as Zelda Fitzgerald wrote, we grow up “founding our dreams on the infinite promise of American advertising,” the comic book ad has truly shaped our appetites and desires.

Long before art movements such as Pop appropriated the image of a muscle-bound bully kicking sand at a terrified wimp, before post-modern philosophers canonized the image of a ravaged dishpan hand, the cheap advertisements crammed into comic books of the 1940s and 1950s were an essential part of the American experience, revealing more about the national character than the tony appeals in more respectable publications.

Considering that some six to seven billion comic books were produced from 1940 to 1960, and that more comic books have been printed and bought than all the top-ten best-selling books of the last half century, the impact of comic book advertisements cannot be underestimated. By the early 1940s, 15 million comic books were published monthly in the United States, and during the 1950s the number soared to nearly 75 million, with an average of 15 comic books read each month by every other household in America. And tucked inside each comic book were numerous ads.

Yet numbers and statistics, however impressive, cannot illuminate why a form of “low” mass advertising—which first emerged as a modern form of advertising in 1935’s *New Fun* comics—has so thoroughly captivated generations of Americans. One must revisit the 1940s and ‘50s, when, after a hesitant start in the ‘30s, in-your-face advertising inundated the comics, brandishing lurid colors and brazenly peddling miraculous transformation. One could buy a toy pistol that “cracks out like a real gun” and a “life-like” rubber skull, “hideously real.” It was a time when nothing was impossible—that is, if the ad hit the right hyperbolic pitch.

In the 1940s, while Frank Sinatra buckled bobby-soxers’ knees, comic book ads helped readers “Make Your Own Records” for $8.49 plus postage. And as the unfriendly atom threatened to fracture the future, a comics ad announced a “new sensational offer to readers” wherein they could procure a “war surplus” gas mask, “released by the U.S. government.” Comics were thick with all manner of superhero and heroine—The Flame, Miss Fury, The Fighting Yank, Bullet Man, Captain Marvel (who outsold Superman), Wonder Woman, Captain America, Black Condor, Green Lantern—
supreme do-righters and buffed patriots accomplishing feats far beyond garden-variety mortals. Even that modern man-made substance plastic gave rise to an elastic mensch, Plastic Man ("Plas" to in-the-know fans), "His only weapon being his ability to bend, twist, or mold into any shape!!" Comic book readers looking to profit from this malleable material could send off for the Plastikit, with which they could "make $100 worth of valuable plastic objects for only $1.98 plus postage."

In addition to fantastic titans, average all-Americans such as redheaded Archie Andrews and his high school cohorts, who harkened back to everyteens Henry Aldrich and Andy Hardy from the '30s, found favor with readers. While in the late '40s strapless bras, lamp-shade hats, shoulder bags, and Dior's "New Look" were fashion's latest thing, the comic books advertised Twin Allure stick cologne and stick deodorant, which promised to help women get that man "and hold him!!" Comic book readers followed the exploits of caped, cowled, and masked champions, and sent away for such must-haves as glow-in-the-dark "Kiss Me" neckties ("Girls can't resist") or primers on "How to get into the movies," which were guaranteed to improve the earthly plight of those lacking bullet-proof physiques or infinitely extrudable body parts.

As the '40s gave way to the '50s, Ike puttered on the golf course and Americans retreated to a new paradise, the suburbs. Ginsberg and the Beats howled estrangement, Little Richard wailed "tutti frutti," Elvis moaned "be-bop-a-loo-bop," "juvenile delinquents" became big-screen rebels, and Blondie Comics Monthly offered a free copy of "Dagwood Splits the Atom" ("Authentic! Exciting! Amazing!"). Flipping through comics of the day, one encountered stories of loss and redemption, despair and renewal, or heartbreakers of a different order—Richie Rich and Dennis the Menace. Film and comics burst with 3-D, Superman, Batman, and Mighty Mouse leaping off the newsprint. Sci-fi, supernatural, and futuristic space oddities became comic books' everyday ethos, as in EC's Weird Tales. Living-room Philcos broadcast I Love Lucy and I Married Joan, versions of American life more daydream than fact; Jackson Pollock flung house paint onto yards of canvas; Senator Joe McCarthy improvised lists of cutthroat Commies; and Grace Kelly quit America to marry nobility in Monaco. But for those non-royals still searching for that "Dancing, Prancing Kind of Footwear," Thom McAn peddled its "Hoe-Down" shoe in the comic book—at $7.95, a bargain.

