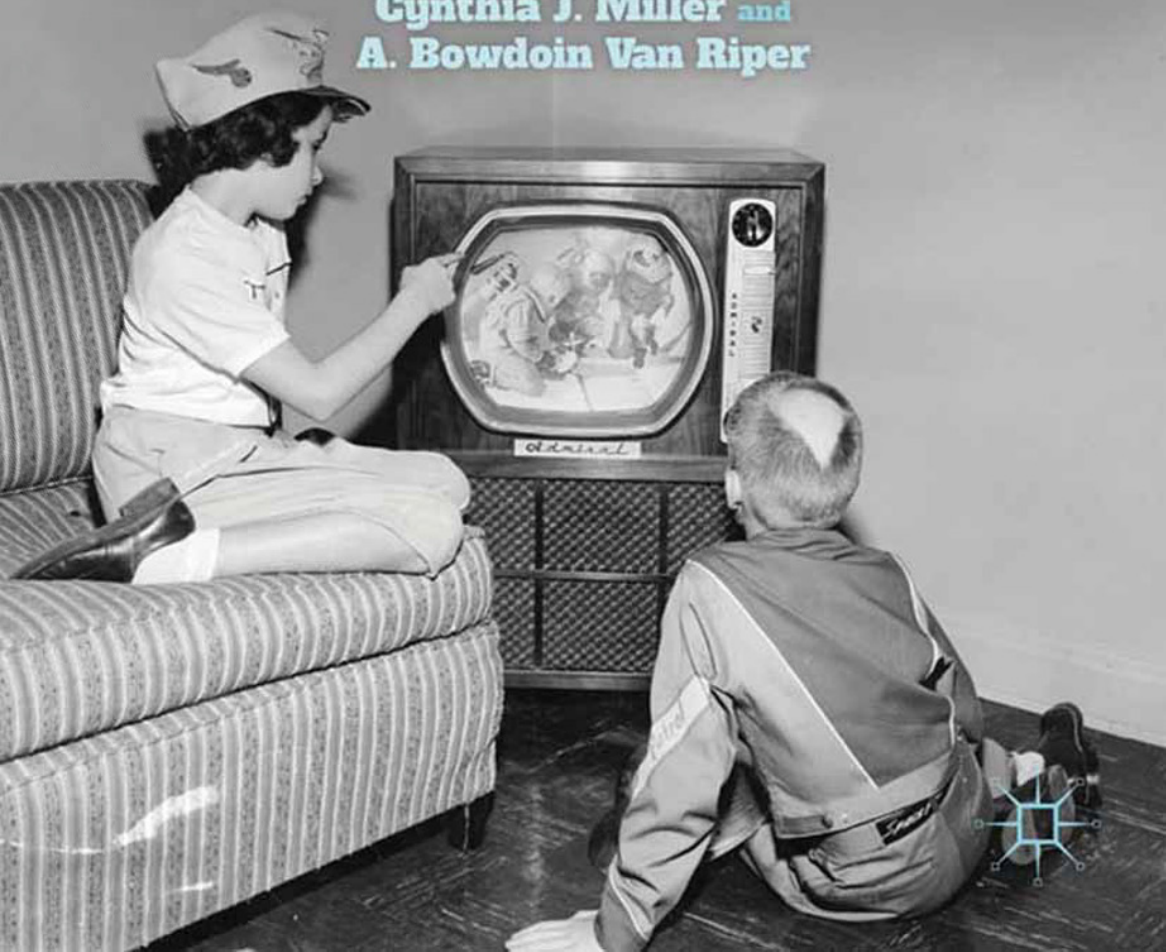


1950s "ROCKETMAN" TV SERIES AND THEIR FANS

Cadets, Rangers, and
Junior Space Men

Edited by
Cynthia J. Miller and
A. Bowdoin Van Riper



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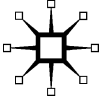
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CYNTHIA J. MILLER AND

A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

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*To all those who looked
at fishbowls, and saw space helmets
at cable reels, and saw rocket controls
at muffler pipes, and saw ray guns
at the stars, and saw the future*

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FOREWORD: TO INFINITY AND BEYOND!

