

SUPERMAN BURNING

By

David R. Remschel

Based on three true stories

SUPERMAN BURNING

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SUPERMAN BURNING

For David Mace

Seduction of the Innocent by Frederick Wertham was published by Rinehart and Company in 1954

Segments of the script are taken from actual court texts from the *Senate Hearings for Juvenile Delinquency*

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Superman Burning received a workshopped read through at The Hill Country Arts Foundation in Ingram Texas. The cast was as follows:

THE CHAIRMAN/ JUDGE ROBERTS.....WRIGHT ROUSSEL
SENATOR KEFAUVER/ALEX NAPOLI.....CHRISTOPHER HUBER
SENATOR HENNINGS/ FATHER MCBRI.....MARCUS GOODYEAR
FREDERICH WERTHAM/PENNYWEATHER/REPORTER.....KEN DEZARN
WILLIAM GAINES/ANDALMAN.....JEFF CUNNINGHAM
ANDY MACE/ OFFICER HEALEY.....IREC HARGROVE
DAVID MACEAIDAN SPRAGGINS
HOWARD LANG.....DIEGO
MARTINEZMRS. RIDELL/TEACHERSARAH
DEROUSSEAUMOTHER MACE/MOTHER LANG
.....BECCA BIGOTTFATHER MACE/PHILLIP
GRIMM.....DANIEL BIGOTT
CHILD 1/LONNIE FELLICK/CLIFF/SUPERMAN.....LAYTON WHEELER
CHILD 2/ BUTCH HOLLY/ WONDERWOMAN.....HAYDEN MAGNEL
CHILD 3/ GERALD MICHALEK/BILLY/BATMAN.....AXEL PETERSON
CHILD 4/ JILL.....KINLEY STARR

Feel free, for the climatic comic burning scene, to bring up children from the audience. Hopefully there will be a plethora you can choose from.

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ACT 1-THE MATCH

A CHILD IN A POOL OF LIGHT

CHILD 4. I like the crime comic books. True crime is what they are called. It's these different true crime stories in the one comic book, you know. Like- The crooks go around stabbing people. They have eight knives, and they rob a liquor store. They stab two women with a knife. The cops get them and put them in the electric chair. Another one. This man's sister-two men took her out in the yard and shot her. There was an electric chair, but they didn't put her in it. They shot her. And another. One man started killing people: five cops, six women and eighteen others. If anybody ever crossed him, he didn't give them no chance. He found himself in the electric chair. I liked one about a girl. She's a woman, goes to college. It becomes a college for murder. They used to commit suicide or murder at this college. Anyway, that one was my favorite.

COURTROOM

The walls of the courtroom have been covered in vibrant covers of the famous crime and horror comic books of the late 40s and 50s. After a while, a rather flustered, and very sickly gentlemen appears. This is one WILLIAM GAINES. Another man enters the court room. A man who is every bit the opposite to Mr. Gaines. Tall, confident, very Germanic in speech and in gait. This is Dr. WERTHAM. He makes his way to his table, stopping just short of it then: He approaches Gaines. He offers his hand.

WERTHAM. Mr. Gaines? It is Gaines, isn't it?

GAINES. *(Wiping his hand on his shirt then taking Wertham's hand.)* Eh, yes. Yes, it is.

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WERTHAM. A pleasure to be sure. I am Frederick Wertham. (*Gaines stops cold.*) I am looking forward to today's proceedings. You will agree they are of some great importance. (*The Senators begin to enter.*) Ah, here they come. Best we to our seats, eh? It was a pleasure to meet you, my boy.

GAINES. Eh. Yes. Good to-eh-Good to meet you as well, Doctor. (*Wertham takes his seat. Gaines stares after him for a moment. Confused. Stunned. The senators have found their places. SENATOR KEFAUVER clears his throat. Gaines does not react.*)

KEFAUVER. If Mr. Gaines would find his seat, we might be able to get started in a reasonable and timely fashion.

GAINES. Oh, sorry, sir. So-so sorry. (*He sits and nervously sneezes into his hanky.*)

CHAIRMAN. Today, the United States Subcommittee Investigating Juvenile Delinquency, of which I am chairman, is going into the problem of horror and crime comic books. Authorities agree hundreds of thousands of these comic books are peddled to our young ones of impressionable age. Some of these comic book covers have been displayed before you viewers. You can see them posted on the walls. The members of this Senate subcommittee-Senator Kefauver, Senator Hennings-as well as myself-the chairman, want to find out what damage is being done to our children's minds by certain types of publications which contain sadism, crime, and horror. I think that about covers the basics. Shall we meet our two witnesses, please?

HENNINGS. Doctor Frederick Wertham. (*Wertham rises, a kind of human titan of the proceedings, throws a less than genial glance down to the hunkered Gaines and takes the stand.*)

CHAIRMAN. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you will give before the subcommittee will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

WERTHAM. I do.

CHAIRMAN. The Chair, with pleasure, commends the presence of the distinguished Doctor-Frederick Wertham. (*Beat.*) And the next witness?

HENNINGS. Mr. William Gaines. (*No response.*) Mr. Gaines!

GAINES. Eh, sorry, sir?

HENNINGS. Will you take to the stand, sir?

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GAINES. Yes. Yes sir. Please forgive me. I have been feeling-eh-a little under the weather lately.

CHAIRMAN. I do hope that will not have any negative influences on your performance here today.

GAINES. So do I.

CHAIRMAN. Pardon?

GAINES. I mean. Yes sir.

CHAIRMAN. Very well. *(Beat.)* Mr. Gaines, do you solemnly swear that the testimony you will give before the subcommittee will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

GAINES. I-eh-I do. Yes sir.

CHAIRMAN. This court-acknowledges your presence.

GAINES. Eh, thank you, sir.

CHAIRMAN. Gentlemen, you may begin.

WERTHAM. I have a statement I should like to begin with. If Mr. Gaines has no objections-

CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gaines?

GAINES. Eh, that is alright. I mean-

CHAIRMAN. You may proceed, Doctor Wertham.

WERTHAM. I thank you. Gentlemen, I have here a book. My book. Entitled "Seduction of the Innocent". Perhaps you have read it, ja? *(Each of the senators nods or grumbles in agreement.)* I begin with a passage from the book. *(Glancing down at the book.)* Alright. *(Beat.)* Gardening consists largely in protecting plants from blight and weeds, the same is true of attending to the growth of children. If a plant fails to grow properly because it is attacked by a pest, only a poor gardener would look for the cause in that plant alone. The good gardener will think immediately in terms of general precaution and spray the whole field. But with children we, as a society, act like the bad gardener. We often fail to carry out elementary preventative measures, and we look for the causes in the individual child. The question is. Can we help the plant without attending to the garden? Once, not so long ago, we lived in relative bliss knowing that our children walked about free of the rot that has now become too common place in our society, ja? But today, our children nurse themselves on an abundance of comic book reading material that has added rivers of rape, arson, torture and hooded justice to

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today's youth's increasingly dim lexicon. *(Beat.)* The Reverend Shelton Hale Bishop, an authority on juvenile gangs, said, "At least these children cannot live with the movies that they see day in and day out. But these comic books. They take them to bed with them. They walk along the street on their way to school with them. Along goes an average of five or six magazines per child a day, and an abnormal amount of attention is given to them." He finishes his message with, "The whole thing borders on extreme and abnormal avidity." Indeed it does. Indeed, it does.

DAVID IN SINGLE POOL OF LIGHT

A boy. Quite young. No more than 13 appears on stage in his own pool of light. This is DAVID MACE. There is a confidence and charm about David that should be noted. Suddenly, a cavalcade of characters appears just behind him. The boy acknowledges his visitors then:

ANDY. My brother David was:

RIDELL. A natural born leader.

