

Comic Books, Dr. Wertham, and the Villains of Forensic Psychiatry

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Comic books have been part of popular culture since the 1930s. Social activists quickly became concerned about the risk that comic books posed for youth, including that their content was a cause of juvenile delinquency. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a forensic psychiatrist, led efforts to protect society's children from comic books, culminating in multiple publications, symposia, and testimony before a Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency in 1954. During the course of his activities, and quite possibly as a backlash, comics started to represent psychiatrists and particularly forensic psychiatrists as evil, clueless, and narcissistic characters (e.g., Dr. Hugo Strange went from being a mad scientist to a mad psychiatrist). Clinical forensic psychiatrists who were not necessarily evil were often portrayed as inept regarding rehabilitation. There are very few positive portrayals of forensic psychiatrists in the comic book universe, and when they do occur, they often have severe character flaws or a checkered history. These negative characterizations are woven into the fabric of contemporary comic book characters, whether represented in comic books or other media offshoots such as films and television.

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Comic books in their current form came into existence around 1935, with the superhero genre being firmly established in 1939 with the introduction of a Superman comic title.^{1–5} In the 1930s and 1940s, popular genres included romance, humor, horror, and crime (e.g., noir, detective, western, and superhero).^{1–6} The two most popular genres of the time were crime and horror.^{1,2,5,7} Both quickly started to draw the attention of societal activists by the late 1930s and through the 1940s.^{1–5,7} The content of comic books was regarded by some as corrupting the morals of children, leading to juvenile delinquency.^{1,6–11} There was such fervor against comic books that there were even book-burning events focused on them in the late 1940s in many American cities.¹² One of the individuals who eventually spearheaded the effort to protect society from the

perceived harms of comic books was Dr. Fredric Wertham.^{1–7} The intention of this article is to describe how Dr. Wertham, a child and forensic psychiatrist, came to symbolize the movement against the majority of comic books sold in the 1940s and 1950s and the cultural impact his work has potentially had on how forensic psychiatrists are portrayed in modern media, including comic books, movies, television, and video games.^{7,13,14}

Background History of Frederic Wertham

Dr. Wertham was a German-born psychiatrist (his surname was shortened from Wertheimer) who pursued medical studies from 1914 through 1921 at the London University, the University of Erlangen, the University of Munich, and finally Würzburg University in Germany, where he completed his training.^{15,16} Wertham was greatly influenced by Dr. Emil Kraepelin, whose clinical approach included the principle that environment and social background influenced psychological development and disease state.^{7,17} Wertham worked briefly under Kraepelin at Kraepelin's Munich clinic and also had communication with Sigmund Freud around this time.^{7,8,15}

In 1922, Wertham came to the United States and worked under Adolf Myer at the Phipps Clinic

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associated with Johns Hopkins University.^{7,15} In 1932, he moved to New York City and held a senior position with the Bellevue Mental Hygiene Clinic (later known as Bellevue Hospital) and directed the newly established New York City Court Clinics.^{15,18} In 1936, Wertham was appointed Director of Bellevue, and in 1940 he was appointed Director of Psychiatric Services of Queens Hospital Center in Jamaica, New York.¹⁵ In 1946, he opened the Lafargue Clinic in Harlem to address mental health needs in underserved populations.^{7,19} An interesting historical side note is that the Lafargue Clinic was named after French journalist, literary critic, and political activist Paul Lafargue, who was also the son-in-law of Carl Marx.^{7,19} Besides his clinical work, Wertham testified in high-profile cases of his time such as the Hamilton Howard “Albert” Fish serial killer case, where he was called as a defense witness, and the 1953 Ethel Rosenberg nuclear spy case.^{7,15} In addition to his interest regarding the effects of comic books and other media on children, Wertham also researched the effects of racial segregation.^{7,18,19} His research regarding segregation was presented to various courts and was reported to be one of the justifications for overturning segregation, including the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.^{14,15,19} Surprisingly, his work regarding the dangers of comic books has come to define his career more than his work related to segregation, possibly because the comic book industry has a long memory (e.g., negative references made to him even years after his death in works of fiction, autobiographies, and scholarly work).^{7,20,21}

Wertham’s better-known early books relating to criminal behaviors were *Dark Legend: A Study in Murder*, published in 1941, and *The Show of Violence*, published in 1949.^{22–26} Both works have been described and summarized as using classic lore (e.g., Greek tragedies and Shakespeare) to convey concepts and tell the psychologic story.^{22–26} As a medical reviewer of *Dark Legend* writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1943 described it: “In other words, [Wertham] makes it clear that matricide is based on unconscious motivations, better recognized thus far by the poets than by the professional students of human behavior, at least until recent years” (Ref. 24, p 266).

