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A Look at Comic Books

Mark Chapel

Ouachita Baptist University

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COMIC BOOKS
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A LOOK AT COMIC BOOKS

A Paper
Presented for
Honors Program
Ouachita Baptist University

by
Mark Chapel

A Look At Comic Books

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Thesis Statement

This short study attempts to define and analyze the comic book thoroughly enough to enable the reader to draw his own conclusions about the unique little magazines. The writer also tries to evaluate the worth and possible place in American culture of comic books. Are comic books a menace, a "noxious mushroom growth" as a critic stated in 1943? Are they a harmless diversion as psychologist William Charles Marston upholds? Do comic books deserve a niche in libraries or should they be burned as trash?

A LOOK AT COMIC BOOKS

The comic book developed from the newspaper comic strip. Although the comic strip has expanded to include a wide variety of non-humorous subject matter— family life, romance, fantasy, science fiction, the West, detective adventures — the name comic remains. This subject material carried over into the comic book, whose name is descriptive of a format rather than an editorial content. The many comic books published monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly, include cartoon comics in the broadly humorous category, but the majority of the titles feature fantasy, romance, adventures in space, the West, or the military.¹

Comic books might have been more appropriately called magazines, since from the beginning they were published on a periodical basis. Some are geared to very young readers, and others to the interests of adolescents. Some are aimed at boys' love of action and adventure, and others, with heavy emphasis on fashions and romance, are directed toward female readers. Perhaps the largest number of readers are the 7-14 age group, although there appears a substantial readership in the preschool and high-school age groups.

¹"Comics," Encyclopedia Americana (1970 ed.), VII:374.

During World War II, comic books outsold the combined sales of Life, Saturday Evening Post, and the Reader's Digest ten to one at U. S. Army post exchanges. Comic books sold at the rate of millions of copies per month, with probable² "pass on" readership of at least three for each copy sold.

Primarily an American product, the comic book is a relative newcomer to the publishing trade. It is not an appendage of the newspaper strips nor is it upheld by advertising. It stands on its own too-pulpy feet, a unique and separate accomplishment.

In format the comic book is 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", printed in simple and garish colors on newsprint or similar quality paper. It is usually approximately 48 pages in length.

In 1911 Harris, promotion manager of the Chicago American, conceived a circulation stunt. He printed a grouping of Mutt and Jeff strips on quality paper, 18" wide and 16" high and bound them between two gray boards. He had the Ball Publishing Company of Boston print 10,000 copies from nine plates. These he proposed to sell for six

²Coulton Waugh, The Comics (New York: MacMillan Company, 1947), p. 348.

coupons each, the coupons to appear in the American. Even though Harris was fired by the owner of the paper, the promotion stunt was carried out for coupons were already printed in many of the papers. The reaction of the readers exceeded all expectations. 45,000 orders poured into the offices of the American, and, needless to say, Harris was reinstated in his former position at a higher salary. The total profit exceeded \$6,000.³ Although not a true comic book because it contained no color or original material and was not of the correct size or grade of paper, this was one of the forerunners of the modern day comic book.

The first comic book in its familiar format made its appearance in 1933. This pioneer of comics, Funnies on Parade, consisted of reruns of Sunday newspaper comic strips reduced to standard magazine size. It, too, was conceived as a sales promotion device. When placed on news stands with a 10-cent price tag, they were sold in a weekend.⁴

The first comic books to use original material began in 1935 with New Fun, which was produced by Major Malcolm Wheeler Nicholson. NicholSEN also produced New Adventure Comics. It was not until January, 1937, with the

³ Encyclopedia Americana, op. cit., p. 374-75.