ANDY. My brother David was: **CHILD 3**

. Always very popular among the other students.

ANDY. My brother David was:

FATHER MACE. A true credit to Spencer.

MOTHER MACE. And our boy. We musn't forget that now.

FATHER MACE. *(Beaming)* No. We must never forget that. He was our boy.

DAVID MACE'S BEDROOM

David Mace in his room. It is a tidy room. Well cleaned and organized. David Mace currently, studiously, works on his homework when his brother, ANDY, appears just beside him and watches.

ANDY. My kid brother. David Mace. A good kid. Product of a good, clean, Christian upbringing. Of course, that's what many kids were like in Spencer. That's Spencer West Virginia to you out there. Oh, it was a hamlet of a

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place. Untouched by the ravages of the second world war. Well. *(Gesturing to himself.)* Almost untouched. People carried on in a happy, go lucky fashion. And the kids. Well, they played outside. Or. More than anything they read comic books. Now, these were really just your standard run of the mill, Superman and Batman and what-have-you. But some people. Some people found all of them to be pretty unsavory. What, don't believe me? Why don't you just watch and find out for yourself. *(Finally, Andy approaches David and covers his eyes from behind.)*

DAVID. Hey!

ANDY. You've got two guesses! Better make them count!

DAVID. How about I sock you in the kisser and you forget about the lousy guesses! *(Andy, laughing, releases his brother.)* What are you doing here anyway, Andy?

ANDY. I came by to check up on my little brother.

DAVID. If Mom and Pop knew you were here.

ANDY. It wouldn't be good for you to tell them I was. Besides I only came to talk to you.

DAVID. Oh yeah?

ANDY. That's right.

DAVID. Well, what about, heh?

ANDY. Check under your chair. *(David reaches under his chair and produces a cellophane enclosed copy of the comic book, Superman Issue One. His eyes open wide, and he turns quickly to his brother.)* I figured constantly hiding it just wasn't working so-yeah-I'm giving it to you. *(Beat.)* Are you gonna read it, or aren't you?

DAVID. I don't know if I should. I mean this is one of your most prized possessions and-

ANDY. And there will come a time when it'll be nothing but a novelty item. I'm giving it to you so you can enjoy it. So. Open it. Enjoy it. *(David carefully, carefully opens it and turns to the first page.)*

ANDY. Read it.

DAVID. *(Reading from the comic.)* "Early, Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit all mankind." It's where it all started. Don't you just love that style? That-That age hold heroism.

ANDY. I dunno. It doesn't sound nearly as good when you read it. *(David*

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shoves at Andy. Then moves back to the comic. Marveling at the pages. The lights go off on Andy. David continues to read. Then:)

DAVID. You know. This is, without a doubt, the greatest thing anyone has ever- *(He looks up and around only to find that he is indeed alone.)*-Given me. *(A great wave of sadness befalls him, and he goes back to his comic book. As he reads, we find ourselves back in the:)*

COURTROOM

CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gaines, do you have a prepared statement?

GAINES. I do not.

KEFAUVER. I think it might be easier for Mr. Gaines if we started with a question.

CHAIRMAN. Proceed then.

KEFAUVER. For the record, Mr. Gaines, just what kind of comic magazines do you publish?

GAINES. *(Deep sigh.)* I publish-

KEFAUVER. Come again, Mr. Gaines.

GAINES. Sorry?

KEFAUVER. Could you speak directly into the microphone, sir, so we can better hear you?

GAINES. I was-*(The microphone reverberates causing everyone in attendance to react quite unfavorably.)*-Sorry.

KEFAUVER. You were saying.

GAINES. Yes. I was saying that I publish horror comics. I am responsible for them. I started them. Some-Some may not like them-

KEFAUVER. A great many others do not-

GAINES. Eh, per-perhaps. *(Beat.)* Gentlemen. Our children, our American children, are bright children, are wonderful children, but those who seek to ban comic magazines seem to see dirty, sneaky, perverted monsters who use the comics as a blueprint for action. It is my belief that a normal child has never been made worse for reading comic magazines. See, delinquency is the product of real environment, in which the child lives and not of the fiction he reads.

HOWARD IN SINGLE POOL OF LIGHT

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A boy. About David Mace's age appears on stage in his own pool of light. This is HOWARD LANG. Unlike David, Howard appears stone faced. Unmoving. Unblinking. Just staring straight ahead. Suddenly, his own group of characters appear behind him. HOWARD acknowledges his visitors then:

MOTHER LANG. My son Howard was:

PHILLIP. A damned creep.

MOTHER LANG. My son Howard was:

TEACHER. Always a very peculiar boy.

MOTHER LANG. My son Howard was:

GERALD. A kid you felt real sorry for. He was a loner.

MOTHER LANG. My son Howard was: *(Pause.)*

HOWARD. Ma?

MOTHER LANG. *(Pause.)* A mistake.

HOWARD LANG'S BEDROOM

The lights up on HOWARD LANG'S room. This is a room, in dire need of a makeover. The chair Howard currently sits upon is itself presiding over a massive stack of comic books some of which have spilled out onto the floor beside the chair. Howard takes one of the top-most comics and begins to read. PHILLIP GRIMM, Howard's stepfather is the only member of the Howard Lang group to remain behind him.

PHILLIP. Yeah, I was in the army. Saw quite a few battles. Killed quite a few men. Came back. Got married. Her name was Alma. She had this little fat boy from her third husband. Howard Lang. Weird, damned creep. Anyway. It's sort of the packaged deal. Get the mothering broad, get what baggage she brings with her, am I right? She had been married-what-four times before me. Seems highly unlikely that she'd make it through all of them unions without scoring the ultimate prize, if you know what I mean. Well. I never liked Howard all that much. I guess I never really even liked old Alma but a man my age learns not to be too picky. Anyway. I guess that's about all I have to say on the matter.

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He turns away from the audience and knocks on a door-*(the sound shall be made off stage.)*

HOWARD. *(Without looking up from his comic)* Yeah?

PHILLIP. Get your butt downstairs. Alma's got supper on the table.

HOWARD. I'll be right down.

PHILLIP. That weren't no-*(Phillip enters the room. Howard remains in his seat.)* Request. *(For a moment they share a tense silence then:)* Up. *(Howard doesn't move.)* Did you hear what I said, runt? I said-up! *(He hoists Howard up by the shirt collar.)* Let's get one thing perfectly straight-here in this room. If you don't rise when I tell you to rise or come when I tell you to come, I will not lose one wink of sleep before stoving in your shit for brains. Is that clear?

HOWARD. Yes. *(Phillip squeezes Howard's neck hard.)* Ah! Yes sir!

PHILLIP. Sir first!

HOWARD. Sir. Yes. Sir.

PHILLIP. That's what I thought. *(There passes a moment. A long moment. Phillip's hand remains on HOWARD'S neck. His face still inches away from the boy's. Then, softly.)* Now, get downstairs and help your Mama before I really lose my temper. *(Howard leaves. Phillip starts to go then turns back into the room and inspects the many comic books. He takes one and peruses through the first few pages.)* Freak stories for a freak kid. That's all I have to say on the matter.

