

# **Congress Investigates:**

## **The Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency Investigates Comic Books in the 1950s**

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#### **Worksheet 1: The Background of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency's 1954 Investigation of Comic Books**

A resolution passed by the United States Senate authorized the Judiciary Committee to create a Special Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency to investigate the rising level of juvenile crime in the United States. Although the subcommittee examined several causes of crime, public attention focused on allegations linking juvenile delinquency to the harmful effects of reading comic books.

The early 1950s were a time of great anxiety about the nation's youth. In 1955, *Newsweek* magazine reported that the national crime rate had increased by 33.4 percent since 1940, largely due to increased criminal acts by teenagers. Comic books were a new form of media and among the first consumer products specifically marketed to teenage buyers. Civic and religious leaders linked comic book reading to antisocial and criminal behavior, and several major newspapers launched anti-comic book editorial campaigns.

Fear about the harmful effects of reading comic books emerged after World War II, fueled by the growing popularity of crime and horror comics. Many comics also featured sexually suggestive illustrations and lurid plot lines describing incidents of crime and revenge. By the early 1950s, 80 to 100 million comic books of this type were being sold each week. Although popular with teens, the violent comic books triggered adult outrage. Public discontent was expressed in many ways, including mass comic book burnings conducted in several communities.

Childhood expert Dr. Fredric Wertham emerged as the best-known anti-comic book voice. Beginning in 1948, Wertham called for a ban on the sale of comic books to children under the age of 16, claiming that many delinquent children he had studied in his practice had been influenced by reading comics. Six years later, Wertham seized national attention with the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, a bestselling anti-comic book expose. Although Wertham's views were respected and widely known, critics argued that his research was not supported by adequate data and consisted mostly of unproven theories.

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The Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency focused its investigation on crime and horror comic books because they were said to offer—according to the subcommittee's report on the topic—"short courses in murder, mayhem, robbery . . . and virtually every other form of crime . . . and horror." During April and June, 1954, the subcommittee held televised public hearings in New York, the center of the comic book publishing industry.

The subcommittee was especially concerned about comic books' vivid, detailed illustrations of violent acts. The subcommittee expressed alarm that rather than provoking laughter, these crime and horror comic books aimed a spotlight on violent death in every form imaginable and dwelled in detail on sadistic cruelty and various forms of insanity.

In the end, the subcommittee found that reading comic books did not cause teenagers to commit crimes. They ruled against censoring or banning comics and instead called on the comic book industry to regulate itself by adopting a ratings code and imposing a voluntary ban on depictions of extreme violence. The committee concluded that, ultimately, it was a parent's role to screen material their children read.

Although the subcommittee's examination of popular media is a well-remembered chapter of its work, the investigation of comic books was only one element of a far reaching and long-lasting study of mass media. After the completion of its study of comic books, the subcommittee shifted its focus to violence and horror on television and movies and the power of media to shape behavior.

The subcommittee's work encompassed far more than analysis of the media. Among the other topics investigated by the subcommittee were the effectiveness of the juvenile court system and youth correctional institutions, the condition of government and social welfare organization programs for young people, and the effectiveness of youth employment programs.

The subcommittee's work was valued by the Senate, and its authority to investigate was renewed and extended by a series of Senate resolutions until 1986.

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**Review Questions:**

1. How did the Senate respond to 1950s concerns about juvenile delinquency?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How did the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency use television to inform the public of its study of media?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What was the importance of Dr. Fredric Wertham in this history?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How appropriate is it to describe the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency as being primarily focused on investigating comic books?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What does the history of the subcommittee illustrate about how Congress represents the American people?



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### Worksheet 2: Testimony Introduced to the Subcommittee

**Instructions:** Read the following three excerpts. Answer the questions at the end of the worksheet, and record your answers to share with the rest of the class.

1. Excerpt from the Testimony of Dr. Frederic Wertham (medical expert on children), Psychiatrist, Director, Lafargue Clinic, New York, NY—Presented to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency Hearing, New York City, April 21, 1954

**Dr. Wertham.** . . . It is my opinion, without any reasonable doubt, and without any reservation, that comic books alone are an important contributing factor in many cases of juvenile delinquency. . . .

Mr. Chairman, as long as the crime comic books industry exists in its present forms there are no secure homes.

. . . One of the outstanding things there is in crime comic books—let me say here subject to later questions that in my opinion crime comic books as I define them, are the overwhelming majority of all comic books at the present time. There is an endless stream of brutality...

