

American Comics: A Jewish History

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Comics: a series of images put in sequence, usually mixing in some text, has a long history in the United States. Americans did not create this art form (scholars believe comics can be found in medieval European tapestries, Mayan codices, and even ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics), but the modern form of comics, ranging from superheroes to lengthy autobiographical stories, has been significantly influenced by their development in America. Throughout the different stages of comic history, Jews have been involved at every level, often playing crucial and foundational roles. This article will provide a brief overview of American comics, emphasizing the contributions of Jewish creators—one of the many influential roles American Jews have had in shaping American popular culture. And certainly one of the most fun.

Comics have been part of American culture since before the Revolutionary War. Benjamin Franklin even created a few, most famously the 1754 cartoon showing a snake cut into pieces to represent the colonies, with the caption “JOIN, or DIE.” Comics grew in popularity around the turn of the twentieth century with the rise of affordable newspapers that carried national content.



*Join, or Die, a 1754 political cartoon by Benjamin Franklin published in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* in Philadelphia, addresses the disunity of the thirteen colonies during the French and Indian War. Several decades later, the cartoon resurfaced as one of the most iconic symbols in support of the American Revolution. Wikimedia Commons.*

One of the leading publishers, Joseph Pulitzer (a Jewish **immigrant** from Hungary), understood the importance of comics. Before this, comics mostly appeared in expensive, high-status weekly magazines. Pulitzer used comics to attract more readers to his newspapers. He also liked sensationalistic journalism (the “if it bleeds, it leads” style), which is surprising since today his name is linked to a major prize for excellence in journalism.

Pulitzer’s publishing rival, William Randolph Hearst, also embraced comics. In 1895, Pulitzer’s newspaper *The World* introduced *The Yellow Kid* by Richard F. Outcault, one of the first great comic strips. In the early decades of the new century, when nearly everyone read newspapers, it was impossible to grasp American life without considering the cartoons that tens of millions of readers enjoyed each day.

Being a newspaper cartoonist was a high-status, high-income job, and Jewish people were mostly excluded from that world. There were, however, some exceptions. Cartoonists like Milt Gross, who brought ethnic dialect to the comics page with works like *Nize Baby*,¹ and Rube Goldberg, whose cartoons of ridiculously complex machines became legendary, managed to break through. But they were rare, and their success proved the rule.

On the other hand, a side business that grew out of newspaper comics—collecting old cartoons and reprinting them in books—was low-status work. In other words, comic books started as reprints. It was not until the mid- to late-1930s that people began creating new stories for them. And it was in one of those comics, focused on the theme of “action,” that the world changed.

In 1938, *Action Comics #1* introduced the character Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, marking the birth of the superhero genre. This new style of storytelling, focused on larger-than-life heroes, shaped the future of comic books and popular culture. Siegel and Shuster, young Jewish men from Cleveland, Ohio, created a hero who mixed pulp fiction and science fiction—a guy from outer space who came to Earth to fight for truth, justice, and the American way. After their idea was rejected by newspapers, they moved to sell it to a comic book company.



Joe Shuster (seated) and Jerry Siegel at work on *Superman*, in their studio, in 1942. Wikimedia Commons.

Superman became a massive hit and the superhero an icon, and started a wave of superheroes. The overwhelming majority of the creators behind these modern comic book pioneers were Jewish. Batman, Robin, the Joker, Captain America—their creators, Bob Kane (born Robert Kahn), Bill Finger (born Milton Finger), Jerry Robinson (born Sherrill David Robinson), Joe Simon (born Hymie Simon), and Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg), were all Jewish. Some people say these heroes’ alter egos were intentionally un-Jewish, as the creators tried to distance themselves from their Jewish identities.

¹ *Nize Baby* is a 1926 book that collected humorous retellings of classic stories like “Elledin witt de Wanderful Lemp” and “Jack witt de Binn Stuck,” using a playful mix of Yiddish and English that would define much of his later work. For a collection of Gross’s work, see *Is Diss a System?: A Milt Gross Comic Reader*, edited by Ari Y. Kelman (2010).

Others believe these creators were simply trying to write stories that would appeal to a wide audience. However, one thing did seem more Jewish: many of their characters, including Superman and Captain America, opposed the Nazis early on, even before America entered the war, at a time when much of the country was still isolationist.

