

## Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-war Constructions of British Girlhood. Some initial thoughts.

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From the 1950s to the late 1970s, the comic book, including titles such as Bunty (DC Thomson, 1958) and Jackie (DC Thomson, 1964), was a profoundly influential part of British girls' culture. The comics inherited a specific style and set of topics from the illustrated story magazines of the nineteenth century, at least in the form they had evolved into by the 1930s. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig in You're a brick, Angela! The girls' story 1839-1985, describe this as "endlessly successful school themes, "tales of bygone days", ghost stories, mystery and detection, exploits of gypsies in disguise, poor little rich girls and rich little poor girls"(Cadogan, 1986: 233). These themes were adopted by the comics, supplemented by narratives of active girls involved in the Girl Guides, ballet and horse riding. Typically, these publications did not only contain comic strips. Girl (Hulton Press, 1951), which at its peak sold around 500,000 copies per week, included text stories, puzzles, non-fiction strips, biographies and activities, usually craft based; a mixed format that continued in later titles.

During the 1950s, producers started to look to both the growing teenage market and working class girls for sales, due to the shifts in education taking place at this time, rather than focusing on the middle-classes; although they continued to offer an aspirational model tied in to middle-class norms for all readers. There was also a drop in overall sales that resulted in a shift in approach at the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s. Comics for younger readers were launched that used short snappy versions of girl's names for titles. Bunty and Judy (1960) from DC Thomson, a Dundee publishing house with a Scottish Presbyterian origin that took a strong moral line, were the first titles in the field. These were followed by Tammy (1971) and Jinty (1974) from IPC (which took over Amalgamated Press in 1960). Cheaply produced on newsprint rather than the higher quality paper used for Girl, these publications also had roots in the story papers and emphasized stories over activities, although even Bunty included, famously, a cut out doll.

What differed was that their basis was in story papers largely read by working-class girls in their late teens and early twenties, rather than a middle-class audience. Developed to serve the increasingly literate population emerging after the Education Acts, Amalgamated Press titles Girls' Friend (1899-1931), Girls' Reader (1908-1915) and Girls' Home (1910-1915) influenced the comics aimed at working-class pre-teen girls in the 1960s. They told stories "from the viewpoint of the skivvies, shop-girls and factory hands" (Cadogan, 1986: 127) and Cinderella figures working in laundries or shops were often central characters. Alongside these stories were ones about schoolgirls as well as romances for older readers. Thus, the schoolgirl story links turn of the century changes in education, a widening experience of school in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the fictional boarding school for girls of all classes.

The accounts in these comics were not of exuberant adventures or activities that could be characterised as middle-class, but of lonely children fighting against the odds, trapped, misunderstood and exploited. Equally, the figure of the schoolgirl often differed from those in the middle-class papers in that many of the stories focused on the working-class outsider struggling with the snobbery of both staff and pupils in private schools. This double-edged theme made the reader aware of the possibility of this type of education, whilst presenting it as a nightmare.

The titles for older readers in contrast, focused on romance. This also originated with the turn of the century magazines, as did that essential element, the Problem Page. The romance formula of the late 1950s, which had produced comics like Romeo (DC Thomson, 1957) and Valentine (Amalgamated Press, 1957) was seen as dying out in the 1960s, but Jackie changed this. With over 1,000,000 sales per week in early 1970s, Jackie also signalled later trends in publications for girls in being the first to be created by a woman's magazine department. Again, the comic strip story was only one element, amongst pop star posters, advice and quizzes.

Jackie for older girl, and for the pre-teen Bunty, which sold 800,000 copies per week at its peak, are the two titles that best represent this tradition of publishing. They also represent the last hugely successful innovations in comics for girls as outlined above. This form of production has now disappeared in favour of the model offered by magazines for women which now takes up the majority of readers over ten years old. In addition, the range of comics for all children has narrowed significantly, with the majority being product spin-offs. This means that in researching the comic for girls I must look to both previous accounts and readers' memories as the culture of the comic for girls has largely disappeared.