I think that comic books primarily, and that is the greatest harm they do, cause a great deal of ethical confusion. . . .

I would like to point out to you one other crime comic book which we have found to be particularly injurious to the ethical development of children and those are the Superman comic books. They arouse in children fantasies of sadistic joy in seeing other people punished over and over again while you yourself remain immune. We have called it the Superman complex.

In many comics, the whole point is that evil triumphs: that you can commit the perfect crime. I could give you so many examples that I would take all your time.

I will give you only one or two. Here is a little 10-year-old girl who killed her father, brought it about that her mother was electrocuted. She winks at you because she is triumphant...

I want to make it particularly clear that there are whole comic books in which every single story ends with the triumph of evil, with a perfect crime unpunished and actually glorified...

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Now what about the remedy? Mr. Chairman, I am just a doctor. I can't tell what the remedy is. I can only say that in my opinion this is a public-health problem. I think it ought to be possible to determine once and for all what is in these comic books and I think it ought to be possible to keep the children under 15 from seeing [crime comics] displayed to them and preventing these being sold directly to children.

In other words, I think something should be done to see that the children can't get them...

I am not advocating censorship, but it is the comic book industry which at the present moment tries to censor what the parents read... Ever since I published my book... I have been told by threats by libel suits, of damages; it is a miracle that my book was published considering how many threatening letters these lawyers and people have written to my prospective publishers...

**Senator Estes Kefauver (D, TN).** Would you liken this situation you talk about, showing the same thing over and over again until they finally believed it, to what we heard about during the last war of Hitler's theory of telling the story over and over again?

**Chairman Robert C. Hendrickson (R, NJ).** The "big lie" technique"

**Dr. Wertham.** Well, I hate to say that, Senator, but I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry. They get the children much younger.

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2. Excerpt from the Testimony of William Gaines, Publisher of Entertaining Comics. Questioned by Senator Estes Kefauver (D, TN) and Subcommittee staff Associate Chief Counsel Herbert Wilson Beaser—Presented to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency Hearing, New York City, April 21, 1954

**Mr. Beaser.** Let me get the limits as far as what you put into your magazine... Is the sole test of what you put into your magazine whether it sells? Is there any limit you can think of that you would not put in a magazine because you thought a child should not see or read about?

**Mr. Gaines.** No, I wouldn't say that there is any limit for the reason you outlined. . . .



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**Mr. Beaser.** There would be no limit actually to what you put in the magazines?

**Mr. Gaines.** Only within the bounds of good taste. . . .

**Mr. Beaser.** Your own good taste and salability?

**Mr. Gaines.** Yes.

**Senator Estes Kefauver (D, TN).** Here is your May 22 issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?



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**Mr. Gaines.** Yes, sir; I do, for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be



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seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody.

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3. Excerpt from the Testimony of Richard Clendenen, Executive Director, United States Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency—Presented to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency Hearing, New York City, April 21, 1954

**Mr. Clendenen.** I am executive director of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. . . .

Our investigation into the comic book industry has been almost exclusively limited to those comics which themselves center about horror and crime.

The particular type of comics to which I refer present both pictures and stories which relate to almost all types of crime and in many instances those crimes are committed through extremely cruel, sadistic, and punitive kinds of acts.

Now, in connection with that question, I should like to make it perfectly clear that our investigation has not been concerned with other types of comics, many of which all authorities seem to agree represent not only harmless, but many times educational entertainment.

I should also add that even within that type of comic books known as the horror crime comics; there are gradations within this group, too. That is, some are much more sadistic, much more lurid, than others in the same class or category.

Now, although our investigations have been limited to this particular segment of the comic book industry, we should not give the impression that this is a small portion of the comic book industry.

According to estimates which were provided us by the Audit Bureau of Circulations and Controlled Circulation Audits, the two firms that publish circulation figures, there were about 422 different kinds of comic or comic-book titles on the newsstands in March 1954. About one-fourth were of the crime and horror variety. Now, as far as all comic books are concerned,

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although exact figures are lacking, most authorities agree that there are probably somewhere between 75 million and 100 million comic books sold in this country each month.

If one quarter of these are of the crime variety of comics, this means that there are some 20 million comic books, crime comic books placed on the newsstands of this country each month. . . .

We have reviewed virtually all of the surveys and studies that have been made; that is, we have reviewed all that we have been able to find.