COURT ROOM

WERTHAM. The crime comic book. What is it? What is in it? And what do we do about it? That is what we will find out here today, ja? *(Beat.)* Mr. Chairman, Mr. Gaines was right about one thing. American children are wonderful children. If we give them a chance they act right. But if we continue to shovel out this garbage to them there is little to no way they can go through life untouched by it all. *(Beat.)* I use, as an example, the story of the first psychologist of Medicine St. Augustine who described, in detail, how when he was a very, very young man he was in Rome and he saw these very bloody, sadistic spectacles all around him, where the gladiators fought each other with swords and daggers, and he didn't like it. He didn't want any

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part of it. But there was so much going on and his friends went and finally he went and he noticed, as he expresses it, that he became unconsciously delighted with it and he kept on going. In other words, he was tempted, he was seduced by this mass appeal, and he went. I think it is exactly the same thing, if the children see these kinds of things over and over again, they can't go to a dentist, they can't go to a clinic, they can't go to a ward in a hospital, everywhere they see this where women are beaten up, where people are shot and killed, and finally they become, as St. Augustine said, unconsciously delighted. (*A bell rings.*)

CLASSROOM

Students enter carrying chairs and set them up like in a classroom setting. David Mace is among them and currently reads from his comic book. A lady, their teacher, MRS. RIDELL enters and freezes at the front of the class.

CHILD 3. Hey Davey.

DAVID. Hey fellas.

CHILD 1. (*Re: his comic*) Better put that thing up before Ridell sees you with it. (*David, practically oblivious to the fact that he even had it out, quickly yet carefully puts it into his pack. Mrs. Ridell unfreezes and:*)

RIDELL. I end today's session with the following verse. This is a favorite of mine. The book of Psalms chapter twenty-six verses one through twelve.

(*There are some slight murmurs of displeasure from the students.*) And there will be silence during the reading of this verse. I thank you. (*There is*

silence.) Vindicate me, LORD, for I have trusted in you and have not faltered. Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for I

have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness. I do not sit with the deceitful, nor do I associate with

hypocrites. I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked. I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, LORD,

proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds.

(*Pause*) We are all so fortunate to say-(*with students*)-Amen.

STUDENTS. Amen. (*The children each stand and make their way back to their previous seats. DAVID takes out his comic and follows the others out,*

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reading when:)

RIDELL. David Mace. I'd like to have a word with you, please. *(Beat.)*
Alone.

DAVID. I guess she wants to speak to me alone, heh? *(His friends offer up a few sinister sounds in response. He waves them off. They complete their exit, leaving David alone with Mrs. Ridell.)*

RIDELL. Take a seat. Stay a while. *(He does so.)* "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breast plate of righteousness in place."

DAVID...?

RIDELL. So says Ephesians. But I get ahead of myself. *(Beat.)* You read a lot of comic books, don't you, David?

DAVID. Well, sure. Everyone does.

RIDELL. Yes. I have seen that. Tell me, if you had to select a single character that you most admire, which character would that be?

DAVID. Sorry?

RIDELL. A comic book character that you wish to be like. Who might that be?

DAVID. *(Looking down to the comic in his hand)* Well, I guess I have always been-eh-been partial to Superman.

RIDELL. Superman?

DAVID. Yes ma'am. He's just swell.

RIDELL. *(Lowly)* Swell.

DAVID. Eh-yes ma'am?

RIDELL. I am sure this is a very common favorite amongst young people your age. But I do wonder what the real appeal is. Perhaps. Perhaps you could enlighten me. Is it his wanton destruction of million's of dollars worth of property that you find most compelling or the complete disregard for good Christian values?

DAVID. Eh-

RIDELL. It is in my humble opinion that comic books featuring the Superman give to the illusion, you remember what the word means yes?-give to the illusion that you can be bigger and stronger and ultimately better than anyone else if you use powerful, deadly force. What are your thoughts on the matter?

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DAVID. Superman uses his powers for good. For the good of the people.

RIDELL. How very interesting that you should say that, David. The good of the people. *(Pause.)* Do you remember the story of Moses? And what he endured for the good of his people?

DAVID. Sure, he led them out of Egypt.

RIDELL. Yes, but then how did they repay his efforts?

DAVID. Eh-

RIDELL. They erected a golden statue. A statue they worshipped in place of the Father. A false God. How is this so different, David? To the many superheroes you and your friends admire, no, worship? Tell me. I'd love to hear your opinion.

DAVID. I don't-

RIDELL. There is a grave, terrible epidemic, I think, David, that has infected the minds of the youths of our town and perhaps even our great country. Something must be done in response by someone who the people will listen to. Someone like you, Mr. David Mace.

DAVID. Like-Like me?

RIDELL. What is so phenomenal about the idea? I have been watching you. Off and on throughout the year, in games of sport and academics. And do you know what I have gathered from watching you?

DAVID. No ma'am. I don't.

RIDELL. You are a natural leader. True and through. Just the type of leader I have been looking for.

DAVID. Do you really think so?

RIDELL. David, I know so. You are still unsure. Well. Here. I have a script of sorts for you to peruse. Just a little smackling of words and verses that I've come up with and amended. This may all seem insignificant now but when, I think, when they are uttered by the right tongue, these words, your words, can have an everlasting effect. This could be your manifesto, David. Spread the word about the evils of comic books. Spread the truth. And if the others do not or if they choose not to listen then you will make them hear you. Until they have seen the reason of the right.

DAVID. I don't know-

RIDELL. David, this must be done. If not for the good of the people of Spencer then for the good of our country. For the good of mankind.

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DAVID. The good of mankind-

RIDELL. I tell you what. Why don't you think on it tonight and come back tomorrow with your made decision? Will you do that for me?

DAVID (*Long pause*). Yes ma'am. (*He starts to leave.*)

RIDELL. And David.

DAVID. Yes Miss Ridell?

RIDELL. It starts with you. Remember that. (*Beat.*) I'll see you tomorrow. (*David meets a few of his friends outside.*)

BOY 1. Well, what did the old bat want with you?

BOY 2. Yeah, tell us, Davey. What'd she say?

DAVID. S'funny. I don't even know how to even begin to describe what she said. It was all just so-different, I guess. Yeah. Very, very different.

CHILD 3. You look different. What gives?

DAVID. Heh? Sorry?

CHILD 1. Gee whiz, you think you'd have seen a ghost or somethin'.

DAVID. It's nothin'. I mean. I don't know. It could be something. Something big. Real, real big. I gotta go. Eh. Sorry, fellas. I don't think I'm going to be able to come over today. (*He dashes off leaving his friends alone.*)

CHILD 3. What are you up to, Ridell? Heh.

COURT ROOM

Gaines raises a hand.

CHAIRMAN. Yes, Mr. Gaines?

GAINES. I have a question I wish to ask Mr. Wertham.

WERTHAM. Doctor.

GAINES. Sorry?

WERTHAM. My name is Doctor Wertham, please.

GAINES. Oh, forgive me. (*Beat.*) Doctor Wertham-*(Pause.)* Are you-Are we, rather, afraid of our children?

WERTHAM. I should hope not, dear boy. Myself. I try to understand them. I try to help them. Not make them worse than they already are.

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GAINES. Well, it is far from my intent to make a child worse off from what they read. I am also interested as to what the cause of delinquency is. Perhaps. I wonder. Perhaps, could the cause be pressure from a disturbed parent, sibling or peer? Could that not, in fact, be directly correlated with delinquency? There are so many problems that reach our children today. They are tied up with insecurities. No pill can cure them. No law will legislate them out of being. The problems are economic. Social and they are very complex.

HOWARD'S DINING ROOM

Phillip joins the two LANGS at the table. Once he has arrived, they all sit and begin to eat. After a while:

PHILLIP. Hear this, Alma. Would you like to know what I found in your boy's room, heh? Comic books. Loads of them. I thought we were of the understanding that he wasn't to have any more.

HOWARD. Ah, Ma. They aren't hurting anybody.

MOTHER LANG. Not hurting-

PHILLIP. I looked through one. Just to see what it was all about and do you know what I saw in it?

WERTHAM (*Going to the image pasted on the wall*). I believe the image in question is displayed here. Can you see it? It is a baseball game which I ask the court to scrutinize in some great detail.