The stimulus for researching this area has been my work in libraries, schools and other organizations with teachers, parents, children, librarians and others encouraging the development of graphic novels collections for use with unwilling and less able readers, who are currently seen as predominantly male. In doing so, I began to try to develop the participants understanding of how these texts might stimulate literacy through trying to connect current provision with what they had read themselves. Given that the majority of participants at each training event were female, the resulting discussions about childhood reading often focussed on girls' comics. It became quickly apparent that these had been an important part of childhood reading, and that few had spoken about that reading until the course. Researching this area is then, in part, a reclaiming of very influential, but nonetheless largely forgotten material.

In looking at titles such as Bunty, the typical approach has been to look at the comics themselves, as we shall see. In exploring both comics and readers, however, there are difficulties in that few sources of the period offer a perspective on how girls felt about comics aimed specifically at them. Such an approach does not really emerge until feminist work on Jackie in the 1980s and then with current audiences. Unless speaking with current fans of comics from the 1970s and before I cannot directly immerse myself in the culture of the readers, as is often the case in ethnographic accounts of groups of media fans (Jenkins, 1992). This is impossible with girls' comics as no organized fandom exists. Accordingly, I have gathered data in the shape of interviews and some written pieces from volunteers that came through my ongoing graphic novel work across Britain over the last six years. This geographical spread was matched by an educational spread from minimal GCE or CSE through to higher degrees.

In trying to uncover how the readership of the time might have used such publications the researcher has to work with both the texts and with adults' memories. This work does have precedents, although not in work with comics but in work like that of Jackie Stacey who in Star Gazing combined film theory and ethnographic material in researching the historical cinema spectator. Equally Annette Kuhn in her exploration of her own childhood memories asserts that avoiding the latter approach means omitting important aspects of cultural research: "experience is undeniably a key category of everyday knowledge, structuring people's lives in important ways" (Kuhn, 1995: 28). However, working with memory and experience has been seen as problematic. This is suggested by Kuhn's question, "Can the idea of experience not be taken on board -if with a degree of caution- by cultural theory, rather than being simply evaded or worse, consigned to the domain of sentimentality and nostalgia?" (Kuhn, 1995: 28) This implies that this area necessitates a constant awareness of such concerns in the researcher. I feel that this is particularly so in dealing with something as intimate as memories of childhood. Kuhn's reference to nostalgia also emphasizes how vital it is to remain aware that we rewrite our history as we age.

In addition, Ribbens and Edwards state that in this "we are researching areas ideologically constructed as concerning 'private' ways of being, and then writing for audiences situated within 'public' worlds of academic knowledge production, whose terms of reference have predominantly been constructed by white, western, middle class men. Is it possible to write within the terms of such public academic knowledge while also remaining faithful to more private and personal lived experiences?" (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998b: 20) In dealing with material that has been pushed to the edge of academic interest the researcher is on the boundaries of two worlds, interpreting from one to another, revealing the tension between listening to people's words and the need for a theoretical framework. It also flags up what Stacey saw as the problematic "power of the feminist researcher to interpret other women's feelings and thoughts from a position of expertise in the academy... There are certainly fewer moral dilemmas for feminists who continue to analyze film texts to which they are never held accountable in terms of the politics of research methods" (Stacey, 1994:71). Discussions about reading comics often evoked memories in all participants

that were intense, revealing and sometimes painful and it was hard to know how to translate them into academic writing. As Ribbens suggests “We may thus shift uneasily between the position of participant and observer/listener, constantly reflecting upon how we know about things, and how to view the knowledge we produce” (Ribbens, 1998a: 2). Yet, this too can be seen as an enabling rather than disabling awareness and, as Stacey asserts “avoiding analysis of woman audiences because of embarrassment or anxiety about imposing such a framework merely perpetuates their absence...” (Stacey, 1994: 72).

