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American Newspaper Comics: An Encyclopedic Reference Guide [book review]

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Review Subject: *American Newspaper Comics: An Encyclopedic Reference Guide* by Allan Holtz

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American Newspaper Comics is a hefty 624 page hardback with a cover as inviting as its subject. Technicolour tones radiate warmth and a four-colour fringe of cartoon faces grabs the eye, recalling Sunday mornings of broadsheets and ink-smudged fingers. So forgive the reader initially disappointed to discover not comics but hundreds of double-columned black-and-white pages, each packed tight with capsule paragraphs, a seeming jumble of dates and proper nouns. This is not a case of false advertising. Indeed, the book's subtitle is *An Encyclopedic Reference Guide*, not "an encyclopedia". A reader hoping for short histories, biographical details, and notes on recurring themes and features should look to *The Encyclopedia of American Comics* (Goulart, 1990). For the serious collector or comic historian, however, *American Newspaper Comics* is an impressively authoritative index and an indispensable research guide.

Assembled by Allan Holtz over a twenty-year period, the book chronicles over 7,000 daily, weekly, and Sunday comics that appeared in mainstream American newspapers from 1894 to the present day (editorial cartoons and strips in alternative weekly papers are not included). Comics are arranged alphabetically by title and each receives a pithy paragraph enumerating, like a baseball card, the strip's stats and vitals, including format (single panel or strip); frequency; running dates; creator(s); syndicates that licensed the strip; alternate titles, if available; and catch-all notes covering miscellaneous but salient information. Much of the data comes from primary sources: pages in Holtz's personal collection, papers foraged from research libraries, and details heroically extracted from murky microfiche. Additional insights are gleaned from the reference literature on comics, including venerable texts such as *Syndicated Comic Strips and Artists, 1924-1995* (Strickler, 1995). Every fact and tidbit is backed by a source note, a boon to those following in Holtz's footsteps.

Also included are nearly 200 pages of appendices: an index of syndicates; another of authors and their cartoons; an extensive list of published comics collections; and a title cross-reference to help researchers track down elusive comics published under multiple or ever-changing titles. It amounts to a staggering amount of effort, proof of Holtz's contention that "research is serious business".

Due to spatial limitations, examples of the comics are not reproduced in the book. Instead Holtz scanned over 2,000 strips and compiled them in a massive PDF file, which is included on a CD-ROM. At almost 600 megabytes and an astonishing 3,108 pages, merely opening the file could choke older machines. Moreover, the size of some full-page comics will have readers, especially those working from laptops, making great use of scrollbars in order to see every panel. Because the PDF is not searchable, readers must locate strips by scrolling through a sidebar of bookmarks, one for each strip name. Despite these inconveniences, the breadth of content is unrivalled, even by Holtz's enthusiast blog, *Stripper's Guide* (<http://strippersguide.blogspot.co.uk>), which regularly showcases the fruits of his research.

Given the high quality of this content it is puzzling that the University of Michigan Press issued *American Newspaper Comics* in a format least likely to facilitate discovery. Perusing the thousands of entries I was reminded of Macmillan's announcement last year that it would no longer print dictionaries in favour of digital editions. In a blog post, Michael Rundell, the dictionary's editor-in-chief, wrote that "exiting print is a moment of liberation, because at last our dictionaries have found their ideal medium". The same could be said of a supersized index like Holtz's. On the web, entries could be summoned from a search box and data made actionable. Click an author's name to see the comics he/she produced. Browse illustrations on each strip's unique page, and locate problematic titles like *Thimble Theatre*, more commonly known as *Popeye*, through predictive metadata. And then there's folksonomic tagging of the kind generated by online communities. This informal metadata could allow for searches by subject (e.g. retrieve all strips to do with Arizona, or baseball, or both), but it could also allow readers to ascribe individual meaning. A recent collection of Smithsonian photographs, uploaded to Flickr, was extensively catalogued by users according to their interests and associations, including the history of photography, mustaches, even Steampunk, creating new and unexpected kinds of value. As Clay Shirky put it in a keynote to IT leaders, "You open up your data to see where the value is" – a tantalizing prospect when turned on Holtz's project.

In its current format, and priced at a not inconsiderable \$150, this tome is aimed squarely at diehard collectors, super-fans, and graduate level or faculty researchers. This is consistent with the obscure quality of much of the information in the volume. All the same, no library supporting advanced programmes in the history of mass media, comic art, or American culture

generally should be without a copy of *American Newspaper Comics*. Here's hoping it turns up on the web in a future iteration.

References:

Goulart, R. (1990), *The Encyclopedia of American Comics*, Facts on File, New York, NY.

Strickler, D. (1995), *Syndicated Comic Strips and Artists, 1924-1995: The Complete Index*, Comics Access, Cambria, CA.