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Comics, Reading and Primary Aged Children

Comics are often associated with cheapness, poor quality and disposability. Rarely have comics been seen as appropriate reading material for children.

Milliard and Marsh (2001) summarised the feelings about comics:

"Boys' comics have been thought to promote violence, girls' to induce a soppy passivity based on a preoccupation with domesticity, appearance and dress which denies girls' agency in the adult world". (p. 26).

They argued that as a society we do not value visual literacy and that a progression in reading sophistication is assumed from picture books to full text books. Early readers rely on pictures while good readers use the text alone.

Despite these problems however, we are suggesting that comics can make good reading materials for children.

Defining Comics

The clearest definition of comics comes from McCloud (1993) who defined comics as 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer' (p. 9).

Most people can recognise comics: sequences of pictures accompanied by dialogue in word balloons or other text in captions. The point is that it is the sequence that is important in comics, so single panel cartoons, for example, cannot be considered comics.

Bender (1999) argues that because comics are a relatively new medium they have often been treated as a less than legitimate form of

entertainment. McCloud (1993) noted that we need to disassociate the form of comics from their content. In other words, while we associate the medium of comics with juvenile humorous characters and superheroes these are not their only possible subject matter.

A Short History of Comics

Most traditional 'histories' of comics begin around the turn of the 20th Century. However, McCloud (1993) has pushed this back by several thousand years and notes examples of early comics in Ancient Egyptian art and in the Bayeux tapestry.

With the advent of western printing methods, comics began to expand. One early example is 'The Tortures of Saint Erasmus' published around 1460. William Hogarth's series of paintings (later printed as engravings) called 'A Harlot's Progress' (1732) are 'comics' since they were displayed in a specific order so that the sequence of paintings told a story.

The title of 'father' of modern comics is usually given to Rudolphe Töpffer who produced satiric stories in the mid 1800s that employed many of the conventions of modern comics. These led on to caricatures in magazines that eventually developed into the comics we know today. It seems therefore, that comics have a long and (fairly) distinguished history.

Academic Interest in Comics

Early academic interest in comics was generally derisive. The most famous example was by American psychiatrist Frederic Wertham (1954). He argued that

comics were responsible for increased levels of delinquency in children. This led to a set of congressional hearings by the US government to ascertain the validity of his argument. While the hearings found no evidence to support Wertham's proposition, it resulted in a voluntary system of censorship amongst American comics publishers. There have been other similar 'crusades' against comics in different English speaking countries (see Barker, 1989).

Wertham's attacks on comics lacked any serious theoretical or empirical foundation and modern investigations have suggested that the link between violence and comics is not well established.

Nevertheless, many authors believe that the impact of Wertham's criticisms is still being felt and has kept mainstream comics from developing as a true medium and hence contributed to the enduring image of comics as poor children's entertainment.

It is worth pointing out that some countries and cultures have embraced comics much more strongly than in the United States or Great Britain. In mainland Europe, comics are seen as a valuable medium appealing to children and adults alike. Even more dramatic is the comics (manga) industry in Japan. There, comics the size of telephone directories sell to adults in millions every week.

It wasn't until the 1980s that mainstream comics began to be taken more seriously both in terms of content and style. It is notable that the concept of the 'graphic novel' gained popularity at this time.

Along with this, comics have begun to be investigated academically. There have been attempts to study the role of comics as tools for teaching different subjects including sociology and descriptive writing (e.g. see Burns, 1999; Snyder, 1997). Additionally, the role of comics and general comprehension and memory (Brooks, 1977); and perceptual skills (Singh, 1981) has been investigated as well as research into comics as a 'pictographic' language (e.g. Fischer, 1984;

Oshiro, 1982).

Do Children Read Comics?

Reading surveys by Davis & Brember (1993); and Worthy, Moorman & Turner (1999) found that comics are in the top three choices of reading materials for primary aged children. Millard (1997) and Hall & Coates (1999) found that boys tended to read comics more than girls.

In a study involving over 18,000 children, McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1991) found that the proportion of boys reporting reading comics rose significantly from around 69% to 75% from the first to the sixth year in school. For girls they reported a significant decline from 60% in the first year to 50% in the sixth.

Worthy et al. (1999) and Ujiie & Krashen (1996) found that children who read comics also read other books.