HENRY JENKINS

THE HAPPY-GO-LUCKY ED NORTON (ART CARNEY) SITS down in front of the television set he shares with his loud-mouthed downstairs neighbor, Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason), and begins pulling things out of a large cardboard box. He replaces his familiar pork-pie hat with a massive space helmet and tucks a disintegrator gun into his belt, as he eagerly awaits the start of his favorite television program, *Captain Video*. This is the day that Captain Video takes off for Pluto, and as a loyal fan, he has to be there, fully equipped, and ready to “join” the rocketman’s adventures. Ralph returns to the room, just in time to see his adult friend leaning way back in his chair, as if trying to absorb the gravitational pull of the blast off. The astonished Ralph holds his tongue, with increasing difficulty, as he watches Ed take his space-cadet oath:

“I, Edward Norton, Ranger Third Class in the Captain Video Space Academy, do solemnly pledge to obey my mommy and daddy, be kind to dumb animals, help little old ladies in and out of space, not to tease my little brothers and sisters, and to brush my teeth twice a day and drink milk after every meal.”¹

Finally, the blustering Kramden explodes, ordering Ed from the apartment, resulting in a knock-down, drag-out argument over control of the set: “For three nights, I have listened to nothing but space shows, Westerns, cartoon frolics, and puppet shows. Tonight I am watching a movie and if you dare to make a sound while the movie is on, I will cut off your air supply.”²

After a short truce, they are soon changing channels on each other, resulting in amusing juxtapositions between the highly melodramatic dialogue of the romantic movie Ralph wants to watch (“Your hair is like golden sunflowers”) and the equally hyperbolic space opera Ed desires (“a giant crater full of boiling lava.”)

Aired on October 1, 1955, “To TV or Not To TV” holds a special place in the history of the American sitcom—the first episode of *The Honeymooners* produced as a stand-alone series, as opposed to as a recurring skit on *The Jackie Gleason Show*. By fall 1955, *Captain Video and His Video Rangers* had just ended its six-year run on the DuMont Network, the same network that aired *The Honeymooners*. As this book



Image 0.1 Ralph (Jackie Gleason) loses his patience with Ed's (Art Carney) "Space Fever"

suggests, *Captain Video* was one of a cluster of serials in the first half of the 1950s that targeted America's youth with larger-than-life adventures of "Cadets, Rangers, and Space Men."

This selection of essays offers us a rich and diverse account of these programs and what they meant to the generation that came of age in the mid-twentieth century. The chapters connect the programs backward in time to the pulp magazines, the space operas of Doc Smith and Robert Heinlein, B-movies and big-screen serials, the comic strips of Alex Raymond, popular discourses around science and space, and even *Peter Pan*. We learn here about how these programs addressed social debates about the nature of masculinity, the place of women in science, the global role of the United States during the Cold War, and the appropriate goals and methods for educating young citizens for the Space Age. We learn here about the ways that the "space craze" represented a key step toward serialized programming on American television at a time when dominant trends still pulled toward more episodic structures. These stories sometimes leaped off the small screen and ended up at the local movie theater (not to mention vice versa in the case of the old movie serials repackaged for early television). They were highly self-reflexive about the nature of television as a new and emerging medium. There were complex interplays between the fictional narratives and the brands attached to them. These space operas spawned a succession of licensed and tie-in merchandise that encouraged young fans to actively participate in their imaginary worlds. Each writer has his or her own reasons for reexamining these too often neglected (but fondly remembered) programs, but collectively, this book sheds remarkable insights into the social, cultural, and economic life of the 1950s. These chapters combine a fan's respect for particular detail and the academic's attention to context and implication.

Unlike many of this anthology's contributors, who write with nostalgia about programs that loom large in their childhood memories, I was born in 1958, too late to have had a direct experience of these shows when they first aired. Nevertheless, I have often encountered the "memory traces" they left behind. I listened to old records and read picture books handed down to me by older cousins. And so, in this introduction, I want to look not at the programs themselves (which are well covered elsewhere in this book) but at the ways these programs were represented in other popular texts, at the time and subsequently, which brings us back to *The Honeymooners*.

"To TV and Not To TV" is an amazing time capsule of attitudes toward television as a technology, a domestic practice, and a set of genre conventions. (Television historian Lynn Spigel [1992] draws on this same episode heavily in her book, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*). I often use this episode to get my students, who have grown up in the era of networked computing and mobile telephones, to imagine a time when television was a new and disruptive technology. The episode makes it easy to link television with new media technologies: Ralph, challenged by Alice to explain why he has not bought her a television set, finally falls back on, "I'm waiting for 3D television." So are many of my students, who are now being sold 3-D as the latest innovation in home entertainment.

