

Introduction: Why Comics Can Save Us from Illiteracy

Comic book heroes have saved us from exploding stars, streaking comets, alien invasions, communist conspiracies, bank robbers, and terrorists. So why shouldn't they save the human race from illiteracy? After all, high literary culture aside, comic books are books. And — more to the point of *this* book — they are one of the very few types of books that young Americans willingly pay to read. Can we utilize their obvious appeal to make us all better readers and, ideally, better writers? For as media gurus tell us, something happens to voluntary readers as they navigate the American school system. After exposure to traditional school-mandated literature, many young readers give up reading everything, comic books included. Education sets in, and with it, a kind of reading rigor mortis.

The following pages aim to revive a love of reading. If you read comic books, the following data do not apply to you: According to the National Education Association (NEA) most people do not voluntarily read *anything*—not novels, not short stories, not poems or drama, nor, as Dana Gioia, chair of the NEA, explained, “any book that people read without guns pointed to their heads.”¹ And let's not kid ourselves, the problem is real and it is serious: Only 46.7 percent of respondents to a 2004 *Newsweek* survey had read any fiction at all, down from 56.9 percent twenty years ago. And, we are told, young people, irrespective of race and gender, show the least interest in reading. In fact, the steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups. Over the past twenty years, adults 18–34 have declined from being those most likely to those least likely to

1. Malcolm Jones, “Waiting for the Movie: Reading's going out of style, even as publishers go wild.” *Newsweek*, July 19, 2004.

read literature, and the rate of decline for the youngest adults 18–24 is 55 percent greater than that of the adult population.

We think the NEA needs to visit a comic book shop. For as we know, there are readers— young readers— so passionate about books that they cherish them like treasures to be handed down to future generations. We are talking about millions of readers: willing readers, habitual readers, readers hooked on character and plot, readers who weigh virtues not simply in terms of winning and losing but in spiritual and moral terms of good and evil; readers who discuss issues and concerns with other readers at conventions, online, and in coffee houses; readers who take pleasure in a suffusion of ethics and aesthetics, paneled in transitions of images and words, drawn from the disparate vocabularies of cuneiform, the printed word, and the cinema.² They are comic book readers, and, we argue, each one has the enthusiasm, dedication, motivation, and imaginative skill to make an excellent English major.³

Here are some startling and, we think, hopeful, statistics:

<i>Magazine</i>	Monthly Audience	
	<i>Kid Readers (6–11)</i>	<i>Teen Readers (12–17)</i>
Marvel Comics	20,449,000	10,826,000
DC Comics	14,804,000	5,597,000
Archie	1,000,000	300,000

Although there is a significant drop off in comic book readers once they reach puberty, superhero comics still sell over 16,000,000 copies a month, well in advance of teen magazines such as *Seventeen* (5,269,000 a month) or *Teen People* (5,244,000 a month).⁴ Even Stephen King can't match these numbers. The numbers are even more astonishing when we consider the findings of Lawrence A. Breed, who noted that on average one comic book is read by 4.5 different readers.⁵ That means that teen comic readers go through some 72 million comics a month, or about 864 million comics a year.

In this book you'll discover that the connections between, say, Spider-

2. Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys have argued that comics have been intellectually marginalized because the medium is a hybrid of text and image and, thus, defies easy categorization. See "History in the Graphic Novel," in *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2002), 255–60; 255.

3. Anne Rubenstein argues that comics compete directly with video games and movies more than with other forms of print media. See *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 8. Nonsense! A comic book's direct competition is other comics on the same rack. Video games often feature comic book characters and are, thus, an extension of the comic reader's experience; ditto films, which increasingly cater to comic readers: witness the blockbuster summer films *Spider-Man I and II*, *X-Men*, *Daredevil*, *Batman Begins*, etc.

4. Simmons Market Research Bureau, Spring 2002 Study.

5. Lawrence A. Breed, *Alcohol in the Comic Book* (M.A. Thesis, San Jose State University, 1979), 4.

Man and Shakespeare are not as remote as you may think. If you love *The Fantastic Four*, we want you to check out *The Fairie Queene*; we want you to connect or reconnect one book with another, to read allusively, intelligently, critically, and, yes, poetically. We're not arguing that comics can or should replace Milton or Shakespeare — or even Stephen King. But, if we can get you to think of comics *as* literature, telling similar stories, expressing similar concerns, then you might see the role that other literature can play in your life.⁶

One legitimate question some of you may ask is exactly how we're defining the comics themselves. When dealing with Spider-Man, for example, should we include just *Spider-Man* comics or include offshoots such as *Spectacular Spider-Man* or *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Spider-Man Unlimited*, *Web of Spider-Man*, or *Spider-Man 2099*? What if our web-slinging hero appears in another series, such as *Marvel Team-Up* or *The New Avengers*? What about the newspaper serial, *Amazing Spider-Man*, or the 1960s TV animated series, or the short-lived TV live action show, or the recent *Spider-Man* movies? What about novelizations, video games, board games, or product placements? Can we discuss Spider-Man as a singular character if there are 10 or more Spider-Men engaged in differing adventures running concurrently? When we refer to Spider-Man, can we or should we draw from all of these sources and various media outlets—comics, newspapers, animations, low-budget live-action TV, big-budget live-action film, video games, etc.? Another problem: If Spider-Man, is a prisoner of Dr. Octopus in *Amazing Spider-Man*, how can he in the same time frame be free to fight alongside Iron Man in *The Avengers*? Should we consider these comics as existing in parallel but distinct worlds or simply ignore the special issues and conflate them all under the rubric of "Spider-Man"? Can we discuss Spider-Man as a constant, or should we consider him as ongoing, ever evolving? Let's recall that a myriad of writers and artists have drawn the character and written his stories since he was first crafted by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 way back in 1962. Does it matter that Spider-Man's creators did not and could not envision the new stories of their hero?

