in the name of justice served as counterpoint to an underlying miasma of greed and corruption, handily illustrated by a specific dichotomy involving "legal" gambling. Placing comics in candy and drug stores gave Donenfeld ample opportunity to slip shipments of contraband, including booze and slot machines,

into the establishments as well. The Costello-owned slots served as a “convenient adjunct to the numbers game and illegal bookmaking” (96), despite the fact that 1939 saw the publication of *Superman #5*, in which the brawny protagonist destroys the slot machine racket of fictional mobster “Slug” Kelly. Jones’s treatise on the pioneering golden age of comic book history presents a compelling, page-turning account of the creation of a major pop cultural mass medium. As comic books occupy a position as envoys from (or perhaps, prototypical examples of) the hyperkinetic realm of ephemeral junk culture, many American, particularly men, already possess a sort of hazy, incomplete “folk memory” osmosis of the events of this narrative, gleaned from years of operating as members of the mass-mediated geek subculture.

Even if the primary storyline of Donenfeld, Siegel, and Superman seems alien to readers, no doubt most Americans can find a touchstone of familiarity in the work, turning to other comic book greats such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, driving creative forces behind DC’s chief rival, Marvel Comics.

In his author’s note, Jones thanks one friend who “turned her profound indifference to superheroes into a critical weapon to force [him] repeatedly into reluctant clarity.” The book is certainly readable and enjoyable by non-geeks, as a means of understanding America’s cultural development of the mid twentieth century, presenting a specific subculture as indicative of larger social changes.

The author’s goal with *Men of Tomorrow* seems to be a narrative journalism-style profile of key figures from the development of the medium he so cherishes. As an historical document of the subjects he does choose to profile, Jones’s book remains relevant and

engaging. The author might have invested more pages in fan-favorite publishing concerns such as Marvel Comics or Fawcett Comics, and in tracing a more direct route from his favored subject matter to popular culture at large. The author’s passion for and attention to the somewhat narrow subjects of Superman, Jerry Siegel, and the history of DC Comics is interesting, perhaps even laudable, but leaves little room for contrast or synthesis. The book may have been more effective, albeit drier, perhaps, if the author had adopted a survey approach.

As superheroes continue their big-budget fights on the silver screen, *Men of Tomorrow* enters an increasingly crowded marketplace for comic book-related criticism, theory, and nonfiction. No doubt inspired by the success of Michael Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, in which the titular characters operate as fictionalized Shuster and Sigel proxies, *Men of Tomorrow* seems to be marketed toward the same audience. And in that sense, the work succeeds. Jones paints likable portraits of his protagonists (even when those players on opposite sides of legal maneuvers), and presents a great deal of factual information in a straightforward, clever, and readable fashion.

While similar in content to such seminal works as Les Daniels’s *Superman, The Complete History: The Life and Times of the Man of Steel*, Jones presents his primary characters in shades of gray, rarely resorting to the sort of “ra-ra” boosterism that fans seek in Daniels’s work. Jones’s storyline is closer in scope and significance, perhaps, to Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to their Limits, famed cartoonist Art Spiegelman’s (Maus) definitive investigation into to the artistic style and tragic life of the creator of the Plastic Man character.

As popular culture begins to be

taken more seriously as appropriate intellectual grist for the mill of academe, more books like that of Jones will no doubt soon fill the shelves. The shift in acceptance of pop culture as communicative of societal goals is not insignificant, mirroring the very rise of the nerd subculture that Jones chronicles. Presumably *Men of Tomorrow* will soon be viewed as a trailblazing work in the expanding field of popular culture studies.

## Resources

- Jones, G. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.
- Siegel, J., et al. *Superman #5* (comic book). New York: National Periodicals, 1939.

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