Classics Illustrated: A Cultural History with Illustrations (review)

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Book Reviews

William B. Jones, Jr.
Classics Illustrated: A Cultural History with Illustrations.
McFarland, 2002.
287 pages; $55.00.

Postwar Period

From approximately 1945 until 1955 another generation of American teenagers emerged onto the adolescent stage. Here, during these formative years, the youngsters played fast-moving neighborhood games such as Johnny-rides-a-pony, ringalevio, and spud, helped their mothers operate those ringer washing machines, while off to the side, eyed their fathers slap another patch on a tire's inner tube. In the schoolroom, they sang "The Arkansas Traveler," "Stout-Hearted Men," and "Tit Willow" while their teachers reminded them that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating" or warned about the dangers of being "out of kilter."

Back in the house, these kids screwed flashbulbs into cameras, threw coal into the furnace (later, they would remove the ashes), and, when feeling mischievous, listened to some neighbor "chew the fat" on those party line telephone connections. Sometimes, they watched an older sister (or an unmarried aunt) get "dolled up" for a Saturday night dance or envied an older brother who strolled into a diner and ordered a blue plate special.

In their kitchens, these adolescents wolfed down bowls of Kellogg's Pep (Superman's official cereal), gulped glasses of Ovaltine (Captain Midnight's favorite drink), and watched their mothers toss a generous spoonful of Crisco into a frying pan, while in the background the radio adventures of *Boston Blackie* ("friend to those who had no friends"), *The Fat Man* ("Weight: 237 pounds; fortune: danger"), *The Shadow* ("Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?"), *We the People* (Gabriel Heatter's reassuring "Ah, there's good news tonight"), and, of course, *The Lone Ranger* ("Who was that masked man?") emanated from the front room.

At the neighborhood shows, the youngsters cheered their favorite cowboy heroes—Johnny Mack Brown, Lash LaRue, Red Barry, Hopalong Cassidy—galloping across the plains blasting those unsavory, mustachioed villains trying to steal some widow's ranch while over in the combat zone John Wayne, Dennis Morgan, and John Garfield repeatedly routed America's Axis foes. Since the postwar period was in its incipient stages, many of the youngsters remembered those blackout shades their parents installed, the postage-stamp-sized points necessary to buy rationed food, the backyard victory gardens, those war bonds sold almost everywhere, and the Memorial Day parades, where polite spectators quietly demurred when the Gold Star mothers—sitting collectively in their convertible automobiles—passed in review.

For literary pursuits, every teenager stocked his own stash of comic books, those ten-cent purchases that provided untold enjoyment and faraway dreaming. Here in the fantasy world of *Red Ryder, Little Lulu, Mandrake the Magician, Bucky Bug, L'il Abner, Smilin' Jack, Terry and the Pirates, The Little King,* and *Dick Tracy,* these adolescents reveled in the fun and fancy these monthly publications provided. *Blackhawk, Plastic Man, Batman, Archie, The Phantom, Wonder Woman, Superman*—these comic book characters provided a visual education and, coupled with pride in ownership, formed the basis of a youngster's first library.

But what comic books stood out? Which titles provided the best venue for vicarious thrills? What publications combined exotic adventure pitched exclusively to young boys' yearnings while providing a backdrop for learning and serious literature? The answer—according to popular culture historian, William B. Jones, Jr.—was a collection of noteworthy titles, published monthly, using the simple inscription, *Classic Comics,* as a prominent logo. Here, according to the distributors, were stories by the world's greatest authors in a format that everyone could enjoy and understand.

According to Mr. Jones, *Classic Comics* (renamed *Classics Illustrated* in 1947) had become as much a part of growing-up in postwar America as baseball cards, hula-hoops, Barbie dolls, or rock'n'roll. From its modest beginnings in 1941—until the last press run in 1971—these comic books introduced GIs, bobby-soxers, and their baby-boom children to every genre of world literature encompassing such diverse works as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Frank Buck's *Fang and Claw,* Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations,* Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* By the time it was all over, 169 titles were printed (and, frequently, reissued), numerous spin-offs created, a rival copy-cat company emerged and departed, right-wing educators and reformers denounced its "immoral" format, and, as the *pièce de résistance*, translated editions appeared in twenty-six languages in thirty-six foreign countries.