PHILLIP. But it weren't just any baseball game. Oh no. They:

WERTHAM. Play baseball with a dead man's head, where the man's intestines are the baselines. All his organs have some part to play. The torso of this man is the chest protector of one of the players. There is nothing left to anybody's morbid imagination.

MOTHER LANG (*To Wertham*). That is from a comic book?

WERTHAM (*To Gaines*). Ja, that is from a comic book.

PHILLIP. And where did you get the money for all of them? That's what I'd like to know. Well? D'you steal it all from your mother again?

MOTHER LANG. Phillip, Howard wouldn't do that to his Mama. Not again. Would you, Howard?

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PHILLIP. There were loads of them. Damn near hundreds. You didn't just snap your fingers and make them all appear. Well? I'm waiting for an answer.

HOWARD. I traded for them.

PHILLIP. Oh, he traded for 'em!

HOWARD. That's right. I keep them in mint condition. Sometimes I can trade four or five others for the one.

PHILLIP. Back to your old wheelings and dealings, heh? The little racketeer.

HOWARD. You believe me, Ma. Don't you?

MOTHER LANG. I don't know. Oh, I'm so tired.

PHILLIP. I'm surrounded by sneaks. Him with his comic books and my wife with her damned hooch.

MOTHER LANG. I don't know what you're talking about.

PHILLIP. I can smell your reek all the way over here. It's disgusting.

MOTHER LANG. So, I had a few before dinner. Can't we just eat in peace-for once? Please.

PHILLIP. Alright.

MOTHER LANG. Alright?

PHILLIP. Sure. Alright. You two eat in peace. Just give me a second. *(Phillip takes his plate and hurls it aside. All goes silent.)* There's your damned peace and quiet. *(At this moment, Howard lets out a loud snigger. Phillip lunges at Howard.)* Now, see here you little-*(Alma is now on her feet.)*

MOTHER LANG. Phillip, that's enough!

PHILLIP *(Pause).* You better watch your ass, twerp. *(Beat.)* I'm going out. Don't feel the need to wait up for me. *(He leaves. Mother Lang falls back into her chair. There is silence in the room then:)*

HOWARD *(A solid Phillip impression).* You better watch your ass twerp! *(Mother Lang lets out a loud guffaw. Covers her mouth. Then lets it all out. Howard joins in the laughter. It dies down, eventually.)*

MOTHER LANG. Howard, you know sometimes, I really don't know why you egg him on the way you do.

HOWARD. Oh, he isn't so tough.

MOTHER LANG. Just the same. Will you promise me that you will-at

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least-try not to make such waves with him? It gives me terrible aches hearing you two go round to round.

HOWARD. Sure thing, Ma. I'll give it a try.

MOTHER LANG. I appreciate that. *(She reaches over and takes his hand. He kisses it. She draws his hand to her face. More silence. Then:)*

HOWARD. Say, Ma?

MOTHER LANG. Yes? What is it, Howard?

HOWARD. Some of the fellows were going to go down to the preserve. To trade some comics. Kid's stuff. D'you think it'd be okay if I went?

MOTHER LANG. Eh, sure. I guess. Just-eh-Just be back by eight, okay?

HOWARD. No later than ten. Got it.

MOTHER LANG. Howard-

HOWARD. Gee, Ma. You're the greatest.

MOTHER LANG *(Beat).* Ten then. *(Howard leaves. Mother Lang remains and cries.)*

COURTROOM

KEFAUVER. The illustration that the good doctor has pointed out. It comes from one of your comic books, yes, Mr. Gaines?

GAINES. Eh, yes. That is correct.

HENNINGS. Your father, Arthur Gaines, was-eh-he was in the comic book publishing business, wasn't he?

GAINES. He was.

HENNINGS. What type of comic books was he best known for publishing and distributing?

GAINES *(Beat).* Picture Stories from Science, Picture Stories from World History, and Picture Stories from American History.

KEFAUVER. Didn't he also publish Picture Stories from the Bible?

GAINES. That is correct.

KEFAUVER. And you publish-horror comic books.

GAINES. Yes. I-I publish horror comic books. *(There is some low grumbling amongst the senators.)* It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to a Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid. *(More low grumbles.)* Crime itself

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is-(*The grumblings get louder.*) I said crime itself is-Eh, gentlemen, may I continue?

CHAIRMAN (*Beat*). Eh, yes. You may, Mr. Gaines.

GAINES. Crime itself is not pretty. Detective work, police work of itself, is not delicate and there are those here today that believe crime should not be shown in a revolting manner. But-But what of the crime in our newspapers?

KEFAUVER. What about it?

GAINES. Couldn't you say that a child is exposed to violence in their parent's newspapers far moreso than he is that in a comic book? For instance. I have here today's edition of the Herald Tribune. On the front page you have the story of a man whose ex-wife beat him on the head with a claw hammer and slashed him with a butcher knife. In the same paper, there is the story of a lawyer who violently killed himself. In another, a story of that man who shot his wife while having a nightmare. These are a few of the many stories of violence and crime and brutality in the Herald Tribune today. I am not saying it is wrong. To post this. Not at all. But when you attack comics, when you talk about banning them, you are only a step away from banning crimes in the newspapers. And then what have we become? Spain? Communist Russia?

DAVID'S DINING ROOM

Father and Mother Mace sit at either head of the table, eating and locked in conversation with each other. There is something familiar yet wholly different between this scene and the dinner scene involving Howard and his parents. Whereas Howard's scene was one of conflict and anger this is one of support and beyond anything else love. While we get this sense of familial comfort, it should be noted that instead of the parent's conversation, we are only able to hear a kind of strange, dull sound. Maybe it's music or maybe it's a white noise. Whatever be the case our focus should remain transfixed on David Mace who stares down at his plate, oblivious to the conversation happening around him.

MOTHER MACE. David, dear? (*David snaps out of his trance.*)

DAVID. Eh. Yeah? Sorry. Yes?

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MOTHER MACE. Is something the matter? You haven't touched a bite of your meal and you seem so-so-What is the word I am looking for, dear?

FATHER MACE. Disassociated.

MOTHER MACE. Yes, that's it. Disassociated from the present moment.

DAVID. Sorry, I-(*Pause.*)-Okay. There's this idea. This-This pretty big idea that has been passed down to me.

FATHER MACE. What kind of idea?

DAVID. Well, it isn't very popular, I can tell you that.

FATHER MACE. Go ahead, son. You can tell us.

MOTHER MACE. You can tell us anything, dear heart.

DAVID. Well, it all began with Miss Ridell-

MOTHER MACE. A fine woman.

FATHER MACE. Of real, sound character.

DAVID. Sure, she is. I guess. Anyway, she's the one who came to me with the idea. At first I thought it was kind of-well-kind of silly. At first. But she gave me this script to say and the more I read over it the more-well-

FATHER MACE (*Pause*). The more you started to believe in it.

DAVID...I dunno.

FATHER MACE. Tell me, son. Do you think this idea, that you are not quite sure if you believe in yet or not, is in the best interest of others?

DAVID. It could be. Yeah.

FATHER MACE. Then there we have it. This was passed down to you by a teacher, whom you hold in very high regard, that saw some real potential in you. The potential for greatness. Fight for it, son. This idea of yours and hers.

MOTHER MACE. If it is as unpopular as you say, it will be hard.

FATHER MACE. That it will.

MOTHER MACE. There will be those who stand against you and your efforts.

FATHER MACE. A good leader should listen to each disagreement but ultimately do what he knows is right.

MOTHER MACE. For the good of the people.

RIDELL. For the good of the people, David.

DAVID. The good of the people-

MOTHER MACE. A leader-

FATHER MACE. A good leader must be-

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MOTHER MACE. Diplomatic-

FATHER MACE. Yet firm. He must always be firm if he is to be respected.