I might say that it probably is not too surprising that the expert opinions and findings of these studies are not wholly unanimous. That is, there is certain diversity of opinion regarding the effects of these materials on youngsters even among these individuals whom we might properly qualify as experts. . . . There is substantial, although not unanimous, agreement on the following three points:

1. That the reading of a crime comic will not cause a well-adjusted and well socialized boy or girl to go out and commit crime.
2. There may be a detrimental and delinquency producing effect upon some emotionally disturbed children who may gain suggestion, support, and sanction for acting out his own hostile and aggressive feeling.
3. There is reason to believe that as among youngsters, the most avid and extensive consumers of comics are the very boys and girls less able to tolerate this type of material. As a matter of fact, many experts feel that excessive reading of materials of this kind in itself is symptomatic of some emotional maladjustment in a youngster.



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**Worksheet 2 Questions:**

1. What joy does Dr. Wertham claim that children find in comic books?
2. In what ways do Senator Kefauver and Dr. Wertham liken the impact of comic books to propaganda?
3. How did William Gaines justify the tastefulness of the cover of *Crime Suspense Stories* that EC Comics published on May 22, 1954?
4. What potential link does Richard Clendenen draw between comic books and juvenile delinquency?
5. What do you think was the most persuasive testimony in the above excerpts, and what was the least effective? Why?



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**Worksheet 3: Documents in Subcommittee Evidence**

Instructions: Examine the following three comic book covers and three comic book plot summaries. Answer the questions at the end of the worksheet and record your answers to share with the rest of the class.