The style of interpretation that focusses on “unconscious motivations” and assigning causation was generally well received in earlier writings, but later received criticism from other contemporaneous

scholars (e.g., sociologist Frederic Thrasher) and later historians when applied to comic books.^{2,7,27} As noted in the Congressional hearing report related to comic books and juvenile delinquency:

Professor Thrasher asserted that Dr. Wertham’s claims rest upon a selected group of extreme cases. Although Dr. Wertham has since declared that his conclusions are based upon a study of thousands of children, he has not offered the statistical details of his study. He says that he used control groups, i.e., compared his groups of delinquents with a similar group of nondelinquents, but he has not described the groups to prove that the difference in incidence of comic-book reading is other than a selective process (Ref. 2, Section IV).

Subsequent to Wertham’s death, when his papers were made available for review by the Library of Congress, additional questions related to selective editing of content, sources without clear attribution, and failure to identify potential confounding factors also arose as criticism of his work on comics.^{7,27}

Wertham’s first article focusing just on the comic book industry was “The Comics . . . Very Funny!” This article was originally published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* and later condensed for the *Reader’s Digest*, both in 1948.^{8,9} This article was published around the same time Wertham organized a symposium for the American Psychoanalytic Society entitled “The Psychopathology of Comic Books.”¹⁰ “The Comics . . . Very Funny!” contained anecdotal examples of youth who committed felonies and their interest in comic books. In the article, Wertham made statements such as:

“But the increase of violence in juvenile delinquency has gone hand in hand with the increase in the distribution of comic books.”

“These apologists [experts who approve of comics] function under the auspices of the comic-book business.”

“It is pretty well established that 75 percent of parents are against comic books. (The other 25 percent are either indifferent or misled by propaganda.)”⁸

Three days prior to the 1954 Subcommittee Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency by the United States Senate Justice Committee, Wertham published his seminal work on comic books, entitled *Seduction of the Innocent*.¹¹ As in his previous articles, he used case studies of troubled children to highlight how comic books were leading to maladaptive childhood behavior.^{11,28} Wertham then went further, discussing how comic books could affect even those children who were not engaging in deviant behavior by corrupting them through graphic examples and stories that taught them how to be criminals; hence

the title, *Seduction of the Innocent*. Although seen as a cultural milestone, *Seduction of the Innocent* only sold roughly 16,000 copies within the first 6 months of its publication.⁷ Wertham's literary agent attributed the relatively poor sales to the fact that much of the content and themes of the book were discussed during the televised Senate hearings and had been discussed in other publications at the time.⁷

Wertham's significance in the comic book debate, however, can clearly be seen by how he was referenced in the preliminary report of the Senate subcommittee:

Dr. Wertham was the first psychiatrist to call attention of the American people to crime and horror comics. It is incontrovertible that he has exerted far-reaching influence through alerting parents' and citizens' groups to the extent of bestiality and depravity being dispensed to children through such comics (Ref. 2, Section IV).

It is interesting that even though these hearings were held during the height of McCarthyism in the 1950s, little to no mention was made of Dr. Wertham's past involvement in legal matters related to Soviet spies or the fact that his clinic was named after Carl Marx's son-in-law. Individuals in the comics industry tried to discredit Wertham as being a communist, but the label gained little to no traction as evident from hearing testimony. Here he is questioned by Senator Estes Kefauver, chair of the committee and the 1956 Democratic vice-presidential candidate:

Senator KEFAUVER: I have read a number of your [Wertham's] writings. I have read your *Seduction of the Innocent*. You remember a number of years ago I had several visits with you and told you about the pressure they tried to apply on you in connection with this. But I noticed here this thing, that anyone who opposes comic books are Communists. "The group most anxious to destroy comics are the Communists." . . . This seems to be an effort to tie you up in some way as Red or Communist. Is that part of a smear?

