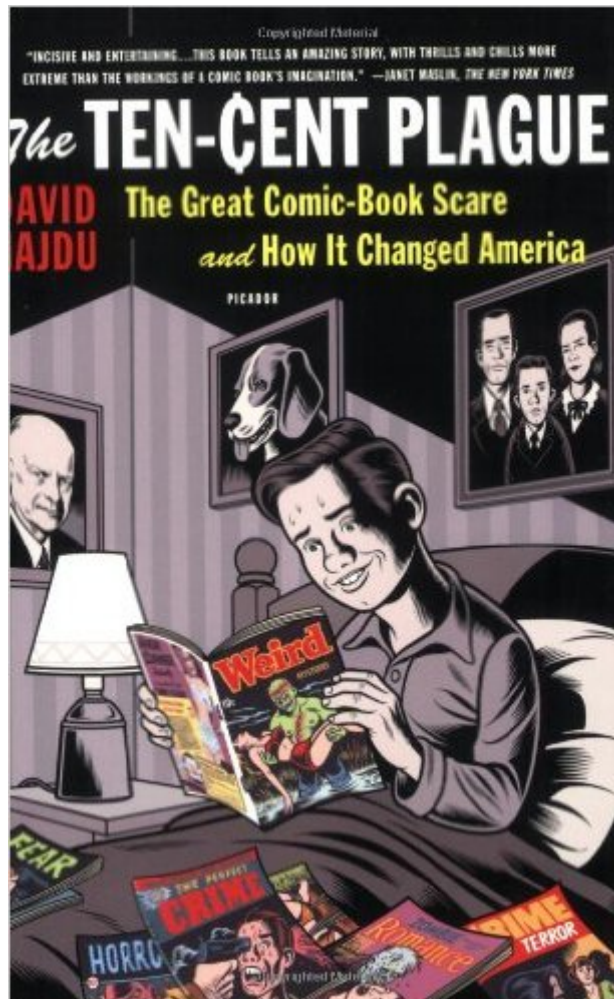


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The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare And How It Changed America



Synopsis

The story of the rise and fall of those comic books has never been fully told -- until *The Ten-Cent Plague*. David Hajdu's remarkable new book vividly opens up the lost world of comic books, its creativity, irreverence, and suspicion of authority. In the years between World War II and the emergence of television as a mass medium, American popular culture as we know it was first created in the pulpy, boldly illustrated pages of comic books. No sooner had this new culture emerged than it was beaten down by church groups, community bluestockings, and a McCarthyish Congress only to resurface with a crooked smile on its face in *Mad* magazine. When we picture the 1950s, we hear the sound of early rock and roll. *The Ten-Cent Plague* shows how -- years before music -- comics brought on a clash between children and their parents, between prewar and postwar standards. Created by outsiders from the tenements, garish, shameless, and often shocking, comics spoke to young people and provided the guardians of mainstream culture with a big target. Parents, teachers, and complicit kids burned comics in public bonfires. Cities passed laws to outlaw comics. Congress took action with televised hearings that nearly destroyed the careers of hundreds of artists and writers. *The Ten-Cent Plague* radically revises common notions of popular culture, the generation gap, and the divide between "high" and "low" art. As he did with the lives of Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington (in *Lush Life*) and Bob Dylan and his circle (in *Positively 4th Street*), Hajdu brings a place, a time, and a milieu unforgettably back to life.

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Customer Reviews

So thundered psychiatrist Frank Wertham in his 1954 *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book which accused comic books of breeding juvenile delinquency (quoted on p. 6 of Hajdu's book). Today, Wertham's comparison between Hitler and comic books seems ludicrous. But at the time, millions of Americans took it seriously, and it brought down the comic book industry. David Hajdu's wonderful *The Ten-Cent Plague* is a history of the culture war over comics that spanned the decade after the second world war. By the mid-40s, he claims, comic books were beyond doubt the leading form of popular entertainment, selling an astounding 80 to 100 million copies each week. Some 650 titles were released each month, and the industry employed around 1,000 writers, artists, and editors. The leading comic book publisher was EC, headed by the genius William Gaines. The genre in those days, lead by EC, focused primarily on horror and crime, and some of the covers, interior artwork, and story lines could get gruesome: pools of blood, severed heads, stony-faced and scary killers. The artwork and storylines could get sexy too: heroines in filmy negligees, the occasional cleavage or bare foot showing. Middle class parents, egged on by a few religious leaders and political conservatives, began to express concerns, and those concerns grew into a national crusade against the "corrupting" influence of comic books. Editorials raged against them, politicians speechified against them, the Senate held hearings, and schools and churches sponsored comic book bonfires. In an effort to salvage what it could, the comic book industry organized the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1954, and promised to watchdog its product by promoting "wholesomeness and virtue" (p. 319).

Probably one of the greatest evils in society are the self-righteous moralists who want to rid the world of what they perceive as sinful, usually saying it's "for the children". Usually, the things they want to actually get rid of are merely items that encourage free thought or seemingly contradict their own narrow dogma. Thus today, we get those who want to ban Harry Potter books not because of any proven harm, but merely the fact that they don't fall into their own interpretation of good and evil. It's not enough to choose to ignore the items, but also to deprive others of their joy. David Hajdu's *The Ten Cent Plague* details one such situation that occurred in the early 1950s and focused on comic books. This was an era when comics were at a creative and commercial peak, dealing with not only the superhero genre, but also horror, crime, war and romance. While some of it was over-the-top, it also provided entertainment and occasionally delivered a message as well. The main villain in this piece is Fredric Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a book that alleged links between comic books and juvenile delinquency, links that were often weak at best, and completely fabricated in other cases. In this Legion of Doom, however, Wertham is merely the

biggest name, but there are others as well, driven to hound the comic book industry out of existence. They would use book-burnings, boycotts and the police to get their way, and to a large extent, they would win. Due to their efforts, the Comics Code was instituted, resulting in comics that went from being fun (if edgy) to watered-down pap fit for only the youngest kids. It was like replacing Bugs Bunny and Homer Simpson with Baby Huey and the Care Bears.

Here's something truly "Weird," "Scary" and "Amazing!" It's a history with a gripping-but-true story of American hysteria that most Americans probably have forgotten - or perhaps never knew -- until Columbia University journalism professor David Hajdu thoroughly researched America's crazy crusade against comics. In the growing literature about Americans' love affair with comic books, Hajdu has staked a major cultural landmark with his new, "The 10-Cent Plague." As a journalist myself for more than 30 years, I've closely watched the ebb and flow of American comics and graphic novels. I can tell you this: Hajdu's cultural history is so fresh and so solid that, henceforth, anyone interested in understanding the strange twists and turns of our post-World War II culture will have to include his history of comic hysteria on any "must-read" list. If you haven't heard Hajdu on NPR or read any of the growing number of magazine and newspaper articles about his book, the use of the term "hysteria" may sound - well, "Insane." But the tragic truth is that, starting in the late 1940s only three years after the defeat of the Nazis in Europe, Americans in towns across our nation felt it was their sacred duty to build comic book-burning bonfires, encouraging and sometimes compelling students to stand up for virtue at these conflagrations. Hajdu points out that this showed a terrifying blindness to world history - eerily reminiscent of the zealous book burnings in Germany in the 1930s. A few wise American observers in that era recognized this historical irony - but, as shocking as this sounds, Hajdu documents that the mainstream of American media amounted to a frenzied mob in some Grade-B horror film.

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