**Books Covers:**

1. *Vault of Horror*, February–March, 1954

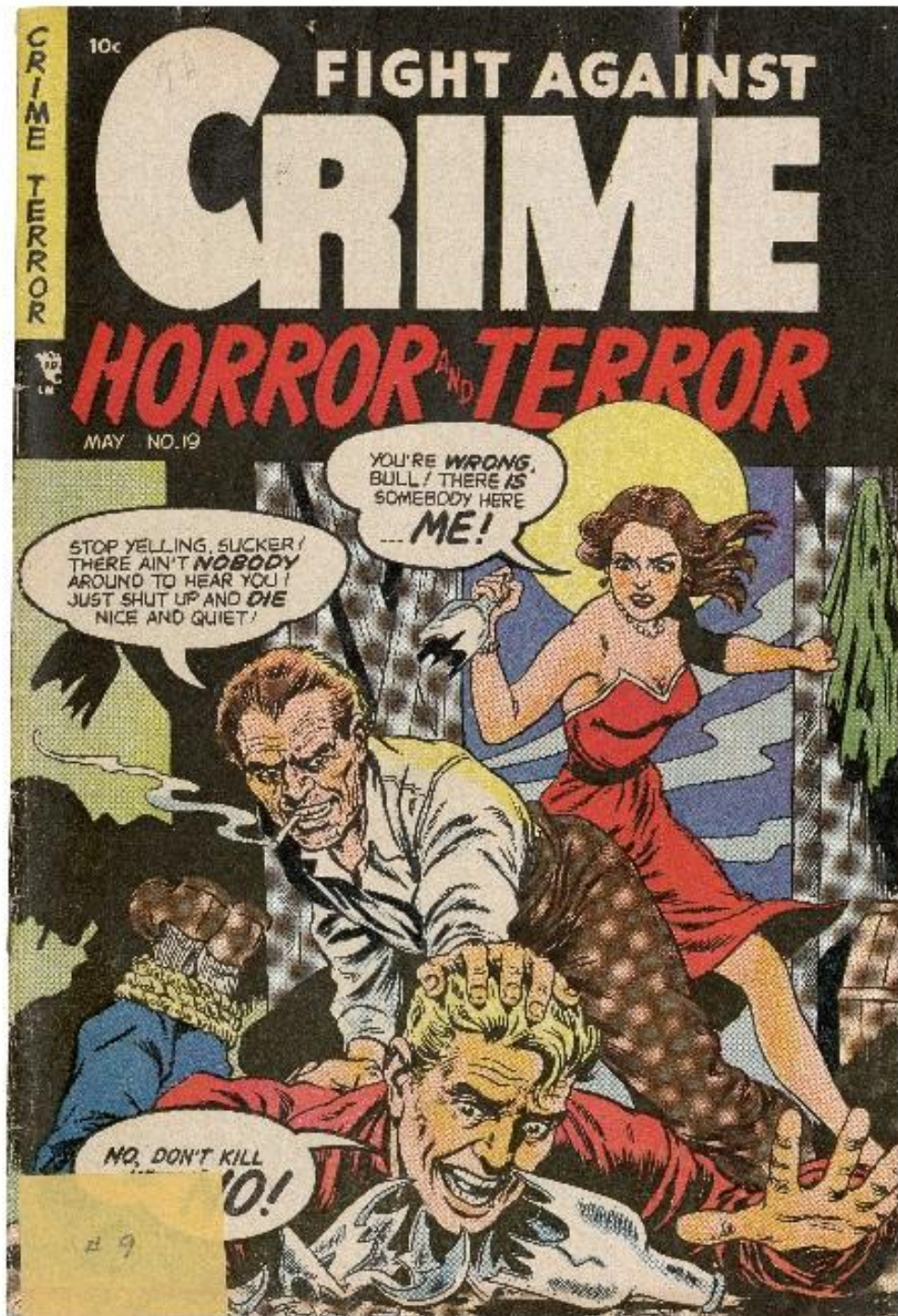




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2. *Fight Against Crime*, May 1954



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3. *Panic* May, 1954



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### Plot Summaries of comic books (written by the subcommittee staff):

#### 1. *Bottoms Up* (Story Comics)

This story has to do with a confirmed alcoholic who spends all his wife can earn on alcohol. As a result their small son is severely neglected. On the day the son is to start in the first grade in school, the mother asks the father to escort him to the school building. Instead, the father goes to his favorite bootlegger, and the son goes to school by himself. En route, the child is struck and killed by an automobile. Informed of the accident, the mother returns home to find her husband gloating over his new supply of liquor. The last four panels show the mother as she proceeds to kill and hack her spouse to pieces with an ax. The first panes shows her swinging the ax, burying the blade in her husband's skull. Blood spurts from the open wound, and the husband is shown with an expression of agony. The next panel has a montage effect: the husband is lying on the floor with blood rushing from his skull as the wife is poised over him. She holds the bloody ax, raised for more blows. The background shows an enlargement of the fear filled eyes of the husband, as well as an enlargement of the bloody ax. To describe this scene of horror, the text states that, "and now the silence of the Hendricks' apartment is broken only by the soft humming of Nora as she busies herself with her 'work.'" She then cuts his body into smaller pieces and disposes of it by placing the various pieces in the bottles of liquor her husband had purchased. She then returns the liquor to the bootlegger and obtains a refund. As she leaves, the bootlegger says: "HMMM, *funny!* I figured that rye would be *inside* Lou by now!" The story ends with the artist admonishing the child readers in a macabre vein with the following paragraph, "But if Westlake were to examine the remainder of the case more closely he'd see that it is Lou who is inside the liquor! Heh, heh! Sleep well, kiddies!" We then see three of the bottles—one contains an eye, one an ear, and one a finger.

#### 2. *Frisco Mary* (Ace Comics)

This story concerns an attractive and glamorous young woman, Mary, who gains control of a California underworld gang. Under her leadership the gang embarks on a series of holdups marked for their ruthlessness and violence. One of these escapades involves the robbery of a bank. A police office sounds an alarm thereby reducing the gang's "take" to a mere \$25,000. One of the scenes of violence in the story shows Mary poised over the wounded police officer, as he lies on the pavement, pouring bullets into his back from her submachine gun. The agonies of the stricken officer are clearly depicted on his face. Mary,

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who in this particular scene looks like an average American girl wearing a sweater and skirt and with her hair in bangs, in response to a pleas from one of her gang members to stop shooting and flee, states: "We could have got twice as much if it wasn't for this frog-headed-rat!!! I'll show him!"

#### 3. *With Knife in Hand* (Atlas Comics)

A promising young surgeon begins to operate on wounded criminals in order to gain the money demanded by his spendthrift wife. After he has ruined his professional career by becoming associated with the underworld, a criminal comes to get help for his girlfriend who has been shot by the police. In the accompanying panels, the girl is placed upon the operating table; the doctor discovers that the criminal's girlfriend is none other than his own wife. The scene then shows the doctor committing suicide by plunging a scalpel into his own abdomen. His wife, gasping for help, also dies on the operating table for lack of medical attention. The last scene shows her staring into space, arm dangling over the side of the operating table. The doctor is sprawled on the floor, his hand still clutching the knife handle protruding from his bloody abdomen. There is a leer on his face, and he is winking at the reader, connoting satisfaction at having wrought revenge upon his unfaithful spouse.



