
A GREAT COMPANION FOR THE I.N.D.U.C.K.S. SEARCH ENGINE

by Katja Kontturi





Review: Alberto Beccattini: *Disney Comics. The Whole Story*. Theme Park Press, United States of America, 2016. ISBN 978-1-68390-017-7, 449 pages.

In the foreword to Alberto Beccattini's 2016 book, *Disney Comics: The Whole Story*, historian Didier Ghiz writes that "if Disney history is only understood as the history of American cartoons and theme parks, you are missing a large part of Disney's creative history" (p. viii). As a Disney comics scholar, I could not agree more: Beccattini's book is a much-needed attempt to make the comics branch of the Disney phenomenon known worldwide. It is an encyclopedic guidebook to Disney comics published globally that offers useful references to even the rarest pieces of work published under the Disney label.

Alberto Beccattini is an Italian Disney historian, whose previous works have mainly been published in Italian and include, among others, the unofficial biography of the Disney artist Don Rosa, titled *Don Rosa e il rinascimento disneyano* [*Don Rosa and the Disneyan Renaissance*.] (1997). His most recent work is *Guido Martina e l'età d'oro Disney in Italia* [*Guido Martina and the Golden Age of Disney in Italy*] (2017), which concentrates on the noted Italian Disney artist Guido Martina, who specialized in parodic and Disneyfied interpretations of various literary classics. None of Beccattini's work has been translated into English before, so it is a cause for celebration that it has finally been made available to a broader range of scholars and is able to serve the interest of a wider readership.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *DISNEY COMICS*

The most (in)famous among available studies of Disney comics remains the pamphlet *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, published in 1971 by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart. Although their reading and analysis of the Disney comics has unquestionable value, the reference system is poorly executed, and the authors fail to mention their source comics, which damages the depth of the work. In addition, their studies are solely based on translations of the original comics. *How to Read Donald Duck* accuses Walt Disney personally for the capitalist and imperialist values in Disney comics, even though Disney himself



did not have much to do with the comic branch of his company.¹ The field of Disney comics studies needs more critical scholarly approaches.

Conversely, *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity* (2006) by Thomas Andrae, has been by far the most promising work amongst Anglophone Disney scholarship written in this century, a field that has otherwise offered up work ranging from good to middling. However, whatever its quality, much of this work has a glaring blind spot: it is exclusively focused on American-made Disney comics. It is high time for Anglophone Disney studies to open its eyes also to Disney comics from Europe and beyond. Becattini's book, which was originally published in Italian in the mid-1990s and has finally been translated into English and revised to be up-to-date with the comics published since its original publication, can serve as an invitation to expand this horizon, and that is one of its primary strengths.

It is unfortunate that the English language dominates academic research on Disney comics, yet it is also pertinent to bring discoveries made in various European countries written in their own languages available for wider academia. The translation of Becattini's book was undertaken not (only) to provide a curiosity or resource for Disney comic collectors, but it also serves as proof that Disney comics are valued elsewhere than in the US, especially in Europe, a fact that should be noted in the field of comics research as well. Hopefully, Becattini's *Disney Comics: The Whole Story* will serve as a wake-up call for Disney comics scholars globally to bring their research to the Anglophone table.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DUCKS, MICE, AND ADAPTATIONS

Becattini's book is divided into twelve sections, structured mainly around country of publication. He has done a tremendous job by listing both popular and rare comics published not only in the United States, Italy, and South America, but in European countries with smaller readership and circulation.

The majority of the book is primarily dedicated to US Disney comic books, and secondarily to Italian Disney comics. The former focus is based on the works and significance of Carl Barks (1901–2000). By far, Barks has been the most-studied Disney artist among comics scholars and

¹ Kontturi 2014, 22-23.



fans. “The good artist,” as he is called by Disney fans and scholars, is claimed to be one of the most popular storytellers of his time:² “His stories reflected traditions and contradictions peculiar to the United States yet at the same time dealt with universal themes – which is why they have been so popular all over the world” (p. 39). Though Becattini notes that there were other American comic artists working during the time of Carl Barks, they were largely left in the shadow of the master after his name was made world-famous.

