

**Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire. The Comics of Jack Kirby*  
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I did not grow up with comic books and superhero stuff. Nor am I specifically a fan of Jack Kirby's and of his *Fantastic Four* which was created in close collaboration with Stan Lee, that other founding father of the new comics of the 60s and beyond. And Charles Hatfield's book has not not turned me into a lover of the costumed heroes and their authors/*auteurs*. But *Hand of Fire* does represent what comics studies can mean today, and the reading of this book has been, from the very first till the very last line, a *wow* experience that it is a pleasure (no, a duty) to share with all those interested in the field, a field which Hatfield's investigation broadens significantly, beyond the incrowd of comics or even popular culture.

*Hand of Fire*, which presents the amazing career of Jack Kirby and discusses the way in which he stretched the limits of both the comics medium and the superhero genre, is indeed a landmark publication that continues the author's own important contributions to the field (as illustrated in his first well received and widely used publication *Alternative Comics. An Emerging Literature* (published in 2005) while opening many new perspectives for comics studies of today and tomorrow. On the one hand, Hatfield's study has a narrow focus: although it offers an illuminating overview of the whole of Kirby's career, including his important participation in the romance comics genre during the fifties (welcome information for less specialized readers, and, one supposes, a hint for further research into what constitutes an almost completely neglected domain), *Hand of Fire* limits itself to the close-reading of a specific period and a specific dimension of Kirby's work, namely the Marvel years of *The Fantastic Four* and the DC experiments of the *Fourth World* books. Within this twofold or two-sided corpus, it is clearly the latter production, the various series and works gathered in the Fourth World universe, that has Hatfield's sympathy. Contrary to many Kirby fans who tend to consider the DC intermezzo 'over the top' and therefore less convincing, Hatfield champions the stimulating idea that it is exactly in these works, which were quickly interrupted and have often been criticized, that one can discover the most ambitious as well as the most personal Jack Kirby -and perhaps also the best example of how Kirby engages in a creative dialogue with society. Indeed, the issue of freedom, or rather of the battle between

freedom and dictatorship displayed in the *Fourth World* books clearly ties in with contemporary post-68 youth culture, the social and ideological debates raised by the War in Vietnam and, more generally, the bureaucratic tendencies within corporatized America.

Yet reducing *Hand of Fire* to a discussion on the social relevance of comics studies or the use of the medium as a channel for self-expression, would not do justice to the dramatic importance of Hatfield's study, which one can link to three main fields of inquiry, all of them crucial for the way in which we should conceive of comics studies in the near future.

First of all, Hatfield offers a very well-balanced and subtle discussion of what he rightly presents as a false dichotomy between Kirby the auteur (the individual creator of the *Fantastic Four* and the lone inventor of the new superhero comics) and Kirby the mercenary (the helpless and exploited Marvel employee who, together with many others, was involved in a collective process the rules of which were set by people other than those who were writing the stories and drawing the books). What he stresses throughout the book is on the contrary the fact that creative impulses can come from very constraining circumstances. If Kirby, whose individual ("auteur") contributions to comics are not at all contested by Hatfield, has been able to do what he has done, it was not only despite but also thanks to the commercial and capitalistic environment in which he had to produce his work. In this regard, *Hand of Fire* lines up with cutting-edge research in the creative industries field (I am thinking here of the work by David Hesmondalgh and Pierre-Michel Menger for instance), which emphasizes very much not just the possibility, but the very necessity of inventive and innovative work within what Adorno and Horkheimer coined the culture industry.

Secondly, *Hand of Fire* also offers fascinating analyses to all those interested in gaining a better understanding of comics as storytelling. The great advantage of Hatfield's approach, which will not come as a surprise to readers of *Alternative Comics*, is his strong awareness of medium-specificity, although this awareness never manifests in a shallow, bloodless, formalist way. In this case, the author starts from a clever semiotic reframing of Scott McCloud's reading of realist versus stylized and abstract ways of drawing, to develop a sound and extremely handy and useful method for the analysis of indexical, iconic, and symbolic values in panels and pages, which he then links with an astute reinterpretation of the merger of time and space within the very drawings of Kirby (the major theoretical references here are Peirce and Lessing, each of them perfectly integrated in a new method of assessing the temporal dimension of the still image that should interest more people than just the students and scholars of comic books). Hatfield's critique of the stereotyped vision of the panel as snapshot, on the one hand, and his bringing together of abstract and symbolic values

on the other hand, are fundamental contributions to all emerging and ongoing discussions on the semiotics of comics (and visual culture in general).

Thirdly, *Hand of Fire* is also very helpful for myth analysis. Given Kirby's interest in mythological themes, Hatfield could have focused directly on a discussion of the artwork as individual mythmaking. And of course this is also what the book offers (the opposite would have been a critical mistake), yet what it does is much more than that. Hatfield stresses the link between myth and issues of format, genre, intertext, in short the industry in which an author decides to develop his stories, and this perspective brings him to underline the continuing impact of the notion of 'formula' (even in the apparently devalued forms it may take in expressions such as formulaic literature). Myth and mythology suddenly become less vague, less free-floating, less formless in a word, and this shift might be experienced as a relief (and a new start) by all those confronted with myth and similarly slippery subjects.

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