MOTHER MACE. You put that so well, dearest.

FATHER MACE. Why, thank you, darling.

FATHER MACE. But remember son-

RIDELL. Remember, David-

FATHER MACE. It all-

RIDELL. Starts with you.

DAVID. It all starts with me.

FATHER MACE. How about it? Did this help at all with your confusion, son?

DAVID. Yeah. I think it did.

FATHER MACE. Well, there you have it. Glad we could help. *(Father and Mother Mace resume their conversations. But this time instead of the buzzing music as before there is a triumphant symphony which plays David off as he hurries out of the room. Determined. Excited.)*

COURTROOM

WERTHAM. If it were my task, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Gaines, to teach children delinquency, to tell them how to rape and seduce girls, how to hurt people, how to break into stores, how to cheat, how to forge, how to do any known crime, if it were my task to teach that, I would have to enlist the comic book industry. Formerly to impair the morals of a minor was a punishable offense. It has now become a mass industry.

KEFAUVER. In some of the comic books the villain made one mistake, he almost committed the perfect crime, but he made one mistake and he got caught. We found some cases where they are trying to eliminate the one mistake so that they can make the perfect crime.

WERTHAM. That is absolutely correct. That is the whole philosophy of comic books. The point is don't make any mistakes. Don't leave the map there. Don't break the light, put a towel over it.

KEFAUVER. Would you liken this situation you talk about, showing the same thing over and over again until they finally believed it, to Hitler's theory?

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CHAIRMAN. The "big lie" technique?

WERTHAM. Well, I hate to say that, Senator, but I think Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry.

GERALD MICHALEK IN SINGLE POOL OF LIGHT

GERALD. Howard was older by-oh, a couple of years. Being a young fellow. It was customary to spend your time with the older boys in a group. They watched out for you. Gave you a sense of security, I suppose. With Howard Lang though, you'd have more of a sense of security with your kid sister than him. He wasn't exactly what you would call formidable or imposing. He was just Howard. The one thing, really the only thing that we had in common was our love for comic books. In particular the True Crime Comics. Or Crime Doesn't Pay. Now, I had my fair share but Howard had hundreds of them. *(Beat.)* How did he get them? He did whatever he could. Steal. Barter. There was even rumor, and that's all it is, that he partook in rather unseemly actions for comic books with the older boys. But they were just rumors. *(Pause.)* Oh, no. I never thought Howard would be capable of something like what he was accused of. Sure he was a bit odd. But you'd never in a million years think somebody would want to do such a terrible thing. Especially not some nobody like Howard Lang.

RIVERBANK

Howard and GERALD MICHALEK wait.

HOWARD. You're sure he'll come?

GERALD. Of course, I'm sure. You really need to lighten up, you know.

HOWARD. Well, he'd better come. My step pop is starting to wise up to our little operation here, I think.

GERALD. Your Ma needs to up and leave him already.

HOWARD. Don't you think I know this. *(Pause.)* Legs Diamond wouldn't have all of this damned trouble. He'd take his Tommy Gun right out and give it to him. Powpowpowpow!

GERALD. Kablooie! *(There is a shrill whistle which sounds from off in the*

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distance.)

HOWARD. Is that him?

GERALD. I think so.

HOWARD. Who's that with Bruce? It's a little fella. I thought it was only going to be Bruce.

GERALD. Don't sweat it. He's lookin' out for a little twerp. Nothin' you need to worry yourself over.

HOWARD. Do you know the twerp?

GERALD. I know him from here and there, you know.

HOWARD. What does that even mean?

GERALD. It means I see him around. Here. There. I don't really know him. I just know-you know-of him.

HOWARD. What's his name?

GERALD. Mr. Blue Jay copper over here with his twenty questions.

HOWARD. What's his name, Gerald?!

GERALD. For cryin' out-Lonnie, alright. The twerp's name is Lonnie Fellick. *(BRUCE HOLLY and LONNIE FELLICK arrive. The usual greetings, which are pretty serious for a group of young people, are exchanged.)*

LONNIE *(Regarding Howard).* What's with the stiff?

HOWARD. Watch it, you little-

GERALD. Easy. Fellas. Easy. Are we here to do some business or aren't we?

BRUCE. I can speak for Lonnie.

GERALD. And I speak for Howard.

BRUCE. Then whadya say we make some medicine. *(Beat.)* You got somethin' for me? *(Howard reaches behind and produces the comic book. True Crime Issue number five. He smooths it out against his chest and holds it to Bruce to inspect. Bruce reaches for it but Howard yanks it out of the way before he can lay his fingers on it.)*

BRUCE. Hey!

HOWARD. What you see before you is an un-opened custom edition. Mint quality. I don't deal in bull-shit. You know this. Now let's see yours.

BRUCE. Gerald.

GERALD. Hey, what's right is right is fair.

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BRUCE. Whatever. *(Bruce reaches down to his ankle and extracts a comic book from his sock. He does what he can to smooth it out but it is clear that his work is nothing compared to the care exhibited by Howard.)*

HOWARD. What the hell is that?!

BRUCE. Legs Diamond. Crime Doesn't Pay Issue twenty four. What you asked for. Whadya think it was, dummy?

HOWARD. It's a mess. Look at it. It's tearing at the top. Siding is all gummed to hell. No trade.

BRUCE. Whadya mean no trade, nimrod? Hey, I did what I could to get it here to you. My old man was snoopin' around. More than usual even. I tell you. I couldn't take no lousy chances.

GERALD. You do know what that's like, Howard.

HOWARD *(Beat)*. Alright. Let me see it.

LONNIE. Not so fast, ace. You gotta give it to your second for inspection. You know. So we're all on the same page.

HOWARD *(Re: Lonnie)*. But I'm not giving you my comic. I told you. It's mint quality.

LONNIE. Then there is no deal.

GERALD. Come on, How. Play along.

LONNIE. Yeah, Howie. Play along.

HOWARD. Don't call me Howie. You little twerp!

LONNIE. Watch who you're callin' twerp you lousy mother-!

GERALD. Boys. Boys. This is a friendly transaction. Friendly, yeah? You got what he wants and he's got what you want. Let's just do it and be done with the whole thing, you know.

BRUCE. My friend Gerald is right. How does she look, Lon?

LONNIE. We're all aces on our end.

HOWARD. Gerald? What about us? Are we aces?

GERALD. Aside from some minor cuts and bends in the covers and some wet spots-we be happy. I say the deal is done. *(The comic books are traded to their new owners. Their seconds congratulate their firsts, and they start off on their ways home. Lonnie watches Howard and Gerald make their leave and:)*

LONNIE. Hey, Howie! *(Approaching them.)* Howie, hold up!

GERALD. Come on, How.

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HOWARD. Just a moment. What do you want, twerp?

LONNIE. I'm a-a bit of a collector too. Of Legs Diamond.

HOWARD. Congratulations.

LONNIE. I'll give you two bucks for the copy.

HOWARD. That's no doing, kid.

LONNIE. Come on. I'll make it five.

HOWARD. Keep your money and leave me alone. It aint for sell. (*Howard joins Gerald and they leave.*)

LONNIE (*Lowly*). We'll see about that. (*He leaves.*)

COURTROOM

GAINES. Children love comic books. They love to collect them. Read them and then trade them. If you will permit me, I would like to focus on the part of reading. There are many learned minds that say comic book reading can prove beneficial especially to a child with learning disabilities.

HENNINGS. Excuse me but how is that?

GAINES. You have the words that correlate with the individual picture. The child can see it and better understand it based on what the picture gives to them.

KEFAUVER. Better understand how to assault and brutalize?

