



Is Everything Dandy with Beano

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Brian Walsh and **Nicholas Tucker** consider comics from two points of view.

Brian Walsh and **Nick Tucker** consider the question from two points of view.

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The first issue of *Funny Folks* appeared on 12th December 1874. A lot has happened to comics since then but the funny papers have remained with us. How are the titles of 1981 facing up to competition from vampires, monsters and aliens from other worlds?

Brian Walsh went round to the corner shop to find out.

Out of forty-six titles on the racks only a measly four were 'funnies': **Beano**, **Dandy**, **Topper** and **Jackpot**. That's discounting some of the papers for the youngest children like **Pippin**, **Jack and Jill** and **Playhour** which set out to amuse in a pasteurised way, and some of the stories in the girls-only weeklies like **Tammy/Misty**, **Tracy** and **Mandy** which have been known to bring smiles to the faces of readers (though it sometimes seems to me that the main aim of this group of comics is to move kids on to the love-interest, pop music and problem pages of the new photo-realistic **Loving**, **Love Affair** and **Photo-Love**, and ultimately to addiction to women's magazines.) Of the rest, four, significantly, were new publications from Marvel Comics, with titles like **Future Tense** and **Savage Action**, featuring characters like Man-Thing, the most awesome swamp creature of all, and Molecule Man, a spectre from the past.

Like any other, the world of children's comics is subject to change, specially since it's still big business. Geoff Fenwick writing in 1977 estimated that ten million comics were sold weekly in Britain bringing in something like £20 million, much of that shared between the giants IPC and D.C. Thomson. New titles appear while others merge or sink with hardly a trace. It's a hard world, the world of comics.

Anyone looking back over the history of comics will find two distinct traditions. In America comics have always been produced with an adult readership in mind, although they are, of course, read by kids (hence the fuss about horror comics in the fifties and the publishers' agreement on standards in the Comics Code Authority.) The new Marvel titles are in this line. The British tradition of comic publishing is founded on comedy and on adventure for boys. The latter begins with **The Gem** and **The Magnet** and **The Boys Own Paper**, living on through the famous four, **Wizard**, **Rover**, **Adventure** and **Hotspur**, of which sadly only the last survives today and in much altered form at that. Once packed with solid-print stories that read like chapters in books, about a whole range of experience - sport, war, school, exploration - a recent issue is nothing but picture-stories with the verbal content cut to a minimum. The featured sport is golf, would you believe, several stories are set in America and the lead item is a blatant sell-out to the 'space-invaders', featuring King Cobra who metamorphoses from mild-mannered Bill King at the zip of a scaly suit. There's even a

problem page: 'If you have a problem you want advice on send it to Andy?' 'What Rockfist Rogan would have thought of that I shudder to think.

The adventure comic has narrowed in number and range to a few, mostly about war, like **Battle**, **Warlord**, **Sub-mariner** and **2000 AD**. Are we seeing the slow extinction of the 'funny'?

To find out I went into a local junior school and asked 142 kids between the ages of 7 and 11 what was their favourite comic. Of the 105 who had comics, over a third (43) named one of six 'funnies', with **Beano** way out in front (29 mentions). Girls-only comics got 38 mentions with **Tracy**, a relative newcomer out in front (13 mentions). The 'space-invaders' such as **The Empire Strikes Back** trailed in with 24 assorted mentions. So **Beano** lives on, now well past its two thousandth number and thriving: the current issue recognisably the same as the first in 1937.

There's nothing more doomed to fail than an analysis of humour though some have tried to account for the appeal of **Beano** and **Dandy**, describing the Bash St. Kids as 'instruments of anarchy' and Dennis the Menace as 'a malign demon'. Well, maybe, but after looking through the current issue I'd like to think the secret lies in its consistency of point of view and style, not to mention value for money. For a mere 9p you are offered no less than seventeen short comedies, or expanded gags, each drawn in the characteristic graphic line and each presented consistently from the child's perspective, even if it features the mobile canine ink-blot, Gnasher, or the anthropomorphic mice, The Nibblers. The sense of solidarity is further increased by the open invitation to join the Dennis the Menace Fan Club, including Gnasher's Fang Club, with badges (one hairy with moving eyes) and readers' jokes and letters which, if printed, win extremely covetable Dennis tee-shirts.

Some of these features are shared by other 'funnies' like **Dandy**, **Nutty** and **Whizzer and Chips**, but for me **Beano**, as the kids I saw confirmed, is still out in front. No wonder the local library keeps it under the desk with items on restricted loan. **Dandy** and **Beano** survived the intense competition of television in the Fifties and Sixties. Interestingly, some of the work of current TV favourites like Bill Oddie, Michael Palin and Rowan Atkinson seems to have links with the humour of children's comics. In books, Raymond Briggs makes links between his art and that of comic books, mentioning Asterix, Tintin and Rupert. But I suspect there's more than a hint of Desperate Dan and some of the unmentionable habits of Minnie the Minx behind Fungus the Bogeyman and his dreadful wife.

