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The teacher---

ADT 8114

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And
The Comics

By

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Published by
POST-REPORTER

A Catholic weekly newspaper for students in
junior and senior high school

128 E. 10th St.
St. Paul 1, Minnesota

Printed in U. S. A.

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THE TEACHER AND THE "COMICS"

by

Gabriel Lynn

When the welfare of children is menaced, teachers along with parents must stand as the front line of defense. Resistance to the menace must be based upon thorough comprehension of the nature of the evil to be opposed.

Foremost among the threats to today's children is the objectionable type of so-called "comic book," and evidence accumulates to suggest that many of our teachers are insufficiently familiar with the nature of these offensive publications, many millions of copies of which are read each month by boys and girls.

A jolting revelation of the widespread juvenile addiction to the comic books is made in the report of a survey conducted by Sister M. Katharine McCarthy, College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, Minnesota, in collaboration with the principal of a Duluth public school.¹ Included in the survey were more than 8,500 pupils in the parochial and public schools of Duluth. It was discovered that during the single

¹ "The Much-Discussed Comic Book," *The Elementary School Journal*, October, 1943.

week immediately preceding the making of this survey these 8,500 children had read a total of more than 27,000 comic books!

Another survey, conducted by the principal of the Bulkeley High School, Hartford, Connecticut, and reported in **Editor & Publisher**, June 3, 1944, revealed that 89.3 per cent of high school students covered by the survey "always or nearly always" read the comic sections of newspapers, the exact figures being: "Boys, 100 per cent; girls, 79.1 per cent."

Whenever similar studies have been made in communities in every section of the country, comparable findings have resulted. It may not reasonably be questioned that an enormous majority of modern children habitually read the comic books and newspaper comic strips, nor may one reasonably doubt that these publications exert a considerable influence upon their youthful addicts.

It follows, necessarily, that teachers and parents must have a profound interest in the nature of this influence. They must prepare to qualify as experts in determining whether the influence exerted by these publications is wholesome and constructive or harmful and destructive. They can hope to accomplish this expert determination only by acquainting themselves thoroughly with the contents of the comic books and strips read by the

boys and girls who are under their guidance.

DO TEACHERS AND PARENTS KNOW THE COMICS?

That our teachers and parents are not familiar with the contents of these books and strips so universally read by children is revealed by the letters and statements of many Sisters who have been aroused to understanding of the menace presented by the publications in this field which may fairly be appraised as objectionable.

From a western state, one Sister writes: "It might be well to ask the Sisters to really look at and read the comics. The truth is that our Sisters and most of the parents of the children haven't even looked at one! Our Sisters here were shocked. . . . One of them confessed that she had thought the movement against them (the comics) was 'much ado about nothing.' She knows now."

Yet another concerned teacher has written: "The children in our Catholic schools may be convinced of the danger, if the Sisters are. I know that few of the Sisters have any idea of what the comic books really are."

Much space might be filled with comments of like nature. The fact appears indubitable that few teachers and few parents have any considerable knowledge

of the contents of the comic books and strips, and that they are, in consequence, incapable of distinguishing between those which do not offend and those which are by any realistic standard objectionable.

Distressing as this lack of familiarity with a type of reading material so widely adopted by children may be, it is scarcely surprising. The very names, "the comics," "the funnies," are disarming. We of older generations recall the comic features of our youth as simple, mirth-provoking newspaper strips, designed to amuse and accomplishing this objective. "Happy Hooligan," "Little Nemo," "Buster Brown" brought us the hilarious antics of characters involved in situations without sinister or offensive overtones. As art, these pictures left much to be desired. They were never profound, nor pretended to be. But they were entirely harmless insofar as their influence upon juvenile readers was involved.

Unfortunately, the same may not be said of all of the comic books and strips which so generally engage the interest of youngsters of today.

WHICH COMICS ARE HARMLESS, WHICH BAD?

It is important to recognize that there are comic books and newspaper strips today which are entirely harmless and

even, in certain regrettably few instances, genuinely worthwhile and constructive. But it is the existence of these unobjectionable books and strips among the hundreds published which makes it essential that the teacher be familiar with all of the publications in this field.

