

The Irony of ‘Cool Club’: the place of comic book reading in schools.

Introduction

What do you think other people think of people who read comics?

Honestly? I don’t think they think we’re that cool.

Is that why you call yourselves the ‘Cool Club’? With some irony?

Well, yeah.

It is the first lesson of the day and I am in the school’s fiction library with my fourth year class – it is our designated reading period. The boys and girls disperse to different sides of the room as usual; on the boys’ side four sit around a small circular table reading graphic novel adaptations of classic literary texts. They are silent, relaxed – blazers off, legs outstretched – and utterly engrossed. The librarian looks over once or twice; finally, with a distinct note of sarcasm in her voice, she says, ‘Nice to see you boys stretching yourselves.’ Two of them look up briefly; one blows a hair out of his eye, the other twitches his nose, then they go back to reading.

To set the context a little more: this was what we called a ‘top set’ class and these were clever boys who were good at English – the subject I was responsible for teaching them at the time. The librarian had been given the hard sell on graphic novels by the libraries’ representative and had finally relented, purchasing a range of adaptations against what seemed her better instincts. In addition, the library contained a very small selection of other comic books that had been collected over time; these included Spiegelman’s *Maus*, a couple of *Simpsons* comics and some Shakespeare adaptations. They were often read in library lessons or lunch times but rarely taken out. The boys in question were able and discerning readers who could, and did, read ‘quality’ literature. So, I take the librarian’s point – shouldn’t they actually have been reading the original *Jekyll and Hyde*, the real *War of the Worlds*? The boys would, in turn, have challenged the presence of the graphic novels in the library in the first place: ‘If you don’t want us to read them, why do you stock them?’ The fact is of course, from the librarian’s point of view, that the adaptations were not stocked for these kinds of pupils, but for those struggling to read. They were not supposed to be light reading for ‘clever’, but ‘lazy’, boys; the comics were there to encourage and motivate, to facilitate the reading experience for pupils in ‘bottom set’ classes.

This incident seemed, for me, to throw into relief many of the issues around the place occupied by comic books¹ in schools – the possible advantages, disadvantages; the prejudices of both staff and pupils themselves. It seemed that the traditional perception, in the Anglo-American world, of comics as either ‘harmful’ or ‘harmless’ trash (Pumphrey in Barker, 1984) was coming into conflict with the rising view of these texts as aids to literacy. In this instance, I chose to remain distant: neither challenging the pupils for reading them nor challenging the librarian’s perception of the value of the comic books themselves. Perhaps this was because I

¹ The term ‘comic book’ here covers both comics and graphic novels; there is overlap in my use of these terms in this article. While I am aware that this might be contentious, I have taken my cue from the ethnographic subjects in the study who spoke of them collectively as belonging to the same medium and culture of reading.

didn't know exactly where I myself stood in relation to all these arguments and points of view. The pupils knew that I read and enjoyed comics and graphic novels too; one of them had borrowed my copy of *Watchmen*; another had discussed *The Killing Joke* with me previously. They also knew that I was running an extra-curricular Graphic Novel Reading Group on Tuesday lunchtimes. In one respect it would have looked hypocritical of me to contest their chosen reading matter for that period. On the other hand, as their English teacher, of course I would have preferred them to be reading Stevenson's version of *Jekyll and Hyde*.