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**Worksheet 3 Questions**

1. What action is the main focus on each of the three comic book covers?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Distinguish among the three types of violence shown on the comic book covers. Which do you think has the most potential to be considered harmful to young readers? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Should the cover of *Panic* be considered a violent scene or a social satire?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Which of the three plot summaries did you find the most engaging? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How was revenge used in the plot you selected in answering question 4?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Which plot most effectively surprised the reader? Why?



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**Worksheet 4: Correspondence Sent to the Committee**

Letter from Eugenia Genovar, November 24, 1953

5022

NOV 27 1953

271 St. George Street  
St. Augustine, Florida  
November 24, 1953

My dear Senator Hendrickson,

I see in today's Florida Times-Union that you have been appointed to head a committee for the investigation of juvenile delinquency.

This is indeed a very fine idea for really a mother today lives in constant fear because of the awful increase in crime among the young, and especially the dreadful increase of sex crimes and depravity.

My dear Senator Hendrickson as an American mother I offer you these suggestions.

First, please read the article in the November issue of Ladies Home Journal on "What Parents Don't Know About Comic Books" by Dr. Frederick Wertham. I am positive that he has the right idea!

If the mothers of our beloved country would unite to have these pernicious comic books banned I am sure it would be a great step forward in the control of the young, especially the young boys.

Second, all the awful crime stories and murder mysteries sent out to pollute the air and corrupt the minds of our younger generation.

I do not want to bore you with onerous detail but I have found that even though a mother is alert and does not allow her children to waste their money or time on these cheap and filthy comics, one's children can read them at the book stands or read them when they visit their friends.

Third, reading all these lurid, highly colored comics ruins a child's appetite for good books as the better literature sounds too tame after this other highly seasoned diet.

I believe that the P. T. A's all over the country could unite to have these comics banned, many cities have done this and as Dr. says, we have laws that prohibit selling poison, why can't we prohibit these people from selling poison to our children's minds?

I do not think that it is necessary or just to conduct an investigation that will cause the long suffering, over taxed American citizen a great deal of money when the evidence is right in front of our eyes and the way to stop it is so very simple.

Of course you will have educators (?) and others who will rise up and say these comics do not harm the minds of the readers but I think the proof that they do is right in front of us, in increased juvenile delinquency for as you know, we do spend a great deal of money on our schools, our recreation programs, etc, and the great majority of the parents are trying to bring their children up right, yet, in spite of all this we are appalled at what we read in the papers every day and hear from our neighbors, friends, nurses and doctors.

I will not take up any more of your time.

