

## “THE HORROR! THE HORROR!” (Book Review)

Written by Jorge Solis

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THE HORROR! THE HORROR! (Abrams ComicArts) showcases the artwork and stories of the pre-Code horror comics of the 1950s. Edited by Jim Trombetta, this extensive collection provides a detailed history of the era when horror and government censorship clashed.

Horror comics became a huge, blooming business in the '50s. Harvey Publications was printing four of these titles a month, and fans rushed to newspaper stands to buy the latest issue of EC's TALES FROM THE CRYPT, THE VAULT OF HORROR and THE HAUNT OF FEAR. In a typical tale, "Foul Play," readers were introduced to a baseball team who amusing themselves with a ghoulish game using dead body parts. Readers wanted more supernatural tales from the Crypt-Keeper, the Old Witch and the Vault-Keeper, and these successful titles continued to overflowing with stories about the living dead, werewolves and vampires. Scores of writers and artists mixed horror and self-deprecating humor, while illustrators such as Hy Fleishman brought walking skeletons and other malefic beings to life through their art.



Underneath the ghoulish fun was a profound message, a reaction to the times, that the writers and artists wanted to convey to their readers. From 1947 to 1955, the United States loomed large as a military superpower during the Cold War. In this age of nuclear terror, the likes of TOMB OF TERROR commented on fears of Communism and armageddon. In one issue of MARVEL TALES, an unstoppable monster rises from the aftermath of a nuclear threat. Horror comics promoted an anti-warfare campaign, warning concerned readers of an apocalyptic future.

Perhaps the government didn't prefer to be portrayed as the antagonist in books read by children. In 1954, a U.S. Senate Subcommittee held a televised hearing condemning comic books. Anti-horror groups spoke against the industry, defaming them as the deliberate cause of

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the nation’s troubles. The Comics Code Authority was created to enforce rules of morality and regulate content. Even words such as horror and terror were banned from appearing on any cover.

Thankfully, there was one publisher who fought against the Comics Code: EC’s William M. Gaines co-wrote “Judgment Day!”, about an astronaut fighting an intergalactic war. At the end of the tale, he returns home in his spaceship and removes his helmet—revealing himself to be African-American. Charles F. Murphy, administrator of the Comics Code, refused to allow blacks to be depicted—but Gaines published the work—a comment on racist imagery in society—without approval.

THE HORROR! THE HORROR! reprints classic covers and stories from the period that were vilified as the cause of juvenile delinquency, but are now regarded as influential classics. This comprehensive history spins an absorbing tale about what horror comics used to be.



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