There has been much press recently about the introduction of comics and graphic novels into Higher Education. They are now part of the undergraduate English course at Dundee University and Napier University is offering a course in the composition of graphic novels as part of their Creative Writing MA. The University of Creative Arts in South East England runs a BA in Graphic Storytelling and Comic Art. In North America there are various colleges (Savannah College of Art and Design; Minneapolis College of Art and Design; University of Quebec) which offer courses on creating comics and a National Association of Comics Educators who advocate the teaching of comics alongside more conventional literary texts. Despite this, however, comics in Britain and parts of North America are still tinged with outdated prejudices about their childish nature. "Holy academia, Batman! Scots universities offer courses in comics" was the headline of a recent article in the *The Times*, re-inscribing the view of comics as juvenile and kitsch in its evocation of the 1960s television series (Maxwell: 2009). It is important to see the cultural limits of such prejudices; in France, Japan and much of South America, comics are taken seriously, read by adults and exist in current school curricula (Bitz 2009: 15; Gravett 2004: 13; Rubenstein 1998: 13). But it is the secondary/high school environment, where picture books and illustrated texts are less commonly used and are unusual within the confines of an English lesson, which interests me here. The small body of literature on comics and education is often by, and almost exclusively for, practitioners and as such, focuses on *how* to, rather than *why* to, use them (Cf: Thomson 1983, Cary 2004, Bucky Carter 2007, Thompson 2008, Thurman and Hearn, 2010). Comics are regarded as tools, either for engaging pupils in the content of the curriculum, or as a form of social cohesion, particularly in projects where pupils are involved in creating comics of their own. The latter, it is argued, raise self-perception and belief amongst those pupils with low self-esteem.² Some argue that comics are a useful bridge for pupils accessing a new language, or that they are helpful in conveying complex political and moral issues to younger readers, both as support tools and as ways of stretching more able learners. Throughout the descriptions of these applications there are assertions and claims that literacy is improved. Bitz, for example, argues that 'in the process of creating comics, students are extending literary pathways that, in the end, address the basic literacy concepts we're all trying to get at.' (Bitz in Viadero 2009). Hence comic books in education are often targeted at groups with traditionally low literacy levels: white working class boys, underprivileged urban ethnic minorities and so on. None of the claims made for

² The largest and most successful of such projects was initiated by Michael Bitz and his Comic Book Project in the United States, one example of which is described in *Manga High: Literacy, Identity and Coming of Age in an Urban High School* (2009). Examples in the United Kingdom include a Rotherham secondary school's comic *Fool's Gold*, details of which are described in Ritchie (2009).

comics have been proved or explored in detail.³ Yet there is a whole industry of comic book adaptations of classic literature and educational policy touts them as acceptable ‘texts’.⁴ While the most interesting discussions of comics and education are those by critics who are also comics enthusiasts themselves, (see Gibson 2008, 2009) they too admit that more work needs to be done if the claim that literacy is improved is to be verified.⁵ However, other than Martin Barker (1984, 1989), none of these critics consider the social context of comic book reading in any detail.⁶ It is this which I wish to begin exploring in this paper through an analysis of my work in a Scottish secondary school.

The school, which I will call Meredith’s, is a large, co-educational, independent secondary school in an affluent area of Edinburgh. Through a foundation it supports the education of pupils from less privileged backgrounds. One in ten pupils at the school are currently on financially assisted places; as well as this, the school offers a number of full academic scholarships. Most pupils live locally and come from middle class, economically comfortable, if not wealthy, families. Meredith’s has its own junior school situated on the same campus in a nearby building and the vast majority of pupils in the secondary school have come up from Meredith’s upper primary. The campus also includes a games stadium and large playing pitches. Sport, particularly rugby and hockey, are important in the culture of the school; the range of extra-curricular activities available is highly valued by both parents and pupils.

Over the six years I worked in this school I had been involved in various extra-curricular clubs; on this occasion my own interest in comics and the rise of the graphic novel, as well as an inspiring talk from Mel Gibson at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2009, persuaded me to attempt to set up a Graphic Novel Reading Group. My idea was a lunchtime meeting where we would discuss a graphic novel while enjoying tea and biscuits. I placed a notice in the school bulletin (produced every day and read out by form teachers before assembly) and waited to see who would turn up to a meeting. Initially, five pupils came along (four boys and one girl). All were from

³ In fact, the claim that comics are a good way to make pupils who do not ordinarily read, interested in reading has been rather disproved. For instance, a 1996 study in the United States (Ujii & Krashen in Viadero 2009) showed that pupils who read comics also read more conventional books; comics were neither a replacement for texts regarded as more challenging, nor were they attractive to those who did not read anyway. This is corroborated by further research conducted by Gibson (2008:33).

⁴ For instance, the literacy section of Scotland’s recent Curriculum for Excellence includes ‘comics, newspapers and magazines’ in its ‘Examples of Texts’ (2004:6).