By 1955, the country could look back nostalgically at a period of social viewing, where neighbors gathered together to watch programs because there might only be one set on their block. Today's generation has grown up in households where there were often more television sets than people, and the really hip ones have gotten rid of their consoles to stream pirated television content through computers and game systems. *The Honeymooners* depicts a world of conflicting tastes and clashing expectations about the medium. Alice wants Liberace to brighten up her housework drudgery, while Ralph wants home entertainment so he can relax at the end of the work day.

At the center of this farce is the image of the adult fan of children's space programs. Everything about Ed's relationship to *Captain Video*, starting with his awe-struck tone every time he mentions the program, suggests age-inappropriate tastes. While the actual pledges on these action-adventure serials allow their young viewers to signal their eagerness to enter the adult realm, Ed's oath was written for someone still dependent on his "mommy and daddy" for support and protection. There certainly were adult fans of these programs—as several of the contributors here note—and science fiction fandom, having taken root in the 1920s and 1930s, had achieved a solid institutional footing by the 1950s.³ The production of genre entertainment was being shaped by a generation of men who had grown up through fandom with its expectations about participatory culture and now were exerting influence on the media around them. But, the program treats fandom as a form of arrested development.

Ed's childlike enthusiasm, innocence, and imagination contrast with Ralph's aggressive masculinity. Ralph's own tastes would have seemed more than a little gender inappropriate by the standards of 1950s America—most of what Ralph watches are romances and musicals, both historically aligned with the female spectator. In his 1986 book *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz described the ways in

which television viewing often scrambles traditional divisions between the genders or across generations, exposing domestic viewers to practices that once would have occurred behind closed doors. We might link the 1950s adult fans of children's space opera with mature fans today who have fallen under the spell of *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, or a range of other series focused on young-adult readers, while Ralph's taste for soaps would have existed in the 1950s alongside the sizable number of women who became active fans of television wrestling.⁴

Captain Video also stands here for a particular relationship with television content. The images of Ed Norton, thrown back in his chair by imaginary thrust, embody an immersive engagement with the medium. The rituals Ed performs—reciting the oath, saluting the screen before putting on his helmet—all represent a kind of ersatz interactivity: the viewer is responding to direct address from the program announcer, who often assigns specific identities and tasks to perform, but the announcer cannot respond to the participant, anymore than the host of the then-current *Winky Dink and You* program really knew what the little boys and girls drew on their “magic” plastic screens. Here, *Captain Video* embodies fantasies of television as a more responsive medium, one that extends the space of fantasy and adventure directly into the everyday lives of its viewers. William Uricchio (2005) tells us that as early as the mid-nineteenth century, people imagined television as a technology that could connect us to distant places in real time, often coupled with the telephone, to ensure actual conversations across continents. Early audiences had been disappointed with cinema, Uricchio suggests, because it was “canned” and not “live” entertainment. The space rangers' promise to show us what is happening “right now” at the outer limits of known space is just a fantastical embodiment of the same thrills contemporary audiences got when news programs showed them the East and the West Coast on screen at the same moment or took us live to Wrigley Field or to the opening of a Broadway play. And this desire for a more interactive medium has been a central promise of the digital age, one my students easily recognize when watching Norton's intense efforts to pretend he is traveling through the stars.

A 1959 episode of *Dennis the Menace*, “Innocents in Space,” still uses the children's space-adventure program—represented here by the fictitious *Captain Blast*—to explore the ways in which people interact with the television medium.

Here, again, we see the fan boys gather around the set for a “special event”—in this case, the day Captain Blast and his simian sidekick, Lt. Peep, land on Mars. When the Captain is captured by the Martians, he appeals to the young fans to participate actively in his adventures. In order to convince the Martians that he actually commands a large army on Earth, the space man urges his young fans to go outside at 7:30 each night and fire glowing ping-pong balls, sold to them for this purpose, into the night sky. As the episode continues, Dennis wins a program contest, and the reward is a visit by Blast and Peep to his home. All of the local boys gather in the Mitchell living room to meet the space rangers and hear their stories firsthand.