Only if she possesses first-hand knowledge of the actual contents of the comic subjects favored by boys and girls can the teacher with authority discriminate between those which call for vigorous condemnation and those deserving of approval. Because of the large number of comic books and strips it is inadvisable to attempt to classify each by title in this limited space, but it is possible to indicate which types of comics are, in most instances, free from offensive characteristics, and to suggest the varieties which, almost invariably, are objectionable as reading fare for juveniles.

The comic subjects which may, in nearly all cases, be approved for use by children fall into three general groups. These may be described, broadly, as animal comics; as factual comics; and as genuinely humorous comics. They are easily recognized.

The first group includes such familiar subjects as Mickey Mouse, Bambi, Donald Duck, and many others. Rarely if ever are causes for objection to be discovered in the books and strips of this category,

and it is a significant indication of the fundamental soundness of juvenile taste that in most polls taken to determine the preferences in comics of boys and girls, the animal features are revealed to be universal favorites.

To classify the features of the second or factual group as comics is to apply a misnomer, for these are never humorous. They present in pictorial form true stories based upon the lives of great historical characters, Biblical figures, and the like. Features of this type may be employed as useful adjuncts to academic and religious text material, and their use by children may with propriety be encouraged.

In the third or humorous group are to be found subjects presented solely for their laugh-producing qualities: Blondie and Dagwood, Bringing Up Father, Skippy, The Little King, Mr. and Mrs., The Timid Soul, all are typical examples of this group which includes subjects for adult as well as juvenile consumption.

Comics of the types cited above may with safety be approved, although the fact can not be too strongly emphasized that no comic book or group of books should be permitted to absorb too much of the reading time of the child. The development of literary taste can not be fostered by an exclusive diet of pictorial material, however unobjectionable or

even laudable this may be. The wise teacher will seek wherever possible to use the approved comic subjects such as the historical and Biblical treatments to stimulate interest in the persons depicted so that the child may go on naturally to reading history and Bible study. The growth of appreciation of literary quality thus encouraged will in due course serve as a most effective antidote to the poison of an all-comic diet.

While many objections may be made to the comic books and strips classified as objectionable, three principal characteristics are present in these and, when found, singly or in combination, warrant the application of extreme pressure by teachers and parents to bring about non-use by youngsters. One, two, or all of these three characteristics may be found in comic subjects classified as bad. They are:

1. Scenes of gross physical violence; scenes in which antisocial or criminal acts are discussed and depicted; scenes in which gangster methods and underworld practices are portrayed.

2. Scenes and stories which glorify unAmerican, vigilante philosophies and, by so doing, condition plastic youthful minds for rejection of lawful principles and for acceptance of harshly intolerant totalitarian ideologies.

3. Scenes of action which menace

chastity, by presenting an unwholesome, distorted view of sex.

As previously suggested, there are other objections to be made to the bad comics, but those cited include the most serious and constitute a sufficient reason for urging teachers and parents to gird for a determined stand against use of these books and strips by children.

WHAT FACTS SUPPORT THESE CHARGES?

Here are some of the facts upon which these accusations are based.

The charge that scenes of gross physical violence are depicted may be verified by selecting at random any of the comic books not included in the three groups described as unobjectionable. Physical assaults, mayhem, bloodshed abound in the bad comics.

For example, several months ago I made a study of 92 comic books and more than 1,000 newspaper comic strips, analyzing their contents and tabulating the objectionable features discovered.* It was found that in the publications studied 522 separate physical assaults were depicted, these consisting of acts of violence performed upon human beings, shown in terrifying detail and tending to glorify

*Case Against the Comics—Lynn-5c, Catechetical Guild—128 E. 10th St., St. Paul 1, Minnesota.

brute force. In addition to these, 86 acts of clearly defined sadism were depicted.

To cite one appalling example of the most depraved type of comic book, Sister Mary Aurea, B.V.M., of Butte, Montana, reports having inspected a book in which, among other material almost as offensive, was shown "a son who kills his mother to make good a bet. (This one is supposed to be very funny. The son says, 'Mother, this is going to hurt.' The mother answers, 'Go ahead, son, anything you do is too, too cute.')" This, admittedly, is an extreme example, but it demonstrates the need for ceaseless vigilance on the part of teachers and parents to keep informed as to the contents of the comic books read by boys and girls.