How readers actually felt about and used these texts contrasts with what the textual analysis suggests the readers learnt from them. The nature of the ‘private’ reading practices associated with the comic book form often served to undermine what textual analysis of the ‘public’ text revealed. Here, interweaving textual readings and interviews leads to an understanding that research need not use the latter as an empirical verification of the former. Spence & Holland in addressing the family snap describe this inter-relation of texts, history and memory in such a way as to offer a useful model in dealing with other types of text. They see such history as, in a positive way: “Blurring the boundaries between personal reminiscence, cultural comment and social history, paying attention to the overlap between history and fantasy, using popular entertainment, reading official histories between the lines and against the grain...” (Spence & Holland, 1990: 9). In this context difficulties become, instead, opportunities to explore how history is defined.

Such an approach contrasts dramatically with much of the work on comics that has previously occurred. The majority is educational and concerned with informing parents about the author’s opinions of the merits, or otherwise, of specific titles. Much writing on the comic book is also tied in with moral panics about the supposed influence that this material has on young readers. This is clear in the work of Pumphrey in the 1950s and 1960s, who developed an interest in comics as part of the Comics Campaign Council. Seeing them as a danger Pumphrey aimed to refocus children from comics onto periodicals whose “producers are not satisfied with mere entertainment” (Pumphrey, 1964: 35). His reports included some material from questionnaires sent to schools and completed by children about their reading, but adult judgement gets precedent. This deplores the existence of the material, he accepts that it exists and that children will read it, and so attempts to minimize the damage through suggesting censorship or intervention by parents, librarians and teachers in children’s reading.

Such concern is predominantly for the male reader but Connie Alderson (1968) looks at reading for teenage girls from an educational perspective in which textual analysis of issues of Trend (City Magazines, 1959), Jackie and Valentine was juxtaposed with questionnaire and interview material. Mass media, exemplified by the “pop scene” and magazines for teenagers and women, is seen as a pernicious influence upon girls at secondary modern schools in terms of both literacy and achievement. This is seen as compounded by the education system failing to develop girls’ critical skills. Alderson asserts that: “We shall continue to have two nations as far as enjoyment of what is valuable and lasting in the arts is concerned as long as we have a system of education where children are segregated at 11 and the majority become young workers at 15. A developing taste for what is good in a child of 16 can be reinforced, but where no initial flowering is possible there can be no strengthening and the child is most vulnerable to the pressures of all that is bad in mass media.” (Alderson, 1968: 112)

In the case of the 1988 Survey of comics & magazines for young people, from Camden Libraries and Arts, the ‘problem’ of comics is racism and sexism, as well as poor writing. Thus the survey is very much in line with thinking about books for children in the early years of the current women’s movement. Rosemary Auchmuty’s (1992) discussion of the school story also notes this tendency in early second wave feminism. “In the educational sphere feminists launched an attack on ‘sex-role stereotyping’ in the classroom and children’s reading material, considered to be damaging to both sexes, in the hope and expectation that the removal of sexist imagery and its replacement by sexually interchangeable role models would create a climate of true educational opportunity” (Auchmuty, 1992: 18).

More recently, Elaine Millard, discussing differences in boys and girls reading, touches briefly on the comic. While persisting in seeing it as a stage before ‘proper’ (i.e. text-only) reading, she is keen to distance herself from previous negative perspectives on the comic, criticizing the Whitehead, Capey, Maddren and Wellings report on reading for describing the comic as “a time-consuming drug” (Whitehead

et al, 1977: 255). Between the 1950s and the 1990s, the outright hostility of earlier reports turns to grudging acceptance of a limited number of titles.

