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Dare to Know

Spy Comics

Comics that depict the clandestine world of espionage and secret agents.

A genre in which international intelligence-gathering is the focal point of the plot. These culturally and politically charged stories are often set during World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the War Against Terrorism. They follow spies and saboteurs, usually working for a real or fictional government agency, as they complete their missions to defeat foreign powers or arch-villains planning global domination. Spy hunters and counter-intelligence operatives are occupied with countering the activities of enemy agents in the homeland. Operating in a nebulous reality of moral uncertainty, characters encounter smugglers, arms dealers, racketeers, rival operatives, and terrorists.

Protagonists are sometimes depicted as world weary, trapped between ethics and duty or betrayed from within by the organizations that once trained and sanctioned them. They have discovered that colleagues and counterparts in the profession, both men and women alike, are dreadful, and that life offers few prospects for them. Stories may question the authority and morality of the political and bureaucratic forces that direct the spies as much as focusing on those whom the protagonists oppose. Often, the agent goes rogue to uncover traitors inside his or her organization, and there is some focus on the protagonist's psychological state. During World War II, characters belonging to this genre often appeared alongside superheroes. C. C. Beck and Bill Parker's *Spy Smasher* (1940-1945) is a notable example. More recently, spy comics sometimes merge with **action and adventure comics**, **detective and mystery comics**, and **thriller comics**. Dashiell Hammett and Alex Raymond's *Secret Agent X-9* (1934-1996); Fawcett Comics/Charlton Comics' *Don Winslow of the Navy* (1943-1955); American Comics Group's *Spy and Counterspy* (1949) and *Spy-Hunters* (1949-1953); Ziff-Davis Publications' *Little Al of the F.B.I.* (1950-1951) and *Little Al of the Secret Service* (1951); Quality Comics' *T-Man* (1951-1956); Charlton Comics' *Danger* (1955), *Sarge Steel* (1964-1966), and *Secret Agent* (1966-1967); Al Feldstein and Joe Maneely's *Yellow Claw* (1956-1957); and Stan Lee and Jim Steranko's *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (1968-1971) are classic examples.

Common Elements

Shadowy world behind the headlines
Political and economic espionage
Sabotage and "dirty tricks"
Conspiracies
Paranoia
Guilt
Deception
Moral ambiguity
Propaganda
Counterpropaganda

Charming secret agents
Assassinations
Shifting alliances
Rivalries and intrigues between world powers
Government corruption
Rogue states
Global terrorist networks
International criminal syndicates

Graphic Novel Examples

<i>Black Widow: Deadly Origin</i> (2010) by Paul Cornell, Tom Raney, and John Paul Leon	<i>King of Spies</i> (2022) by Mark Millar and Matteo Scalera
<i>Cannon</i> (2014) by Wallace Wood	<i>MIND MGMT Volume One, The Manager</i> (2013) by Matt Kindt
<i>Casanova – Volume 1: Luxuria</i> (2007) by Matt Fraction and Gabriel Bá	<i>Modesty Blaise</i> (1994) by Peter O'Donnell and Dick Giordano
<i>The Coldest City</i> (2012) by Antony Johnston and Sam Hart	<i>Ninjak: The Complete Classic Omnibus</i> (2017) by Mark Moretti and Joe Quesada
<i>Cold War Volume 1</i> (2012) by John Byrne	<i>Queen & Country: The Definitive Edition Volume 1</i> (2008) by Greg Rucka et al.
<i>Danger Girl: The Ultimate Collection</i> (2002) by J. Scott Campbell and Andy Hartnell	<i>Secret Volume 1: Never Get Caught</i> (2014) by Jonathan Hickman and Ryan Bondenheim
<i>Days of Darkness</i> (2012) by Wayne Vansant	<i>Sleeper: Season One</i> (2009) by Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips
<i>The Dead Hand Volume 1: Cold War Relics</i> (2018) by Kyle Higgins and Stephen Mooney	<i>Spy Superb</i> (2023) by Matt Kindt
<i>Executive Assistant: Iris Volume 1</i> (2019) by David Wohl and Frank Mastromauro	<i>Super Spy</i> (2007) by Matt Kindt
<i>Grayson the Superspy Omnibus</i> (2022) by Tom King and Tim Seeley	<i>Too Dead to Die</i> (2022) by Marc Guggenheim and Howard Chaykin
<i>Ian Fleming's James Bond 007: Permission to Die Volume 1</i> (1989) by Mike Grell	<i>Velvet Deluxe Edition</i> (2017) by Ed Brubaker, Steve Epting, and Elizabeth Breitweiser
<i>Ian Fleming's James Bond 007: Serpent's Tooth</i> (1992) by Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy	<i>Who is Jake Ellis? Volume 1</i> (2011) by Nathan Edmondson and Tonci Zonjic
<i>James Bond Volume 1: VARGR</i> (2016) by Warren Ellis and Benjamin Percy	<i>X-9: Secret Agent Corrigan Volume 1</i> (2010) by Archie Goodwin and Al Williamson
	<i>Zero</i> (2019) by Edward Mullen