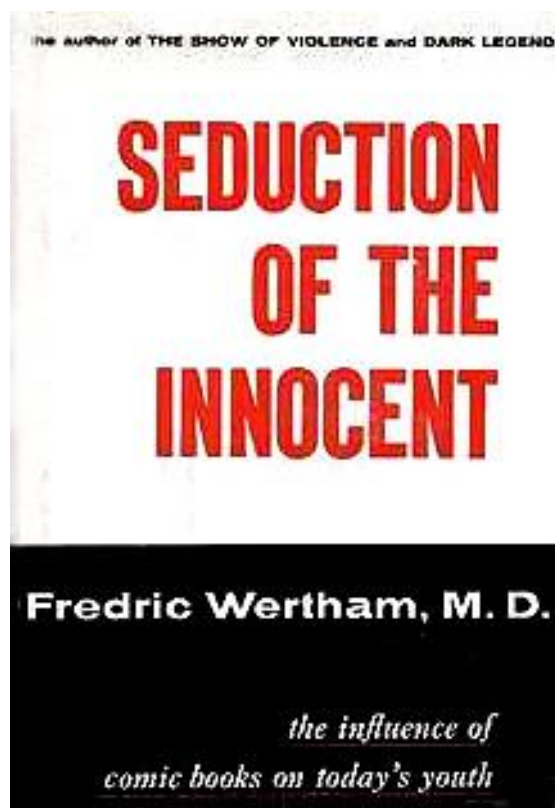




# SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT

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*Seduction of the Innocent*



First edition cover

Author	Fredric Wertham
Subject	Comic books
Publisher	Rinehart & Company
Publication date	1954

## CONTENT AND THEMES

*Seduction of the Innocent* cited overt or covert

depictions of violence, sex, drug use, and other adult fare within "crime comics" – Wertham used to describe not only the popular gangster/murder-oriented titles of the time, but superhero and horror comics as well. The book asserted that reading this material encouraged similar behavior in children.

Comics, especially the crime/horror titles pioneered by EC, were not lacking in gruesome images; Wertham reproduced these extensively, pointing out what he saw as recurring morbid themes such as "injury to the eye".<sup>[1]</sup> Many of his other conjectures, particularly about hidden sexual themes (e.g. images of female nudity concealed in drawings or Batman and Robin as gay partners), met with derision within the comic book industry. Wertham's claim that Wonder Woman had a bondage subtext was somewhat

*Seduction of the Innocent* is a book by German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, published in 1954, that warned that comic books were a negative form of popular literature and a serious cause of juvenile delinquency. The book was taken seriously at the time, and was a minor bestseller that created alarm in parents and galvanized them to campaign for censorship. At the same time, a U.S. Congressional inquiry was launched into the comic book industry. Subsequent to the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, the Comics Code Authority was voluntarily established by publishers to self-censor their titles.

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better documented, as her creator William Moulton Marston had admitted as much; however, Wertham also claimed Wonder Woman's strength and independence made her a lesbian.<sup>[2]</sup> Wertham also claimed that Superman was both un-American and a fascist.

Wertham critiqued the commercial environment of comic book publishing and retailing, objecting to air rifles and knives advertised alongside violent stories. Wertham sympathized with retailers who did not want to sell horror comics, yet were compelled by their distributors' table d'hôte product line policies.

*Seduction of the Innocent* was illustrated with comic-book panels offered as evidence, accompanied by a line of Wertham's sardonic commentary. The first printing contained a bibliography listing the comic book publishers cited, but fears of lawsuits compelled the publisher to tear the bibliography page from any copies available, so copies with an intact bibliography are rare. Early complete editions of *Seduction of the Innocent* often sold for high figures among book and comic book collectors.