⁴Ibid.

publication of Detective Comics, that a comic book devoted itself entirely to a single theme or predominant character. This subsequently became the standard form. The industry wxploded in 1938 with the publication of Action Comics which featured a personality named Superman, who flew through the air like a bird. Superman was created by two teenagers from Cleveland, Joel Shuster and Jerome Siegal. After an attempt at newspaper syndication, Siegal and Shuster put Superman in Action Comics, whose circulation doubled within months. January, 1939, the syndication of Superman by the McClure Syndicate took place, and, May of the same year, Superman had his own magazine, Superman Quarterly Magazine. The particular brilliance of Superman lay not only in the fact that he was the first of the true super-heroes, but in the concept of his alter ego or secret identity. This became one of the standard formulas for comic book characters.⁵

The success of Superman led to a veritable menagerie of imitators. Some more notable of the super-heroes to appear were the Shield (1940), Capt. America (1941), the Sub-Mariner (1940), the Angel (1941), Batman (1939), Doll Man (1939), Plastic Man (1941), Daredevil (1941), the Human

⁵Nochet's Blast-Comic Collector, I:58,(No. 48, 1968).

Touch (1939), Steel Sterling (1941), and Captain Marvel (1941). All these imitated Superman to an extent (costume, cape, super-human power, etc.). Perhaps the closest imitator and most successful of these was Captain Marvel, who was, in reality, newsboy, Billy Batson. Captain Marvel, at one time, outsold "the steel man" and was even sold on the news stands weekly. His circulation reached 3,000,000, and the publishers of Superman, National Periodical Publications, became worried about their own sales. They took the owner of Captain Marvel, Fawcett Publications, to court. Years later, in 1952, Fawcett Publications lost the lawsuit and consequently folded.⁷

The Batman, "a mysterious and adventurous figure fighting for righteousness and apprehending the wrongdoer", was another imitator but with a different slant. He had no super-powers as such, yet wore a costume and battled criminals. He employed a form of super-science, gadgets such as the Bat-Mobile, his super-powered, bulletproof car. He also had the detective ability of Sherlock Holmes. A few years after his introduction he acquired a young boy, Robin, as his partner. The Batman formula was also a popular one, and it had as many imitators as Superman.⁸

From 1940-1945, there were thousands of the so-called super-heroes, and several new publishers emerged; however, the leader was always National Periodicals. Some of the

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

others were Timely Comics, Fiction House, Fox Comics, Dell Publishing House, Quality Comics, Street and Smith, United Features, Holyoake (Helnit), Fawcett Comics, and Betts (Nedor) Comics. In 1941 the Parents' Institute started an educational comic, True Comics. From 1939- 1940 there were 60 comic titles published, and in 1941 the number reached 168. World War II caused the number to drop to 100; however, the circulation reached 50,000,000 a month with an annual revenue of \$15,000,000. This period, from 1939 until 1945, is called the First Golden Age of Comics.⁹

The end of World War II brought a sharp drop in the sales of comic books. Many companies and titles folded. By 1949 almost all were gone except National Periodicals, and many of its best-selling titles were defunct, such as Flash, Green Lantern, Sensation, More Fun, and All Star Comics. Another contributing factor for the sharp decline in sales was the crusade of Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychologist. His book, Seduction of the Innocent¹⁰ (1953), studied the effects of comics on juvenile delinquents. His findings led

⁹Waugh, op. cit., p. 347.

¹⁰Fredric Wertham, Seduction of the Innocent (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1953),

him to believe the comics were a contributing factor to crime.

In 1953 an extremely successful comic publishing company called E. C. was started. It specialized in bizarre humor and horror tales. Among its titles were Tales From the Crypt, Vault of Horror and Mad. Wertham's anti-comic crusade led the comic book publishers to set up a comic regulating and censoring agency called the Comics Code Authority. Without its seal of approval most of the channels of distribution to the news stands were closed. The Comics Code Authority gave E. C. a bad rating. Of the entire E. C. line, only Mad managed to survive, and then only by changing its format.

Another trend of the 1950's was science fiction and fantasy. Almost all of the companies had begun branching off into other areas after the comic depression of 1949. National went into distribution and production of comics dealing with such subjects as romance, humor, western stories, true life stories, horror, and science fiction. Most other companies did the same. The science fiction-horror genre made comic books successful once again. Soon companies began to re-open, many under new names. Timely reopened as Atlas Comics, later as Marvel Comics. Fox reopened as Charlton or CDC.

In 1960 super-heroes began to rise in popularity. They were cross-bred with science fiction heroes. Many new titles and some revamped old titles appeared. Examples are Flash, Green Lantern, Justice League, Challengers of the Unknown, Hawkman, the Fly, and Tales to Astonish. By 1964 comic books enjoyed fairly good sales and popularity. Then, in 1965, pop artists and television made super-heroes household words once more. Comic books were "camp" and became a college fad. They continue to be "in" and are now a well entrenched part of pre-adult entertainment.

