

Rethinking Charles Atlas

Elizabeth Toon

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Janet Golden

Rutgers University-Camden, USA

In 1947, 18-year-old New Yorker Donald Trill (pseudonym) signed his application for the Charles Atlas Championship Trophy.¹ He listed his measurements before and after completing Atlas's 'Health, Strength and Physique Building System' and described his improved appearance: 'Have developed rosy cheeks. My vests have become so tight that I think a few buttons will pop soon'. In response to the question regarding 'Health (constipation, etc.)', Trill wrote 'Am in good health, no constipation, or any suspicion of it'. His strength had also improved: 'Can now play bass fiddle and get a much stronger and fuller tone out of it. My fingers and arms no longer get tired after an orchestra workout, but instead I feel fresh as a daisy'. Finally, he stated, 'I can now go swimming and not be afraid that fellows and girls will laugh at my physique'. His response mirrored the plot of the famous magazine advertisement for the Atlas System, the comic strip story of 'Mac', who redeemed his honour and recaptured his girl by remaking his physique.

In the late 20th century, as 'iron' men and women compete in weekend triathlons, joggers crowd the streets at dawn and dusk, and those in search of 'hard bodies' affix themselves to exercise machines calibrated to their individual needs, both Trill's self-depiction and Atlas's regimen seem touchingly innocent. This innocence, we believe, is a reflection of a shifting 20th-century body culture in which 'fitness' has become a new form of work and a source of status for the bourgeoisie (Green 1986; Gorn 1986; Mrozek 1989; Kimmel 1994). Our exploration of the career and meaning of the Charles Atlas System will examine this shift and its importance.

Charles Atlas himself lived a life in three acts, finding redemption not by faith but through fitness (Dougherty 1972; Gaines and Butler 1982; Gustaitis 1986; Graebner 1994). His saga opens in Brooklyn, where the teenaged Angelo Siciliano is humiliated by a Coney Island tough. Act 2 takes Siciliano on a journey. He views the Greek and Roman statuary in the Brooklyn Museum and he visits the Prospect Park Zoo, where he observes a lion flexing its muscles and is inspired to develop his own system of isometric exercise. In Act 3, Siciliano's friends dub him 'Atlas' and the famous physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden anoints him 'the World's Most Perfectly Developed Man'. Angelo Siciliano renames himself Charles Atlas and uses prize money to hire a naturopath to write his Dynamic Tension lessons. Atlas then teams up with advertising genius Charles Roman, who creates what has been called 'the single greatest mail order ad of all time' – the comic strip advertisement