The inclusion of a large Italian Disney comics section is explained not only by the fact that Becattini is himself Italian, but also by the statistics: the major part of the Disney comics industry is today concentrated in the Italian market, which produces comics for the magazines all over Europe. The Italian *Topolino* magazine (from the Italian name for Mickey Mouse) has a long-standing history: it was issued on the last day of the year 1932, making it the first Disney comics magazine outside the United States. Notable about the Italian Disney comics, is the influence of the country’s culture and history: even in their early years, the milieu in Italian Disney comics was more Italian than American. And since Guido Martina introduced parodies of literary classics with “L’Inferno di Topolino” in 1949, literary adaptations have been a typical trope in Disney comics of Italian origin. However, as Becattini notes, Martina got the inspiration for the comic from the Sunday strip “Mickey Mouse vs. Robin Hood” (1936) by the American Floyd Gottfredsson (p. 167).

SMALL FACTS AND SOME FICTION

Alberto Becattini has not only managed to compile a massive encyclopedia of Disney comics, but his book also includes some interesting anecdotes. Even in the early 1940s, the American artists included quite a lot of inside jokes into their works. For instance, Al Taliaferro used his own phone number in the Donald Duck strip, as Donald’s number, and received a great number of phone calls as a result (p. 22). And Jerry Siegel, the co-creator of Superman, apparently worked for *Topolino* between 1972 and 1979, scripting 155 comics (p. 185-186)!

Despite the detailed work and research put into Becattini’s book, however, there are some obvious shortages. Firstly, even though the significance of Carl Barks is addressed, his follower,

² Andrae 2006, 6



Don Rosa is not discussed in equal depth. Becattini fails to mention that Rosa is in fact the only Disney comic artist ever to receive a highly valued Will Eisner Award (twice, in fact), or that the main reason for his retirement was not his eyesight (p. 270), but his problem with the Disney industry.³ Also, *BOOM! Kids* (an imprint of the BOOM Entertainment publishing house) comics' listing (p. 105) does not include the unfinished Don Rosa collection (*Walt Disney Treasury: Donald Duck vol 1 & 2*, 2011).

Some minor details also caught my eye. The book remarks on seventy-six years of Disney comics history (p. x), although it would make eighty-six years from the first Mickey Mouse strip (13th of January 1930) to the publication of the Becattini's book (2016). Perhaps he has based his numbers in the first issue of the comic book *Mickey Mouse Magazine* published in September 1940. The title of the chapter "Scandinavian Way" is misleading, since Finland is not part of Scandinavia, but rather a part of the Nordic countries. In addition, although Finnish Disney artists are listed in the book, Finnish Donald Duck fan culture is not discussed at all. As a citizen of a nation that claims to read the most Disney comics in the world per capita, the comparison between the comics readerships in different countries would have been an interesting subject to consider, since Becattini brought it up concerning the Netherlands, where their weekly had 236,000 readers – including subscribers and sales in 2014 (p. 331). According the latest (2016) KTM readership survey of the magazine readership in Finland, the weekly *Aku Ankka* magazine had 674,000 subscribers. It was the third most read magazine in the country.

CONCLUSION

Disney Comics: The Whole Story is indeed an encyclopedia, not a study or a detailed analysis of the comics listed, but it does not promise to be anything else. The amount of detail and the focus on publication years make the book a great companion for the I.N.D.U.C.K.S. search engine, an online Disney comics database. What is indeed unfortunate, however, is that the Walt Disney Company seems not to have granted the author permission to reproduce, which means that there are no reference images, panels, or cover art present in the book.

³ Rosa 2013



Furthermore, I would have liked to see a concluding chapter that summarizes the book's most important observations: what is the readership of Disney comics in general and what is the difference between the comics' popularity in different countries. All in all, *Disney Comics: The Whole Story* is not perfect, but it is a more than adequate tool for the collector or researcher who needs an overall idea of Disney comics globally, or who wants to know some minor details of a certain rare comic.



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