⁵ Gorg Mallia (2007: 3) goes one step further and attempts to prove that the comic form can indeed be a ‘direct contributor on the cognitive level’ to the process of learning. In a small-scale experiment conducted with secondary school pupils in Malta, Mallia designed his own comic strip version of a commonly taught text. He then compared the effect of this with a text only version and an illustrated version. He found that the pupils were able to recall the versions with picture text combinations more effectively but also that the added dimension of the comic strip was more stimulating because it told a story in ‘continuously paced pictures’. (2007: 6)

⁶ Gibson’s (2000) work on “rebellious reading” and the “cult” status of comics argues that these are important factors in their appeal. Bitz suggests that his Comic Book Project actually improved the literacy skills of pupils *because* it took place out of school and was perceived by pupils as an ‘alternative’ activity, however, does not develop this any further. (2009: 37-8).

the same year group (fifth year, so approximately sixteen years old), and all seemed to know each other. As time went by these core members grew to eight and then nine, as they talked other friends who read comics into coming along. The last pupil to join the group was a girl who read manga but was also an enthusiastic Batman fan. She accidentally walked into one of the sessions and was intrigued by the reading matter. Two male members of staff who enjoyed reading comics and heard about the Group also came along to some of the sessions. On one occasion two first year pupils attended the group, made some suggestions for reading, and then did not return, perhaps intimidated by the older pupils. The resulting group of pupils, the 'Cool Club' as they came to call themselves, had an established but covert history of reading comics; they were intelligent, articulate pupils (three out of the nine were on academic scholarships to the school) who tended not to participate in class discussion, or many of the extra-curricular activities on offer. Most of them were readers of ordinary novels; some had a particular affinity with fantasy and science fiction. Two of the boys, in particular, had sophisticated reading histories, having completed texts such as *Ulysses*, *The Castle* and *Crime and Punishment* in the past year. Interestingly, none of this information came from the pupils themselves but from their friends; much of the reading that these pupils did was 'hidden'. While some were in top set English classes, for others English was their weakest subject. Many had a bias towards Mathematics, Science or IT. All except one of them played computer games regularly and saw their comic reading as a connected activity; much of their comic reading took place on-line. They were consistently enthusiastic, unwaveringly loyal and deeply grateful. Individuals came to the Group meetings, even if they had not managed to read the text; most still keep in touch with me, despite my departure from the school. To those familiar with comic book readers, some of these characteristics might not be remarkable; however, what struck me, almost immediately, was that these were not the kinds of pupils some educationalists would have associated with the reading of comics and graphic novels. These were not weak or reluctant readers; not only did they already read novels but they had an intuitive understanding of the differences between conventional literary texts and graphic novels.

'A different way of reading': the values of form

The members of the Group traced the beginnings of their comic reading to a variety of sources. Andrew, who had started reading *The Beano* and *The Dandy* as a young child, said he had read *Watchmen* 'Twice. Maybe three times.' as a teenager. Adam, a latecomer to the group, enjoyed re-reading the *Tintin* books he had encountered as a child, 'Although you know roughly what's going to happen, you can still appreciate it again.' For Robert, a mild-mannered and shy pupil, it had been Nintendo magazines where it had all begun. Both Scott and Su had been drawn to manga first: Scott's aunt had brought some manga as a present from Japan which had started what he described as an 'obsession'; Su, the only non-white member of the Group, encountered it on family holidays to China. Most of them admitted to reading comics that weren't very 'good'; Su told me that she used to read comics that "were like drivel, like really bad" before she joined the Group. Fergus, a chatty, enthusiastic pupil, was the most recent convert to comics, having only begun reading them a month or so prior to the inception of the Group. There was a relaxed atmosphere in the meetings and the pupils would often digress and talk of other things: that time Jamie fell asleep in Biology because 'we weren't learning anything' or complex conversations about *Pokemon* that I found hard to follow. But whatever reason these pupils had for

starting to read comics, they came to understand that what was essentially appealing about the medium was not its content, but its form.⁷

The pupils articulated this appeal in many ways: the speed with which comics could be read, the combination of pictures and text, and the layout of panels. ‘If you’ve read books for ages,’ said Su, ‘and then you read graphic novels, it’s like a nice break and then you read them and then you go back to a novel. You like reading novels again...it’s so different.’ Adam put it this way, ‘I just don’t think the nature of them is the same. You achieve things in very different ways through graphic novels; ...so for ... example in *When the Wind Blows* you have a switch every now and then to some large chalk picture of some dark thing happening in a distant country, or that kind of thing.’ The members of the Group were able to describe at some length what they thought was particular about reading comics. Scott, who had been inspired by his parents’ collection of old comics, had grappled with Kafka’s *The Trial* in its original form. He recommended the graphic novel version to the reading group. When I asked him why he was able to read it more easily he replied,

It wasn’t that it was easier in the sense of dumbing it down, it was just that it was more accessible to read...it was visual, it felt shorter. Visual symbolism for me is always much easier although it can sometimes be even more simple if it is written down but...visual things have like visual contexts, look like other things...

