reading Tama Leaver’s essay about the influence of 9/11 on the Spider-Man film trilogy, she details at great length the August 2001 trailer for the original Spider-Man film (featuring the Twin Towers – the trailer was withdrawn after the traumatic event). The trailer depicts bank-robbers fleeing in a helicopter, only to be caught in a spider web between the towers. Where an image would have sufficed, I found myself getting acquainted with the scenario by watching the scene unfold on YouTube. In a time when reproductions of images are a general requirement for visual scholars, it seems a shame that this collection was lacking in visual material. A similar lack of imagery was afforded to McFarland’s (2012) The Ages of Superman. This could possibly be reflective of the extant problems in gaining permissions for image reproductions; something that is at the heart of comics academic discussion, and an issue all too familiar with this very journal.

Notwithstanding this, the collection will provide an invaluable resource for any researcher and ‘Spidey-phile’ alike.

Reference

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Every fanboy, every comic-book historian, every sci-fi/fantasy buff, and every student of American popular culture knows that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the world’s most recognizable comic book character, the Man of Steel. What most people do not know is that the two creators also gave birth to an equally curious hero, but one whose popular and economic fate was markedly different from that of the Man of Steel’s. In Siegel and Shuster’s Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero, from the Creators of Superman, Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon reveal the history behind a highly obscure, and largely forgotten, comic-book figure from the late 1940s who stands alongside Superman in a number of curious ways. Perhaps more importantly, they also contextualize this unlikely superhero in light of post-war America and what he tells us about its cultural assumptions surrounding humour, ethnicity, and masculinity.

Funnyman is the alias of Larry Davis, a television comedian who at one point poses as a hero for a publicity stunt, one that goes wrong, and then discovers that he enjoys fighting
crime. Upon first inspection, Funnyman seems to be a comedic reflection of the Superman prototype. Much like Clark Kent, Larry Davis is a member of the media, although the latter does not so much report the news as makes light of it. Also similar to the mild-mannered reporter, Davis lives a conspicuous double life, separating his civilian responsibilities from his escapades as a brightly coloured crime fighter (Funnyman’s ‘uniform’ bears more of a resemblance to circus clowns than it does men in tights). In addition, just as Superman is physically outstanding and, as such, is easily recognizable to all who encounter him, Funnyman is similarly striking, although his defining features are exaggerated slapstick, a skinny body and a stock of bright red hair. Indeed, these physical characteristics make him a not-too-veiled comics embodiment of the comedian Danny Kaye (whom Shuster apparently used as a visual model). Yet, while there are similarities between these two heroes born of Siegel and Shuster’s imagination, there are, nonetheless, significant differences. Whereas Superman was able to defeat his enemies through his strength and enhanced powers, Funnyman is always weaker than his opponents, prevailing instead through the use of comedic props, gimmicks and creative mind games. Even more notable is Funnyman’s inversion of superhero genre expectations. Readers easily laugh at the feigned ineptitude of Clark Kent, the façade masking the real character underneath, a super-being who demands serious respect. But with Siegel and Shuster’s comedic creation, it is the everyday man behind the hero, Larry Davis, who is drawn more seriously, and it is his crime-fighting alter ego, Funnyman, who comes across as the constructed, albeit wacky, fictional disguise. Given Siegel and Shuster’s growing frustrations with National Periodicals (now DC Comics) ownership of Superman in the late 1940s, it is no surprise that they created an upended version of their pre-eminent superhero.

Yet, while the primary focus of Siegel and Shuster’s Funnyman is on the long-overlooked, and short-lived, superhero – the Funnyman comic book ran for only six issues, between January and August 1948, and in daily and Sunday newspaper strips between October 1948 and October 1949 – Andrae and Gordon use their discussions to highlight many of the cultural issues raised by the comic creation. Indeed, the book is almost equally divided between critical analysis in the first half and reproductions of the original comics in the second part. After a preface by Danny Fingeroth, himself an authority on the Jewish-inspired superhero, Mel Gordon opens the book with an essay on the roots of Jewish humour, its defining characteristics and its various translations onto the text of American popular culture. (Andrae and Gordon do not co-write the book as a whole, but instead contribute separate sections, each of which bears the single author’s name.) Thomas Andrae follows with two contributions of his own: a brief essay on the Jewish ‘superhero’ image leading up to Superman (e.g. the golem legend and popular strongman Siegmund Breitbart), and a more involved exploration of Jewish masculinity and its dichotomous expressions into the schlemiel and the tough Jew.

This second essay by Andrae is by far the most salient portion of the book. His first entry, ‘The Jewish Superhero’, is underdeveloped, and Gordon’s survey of Jewish humour, while engaging in its own right, seems almost out of place. Certainly a discussion of humour and its place within Jewish culture is necessary when approaching Siegel and Shuster’s comedic anti-hero, but most of Gordon’s essay is divorced from the actual context of Funnyman. As such, Gordon’s contribution is a useful companion piece to other recent studies of Jewish humour and American popular culture—for example, Lawrence J. Epstein’s (2001) The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America, Vincent Brook’s (2003) Something Ain’t Kosher Here: The Rise of the ‘Jewish’ Sitcom, David Zurawick’s (2003) The Jews of Prime Time and Leonard Greenspoon’s (2011) Jews and Humor – even though it does not reveal much about the creation and significance of

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The last half of the book is devoted to the Funnyman comics themselves, with Andrae and Gordon including a generous sampling of reproductions from the Funnyman comic book, the Sunday coloured strips and the black-and-white dailies. In addition to the comics, the authors also provide a summary of each of the six comic books and a partial listing of the Sunday and daily storylines. This is the highlight of Siegel and Shuster’s Funnyman. Indeed, the last half of the book is arguably the most valuable, and one cannot help but wonder if Andrae and Gordon would have been more successful in providing us with the complete run of Funnyman comics, something akin to the kind of collections reproduced by publishers such as Fantagraphics (such as their Peanuts and Krazy Kat books) and Drawn and Quarterly (the Gasoline Alley and Tove Jansson collections), albeit on a much smaller scale. Still, an incomplete picture of Funnyman is better than no picture at all.

In this way, Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon provide a much-needed reminder of Siegel and Shuster’s varied imagination and how their contributions extend well beyond their Man of Tomorrow (and other more traditional comic-book heroes, such as Siegel’s The Spectre and The Star Spangled Kid). What is more, Siegel and Shuster’s Funnyman stands as another facet of the recent spike in scholarship on Jewish comics. Alongside such works as Danny Fingeroth’s (2007) Disguised as Clark Kent, Arie Kaplan’s (2008) From Krakow to Krypton, Paul Buhle’s (2008) Jews and American Comics, Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman’s (2008) The Jewish Graphic Novel, Simcha Weinstein’s (2009) Up, Up, and Oy Vey and Fredrik Strömberg’s (2012) Jewish Images in the Comics, the volume on Funnyman highlights the centrality of Jewish culture in the creation of American comics and, more specifically, its nurturing of the superhero genre. Philip Roth (2001, 96) once stated in an interview with Joyce Carol Oates that ‘Sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness are my closest friends’, and, as Andrae and Gordon suggest, the same could be said of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Their emphasis on the insouciant ‘little man’ and his humorous antics played just as much of a role as their idolization of power in the development of the American superhero figure.

References


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