

Spotlight

Comic books not just 'kidstuff' to college collectors

By ELIZABETH MURRAY

Staff Writer
Many college students wouldn't be caught dead reading Batman, X-man, Archie and Friends, or Richie Rich comic books. After all, only little boys or perhaps high school students buy

comics. Wrong, said Dan Breen, owner of Second Foundation Bookstore in Chapel Hill, who asserted that comic books aren't just "kidstuff" anymore. He said that in the past ten years, comic books have been expanding their read-

ership to accommodate any reader from age 6 to 66.

"What comic publishers have accomplished as far as I'm concerned is not so much bringing more people into the store as keeping the people that were there from leaving," Breen said.

Keeping its readers used to be a problem for the comic industry, he said. "They read comics until they are about 8 or 10, and then when they hit puberty, they either decide it's kidstuff, or they don't have enough money for comics and girls, or they hold with it a little

while longer. Then they get to 18 and they say, 'Well, this is kidstuff. I've really got to put this aside.'

"In the rare instance you have somebody who will get all the way to 21 who finally says, 'This is really bad. I'm an adult and I'm still buying comics,'" he said.

In response to this problem, publishers have targeted the older crowd. "Recognizing the fact that they have this stigma attached to them of being a kid's item, independent publishers started producing more mature characters, more mature storylines," Breen said.

"A 10-year-old can read something and get the storyline, and the 20-year-old can read the same thing and understand more of the subtleties that would have escaped the other one," he said. "But that isn't to say that their enjoyment is any less. It's just different."

James Dunlop, comic specialist at Jeannie's Books Shoppe in Durham, described adult comics as those with more sophisticated plots. "Some are comics that make you think, and some are pure escapism."

Breen said many of the 'adult only' comics can be compared to 'adult only' magazines. "There are some comics that are so specifically adult that they're contained in plastic." No one under the age of 21 years is allowed to buy those at Second Foundation, he said.

About 20 to 30 percent of the titles on the rack are aimed toward those age 16 and older, Breen said. "There's enough to go around and it's similar to reading a very good piece of fiction. Assuming it has a good story line, you can read it and appreciate it for that."

"If you're a student of literature, you can read it and understand it for the roots from which it has sprung, the

storytelling tradition," he said. "Depending upon what you bring to the literature, you get a different level of enjoyment."

Although comic readership has broadened in recent years, it has encompassed mainly males, Breen said. "So far as science fiction, fantasy and comics are concerned, the participation of women is a very small minority from the point of view of people who purchase it and from the point of view of people who create it."

He said that out of Second Foundation's subscription list of 200 names, no more than 8 or 9 of them are women.

Dunlop, a Duke graduate and comic junkie himself, also said that not many women are interested in comic collecting. Even though there are more comics to choose from now, he said, not many girls or women are interested in things like G.I. Joe.

With comics ranging from 'Mickey Mouse' to 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' to 'Batman', Dunlop said, readership is diversified. "Subscribers vary from people like myself — college graduates who are continuing our hobby because we enjoy it — to others who are teenagers just getting into it. There's a comic book for everybody."

Dunlop started reading comic books when he was 10 years old and just kept up the hobby, but he said he's not sure what the attraction is for others. "Maybe it's the artwork that keeps them going and the fact that the stories are interesting," he said. "You have your good and your bad. You have some you could put up against any regular book and some that are good for a little kid."

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