Another important Jewish creator from the time was Will Eisner, the son of a **Yiddish** theater set designer. Eisner played a key role in creating the “shop” system, which broke down comic book production into different assembly line steps, much like many immigrant-run shops in New York’s garment district at the time. Along with his business perspective, Eisner viewed comics also as a medium for artistic expression. This led to his creation of innovative splash pages (one-panel covers) and new narrative techniques in his superhero comic, *The Spirit*.

After World War II, one company produced the most important and influential comics in the country for a time. EC Comics was founded as Educational Comics by Jewish publisher M.C. Gaines (who passed on Superman). After M.C. died in a boating accident, his son Bill took over and changed the “E” to “Entertaining.” And entertaining they were—though for adults, not just the kids who loved superheroes like Superman, Batman, and Captain America. EC’s comics set the standard for several genres, including science fiction, war comics, and horror comics. Horror comics sparked a moral panic in the early 1950s. This led to a Senate subcommittee investigation into comic books and juvenile delinquency, where Gaines testified. He infamously noted that, for a comic book, a cover of theirs depicting a hand holding a severed human head was in “good taste”—after all, it could have had more blood dripping from it.

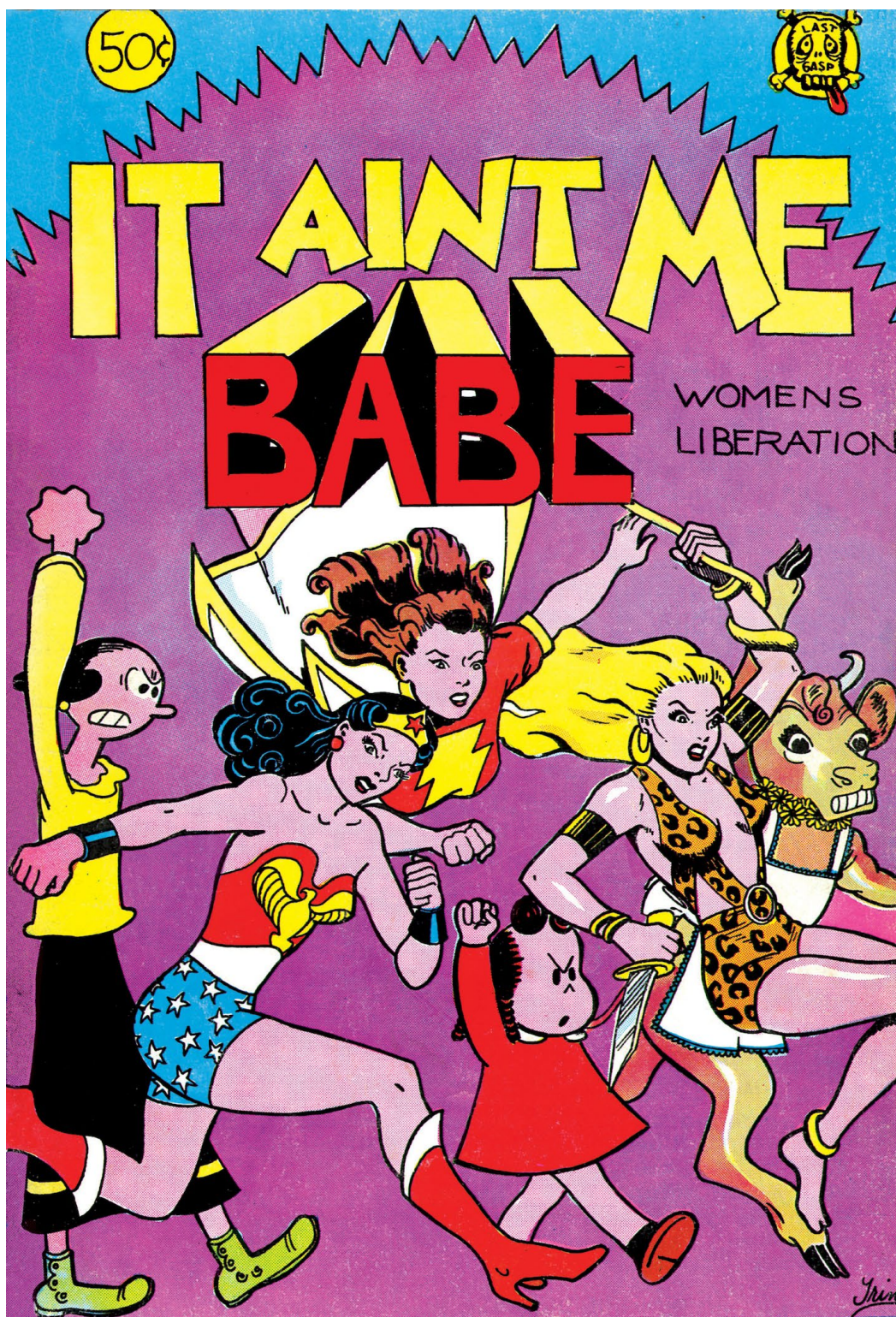
In use from 1954 until 2011, all comics that (voluntarily) carried this seal were approved by the Comics Code Authority. Under the code, almost all depictions of horror and violence were forbidden. The seal became a powerful symbol of the industry’s self-censorship during a time of heightened concern over comic books’ influence on youth. Toronto Metropolitan University.