As for the charge that antisocial and criminal actions are depicted in the objectionable comic books, my own survey of those previously cited revealed 216 major crimes, 309 minor crimes, 271 examples of antisocial behavior, 39 larcenies. It should be stressed, concerning these data, that only those examples were recorded which depicted in unmistakable detail the acts described.

Gangster practices were found in a great many of the books and strips, with underworld characters behaving and talking with unexpurgated realism. Members of a gang would be shown plotting the commission of a crime or series of crimes.

Methods would be discussed, and in succeeding panels the gangsters would be followed step by step through the execution of their plans, criminal techniques being portrayed in detail sufficient to make it easily possible for impressionable young readers to copy this behavior if so disposed. Elsewhere in this pamphlet, I shall submit evidence to support the contention that youngsters, influenced by this type of comic, do become so disposed, often with tragic consequences.

The charge that many of the objectionable comic books and strips glorify un-American, vigilante philosophies may be corroborated by a study of any of the comics featuring a superhuman person with a "mission" to crusade against wrongdoers. These follow a standardized pattern. The hero may be a human being of abnormal strength and superb intelligence, or he may be a creature half man, half bird, or even a monstrosity capable of "growing" extra arms, legs, and heads, as the vagaries of the story may demand.

Such a hero is customarily introduced as one who is about to eradicate evil and crime from his community, or, in some instances, from the universe. Operating without regard to established law-enforcement procedure, this super-hero will determine (by processes known only to himself) the identity of public enemies,

will pursue and capture them, will pass upon their guilt, pronounce the penalty for their misdeeds, and execute the sentence which, more often than not, will be that of death.

This, manifestly, is the vigilante procedure, the Hitlerian method. It is Ku-Klux terrorism in new garb. It is government by men—or a man—rather than government by law. It creates disrespect for and impatience with constitutional methods, reveals regularly constituted law-enforcement agencies in an unflattering light, and surely it conditions the youthful mind for acceptance of those ideologies upon which dictatorships are built.

In my study of comic books and strips I recorded 246 separate portrayals of un-American vigilante activities. Such material feeds the flames of intolerance and bigotry from which, at recurring periods, the United States has suffered. It seems unnecessary to elaborate the argument that this is dangerous fare for young, suggestible minds.

Apologists for the comics defend this variety of subject by asserting that good always triumphs over evil and that the end justifies the means. This argument is invalid, because the ultimate triumph of the super-hero is accomplished by the use of unlawful methods, and because the evil which is defeated is first depicted in

detail so graphic as to constitute a menace to juvenile readers who may be prompted to emulate the behavior of the lawless.

That the objectionable type of comic book menaces chastity may be understood as one studies certain of the more offensive specimens. In these it will be found, first, that the drawings place exaggerated emphasis upon sexual characteristics of men and women, often presented scantily clad, in wantonly provocative postures, and in situations which may temperately be described as wholly unsuitable for distribution to the immature.

There is, moreover, a sexual danger in many of the comic subjects in which violence is depicted. Psychiatrists have discovered the connection which exists between sexual excitement and pain, and it may not be disputed that persons with irregular sexual tendencies, including children, may be dangerously affected by scenes of gross physical violence.

SELLING METHODS TO BE OBSERVED

The fact must be recognized that many ingenious devices are employed by merchandisers of comic books to swell the sales of their product, and while many of these methods are legitimate enough, others appear devious and call for alert

watchfulness on the part of teachers and parents.

This need for alert concern may be understood if we consider conditions under which comic books are sold. Magazine counters today contain hundreds of publications. Dealers manifestly cannot acquaint themselves with contents of these. The dealer receives the publications from his wholesaler, places them on his counters, racks, or shelves, and leaves it for customers, old and young, to make their own selections. To the newsdealer the comic book and other periodicals are articles of merchandise; only those which may be expressly banned by local authorities are excluded from his stock. The parent and teacher, therefore, must stand between the child and unwise or even dangerous comic-book purchases. The newsdealer is a merchant, not a censor.

