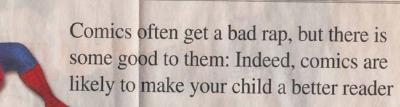
FEATURES EDITOR: CAROLYN HEIMAN TELEPHONE: 380-5343 E-MAIL: HE@times-coloust.com



## D'EM AND REAP

HEN VICTORIA TV reporter Keith Baldrey was growing up in the 1960s, comic books loomed large in his literary life. Never mind mere Superman and Batman. Baldrey hunkered down and devoured Faust, Hamlet and The Last of the Mohicans thanks to the Classics Illustrated comic series of great literature.

His 150-plus collection now comes out of the closet to win over his young daugh-ters, who know not to turn the pages of

ters, who know not to turn the pages of dad's fragile boyhood treasure trove without permission but love to hear the stories. "I would say comic books helped me get started on reading and helped make me a voracious reader, particularly because the Classics Illustrated contained such riveting story lines," says Baldrey, whose home is a bookworm haven. "I remember in Grade Two reading The Count of Monte Cristo and I was absolutely hooked."

Decades later, Kate Baldrey, and the says and drey, age nine, and Maddy.

1 THINK IF A KID drey, age nine, and Maddy, seven, hang on every cartoon word and cartoon panel of fare such as H.G. Wells' The Invisible Man or Shake-IS A GOOD READER, IT'S speare's MacBeth. And along with a million other kids NOT GOING TO every month, his daughters revel in the Archie series that chronicles the Riverdale MAKE THEM A BETTER READER. antics of rivals Betty and BUT IF A KID IS Veronica over the amiable

A STRUGGLING

READER, I THINK

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MORE FLUENT.'

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Archie. "They love to pick up

Archie." says Baldrey. "Last summer I recall those two and six of their cousins sit-ting on the front lawn on holiday all reading Archie books and reading Archie books to each other."

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Baldrey's belief that com-

literacy education at the Uni-versity of British Columbia, has studied Archie comics for the past three years after noticing how engrossed her own children, their friends and neighbours would find

READER, I THINK

them, along with other children she noticed wherever she went. "Rather than dismissing them, I thought, 'maybe I should try to understand them a bit better.' So little research has actually been done on this and maybe we need to take this a little more seriously."

Comics may be getting an undeserved bad rap from parents who would prefer their children tackle more demanding nar-

ratives in book form, she found.

True, it's best if young readers are exposed to a wide variety of literature. But comic books have a lot to offer in terms of fluency, comfort level and a way into the world of childhood angst as reflected in cartoon character lives, she

asserts.

If a child is labouring to read or maybe even hates it, should you bring



Keith Baldrey reads from a comic book to daughters, from left, Maddy 7, and Kate 9.

home some comics to break the ice? "Without a shadow of a doubt," says

Notton.
"I think that would be a really good idea... because the language tends to be fairly simplified, the pictures help with comprehension and it's not so threatening for kids because they can always can't always read the words "And they can

start making words and the

pictures.
"I think if a kid is a good reader, it's not going to make them better reader. But if a kid is a struggling reader, I think it will help them become more flu-

Her pro-comic point of view is covered in *Better Learning*, a glossy mini-mag put out by none other than the B.C. Ministry of Edu-

Norton, who grew up reading Casper, The Friendly Ghost and Richie Rich among others, naturally does not advocate violent

or explicit adult comics. She favours the child-friendly comics with happy endings and predictable story lines that are neither

"When kids read comic books, it's

in the end. A lot of kids will say they read Archie before they go to bed at night." Norton isn't sure how well the Clas-sics Illustrated series york as comics, given

things do tend to work out

they lack humour and retell literary tales. "I never found those all that appealing," she confides

Others do work. "If you read comic books, it doesn't mean you're a weak reader because a lot of strong readers read comic books. For those that are weak readers, comic books often represent the only way they define



Bonny Norton, an associate professor of language and literacy education at the University of British Columbia, has studied Archie comics for the past three years.

themselves as readers. They feel like read-ers, they're getting it and it's enjoyable. And that kind of confidence can lead to other kinds of reading and I think that's

omer kinds of reading and 1 think that's important."

Norton will include a chapter on comics in an academic tome she is co-editing called Critical Pedagogies and Language Learning, and she will also endorse comics at the U.S. National Reading Conference in Arizona later this year.

Comics also offer a crucial path into conversation about the child's life, she stresses

Conversions.

"One of the things I find with Archie is (that) you can really talle to kids about what's important to them or why they liked them. So often, kids feel that they liked them had been single the adult world.

liked them. So often, kids feel that they have to make the leap into the adult world and they find it very grafifying that parents are making a leap into their world."

Norton suggests that parents who notice their kids devouring comics may want to read along, or surprise them with some new comics to read together and discuss.

A lot is revaled about then insecurity and peer relationships in Archie comics, she attests. And it's not a big jump to relate the goings-on with real-life complexities. Comics

attests. And it's not a big jump to relate the goings-on with real-life complexities. Comics provide an avenue for discussion that is not intimidating, because the characters provide third-party distance, she says.

In the Archie world, girls identify with more wholesome Betty, but are more intrigued by the vixenish Veronica. And when faced with a scenario in which the rivals play out a modern-day Little Red Riding Hood, both genders are ambivalent about Betty's feistiness in besting the wolf as opposed to Veronica's wiles in harnessing Archie's protection.

"Half of them thought it was good for girls to be strong and independent but the other half, and this was boys and girls, said that being strong can sometimes compromise girls' pursuit of romantic happiness."

Like comics or hate them, one thing is certain; your child will eventually outgrow them. Norton underscores.

"So rather than seeing that period that kids are interested in comics as something you have to endure, maybe you should think of it as a golden opportunity to interact with your kids."

## Parents want more time to spend with family