



Comics often get a bad rap, but there is some good to them: Indeed, comics are likely to make your child a better reader

READ 'EM AND REAP

BY KATHERINE LEDYNA • TIMES COLONIST STAFF

WHEN 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 daughters, 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."

'I THINK IF A KID IS A GOOD READER, IT'S NOT GOING TO MAKE THEM A BETTER READER, BUT IF A KID IS A STRUGGLING READER, I THINK IT WILL HELP THEM BECOME MORE FLUENT.'

—Bonny Norton, associate professor of language and literacy education, UBC

Decades later, Kate Baldrey, age nine, and Maddy, seven, hang on every cartoon word and cartoon panel of fare such as H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* or Shakespeare's *MacBeth*. And along with a million other kids every month, his daughters revel in the *Archie* series that chronicles the Riverdale antics of rivals Betty and Veronica over the amiable Archie.

"They love to pick up *Archie*," says Baldrey. "Last summer I recall those two and six of their cousins sitting on the front lawn on holiday all reading *Archie* books and reading *Archie* books to each other."

Baldrey's belief that comic books can foster reading is well-founded.

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 after noticing how engrossed her own children, their friends and neighbours would find 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 narratives 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. John McKay/Times Colonist

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

"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 pick up a message even if they can't always read the words."

"And they can start making links between the words and the pictures."

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

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 Education.

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 demanding nor dull.

"When kids read comic books, it's often because they need something a little bit lighter in their lives," she says. "The *Archie* world does represent a safe, fun world."

things do tend to work out 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 *Classics Illustrated* series work as comics, given 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



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themselves as readers. They feel like readers, 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 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.

"One of the things I find with *Archie* is (that) you can really talk to kids about what's important to them or why they liked them. So often, kids feel that they have to make the leap into the adult world and they find it very gratifying 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 revealed about teen insecurity and peer relationships in *Archie* comics, she attests. And it's not a big jump to relate the moans-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."

TIME STUDY

Parents want more time to spend with family

AVERAGE HOURS SPENT PER DAY

Many parents worry that they do not have enough time for family and friends.

Statistics Canada's 1998 General Social Survey on Time Use found that

their children during the workweek and one out of 10 women complain of the