The episode remains highly sympathetic to the boys and their active imaginations, though, as is typical for *Dennis the Menace*, the incident becomes the focus of intergenerational conflict. The camera cuts from the Dennis and Tommy watching *Captain Blast* with rapt attention to a frustrated Mr. Wilson, also watching



Image 0.2 Dennis and his friends gather for an episode of *Captain Blast*



Image 0.3 Dennis wins the biggest prize of all: a rocketman in his own living room

but outraged by the show's scientific misinformation. An amateur astronomer, Mr. Wilson tries to convince the local boys that it is more fun to visit other planets through a telescope than via television.

Mr. Wilson's claims of expertise are undercut when he confuses the glowing ping-pong balls for an actual satellite being launched from Cape Canaveral. When

Mr. Wilson learns of Captain Blast's visit, he stomps over to the Mitchell's house and actively challenges the television performer's claims that, for example, Titan is a moon of Jupiter (rather than Saturn), or that he went without a space helmet on the surface of Mercury. Mrs. Wilson, on the other hand, suggests that the space stories, however fanciful from a scientist's perspective, are really no different from the fairy tales she heard as a child. As such, "Innocents in Space" stages the debates among 1950s-era parents and educators over the balance between pleasure and pedagogy, entertainment and enlightenment.

If "To TV or Not To TV" (1955) aired when children's space-adventure series were at their peak, "Innocents in Space" (1959) is decisively post-*Sputnik*, produced at a time when real world developments around space exploration outpaced "that Buck Rogers stuff." If *Captain Video* and its counterparts had just left the air when "To TV or Not To TV" was first broadcast, these series had given way to Walt Disney's *Man in Space*, *Our Mister Sun*, and *Mr. Wizard* by the time *Dennis the Menace* dealt with the phenomenon. The adult astronomers are celebrating a new "age of discovery," but they also respond with mixed feelings to the prospect that they will soon know what lies on the dark side of the moon, each adult clinging to the "sense of wonder" associated with earlier space fantasies. If "To TV or Not To TV" questions whether adult men remain "boys" at heart, "Innocents in Space" wonders, given the urgency of the Cold War and the race to space, whether young boys should be fed science fantasy or science fact. Here, again, the stunt with the glowing ping-pong balls, the space host who comes off the screen and into Dennis' living room embody fantasies about immersion, interactivity, and participation through television.

Given their enormous influence, we should not be surprised by how often the space-cadet programs surfaced as a reference point in the surrounding culture—often framed in terms of a competition between the Rocketmen and the Cowboys for the heart and soul of American boys. Consider, for example, the 1962 propaganda film *Red Nightmare*, which feels like it should have been an episode of *Twilight Zone*. A more down-to-earth version of Rod Serling, Jack Webb tells the audience that he is going to give the film's protagonist, an average American who takes his democratic birthright too much for granted, a "nightmare" he won't soon forget—showing him and us what will happen when the Communists take over the U. S. of A. The "normalcy" of suburban life is summed up by two sequences of the father interacting with his children. In the first, we see the son, dressed in full "redskin" regalia (a feathered headdress, buckskin, face paint, and tomahawk) threaten to tie up his father atop "a hill of red ants." By the film's closing sequence, the same boy is begging his dad to buy him a space helmet, as the daughter, who translates between the world of children and adults, explains, "He's gone from wide open spaces to outer space."⁵

Both the space man and the cowboy are depicted as the kind of fantasies All-American boys *should* have. The son's shifting taste implies the freedom to choose between competing consumer options as fundamental to the nation's democratic (and capitalist) heritage. Billy Wilder's *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) opens with a similar situation, as a baffled father tries to navigate his son's over-active fantasy life. Here, the boy refuses to take off his space helmet to kiss his father goodbye as he heads off for the summer, accusing Dad of "cutting off my air supply," an

appropriate metaphor in a Thurburesque comedy about the battle of the sexes and the wandering attention of the American man.

Space fantasies play a remarkably similar role in Pixar's *Toy Story*, one of the most popular animation franchises of the past decade, which starts on the traumatic day when Space Ranger Buzz Lightyear displaces the Cowboy (Sheriff Woody) from his place of honor in Andy's Toy Room. This struggle between the Western and the space opera surely means much more to the baby-boomer filmmakers than to their young viewers, who have grown up in a world dominated by science fiction and almost entirely devoid of Westerns. Gags certainly link Buzz Lightyear to some contemporary franchises, starting with heavy breathing (intended to evoke Darth Vader) or references to "Stardates" (the legacy of *Star Trek*). But, there are also hints here of a much older vocabulary of Space Rangers, Evil Emperors, and Galactic Alliances, straight from the space operas of yesteryear, whose viewers would certainly have recognized the spirit behind Buzz's vow to take us "to infinity and beyond."

