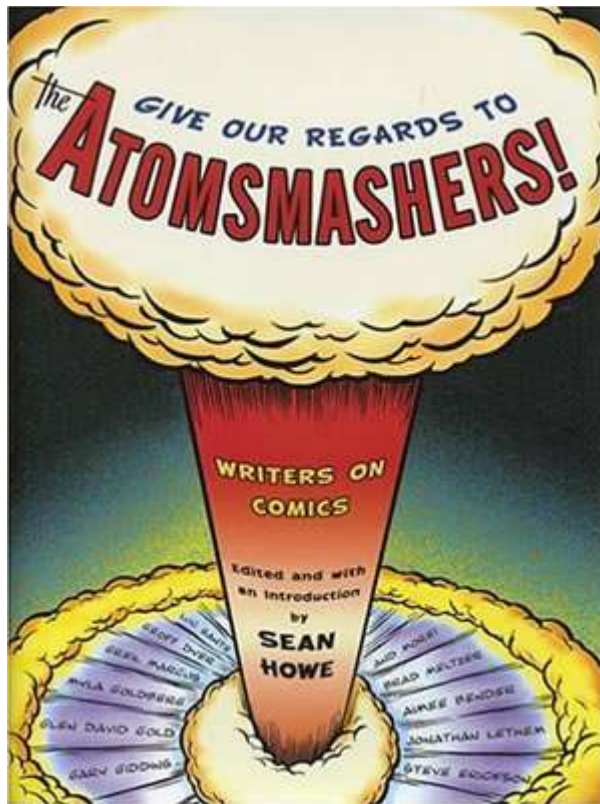


# “I, too, was a Teenage Marvel Zombie:” Review of:

Howe, Sean (editor). *Give our Regards to the Atomsmashers!: Writers on Comics*. New York, NY: Pantheon, 2004. ISBN: 0-375-42256-0.

by Travis Fristoe



1. Given the undying popularity of superhero comics, how does one measure the impact of these garish do-gooders? Surely, some of the legion “true Marvel zombies” make it back to the land of the living. A select few might even go on to craft other, more socially-acceptable literature. Which brings us to *Give our Regards to the Atomsmashers!: Writers on Comics*, a collection of essays on possible comics legacies.
2. Written with a fan’s enthusiasm and tempered with critical hindsight, 17 contemporary writers contribute pieces. And by writers I mean playwrights, novelists, rock critics, journalists & comics sripters. You should recognize at least a few of the names from the literary American landscape: Greil Marcus, Luc Sante, Aimee Bender, Jonathan Lethem, Myra Goldberg. The resumes don’t matter so much as the strength of the pieces though, and the results here are compelling.

3. Editor Sean Howe introduces the books as “personal writing about this most personal of art forms. The truth is, comic book fans have been tight-lipped about their forbidden love, and their ruminations about comics have incubated.” Further, Howe divulges that “Many of the writers I approached for this book told me (after asking, “*How did you know I love comic books?*”) they’d wanted to write about this for years, wanted to share their long-whispered lingua franca, wanted to come clean with their secret identities.” While there’s certainly no uniform tone to the essays, this voice of furtive, gushing enthusiasm resonates throughout. It’s a voice familiar to many of us whose relationships to comics, particularly angst-y superhero stuff, has, to say the least, *changed*.
4. Each article gets a single full-color of comics art. Isolated, these images convey the sustained gaze of paintings—an appropriate graphic choice for the text. The multiverse of battling demigods (& their emotionally-stunted antics) becomes infinitely more complex when pulled out from the realm of escapist juvenilia, and into a larger focus of capitalist production/consumption & cultural studies. Remember, with great power comes great responsibility.
5. Jonathan Lethem starts the anthology. A good choice given the relevance of his 2003 novel *Fortress of Solitude*, which ambitiously (if unevenly) wove the fates of gentrifying Brooklyn, Marvel fandom & the better American styles of hip-hop, punk & graffiti. Lethem’s essay focuses on the eternal debate about auteur Jack Kirby. Of Kirby’s later, blatantly & hermetically psychedelic issues, Lethem writes “the feet of his work never touched the ground. The results were impressive, and quite boring.” Excelsior, indeed!
6. Further, Aimee Bender makes an interesting case for minimalist drawings, positing that “the mind takes in simple words or images with ease, then we’re freed up to expend brain effort in other ways.” Agree or not, it’s a decent starting point for discourse. Like Luc Sante’s almost-apologist piece on the blatantly racist & colonial nature of Tin-Tin comics. Or Lydia Millet making sweeping statements like: “And you have to have a story, right? Art without story is not enough for most people; they need linear, forward-moving structures of myth to imbue their own lives with meaning. Beauty is not enough because we can’t easily glean meaning from it...The job is just too hard.” Granted, this isn’t primary source material, but the emergent field of comic scholarship shouldn’t shy away from such aesthetic debates.
7. While the pieces are more conversational than formally academic, *Give Our Regards to the Atomsmashers!* comes highly recommended. You’re probably already having these sort of discussions with your friends anyway, so why not further validate them with another book?

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