Whilst educational studies of children's reading tends to denigrate the comic; histories of comics tend not to focus on material for girls. Roger Sabin's Comics, comix and graphic novels, for instance, devotes one chapter largely on British publications to girls and the comic. However, he does feel that girls' comics and girl readers in Britain, "should not remain a forgotten story" (Sabin, 1996: 81). This reflects the as yet limited amount of work on all audiences for the comic book, as well the limits of work on publications for girls and female audiences in particular. What is also apparent is the perception that girls' stuck largely with material aimed at them. In my research it is clear that girl readers actual reading practices involved comics that were targeted at boys, those which maintained an evenly split readership and a range of other texts as well. Thus, the academic focus on Jackie and Bunty, whilst admittedly the most popular titles for girls, does not acknowledge the varied nature of choices readers made, or how they related to their chosen texts.

The interviews offer some clear perspectives on the comic book for girls. Certain themes emerged amongst those interviewees who identified themselves as having been readers, often involving concerns as much as pleasures. Favourite titles often, but not always, included Bunty and Jackie which as suggested above, have been seen as icons of girlhood for both academics and the majority of interviewees, with many reading the former as younger girls and the latter as teenagers. The enthusiasm shown in interview was also visible in the press coverage of Bunty's 40th birthday, reflecting its position as the, then, last survivor of the form. The tone mixed celebration with a slight uneasiness, in that this was a rare occasion of focus on girl culture. Some reports gently mocked the 'jolly-hockey-sticks' stories without looking more carefully at the comic. The exception to this was an enthusiastic edition of On These Days (Radio Four, 17/1/98) that took care to look at a range of stories and did not make assumptions about the readership beyond assuming their enthusiasm. It seemed however, to imply that all girls had embraced Bunty, allowing limited space for criticism.

Beyond the educational and historical accounts of comics lies research in girl's culture that engages with girls as readers of comics, and comics produced for girls. Angela McRobbie (1978,1981,1984,1991), Valerie Walkerdine (1984,1990,1997), and Martin Barker (1984,1989,1993,1997) focus predominantly on the 1970s and 1980s, the British comic book or magazine and, to varying degrees, readers. In writing about Bunty and Jackie accounts by McRobbie, Barker and Walkerdine are often intertwined. Their rather different perspectives on the material tie in with some aspects of what readers had to say about the form, but do not account for the overwhelming majority reading of these texts as offering positive pleasures and active role models. The readers' memories and concerns revealed in interviews were reflected in this academic writing, but sometimes added other possible readings of the texts. This emphasizes how important textual analysis of the material can be, but also how it can benefit from being balanced by empirical work.

Walkerdine, whose fascination with these comics was that she could not see them as "the worst, most offensive and stereotyped literature around" (Walkerdine, 1997: 46), used a psychoanalytic approach in analyzing texts argues that comics like Bunty act as an "ideological preparation for adolescent sexuality" (Walkerdine, 1990: 87). Their main role is in preparing the girl for the model of heterosexuality offered by romance publications like Jackie, thus talking, Walkerdine suggests, to girls' desires, dreams, hopes and ambitions. These periodicals are part of a system of implicit guidance "...as to how young girls may prepare themselves to be good enough to 'win' the glittering prizes: the man, the home, the adventure, and so forth" (Walkerdine, 1990: 90). She saw them as classic fairy tales with happy endings that also produce the heroine and the reader as suffering, often orphaned, victims. Walkerdine argues that selflessness and helpfulness are central: "anger signifies as wholly negative...nor is rebellion ever sanctioned" (Walkerdine, 1990: 96). The stories locate bad desires and anger elsewhere, as in a story about a girl who performs evil acts under the influence of a glove puppet (Walkerdine, 1990: 93) and activity is equated with selfishness. The reader is involved in an emotional struggle to achieve the passivity related to rescue, goodness and eventual success.

