

## Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

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Ian Gordon. *Kid Comic Strips: A Genre Across Four Countries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ---. *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2017.

Cathy L. Ryan

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**Abstract**

Review of Ian Gordon. *Kid Comic Strips: A Genre Across Four Countries*. Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels, Ed. Roger Saban. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Review of Ian Gordon. *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2017.

**Keywords**

comics, children's comics, kid comic strips, Comics Studies, Ian Gordon, Superman

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Ian Gordon. *Kid Comic Strips: A Genre Across Four Countries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 94 pp.

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Ian Gordon proposes in *Superman: The Persistence of An American Icon* that when a daily Superman comic strip was introduced in 1939, a confluence of factors in the 1940s transformed the titular character into a symbol of more general American cultural values. Superman's individualism and success as a comic book character brought new opportunities and attention to publishers and creators who clashed as they sought "to realize the [consumerist] value in those opportunities" (18). At the same time, the morality campaign that morphed into the Comics Code Authority of the 1950s and 1960s was attributable to the success of comics and the nation's growing patriotism. All these factors led to the "timeless" nature of the Superman comic strip (18). Gordon's study explores how the vast Superman corpus crosses media forms and incorporates myth, history, ideology, and nostalgia (173). California State University, Northridge professor and leading comics historian and theorist Charles Hatfield suggests in his editorial review for Amazon that Gordon brings a new perspective on Superman as a "process," what he describes as "a shared, and often fought over, element of American culture."

By comparison, Gordon's *Kid Comic Strips: A Genre Across Four Countries*, focuses a more singular lens on comics history. The term "kid comics" refers in Gordon's study to comics featuring kids, not necessarily comics read by children. The book represents his comprehensive efforts to coalesce extant knowledge of the nature of kid comics across four continents. The author manifests a cultural anthropology of comics in his slender book. The aficionado may find the book appealing as a resource text. Yet Gordon describes his study as "exploratory" rather than "exhaustive" (2). He examines comic strips across countries as a way to provide an introduction to the international history of comics, as follows: Why Kid Comics? (chapter 1); America and Australia: *Skippy* and *Ginger Meggs* (chapter 2); America and France: *Perry Winkle* and *Bicot* (chapter 3); America and Britain: *Dennis the Menace(s)* (chapter 4); and Comics Scholarship and Comparative Studies (chapter 5). Generally speaking, the book offers three comparative studies: the American strip *Skippy* with the Australian strip *Ginger Meggs*, the *Perry Winkle* Sunday episodes of *Winnie Winkle* with the French translation of that strip as *Bicot*, and both the American and British *Dennis the Menace* comics. Publications like Gordon's and the first collection of critical essays on children's and Young Adult (YA) comics, *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox

(2017), lend credence to the notion that comics have transitioned from graphical canon to literary canon.

Studying kid comic strips across four countries affords Gordon the opportunity to ascertain what Americans contributed to the development of the comics form. Scholarship across the past twenty years has created a burgeoning field of inquiry made up of panels, pages, and varied literary forms that comprise a comics genre. Gordon postulates that the emergence of the word balloon in the 1900s was distinctively American. Gordon gives attribution to Thierry Smoderen and further explains that the word balloon addressed the need to give voice to characters, in part, due to Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph. Pascal Lefevre adds that word balloons facilitated a movement from an American culture that privileged the written word to a "more visual oriented mass culture" (qtd. 6). Word balloons did not emerge in French comics until the 1920s. Beyond considerations such as country of origin, format, and comics structure (e.g., the American *Dennis the Menace* was a single-panel, six days a week "gag strip," 81), the book treats diverse societal issues, including class and race. Gordon proposes that what made American comics different from those authored elsewhere was their place in mass circulated newspapers. Not only did American comics have a commercial bent but the comics themselves were instrumental in shaping a culture of consumption. *Kid Comic Strips* provides a snapshot of the history of comics, as well as helps today's readers contextualize the growth of Comics Studies from nascent discipline into one of the fastest growing fields in the Humanities.

Generally speaking, *Kid Comic Strips* will appeal more to teachers and practitioners than to the casual reader. Gordon spent countless hours in libraries poring over comic strip clippings and archived newspapers. *Kid Comic Strips* provides readers entrée to a time in America when children grew up playing baseball in sandlots and stickball in city streets, milk was delivered in glass containers on the doorstep, and Sunday readers of *The Daily News* opened a Comics section in full color that spread out across the kitchen table like a newspaper. Gordon achieves this nostalgic effect in how he minutely catalogs thematic elements, such as Dennis the Menace's tendency to be overly frank at the wrong moment (on page 67, he identifies at least 34 of these gags in Hank Ketcham's American comic strip published between 1951 and 1954).

One of the delights of Gordon's study comes from his insights pertaining to comics across continents. Chapter 2 compares and contrasts the way America's Percy Crosby (*Skippy*) and Australia's James Bancks (*Ginger Meggs*) used similar humor tropes, such as broken window gags. For example, Crosby's economical style set up and delivered his gag in one to four panels versus Bancks's full page and 12-panel form. Different styles were needed in a daily than in a Sunday comic strip. Beyond simple intelligences of form, serialization, and so on, readers will

appreciate Gordon's keen comics sense, such as when he elaborates on Crosby's delivery of the "short sharp joke" versus Bancks's "small narrative" (16). He explains how long-running comic strips generally set up stock situations in which the humor is not so much the situation as the way in which it plays out. Figure 2.1 on page 29 of *Kid Comic Strips* depicts a *Skippy* soap box racer gag from the *Des Moines Register* (c. 1936) that readers will clearly see as an antecedent to Calvin's madly careening wagon in Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip. Kid comic strips featuring kids—not necessarily comics read by children—provide Gordon the opportunity to compare comics from different countries as a way to understand what features American comic strips have contributed to the international form of comic art.

Gordon wants readers to see his book, and its comparison of American comic strips to strips in Australia, France, and Britain, as a "provocation" (89) to people who insist on the unique American origins of the comic strip as an art form. He argues that we should see humor as international and understand America's contribution to the development of comics largely as the commercialization of the form in ways easily adaptable to the traditions of comics in other countries. The book makes an important contribution to the field of study by providing unique historical contextualization of the lesser-explored world of kid comics. No doubt, readers will revisit *Kid Comic Strips* time and time again.

Cathy Ryan  
*The Ohio State University*