

For improving early literacy, reading comics is no child's play

November 5 2009



Carol L. Tilley, a professor of library and information science at Illinois, says that comic books are just as sophisticated as other forms of literature, and children benefit from reading them at least as much as they do from reading other types of books. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Although comics have been published in newspapers since the 1890s, they still get no respect from some teachers and librarians, despite their current popularity among adults. But according to a University of Illinois expert in children's literature, critics should stop tugging on Superman's cape and start giving him and his superhero friends their due.

Carol L. Tilley, a professor of library and information science at Illinois, says that comics are just as sophisticated as other forms of literature, and children benefit from reading them at least as much as they do from reading other types of books.

"A lot of the criticism of comics and comic books come from people who think that kids are just looking at the pictures and not putting them together with the words," Tilley said. "Some kids, yes. But you could easily make some of the same criticisms of picture books - that kids are just looking at pictures, and not at the words."

Although they've long embraced picture books as appropriate children's literature, many adults - even teachers and librarians who willingly add comics to their collections - are too quick to dismiss the suitability of comics as texts for young readers, Tilley said.

"Any book can be good and any book can be bad, to some extent," she said. "It's up to the reader's personality and intellect. As a whole, comics are just another medium, another genre."

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critics would say that reading comics is actually a simplified version of reading that doesn't approach the complexity of "real" books, with their dense columns of words and relative lack of pictures. But Tilley argues that reading any work successfully, including comics, requires more than just assimilating text.

"If reading is to lead to any meaningful knowledge or [comprehension](#), readers must approach a text with an understanding of the relevant social, linguistic and cultural conventions," she said. "And if you really consider how the pictures and words work together in consonance to tell a story, you can make the case that comics are just as complex as any other kind of literature."

Tilley said some of the condescension toward comics as a medium may come from the jejune connotations that the name itself evokes.

"The term 'comic' is somewhat pejorative and tends to denote the child-

like and ephemeral, and it brings to mind the Sunday funnies that you used to line your birdcage," she said.

The term "graphic novel" is sometimes used to give comics a measure of respectability, Tilley said. But some artists, including Pulitzer-Prize winner Art Spiegelman, hate the term.

"They feel it's just a dressed up euphemism for comics," she said.

Despite their popularity among juveniles in the early twentieth century, comic strips of that era were written and drawn primarily for an adult readership.

"Comics were originally an adult medium, since newspapers reached a primarily adult audience, but they very quickly turned into something that was appropriated by kids," Tilley said. "Certainly by the first decade of the 20th century it had become a kids' medium."

According to Tilley, even in the early 1900s, there were teachers who raised concerns about children reading comics - that their content wasn't appropriate content for a children, and that it wasn't real literature.

And when the first comic books were published as omnibus collections of popular published comic strips in the mid-1930s, "the same concerns sprang up again from adults," Tilley said.

"They claimed the texts weren't good texts because they used slang, there were misspellings, they used colloquialisms and that the pictures were of questionable merit."

In 1955, after a sustained outcry over the suitability of comics as children's reading materials, the comics industry instituted a restrictive editorial code. Soon thereafter, juvenile readership plummeted.

"Between 1955 and the last 10 years, it became very much an adult medium," Tilley said. "Part of that was because the comics code watered down what could be sold in drugstores, and also because they were slowly getting out of the affordable price range for kids. Comic books became incredibly tame, and the more sophisticated comics were direct sales to adults from the comics publishers."

In 1940, a comic book was 10 cents, while the average hardcover juvenile book was \$2.

"That's a 20-to-1 price ratio. Now it's not quite so generous - maybe 4- or 5-to-1. As it's become an adult-focused format, kids have been priced out of the market."

Recently, many publishers and creators of comics - including Spiegelman and another Pulitzer Prize winner, Michael Chabon - have advocated reconnecting a juvenile audience with comics.

So far, those efforts have met with mixed success.

"If you look at the comics that are being mass-marketed to kids," Tilley said, "it's mild, tame stuff with a strong commercial tie-in to another media format. There aren't many stand-alone titles unless you go to comic book store."

The one exception is Manga, the Japanese version of comic books that has its own unique artistic and narrative style whose influence can be seen in the "Astro Boy" and "Sailor Moon" franchises.

"You are going to find a wide selection of Manga at most bookstores," Tilley said. "That's another part of comics that has taken off - one that kids have claimed as the format of choice for themselves."

Although commercial publishers of comics have yet to recapture children's imaginations, Tilley says that some librarians and teachers are increasingly discovering that comics can be used to support reading and instruction.

"In the last 15 years, we've seen some big changes. For instance, comic book publishers and distributors are showing up at library conferences and some review journals regularly evaluate graphic novels. That would have been unimaginable 20 years ago. So it has caught on, to some degree."

Public libraries collect comics and graphic novels much more than school libraries, primarily because of decreases in funding and emphasis on strong ties to the curriculum through No Child Left Behind.

"Comics tend to be omitted under those circumstances," Tilley said.

Despite their marginalization, Tilley said the distinct comic book aesthetic - frames, thought and speech bubbles, motion lines, to name a few - has been co-opted by children's books, creating a hybrid format.

"There has been an increase in the number of comic book-type elements in books for younger children," Tilley said. "There's also a greater appreciation among both teachers and librarians for what comics and comic books can bring to the classroom. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English sponsors an instructional Web site called 'Read, Write, Think,' which has a lot of comics-related material. Instructional units like these would have been much more rare 10 years ago."

More information: Tilley's research on comics was published recently in *School Library Monthly*.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: For improving early literacy, reading comics is no child's play (2009, November 5)
retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-early-literacy-comics-child.html>

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