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Review of Adin, Mariah, The Brooklyn Thrill-Kill Gang and the Great Comic Book Scare of the 1950s

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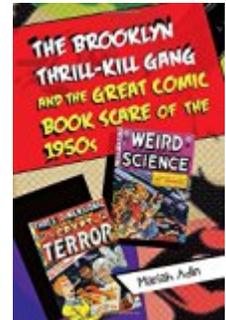
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Mariah Adin. *The Brooklyn Thrill-Kill Gang and the Great Comic Book Scare of the 1950s.* Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015. 167 pp. \$37.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4408-3372-4.



Reviewed by Molly J. Scanlon

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Commissioned by Charles L. Zelden (Nova Southeastern University)

Mariah Adin's historical foray into a murder trial that captured the nation's attention is an enjoyable read because her writing is not only engaging but also supported by an impressive amount of research. The research is used to sustain a compelling and detailed retelling of a "case—which made headlines throughout the nation, was used to vindicate the banning of horror comics in New York State, and ultimately led to the U.S. Supreme Court case *Kingsley Books v. Brown*—[that] has been relegated to the dustbin of history" (p. xiv).

The book's success centers on the author's ability to depict the incredibly multifaceted context of this particular case. The story details the four members of the gang; their Brooklyn neighborhood, Jewish upbringing, and indictment of heinous crimes; and the trial that followed. The case itself, however, is only one area of interest in the book; Adin informs readers early on that the story of the case barely scratches the surface of American zeitgeist in 1954. The book is "the story of the Brooklyn Thrill-Killers, but it is more im-

portantly a recounting of the climate that made them famous, the underbelly of America's Golden Age, a story of juvenile delinquency, the terrible price of assimilation, and the dystopia already present among American youth well before the 1960s" (p. xiv). She explores the case's historical context (political, economic, and geospatial factors); cultural context (public attitudes and perceptions, mass media, popular culture, the nation's concerns regarding its adolescent population, and changing definitions of masculinity); and psychological/sociological contexts (scientific studies, academic debates, theories related to juvenile delinquency, and narrowing understandings of heteronormativity). And all of this research is woven quite neatly into the narrative, making the read both informative and enjoyable.

Adin's chapters volley back and forth between storytelling and analysis, making the read entertaining and analytic for historians and history buffs alike. This text would serve students of legal history well as they begin to develop more nuanced understandings of the many factors that in-

form the creation, enactment, and enforcement of law. On the whole, she builds a compelling argument to help readers understand how an incident in Brooklyn garnered national attention and how that case played a role in the much larger national crises related to juvenile delinquency—of which the comics industry was also a target.

The “great comic book scare” receives attention toward the second half of the book. Having read many histories of comics in American history—almost all of which contain at least a token reference to the comic book scare—I expected to hear the same story I’d heard many times before. I was pleasantly surprised. Previous scholarship vilified Dr. Frederic Wertham for his role in the national comic book campaign and painted him as a conservative, out-of-touch, McCarthy-like figurehead of the comic book censorship movement. On the contrary, Adin offers a nuanced presentation of “the good doctor,” a fairly progressive psychiatrist who was active in forensic psychology and social theory research. His work in social activism, for example, resulted in the creation of a mental health clinic for black patients who had been refused by another Harlem institution. He publicly argued against claims regarding the psychological inferiority of blacks and about the monolithic nature of comic book characters so that a typical hero was, not surprisingly, according to Wertham, “a pure, American white man” while a villain was predictably a member of one or more of the following groups: “foreign-born, Jews, Orientals, Slavs, Italians, and dark-skinned races” (p. 68). Other historical accounts of Wertham’s role in the comic book scare tell of his contributions to the growing concern about media effects, concerns along the same lines as expressed by those looking to eradicate crime and horror comics. Adin changes this perspective. Wertham did, in fact, argue against the media effects of comics; he argued that the evidence of racism in comics would be harmful to young children, and would prove problematic for America’s public image internationally. Both of these claims

would prove true. Both of these claims, in fact, were echoed by comics artists and readers who demanded more of the industry in terms of adequate representation in the pages of American comics, particularly racial and gender diversity. Adin’s exploration of Wertham is likely to inject a disruptive yet productive counternarrative into the current body of comics history scholarship.

Unlike her in-depth coverage of figures associated with the case, Adin’s analysis of other legal aspects seems largely absent. Adin primarily focuses on the myriad of social contexts that set the stage for the very public, nationally reported court case and its implications for popular mass media. She presents far fewer discussions of its implications for the case itself or broader understandings of the law. For example, in her extensive retelling of the boys’ confessions, she writes that the boys were questioned without adult supervision and reminds readers that the 1954 case was prior to *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966). Readers might expect her to delve a bit deeper into an elaboration of why this was so problematic and how it affected the outcome of the case, but their expectations will not be met. Toward the end of that chapter, Adin briefly discusses the problematic nature of the prosecution’s desire call for murder one (as opposed to manslaughter, which, as she says, more closely fit the crime) but she discusses it no further in the chapter and neglects to return to this issue later in the book.

Overall, Adin has produced a well-written narrative intended to engage readers through impressively extensive research into not only the legal history (the court case itself) but also—and perhaps to a greater extent—the cultural context of this case. In terms of legal history research, this book has promise for introducing novices, but will probably not serve as a reference for established scholars. However, if her intention—as she states in the introduction—is to retell “the unfortunate tale of four messed-up kids who threw away their lives by committing terrible crimes,” to

revisit “the biography of a deeply disturbed young man who was bullied for being different and whose sexual identity did not fit into a Lavender Scare world in which alternate sexualities were akin to treason,” and finally, to determine “how these boys would be used by the adults around them to further their own agendas,” then Adin has certainly succeeded (p. xiv).

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