The History of the American Comic Book, Revised

Review of *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* by Shawna Kidman, University of California Press, 2019

ASHER GUTHERTZ

> Financing tends to choose the winners and then wait for the industry narrative to catch up and call those winners great storytellers.
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> —Shawna Kidman, Comic Books Incorporated

Shawna Kidman's *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* is a phenomenal work of media history predicated on the premise that the history of comic books has been told wrong—at least, told from one particular perspective. In the history that comic book culture produces of itself, "the embattled but worthy comic book, with the help of fans and creators, stands up to those who would destroy it. . . . In this version of the story, comic books are fundamentally subversive, subcultural, and resistant."[1] Kidman argues that attending to the various legal, social, and industrial infrastructures of comic book culture can illustrate that same history—the ebbs and flows of comic book popularity, its shifts in genres and tone, its movements across mediums—as the path of a "fundamentally corporate" medium, "a dominant form in a culture built to support its growth." *Incorporated*

1. Shawna Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 7–8.

https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.2666

succeeds in telling an alternative and extremely convincing narrative of the American comic book across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

In order to demonstrate the usefulness of its approach, the first chapter sketches the broad industrial history that it illustrates in greater detail in the chapters to come. It begins with a sharp takedown of the famous formulation of a golden, silver, and bronze age of comic books. Kidman rightly criticizes the overemphasis of superheroes in that historical narrative and provides a more useful periodization for understanding the medium's trajectory: "An establishing era (1933–1954), a phase of crisis and experimentation (1955–1988), and an age of institutionalization (1989–2010)."[2] The chapter ends with the provocative claim that the comic book medium's historical precarity within the larger media landscape is exactly what has made it such a bedrock of that landscape:

> The comic book industry had learned very early on to mobilize its characters across various media platforms simultaneously and to assimilate itself into corporate networks and infrastructures. They had also, importantly, fostered a more reciprocal exchange with audiences. In all these ways, comic book culture had been a culture of convergence for nearly half a century when the rest of the entertainment industry began moving toward this logic.[3]

In the precise and understated fashion that characterizes this book, this passage disrupts a fantasy held by many comic book fans: that there is something textually special about comic book stories that have made them such a successful locus for contemporary convergence culture. Instead, Kidman provides a strong case for the centrality of the legal and industrial strategies of the comics industry in its current media dominance.

2. Kidman, *Comic Books Incorporated*, 19.
3. Kidman, 43.

The centerpiece of *Comic Books Incorporated* is its second chapter, in which close attention to industrial logics and distribution infrastructures shatters the prevailing story of the medium's massive collapse. In the 1950s, comic books ceased to be a mass medium, falling from a readership of half of the entire US population and more than 90 percent of all children to a current-day readership of one-half of 1 percent of the population. In the usual narrative of that decline, iconoclastic auteurs like Bill Gaines of EC Comics faced public scrutiny from conservative McCarthy–era politicians who forced the industry to develop a self-censorship strategy that vastly limited its creative faculties and audience capacity. Kidman demonstrates that the industry had actually faced several waves of public scrutiny earlier in its history. By the mid-fifties, however, the comic book market was oversaturated, television was siphoning the attention of younger consumers, and distribution infrastructures were breaking down. McCarthy–era hearings, deeply probusiness and invested in a free-market ideology, explicitly aimed to aid entertainment industries in bringing themselves to financial stability and public favor. Kidman even notes that the hearing subcommittee explicitly ignored the now infamous antisuperhero rhetoric of Frederic Wertham, instead focusing on small publishers' "bad taste" comic books like *Tales from the Crypt*. The creation of the Comics Code allowed large publishers, with control of the physical distribution networks, to tighten their stranglehold on the industry and utilize stringent content standards to push out small publishers who were reliant on specific genres: "The comic book industry—disciplined by content codes and constricted distribution networks—became less contentious, more predictable, safer for investors, and less open to independents. It became more corporate."[4]

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the legal and interpersonal infrastructures that led to the transformation of the comic books industry from a mass medium to a niche loss leader whose value lies in its licensing potentials. Chapter 3 uses the famous legal battles of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, creators of

4. Kidman, 90.

Superman, to demonstrate that from the beginning, publishing companies employed a rhetoric of auteurism to ignore the multitude of creative labor involved in comic production while simultaneously wresting copyright control from the very people they claimed author their stories (the writers). Kidman argues that DC and Marvel strategically catered to growing fan interest in individual comic authors to bolster affective engagement, but at the same time, both publishing companies (now part of larger media conglomerates) refused to improve labor conditions and maintained tight control of their right to own their workers' intellectual property. Chapter 4 contends that the cultivation of a small but dedicated consumer base of young adult men in the '60s and '70s generated the conditions for media dominance. In a historically creative gesture, Kidman argues that the Underground Comix movement reshaped distribution infrastructures and strengthened the medium's appeal to college-educated men. The short-lived Comix movement demonstrated that a direct market operated out of specialty stores could minimize overhead by buying for small, dedicated audiences. The modern comic book store arose in the wake of this innovation. This distribution shift explains why textually, comic books became more serialized, continuity heavy, and male-centered. The cultural power of college-aged white men, and their overrepresentation in media production itself, along with the rise in prestigious works like *Maus*, transformed the comic book into something closer to a respectable cultural object.

