
American comic books and the superheroes that populate them are often derided as mere fantasies, but in his debut book, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, Ramzi Fawaz argues that postwar and specifically post-Golden Age (after 1956) superhero comics were neither escapist nor power fantasies. Rather, they were world-making technologies that reimagined the possibilities of American social and political life by making outcasts, deviants, and “mutants” into heroes. Fawaz forwards feminist, queer, and cosmopolitan readings of major superhero comics, making *New Mutants* the most recent book in a lineage of scholarship on the gender, racial, and sexual politics of American superhero comics. Others include Frederick Luis Aldama’s *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (2009), Adilifu Nama’s *Super Black* (2011), Noah Berlatsky’s *Wonder Woman* (2014), and Jos Alaniz’s *Death, Disability, and the Superhero* (2014). It is therefore surprising that Fawaz fails to engage in any significant way with this growing body of scholarship, even where particularly well-traversed topics are concerned. *New Mutants* does, however, make strides in realizing how a selection of superhero comics rethought relations of difference in postwar America by embodying the methods of both liberal and radical political activisms, at the same time offering a powerful defense of fantasy as political tool.

*New Mutants* boasts seven chapters, plus introduction and epilogue. Fawaz’s introduction frames his project as narrating how “postwar superhero comics made fantasy a political resource for recognizing and taking pleasure in social identities and collective ways of life commonly denigrated as deviant or subversive” (4). The first three chapters tackle the cosmopolitan ethics of “team” superhero comics that valued “the uncertainty of cross-cultural encounter and the possibilities afforded by ... diverse group affiliations” (16), presenting readings in chapter one of *Justice League of America* (DC, 1960–1965) and in chapters two and three of *The Fantastic Four* (Marvel, 1961–1968). Chapters four through six offer readings of comic-book storylines that, as Fawaz argues, embodied the most popular and politically radical genres of the 1970s—the space opera (Marvel, *The Silver Surfer* and *The X-Men*) in chapter four, and the urban folktale (DC, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*; Marvel, *Captain America*) in chapter five—and the 1980s—the demon possession saga (Marvel, *The X-Men* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*) in chapter six. The seventh chapter is a study of the titular *The New Mutants* (Marvel, 1982–1991), which Fawaz reads as demonstrating how a group of superteens confronted the social stigma of the very differences (mutancy) that made them special, i.e., superpowered. What Fawaz’s book explores, ultimately, is how superhero
comics dealt with “difference” as a social and political problem, not always to be solved and often as the basis of exciting gender, racial, and queer world-making projects that reflected the era’s shifting political trajectories. The epilogue offers some final reflections on the neoliberalization of superheroic difference, or its transformation into “diversity” in the current moment as comic-book publishers use the inclusion of “diverse” characters to sell more comics, therefore lacking, according to Fawaz, the grappling with difference that made postwar comics so radically imaginative.

The introduction is an obvious place to begin because it is there that Fawaz advances what is likely to be New Mutant’s greatest contribution: the concept of “popular fantasy.” Mapping commonalities across psychoanalytic, genre studies, and Marxist approaches to fantasy, and redressing particularly negative critiques (e.g., fantasy as false consciousness or mystification of real conditions of exploitation), Fawaz characterizes fantasy as a subversive mode of communication “that can work as an imaginative resource for resisting” and altering “norms that constrain one’s world” (26). Fawaz modifies this basic understanding of fantasy to describe the concurrent phenomenon of fantasy’s mass entertainment uses and its often radical political valences, thus identifying popular fantasy with the queer-feminist concept of “world making” or “worlding.” For Fawaz, popular fantasy denotes “expressions of fantasy that suture together current social and political realities with impossible happenings to produce figures that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires and modes of social belonging that appear impossible ... within the terms of dominant political imaginaries” (28). Moreover, drawing on diverse cultural theorists such as Jane Bennett, Deborah Gould, and Robin Kelly, Fawaz argues that subjective feelings of “enchantment” and “fun” are basic to the political work of popular fantasy, and goes one step further to suggest that fantasy is a prerequisite for radical politics, since efforts at world making desire to bring seemingly “impossible happenings,” such as racial or gender equality, into existence (28-29). The entirety of the book, then, offers a detailed demonstration of how popular fantasy worked across time in a particular medium and genre, superhero comics, opening up a conceptual space for future work to identify the radical potential of other texts denigrated as mass entertainment fantasies. On a related note, Fawaz provides a compelling argument late in the book for seeing magic as a type of politics (244-45).

Another particular strength of New Mutants is Fawaz’s use of comic-book readers’ responses to the popular fantasies he charts. He sees them as central to superhero comics’ fantasies, since it is through readers, their interactions with creators, and their acknowledgment of comics’ political possibilities that world making happens. What makes Fawaz’s queer and feminist readings of comics like Justice League of America, The Fantastic Four, and The X-Men all the more compelling is that he cites letters written to the comics’ creators.
and published in the comics’ letter columns that demonstrate how readers played an active role in critiquing characters and storylines; for example, he references one letter calling out Stan Lee for writing the Invisible Girl as a passive, almost powerless member of the Fantastic Four, after which Lee greatly increased her presence and abilities in the comic. Fawaz deftly reads such moments of collaboration as evidence of an “affective counterpublic” that included comic-book letter columns, fan clubs, and conventions, and that encouraged readers to use “a popular media form to engage one another across race, class, gender, generation, and geographical space” (19; the argument is further developed on 100-13). As ground-breaking as insights like this are, however, Fawaz overlooks previous work on letter columns and comics fandom, merely endnoting Pustz’s seminal Comic Book Culture (290n4), while failing to acknowledge the earlier history of letter-column counterpublics developed in the pulp magazines, which Earle traces in Re-Covering Modernism (2009). The pulp-comics connection here is significant, since Mort Weisinger, who Fawaz asserts introduced the letter column into comic books (18, 100), was originally an editor and publisher of pulps before editing Superman comics at DC in the late 1950s.

As this minor example demonstrates, what New Mutants lacks is any serious engagement with scholarship on superheroes, comic books, or other aspects of popular culture that the book concerns such as the transmedia spread of the space opera in the 1970s or the wider cultural presence of demon possession stories during the 1980s. While Fawaz does reference the occasional comics scholar (most often Wright’s Comic Book Nation [2003], which although a touchstone has been followed by much more thorough investigations of comics, creators, and trends relevant to every argument Fawaz generates), they are never evoked in-text as are key cultural, feminist, or queer theorists, but are instead buried in the endnotes. Of course, such a strategy is not in itself objectionable, since it demonstrates Fawaz’s self-positioning as a scholar of postwar America and radical political movements more than as a comics scholar; that is understandable for a number of reasons. But, when paired with the bibliography’s lack of any recent major works in comics studies (Hatfield’s The Comics Art of Jack Kirby [2011] being the only exception), it does have the effect of making New Mutants appear incorrectly as the sole pioneer in the study of postwar comics, and more egregiously as the first to touch on topics with robust secondary literatures, such as The Fantastic Four’s non-normativity, The X-Men’s queerness, or the nuclear-age vulnerabilities of the superhero figure.

Whatever its flaws, Ramzi Fawaz’s New Mutants will have a significant impact on scholarship about American comics and their superheroes. Comics scholars will no doubt find Fawaz’s book thought provoking, even if they occasionally wish for more engagement with relevant scholarship, while scholars
of fantasy and popular culture will discover that concepts such as “popular fantasy” are generative for their own work. I recommend *New Mutants* for individual scholars and academic libraries alike.

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