With heartfelt best wishes, I am,

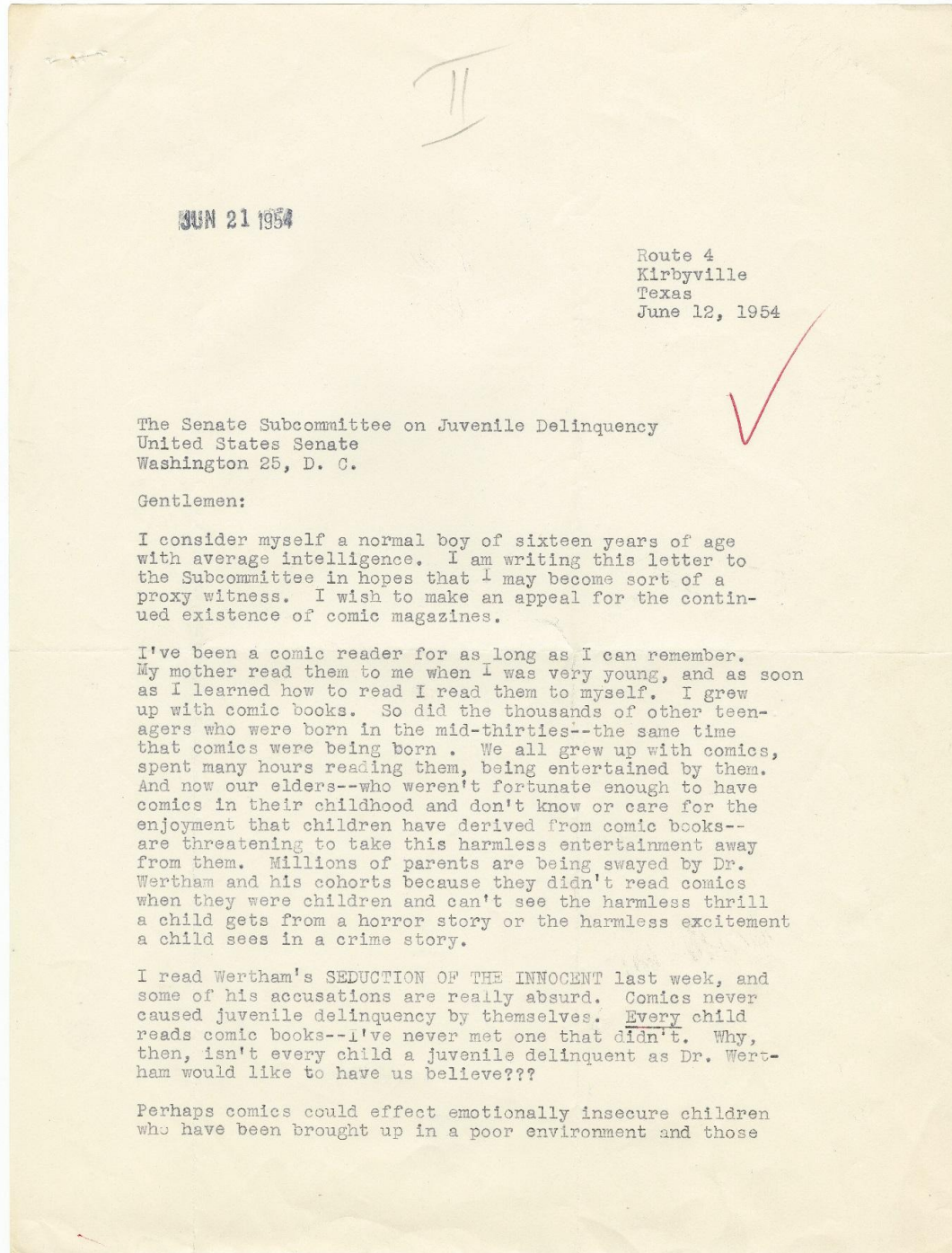
Sincerely yours,  
*Eugenia G. Genovar*



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Letter from Bob Stewart, June 12, 1954 (Page 1)





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Letter from Bob Stewart, June 12, 1954 (Page 2)

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who have been brought up badly by their parents, but I maintain that any child who has been given a proper chance to grow up normally could not be effected in any way by reading comic magazines.

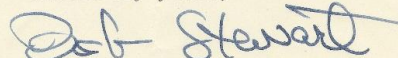
As long as The Entertaining Comics Group seems to be one of the leading comic houses under question I'll a paragraph or two to them. The fact of the matter is that the Entertaining Group is not publishing comic books for children! You can look at an EC yourself and see this fact. EC has acquired the finest comic artists available and prints maturely written stories. I know of many many teen-agers who have stopped reading all comic mags but EC because they have discovered that the other comics are directed at those of a lower age level..

But pre-teen-agers don't care about the literary quality of comics. To them any comic story is entertainment. When they mature, they will find that they can only find real entertainment in EComics just as I did when I was twelve years old.

Wertham seems to imply that all comic publishers are criminals turning out handbooks for crime. But really they're just writers and artists trying to survive until they can get their big break. Remove comics, and there goes some of the best experience tomorrow's famous authors and artists will get.

The EC Group, by the way, is the only comic publishing house that can claim to have a really recognized fandom. In fact, I am co-editor of an amateur magazine devoted to the EC fan. In the next few issues the discussion of Wertham and the Comic Book Hearings will be entirely discoursed. You'll hear even more from us then!

Sincerely yours,

  
Bob Stewart



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Letter from Robert Merdian, June 22, 1954

card 6/24/54  
JUN 22 1954  
476 Evergreen Avenue  
Millvale 9, Pennsylvania  
(289082)

Dear Sir.

I have been reading comic books for seven to nine years. Every kind of book that was written, I have never robbed a bank or thinks, like that. My personal opinion is I think reading crime books makes a young or old person not want to commit a crime, because in every story the old saying "Crime don't pay" is carried out. The person or persons committing the crime are always caught. The fear of this stops crime and stops juvenile delinquency in fact there is not a sufficient number of the comic books on the book stands. I am 14 years old.