These conflicts and miseries in Bunty lead the reader within a few years, Walkerdine argues, (Walkerdine, 1990: 98) to the solution of reneging on sisterhood and turning to heterosexual romance as offered by Jackie. This leads into the work done by McRobbie assigning this publication considerable ideological power. Here however, the importance of the form that the stories take is minimised, and the continuity of Jackie with magazines for women is emphasised over that of its relationship with girls' comics. Her position was originally that; "Within the world of Jackie what we find is a cloyingly claustrophobic environment where the dominant emotions are fear, insecurity, competitiveness and even panic"(McRobbie, 1991: 84). Here too, the focus was the text, analysing it using semiology to identify codes in the stories and other aspects of the magazine. These can be summarised as romance, personal/domestic life, fashion/beauty and pop music (McRobbie, 1991: 93). Primary themes were the need to get a man and not trust other women who stab the heroine, and the reader, in the back. McRobbie argued that the intention was to create; "A systematic critique of Jackie as a system of messages...an ideology which deals with the construction of teenage femininity" (McRobbie, 1991: 82). In presenting a generalised girlhood where romance and distrust are the main arenas "Jackie asserts a class-less, race-less sameness, a kind of false unity which assumes a common experience of womanhood or girlhood" (McRobbie, 1991: 84). Thus, the problem for young women readers is isolation in real life, compounded by the lack of emphasis on working together in the stories. Difficulties are characterised as to do with the behaviour of individuals, and solutions as assuring conformity to a traditional female role. This is confirmed by the Problem Page which both "depends upon, exploits and offers a solution to the isolation of women" (McRobbie, 1997: 195).

Both of these sets of arguments and approaches became part of a dialogue between the above authors and Barker. Barker challenged Walkerdine's claims about emotional reorganisation as the comics' main function, arguing that the happy endings in the two comics she used as her sample were mostly accidental outcomes. The action, or rather, inaction, of the heroine, is irrelevant. A variation is that an outsider may enhance the heroine's understanding of what is going on, enabling her to solve the problem herself. Thus both psychological tools and choice of sample are criticised and Barker argues, "In as much as there may be ideology in these stories...it is in the stressing of self knowledge" (Barker, 1989: 231). This emphasis on knowledge rather than desire comes from the reader sharing the frustrations of the story, but knowing more than the character, allowing some sense of mastery. To Barker, the stories in Bunty and Tracy (DC Thomson, 1979) represent "unresolved dramas of the class-experience of working class girls" (Barker, 1989: 233). He states that girls have many restrictions and duties and that "along with these restrictions goes also an ideological instruction manual telling them that this is their proper lot" (Barker, 1989: 231). Further, as in the case of the Judy story Nothing Ever Goes Right! in which the heroine dies having changed many lives, the unhappy ending is possible, although producers shied away from it when this story was eagerly embraced by readers. This suggests that death rather than romance might be the appropriate resolution to the dramas.

Walkerdine reviewed and extended this debate is around the issue of class, taking Barker to task over his view that her argument "...twisted the class messages of the stories into one of gender and sexuality" (Walkerdine, 1997: 48). Whilst accepting the need for production history and class specificity she argued in turn that Barker "...is pointing to something important, but also conveniently ignoring the place of femininity and of the place of the psychological in girls' struggles."(Walkerdine, 1997: 49) She feels his depiction of the working class girl as victim denies womens' class mobility and their traditional and other ambitions. "The comics for Barker are examples of grim realism, whereas I read them as anti-realist texts"(Walkerdine, 1997: 50). She develops an argument about how what might act as empowering fantasy to some working class girls, may be read as sexist by their middle-class equivalents and that these two positions are often in constant play.

Barker also challenged McRobbie, suggesting that girls' lack of power does not mean they are more open to media influence. Whilst McRobbie speaks about how the publisher, "attempts to win consent to the dominant order- in terms of femininity, leisure and consumption" (McRobbie, 1991: 87), for Barker the magazine is not an ideological bloc imprisoning the reader. In support, he offers his own textual analysis and refers to another piece of McRobbie's research, this time ethnographic. In 'The culture of working class girls' (McRobbie, 1991) the role of Jackie seems to be communal. Far from encouraging competition

between girls, it is used to signal boredom at school and is central to a resistance of boys and authority. The way the reader uses the text undermines the possible ideological implications. Barker signals this shift as significant. The actual rather than implied reader and the resulting impact on the way the text is interpreted is central to my interviews with readers whose stories more often focused on how they used these texts rather than what was in them.