On one level, we should not be surprised that the space men were depicted as somehow superseding the cowboy mythology: space opera represented a force of modernity, a rereading of America's manifest destiny as the new nation accepted its obligations as a world power, or perhaps, soon, the most powerful force in the universe. Read less sympathetically, the space men represented the loss of American manliness, as the idea of the rugged individual gave way to a more corporatized conception of working well on teams, the same shift that occurs within the genre between mad scientists going where human society forbids them to go and government agents going where their national duty dictates they travel. Historically, at least on American television, the space shows came first, with children's television turning to the Western in the mid-1950s as it sought to capitalize on the success of Disney's



Image 0.4 Buzz Lightyear and Sheriff Woody vie for top hero status

Davy Crockett series, but popular memory reverses the two, assuming that the space programs were a product of the Space Race, rather than an anticipation of it.

Either way, these depictions assume that there is some kind of sharp line to be drawn between the frontier mythology of the American West and our fantasies about space as “the final frontier.” Such rigid boundaries break down quickly enough in *Toy Story*, when the assembled toys are cast and recast into a variety of different adventures across the trilogy, and where Buzz and Woody discover they have a friend in each other. Our modern sense of popular genres emerged from the pulp magazines, which often sought to structure publication priorities and readerships by distinguishing among different and competing kinds of fantasies. Most of the genres that have dominated popular fiction since (and a few which have disappeared almost entirely) took shape on the pages of these magazines, and in the process, each developed particular reading protocols and genre expectations among their most hard-core fans. Yet, a closer look at the pulps shows how genre distinctions were blurred from the start. Many pulp writers moved between different publications, reworking stories that were not sold to fit into alternative genres, resulting in a constant exchange of themes and plot devices across genres. Feeding into the modern space opera, then, were other currents. The rocketeer stories were the descendants of “flyboy” dramas. The space academies owed much to boys’ school stories. The battles in space were inspired by military dramas. Captain Video and the others were galactic policemen. The space opera protagonists often found themselves yielding swords (or perhaps prototypes for *Star Wars*’ light sabers) as they struggled with the rulers of imaginary kingdoms and their seductive daughters. And, yes, some elements of the Western got mapped onto Mars’ dusty red deserts. So, perhaps in the end, there should be no competition between Buzz and Woody, the space man and the cowboy. Ultimately, they come from the same cultural roots and serve many of the same functions for their young fans.

Today, the space-men dramas of the 1950s are likely to be the object of nostalgia and camp, as they have resurfaced via online video platforms or been reissued on DVDs. A networked culture is kind to retro-consumers, who go on eBay to buy the toys their mothers gave to the Salvation Army. In that sense, the computer is very much a time machine, where everything new is old again, and science fiction, once a genre relentlessly pursuing a future which, as visitors of the 1939 World’s Fair were told, was where we would be experiencing the rest of our lives, has become fascinated with yesterday’s tomorrows, futures that never quite arrived. The Steampunk movement has revitalized interest in the technological fantasies of the Victorian era, even as other works have sought to rekindle our fascination with mid-century modernism. So, something of the spirit of the space opera informs retrofuturist films such as *The Rocketeer* or *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, television series such as Hulu’s *Mercury Men*, or comics such as Dean Motter’s *Terminal City* and *Mister X*.⁶

Over the past few years, the Green Lantern has reemerged as one of the top-selling superhero characters. Dramatic increases in comic book sales around titles associated with the Green Lantern Corps inspired the production of a blockbuster in the summer of 2011, a film that disappointed those somewhat inflated expectations, but nevertheless brought this vintage character to a much larger public. Comic-book historians

are apt to link Green Lantern back to E. E. “Doc” Smith’s Lensman series, and the connections there are strong.⁷ They note that DC’s publisher, Julius Schwartz, who was responsible for the 1959 relaunch of the Green Lantern, had been an active science fiction fan in the 1940s and 1950s, helping to organize the first Worldcon and editing some early fanzines. If the superheroes of the Golden Age were often associated with hard-boiled detective stories, those of the Silver Age were much more closely aligned with the themes and tone of space opera. DC had tested the waters with a series of space-men adventures, with titles like *Mysteries in Space* and *Strange Adventures*, which sold briskly on newsstands over the same years that young readers were racing home to watch *Captain Video*. Soon, Schwartz put a sci-fi spin on DC’s classic characters such as The Flash, Hawkman, the Atom, and Green Lantern, each of whom was treated as a “man of science” and placed in space opera settings, while new characters like the Martian Manhunter continued this same tradition. Much like the television rocketmen, these superheroes were designed to be aspirational figures for their boyish readers, occupying a space somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, forming partnerships with each other that took them where no man had gone before.

