

# Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture



Too often remembered solely as the psychiatrist and cultural critic whose testimony in Senate subcommittees sparked the creation of the Comics Code, Fredric Wertham was a far more complex man. Author Bart Beaty traces the evolution of Wertham's attitudes toward popular culture and reassesses his place in the debate about pop culture's effects on youth and society. When *The Seduction of the Innocent* was published in 1954, Wertham (1895-1981) became instantly known as an authority on child psychology. Although he had published several books before *Seduction*, its sharp criticism of popular culture in general--and comic books in particular--made it a touchstone for debate about issues of censorship, child protection, and freedom of speech. *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, a fresh perspective on Wertham's career, reinterprets his intellectual legacy and challenges notions about his alleged cultural conservatism. Drawing upon Wertham's published works as well as his unpublished private papers, correspondence, and notes, Beaty reveals a man whose opinions, life, and career offer more subtlety of thought than previously assumed. In particular, the book examines Wertham's change of heart in the 1970s, when he began to claim that comics could be a positive influence in American society. The Wertham that emerges is a critic who was significantly more progressive and multifaceted than his reputation would suggest. Bart Beaty is associate professor of communication and culture at the University of Calgary. His work has been published in the *Comics Journal*, *International Journal of Comic Art*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *Essays in Canadian Writing*, and *Canadian Review of American Studies*.

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