The distinction Scott makes between these texts being more ‘accessible’ rather than ‘easier’ points to his understanding of the different *kind* of skill required to read the complex visual narrative of a graphic novel. He goes on, ‘once you’ve got hold of the visual idea of symmetry in a comic book you suddenly notice it all a lot easier.’ Su, too, identifies reading graphic novels as a particular kind of skill acquired over time,

If say I hadn’t read graphic novels before and was given like *V for Vendetta* or *Watchmen* or something then I might find it like really weird or hard to read but because...you’ve had that experience of reading graphic novels before you like, you go straight into it, you’re like fine with it.’

The active role of the reader in making meaning and seeing connections is also acknowledged by the pupils in the tension between what is included and excluded in the medium. Su, trying to articulate the differences between novels and graphic novels, explained,

When you’re reading a book you form the pictures in your mind whereas when you’re reading a graphic novel the pictures are already there and because it’s a different way of reading things...because it’s not like ‘he said’ or ‘she said’ or ‘he walked into the room and picked up a cup’ or something – it’s there in the picture.

She goes on, ‘It’s like, you sort of know more things about the story, more like details about the story come out to you than in a book. And you sort of feel like, you, I don’t know – you *know* more?’ I would suggest that the belief, as Andrew articulated it, that ‘they’re different *kinds* of reading’, links us to those theorists who wish to acknowledge comics as a serious and distinct medium in its own right.

Indeed, the original work of comics creators such as Eisner (1985) and McCloud (1994) built on by Groensteen’s more detailed theory (2007), may help us

⁷ This appears to contradict the experience of Bitz; the children he worked with were drawn to the content and characters of the manga, not the medium itself. (2009: 31)

shed some light on what these pupils experience when they read comics. I would argue that they identify the actual *process* of reading as different and that this is vital in understanding the place comic books occupy and could occupy within an educational context. While many have since argued with aspects of Groensteen's work (see Cohn 2010), it remains the most rigorous and comprehensive theory of how comics work as a 'system'. Groensteen's contention that comics are primarily a visual medium, telling stories through the interaction between panels (the smallest unit he recognizes), 'hyperframes' and 'multiframes', puts forward what is a complex process of meaning making. In comics, he argues, meaning is assigned to almost everything one sees from the empty space of the gutter to the frame of the panel; all of these require an involvement from the reader that is different in its nature to that required by a literary text. In fact, even the text/speech of comics is 'verbal'; as Hergé explained, 'it emerges graphically from the mouths of the characters' – it is, in other words, another picture. (Hergé in Groensteen, 2007:128) The text in a comic then can enhance the meaning taken from the visual symbols/pictures but, according to Groensteen, it can never supplant it, although speech balloons can be used to slow down the reader and make him/her linger on a particular panel. (2007: 10) The value that the pupils I worked with placed on comics, shown through their continued reading of the medium and faithful attendance at the Group, did rely partially on their appreciation of its complexity and difference. It is noteworthy that the most popular answer to the question, 'Which is your favourite comic/graphic novel?' was *Watchmen*, probably the most sophisticated of the texts we read and widely acknowledged for its subtle and artful exploitation of the comics medium.

Like the four boys in the library, the members of the Group were critical readers, capable of discerning the quality of a text, and of showing their *appreciation* for it. The 'visual context' of images Scott was describing in *The Trial* can be linked to what Groensteen calls 'braiding' which is 'generally founded on the remarkable resurgence of an iconic motif (or of a plastic quality)' (2007: 151). Su's expression of the classic difference between graphic novels and literary texts in terms of the information they provide would fit with Groensteen's argument that, 'the image always extends, by nature, the message that it contains.' (2007: 119) Groensteen goes on to explain that, while the picture is much 'less discriminating' than the literary text, it is always clear which pieces of information we should privilege over others; the comics creator will communicate this visually through detailing one thing, while another remains sketchy, or through the repetition of motifs and characters. We know Tintin is the most important character simply because he *appears* more often than others. However, as Groensteen notes, the way in which we read has to be altered, the image 'only furnishes answers under the condition that, modifying my regime of reading, I *look* at it like a describable, instead of *consuming* it like an utterable.' (2007: 121-2) These pupils were capable of looking at, rather than consuming, the images. 'If in an image,' said Su, 'they have subtle things in the picture that's part of the story, then you sort of have to *look* for those'. It is clear that Su, like the others, acknowledges, if she does not always choose to accept, the invitation to *look* carefully.