Chapter 5 picks up where the last chapter left off, explaining how shifts in film financing aligned with shifts in the status of the comic book to create the perfect storm for the adaptation mania of the last two decades. Even while fans of comic books gained cultural power and the status of the medium changed overall, a slew of adaption flops in the '80s, including *Howard the Duck* and *Supergirl*, resulted in an industry myth that comic books were bad adaptation material. Around the turn of the century, studios dedicated themselves to a blockbuster logic in which large budget films were advertised so heavily that studios could virtually guarantee weekend openings massive enough that a sharp drop-off in later weeks did not prevent overall

profit gain. Films like *X-Men* and *Spiderman* were perfectly positioned to do well, and when they did, they launched not just a fad of interest but a real reliance on big-budget superhero films.

That chapter ends by pulling together the greatest thread of *Comic Books Incorporated*: its dogged demystification of industry narratives about the intrinsic cultural value of comic books. We must lay bare the financial logics that enabled this cultural moment, Kidman proves, to counteract Marvel Studios' story that its success stems from the strength and their deep understanding of the source material. The book is a major historical intervention because of the quality and consistency of its rebuttal to that narrative. I can't tell you how many comic book writers and journalists fetishize and self-reflexively write about the Kefauver hearings, implicitly suggesting that the iconoclasm they find in comic book history gives their work value and political edge (which it very often lacks). I actually began this project because of *616*, a Marvel Studios documentary about the history of Marvel Comics. The series is surprisingly rigorous in some ways, but it is no coincidence that it elides from comic book history much of what Kidman brings forth. Everyone who has something to say about comic books or superheroes should read *Comic Books Incorporated*.

After such a precise and measured book on a subject that does not usually get treated in that manner, I was disappointed by Kidman's epilogue, in which she declares, "Socially and structurally, comic book culture is hegemonic."[5] The book's innovative focus on comic book infrastructures allows it to avoid the fan-studies trap of overstating the democratic power of a devoted audience that we should all know by now has truly nominal control over their beloved cultural products. However, by relying so much on industrial and economic data, the conclusion conflates "comic book culture" with the industrial infrastructures that have shaped and enabled it. *Incorporated* discusses human infrastructures, such as the vocal fan communities that shaped the industry's transformation and the

5. Kidman, 231.

comic-fans-turned-Hollywood-creatives who facilitated its transmedial movements, but leaves out of its assessment that comic culture is a multitude of reading relationships that occurred in the history of American comics. The epilogue goes on to commend recent diversity efforts in superhero films like *Black Panther* and *Wonder Woman* while warning that those shifts likely came about because shifts in corporate decision-making allowed them to. Kidman argues that "a better cultural future" is predicated upon "the right distribution networks and the right laws," in addition to accommodating corporate structures and available financial backing. Without negating the importance of those industrial changes, I would ask how we know what a better cultural future for comic books looks like without paying close attention to the role comic books have played and continue to play in real people's lives.

Which leads me to a suggestion for some areas of further research suggested by the history presented in *Comic Books Incorporated*. This is the best book of comic book history I have ever read, and I believe it is crucial to hold on to the insights and revelations that this text finds through its industry-studies approach while introducing a closer attention to comic book reading practices. One major lingering question that seems to necessitate ethnographic historical work is, Why did women turn their backs on the comic book medium in the 1950s? Scholars, including Kidman, seem to assume that the industry's turn away from romance comic books and toward superheroes explains the demographic shift in and of itself, but according to the history presented in this book, comic book genres cycled in and out of popularity in the '40s and '50s, suggesting to me that women were not exclusively or even primarily reading romance comics. What comic books did women read, and what did they find (and then cease to find) in those stories? Similarly, *Incorporated* effectively argues that a dedicated cult audience of college-aged white men drove the trend toward serialized storytelling in comic books (and that the comics industry capitalized on that demographic's investment). In the context of the American soap opera, however, seriality is associated with female audiences and consumption within the

domestic sphere. Why did the comic book serial-reading relationship become so associated with male reading? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the serialized pleasures of comic books and the serialized pleasures of soap operas?

Comic Books Incorporated is a stellar industrial history of the American comic book that thoroughly demonstrates that its evolution was driven not by creativity and iconoclasm but by corporate logics. Its publication will hopefully inaugurate new directions in comics studies, some of which Kidman herself points to, such as an infrastructural analysis of comic book industries outside of America (and, we might add, the relationship between American and other graphic arts industries). While we absolutely need "to bring these changing infrastructures out of the shadows," we also need to revisit the well-trod arguments and questions of comic book studies. Medium specificity, serialized reading practices, shared narrative universes, demographic shifts in readership and fan cultures, and the relationship between superheroes and other forms of myth need to be recontextualized within this fascinating history of corporate infrastructure.