Dr. WERTHAM: This is from comic books. I have really paid no attention to this (Ref. 6, p 12).

The Senate report does make some reference to the Red Scare but primarily in the context of how the Soviets were using American comic books in their own propaganda to indicate that American society was crime-ridden. Some have also speculated that another reason that Wertham's contribution to the civil rights movement, which was more liberal in ideology, was not more widely acknowledged was that his work related to comic books was seen as in line with conservative causes and beliefs.¹⁹

Wertham testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Wednesday, April 21, 1954.⁶ His style of testimony could be described as authoritarian, moralistic, and steeped in the prevailing psychoanalytic theory of the day.^{5,6} His testimony included the following:

" . . . I think Hitler was a beginner compared with the comic-book industry. They get the children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of 4 before they can read . . . Formerly to impair the morals [of] a minor was a punishable offense. It has now become a mass industry. I will say that every crime of delinquency is described in detail and that if you teach somebody the technique of something you, of course, seduce him into it. Nobody would believe that you teach a boy homosexuality without introducing him to it. The same thing with crime . . .

I would like to point out to you one other crime comic book which we have found to be particularly injurious to the ethical development of children . . . the *Superman* comic books. They arose in children's fantasies of sadistic joy in seeing other people punished over and over again while you yourself remain immune. We have called it the Superman complex. In these comic books the crime is always real and the Superman's triumph over good is unreal. Moreover, these books like any other, teach complete contempt of the police . . .

I am just a doctor. I can't tell what the remedy is. I can only say that in my opinion this is a public-health problem. I think it ought to be possible to determine once and for all what is in these comic books and I think it ought to be possible to keep the children under 15 from seeing them displayed to them and preventing these being sold directly to children. In other words, I think something should be done to see that the children can't get them" (Ref. 6, p 14).

Wertham's campaign against the comic book industry was very effective and is widely seen as the impetus that led to the Comics Code Authority being created. His work led to bans in some jurisdictions in the United States and in Canada, so it is understandable that the comics industry was concerned.^{2,4,5,7} The comic industry started the Comics Code in an attempt to self-regulate before the federal government took action to censor comic books.⁵ (Relevant points from the Comics Code are listed in Table 1).^{1,5,7,14,28-30} The results of the Comics Code were that several publishers went out of business, some publications such as *MAD* went from being a comic book to a magazine, and artists and authors had difficulty finding work.^{1,30} In addition, the entire subgenre of horror comics ceased to exist, and mainstream publishers severely limited the content of comic books, resulting in what is referred to as the Silver Age of Comics (from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s).^{1,30} The influence

Table 1 Examples of Prohibitions in the Comics Code²

A1. Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
A2. No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
A3. Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
A5. Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates the desire for emulation.
A7. Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.
B1. No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
B3. All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
B4. Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
C. All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the Code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency shall be prohibited.
Costume 3. All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
Costume 4. Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.
Marriage and sex 2. Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.

of Wertham on other countries was evident from the testimony of Canadian Parliament member E. D. Fulton, who testified at the Senate hearings on Canada's legislative attempts to regulate the comic book industry:

I have read extensively from Dr. Wertham's articles and, of course, I read with great interest his latest book, *Seduction of the Innocent*. I have had considerable correspondence with Dr. Wertham and I think it is fair and accurate to say that insofar as I, myself, made any contribution to this matter and to the enactment of our legislation that I used and found Dr. Wertham's opinions, his quotations, of great assistance and I found they were generally accepted as authoritative in our country in a discussion of this matter (Ref. 31, p 4).

Comic Books Push Back in Their Own Way

Prior to the hearings, in 1953, the comic book industry did try to defend itself by publishing editorials in their own books.³² Comic book writer and editor Stan Lee, in the last issue of *Suspense* (number 29), went one step further by writing and publishing a story called *The Raving Maniac*, where a Wertham-esque character forces his way into a comic book editor's office to complain about the content.³³ The fictional editor tries to have a discussion with the man, saying that the stories are no different from fairy tales and serve as a fictional distraction from real-world horrors such as nuclear war. The story ends with the Wertham-esque character being dragged away by orderlies due to being perceived as having mental health concerns. Although Wertham is not directly named in the comic, he was clearly the type of person, if not