McRobbie's later work acknowledged the power of the reader, but predominantly discussed Elizabeth Frazer's response to her work, rather than Barker's: "Frazer (1987) demonstrated that my own earlier work on Jackie magazine wrongly assumed that ideology actually worked in a mechanical, even automatic kind of way. By carrying out interviews with groups of Jackie readers, Frazer showed that instead of accepting the meanings, the girls actually negotiated them, arguing with the magazines and taking issue with what they were saying." (McRobbie, 1997: 195) The presentation of empirical data, in the form of transcripts of discussions moved debate with regard to publications for girls to the way in which texts may be used and talked about by readers. This research, concerned with current readers of the form rather than with memory, confirmed that mismatches existed between what texts taught and what readers learnt.

In 1997, McRobbie returned to Jackie, comparing its contents to that of the new girls' magazines. In doing so she asserted that the focus on women's and girls' magazines, as exemplified by Janice Winship (1987), had been so central that it amounted to "part of the history of the development of feminism in the academy" (McRobbie, 1997: 190). Referring specifically to questions of pleasure as enabling feminists to reassess various popular cultural forms: "also pointed to the political opportunities that seemed to arise in gaining pleasure from, for example, autonomous, even clandestine, readings of romantic novels" (McRobbie, 1997: 195). The strength in this tradition is in both the textual analysis that it includes and in the emphasis on work with readers, whilst the latter is largely missing from writing on comics. Whilst sharing this combination, talking to women about their reading practices as girls necessitates, as I have suggested, turning to other feminist research in terms of methodology.

Academic account and memory tally in according the comic's importance as part of the interviewee's childhood. This discussion occasionally expanded to compare the role of the comic with that of text based books. In one discussion (28/7/98) books were described as more important, in that 'they stay with you' and have wider significance, but comics 'somehow seem more connected to who you were at the time'. They were felt to be about the child self in a way that books are not. Whilst ephemeral, or perhaps because of that, the memories they evoke were seen as very directly related to experiences at a certain age, and especially at points of transition, such as approaching puberty.

Further, interviews suggested that reading material for older girls, such as the romance comics and Jackie did suggest ways of dealing with the possibility of relationships at an age when 'you are looking for clues'. This was contrasted with books which were not generally helpful when 'you had to work out where you fitted in' (28/7/98). In several discussions it was argued that these texts, whilst the reader may have chosen to reject them, were one of the few sources of information about adolescence, particularly for those women who were the first generation of teenagers. Rather than identifying them as training texts, readers recalled their desperation to find any information at all about 'growing up'.

Readers did feel that their comics represented them, or some kind of ideal self. Jackie, for instance, was named after children's writer Jacqueline Wilson, when she worked in the firm's offices as a young woman, reputedly because she seemed the type of girl who readers might aspire to be. This ties in with McRobbie's suggestion that, "Jackie is both the magazine and the ideal girl" although it is clear from her analysis of the texts that this could be seen as a very dubious model. In addition to wanting to be the kind of girl that the overall comic represented in the case of Bunty and similar titles, many also felt very close to many of the characters they discussed. There was a distinct view that the comics offered positive role models. Many readers characterised the comics as offering aspirations and images they were inspired by, and which have stayed with them all their lives. These included Valda, an immortal who took strength from the sun in Mandy (DC Thomson, 1970), Lettice Leaf, a schoolgirl character who despite being disaster prone usually managed to save the day and Belle of the Ballet in Girl.