Watch out, Shandra the She Barbarian of Space, Dennis and his pals are fighting back, and I and a few million kids have got money on them to win the next round in the battle of the comics.

Brian Walsh taught for twenty years in schools and colleges before becoming a LEA Adviser.

Adult attitudes to comics range from nostalgia to suspicion. There are fears that comics are subversive, calls for censorship. Are comics harmful? Do the funnies have a part to play in growing up? We asked Nicholas Tucker for his opinion

For a small child, almost every book, together with most educational comics, will be bought for him or her by someone else. Such 'parent-buys', of course, can often be loved very much, but there is rarely quite that absolute freedom to stuff them into pockets, cut out bits from them, swap them with friends, or simply throw them away when finished. Such valuable freedom, though, usually obtains in the case of comics that children have bought for themselves. That is why the extraordinarily cheap price of the 'funnies' is still one of their most significant aspects for the young. Here, after all, is something that for only a few pence can either arrive importantly each week with the family newspaper, or else be bought with all the deliberation of those first genuine financial transactions with otherwise impersonal newsagents.

Once at school, young readers will find that other children may also be reading the same comics, and they will therefore be able to swap stories or casual references with each other as easily and confidently as their own parents sometimes rehash the contents of last week's Sunday papers when conversing with their friends. Social inclusion is important for all of us, but especially so for the infant or junior striving to keep afloat in the hurly-burly of the school playground. It may well be that references to last night's television now heavily outweigh any conversation about Lord Snooty or

Dennis the Menace. But even so, comics are still very popular with children, and have so far shown no signs of being killed off in the way that was once predicted when television viewing first became wide-spread.

Equally, it is hard for most television programmes to rival, at least for long, the immediate intellectual and emotional accessibility of the funnies for most children. For the young, the world is often a highly confusing and arbitrary place, but in the comic strip everything soon becomes crystal clear. Every main character, after all, will act in a few, very stereotyped ways. Once it is learned, for example, that Desperate Dan has super-human strength and a vast appetite, it will simply be a question of seeing how these particular characteristics will be deployed each week. There will be no possibility that Dan will ever develop as a character in the way that Long John Silver, for example, changes from being a total villain into someone harder to judge and pin down (a phenomenon known to American literary critics as 'role-drift'). Similarly, the people Dan meets will be as clearly advertised as if they had slogans written on their chests. Mayors, for example, always bear chains of office, convicts wear suits decorated with broad arrows, burglars disport black masks and bags of swag, and dentists tend to have names like 'I. Pullem' plus window-displays of what look like sets of plumbers' tools. Such characters will also act in utterly predictable ways. Goats, for example, will either butt or else eat tin cans, teachers will usually cane, and absent-minded professors will invariably come into contact with examples of wet paint.

The fact that such stereotypes may be completely foreign to a child's actual experience of life is neither here nor there. In comic-land, everything works to rule, and once you have learned the few rules that apply there, you can simply sit back and enjoy it all, without ever being brought short by that tedious and sometimes disheartening experience of not being able to understand. Even if a few of the words are difficult, there will always be pictures to help out with before and after contextual cues, so important when it comes to the business of trying to make sense of any written down or illustrated story.

Ease of comprehension, although pleasurable in itself, is also a means to an end, whereby children can arrive in easy stages at the heart of what the funnies are really about. Looking at the repetitive examples of aggression, greed, mess, lying and stealing that run through such comics, one can only conclude that as in so much art, the funnies chiefly celebrate those things that most of their readers are otherwise learning to put to one side in real life, or else. In this sense, the funnies enable children to let off steam, just as romantic novelettes or James Bond stories allow older readers to taste the delights of unlikely, often dangerous adventures in the safety of the imagination. Children's books offer this sort of opportunity too, of course, but seldom in such a whole-hearted way as in the comics. So if you sometimes resent Mum and Dad or the teacher's authority over you, or else daydream about beating up the school bully, it is comics that will show you how this might be done and what it might feel like. And as the characters in the funnies look like grotesque caricatures rather than recognisable people, it is possible to watch them put to a great deal of pain and anguish without ever having to feel guilty about enjoying the spectacle.

The diminishing number of parents and teachers who continue to object to such comics, therefore, are surely missing the point. The funnies may show children things they would like to see, but only in a comic strip, and even here most transgressions are usually punished in the last frame, either by Dad wielding a slipper or by teacher with his omnipresent cane. At the same time, comics always steer well away from the genuinely seamy aspects of childhood, such as the racial insults sometimes heard in the playground, the whispered smut in the lavatories, or the experiments with glue-sniffing or whatever else may be 'in' at that particular moment for inner-city children at risk. In this light, the funnies can seem deeply conventional and often highly moralistic beneath all that show of aggressive energy, and if children find them amusing and entertaining as well, who should worry?

Nicholas Tucker teaches in the University of Sussex and has written widely about children and children's books.

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