To students of literature, these questions are indeed important. Let's start with the most obvious problem: Just who owns Spider-Man? Can or should we have the freedom to change him? Can we give him a new power or take one away? In doing so, are we betraying Lee and Ditko's Spider-Man? Another problem comes when we want to use traditional literary techniques

6. Many programs are attempting to use comics in just this way: A series of educational comics, bowdlerized of obscene language and sexual content, is available from *Crossgeneration Comics*, designed for high school readers. The books come with a teacher's guide, CD ROMs and skill activities. The program is currently being used in seven states nationwide. (See www.crossgen.com)

to examine and ultimately pass judgment upon these characters. In Aristotelian terms, we should value a character for how he matures and grows through the story. But in the comics, how a character develops, grows, matures, is not only unclear; for some characters, it is practically impossible. When we read issues of *Superboy*, *Supergirl*, *The Teen Titans*, *The Young Avengers*, their titles tell us that our heroes must remain always young; no matter how many issues pass, their lives must include all the things that go along with youth, inexperience, immaturity. Eternally 14 or so, these characters cannot, despite their prowess, suffer into any truth without losing the sheen of youth that defines them.

Certainly, our most treasured writers would not be impressed with the open-endedness of the comics. The sixteenth-century Italian poet Tasso, for example, derided the idea of sequels. Once the poem had reached its end, he argued, it was complete and perfect, and to add sequels to continue the action would only introduce imperfection, which would then need to be corrected in yet another sequel, which would introduce more imperfection and so on. Very soon, the reader would be confronted with a massive and forbidding body of work, but one that only weakened the simplicity and clarity of the original. It would be as if we kept covering a statue with layer after layer of clothes. Eventually, the statue itself would disappear from view.

Then again, we might say, who cares what Aristotle or Tasso thought? Certainly William Shakespeare didn't. When his play *Henry VI* became a hit, he wrote not one sequel but three. His *Henry IV* plays inspired two sequels. And, as legend has it, when Queen Elizabeth complained that Shakespeare shouldn't have killed off the comic character Falstaff, he simply brought him back to life in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

As for the various media in which comic book heroes appear, the fan is encouraged to integrate all stories into a stable and coherent lore. Let's remember that Kryptonite was first introduced not in *Superman* comics, but on the *Superman* radio series; Spider-Man's foe the Kingpin was not introduced in a *Spider-Man* comic, but on the animated TV series. Further, many of these characters remain remarkably stable in their "backstory"—in fact, the comics often meticulously trace prior appearances, which they detail in helpful, almost scholarly footnotes. Daredevil, for example, might run into Spider-Man and say, "I haven't seen you since we both fought Kingpin," to which the helpful editor might add the following: "As seen in *Spider-Man* #124." Another example: When Frank Miller decided that he wanted to kill off a fairly minor character like Daredevil's sometime love interest, Karen Page, he had to have the approval of Marvel editor Joe Quesada, who had to consider how the death of one of Marvel's characters would affect the larger Marvel Universe. And as for not aging, well, *no* character

in literature ages beyond the confines of the text. Further, Aristotle is often misread on the problem of a character's growth; it is not necessary that a character cultivate wisdom. It is the reader who must suffer into truth, who must age, experience, mature, gain and grow in wisdom by reading and reflection.

Some will doubtless say that by bringing Aristotle, Tasso, and Shakespeare into the discussion we're taking comic books too seriously. But comic book readers are serious about comics. And, as we will argue, comics offer serious intellectual arguments on the problems we all face. After all, the comic book world *is* our world. It has the same problems—crime, drugs, racism, nationalism, commercial exploitation — and offers ideological solutions to these problems. Our first chapter, for example, looks at Marvel's attempts in the late 1960s and early 1970s to broaden its comic book line to include African-American heroes. While there were economic and perhaps even altruistic interests at the heart of this project, the result was often a kind of apartheid: black heroes for black villains. Chapter 2 shifts to the comics' varied responses to the brinkmanship of the Cold War and the end game we now refer to as *glasnost*. Our next chapter looks at the comic industry's take on capitalism. Both recent Batman and Spider-Man movies have argued that with great power comes great responsibility, but in terms of business practice, are we talking about a responsibility to the workers or to the shareholders? Chapter 4 traces the concept of the superhero to the philosopher Nietzsche. His superman, however, lacks the restraint of the hero and more closely resembles the typical supervillain. Exploring the concept of the alter ego, we'll argue that what makes the hero truly super is his moral strength, not his muscular articulations. Our next chapter looks at the recent *Daredevil* movie and asks what responses the comic industry had to the tragedy of September 11. In our seventh chapter, we look at prisons in the comics and wonder how they influence the ongoing debate concerning capital punishment. In our conclusion, we ask you, the reader, to join us in a crusade against illiteracy — our weapon of choice, the comic book. To that end, each chapter contains a series of questions and assignments that we hope will stimulate further reading, writing and discussion both within and outside of the classroom.

Interesting? Maybe. But we know that you don't buy *Batman* to argue about the Cold War; you buy Batman to enjoy the adventures of Batman, and we'd be making a mistake to forget that that fact. We want to discuss serious topics here, but we're also excited and moved by the adventures of these heroes. Comic books are visual, violent, and sexy because they are supposed to be. They are also serious, because they are supposed to be. And they are made to be read, because they are books. In the words of Stan Lee, "Nuff said."