Whilst most studies of this material emphasize the way in which the comics work towards reader conformity and cast the characters as victims there was considerable investment by readers in the notion of rebellion. Many of the characters were remembered as rebelling against something and the rich girls, fighting against their stuffy families to follow their dream were as positive as those overcoming poverty to achieve ambitions. The characters in Bunty who suffered were read not as training the reader, but as either heroically tolerant 'I'd have killed that family' (10/8/99) or hopelessly 'wet' (21/9/97). It is a model that clearly sees these characters as victim-heroes almost as Carol Clover suggests in her account of the horror film, although fighting here against less obvious monsters.

Although many of the stories do focus on suffering and passivity as leading to reward, there are others which show female protagonists as active, usually through 'acceptable' (and middle-class) activity, such as ballet, riding, and later gymnastics (which was much more accessible across class), a theme commented on by several interviewees. Although some saw this as profoundly limiting the imaginative possibilities for the girl reader, others saw this as a positive depiction of girls as physical. In addition, the Bunty celebration of the late 1990s focused on even this notion as a radical one, saying that girls can be active rather than conforming to a 'high heeled and fragile notion of womanhood'. This account ignored the older heroines of Girl who were replaced with schoolgirls, but is in accord with comic book historian Trina Robbin's comments in conversation that from an American point of view the British comics showed girls images of things it was possible for them to do.

These comics did offer other pleasures, particularly that they were something that many adults were uncomfortable about. One interviewee spoke of the romance comics Valentine and Romeo as 'illicit, it was considered naughty to read them' (28/7/98). Comics of all kinds had the appeal of being something of which adults did not approve. Readers identified comic reading as a small rebellion although not necessarily clear about why this was the case. For most readers this naughtiness was as far as they needed to go, although many read their brothers or other male relatives comics as well. It is telling that comic reading was always a secret from someone, often from parents, but sometimes from peers and later from boys. For some readers, the pressure to read specific titles or none at all, depending on peer group or partner was seen as an important reason to stop reading.

Another group who had simply been forbidden to read comics also reported this notion of the comic as forbidden fruit. This took the importance of comic reading as a rebellious statement a step further and was a pattern that was quite common. Many girls who became enthusiastic readers of these comics talked about the difficulties of trying to sneak what they wanted to read past parents. Their enthusiasm was clearly partly due to the opposition. Sometimes ownership was enough, as one reader reported 'I remember the thrill of getting it, but wasn't bothered about reading it' (6/8/99). In general, the parental attitude towards the girls' comic, along with the huge majority of others, and especially non-British ones, was to consider them inherently unacceptable reading, often using the term 'lower class'. The exceptions were School Friend (Amalgamated Press, 1950) and Girl that were considered 'nice' and therefore 'middle class' comics bought for girls rather than chosen by them. In seeking out the forbidden there was usually collusion with an adult, usually a grandparent or aunt. This shows how economic control was also part of the experience of comic reading. This might mean not being able to buy any at all, but often meant that choice was vetted and 'unsuitable' material weeded out. Many interviews focused on the difficulty of getting access to material when pocket money had to be spent on 'approved reading'.

In contrast, a significant group did not associate the comic for girls with positive memories. One interviewee said that what was upsetting was that there was 'no choice' (9/7/98). She could remember being pressured by her parents into reading specific comics that were approved of and thinking that she would rather be reading something else. Her objections were, she recalled, about the comics being 'girly' and 'mostly posh'. This reader tried her brother's superhero comics and read them for quite some time, before giving up on comics entirely. All those who had negative memories of the British comics remember being desperate to find some other option.

For readers who had rejected the girl's comic another perceived source of tension was this peer pressure. Where reading communities existed, the role of Jackie for instance was as important as discussing what had

been seen on the television. The consensus on what was acceptable meant that some readers kept reading the girls' comic, largely without pleasure, as a cover. In effect, this was a form of 'passing'. Thus, the issue of gender, of appropriate reading for a girl of a specific age, policed by both parents and peers was central to their memories. A number of people interviewed said that they were told they could not have a range of comics, often including the Dandy or Beano on the basis that 'these were for boys' (3/8/99).