As well as drawing comparisons with novels, pupils made contrasts with film as a way of articulating the unique nature of the comics medium. Scott said, 'With comic books and graphic novels, you can look at an image more and they can hide things in the image more; in films it's one blink and you've missed it but in this one you can see it, and concentrate on it, and like with

the Rorschach face you can notice it properly and sort of try and work out what it is, sort of look back over again.

However, what does emerge from what the pupils told me is that they enjoyed the *choice* to slip into more analytical depth, or linger on a particular image, that a graphic novel afforded. Fergus said that with graphic novels,

You've got the pictures there as well and you can either build on that in your head or you can just keep it to that and sort of, spend as much time as you like on that, just looking at that and the words that go with it. Or alternatively, the no words that you get sometimes.

In delineating the 'readerly function' of comics, Groensteen states that because each panel is framed, the reader is invited to stop and look at what is contained within it. However, he argues, 'It is evident that this apparatus operates on the model of invitation and that it has no coercive power.' (2007: 57) Andrew told me that the appeal of manga for him was that 'it's easier to read, it's faster, to some extent' and when asked why he thought it was a faster read replied, 'I suppose it focuses more on pictures than on actual words'. As Groensteen argues, words do slow you down, but so can pictures if you take the time to 'read' them; in fact, they can slow you down much more than words because the choice to linger or not is yours and not that of the writer who carries the reader along with the momentum of a sentence. Similarly, film moves in a linear way; the duration of shots are dictated to the viewer who remains quite passive throughout the experience. The ability to control the speed at which things happen to you then appears to be an important element in the enjoyment of comics for these pupils.

It is clear that comics/graphic novels were valued for reasons that arose from the nature of their form and were connected to the ways in which they were consequently read. However, other values also emerged during the time I was running the Group. Several of the pupils identified the reading of comics as being more 'sociable' than the reading of conventional novels. This was partly due to the existence of the Group which provided a social, interactive culture around the reading of comics. As Adam pointed out, 'it's partly getting to know all the people who... have also been reading – it's partly knowing that they've read the same one as you'. However, the word 'social' seemed to mean more than just fellowship or company, it was also related to the conditions in which the texts were read. 'It's a wider thing, I think,' said Fergus, "because you can do it where you want and whenever you want and with whoever you want as well. But with novels I find you just have to stop what you're doing: 'I'm reading this. Leave me alone.'" Indeed reading and discussing graphic novels, Fergus explained, provided a further element of enjoyment simply because of what the existence of images allowed one to do:

You can sort of discuss novels but it's more like analyzing it but with graphic novels you can talk more about the illustrations. You can't really do that with novels. And you still have the analysis bit of it if it's like a deep and complex graphic novel. Like *Watchmen*.

During the Reading Group sessions there were always copies of the graphic novel being discussed around the table. This proved to be an invaluable spur to conversation as members were reminded of images or thoughts they had had while reading. But they also claimed to recall visual narratives more efficiently than verbal ones. Adam told me that, 'Graphically I think I remember them more, yeah, I think I can remember seeing a single scene in a graphic novel for a lot longer than I can remember a single scene in a book.' This means that for him, talking about what he sees, is easier than talking about what he has read. 'I think [having the pictures in

front of you/in your mind] gives you a bigger scope for *thinking* about it.’ This element of sociability extends to the fact that such texts are not only easier to discuss for these pupils, but can also be read *with* others. During one reading group session I watched Adam and Robert flick through Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (perhaps particularly suited to this kind of shared reading as it contains no text) at the same time, discussing the images as they went along and involving others in the conversation. Adam spotted a parallelism in the images and he and Scott looked back at it together. They showed it to me, ‘It reflects the first page,’ Adam told me, ‘You know how the first page is nine panels of what his life was like? That’s copied in his new lifestyle.’ So Adam’s appreciation of the ‘braiding’ in this work becomes a shared activity, he tells me about it, points it out to his friends and, importantly, he can demonstrate it to me visually so that I appreciate and acquire his knowledge. As he told me in interview about another text, ‘I was reading *Gon* (a wordless manga by Masashi Tanaka about the adventures of a baby dinosaur who has survived the ice age) through a study period with Robert sitting next to me and every now and then we’d point out something amusing and something we’d noticed in it and you couldn’t do that with a novel.’ The sharing and borrowing of comic books amongst the group also seemed to add to the ‘sociability’ of reading; books were not owned and read individually but lent, returned, passed on – the fact that the physical material itself was shared, either in the moment (as above) or over time, also lent a sense of togetherness to the group.

