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**Title:** Rising from the ashes: making spaces for new children's comics cultures in Britain in the 21st century.

**Abstract:**

This article analyses the growth of British comic publishing for children in the twenty-first century. It starts by outlining the children's comic culture of the mid to late twentieth century and some of the factors involved in its disappearance. The article looks at what changed in the early twenty-first century to alter the perceptions of comics and stimulate the growth of a new children's comic culture, making new spaces. In doing so, it looks at the rise of publishers who specialize in graphic novels and publish work for children and young people. It also looks at institutions such as comic specific events, competitions and awards and how they are spaces where children and young people can participate, developing an awareness of the wider industry, entailing some engagement with readership and constructions of childhood. It also looks at aspects of the reputation of the medium and how it has changed, arguing that, in part, it is because of the involvement of 'mainstream' publishers, universities and other institutions. Finally, the most important change is that there seems to be a shift in British attitudes towards the medium, which has moved from a profoundly negative one, to one that is more accepting.

**Keywords:**

Childhood, children's comics, publishers, spaces, Britain.

**Introduction.**

There is an increasing growth of academic interest in children's comics, both nationally and internationally, from a range of disciplines including Education and Children's Literature along with Comics Studies. What this interest involves varies, but research often engages with an analysis of the depiction of children in comics, or focuses on comparing those depictions across the world, so enabling an analysis of how constructions of childhood differ, or aspects of culture, as in Ian Gordon's (2016) *Kid Comic Strips*. What this article intends to do is to expand work around children's comics by looking at recent changes in a children's comic industry and culture in a country-specific case study, in this case, Britain. In doing so, the article suggests that a number of new spaces, physical, mental and institutional, are now open to children's comics.

When older adults in Britain think about comics published in the UK for children, they usually draw on memories of some of the weekly titles that began publication in the 1950s, alongside a small

number of earlier ones, especially *The Beano* (DC Thomson, 1938-date)<sup>1</sup>. As Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury (2006) demonstrate, this rich culture contained a range of reading options in a number of genres. Titles addressed gendered audiences, in addition to a group of nursery titles aimed at the youngest readers, which usually did not divide the audience by gender, although *Twinkle* (DC Thomson, 1968-1999) did specifically target girls. Each gendered space included narratives deemed appropriate, so girls, for instance, were offered a range of stories including nurses, ballerinas and horses, although 'spooky' stories also featured, sometimes in titles focused entirely on this kind of narrative, such as *Misty* (1978-1980, Fleetway), as discussed by Julia Round (2014)<sup>2</sup>. Boys, in contrast, as shown by James Chapman (2011), were presented with narratives that focused more on war, adventure and sports (in the latter case soccer and athletics featured extensively). There were also titles intended to appeal to both girls and boys, most often focusing on humour. However, the children's comic started to disappear from British periodical publishing in the 1980s to be mostly replaced by magazines, both physically on the shelves of retailers and in the minds of younger readers as the type of publication associated with youth. Comics largely became perceived as created elsewhere, whether the USA or Japan, or attached to specific franchises<sup>3</sup>. This article's emphasis, however, is on the resurgence of interest from creators, publishers and the public in non-franchise British-based comic strip materials aimed at children, a shift that began in around 2008. It explores how the medium has again become a focus for publishers in relation to children and young people. A number of factors are identified which contribute to the new growth of interest.

### **Setting the Scene.**

The comics of the past in Britain were typically anthologies covering a range of genres from humour to war comics, predominantly, although not entirely, created by men for both boys and girls. Despite being published and commissioned in Britain, many of the strips were drawn by artists from other countries, so the 'Britishness' of these comics is about place of publication, narrative content and the ideology informing the comics. The form of the narratives in these older comics varied from short stand-alone stories featuring recurring characters to stories that unfolded over a number of weeks or months, so these titles offered several kinds of reading pleasure. On the one hand, a sense

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<sup>1</sup> Periodical publishing for children before the 1950s focused largely on producing story papers containing text-based narratives with illustrations, not comic strip materials. The exceptions, whether published as newspaper strips, as is the case with 'The Broons' in *The Sunday Post* (1936-date), or in stand-alone comics like *The Dandy* (1937-2013), both from DC Thomson, are so embedded in British culture that they inform the thinking of some of those involved in developing comics and graphic novels today.

