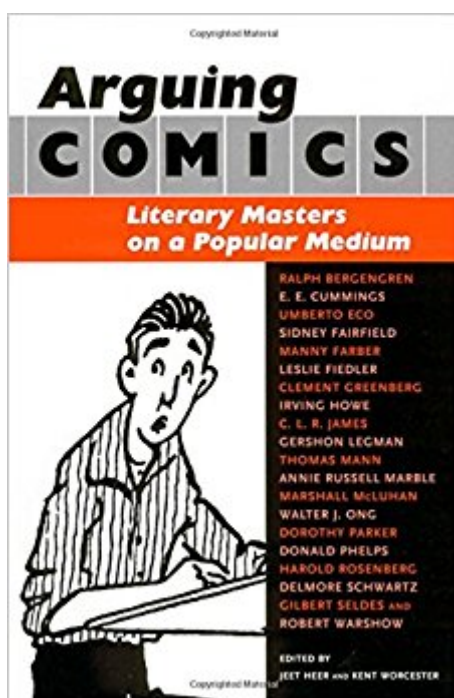


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Arguing Comics: Literary Masters On A Popular Medium (Studies In Popular Culture (Paperback))



Synopsis

When Art Spiegelman's *Maus*—a two-part graphic novel about the Holocaust—won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, comics scholarship grew increasingly popular and notable. The rise of "serious" comics has generated growing levels of interest as scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals continue to explore the history, aesthetics, and semiotics of the comics medium. Yet those who write about the comics often assume analysis of the medium didn't begin until the cultural studies movement was underway. *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* brings together nearly two dozen essays by major writers and intellectuals who analyzed, embraced, and even attacked comic strips and comic books in the period between the turn of the century and the 1960s. From e. e. cummings, who championed George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, to Irving Howe, who fretted about Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*, this volume shows that comics have provided a key battleground in the culture wars for over a century. With substantive essays by Umberto Eco, Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, Gilbert Seldes, Dorothy Parker, Irving Howe, Delmore Schwartz, and others, this anthology shows how all of these writers took up comics-related topics as a point of entry into wider debates over modern art, cultural standards, daily life, and mass communication. *Arguing Comics* shows how prominent writers from the Jazz Age and the Depression era to the heyday of the New York Intellectuals in the 1950s thought about comics and, by extension, popular culture as a whole.

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Customer Reviews

Comic strips, especially done up as graphic novels, have garnered much more critical attention recently, but intellectuals occasionally noticed the medium right from its inception. *Arguing Comics* collects 27 essays dating from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s. Most of the earliest address comics more as social phenomenon than as art form--an approach that became more pronounced in the 1950s, when worries escalated over the effects of crime and horror comic books on youngsters. Certain artful works were exempted from such hand-wringing--the likes of *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Pogo*, and, above all, *Krazy Kat*, lauded here by Gilbert Seldes and e. e. cummings. Other notable pieces include Dorothy Parker's "mash note" to Crockett Johnson's *Barnaby*, Delmore Schwartz's condemnation of *Classics Illustrated*, Irving Howe's indictment of comics (and mass culture in general), Marshall McLuhan's paean to *Mad*, and Umberto Eco's dense assessment of Superman. Much of the discussion turns on questions of social and artistic legitimacy rendered moot in the era of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, but that doesn't negate these documents' historical interest. Gordon Flagg

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An anthology charting the longstanding cultural conversation that the comics sparked brings together a broad-ranging set of essays on comics, all written before the advent of cultural studies in academia. Features essays by such noted writers as C. L. R. James, e. e. cummings, Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, Umberto Eco, Gilbert Seldes, and Dorothy Parker. Covers a wide range of time, from the 1920s Jazz Age to the mid-1960s, just before the rise of the countercultural movement in America. Provides balance: many of these authors were wary if not aggravated about the rise of comics; others were delighted with the medium --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This interesting collection of essays on the historical reception of comics by intellectuals is marred by an inexcusable number of typos and print errors. University Press of Mississippi should be applauded for all the titles it has published on comics scholarship, but the editorial sloppiness in this title is a disservice to the reader and the field.

This is a very interesting book. The range and quality of the contributors is impressive. Some of the smartest English-language intellectuals of the 20th century wrote and thought about comics. The table of contents tells the whole story.