The backlash nearly drove Gaines out of the comic book business, but he had the last laugh. The new industry rules did not apply to magazines, so he created *Mad*, a wildly successful magazine full of comics. *Mad* influenced a generation of counter-culturists, nonconformists, and even some conformists who appreciated a little silliness. The magazine also had a distinctly Jewish flavor, with Yiddish sounds and humor, like the “chicken fat” of Eastern European Jewish cuisine, as one artist described it.

Some of the kids who grew up reading *Mad*—about a generation later—helped change comics into *comix* (with an “x”). This small change in spelling highlights how different these new works were and the significant changes they brought to the medium. Comix were bold and challenged social norms. Jewish artists like a young Art Spiegelman, Aline Kominsky (later known as Aline Kominsky-Crumb), and Trina Robbins were at the forefront of this transformation. They expanded the possibilities of what comics could express. Often, their creations used strong language and addressed new themes. These themes included personal narratives (especially autobiographical ones) and political critiques, often directed at powerful institutions.

While Jews were not the only Baby Boomers involved in liberal movements within comix or elsewhere during the late 1960s, they played a significant role. This was especially true for Jewish women, who began to find ways to express themselves in a field that had long been closed off to them.



Cover of *It Aint [sic] Me Babe* Comix (1970), the first underground comic created entirely by women (and co-produced by Trina Robbins and Barbara "Willy" Mendes), featuring iconic female characters like Wonder Woman, Sheena, and Little Lulu raising their fists beneath the slogan "women's liberation." Grand Comics Database.

Even outside of underground comics, a new sense of adulthood (or at least maturity) was taking hold. College students were drawn to a new wave of superheroes who dealt with more adult issues, or at least very late teenage ones, compared to the science fiction adventures of the Justice League of America. Many of these characters came from the creative minds at Marvel Comics. Two of the most influential were Stan Lee (born Stanley Lieber) and Jack Kirby, who had co-created Captain America a generation earlier. Most of the superheroes that would later dominate movie theaters were created during this time, most by American Jews.

As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, mainstream and independent comics began to converge more and more. Part of this shift was driven by the return of an old master—Will Eisner—who had spent years creating industrial comics for businesses. In 1978, Eisner released *A Contract With God*, a semi-autobiographical work that looked back on his youth in the Lower East Side. It showed the comics world that serious, artistic storytelling was not just for the younger countercultural crowd.

Eight years later, Art Spiegelman, who had long explored autobiography in his work, published the first volume of *Maus* in book form. The graphic memoir told the story of his father's experiences in the **Holocaust** and Spiegelman's own experience as the son of a survivor. *Maus* went on to win a special Pulitzer Prize. It remains one of the most powerful examples of how comics can address any subject—even the most serious.

In the two generations since *Maus* was published, the old anxieties about comics—that they are only for kids, socially harmful, or too slight to take seriously—have mostly faded. With the rise of the Internet and the increased diversity of creators across the country, comics have become more accessible to a wider range of people. As a result, Jews are no longer at the center of American comics in the way they once were. But that does not mean they have disappeared from the scene.

Jewish creators continue to play important roles in the field. Ben Katchor won a MacArthur “genius grant” for his surreal and nostalgic stories about Jewish life. Brian Michael Bendis, who was raised in a traditionally **Orthodox** Jewish home, has become one of the most prolific and respected superhero writers of the twenty-first century. J.T. Waldman reimagined the biblical Scroll of Esther in a style that recalls ancient illustrated manuscripts. And Barry Deutsch's *Hereville* series brings the folk traditions of Eastern European Jewish culture into the modern world, following a brave and clever girl named Mirka.²

The work of these creators, and many, many more, suggest that the story of American Jews and comics is far from over.

² Jeremy Dauber, *American Comics: A History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).