<sup>2</sup> There were many other types of story, but these are amongst the most common.

<sup>3</sup> This article does not, for instance, discuss Disney princess titles, which could form the basis of other articles, chapters or, indeed, books.

of anticipation, the urge to find out what happened next, was a significant motivation to keep reading. Alongside that came the pleasurable reassurance of seeing characters reappear each week. These were also often the first publications young readers bought and owned. As Mel Gibson (2015) notes, having a title of one's own delivered to the house from the local newsagent's shop generated affection and loyalty. The titles were divided into niche markets according to age and gender, as I suggest above, which meant that a reader might see material for slightly older readers as aspirational. For example, Gibson (2015) states that a girl might begin at under five years of age reading *Twinkle*, move to *Bunty* (DC Thomson, 1958-2001) and then aspire to read *Jackie* (DC Thomson, 1964-1993) a title for teenagers. These titles offered cultural constructions of girlhood, cross-cut by age, which were engaged with by real readers. Boys comics emphasised gender rather than age, including *Eagle* (1950-1969, Hulton Press/IPC), *The Hornet* (1963-1976, DC Thomson) and *The Hotspur*, which began as story paper (1933-1981, DC Thomson). In contrast, others, especially humour comics, were seen as appealing across age and gender. Further, as Chapman (2011, p.9) argues, it is the significance of these titles in older readers memories, including *The Dandy*, *Beezer* (1956-1993) and *Topper* (1953-1990) alongside *The Beano*, all from DC Thomson, that result in the dominant British cultural assumption that comics are only for children and are humorous.

Another component of the power of comics in Britain was that this was material disapproved of by some adults and professionals. The construction of the child as needing protection, and as a blank slate, was linked with moral panics about comics, and notions of media effects. This adult disapproval helped make the comic a valued part of children's culture, suggesting actual readers were aware of adult fears, and also contributed to making the medium a significant source of reading for pleasure. However, this disapproval also meant that the medium generally came under attack, as did specific comics, as discussed by Martin Barker (1984, 1989) regarding *Action* (1976, IPC). This may have contributed to the slow demise of the British children's comic, along with some publishing practices such as regularly recycling stories and combining titles.

By the 1990s, the vast majority periodicals for children were not comics, but magazines focused on a specific franchise, predominantly dominated by advertising. Some did include comic strip materials, but usually only as a minor element, with some exceptions, such as *Sonic the Comic* (1993-present, Egmont). The disappearance of the children's weekly comic market, to be replaced by magazines, was partly due, then, to the fact that publishing periodicals which focus on products is cheaper than developing and supporting those creating on-going narratives. The practices of the supermarkets in terms of charging for shelf space, given that they were a primary site for purchase, further limited space for comics given their higher production costs.

Further, far from being marketed to both children and adults, the primary target for most children's periodical publishing could be seen as adults, in that periodical publishing for children was generally framed either as a way of entertaining a bored child on a long journey, so acting as an occasional purchase and a tool for managing behaviour, or as an educational tool and thus tied to a 'testing' culture, rather than a 'reading' culture. The disappearance of comics from the space of children's culture removed a major opportunity to read engaging serial narratives. In a culture where, for example, there had been over fifty titles for girls, the most popular of which circulated 800,000 to one million per week, this could be seen as having a major impact on opportunities for reading for pleasure.