Beginning in 1948, Wertham wrote and spoke widely, arguing about the detrimental effects that comics reading had on young people. Consequently, *Seduction of the Innocent* serves as a culminating expression of his sentiments about comics and presents augmented examples and arguments, rather than wholly new material.<sup>[3]</sup> Wertham's concerns were not limited to comics' impact on boys: He also expressed a concern about the effect of impossibly proportioned female characters on girl readers. A. David writes that Wertham's anxiety over Batman's and Robin's perceived homosexual relationship was aimed at the welfare of a child introduced to that sort of family unit, not on society's inherent immorality of homosexuality.<sup>[4]</sup> Will Brooker also points out in *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* that Wertham's notorious reading of Batman and Robin as a homosexual couple was not of his own invention, but was suggested to him by homosexual males whom he interviewed.<sup>[5]</sup>

## INFLUENCE

The fame of *Seduction of the Innocent* added to Wertham's previous celebrity as an expert witness and made him an obvious choice to appear before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency led by anti-crime crusader Estes Kefauver. In extensive testimony before the committee, Wertham restated arguments from his book and pointed to comics as a major cause of juvenile crime. The committee's questioning of their next witness, EC publisher William Gaines, focused on violent scenes of the type Wertham decried. Though the committee's final report did not blame comics for crime, it recommended that the comics industry tone down its content voluntarily. Possibly seeing this as a veiled threat of potential censorship, publishers developed the Comics Code Authority to censor their own content. The new code not only banned violent images

entire words and concepts (e.g. "terror" and "zombies"), and dictated that criminal always be punished. This destroyed most EC-style titles, leaving a sanitized subse superhero comics as the chief remaining genre. Wertham nevertheless considere Comics Code inadequate to protect youth.

Among comic-book collectors any comic book with a story or panel referred to in *Seduction of the Innocent* is known as a "*Seduction* issue", and is usually more valued than issues in the same run of a title. *Seduction of the Innocent* is one of the few non-illustrated works to be listed in the Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide as a collectible in its right.

## FALSIFIED INFORMATION AND CRITICISM

Wertham "manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated evidence" in support of the contentions expressed in *Seduction of the Innocent*.<sup>[3]</sup> He intentionally mis-projected both the sample size and substance of his research, making it out to be more objective and less anecdotal than it truly was.<sup>[6]</sup> He generally did not adhere to standards of scientific research, instead using questionable evidence as rhetorical ammunition for his argument that comics were a cultural failure.<sup>[7]</sup>

Wertham used New York City adolescents from troubled backgrounds with previous evidence of behavior disorders as his primary sample population. For instance, he interviewed children at the Lafargue Clinic to argue that comics disturbed young people, but according to a staff member's calculation seventy percent of children under the age of sixteen at the clinic had diagnoses of behavior problems.<sup>[8]</sup> He also used children with more severe psychiatric disorders which required hospitalization at Bellevue Hospital Center, Kings County Hospital Center, or Queens General Hospital. Conclusions drawn from flawed sample populations cannot be extrapolated to society at large, leading to sampling error.

Statements from Wertham's subjects were sometimes altered, combined, or exaggerated so as to be misleading. Relevant personal experience was sometimes left unmentioned. For instance, in arguing that the Batman comics condoned homosexuality because of the relationship between Batman and his sidekick Robin, there is evidence that Wertham misrepresented the testimony of young men. He combined two subjects' statements into one, and the two subjects had been in a homosexual relationship for years prior. He failed to inform readers that a subject had been recently sodomized. Despite subjects specifically noting a preference for or the superior relevance of other comics, he failed to give greater weight to the readership of Batman.<sup>[9]</sup> Wertham also presented as hearsay hand stories that he could have only heard through colleagues.

His descriptions of comic content were frequently misleading, either by exaggeration or omission. He mentions a "headless man" in Captain Marvel while the comic only shows Captain Marvel's face splashed with an invisibility potion,<sup>[10]</sup> not a decapitated figure. He exaggerated a thirteen-year-old girl's report of stealing in a comic from "sometimes" to "often".<sup>[11]</sup> He compared the Blue Beetle to a Kafkaesque nightmare, failing to mention that the Blue Beetle is a man and not, in fact, an insect.

## SEE ALSO

Homosexuality in the Batman franchise

Moral panic

## NOTES

## FURTHER READING

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online *Seduction of the Innocent* Text of , but with different images

*Seduction of the Innocent* The bibliography from

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