In *DC: The New Frontier* (2009), Darwyn Cooke draws heavily on Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff* (1979) to situate Hal Jordan first in relationship to other test pilots who were commanding national attention in the late 1950s—most notably Chuck Yeager—and later, to tie him in with the “Rat Pack” in Las Vegas and with the Mercury 7 astronauts, until the Green Lantern embodies everything that was cool about the early 1960s. But, look beneath the surface, and Green Lantern continues the same genre traditions that defined 1950s television space operas. While there is only one Green Lantern on Earth, he belongs to a police force—the Green Lantern Corps—whose members function as the Guardians of the Universe. The origin story sees Jordan get recruited by a dying alien and spirited away to a space academy, where he gets to clown around with other cadets and recruits, in the process of learning how to use his power ring to exert his will on the matter around him. His mentor, Sinestro, soon becomes his greatest rival, which motivates many academy stories in order to provide the necessary backstory. Hal Jordan has to repeat an oath each time he recharges his battery: “In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight—let those who worship evil’s might beware my power, Green Lantern’s light.”⁸ There is no smoking disintegrator gun that allows us to connect the Green Lantern comic to any of the specific programs this book discusses. Perhaps *Captain Video* and the Green Lantern simply draw on similar generic roots as the legacy of the pulps and serials were passed along to the postwar generation. But the recent success of the Green Lantern, in comics, on television, on direct-to-video DVDs, if not on the big screen, suggests that contemporary audiences are still feeding off the sagas that thrilled boys and girls in the early 1950s.

So, if you, like me, didn’t live through the period this book describes, and you were not a young space cadet or rocket ranger, have no fear. This story still matters to you. These series, whether you know it or not, still shape the popular culture we consume today—even if, in an era of digital effects, we can now create far more convincing representations of these fantastical worlds than could be conveyed by sparklers attached to the backside of toy rocket ships. The promises of television as an immersive and interactive media are now more fully realized through contemporary

computer games, yet these games may still depict battles in space and flights beyond the stars. We still have much to learn from the era of the Rocketmen.

NOTES

1. *The Honeymooners* “TV or Not TV” Episode 1, Season 1, 1 October 1, 1955, CBS.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Andrew Ross. *Strange Weather: Culture, Technology and Science in the Age of Limits*. London: Verso, 1991.
4. Chad Dell. *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling, and Fan Culture of the 1950s*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.
5. *Red Nightmare*, directed by George Waggner (1962; GI Studios, 2011), DVD.
6. Henry Jenkins. “‘The Tomorrow That Never Was’: Retrofuturism in the Comics of Dean Motter.” In *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*, ed. Jorn Ahrens and Arno Meteling, 63–83 (London: Continuum, 2010).
7. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs. *The Comic Book Super Heroes: The First History of Modern Comics Books—From the Silver Age to the Present*. (New York: Prima, 1996).
8. *Showcase #22* (September–October 1959), DC Comics.

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BETWEEN THE COVERS OF THIS BOOK, THERE IS A GREAT deal of love, wonder, and inspiration. Rocketmen have that effect on people. While neither of us was among the generation of children who grew up with rocketmen in the 1950s, we both are captivated by their legacy. The flying suits, spaceships, and fantastic technology—and the heroes who used them to explore the universe—are, for us, more than just charming and nostalgic, they are a critical part of our cultural history. We believe they are important, not just as products of early television, but for the impact they had on the world *outside* the box—what audiences young and old did with them—the imaginative play, the merchandizing, the fan clubs, the dreams of space. And it was that belief that brought this volume into being.

This project might never have happened, had it not been for Cindy's involvement with J. P. Telotte's and Gerald Duchovnay's volume *Science Fiction across the Screens* (2011). Her research for that chapter did more than just capture her imagination; it also demonstrated just how broad-reaching the rocketmen's impact was on American youth and their families in the 1950s, and how much was still to be written on these Cold War heroes' relationships with their fans. So, Cindy would like to thank Jay and Gerry for creating the opportunity that ultimately led to this volume.

