

Analysing Archie



Bonnie Norton takes pop culture seriously.

What started as curiosity when Bonny Norton noticed her children absorbed in *Archie* comic books became a three-year research project in which she interviewed 10-to-12-year-olds about the series. It turned out her kids were not alone in their interest in the red-headed hero and his friends. In fact, after nearly 60 years, *Archie* still attracts a million comic book buyers each month. Canadians are especially keen: we buy more *Archie* comics per capita than any other country.

"If 300,000 Canadian kids are reading *Archie* comics, I want to know why," says

Dr. Norton, a professor of language and literacy education at the University of British Columbia, who believes that parents and teachers should take popular culture as seriously as their children do. "When they hear adults trashing what they love, they feel they are being belittled."

Dr. Norton thinks that on balance the *Archie* comics are good for kids, but she's not thrilled with all the messages the kids take away. About half of both the boys and girls studied, for example, think it is a bad idea to be as independent as Betty, noting that when Veronica acts weak and helpless she wins Archie. Still, Dr. Norton says she feels that children's strong interest in the stories provides a great opening to discuss issues such as equity and gender relations. It also gets reluctant readers reading happily, which may lead them to books.

How do her colleagues react to her *Archie* studies? Dr. Norton takes a deep breath and pauses before answering. "It depends who they are. . . . Some think I just like comic books."