Comics and Reading

Arlin and Roth (1978) found that comics did not help poor readers. They did acknowledge that children were interested in comics but they felt that the time spent looking at the pictures in comics was distracting. However, it may be that these authors assumed that the only value of 'reading' comics is about reading just the words rather than becoming involved in the story.

More recent work on comics and reading has been more positive. Millard and Marsh (2001) evaluated a scheme whereby primary aged children were given a class library of comics that they were allowed to take home. They found that children liked taking comics home; their teachers felt comics encouraged reading; and felt that reading comics would help children to interpret books with pictures and text and finally that fathers and older brothers became more involved in reading with their children.

In a theoretical paper, Hallenbeck (1976) suggested that comics could be used to help children with learning difficulties. He

suggested a number of conventions in comics that may be of benefit to those with dyslexia and similar educational needs. He pointed particularly to the left-to-right organisation of comics' panels, the use of simple upper case letters and the use of symbols and context to help with comprehension.

Can comics help reading?

Clearly, more research is needed to examine the effects of comics on reading ability in children. However, currently some conclusions are possible:

- Firstly, children choose to read comics.
- Secondly, those that read comics also tend to read other materials.
- Thirdly, there is little evidence of detrimental effects of reading comics.

It seems apparent, therefore, that children should be encouraged to read comics.

In addition, comics are now available for a range of different ages and in more durable and accessible formats. The subject matter of comics is increasingly more wide ranging and goes beyond the familiar juvenile humour and super-heroes. Additionally, comics publishers are producing better quality material, both in terms of content and format.

Having said this, there is still a great deal of 'room for improvement', especially in the need for comics that appeal to girls and for comics that are produced in the UK.

The other reason that we believe comics should be offered to children as reading materials is the impact that they are likely to have on the development of visual literacy which is increasingly a greater part of our lives in the 21st century.

However, even if after examining the variety of comics available you don't believe that the material can help reading and you don't accept the visual literacy argument, we still believe that children should have access to comics for reading.

Firstly, we know that comics interest

children. For example, there are 'tie ins' to films and cartoons that children already watch. Furthermore, we would argue that comics should form part of the broader selection of reading material available to children and they have the advantage that they deal with stories and are thus more allied to books rather than periodicals.

The violence argument can be avoided by careful examination of the available comics. We would urge those responsible for choosing children's reading materials to examine the comics first.

Finally, there is the fact that one of the criticisms of comics is unfounded. The idea that comics are more immature reading materials because they employ images shows a misunderstanding of the comics medium and also denies the lack of a theoretical or empirical support for this idea in the first place.

The bottom line is that the enjoyment of reading can be fostered by the use of comics regardless of whether children graduate to text only reading or not. They will be, after all, enjoying their reading experiences.

Reading Suggestions

For those unfamiliar with modern comics we would first suggest looking at 'Understanding Comics' by Scott McCloud, published by Harper Collins. This is an in-depth investigation of comics written in comics format. It is not recommended for children but may give you an idea of the possibilities in comics.

The suggestions below are not an exhaustive list but rather a sampler of possibilities.

Comics for Primary Aged Children

'Little Lit' books edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly and published by Harper Collins. These are three large hard backed books containing short stories for younger readers in comic format. The first volume called 'Modern Fairy Tales' is especially worth a look.

'Go Girl' by Trina Robbins and Anne Timmons, published by Dark Horse. There are several volumes of these written by women for younger girls (aged about 8-12).

Marvel Comics have published several volumes of 'Mary Jane' and 'Spider-Man loves Mary Jane' that appeal mostly to girls between 8 and 12. These have been described as 'Teen Romance' comics.

'Abadazad - the Road to inconceivable' and 'Abadazad - the Dream Thief' by J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Ploog, published by Harper Collins. These are fantasy adventure books in a mixture of comics and prose.

DC Comics also publishes comics that are related to cartoon series. Comics such as the 'Justice League Adventures', 'Superman Adventures', and 'Teen Titans Go!'. These are based on television cartoons and are likely to appeal to readers of around the age of 8.

Marvel Comics also publishes what they describe as 'All Ages' comics that appeal to readers aged 10 and younger. These are known as 'Marvel Adventures' books.

There are obviously many other comics that we urge you to investigate (most public libraries now have a comics or graphic novel section).

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