### **Testing the waters with a new weekly comic.**

One of the factors contributing to the resurgence in interest in the medium in Britain is the attempt to launch new titles, most significantly *The DFC* (David Fickling Books, 2008-2009) and *The Phoenix* (David Fickling Comics, 2012-date). The former was funded entirely by subscriptions, without any commercial advertising, and was in full colour, as is the latter, which is effectively a relaunch. Many of the same creators are involved and both titles have been published by a company best known as publisher of novels and picture books for children rather than a comic producer, thus opening up a new space for comics within publishing. The subscription model and the publisher make these comics distinctive<sup>4</sup>. In a sense, they set the scene for the other changes in relation to the medium, as it is publishers of book-length works who are now dominant in creating comic strip materials for children and young people. The model of publishing adopted with regard to these two titles was to publish stand-alone albums, an adaptation of European models, after the completion of a serial in the anthology comic, as part of what was known as 'The DFC Library'<sup>5</sup>. They have also compiled collections of the short, one page a week narratives, such as Adam Murphy's (2014) *Corpse Talk: Season 1* in which each week the narrator digs up a famous dead person and interviews them, so combining the macabre with education. The sales of the albums generated interest amongst other children's publishers in publishing graphic novels for children, creating some specific imprints, although they did not want to attempt to publish weekly comics.

David Fickling originally launched *The DFC* as a direct response to the paucity of weekly publications for children. He had been a reader of the earlier titles, predominantly those for boys, and his memories of them informed the creation of this comic. The narratives consequently cover a number

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that *The Phoenix* does not circulate sales figures.

<sup>5</sup> There were a number of single story compilation publications in A5 associated with British children's comics, and Christmas annuals. However, the format and high production values Fickling adopted, mirrored that of European albums, suggesting that is the tradition he had in mind.

of genres, but adventures with both male and female central characters form a major strand, as does humour, alongside a number of stories that are hybrids, combining a number of genres. However, what Fickling proposed, despite being based on his memories of comics, appealed to creators who had not experienced the earlier titles. For example, Kate Brown, creator of *The Spider Moon* (2010), one of the first DFC Library titles, said of the original comic in an email exchange with me in 2010, that she,

...had immense faith in *The DFC*, and I still do. I would have sawn my hands off to get something like that when I was a kid! My understanding was that it was to be like a children's TV channel... a variety of things that were either stand-alone strips or things that a child could follow episode-by-episode over the months. It was to be pure story-telling, serious quality goodness. It sounded wonderful to me!

It was, as this suggests, a title created primarily from a love of the medium of comics and an urge to foster a similar love amongst others. In effect, it was to be a showcase of younger British creators, making it an intergenerational and geographical hybrid given that many of these creators were influenced by manga. Fickling's awareness of the older titles outlined above suggest a form of continuity with earlier anthology comics, but also that his desire to publish was about making such reading experiences available to another generation. As Brown's comments suggest, such reading experiences were unavailable to her. Thus, these two titles were and are created by several generations of readers who had very different experiences of periodical publishing, for another, in the hopes of profit, certainly, but also from a belief in the possibilities of the medium.

Fickling has long been a passionate advocate for comics, arguing in an email exchange with me in 2010 that,

David Fickling Books is a story house first and foremost. Comic storytelling, words and pictures together, is a tradition as old as writing itself. This combination of words and pictures should be a natural right for all our children. We threw away our hugely successful comic industry in the UK, not because children don't like comics but for very short-sighted commercial reasons. With *The DFC* we weren't trying to restore the old comics. It wasn't a nostalgia trip. We realized that the UK is the odd one out in world culture, in that we are amongst the few cultures without a proper comic culture for our children and I believe it is enormously

to their detriment. The DFC was just a brand new comic to say we have some of the most talented comic storytellers in the world.