Few publishers in the comic book field produce a single book, but rather issue several titles, being known as "chain" publishers. Certain of these employ as a method of promoting sales—and of overcoming parental objection to their product—the device of establishing an editorial advisory board or council composed of persons prominent in national life. The names of these persons are printed in copies of the books published by the concerns using this promotional aid, and while no definite statement is made as to

the nature of the advisory service rendered by these prominent persons, the impression is created that members of these boards or councils approve the contents of the books in which their names appear.

It may reasonably be questioned whether these persons do, in fact, approve the contents of these books, or even whether they are familiar with the subject matter their names are used to promote. An instance is known of one prominent gentleman who resigned from one of these boards after receiving protests from well-wishers; he stated to them that he never read a comic book. When one considers the importance of many of the persons whose names are used in this way and understands the demands upon their time, it is difficult to believe that they could inspect the many issues of comic books published by the concerns who use their names to lull the apprehension of parents and others.

Teachers who encounter objectionable comic books in which appear the names of men and women of national consequence as editorial advisors or counselors might well address to these persons and to the publisher making use of their names an inquiry as to the exact nature of the duties performed and calling attention to the objectionable features of the book they have ostensibly endorsed.

Publishers are responsive to informed public opinion. When they become aware, through formal protests registered by teachers and parents, that offensive comic books will be combatted in every proper way, they will eventually discern the wisdom of trimming their sails. Let them know that you are not condemning comic books as such, but only objectionable comic books. Let them know in specific terms exactly what you object to in their publications. Encourage parents to write similar letters.

Do not be misled by publishers who may reply to criticism of their product by assuring you that their books are thankfully received by educational and charitable institutions. Investigation of such claims will generally disclose that the publisher has donated certain of his books which are entirely free from any objectionable features, carefully omitting from his gift packages those titles which might elicit disapproval. One Mother Superior found it necessary to make formal demand upon a publisher to refrain from using for promotional purposes an unsolicited letter of thanks she had sent to him following the receipt of a donation of selected copies of comic books.

All of these methods are commonly regarded as "good business" in commercial circles. We refer to them here only because they point up the argument that

eternal vigilance by teachers and parents is demanded if they are not to be misled or lulled into ignoring comic books of a nature making them injurious fare for boys and girls.

SOME EFFECTS OF COMIC-BOOK INFLUENCE

Having asserted that the objectionable types of comic books and strips may exert a harmful influence upon suggestible young readers, it is only fair to support the charge with evidence. A few examples should prove sufficient to demonstrate the sound basis for this allegation.

During the year 1943 one widely read comic feature which appears both in comic-book form and as a newspaper strip featured the activities of a band of saboteurs whose specialty was wrecking trains. Within a brief period there occurred what the Federal Bureau of Investigation described as "an epidemic of train wreckings" committed by youthful offenders; one wreck, in which a life was lost and several persons were injured, was caused by three children less than 10 years of age, and a troop train was derailed by three boys, one of whom was aged nine and another 10.

Publishers of this comic feature volubly denied any connection between the train wreckings depicted in their book and

strips and the "epidemic" of wrecks caused by young boys. No such denial can be made, however, in the case of the youthful South Bend, Indiana, lad whose parents returned to their home to discover the boy dead in the bathroom of the house, wearing a "superman" costume and a crudely rigged harness with the aid of which he had attempted to emulate his hero by walking on the walls of the room, strangling himself in the process.

Children—some children—do attempt to mimic their favorite heroes. If only one child does this with fatal results, he serves as an argument against the indiscriminate publication of a feature which can cause such tragedies to the young.

Four boys in a Southern state inflicted severe knife wounds upon a youthful associate while playing "Commando," and when apprehended by juvenile authorities displayed comic books in which "Commando raids" were portrayed in gory detail.

A Chicago juvenile court judge told of a runaway boy who committed a series of daring robberies before being captured by police who found, in the furnished room he had occupied, stacks of comic books in which such crimes were portrayed as those this lad had committed. One apologist for the comic books refused to admit this as a valid objection to such books, claiming that "the boy was bad

anyway. He would have gone wrong without comic books as easily as with them."