Several of our contributors also played a role in the book's initial spark, by writing books of their own that demonstrated how cultural history, production history, and fandom could be productively intertwined. For that reason, we invited them to be part of this project, and for that reason, also, we thank them now. They, and the rest of our talented colleagues featured here, gave unselfishly of their time and talents—often, simply because these interstellar heroes had touched their lives in ways that inspired them. They, in turn, inspired us. So we would like to extend our deepest thanks to each of our gifted authors.

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INTRODUCTION

CYNTHIA J. MILLER AND
A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

In roaring rockets they blast through the millions of miles from Earth to far-flung stars and brave the dangers of cosmic frontiers, protecting the liberties of the planet, safeguarding the cause of universal peace in the age of the conquest of space.¹

ROCKETMEN: BOLD ADVENTURERS IN SPACE, DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY, MASTERS of science, icons of Cold War heroism. Each week, they blasted their way into the living rooms, imaginations, and hearts of children in 1950s America, equipped with jet packs, paralyzing ray guns, viewing screens, and other fantastic technology, their exploits in time and space animating the new medium of television in ways that would pave the way for science fiction entertainment for decades to come. While long ago replaced by new heroes, their names still resonate in American cultural history: Captain Video, Tom Corbett, Rocky Jones, Commando Cody, and of course, the interstellar hero whose adventures started it all, Flash Gordon.

As offspring of the weekly movie-house serials that began in the 1920s, televised rocketmen series of the mid-twentieth century have largely been considered as diminished adaptations of their cinematic predecessors. Scholars have documented production histories, discussed the challenges of special effects in the early years of television, and offered in-depth examinations of individual series, but few have explored the complex relationships between these series, as a body of media texts, and their audiences.² This volume does just that, focusing on the roles, influences, and relationships that existed between televised rocketmen and their fans. The 14 chapters included here shed new light on the culture of childhood in an era that was more innocent in some ways—and more fraught in others—than our own, and reveal the complex, often unexpected ways in which the rocketmen led the children of Cold War America into the Space Age.

RISE OF THE ROCKETMEN

Rocketmen were born in the pulp magazines of the late 1920s, and even as they spread to other forms of popular entertainment they retained the marks of their

pulp origins. They were uncomplicated, unreflective characters designed to serve the needs of the action-filled stories favored by the pulps' mostly young, mostly male readership. Like the pulps' other hero-figures—ace pilots and jungle explorers, steely-eyed sheriffs and wisecracking detectives—they were drawn in bold, simple strokes and behaved in predictable ways. Their strengths were many and prominent, their weaknesses few and (unless the plot demanded it) carefully hidden. They were strong, smart, brave, and—above all—morally incorruptible.³ In a fictional world much like that of the already familiar Western genre, where good and bad were both unambiguously defined and prominently labeled, their metaphorical hats were always a bright, shining white.⁴

The very first rocketman—Richard Seaton, hero of E. E. Smith's 1928 novel *The Skylark of Space*—can stand, in this respect, for all those who came after. A scientist-adventurer as brave as he is brilliant, Seaton has a handsome face, a "powerful body," and an unwavering moral compass. He invents a new method of interstellar propulsion, installs it in a spaceship built by his millionaire-industrialist best friend, and makes plans to explore the galaxy. When the ship is stolen and his fiancée, Dorothy Vaneman, kidnapped by Marc "Blackie" DuQuesne—an unscrupulous fellow scientist in league with gangsters—Seaton wastes no time, building a new ship (the *Skylark* of the title) and giving chase. He returns, at the end of the story, having caught the villain, married the girl, been named overlord of a distant planet, acquired alien technology that makes the *Skylark* virtually invincible, and become wealthy beyond measure. Seaton remains a Boy Scout at heart, however, content to capture rather than kill DuQuesne and given to pronouncements like: "We can outrun you, outjump you, throw you down, or lick you; we can run faster, hit harder, dive deeper, and come up dryer, than you can."⁵