the actual person, who was being depicted.³² As noted by comic book historians, it is often the style of the comics to have subplots represent real people and real events, even if they are not directly referenced in the comic books (e.g., the *X-Men* comics are allegories for the civil rights movement, with Dr. Charles Xavier representing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Magneto representing the views of Malcolm X).³⁴ This was even more true after the Comics Code came out, which prohibited authors from negatively portraying "authority figures" or allowing for a sympathetic portrayal of potential criminal acts (e.g., civil disobedience). Lee was quoted as saying, "I hated the idea of what was happening with Wertham, I hated the fact that he was tarring every comic book with the same brush, but there was nothing we could do about it. We had to live through it" (Ref. 35, p 48).

In his 2002 autobiography *Excelsior*, Lee made similar statements but specifically mentioned that part of the reason people listened to Wertham was because he was a psychiatrist:

He [Wertham] once claimed he did a survey that demonstrated that most of the kids in reform schools were comic book readers. So I said to him, "If you do another survey, you'll find that most of the kids who drink milk are comic book readers. Should we ban milk?" His arguments were patently sophistic, and there I'm being charitable, but he was a psychiatrist, so people listened" (Ref. 20, p 92).

Other comic book publishers had similar views regarding Wertham. Entertaining Comics publisher P. William Gaines testified at the Senate hearing, "It

would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to a Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid” (Ref. 36, p 1). Gaines’ testimony before the Senate hearing was seen as more detrimental than helpful for the comics industry as a whole, however, with one of his most memorable quotes being, “My only limits are bounds of good taste, what I consider good taste” (Ref. 36, p 6).³⁵ It appeared that most Americans did not find it reassuring to have Mr. Gaines as the arbitrator of good taste. By November 1954, after the hearing, a Gallup poll indicated that more than two-thirds of Americans believed that comics were a cause of youth crime.¹⁶

Over time, other comic book creators have made overt statements related to how Wertham has influenced their art, story elements, and character representations, usually after the Comics Code had ended or in ways that circumnavigated the application of the Code. For example, in one of his graphic novels, Grant Morrison noted that he used villains with purported mental illness, such as the Joker, to mock Wertham and his criticism of comics.²¹ In the *Arkham Asylum* 25th anniversary edition published after the Code was defunct, Morrison commented that a section of the book where the Joker is acting in a sexually provocative manner to make Batman “uncomfortable” was “the Joker [doing] Fredric Wertham” (Ref. 21, p 14). Some comic creators used “underground” comic books, usually self-published and not reviewed or approved by the comic authority, to directly mock Wertham. For example, the ironically titled *Dr. Wertham’s Comix and Stories* was one such underground comic launched in 1976 by Clifford Neal, which intentionally included adult-themed material that Dr. Wertham would not have approved.³⁷ Some comic artists published their satirical comics in literary journals instead of comic books. For example, in 2004, Art Spiegelman drew Dr. Wertham in a diaper in a comic that was published in McSweeney’s entitled *No kidding, kids . . . remember childhood? Well, forget it!*^{38,39}

Comic writers and artists who still tried to work in the industry under the Comics Code could not be so obvious in their criticisms of Wertham. Instead there were large shifts in how the psychiatric profession to which Wertham belonged was presented in comic book pages.^{13,40} As psychiatrist and comic historian and critic Sharon Packer noted:

Dr. Hugo Strange was one of the earliest *Batman* villains. Strange began as a geneticist before he morphed into a sinister psychiatrist and asylum superintendent in response to the anti-comics crusade led by psychiatrist Dr. Wertham (Ref. 13, p 274).