I prefer to believe with Father Flanagan that there is no such thing as a "bad boy." There are, unhappily for themselves and for their families, weak boys, suggestible boys, and these are entitled to every protection, every safeguard which may be thrown up about them as they pass through the turmoil of adolescence. Certainly it is due to every such boy that he be protected against the influence of any agent which might conceivably contribute to his downfall.

For a final, and recent, example there is the case of the five high school boys in a Midwestern city who were arrested by state and local police, charged with having organized a subversive, anti-religious society which they called "The State." These boys, all of them coming from homes of comfort and refinement, began their activities with a series of robberies from which they provided themselves with an arsenal of firearms, ammunition, knives, blackjacks, handcuffs, and police badges. They stole a printing press, which was set up in the attic of the home of the leader and on which they produced literature designed to create anti-Jewish and anti-Negro prejudice, contempt for religion, and defiance of the government of the United States.

Working systematically, these boys planned a series of assaults upon Negroes which were to provoke a city-wide race riot, and which was prevented only by the apprehension of the boys a few hours prior to the time they had set for the commission of the assaults.

When the headquarters of the society were raided by police it was found that the boys regularly engaged in a fantastic "ritual," during which a knife (which they called a "sacred dagger") was thrust through a Bible and following which the participants wiped their feet upon an American flag which they had placed on the floor before their "altar." Also discovered in the headquarters were elaborately drawn maps of the community, with the location of vital war plants marked and outlines for acts of sabotage carefully recorded. "The State," boasted its founders, was to "take over" the nation and then the world, all within fifteen to twenty years.

Chief among the material seized by police in their raid was what the Associated Press described as "a huge library" of comic books of "the superhuman variety." In his subsequent confession to the authorities, the leader of the society declared that he and his associates had based their whole mad scheme upon their "systematic study" of the comic books, numbering several hundred, found in

their headquarters. The youth was specific in fixing the responsibility upon these books, from which the society had pieced together the plan which failed to lead them to greater disaster only because their youth caused the authorities to be lenient.

Here, surely, is an almost classic example of what may result from parental neglect, from parental failure to know what children are reading.

A CHALLENGE TO TEACHERS

It would be impossible to overestimate the debt owed by American Christians to the devoted teachers who instruct and inspire the young as they pass through the often troubled waters of childhood and adolescence. But the teacher's duty is never fulfilled, her responsibility never discharged. Always there emerge new problems demanding her attention, unfamiliar enemies to threaten the welfare of boys and girls.

The objectionable types of comic books and strips represent a real, tangible threat to the safety of impressionable youngsters. They constitute a modern fad which has enlisted literally millions of followers. Because there are many comic books and strips which may fairly be classified as unobjectionable and even commendable, the need for keen discrim-

ination is the greater. The teacher must counsel her pupils, pointing them toward the good comics, warning them away from the bad.

To perform this vital service, the teacher must familiarize herself with all comics, must understand and recognize those characteristics which make a comic feature wholesome and constructive and those which make it a menace to youthful security. Moreover, she must share this expert knowledge of good and bad comics with parents, to the end that in school and at home the child may be safeguarded against the danger which has so tragically engulfed children who lacked this protection.

Tell the children how you feel about the comics. Make it plain to them that you do not condemn them all, but only the bad ones. Show them good comics, tell them why they are good, and why the others are bad. They will appreciate your understanding of their tastes and habits and will be grateful for your desire to respect their preferences. And they will be guided by your judgment when you explain why certain comics are bad for them.

The worst of the comic books and strips call for militant opposition by teachers and parents everywhere. More and more is this becoming apparent. As recent as May 18, 1944, Miss Edith Duff Gwinn, of

the Philadelphia Board of Education, was constrained to file a formal protest against one comic feature, published in book form and as a newspaper strip, with the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor. She described the objectionable feature as "a vicious example."