The comics read by youngsters eventually became a major educational issue. A few major psychologists, as William Charles Marston, not only advocated the comic books but served on advisory boards of comic book publishing houses, writing book reviews and making word studies for comic books. Moulton, who under the pen name of Charles Moulton, created a popular comic book character, Wonder Woman. He and other psychologists felt that reading comic books marks a normal stage of development which children will outgrow. Some psychologist maintain that such reading has educational and emotional value. Others take the view that children will read comic books anyway and that the sensible thing to do is to improve the quality of them.

Throughout the forties debates raged over the harmful or harmless nature of comic books. Parents, teachers, librarians, social workers, religious workers, and others

took a stand against the little pulp books. Between 1941 and 1944 more than one hundred articles criticizing comic books appeared in educational and nonprofessional periodicals. Most were concerned with sociological, moral, or emotional effects. Many were concerned with problems of taste and ethics comics could develop in the child.

An early critic of the comics was Sterling North, book reviewer and author of children's books. In an editorial in the Chicago Daily News of May 18, 1940, "National Disgrace and a Challenge to Parents," North struck out against the comics.¹¹ Immediately following north's editorial, the Congress of Parents and Teachers launched a campaign against comic books.¹² They were barred from home or limited in amount. Comic books were forbidden in classrooms and confiscated from children. Substitutes were sought without much success. But as one writer put it, "Critics of the comic books, however, found that their thunder was without much notice by the public and especially without any notice by the children whose millions of noses remained buried in the books as before."¹³

¹¹ Sterling North, "Antidote for Comics," Parent Teacher, 35:16-17 (March, 1941).

¹² Azila Woffard, Book Selection for School Libraries (New York: Wilson and Co., 1962), p. 234.

¹³ Waugh, op. cit., pp. 344-45.

Probably the most deplored comic book by librarians was Classic Comics, whose publishers began with the intention of issuing over three hundred of the world's best novels in comic magazine format. In 1947 Classic Comics was changed to Illustrated Classics. These comics give a sketchy idea of the plot of the real classic. The name has since been changed to Classics Illustrated and even published a junior edition series.¹⁵

The appeal of comic books is almost universal. Adolescents and adults can read them with enjoyment. They require no mental effort, contain a lot of drama, and are colorful, filled with adventure and romance. They often appear in a continued series with the same characters, which children like. Almost all the reading matter is in the form of conversation, but the pictures tell most of the story. This enables comic books to be an aid in learning languages. The pictures, though garish to adults, are humorous to children. Humor is stressed, justice triumphs, and the story always ends right. Comics are also cheap, ten to fifteen cents now and only five cents in the past.

Objections to comic books are many. The physical format is inferior. The paper is from poor quality pulp.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 235-36.

The printing and art work were at one time crude and too bright, but has since improved to a large extent. Grammar is often faulty, although the writing has improved since the forties. The stories are fantastic and unreal, and encourage daydreaming or wishful thinking. Frederic Wertham maintained in his book that there is a definite relation between juvenile delinquency and comic books. Good sometimes uses questionable methods to triumph over wrong. Teachers agree that too many comic books can lead to neglect of school work. Some educators hold that balloon type of reading deters children from learning conventional reading.

Recent studies by the Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books reveal that the quality of comic books is definitely getting better. Only twelve percent fell into the "objectionable" category in the year 1961.¹⁶

The comic book has also shown itself to be highly effective as a communications medium. Government and private agencies, as well as leading industrial firms have used comic books to explain and teach. The United States Atomic Energy Commission used a comic book to describe what an atom is, how it is split, and what happens when it is split. The General Electric Corporation published a number of comic booklets dealing not only with electricity, atoms, and

¹⁶Woffard, op. cit., pp. 235-36.

other scientific subjects, but also with historical topics. Public welfare organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League, used comic books to spread and teach the principles of tolerance and brotherhood.¹⁷

¹⁷ Encyclopedia Americana, op. cit., p. 374.

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