

tortion of motive—its attribution of malice or madness or, at best, massive ignorance to individuals who acted in good faith and, indeed, out of a sense of obligation that, if they did not do something, chemical decay would take from the world a significant chunk of the materials they were charged to protect. Librarians saw no option but to film. Should they have moved the materials instead to ideal storage conditions (salt mines, Himalayan caves) and kept them forever from light and thumbs, inaccessible but intact? Perhaps Baker is just too thoroughly a novelist. Led astray by imagination, he can't help but make fiction.

—JAMES MORRIS

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**COMIC BOOK NATION:**  
*The Transformation of Youth Culture in America.*

By Bradford W. Wright. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 336 pp. \$34.95

A mainstay of popular culture for over 70 years, comic books have at times been as controversial as they've been common. They've been piled and torched in schoolyards as a "violent stimulant" to the young, and Superman himself, that quintessential dogooder, has been denounced as a Nietzschean, Nazi-like figure. Wright, who teaches history at the University of Maryland, treats the genre seriously without slighting what makes it fun.

Through an extensive reading of surviving comics from the 1930s to today, Wright shows how they closely followed, and even presaged, major trends. During the depression, Superman and Green Lantern fought corporate greed, for example, and Captain America took a punch at Hitler well before the United States entered the war. It's not surprising that comics of the era appealed to many adults. Indeed, a 1945 study found that roughly half the population read comic books.

Comics lost most of their adult audience after the

Korean War, when publishers began targeting a distinctive youth market. They achieved their greatest commercial success by demolishing the complacent myths of Cold War America. Horror and crime comics, some of them lurid even by today's standards, soon were condemned by concerned parents, pundits, and politicians, who, with scant evidence, blamed the images for a rise in juvenile delinquency. With Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and subsequent U.S. Senate hearings, comics briefly became the most pilloried mass medium. "Not even the Communist conspiracy," one senator declared, "could devise a more effective way to demoralize, disrupt, confuse, and destroy our future citizens."

The controversy subsided when the industry adopted a self-censorship code in 1956, and the debate over possible causes of delinquency switched to movies, television, and rock music, which had followed comics' lead in catering to teens. Instead of helping define the rebellious youth culture, comics largely restricted themselves to a preadolescent niche for the next decade. The self-censorship slowly abated, starting with Marvel Comics' pitch to adolescent angst in such comics as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The X-Men* in the 1960s. In the 1970s came comics' resurgent attention to social issues, and in the 1980s the violent realism of so-called graphic novels.

Even so, comic books haven't been prominent in recent controversies over misguided youth—simply because much of the teen audience has shifted to movies, the Internet, and video games. The audience didn't move on because comics "failed to keep up with changes in American culture," Wright maintains, but rather because "American culture has finally caught up" with comics in its devotion to the "perpetuation of adolescence." For better or worse, we truly have become a comic book nation.

—ROBERT J. YULE



Along with Batman and Spider-Man, the X-Men became the most popular superheroes of the 1980s and '90s.