‘These are my kind of people’: the value of the margin

While some of the additional values of comic reading identified by the pupils can also be seen to arise from its formal aspects – the visual element that is easier to discuss and recall; the ability to read in a state of distraction; to pick and choose what is dwelled on and what is skimmed over - we are beginning to move beyond the technicalities of the form itself. Behind the efforts of Eisner, McCloud and Groensteen in proving that comics are a distinct medium is an assumption that they are somehow getting at the ‘essential’ nature of comics by identifying and naming these formal qualities. However, in this assumption, lies another one – that this essence exists prior to anything else, the reader, the social context in which reading occurs, the reputation and place of comics within a society of readers. Indeed the only kind of reader acknowledged by these theorists is the reader implied by the text.

The social and cultural context in which a text is read exists prior to the reading process itself. This means that the pupils are aware of this context *before* they become aware, over time (as their comics literacy improves) of the formal qualities of the texts. I have shown that the formal properties of comics, as distinct from both literary texts and film, were important to them. However, this is not the reason that they started to read them in the first place, nor is it the reason why they attended the Group. Unlike Barker (1989: 139) who is interested in the symbiotic relationship between the medium and its audience, I am interested in where that audience positions itself in relation to its own ‘society’ – in this case, the school. These pupils felt marginalized within the school; they live in a society, so they articulate, in which comics are also marginalized. This reality precedes any recognition of the formal qualities any comic might possess. Indeed, the fact that comics had formal qualities that could be discussed in the same way as literary texts was a realization that emerged over time. Pustz (1999: 110), writing of comic culture in the United States, defines ‘comics literacy’ as a cultural, as well as a technical phenomenon. This

'literacy' is made up of common knowledge, shared jokes and self-referential comics and constitutes a secret, enclosed world. Perhaps initially a reaction to outside antagonism this world now contains its own value systems and beliefs. It is this kind of 'literacy' – a social or cultural literacy – that I believe was at the root of the value of the 'Cool Club' for its members.

These pupils felt themselves to be at the edges of the mainstream school culture. For most their non-athleticism marked them out as different in the school and, sometimes, even within their own families. Robert told me,

I'm probably the 'geekiest' person in my family. Everyone else seems very sports orientated. My father seems somewhat disapproving that I spend so much time on my computer... Even when I'm reading something on line he'll assume it's playing.

Both Robert and Fergus identified with the character of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* who also does not fit into the model of a student prescribed by the school he attends. Fergus admired Holden's criticism of the 'classic American high school jock category... people who could be head boy or head girl. You know, the sort of relatively intelligent, good at sports, with a well-to-do family?' All of the pupils in the Reading Group had come to Meredith's from state primary schools; this and their frequent references to finances, would suggest that they did not see themselves as coming from the same class as the majority of pupils at the school. A pattern emerged in my interviews with them, a pattern that established them as excluded and explained their enthusiasm for the Group to some extent. It was from this position – the sidelines – that their comic book reading took its cue.

Like other marginalized and so-called cultish groups, this culture comes with its own stereotype. In his study of Star Trek fans, Jenkins (1992:10) identifies the stereotype of the 'Trekkie' as an obsessive and infantile 'social misfit'. Pustz sees a connection with the comic 'fanboy' – a younger male who is perhaps 'overweight, lacking in sexual experience, petty, obsessive, and completely inflexible regarding their reading matter.' (1999:73) This Anglo-American stereotype of the comic reader was deployed by the members of the Group: Su described 'the image of frizzy hair... then like band t-shirts with heavy metal bands'; Fergus spoke of 'people who collect X-Men comics... with the pocket protectors and the pens in the pockets and things like that... it's like people who aren't good with people or have some form of autism or something'; for Andrew the convention was 'somebody who typically focuses on more material things and is not very socially strong or someone who obsesses over some sort of subject area to an abnormal extent.' Their awareness of the unattractive nature of this stereotype meant that they fought against it to some extent. Many of the pupils showed some embarrassment about the fact that they attended the club. 'But, I mean,' said Scott laughing, 'is it something that you say out loud or in public that you read? Just because you're going to be stereotyped.' Robert explained that, 'When my teacher read out Graphic Novel Club there was a sort of murmured giggle from the background. I can't imagine it's a particularly socially accepted one.' Also speaking of the morning bulletin notice, Scott continued, 'I mean even the Form Teacher makes fun of it. I've never stuck my hand up for it but I always know when it's on.' Yet, as Scott went on to point out, this typecasting is difficult to avoid,