GAINES. I do not think so. Many children are passed over as less than intelligent because of their lack of comprehension for the written word but when they have a picture that they can relate to-

CHAIRMAN. You think? For the record, you think a child cannot be harmed by what they read in your comic books?

GAINES. I do not think so.

KEFAUVER. How would you know? Do you test these stories out?

GAINES. Yes.

KEFAUVER. On who? Adults?

GAINES. Children.

KEFAUVER. Your own?

GAINES. I have no children.

KEFAUVER. Your family's then?

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GAINES. My family has no children but-but if they did, I would use them.

HENNINGS. What would be your procedure to test the story out on a child?

GAINES. I give them the story to read, and I ask them if they enjoyed it, and if they guessed the ending. If they said they enjoyed it and didn't guess the ending, I figure it is a good story, entertaining.

KEFAUVER. Marketable?

GAINES *(Pause)*. Yes, marketable, too. Yes.

KEFAUVER. Then you have not conducted any tests as to the effects of these-these things upon children?

GAINES. No sir. I have not. I, along with several others, read each story and decide whether it would be suitable to send out to the mass public. My only limits are bounds of good taste.

KEFAUVER. Your own good taste?

GAINES *(Pause)*. Yes sir.

HOWARD LANG'S BEDROOM

Howard is in his room reading one of his many comic books. Suddenly:

MOTHER LANG. Howard?!

HOWARD *(Putting his comic aside)*. Oh. Eh. Just one second, Ma. I'm finishin' up some-eh-some homework in here. *(Finishing)* Come in. *(The door opens and in stumbles Mother Lang. She has been drinking heavily and crying and tries with little success to hide either fact.)* Ah, gee, Ma. What's the matter? *(She sniffles and sits directly beside Howard. Howard pulls as far away from her as he can, whilst remaining on the chair.)*

MOTHER LANG *(Pause)*. Do you know. My mother never told me she loved me. Neither did my father. Well. I never knew my father because-He left, see. Left when I was just a little thing. Much younger than you. *(Beat.)* I think I haven't shown you the kind of love you deserve because I never really knew how to show it myself.

HOWARD. Oh, Ma-

MOTHER LANG. No. No, I mean it. I am going to try so hard to do right by you, Howard. From here on. Starting with Phillip. I know he and you

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don't see eye to eye on some things and I'm going to-

HOWARD. To leave him?!

MOTHER LANG. No. But I am going to have a real good talk with him and tell him that if he is going to be living here he needs to treat us both better. *(Beat.)* I will tell him that, Howard. *(Beat.)* You believe me, don't you? *(No response.)* Howard, I know how you must feel but I need him. I need him to take care of me and I think with him taking care of me I can look after you better. Does that make any sense at all? Howard, I want you to feel like you can talk to me about anything. Do you understand?

HOWARD *(Pause).* Sure, Ma.

MOTHER LANG. Is there anything you want to talk about? *(Beat.)* Anything? *(Pause. Long pause.)* Well. I'll just leave you to-to whatever it is that you usually do. *(Noticing the comic under his chair. She retrieves it.)* I tell you what, Howard. If you're sure there isn't anything too-too outlandish or immoral in those comic books you read-I don't see why I couldn't stop by Fillian's and get you one every once in a while.

HOWARD. Gee, Ma. You really mean it?

MOTHER LANG. I do.

HOWARD. You're the best. *(Pause.)* You know what would be better is if you gave me the money and I went and got them. Just cause-well, I know what to look for.

MOTHER LANG. You're probably right. Such a smart little boy, my Howard. *(Mother Lang puts a gentle hand onto Howard's back and freezes in place.*

Then:)

TEACHER IN SINGLE POOL OF LIGHT.

TEACHER. Howard was always a very peculiar boy. Very quiet. He kept to himself. While others excelled at sporting endeavors he chose to remain indoors. The same could be said for his academics. He never turned in a page of work. Never participated in class discussions. I admit, I found Howard Lang to be-well-most unextraordinary. That is. Until I found him sitting in the hallway working on, what I later found to be, illustrations of the cover pictures to some comic books he had owned. I inquired about them and he

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showed me the first selection he had been illustrating. I noticed immediately the striking resemblance to the cover of such a magazine I had seen at Fillians, the local drug store where those kinds of things were sold. I believe it was an issue of the series Crime Doesn't Pay. In the picture you see a very well endowed woman, getting pushed, violently, into the flames on a stove top by some ruthless criminal. Howard embellished even further, going so far as to have the poor woman's hair and skin aflame and even melting-then in the dialogue bubble provided by the head ner-do-well, he had amended the sentence with a flurry of expletives that nearly made me fall out of my chair. Why Joseph Fillian would think to distribute such a-horrible magazine unto the children of our town is beyond me. They can be so impressionable. The children, I mean. I called Howard into my room after class and asked him about why he had changed this specific selection in such a grotesquely outlandish fashion and he said, "I did it 'cause it wasn't believable on the cover page. So I made it better." I wonder what goes on in that boy's mind. I wonder-and, at times, I am very much afraid.

HOWARD LANG'S BEDROOM

Howard notices his mother has not moved and:

HOWARD (*A growing concern*). Ma? Ma, what's wrong? (*He reaches to her. Touches her. Even shakes her but she does not move.*) Ma, please. I can hear him coming. Please do something. Please. (*Phillip enters quietly and locks the door. The produced noise of which makes a great clack bringing Howard back to reality.*) Don't.

PHILLIP. Shut up.

HOWARD. Please.

PHILLIP. You and your Mama have been getting awful chummy lately, haven't ya? Been talkin' a whole lot. Telling her dirty little secrets.

HOWARD. I haven't said anything.

PHILLIP. Damn liar! (*Phillip slaps Howard across the face. Hard.*) You admit that you've told her about us.

HOWARD. Stop it!

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PHILLIP. Be a man! Not some damned little sissy! (*Phillip slaps him again.*)

HOWARD (*Reaching for his mother who remains frozen, just out of reach*). Mama! Help! (*Phillip grabs at Howard and bares down onto him but any further display of violence halts and he tries to embrace Howard.*) I'm sorry, Howard. Oh. Please. Please. I'm so sorry.

HOWARD. Let me go. (*Phillip abruptly lashes out, knocking Howard to the floor. Howard cries.*)

PHILLIP. Shut up. Did you hear what I said! She's not gonna hear your cryin'. She's off getting plastered. Like always. She doesn't care nothin' about you.

HOWARD. I hate you!

PHILLIP. Yeah, well I hate you right back, but we do what needs to be done. I'm going to keep comin' up here and you'd better be a bit more hospitable next time. Do you understand? (*Howard whimpers.*) I'm waiting for an answer.

HOWARD. Yes sir.

PHILLIP. With a sir first.

HOWARD. Sir. Yes. Sir.

PHILLIP. You wanna know what'll happen if you tell anybody? Wanna see? (*Phillip brushes past Howard to the stack of comic books. He takes one and produces a lighter from his pocket.*)

HOWARD. Stop! (*Phillip touches flame to paper and lets it burn then drops it into the dust bin.*) What are you doing?!

PHILLIP. I'm doin' you a favor here. A lesson, even. Yeah, that's what this is. It's a lesson in trust. You gonna tell your Mama about what's been doing?

HOWARD. Please. (*Phillip takes another comic and sets it to flame.*)

PHILLIP. You gonna keep our secret? I can go on, you know.

HOWARD. I won't say anything.

PHILLIP. Stand up. (*No response.*) I said stand your ass up-now! (*Howard does so.*) This is our secret. A code between men. Not that you would understand a damned thing about that. (*Holding out his hand.*) Shake my hand.

HOWARD. No.