To chronicle this elaborate history, Mr. Jones spent long hours locating every issue of *Classic Comics* and *Classic Illus-*

trated—owned by libraries, institutions, private collectors, devotees, and simple enthusiasts—to compile an impressive twelve-part appendix that summarizes all 169 titles plus the many offshoots. Writers, artists, illustrators, designers, and painters, and, of course, the founder, Albert Kanter, are detailed and each person's contribution lauded. As Mr. Jones explains, what started as a 1941 shoestring operation eventually turned into an international publishing phenomenon. Why wouldn't it? As the noted journalist Pete Hamill remarked, these comic books provided a road map for real books.

Since all children, Mr. Jones asserts, create their own mythology as they reinvent the world, there are always tangible elements at work shaping these ideas. During this thirty-year period, thousands of youngsters fell under the spell of *Classic Comics.* Here, many American teenagers fantasized about *War of the Worlds, Ivanhoe,* or *Toilers of the Sea* as they evolved into adults. These narratives, of course, remained with them.

As an academic study, *Classics Illustrated: A Cultural History, with Illustrations* mirrors this postwar generation and the influence it yielded on every reader. With dozens of original cover photos—including a wonderful center section of color reproductions—Mr. Jones' study represents the best memory book in a long time. Anyone who remembers horse drawn milk trucks, mail deliveries twice a day, faded red enema bags, pin boys at bowling alleys, the St. Louis Browns, and the "cat's meow" will love this book. It is a work of outstanding achievement.

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Christoph Lindner, editor.
The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader.
Manchester University Press, 2003.
268 pages, $74.95.

Hero as Globetrotter

When Ursula Andress arose from the waves, like a discreet Venus, in *Dr. No* in 1962, she became, for all time, the quintessence of the James Bond style, so much so that Halle Berry's similar star entrance in *Die Another Day* (2002), was a sign that the old formula still intended to weave its magic in changed times. Never mind that in the intervening forty years 007 had been played by five different actors, or that the Cold War had been and gone along with Swinging London and Sean Connery's hairline. This new version announced the longevity of Bond, the fact that he was a spy for all seasons.

According to *Variety,* over half the world's population has seen a Bond film, and this is not, perhaps, as surprising as it might seem. For these outrageously popular fantasy adventures tap into two general concerns that have been a worldwide constant ever since 1945. The first is an anxiety surrounding the international situation, whether it relates to potential nuclear holocaust, or to terrorism. The second rises out of the first: it is the deep, necessarily deluded need to believe that these problems are less complex than they appear, and that they can be solved by the courage and moral righteousness of an individual hero.

James Bond is that hero. This collection, written by a range of scholars from different disciplines and countries, tackles numerous issues surrounding fiction's most famous secret agent, both on screen and on the page. All the essays are, in essence, variations on the theme of the hero as globetrotter, an empire warrior sent from M's clubby office to exotic locations where he slugs it out with the Blofelds and the Largos, who, in turn, represent all the malevolent forces that whisper to us out of the headlines. A certain amount of ideological baggage goes with this idea: as many contributors point out, Bond is an imperialist, other races are not quite pukkah, and the energy of conquest extends to some pretty dodgy dealings in the sex war. Yet Christoph Lindner and his team show that these issues do not remain constant. To borrow Tony Bennett's and Janet Woollacott's phrase, the character some countries call "Mister Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang" is "a moving signifier".

This means that the nature of Bond's heroism slips and slides according to the particular historical period, or to the writer's point of view. For example, in "Licensed to Look: James Bond and the Heroism of Consumption", Michael Denning paints the spy of the books as a response to the growing Fifties phenomenon of tourism; he sees him as a super-consumer of other cultures, who gives the banality of modern travel an added excitement: "Fleming's adventures are really tales of leisure, tales where leisure is not a packaged, commodified 'holiday'…but is an adventure, a meaningful time, a time of life and death." By contrast, Jim Leach views Pierce Brosnan's film Bond as a reconciler of current tensions surrounding the dominance of technology. The agent connects the impersonality of his gadgetry to the human cunning that can make it effective.

In the midst of these multiple views, one issue remains constant. As Judi Dench's M said, rather crisply, in Brosnan's first outing (*Goldeneye* in 1995), "you're a sexist, misogynist dinosaur." Many essays affirm this outlook in passing, but the main emphasis is on disturbing this placid assumption. In a re-reading of women in the Bond novels, Christine Bold suggests that female readers can reclaim all those breathy