



BOOK REVIEW:

*Comic Books Incorporated: How the
Business of Comics Became the Business of
Hollywood*

Cait Coker

Kidman, Shawna. *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood*. U of California P, 2019. ISBN 978-0520297562.

In recent years I've heard an excess of arguments decrying the popularity of superhero films. Various friends, enemies, and cultural critics who would otherwise not be caught dead with one another in the same room agree that such films are allegedly "ruining cinema", and their existence stems solely from the greed and cynicism of craven corporate despots. *Comic Books Incorporated*, however, goes a long way towards dispelling several elements of those arguments by focusing on the *longue durée* of comics transmedia. It is an entirely refreshing work of publishing history, focusing neither on Great Men™, specific writers, characters, titles, nor companies, but rather on providing an eagle's eye overview of the technological improvements and industrial shifts that have made those figures and texts both possible and profitable. Working heavily on revising our received notions of comic-book history, Kidman argues that comics aren't scrappy cultural underdogs that overcame the challenges of conventional mainstream culture; rather, they reflect that same mainstream. "Comic books were never without power," Kidman writes in conclusion, "the culture around them emanated from a place of economic, political, and social strength" (231). Kidman draws on infrastructure studies, a discipline that describes the production of commodities and business services, to discuss four case studies illustrating the turning points in

comic production history. By doing so, she shows that mass-media production has always been intimately interwoven with the history of comics.

Kidman begins her analyses with “A Brief Transmedia History of the U.S. Comic Book Industry”, an account that acknowledges the vast quantities of film serials, cartoons, television series, and animated and live-action films that have been produced since the 1940s. None of these titles are unfamiliar, as I and likely many other readers can easily reach into our memories of Saturday morning or afternoon television watching to remember *Super Friends* (1973–1986) or *X-Men* (1992–1997), but Kidman recontextualises their individual histories within the broader framework of transmedia. Kidman also provides two extensive, chronological appendices that detail at great length the sheer quantity of these productions: 128 films and television adaptations aired between 1940 and 2010, and 94 theatrical film adaptations released (mostly; there is the one legendary 1994 production of *The Fantastic Four* that was suppressed) from 1956 to 2010 (although, curiously, the listing actually begins with 1972’s *Fritz the Cat*). Comics have *always* been transmedial properties, Kidman argues, and effectively drops the mic with quantitative spreadsheets.

That first chapter creates a singular narrative spanning the 1930s through the 2010s. Kidman then follows with four chapters that discuss industry and change chronologically, starting with the 1950s, in more minute detail. The first case study explores the well-trodden ground of censorship and regulation in the 1950s, including the Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency that ultimately ushered in the Comics Code in 1954. These events kept the public focus on comic-book content, and the regulations legitimised existing business models and discouraged further government oversight. They arguably, if unintentionally, also served to constrain the medium for decades by making it more difficult for independent publishers and creators to enter the industry, reinforcing the notion of a medium primarily created by and for straight white men only. Kidman further argues that these interactions undercut any possibility that comics culture has a truly subversive tradition, given that throughout these shifts the industry operated in collaboration with the US government, and that those points of resistance that did exist instead lay with financially invested distributors who were already faced with a number of market problems. The familiar story of cultural witch-hunting, laid at the feet of Frederic Wertham (the psychologist who argued in his 1954 study *Seduction of the Innocent* that comics were directly at fault for juvenile-delinquency rates), is effectively revised to a more nuanced exploration of media distribution and consolidation.

Kidman’s next case study takes an in-depth look into how authorship and copyright law shaped the landscape of American comic production. Kidman undercuts the tale of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster by arguing that the story acts as a structuring myth for the creative community – the two creators of Superman who early on sold their rights to the character for a paltry sum, only to watch as large conglomerates made massive fortunes. A series of lawsuits and the changing tide of public opinion eventually restored them some fortune and fame, creating a heartwarming story of two underdog artists who made good and fought the good fight. (Recent news stories of other comics writers and artists who were “robbed” by filmmaking studios touch on this as well.) This narrative underscored our cultural emphasis on creators and auteurs as indispensable to cultural production, the singular “great men” stories we

recognise repeatedly from our history books, in contrast to the vast teams of laborers who produce work for large-scale companies. Increasing attention is being paid to creative teams rather than singular authors in terms of television and film studies, but this view is still being filtered down to histories of textual production.

Kidman next looks at the histories of comics fans and their demographics in the 1970s and 1980s. This period oversaw the key transition of comics from popular “low” art to prestige media adaptations, culminating in high-budget cinematic adaptations of *Superman* (1978) and *Batman* (1989) as well as HBO’s popular *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–1996) series and its many offshoots. Prestige productions require a significant audience of socio-economic affluence, though, and its attendant purchasing power. From here arose the familiar constructions of comics fans as white males with enough money and influence to build collector’s markets. At the same time, actual comics readerships were declining; there was more money to be made in media than in books. Kidman does particularly good work here in teasing out the very real “freezing out” of women and other voices from creative production teams and as readers and buyers of comics. Exclusive fan communities make for hostile spaces. Although Kidman never names Gamergate directly, it’s impossible to read these sections without thinking about its pervasive influence on geek culture and the attendant phrase “fake geek girls”.

The final case study looks at the rise of the superhero film in the 1990s and 2000s. In particular Kidman focuses on the business dealings of film companies and how the rights to intellectual properties can be purchased, bought back, or even put in indefinite limbo. Particular attention is given to Disney’s purchase of Marvel in 2009, but the study concludes well before the shake-ups involving Sony Entertainment and others. Unfortunately, Kidman completes her formal study with 2010; moreover, while references are made to the cinematic universes that would soon take over, there is no extended analysis. This, while understandable – this book was published in 2019, and also cultural studies have to stop *somewhere* – is also unfortunate because we lose the extended analysis that could have come from analyses of *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018), to say nothing of the tour de force of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Nonetheless, this book is a must-read for how it contextualises so much comics history as a function of business practices rather than as solely creative works. Kidman’s work effectively displaces a great deal of recent criticism on comics and comics media culture, and by doing so will vastly improve the work of future scholars.

Reading this book during an ongoing pandemic also reinforced many of its points. COVID-19 laid bare the weaknesses of supply and demand chains across the world, including the comics market. As lockdowns multiplied across the US, news stories described in detail the economic travails of businesses large and small; comics sellers, among the last holdouts of brick-and-mortar retailers, and lacking the infrastructures needed for a digital pivot, were hit particularly hard. Publishing companies came to a virtual standstill as they were unable to receive printing supplies, and creators faced difficulties in delivering content and receiving timely payments. Film studios postponed releases again and again as theaters remained closed or with only a handful of visitors, and when some features were finally released via online streaming

platforms, a host of lawsuits followed. Kidman's arguments were thus proved in real time: "Culture is built on top of and through infrastructure" (233).

Biography: Cait Coker is Associate Professor and Curator of Rare Books at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research is focused on the intersections of genre, gender, and publishing history. Her articles have appeared in *Mythlore*, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *The Seventeenth Century*, and the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, among others. Most recently she is the editor of *The Global Vampire: Essays on the Undead in Popular Culture Around the World* (McFarland, 2020).