Thank you  
Robert Merdian

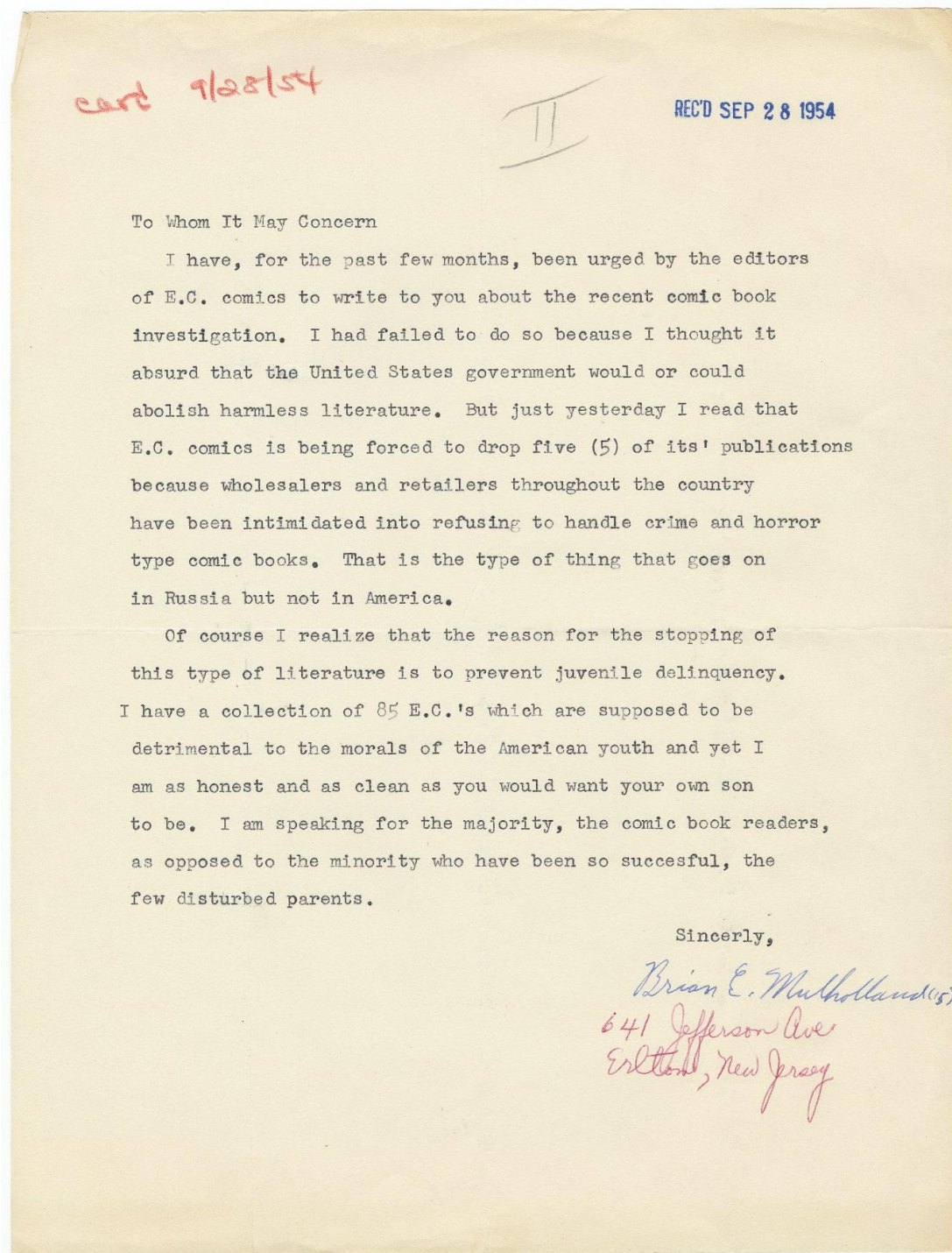




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Letter from Brian Mulholland, September 28, 1954



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**Worksheet 4 Questions:**

1. What do these letters reflect about the influence of Dr. Frederic Wertham on the public opinions about comic books?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Which letter did you find to be the most persuasive? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What do these letters show about the relationship of Congress to the public?





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**Worksheet 5: Review Questions**

1. What does the evidence in this lesson suggest about the importance of crime and horror comics as a 1950s historical topic?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What does the primary source material in this lesson show about Congress as an institution of representative government?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. As a result of the subcommittee's investigation, the comic book industry decided to police itself by banning extreme murder and horror comics. Would you support this policy? Why or why not?