This representation has unfortunately carried over to modern television and movie screens. Evidence of this can be seen in the way the modern television show *Gotham* incorporated the classic Dr. Hugo Strange and the monster men storyline into the second season.⁴¹ What was once the “mad scientist,” following Mary Shelley’s archetypal Dr. Frankenstein, has now become the “mad psychiatrist.”⁴⁰ Given that Fredric Wertham was an early forensic psychiatrist, many of the villains of the day started to take on that role. A 2008 *Slate* article noted, “For comic-book fans, Fredric Wertham is the biggest villain of all time, a real-life bad guy worse than the Joker, Lex Luthor, and Magneto combined” (Ref. 30, p 1). Instead of being healers or individuals trying to protect the public safety, comic book forensic psychiatrists were often portrayed as cold, sadistic people who were only interested in themselves and their horrific research. Without a touch of irony, many of these villainous mental health professionals also exhibited some type of mental illness themselves. One only needs to look at Batman’s Rogues Gallery to appreciate how forensic psychiatrists or psychologists are often portrayed as the villains (Table 2).^{42,43} Forensic psychiatrists certainly have been represented in film and novels as “Dr. Evils” (unethical, deceitful, and manipulative), but not to the same degree as they have in comics.^{44,45} More specifically, the rest of the fiction world presents forensic psychiatrists as Dr. Evils at times, but also as Activists, Hired Guns, and Professorial characters, or as Jacks-of-All-Trades (who go far beyond our actual job duties and save the day)^{44,45}; this is in contrast with comics, in which forensic psychiatrists are primarily represented as Dr. Evils.

The representation of psychiatrists as evil villains continues today with new characters invented in the 1990s, such as Dr. Harleen Quinzel (a.k.a. Harley Quinn), still representing psychiatrists as damaged individuals who are more villain than hero.⁴⁶ Part of what is so surprising about the Harley Quinn character is that she first debuted, not in the pages of a comic book, but in a children’s cartoon spinoff.⁴⁶ Although it should be noted that Harley Quinn in recent continuities has become more of an anti-hero than a pure villain, many of her classic storylines have been accused of promoting misogyny and

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Table 2 Villainous Forensic Psychiatrists and Psychologists from the *Batman* Universe

Character	Background	First Appearance
Hugo Strange	Psychologist (?) but trained in psychiatry, chemistry, and biology. May be why he likes to make “monster men.”	<i>Detective Comics</i> #36 (February 1940); created by Bob Krane and Bill Finger; although he predates some of Wertham’s most notable activities, with time the character evolved from “mad scientist” to “mad psychiatrist.”
Scarecrow, a.k.a. Jonathan Crane	Psychologist (?), made a fear toxin and commits crimes to fund research.	<i>World’s Finest Comics</i> #3 (September 1941); created by Bob Krane, Bill Finger, Jerry Robinson.
Mad Hatter, a.k.a. Jervis Tetch	Neuroscientist who utilizes mind-control technology and is fascinated with <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> .	<i>Batman</i> #49 (October 1948); created by Bill Finger and Lew Sayre Schwartz.
Dr. Hurt, a.k.a. Simon Hurt, a.k.a. Bruce Wayne (not the one who is Batman)	Psychiatrist (?), devil worshiper granted long life, who wants to destroy the Wayne family name.	<i>Batman</i> #156 (June 1963); created by Sheldon Moldoff, Charles Paris, and Grant Morrison.
Anders Overbeck (TV), a.k.a. Red Hood (variant)	Psychiatrist who took the identity of existing villain Red Hood.	<i>Batman</i> TV show (January 1967), <i>The Contaminated Cowl</i> ; created by Bill Finger, Lew Sayre Schwartz, and Charles Hoffman (Bill Finger, one of the original comic book creators, was also actively involved in the original TV show).
Amadeus Arkham	Psychiatrist, original founder of Arkham Asylum who later became a patient of Arkham Asylum.	<i>Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth</i> (1989); created by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean.
Jeremiah Arkham, a.k.a. Black Mask (variant)	Psychiatrist, director of Arkham Asylum and relative of Amadeus Arkham, who often blames Batman for stopping patients’ rehabilitation.	<i>Batman: Shadow of the Bat</i> (June 1992); created by Alan Grant and Norm Breyfogle.
Harley Quinn (TV), a.k.a. Harleen Quinzel	Psychiatrist, fell in love with the Joker and became evil; due to popularity, at times is more of an anti-hero.	<i>Batman the Animated Series: the Joker’s Favor</i> (1992); created by Paul Dini and Bruce Timm.
Spellbinder (TV), a.k.a. Ira Billings	School psychologist, hypnotized students to steal; in other story lines, he is a psychiatrist.	<i>Spellbound</i> (May 1, 1999); created by Robert Goodman.
Charles Nigaff	Psychologist, works at Arkham Asylum, convinced children to use the steroid Venom.	<i>Batman: Orphans</i> #1 (February 2011); created by Eddie Berganza and Carlo Barberi.
Merrymaker, a.k.a. Bryon Merideth	Therapist to those obsessed with the Joker.	<i>Detective Comics</i> #16 (March 2013); created by John Layman and Jason Fabok.
Harlequin (TV), a.k.a. Holly Quinn (on TV, predates Harley Quinn on TV, postdates Harley Quinn in comics)	Psychiatrist, worked at Arkham Asylum with the Red Hood.	<i>Batman</i> TV show (1966), <i>Batman ‘66</i> #3 (November 2013); created by Paul Dini and Bruce Timm.
Bethanie Ravencroft	Psychologist, affiliated with the League of Assassins; like Harley Quinn, was introduced in a children’s TV cartoon.	<i>Beware the Batman</i> TV show (July 20, 2013), <i>Secrets</i> ; created by Mitch Watson.
Dr. Double X, a.k.a. Simon Ecks	Psychiatrist, worked at Arkham Asylum, gained the ability to mentally project energy.	<i>Batman Eternal</i> #16 (September 2014); created by Dave Wood and Sheldon Moldoff.
Miss Peabody, a.k.a. Ethel Peabody (TV)	Doctor, worked with Dr. Hugo Strange on <i>Gotham</i> TV show.	<i>Gotham</i> TV show (November 30, 2015), <i>Rise of the Villains: Worse Than a Crime</i> ; created by Bruno Heller.

