

Henry Jenkins, **Comics and Stuff**, New York: New York University Press, 2020, 347 pp., \$32.00 (paperback).

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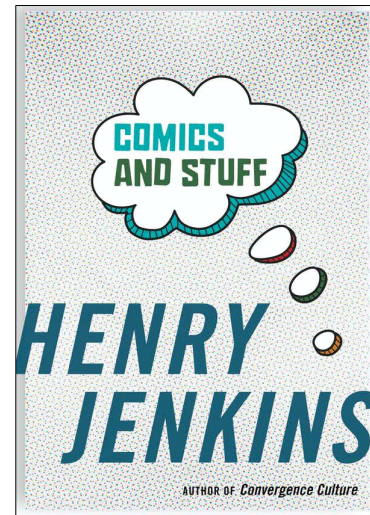
In a timely moment where comics are shaping video games and film franchises, media scholar Henry Jenkins takes an inside look at the evolution of the value of comics over the generations. **Comics and Stuff** doesn't simply examine how comics have changed but also considers how public opinion and passion for the consumption of comics reflect consumer culture.

For several decades, comics have evolved from a disposable medium to be destroyed after reading to one with high cultural status. Nowadays, many comics are linen-bound, glossy volumes that can be bought in bookstores, checked out in libraries, and displayed on bookshelves; in some cases, they are referred to as graphic novels. Times have changed as comics and bookshops have become more diverse and better represented in the graphic novel market. Older works are even reprinted in high-quality editions. Before they were more commonly treasured as collectibles and investments, it was more likely that comics would be read and then discarded. The author describes this as "the concept of the ephemeral," which "emphasizes disposability and perishability, the arbitrary nature of what survives" (p. 12).

While to more casual fans comics may still be disposable, to many enthusiasts they've been rebranded and have become cherished collectibles. The medium that was once considered throwaway has evolved over the generations into something respectable, if not elite. According to Jenkins, this "revaluing of comics can be understood as an extension of larger logics shaping how today's consumer culture operates" (p. 15).

The book is divided into eight chapters and makes strong arguments for how the dual relationship between subject matter and comics says a lot about lived materiality and contemporary society. It offers a series of case studies of various graphic designers and their creative work that helps us to understand comics as artifacts of curation, meaning, belonging, and self-construction. Readers get to consider how collecting, exhibiting, and even inheriting comics have given comics a level of familiarity in consumer culture that makes them more than just "stuff" to many fans. Jenkins, a fellow comics buff, was influenced by his ongoing interest in exploring emerging media and forms of popular culture as well as by his parallel interest in children's culture.

Jenkins first explains that the use of the term "stuff" in his title is not a coincidence but is significant because of his previous explorations of comic culture. His goal is to use stuff "to trace the character's and author's relationship with meaningful objects" (p. 42). While the term "stuff" usually holds vague meaning when used in conversation, in this book, the term does not only mean the physical objects that comics and the things illustrated inside them are but the emotions, sentiments, and attachments that are expressed through them and ourselves.



The books helps the reader to understand how conscious decisions are made in every little detail that makes comics so valuable to their consumers: "For the most part, the process by which we ascribe meaning and value to our stuff remains unconscious and invisible, the backdrop for our everyday lives" (p. 15).

Jenkins puts strong emphasis on the notion that the aesthetic of comics requires our own memories to be woven into its fabric, giving them a subjectivity that is unique to the reader. He condenses many thoughts around the visual and rhetorical tactics of cartoonists (such as Scott McCloud and others) and focuses on the many ways comics have evolved. Whereas American comics used to focus on the many ways to represent good versus evil, today's graphic novels are more focused on relatability. It gives the reader a sense of how personal experiences shape our understanding of what prized possessions can be.

This shift in the role comics play currently compared to an earlier time is similar to the shift Jenkins (2007) pointed out in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. In it, Jenkins argues that "old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (p. 14). In that same regard, as new technologies such as digital comics have been introduced, the status of physical copies has changed, making them more valuable to hold. In *Convergence Culture*, that argument was harder to grasp, as it was meant to cover the much broader topic of media and content, but when applied to the more specialized topic of comics and "stuff," it is easier to grasp the idea that innovative and disruptive technologies have allowed us to place more value on what we once saw as disposable.

The questions posed throughout Jenkins' book puts our relationship with "stuff" into various perspectives, examining what stuff means to us, as well as the extent to which it controls us. When someone overidentifies with material possessions such as comics that someone else deems "worthless," does it mean that we think that person is worthless as well?

Jenkins asks many questions that invite reflection about the extent to which personal and lived experiences shape people in ways they may not have considered:

What does it mean to live in a world where in theory we could reclaim every toy and every comic our parents ever threw in the trash? What does it mean that, at a time when little is made to last, we are choosing to hold onto our childish things much later than previous generations did? What changes as we develop expert discourse around objects that previous generations held in cultural contempt? (p. 36)

These questions engage an innovative new way of thinking about comic books and graphic novels in relation to other people and maybe even ourselves. This mixture of questions and thoughts around what comics mean to the lives of other people repositions the meaning of comics as we know it in the cultural landscape. Comics no longer seem like just "stuff," even to those who have traditionally considered them insignificant.

Jenkins also suggests that the way many comics are designed encourages readers to examine their landscape both on and off the pages. It compels readers to pay attention to the physical objects that fill our lives and make up our familiar environment. Readers are also invited to think about whether those objects have a different meaning to those around them. In the same way comics are disposable to some, so are the familiar objects that may exist in a room we visit daily but that hold no significance.

Jenkins notes that comics are objects that we consume in accordance with their images, material elements, and the lives of the characters in them. It is important to remember that every decision, big and small, made on the pages of comics was made on purpose. With just a stroke of a pen or pencil, artists convey messages through the use of "stuff" as simple as a book in the background or the kind of drink a character chooses.

Comics and Stuff deals not only with comics but also with the use of the material depicted in the panels of comics. Jenkins points to the fact that comics use things to curate and invest in memory. This depends on comics connecting material possessions to affective qualities that then make them symbolic. As comic readers, we connect the dots to what those material possessions symbolize. The book tries to present an organic progression of these complex connections but ends up clouding the work of media and memory in the process. Jenkins still makes good points, though some confusion remains around how it all may interrelate.

Comics and Stuff does a good job of drawing parallels between comics and life and various other media. The book is suitable for a broad audience looking both to learn more about comics as well as to engage some of the ideas around consumer culture. As a pioneering media scholar, Jenkins moves through pages of illustrations and close readings of graphic novels in what feels like a mix of literary criticism and art history.

Comics and Stuff is an incredibly useful text that should be on the shelf of college students exploring media studies and what comics mean, as well as professors looking for new ways of teaching these topics. The book can also be beneficial to anyone who wants a deeper understanding of comics. It is so full of information and new ways of thinking about comics and, by extension, media, that frequent breaks will be needed to really absorb its message. Henry Jenkins' work is important and certainly goes far beyond the idea of just "stuff."

Reference

Jenkins, H. (2007). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.