PHILLIP. I said- (*Grabbing Howard's hand.*)-Now shake. (*Howard does*

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so.) Good boy. (Phillip exits. Howard looks back to his mother, but she has gone also. Howard remains alone. Staring at the smoldering dust bin. He reaches into it and produces one of the burnt comic books. A piece of it breaks away and floats to the ground. He cradles the remnants. Tightly. Shaking in anger.)

COURTROOM

HENNINGS. May I ask Doctor Wertham a question at this point?

CHAIRMAN. You may.

HENNINGS. It seems that I recall from reading of Hans Christian Anderson and Grimm's Fairy Tales that there were a number of those stories that related to the vicious, mean, overbearing stepmother, it seems they emphasized the step-relationship.

WERTHAM. Yes.

HENNINGS. Now, there was a great deal that was pretty horrible in some of these things, was there not?

WERTHAM. Yes, there was.

HENNINGS. Going back and relating that sort of thing which has gone on for many generations by way of reading material for the very young and, as I have suggested Poe's stories, and that sort of thing, how do we distinguish, or can we distinguish between that sort of writing which is given to very young children and has been for a long time, and this sort of thing about which we are now talking today?

WERTHAM. Well, among the differences is that although characters are drawn rather in black and white lines, there is some development of character, there is, if you like, some humaneness about the stories, most of which are absent in the comic book materials which seem to enlarge on the most perverse aspects of the human conscience, at least in the kind of materials that were presented here. One might also say that the type of illustration that one sees here, especially the highly sexualized material, was largely absent from some of the more classical fairy tale material. Now, I might say that a large group of the youngsters that we see in our court would be unable to reach very much of the classical fairy tale material because

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reading disability is so prevalent in this population. So I suspect many of them react even more to the illustrative material than to the printed word, although that is kept at a very simple level.

HENNINGS. Thank you, Doctor. I have just one more question, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN. Proceed.

HENNINGS. Doctor Wertham, Mr. Gaines seems to think that a lot of good can come from comic book reading. Is it also possible to utilize the pages of the comics through crime and horror so that children learn to do bad things?

WERTHAM. I think the children, many of whom need expression, many of whom are frustrated, who are in deprived situations, certainly will look to the comic books for release and for expression of the kind of violence which is being stirred up in them.

HOWARD LANG'S BEDROOM/LONNIE FELLICK IN LIGHT.

Lonnie Fellick picks up a phone, dials and waits. Howard answers it, amidst his whimpering tears.

HOWARD. Hell-(*Sniffle*)-Hello?

LONNIE. Is this Howard Lang?

HOWARD. Sure. Who is this?

LONNIE. This is Lonnie. (*Long pause.*) Lonnie Fellick. We did some business last week, remember?

HOWARD. Sure. I remember. What the hell do you want, twerp?

LONNIE. I want the Legs Diamond. You know. The one you got from Brucie.

HOWARD. I told you. It isn't for trade.

LONNIE. I think you're gonna change your mind when I tell you what I know.

HOWARD. Oh, yeah? What's that?

LONNIE. Never you mind. Just meet me at the preserve. With the comic.

HOWARD. No dice. Look, it's been a hell of a day. You don't tell me what

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all this is about and I'll hang up the phone right now. Well?

LONNIE. Alright. I know about your step-pop.

HOWARD *(Pause)*. What about him?

LONNIE. I know all about him-and you. What's been doin' between the two of you. Something like that gettin' out can sure get you and your whole rotten family in a whole mess of trouble, you know what I'm sayin'? Look just meet me there, 'kay, and nobody needs to find out. Kay? *(No response.)* Hey. Hey? You there?

HOWARD. Yeah. Yeah. I'm here.

LONNIE. Then why didn't you say something?

HOWARD. Look, I'll-eh-I'll come but it's gotta be just you and me, understand? No Bruce. No nobody.

LONNIE. Come alone?

HOWARD. Yeah. And-eh-Don't tell your parents either. It's just going to be you and me, understand?

LONNIE *(Quite terrified at the idea)*. But-But I gotta tell them. I mean. They need to know where I am. Where I'm going. My Mama especially.

HOWARD. Then you can just forget about the whole thing. I forgot I was dealing with some little nancy.

LONNIE. Watch it, bub. *(Pause.)* Alright. It's a deal.

HOWARD. No parents.

LONNIE. No parents.

HOWARD. And no Bruce.

LONNIE. For the last time, I'm comin' alone. Just make sure you have the Legs Diamond.

HOWARD. Don't worry. I won't forget it. See you later, twerp. See you real soon. *(Howard hangs up. He wipes the tears from his face. There is a kind of fiery determination and resolve that permeates off of his face.)*

COURTROOM

KEFAUVER. Mr. Gaines, 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. Did you consider this in good taste when you first read it?

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GAINES. Yes, sir; I did. 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 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.

KEFAUVER. You have blood coming out of her mouth.

GAINES. Only a little.

KEFAUVER. Here is blood on the axe. I think most adults themselves, let alone their children, would find this very alarming.

GAINES. Well, for a horror comic-

KEFAUVER. Here is another one I want to show you. It is from your July edition. It seems to be a man with a woman in a boat and he is choking her to death here with a crowbar. Is that in good taste?

GAINES. Eh, I think so.

KEFAUVER. How could it possibly be worse?

HENNINGS. I have a question I'd like to ask Mr. Gaines.

CHAIRMAN. Proceed.

HENNINGS. Mr. Gaines, is it true that your father did not publish horror and crime comic books?

GAINES. That is correct. I started horror. And only horror. Not crime.

HENNINGS. Who started crime?

GAINES. I really do not know.

CHAIRMAN. How many of these things do you sell a month, Mr. Gaines?

GAINES. It varies.

CHAIRMAN. Well, if you had to make a guess. How many?

GAINES. Per month. (*Beat.*) Per month, we have an advertising guaranty of 1,500,000 comic books sold.

KEFAUVER. Of these horrific-

GAINES. That is horror-

KEFAUVER. -These horrific comic books?

GAINES. Yes sir. That is the correct amount.

KEFAUVER. You don't care, do you? About the effects this may have on a child?

GAINES. Wait a minute-

KEFAUVER. You only care about the marketability? Whether it will sale?

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Do you deny this?

GAINES. That is not the only-

KEFAUVER. The only-!

GAINES. My end goal is to entertain. And if there is any direct correlation between the violence in comic books and that in real life, well, then I will relinquish my position as acting head of Entertaining Comics.

KEFAUVER. Do not get comfortable then, Mr. Gaines, for if we have anything to say about it that might very well happen.

MOTHER LANG IN SINGLE POOL OF LIGHT

MOTHER LANG. I always tried to do right by Howard. In my mind. Being married is what he needed. Phillip. He was a mistake, sure. But a woman my age can't afford to be too choosy. There was a way Phillip had with Howard. I never could put my finger on it. But Howard hated him because of it. And whatever it was-Howard changed after it. *(Beat.)* Yes, he loved comics but after-after whatever it was happened between the two of them. It was like he lived through the comic books and the characters in them. We'd be having dinner and there he'd be imitating one of the characters from the latest story he had read. *(Pause.)* Oh, I must have bought hundreds of them comics for him and even when he'd steal some chump cash from me, I'd look the other way. If comics were to be the one kind of outlet into his life then so be it. Oh, I knew. I knew deep, deep down, that they were horrible things for a child so young to read but-but I just wanted my Howard back. *(Beat.)* A parent-A mother never suspects their child of doing something so horrible. Something truly evil. And when it happens you try and convince yourself that it's just a nightmare. That it isn't real. But the real nightmare is that it isn't a dream. That this is all real. You wish you could wake up, but you never can, and you never will.

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HOWARD LANG FAMILY ROOM

Then there is, suddenly, a collection of knocks at the door. She turns to the sound. More knocks. She walks out of her provided space. More knocks. She admits the knocker, a uniformed officer, into her house.