I think the people who would be embarrassed are the people who are definitely not the stereotypes, [they are] people who think they will be judged as *that* and that's part of the problem: meaning that the only people shown who like graphic novels are people who are stereotyped.

Su, the pupil who felt least marginalized within the school, kept her comic reading hidden from friends, 'I don't know anyone else that reads them – or, I didn't,' she told me. The fact that Su chose not to admit or share her enjoyment of comic reading with anybody in school implies the fact that it did not quite fit with the image she had of herself in that social context, using her Chinese background – an obvious 'difference' from others – to explain or excuse her interest in comics and manga. Pustz describes being a comic book fan as 'a source of pain' for some; it 'may make one hesitant to admit one's interest or cause the admission to be accompanied by a longer explanation.' (1999: 70). Su was happy to admit to her comic book reading eventually but it was difficult to decipher what had allowed her to do so. What was clear from what she told me was that she struggled a little to come,

When I told people that I was going to the Graphic Novel Reading Club, like – well, it sounds really bad – but like the stereotype is for people like Andrew and Jamie who go to it. And then I was like, 'Oh I'm going!' and they were like, 'Why?'

But she also affirmed, 'I don't know because for me it's [reading comics] so normal, like I don't know why other people wouldn't.' And yet, despite the 'normality' of it, Su found it difficult to own up to it in front of the rest of the school because it suggested a stereotype she was trying to avoid.

In recent years the profile of comics and graphic novels has grown substantially with film adaptations of both mainstream and alternative comic books. There are now large sections for the medium in high street book shops; there are frequent reviews of new graphic novels in newspapers and on the internet. This, and the continuing rise of academic interest, signals that comics and graphic novels are not only being taken seriously, but are beginning to enter the mainstream. I was surprised, therefore, to find that the pupils I worked with still perceived comic reading as a cultish activity; indeed they perceived comics as icons of their own marginality. But of course, like Su, there were other pupils in the school who read comics and all of us knew this. Robert told me about a boy in his class who was, 'very condescending of the club'. He continued,

I mean he, he reads so much, I mean he went out and bought tons of Batman comics just because he really liked them, but I mean, I don't know if he would muster up the courage.

Do you think it's a courage thing?

Yeah, it is. I mean for people like us, it's something that's second nature: we enjoy reading comics so we'll talk about it but, I mean, people who are more popular, and more sports orientated and more outgoing, maybe they don't want to reveal this, this taboo fact about themselves.

While comic book reading was more widespread than it would have first appeared, there were clearly two different types of comic book readers in this school: those that were willing to engage publicly in discussion about it and those who were not. Or to put it another way, those who wanted to partake of that 'geeky' comics literate culture and those who would not. For the latter - often sporty, or popular – their validation was gained elsewhere and comic book reading was pushed to the margins of their lives, carried out discretely. For the pupils in the 'Cool Club', for most of whom this was a central activity, comic reading was pushed to the margins of the school day – the lunchtime club. However, not only were they grateful that it was there at all, but the fact that it was a marginal school activity, was part of its value for them. 'Reading graphic novels in general is a geeky thing, I would say, and is likely to remain that way,' Andrew told me. Yet later in the conversation when discussing the

cultish nature of comic reading he said, 'I hope that changes. But there is an attraction in it being cultish too.' I would argue that all the pupils in the club held this ambivalent view of the value of comic book reading even if none expressed it as directly as Andrew. The comic readers Pustz worked with also seemed to enjoy the fact that comics were 'vaguely transgressive' (1999: 210) and for the creators of manga in Bitz's after-school clubs, 'butting against' conventions of the mainstream was vital and valuable. (2009:15) So for Andrew, Scott, Robert, Fergus, Su, Adam and the rest of the 'Cool Club'; they did and did not enjoy their difference from others.