As protests of this nature increase in number, as they are lodged by educators, parents, high-minded men and women concerned for the welfare of the youngsters, they will be heeded by publishers. Many of the publishers in this field have already become conscious of the rising tide of opposition to objectionable comics and have taken steps to eliminate offending material from their publications, imposing strict requirements upon their writers and artists, striving to meet the demands of critics.

Encouraging as such results may be, they leave much to be accomplished. Every publisher must be brought to the realization that his product will be condemned by teachers and parents until he transforms objectionable features into treatments which do not offend, which do not menace the welfare of youthful readers.

Education has been defined as "a means of bringing out and harmoniously developing to as high a degree as possible the child's physical, emotional, moral, aesthet-

ic, and intellectual capabilities so as to increase his chances for attaining happiness and success, not only in childhood but also in adult life." It seems genuinely fitting that our Catholic schools should take the lead in combatting one of the graver threats to the modern child's moral capabilities. Christian training supplies the answer to most of the delinquency problems which disturb the nation. The ingenuity of man has never devised a substitute for it. The materialism which too frequently takes its place bears tragic fruit.

All of this is pertinent to the objectionable comic books because they are materialistic, pagan in their standards, Godless in their glorification of brute force, bigotry, hatred, sensuality. The extent to which these allegations are true may be understood only as a result of study, however distasteful, of the offensive types of comic books and strips.

Once teachers and parents become fully aware of the nature of the objectionable books, their opposition will make itself felt impressively in quarters where such opposition, because it threatens profits, will be treated with respect.

This is the challenge to teachers—a challenge to become experts in the field of the comics; to acquaint themselves with the actual contents of all the books and strips; to ascertain which of these are be-

ing read by the children in their charge; to lead these children away from the bad comics and toward the good; to see to it that the parents of these children are awakened to an understanding of their responsibility so that the good results of the teacher's labors may not be undermined by parental indifference; to organize community resistance to bad comics; to inform publishers (and their sponsors) of objectionable comics why their product is found to be offensive and to demand that they eliminate the causes of criticism.

The danger presented by these books and strips is real and immediate. The task of combatting them will be prolonged and arduous. It will be vital to ultimate victory that the teachers spark the opposition into action.

But the cause is gloriously worth while, because the objective is the welfare of the children. Once convinced of the imminence of the menace, Catholic teachers will rise to meet this challenge as they have met all others.

You will do your part?

NOVENA NOTES, August 18, 1944, gives this report on its Comic Strip Poll in which a total of 93 "good and bad" comic strips were voted on.

"Consistently violating Christian Marian Principles."

Dick Tracy.....disapproved by 88% of votes
Smilin' Jackdisapproved by 75% of votes
Moon Mullinsdisapproved by 74% of votes
Supermandisapproved by 69% of votes

CRIME AND THE COMICS

Editorial in September 18, 1944, POST-REPORTER.

The World-Herald of Omaha recently carried a story about a boy who was caught trying to cash a forged check. When asked where he had learned how to make out such a check he stated, "It was easy, I just followed the way it was done in the comic books."

Your editors and many educators of the country have noticed that cases of this kind are becoming more and more common every day. Our conclusion, therefore, has been that a certain amount of our problem of juvenile delinquency can be traced to the reading of the fantastic type of comic books that inspire such deeds.

To prove this contention we have decided to collect as many reports of the relationship of comics and delinquency as we can. We know that there are many more instances of the comic books having a bad influence on children than ever get into the newspapers.

We are asking for your help and co-operation to make this report a success. In every case where you know or have heard of a crime, a juvenile delinquency problem, or other evil effect that is directly traceable to the reading of comic books, please send us a complete report.

Address your letters to Juvenile Delinquency Editor, POST-REPORTER, 128 East 10th Street, St. Paul 1, Minnesota.

BURIAL OF TRASHY COMIC BOOK



Believing that trashy comic books are a detriment in the lives of children, fifth grade pupils of St. Francis Borgia School, Washington, Mo., staged this mock funeral of "Trashy Comic Book." The books were torn to bits, placed in caskets, lowered into graves, a match applied and after the books had burned, the children covered the remains with dirt. They hope other schools throughout the country will follow their example and thus aid in curbing juvenile delinquency caused by comic books.