In the mid-'50s, a New York psychiatrist named Dr. Frederick Wertham, author of Seduction of the Innocent, damned cultural offshoots such as comics as corrupters of youth. At the same time, a series of Congressional hearings on the graphic depiction of violence and sex in the pulps captured headlines and put the heat on comic book publishers. So chastened, they hastily set up their own restrictive rules under an entity called the Comics Code Authority. The CCA implemented a set of commandments forbidding such scandalous offenses as "... horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, and masochism."
But the garish comic book ads would not die. And so late into the 1950s they continued, affirming the curative power of consumerism by promoting new and improved states of human happiness attainable only through acquisition. Contentment lay enticingly within one’s grasp. Who could possibly resist such absurdly tantalizing items as a “racing turtle” with your name painted on its back (“All Turtles Guaranteed Alive on Delivery”), or a 10-day home trial of the Vacutex pimple remover (“Ugly Blackheads out in Seconds with Vacutex!”)? With their pulsating saffron coupons, scarlet-bordered giveaways, and jet-black, cut-along-the-dotted-line solicitations, ads spoke of lives inalterably changed (“I am so thrilled as to how beautiful and white my teeth are from using WYTEN”), assuring satisfaction eternal (“Or your money back. Guaranteed!”).

Unrepentant and unbowed, comic book advertisements stand as a scrappy, low-culture rebuff to the “science” of Madison Avenue, as shameless pleas to buy, and buy, and buy. Eschewing polished campaign strategies and big-budget financing, the pulp pitches pounced on the libido with gleeful ferocity.

In comic books’ grainy formative days, only small, spirited firms with more moxie than money would venture into the untamed medium. But when the mix of visual hyperbole and written overstatement successfully coalesced, legions of youngsters and more than a few adults impetuously mailed off for that top-secret spy decoder ring or full-length, non-flammable wig.

Why do nery ads from yellowed comics still act on us? In informal interviews, several experts gave their opinions. Maggie Thompson, co-editor of Comic Buyer’s Guide and Comic Buyer's Guide Price Guide thinks these printed plugs demand strong participation and involvement. “While TV is passive, its commercials just coming out at you, reading the ads in comics is active.” Tom Ballou, vice president of advertising for DC Comics, attributes the ads' persistence to their particular readers. “ Whereas readers of magazines tend to skim the articles, the comic book reader pays close attention to everything, including the ads.”

Comics readers also keep their books for collections. Comics ads let readers “buy into” the illusion of mystery and magic that is the comic book’s province.

Paul Curtis, fan club manager and archivist for Marvel Comics, suggests that the lasting influence and persistence of the comic book ad is underscored by a range of original work derived from them. A song in the movie The Rocky Horror Picture Show concerns body-building ads; a faux ad in National Lampoon urges readers to send for pet Sea Poodles; and Mad magazine paid early satirical tribute to the comic book advertisement by running a mail-order spoof of the genre on its March 1955 cover. Even contemporary comic books, Curtis says, cannot escape the early ads’ immense gravitational pull: an ongoing story in Doom Patrol features a character who becomes the beefcake of the old muscle-man promotions.
The "golden age" of comic book advertising ended at the dawn of the psychedelic, TV-saturated 1960s, when mind-bending reality became stranger than even the quirkiest comic book appeals. Today, however, comic book ads of yesteryear occupy a venerated position in contemporary art circles. Once condemned as insidious cons, they are now celebrated as cherished icons.

In Hey Skinny!, we have gathered the most memorable and incendiary ads. These ads appeared in many different comics at many different times. The dates under these ads refer to the editions from which the image was photographed. Brash, bold, and uncompromising, they are graphically compelling and textually captivating. Having read through thousands of comics, we chose those ads that stand as shining examples of naked hyperbole and unfettered hype.

Today, long after the professional bluenoses and sanctimonious moralizers have been hushed, the comic book advertisements of the '40s and '50s continue on their idiosyncratic way. Emblems of the collective culture, enshrined like sacred tableaus depicting consumerism's oddball saints, these irrepressible graphic artifacts disregard conventional logic. They continue to entertain, enrich, and enliven the American scene in matters high, low, and in-between.