glorifying domestic violence (e.g., the *Mad Love* comic book and television storyline).⁴⁷ Even as a prominent character who is classically identified as a psychiatrist, her credentials are often downplayed as seen in dialogue from the DC animated movie *Batman vs. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, which was adopted from the graphic novel of the same name.⁴⁸ In the movie, the Joker refers to her as “Nurse Quinzel,” to which she responds, “Eight years of

college and three of residency, and he says ‘nurse.’”⁴⁸ Although she identifies as a physician, the fact that she completed medical school is not mentioned. Even if her background was mistaken for that of a psychologist, the notion of graduate school or doctoral level training is not identified. This example highlights another trend in comic books and related media spinoffs where the educational backgrounds between psychologists and psychiatrists are often

blurred or constantly alternating. Whether this is intentional or just ignorance is hard to determine. Although negative representations of a profession may not be unique to psychiatry (e.g., the crooked politician), other professions usually have their educational background more realistically and reliably represented.⁴ There are studies that indicate that pro-health comic books can be used to effectively encourage health behaviors and interactions with professionals, so it is not unreasonable to assume that negative representations can have a negative impact.⁴

Even when forensic mental health providers are not evil, they are often portrayed as clueless, arrogant narcissists who spout psychobabble. This is similar to The Professor category of forensic psychiatrists noted in other works of fiction.^{44,45} One of the best examples of this is Dr. Bartholomew Wolper from Frank Miller's 1986 *The Dark Night Returns* graphic novel, which has also been made into an animated movie.⁴⁹ Dr. Wolper describes Batman in language that is reminiscent of aspects of Wertham's writings and testimony:

I know that sounds confusing. These things often do to the layman. But I'll try to explain without getting overly technical. You see, it all gets down to this Batman fellow. Batman's psychotic sublimative psychoerotic behavior pattern is like a net. . . . You might say Batman commits the crimes using his so called villains as narcissistic proxies (Ref. 49, p 47).

Every anti-social act can be traced to irresponsible media input. Given this, the presence of such an aberrant, violent force in the media can only lead to anti-social programming. . . . So a whole new generation, confused and angry, will be bent to the matrix of Batman's pathological self-delusion. Batman is, in this context, . . . a social disease (Ref. 49, p. 67).

Just as I predicted, the Batman has infected the youth of Gotham, poisoned them with an insidious excuse for the most violently antisocial behavior (Ref. 49, p 102).

It is no surprise that Dr. Wolper is eventually killed by the Joker, right after Dr. Wolper claims to have reformed the Joker. In story lines that involve well-behaved forensic psychiatrists (i.e., not supervillains in their own right), they often encounter bad outcomes (e.g., being killed or imprisoned) because they were wrong about having either controlled or cured the villain, who then betrayed them. Either way, the message is that mental health treatment and rehabilitation are ineffective, perhaps even foolish, and not to be trusted.