OFFICER HEALEY. Good morning, Mrs. Lang. My name is Officer Healy. I was hoping I could trouble you with-

MOTHER LANG. We're divorced.

OFFICER HEALEY. Sorry?

MOTHER LANG. My husband Bill Lang and I. We've been divorced for some time now. The name is Grimm.

OFFICER HEALEY. Mrs. Grimm, actually I was hoping to talk to your son. Howard, ma'am. Is he in?

MOTHER LANG. Eh. Yes. Yes, he is? Is everything alright?

OFFICER HEALEY. I'd like to discuss a few things with Howard. Could you call him down here, please?

MOTHER LANG. Eh. Yes. Of course. I'll just call him down here. *(She stands and turns to look out in the direction of Howard's room.)* Howard! Come in here, please! *(Back to the officer.)* He'll be right down. *(Silence.)* Could you tell me what this is all about?

OFFICER HEALEY. I think it's best to wait 'till Howard comes down.

MOTHER LANG. Of course. Eh. Could I offer you a drink? *(Off of his blank, almost shocked expressions.)* Of course you wouldn't. You are on duty. Well, would you mind if I had one then? I realize it's a bit early in the day but. With you sitting in my living room. It's made me very nervous. You know. Maybe I don't need a drink after all. *(Howard enters.)*

HOWARD. Heya, Ma. What's-*(Seeing the officer towering over him.)*-doin'?

MOTHER LANG. This nice officer has come to ask you some questions though he won't even tell me what kind they are.

OFFICER HEALEY. Mrs. Grimm, it might serve us all better if you just stepped into the other room, maybe.

MOTHER LANG. Anything you have to say to my boy can be said to me

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as well.

OFFICER HEALEY. So be it. Ma'am, we have it on good authority that your son is responsible for the death of one Lonnie Fellick.

MOTHER LANG. Excuse me?!

OFFICER HEALEY. The Fellick boy has been missing for some eleven days. The body was found just yesterday. Beaten. Stabbed. A bloody mess, really. We wouldn't have known where to even start looking if our source hadn't come forward and fingered your son to the scene of the crime.

HOWARD. Anonymous? Wait. Was it Gerald? Gerald Michalek? That no good. I bet it was Gerald who snitched.

MOTHER LANG. My God! Howard!

HOWARD. Yeah, Ma?

MOTHER LANG. Is there truth in what he's saying? Real, honest-to-goodness truth?

HOWARD. Well, sure Ma. Every word he says is true.

MOTHER LANG. Oh my God! Oh, I cannot believe I'm hearing any of this!

OFFICER HEALEY. Howard Lang, you are under arrest. Ma'am, if he has an attorney. Now would probably be a good time to call on him.

HOWARD. You gonna cuff me? (*Howard, practically excited, puts his hands behind his back and is led off by the officer. Mother Lang falls to her knees and sobs.*)

COURTROOM

KEFAUVER. I have read a number of your writings. I have read your Seduction of the Innocent. You remember a number of years ago I had several visits with you, and you told you about the pressure they tried to apply on you in connection with this. But I noticed here this thing, as stated in a kind of article published by Mr. Gaines himself, that anyone who opposes comic books are Communists. "The group most anxious to destroy comics are the Communists." Then they have here the statement "The child's natural character must be distorted to fit civilization. Fantasy violence will

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paralyze his resistance, divert his aggression to unreal enemies and frustrations, and in this way prevent him from rebelling against parents and teachers. This will siphon off his resistance against society and prevent revolution." This seems to be an effort to tie you up in some way as Red or Communist. Is that part of a smear?

WERTHAM. I have really paid no attention to this although, I can assure you that I am no communist or Red. But, Mr. Chairman, these comic book publishers do something quite different which is much more serious. The comic-book industry at time present moment - and this is an experiment I would like to suggest to you - the comic-book industry at this present moment interferes with the freedom of publications in all fields. They have their hands on magazines, they have their hands on newspapers, they threaten the advertisers; they continually threaten libel suits and action for damages. The experiment I suggest to you is the following: My book, *Seduction of the Innocent* which is nothing but a scientific report on comic books, as a Book of the Month Club selection. The contracts have been signed. The question I would like to put to you is this: Will this book be distributed or will the sinister hand of these corrupters of children, of this comic-book industry, will they prevent distribution? You can very easily find that out and then you can see how difficult it is for parents to defend their children against comic books if they are not allowed to read what they contain.

THE QUAD OF A SCHOOL

David Mace stepping up onto a makeshift platform of sorts. He looks around for-something. A young girl runs up to him and hands him a collection of documents which he accepts gladly. As David prepares to speak, the children of the cast come together to make up the crowd.

DAVID (*Quite nervous*). Can I have your attention, please. Hey there. Could I have-everyone's attention?

CHILD 4. What's going on?

CHILD 2. I think it's David Mace.

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DAVID. Gather around. Get to where you can hear. *(They have gathered just before him. He clears his throat. Maybe wipes the sweat away from his brow then:)* You may disagree with me now but hear me out and listen to my words. *(Beat. Clears throat.)* Comic books are-evil.

CHILD 2. What?!

CHILD 4. Did he say what I think he just said?

DAVID *(As many of them turn to leave).* Don't leave. Please. Just. Just hear me out. Please.

CHILD 1. We don't want to hear anything you have to say, Crazy Mace.

CHILD 3. Yeah, get off the stage, you maroon!

DAVID. I have articles. Here. Look at them. See that what I am telling you isn't so crazy. Go ahead. Read. These children were injured or worse because of their obsession to comic books. Superman. Batman. Wonderwoman. All of them are just as guilty as the others. Now tell me. Do you want this kind of trash in your house? Do you want your kid brother or sister reading it? Well!

CHILD 3 *(Reading one such article).* I dunno. I mean I read it but I don't think I'd be all that comfortable with him reading it.

DAVID. Our country has been taken over by the big publishers who go unchecked and peddle whatever they want to the masses of us innocent youths. What's stopping them from sending it all to Spencer? What's stopping them from sending this trash right into your homes? Gentlemen and ladies, we have a call to act. And it begins here. Right here in Spencer. It starts with us.

CHILDREN. Maybe there is some reasoning behind old Mace's words. I never really thought comics were all that bad. Are you kidding? My brother has a stash of Tales from the Crypt under his bed. They are horrible. What do you suggest we do, David? Yeah. Yeah. Tell us. Tell us what to do!

DAVID. Gather them up. Go to your homes. To your favorite shops. Find every comic book you can. Find them and bring them here. To the steps of our school. Find them and bring them and we will burn every last one of them! *(The children break away with a newly discovered sense of purpose and urgency. David remains. A sense of accomplishment has now taken over him. He is proud of himself. He hears a person clapping. Turns and sees Mrs. Ridell standing amid the exiting children. Clapping. David nods to her. A might embarrassed at his accomplishment. He turns the other way to begin*

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his work when Andy has appeared. Arms crossed. Disappointed in the efforts of his younger brother. David takes a step to Andy but, just as quickly as he had appeared, Andy has disappeared into darkness.)

COURT ROOM

CHAIRMAN. This concludes this first part of tonight's proceedings. Please see yourself to the lobby for refreshments and time to review what has happened thus far. Court will stand in recess until-*(Checking his time piece)*-Until-*(Insert fifteen minutes from the time it is now)*-So be it. *(The Chairman wraps his gavel and proceeds off. The rest of the Senators follow after him. Wertham stands and makes his way to Gaines' desk. Gaines slowly looks up. Wertham smiles and pats Gaines on the shoulder then strides out of the court room leaving Gaines utterly and totally alone. The lights fade and we go to:)*

END OF ACT 1

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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