The culture around comic book reading, then, and its status as marginal, is vital to the value the pupils place on comics. It is important here that my club, like the ones initiated by Bitz, was extra-curricular and took place out of normal lesson times. The fact that a relationship was built with a member of staff focusing on something shared but not part of the usual professional bounds of that relationship mattered to the pupils. I was not simply a facilitator of a club in school but, as it appeared as time went on, a member of the club who just happened to be able to put notices in the bulletin, or provide the space for the meetings, or make tea and buy biscuits. We shared and borrowed each other's books constantly; being the only one in receipt of a salary, I was often able to purchase books that the pupils could not afford. My copies, then, often did the rounds, coming back to me looking well read. I got the impression that they enjoyed borrowing them from me. As I write, my copies of *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* are still with two pupils who borrowed them months ago. It keeps the link alive somehow. The 'Cool Club' was about 'like-minded people' who shared a culture. As time wore on, we developed our own in-jokes and references; I began to sign off my e-mails to them as 'Dr Manhattan' (sad, but true) and occasionally they'd call me this down a school corridor. This insider knowledge, or as Pustz describes it, 'secret handshake' of comic culture (1999:114) constitutes the cultural wing of comics literacy – it allows a group to share an experience that others do not, because of their lack of knowledge. This specialized knowledge, he argues, is a way of validating, intellectualizing your particular activity and is instantly recognizable to those also in possession of this knowledge. As a colleague of mine who I had invited to the group because I knew he read comics, said, 'These are my kind of people.'

Conclusion

In this paper I have described some of the activity and culture established around a small extra-curricular comic book club in a secondary school. The fact that the pupils in it valued the club is clear but where exactly this value lay is more difficult to answer. I hope I have made some headway into doing so and in the process given both educationalists and comic critics something to reflect upon. The anecdote I used at the beginning is typical of the way in which comics are viewed by most adults, including those working in schools. They are regarded as inferior forms of literature (in the case of adaptations); time consuming trash (in the case of superhero comics; even the *Simpsons* comics), or perhaps worse, as pedagogic tools with no inherent value in their own right. It is evident from talking to the pupils in my Group, that some of them shared some of these prejudices. After all, they too exist in a culture which has tended to devalue comics since the 1950s. However, it is also clear that they value comics as distinct entities, as possessing unique formal qualities that can, in the best examples, be appreciated and generate the same level and amount of discussion as a

literary text. They know that, like other forms of media, there are ‘good’ comics and ‘bad’ comics out there. However, they also valued their marginal status, the insider knowledge they shared with each other, and it was *this* that drove their dedication to the Group. So, what then is the place of comic book reading in schools?

Conducting this study has shown me that it is not weak boys with low literacy skills who tend to read comics; it is, rather, highly able, often extremely articulate, and literate pupils – and not necessarily male. It has revealed that the additional literacy demanded by comics might be ‘different’ (more informed by visual or digital media) and is one which many pupils, particularly those who feel themselves to be marginalized, possess with proficiency. All of this requires more attention than I can give it in this paper. The fact that comics are better remembered, easier to discuss, ‘give you more scope for thinking’ *must* be of value in a learning and teaching context. However, using them as mere pedagogic tools would risk patronizing the kind of pupils in the Group, as was shown by the universal derision of Manga *Hamlet* – neither a good comic book, nor a good adaptation of Shakespeare was the overriding verdict. To a certain extent, the pupils’ experience of reading comics elaborates Groensteen’s theory of their form: this is a sophisticated reading process and requires a high level of skill. The logic of taking comics seriously as a medium, an art form even, would be to place them on the curriculum with other worthy texts. But this has its own problems: it would necessitate teaching pupils a whole new language with which to analyse this distinct medium, just as Groensteen has had to invent his own network of terminology. Then there is the problem presented by centralizing an activity whose value and power depends partly on its marginalization. The ‘geeks’ would lose their icon of marginality, other learners might feel, at best, perplexed. Despite these issues, I believe that the potential of comics in schools is enormous, but it is one that needs to be considered carefully, given that the act of reading comic books is so nuanced in our culture. The pupils I worked with saw themselves as part of a small group of people who valued what others de-valued; in doing so, they themselves felt valued because they were given an opportunity to express themselves intellectually and socially. The place of comic book reading in schools then, may be more complicated than is currently thought; were this club *not* taking place as an extra-curricular, ‘cultish’ activity at which most of the school laughed, it might not have had any value for these pupils. *This* perhaps is the final irony of ‘Cool Club’.

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