Apart from the eye-popping howler 33 words in (inveigle for inveigh) this looks to be a thoroughly solid, dependable collection and foundational text for any student of comics who does other than look at the pictures. Such names! (Clement Greenberg for instance, somewhat disparaging Sir David Low, for many the foremost political cartoonist of the age. Low no Daumier? Daumier's no Low - is he even Tenniel?) What's interesting is that the pictures still speak to (some of) us in a way that these mannered voices, be they never so soigné, frequently don't. Though I warm to Leslie Fiedler's gentle advocacy of this - still! - 'niche' medium

The book is interesting, but it demonstrates one important point that most of us have known for a long time anyway: that the so-called "intellectuals" must justify their enjoyment of any popular medium and write about it as if they were columnists for National Geographic detailing the bizarre folk rites of the Uggabugga village in Lower East Armpit. There is a special amused and self-conscious disdain that the smart-guy "keepers of the flame" of Western Civ. bring with them to the discussion of the best parts of pop culture: they write in that aggravating smug/condescending voice and wrap their superiority up in a fog of twenty-five cent words. Worse, when "intellectuals" enjoy pop media, they can't just relax and flow with it, they have to justify their tastes as if they were disgusting habits. Also, they always get the language wrong. But that's good. It makes the book amusing because it shows what pious hypocrites several of our best writers are when they talk about proletarian entertainments. Woven through most of this book is the idiotic assumption that at the bedrock level, comics exist solely for children and mental defectives. There is also a serious lack of recent intellectual attention for the medium - most of the essays are older than 1990, which means they do not speak to the revolution in graphic storytelling and sequential art that has built up over the last decade and a half. There is also no discussion of the Manga nor of recent graphic novels. Standout essays include material by Marshall McLuhan written in his normal breathy koolkat bop style. The McLuhan piece is from his (otherwise) amazing *Understanding Media*, and is primarily interesting in that for once, McLuhan completely misses the point. He completely overlooks this medium's message, delivery, significance, and even the quality of comic art. Worse, writing in 1964, he confuses Li'l Abner and Kurtzman-era *Mad* with the mainstream comics at the time he was penning his masterpiece. McLuhan's observations ring in the ears like a banjo at a rap concert. The Dorothy Parker essay, "A Mash Note to Crockett Johnson" is wonderful (of course it is), but, as with most of Parker's artistic criticism, tells us a lot more about Ms. Parker than about anything she was supposedly writing about. Parker saw criticism as a chance to display her own remarkable wit rather than the opportunity to discuss the artistic qualities of whatever she was

reviewing. If Parker's critical faculties were on trial for being self serving, "Mash Note" would be "Prosecution Exhibit A" in that trial. Robert Warshow presents two essays, one of which, "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," isn't bad. In terms of cheering the real comics fan, the person who actually understands the medium, the Warshow article is probably the most encouraging material of the book. Warshow "gets it" more or less, but he's still embarrassed to write about the medium and horrified to admit that he actually enjoys Mad magazine (quelle horreur!). What Warshow's article does, though, is attack the absurd Seduction of the Innocent (by Wertham) that led to the 1950's Kefauver hearings that functionally stripped comics of their lifeblood throughout most of the 1960's. As a contemporary criticism of Wertham's paranoid rants, Warshow's tidy little article reads like a paragon of sophistication and moderate thought. Umberto Ecco is represented here with his "The Myth of Superman," which I have nothing but admiration for, since it intelligently and adequately examines Superman as mythic archetype. Sadly, its 1972 publication date renders much of its material unintelligible to the younger regular reader of DC Comics greatest hero, discussing, as it does, the 1940's -- 1960's Superman, a Superman who vanished from pop media about the time that Christopher Reeve played the part for the last time. My favorite essay here is E. E. Cummings' "A Foreword to Krazy," functionally a prose poem dedicated to George Herriman's Krazy Kat (a strip which many of us still consider the finest achievement in comics). The essay is as fabulous and as enigmatic as anything else Cummings wrote (or as the strip to which it is dedicated), but no one will learn much about comics from it. Regardless, it is a perfect essay, lyric, and oblique in pure Cummings style. As I read this little volume, I was mostly reminded of the material that "squares" sometimes used to write about rock and roll music. Think of a really rotten article in Time magazine about rock music...one where some opera buff or other "real music" person chose to write about the Next Big Thing In Pop Music and consistently missed the point, and you'll get the feeling I received from this book. The book is fine, trouble is, that like most books written by the "smart people" about comics, rock and roll, jazz, or any of the other folk/popular media and arts, it consistently misses the point, and will mostly exasperate the real fan. Still, the hard--core fan will want it, if for no other reason than for the occasional jewel--like quote embedded in all this coal. It is nice to see names like this approve - however distantly - of your favorite art form. But actually, this takes us to the prime point: who cares what literary masters think about comics? Isn't one of the points of the arts populaires the opportunity to get away from those guys? Want to know what would be really amusing? I'd like to see a series of essays written about literary masters by comic book fans.

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