Review of:

by Joshua Paddison

1. Jim Davis's Garfield--along with Charles Schulz's Peanuts--is the most heavily merchandised comic strip of the postwar era made its debut in 41 U.S. newspapers in 1978. A longtime assistant on T. K. Ryan's strip Tumbleweeds, Davis shrewdly sized up the U.S. comic strip market and, in a "conscious effort to come up with a good, marketable character," created a strip aimed at cat lovers the way Peanuts appealed to dog owners. Three years later, as Garfield's popularity began to explode, Davis formed Paws, Inc., a private merchandising company that controlled and promoted an aggressive licensing campaign. Like Schulz, Davis licensed his characters to an array of corporate products, from pet foods to plush toys to slot machines; unlike Schulz, who hand-drew every panel of Peanuts for its fifty-year run, Davis quickly turned artistic chores over to assistants and devoted his energy to overseeing merchandizing. By 2004, when a live-action Garfield movie hit theaters, the comic appeared in more than 2500 newspapers (more than any other strip), existing primarily to promote international sales of Garfield-related products to the tune of more than $750 million each year. The history of Garfield is a business success story, a triumphant intersection of market research, commercial exploitation, and global capitalism.
2. Ian Gordon's ambitious *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* reminds us that the rise of Garfield is unprecedented only in its global scope, for comic strips were mass commercial projects from their inception. Richard Felton Outcault's *Yellow Kid*, the first popular continuing comics character, was the product of a bitter circulation battle between New York City newspaper publishers Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in 1896. Humor cartoons had long appeared in such nineteenth-century magazines as *Puck, Life,* and *Judge,* but it was Pulitzer's *New York World* that first utilized a reoccurring character like the *Yellow Kid* as a mascot and selling point. Soon the Sunday editions of Pulitzer's *World* and Hearst's *Journal* both carried color supplements with competing casts of comics characters, including, for a time, two separate versions of the *Yellow Kid* after the Treasury Department decided in 1897 that the *World* owned copyright of only the Kid's name and not its likeness. The formal features of the modern comic strip—its panels, dialogue balloons, visual iconography, and continuing storylines—evolved in this turn-of-the-century urban hothouse of cutthroat competition, sensational journalism, and murky copyright laws. The artistic integrity of cartoonists meant little; when Rudolph Dirks failed to deliver an installment of his popular strip *The Katzenjammer Kids,* the *Journal* simply hired another artist that week.

3. This story of comic strips' birth in the 1890s as a tool to sell newspapers is the first chapter of Gordon's wide-ranging inquiry into the relationship between early comics and America's emergent consumer culture. He argues that comic strips "played a definitive role in the creation of a mass culture of consumption" because they intersected consumer society in three simultaneous ways (p. 12). First, strips were themselves commercial products, sold by syndicates to newspapers and eventually packaged as comic books. Second, syndicates and cartoonists licensed their characters to corporations and merchandisers, contributing to the rise of sophisticated, visuals-based modern advertising. Third, comic strips were a national mass medium that promoted new middle-class values of consumption by depicting "appropriate ways of incorporating a growing number of commodities" into readers' lives (p. 106). In other words, comics were commodities that helped sell other commodities while promoting and naturalizing commodification.

4. To advance this argument, Gordon's six chapters offer a series of case studies that vary in effectiveness. After tracing how comics were born commercial in the 1890s, he focuses next on Richard Outcault's *Buster Brown,* the first extensively syndicated and licensed comic strip. Outcault, having failed to win legal control of the commercial use of the *Yellow Kid,* created *Buster Brown* in 1902 with an eye toward merchandising. A mischievous little white boy always promising to mend his ways, *Buster Brown* proved immensely popular with readers and advertisers alike. By 1910, the character hawked shoes, clothing, watches, textiles, coffee, foods, pianos, dolls, toys, and other products for dozens of companies. Gordon shows how Buster Brown helped create a "national culture of consumption" as Americans from Boston to Des Moines could read the same comic strip and purchase the same licensed shoes (p. 58).
5. Buster Brown's popularity, according to Gordon, lay in his "polysemic" nature—he was specific enough to be recognizable but generic enough to appeal to different groups of Americans. The character's white skin was crucial—only white characters could be universal. To illustrate this, Gordon examines *Pore Lil Mose* and *Sambo and His Funny Noises*, two failed strips that featured African American protagonists. These caricatured stereotypes carried too much racial baggage to catch on with white readers; only if deracinated and refashioned as animals (such as *Felix* and *Krazy Kat*) could minstrel-type characters appeal to a national white audience. He deemphasizes outright racism, blaming instead the narrow "typographies surrounding representations of African Americans" that had grown "codified in the set pieces of minstrelsy and in the politics of post-Reconstruction America" (p. 64). Gordon's consideration of race begs two questions. First, what was so different about the early comic strip that viciously stereotyped black characters failed there but succeeded in vaudeville, radio, and film during the same period? And, second, what of gender? Surely Buster Brown's maleness also made him more "universal," as does the gender of subsequent children's characters from Snoopy to Harry Potter.

6. Less problematic is Gordon's excellent chapter examining the explosion of comic strip merchandizing in the 1920s and 1930s. For the first time, *Krazy Kat*, *Barney Google*, the *Katzenjammer Kids*, *Little Orphan Annie*, and other characters joined *Buster Brown* on product labels, advertisements, and Broadway stages. American doll and toy manufacturers, eager to supplant European and homemade toys, were among the first corporations to employ celebrity cartoon characters to sell their wares. Gordon shows how advertising companies, armed with "scientific" survey data furnished by George Gallup, embraced comic-strip-style ads in the 1930s as a way to catch readers' attention, tell narratives about their products, and "bestow personalities on inanimate commodities" (p. 105). Building on the work of Jackson Lears, Roland Marchand, and others, Gordon uses ads for Atlantic Motor Oil to demonstrate how comic strips helped push advertising away from stodgy, text-based notices and toward eye-catching visuals and humor.

7. Unfortunately, the book's final two chapters are its least developed. In chapter five, Gordon attempts to show how comic strips "created a vision of America as a predominantly white, middle-class, consumer society" through an analysis of Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* and Martin Branner's *Winnie Winkle*. The main problem is that because Gordon focuses most of his attention on plot rather than other formal aspects, he breezes over these strips at high speed, seldom slowing down to provide close readings of individual daily comics. How comic strips presented consumer capitalism is a rich and fascinating topic that Gordon probably should have turned into a separate study, comparing multiple comics over time and reprinting far more daily strips than the meager three presented here. The book's final chapter, on the rise of the comic book in the late 1930s, covers very familiar ground, anachronistically overemphasizes the importance of the superhero genre, and fails to consider the formal differences between comic strips and comic books.
8. Even if his book veers down some unrewarding alleys, Gordon establishes his main argument that comic strips played a unique role in the expansion of American consumerism. He is most successful when discussing the business side of comics; his sections on advertising, syndication, merchandizing, newspaper circulation, and copyright battles are particularly strong. He is least convincing in his content analysis of the strips themselves, especially when advancing his underdeveloped idea that comics "helped create Modernism in both its formal art meaning and its broader cultural denotation" (p. 6). As a study of consumer culture, Gordon's book avoids the common pitfall of knee-jerk declensionism by emphasizing how consumer goods could provide diverse groups of Americans with opportunities for self-expression. His book gains importance considering that the trends that he charts in the first half of the century-cultural commercialization, image-based advertising, corporate vertical integration-only intensified in the postwar era. The undeniable artistry of *Krazy Kat*, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, and other early strips is all the more remarkable given the market forces Gordon chronicles.