The Joker's backstory, shown in the 2019 blockbuster *Joker*, implied that Joker had some sort of mental illness requiring treatment with medication.

After budget cuts, he stops his medication and becomes violent. In one study of stigma, *Joker* viewers increased their prejudice against those with mental illness while watching the movie, indicating the real-world importance of comic book portrayals.⁵⁰

It is also not a coincidence that both major comic book franchises, DC and Marvel, have insane asylums, with Arkham Asylum in DC's *Batman* universe (first mentioned in October 1974 in *Batman* #258) and the Ravencroft Institute (first mentioned in May 1993 in *Spider-Man Unlimited* #1) in the Marvel universe.³⁻⁵ The stories that revolve around these institutions often portray the stereotype that forensic mental health treatment centers are cruel and barbaric locations that have ineffective interventions, such as stereotyped representations of electroconvulsive therapy, that are more often used for punishment than for treatment. For example, Dr. Amadeus Arkham, another *Batman*-universe forensic psychiatrist, used electroconvulsive therapy to kill a patient who had killed Dr. Arkham's family.^{21,51} It is hard to miss that few comic book forensic patients seem to get better or are able to be rehabilitated to a point where they can return to society and remain there.

When the heroes have mental illness, the forensic mental health care system often victimizes them, sometimes in comedic ways and sometimes in dramatic fashion. The 2014 *Moon Knight* series portrayed forced medication, hospitalization, and commitment in a dramatic negative light.⁵² The character Marc Spencer (a.k.a. Moon Knight) says in an interview after being committed, "How is that possible legally? What is this place? Am I in Guantanamo?" (Ref. 52, p 95). The masked doctor just replies, "I assure you American law is not being broken here. Your doctor has filed the paperwork necessary for us to keep you here. For your safety as well as for that of others" (Ref. 52, p 95). When a forensic psychiatrist is clearly opposing the hero, it is hard not to think of them in a negative light.

Although there have been occasional neutral to positive forensic mental health representations in the comics, these representations are often female and usually are a supporting element to the story rather than a lead protagonist or equal of the hero or the villain.⁴ These positive representations may derive from the Senate Subcommittee testimony of another psychiatrist, Dr Lauretta Bender, who is also known for the Bender-Gestalt neuropsychological test. She provided testimony that was seen as favorable for the

comic industry and had written some positive articles related to the therapeutic effect of comic books.^{53,54} In her Senate testimony, she stated, “I have found one of the best methods in my experience to examine children is to get them to tell me their favorite comic book and to relate it and then analyze their material. In adult psychiatry, dreams are analyzed” (Ref. 53, p 6).

It may be because of this testimony that there are a few positive psychiatry characters in the *Batman* universe, such as Dr. Joan Leland (DC animated universe), Dr. Leslie Thompkins (comic books), and Dr. Sarah Cassidy (Arkham-verse video games).^{42,43} In addition, there are some notable exceptions outside of the *Batman* universe of positive forensic mental health practitioners, but they were usually developed decades after Wertham’s testimony. One such example is Doc Samson (first appearance in *Incredible Hulk*, vol. 2, #141, July 1971), from the Marvel universe who has a “PhD in psychiatry.”⁵⁵ He is more the outlier who proves the rule, but even he has had checkered motivations at times.^{4,55}

Conclusions

Many of the negative tropes regarding forensic psychiatrists are woven into the fabric of comic book characters such as Dr. Hugo Strange. It is hoped that as time moves further away from the “ten-cent plague,” of which Wertham became the symbolic opposition leader, the result will be aspects of these characters being re-imagined and given more nuanced representations. There have been occasional good forensic mental health characters, but they tend to be background characters. As mentioned above, the one-time psychiatric villain of Harley Quinn has become more of an anti-hero in some of her more recent storylines. It may not be the heroic representation that forensic psychiatrists want, but it may be a step in a more positive direction. Both DC and Marvel have actually consulted with mental health professionals for some recent storylines (e.g., *Heroes in Crisis*, *The Unstoppable Wasp*).⁴ With time and possibly even engagement with the comic book industry, positive changes of reduced stigma, improved trust, and encouragement of treatment, while still allowing for an artistically creative story, can occur.

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