This negativity on the part of many readers also seemed to be partly tied to the way that British comics and readership were often divided along class lines. Clearly, the producers had a target audience in mind for most comics and it was particularly the case with comics like Bunty which were specifically designed and aimed at children who were working class. Yet in Bunty the anchor story was The Four Marys, the boarding schools story par excellence, a great contrast with the many heroines in the title who had a tendency to suffer stoically. So the stories were more varied than those of the previous generation of comics which had targeted what were identified as middle-class interests, but this could be criticised as limited to offering as aspirational what had been offered as a mirror. In particular, the boarding school remained as the centre of social definition, a place where nice girls stick up for their friends. Those rejecting these comics identified all titles as 'posh', or for 'posh' girls in being about ballerinas, ponies, tennis and private schools. Whilst for some the activities were achievable, for others they served to emphasize a sense of exclusion, 'I felt out of it' (9/7/98). Although there were other stories included, it was those on the themes above that were focused upon in memory.

Many parents saw the comic format in general as a lower class medium, but many girls saw them as representing different class interests. This was as much about the title read than what went on inside. There was not necessarily agreement between parents, readers and producers about how titles were perceived, although there was agreement about one. In a recent discussion, I told someone I had read Girl annuals, and her response was to say that I was more posh than I seemed. This memory of twenty years previously gives a hint as to how for the girl reader the comics you read might have class implications. Girl often acted as a flashpoint in discussions with readers in their late forties and above. Divisions often centered on price and paper quality, with Girl being very glossy, more expensive and using more colour printing than later titles like Bunty that were mostly printed in black and white.

Girl, Bunty and Jackie became the yardsticks against which readers of particular generations positioned their own reading, seeing what they read as marking them out as a certain type of girl or from a certain class. Those who saw the comic for girls negatively felt that this was constricting. Certainly most of the stories cast girls in caring roles with children, animals and people in need. Most of the textual analysis of British girls' comics, as we have seen, focuses on the way that they were meant as training for girls in how to behave if they came from a certain class. The women who disliked them most read them as training tales on how to be a good girl, how to fit in and what to aspire to. They were read as binding you in, not as liberating.

There was also a third position that emerged in interviews. Here, whilst the producers and some of the readers saw these as very much class bound productions, other readers say that they read without consciousness of class and identified with stories about all-girl schools. Even if they did not go them they accepted, or suspected, that "someone somewhere lived like that"(22/7/98B). They also accepted this because that was how all school stories worked, in comics, in Enid Blyton and in the Chalet School. The assertion was that 'everyone read them' and that there were no divisions (22/7/98B). In talking to readers about these comics, then, there are divisions similar to those between academics. However, what these analyses fail to account for is those who saw this material as offering active models and made a reading of some of the characters as inspirational. As seen, one set of readers actually read these figures as heroic and active. The twin perspectives of Walkerdine and Barker mirror what some readers remembered about how they felt about the comic. This was as true of those who read the comic as a pleasurable text as those who found these British girl's comics a depressing experience.

The research flagged up in this paper is to be further developed through textual analysis and in looking in more depth at the reader interviews. I am very conscious at this stage of needing to separate readers and comics into generations and clearly charting the relationships different ages of reader had with these texts. I

am also aware that the relationship between reading specific titles and class awaits further exploration. As ongoing research, a final evaluation is not possible at this time, as new information shifting conclusions and developing discussions emerges all the time. However, whilst in some ways problematic for the researcher, I feel that grasping the nettle of experience is proving illuminating in understanding the girls' comic and how the readers responded to it. Consumption of the girls' comic in Britain has been a complex pattern of pleasure and pain dependant on access, peer group, family, education and class and motives in reading or rejecting such publications have been equally complicated.

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