The planet-hopping adventures of the omnicompetent Seaton—a hero "comfortingly bigger than life," in the words of critic Damon Knight⁶—established a subgenre of science fiction that became known as "space opera." The name, retrospectively coined (in 1941) by Wilson Tucker as a parallel to the use of "horse opera" for Westerns, was meant to evoke formulaic shallowness, but readers, delighted by the stories' fast action and its "feeling that adventures are waiting everywhere," clamored for more.⁷ Within months of *Skylark's* serialized publication in Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, the first pulp magazine devoted solely to science fiction, space opera had spread to the comics pages of newspapers, where author Philip Francis Nowlan and artist Dick Calkins began a strip chronicling the adventures of Anthony "Buck" Rogers. Nowlan had introduced Rogers to the world in a pair of novellas—"Armageddon 2419 AD" and "The Airlords of Han," both published in *Amazing Stories*—portraying him as a World War I veteran who, after spending five hundred years in suspended animation, awakens American resistance forces into battle against ruthless, technologically advanced Asian overlords.⁸ The daily comic strips, published, beginning in January 1929, under the title *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, kept the futuristic setting but eliminated the military plot line and the violence. Buck became, like Richard Seaton, an interplanetary adventurer: a righter of wrongs, scourge of evildoers, and tireless defender of the Earth. A Sunday-only color strip, with separate story lines, began in 1930, and inspired artist Alex Raymond to introduce his own Sunday rocketman strip, *Flash Gordon*, in 1934.⁹

Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon brought space opera—and the rocketman hero—to the masses. Both comics were adapted into radio serials, Buck Rogers in 1932 and Flash Gordon in 1935, and were reprinted in comic books and Big Little books. A novel, *Flash Gordon in the Caverns of Mongo*, and a pulp, *Flash Gordon's Strange Adventure Magazine*, failed to excite interest in 1936, but a twelve-chapter film serial titled simply *Flash Gordon* drew enthusiastic audiences the same year and spawned sequels in 1938 and 1940. Larry “Buster” Crabbe, already famous for playing Tarzan of the Apes in the movies, starred as Flash in all three serials, and Buck Rogers in another, released in 1939. The 1933–34 World’s Fair in Chicago featured a ten-minute film of *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: An Interplanetary Battle with the Tiger Men of Mars*, and the 1939–40 Fair in New York allowed visitors to become rocketmen themselves on a Flash Gordon thrill ride.

Sheer ubiquity, and a broad fan base, made Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon household names by the end of the 1930s. Like other larger-than-life fictional heroes who made their first mass-media appearances during the decade—Batman and Superman, The Shadow, The Lone Ranger, Captain Midnight, and Tarzan of the Apes—their names and reputations were increasingly familiar even to Americans who did not actively follow their exploits. The trappings of space opera—the spaceships that the rocketmen rode, the alien races that they met, and the ray guns that they wielded against evil overlords—filtered into the public consciousness in similar ways. The vast majority of Americans may not have been able to tell the Tiger Men of Mars from the Lion Men of Mongo, but they knew that such beings were fixtures of science fiction, as the Apaches and the Cheyenne were of Westerns. Those who were not science fiction fans may not have known how Flash Gordon’s ray gun worked, but they knew that it fired a magical beam of light just as surely as the Lone Ranger’s six-shooter fired silver bullets. Above all, the general public learned, through the adventures of Buck and Flash, to associate rockets with the future, and with trips to distant worlds.

Space travel, of course, was nothing new in science fiction. Jules Verne had sent a trio of heroes *From the Earth to the Moon* in 1865 and *Around the Moon* in 1870, Edward Everett Hale had sent construction workers into orbit around the Earth (albeit inadvertently) in “The Brick Moon” (1869), and H. G. Wells had chronicled a lunar landing in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Those space voyages, however, had been the focus of the stories in which they appeared—ends in themselves, monumental and challenging, even though they reached no further than Earth’s own moon. Space opera, by contrast, took rocket ships and interplanetary travel virtually for granted, and allowed them to fade into the background of the stories it told. To Richard Seaton and the rocketmen who came after, space travel was not an end in itself but simply a means of going someplace: reaching the next exotic planet, the next alien race, the next undiscovered wonder. To the fans who turned the pages of the newspaper to the latest installment of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, or settled into their theater seats waiting for the next chapter of a rocketman serial, spaceships were like the horses in a Western: essential to the story without being central to it.

The space operas of the 1930s and 1940s added outer space, with its infinity of alien species and strange planets, to the growing list of stock adventure-story settings, and rocketmen to the ranks of stock adventure heroes. And the early