This statement emphasizes the importance of reading for pleasure, developing multi-literacies, including visual literacy and getting to grips with the grammar of the comic itself. Further, it shows an awareness of the economic context for the disappearance of the older children's comics and their loss of market space. However, whilst critically acclaimed, *The DFC* ended with issue 43 when Random House, of which David Fickling Books was an imprint, withdrew financial support. As reported by Caroline Horn (2009) a Random House spokesperson said that 'There can be no successes without taking risks but the economic conditions in 2008/09 were too tough for a slow build'.

Despite the closure of the comic, *The DFC* Library albums continued to be published and success in this area, along with the support of an anonymous benefactor, led to the launch of the new title. That some of the albums, such as *MeZolith Book 1* by Adam Brockbank and Ben Haggerty (2010), sold well internationally was also significant. Some of the creators from the first comic created new material for the second, such as Jamie Smart, who summarized his involvement with both in an email in 2018 saying that 'I had drawn a comic strip called 'Fish-Head Steve', but *The DFC* couldn't survive the recession and unfortunately it sank. But David, and his team, came back with *The Phoenix*, which has been running for about five years now and is going from strength to strength. I was invited to the launch party and we discussed what I could contribute, and my main idea was something called 'Bunny Vs Monkey' which I had originally pitched to *The DFC*. I've been drawing 'Bunny Vs Monkey' since issue 0, and we're on about issue 350 now, so I'm very glad it made it into *The Phoenix*'.

In contrast to *The DFC*, *The Phoenix* was distributed nationally by supermarket Waitrose, as well as by booksellers in London and Oxfordshire and through subscription. This type of distribution was subsequently extended via WH Smith in late 2015, creating wider national access to the title and raising awareness of it. This suggests that there has been a move away from what Adam Brockbank suggested in an email exchange with me in 2010, that 'Both retailers and publishers can be rather timid when it comes to this format'. Thus, international recognition, publisher confidence, and a willingness to experiment with different approaches to supply and distribution may be seen as having contributed to the resurgence of interest in children's comics.

**Contributors of all ages and from a number of professions.**

Another change contributing to a growing interest in children's comics in this context relates to who is involved in creating materials. The range of creators who have contributed to *The Phoenix*, for instance, has included people more associated with other media, such as novelists, film concept artists, oral storytellers and others. This indicates the diversity of those involved in the wider space of contemporary children's comics. As noted above, in addition, a number of the creators involved are influenced by manga, so drawing on a very different comic culture, but one where the concept of the niche market, whether divided by age, gender, or subject matter, is dominant. Many incorporate the range of narratives, and the artistic sensibilities from manga, particularly those of Shōjo manga.

Alongside them are British creators who were influenced by, and work on, humour comics, such as Nigel Auchterlounie, perhaps best known for his current work on *The Beano* as Freeman's (2018) interviews suggest. Jamie Smart has similar influences, saying in 2018 that 'There were so many around when I was growing up too (in the eighties), whole racks of comic titles in the newsagents. I liked *Whizzer and Chips*, *Buster*, *The Beano*, *Topper*, and I loved *Oink!* especially. It was so anarchic and rude, nothing mattered inside its pages. No joke was off limits and even the comics themselves got deconstructed, it was a real eye-opener to see, especially when you're a child learning how to draw your own comics'.

Also important is the age range of those involved, from creators whose memories of children's titles in the UK in the 1950s and on inspire their creations to younger ones, typically in their twenties and thirties whose influences are more typically from manga, to, in the 200th issue of *The Phoenix*, very young creators. The 200th edition featured two stories by young people, Jonny Toons, aged 11, from Middlesbrough and Jordan Vigay, aged 14, from Portsmouth. This suggests the development of peer-to-peer comic creation. It is very rare for books published for children to be created by children, but via initiatives like this, and through self and electronic publishing, comic strips and longer works are appearing which are both by and for young people. Whilst the earlier comics often failed to include details of writers and artists, making it difficult for young readers to envisage themselves in those roles, this information is now easily available. Combined with access to writers and illustrators via social media, and the growth of comic events focusing on families, so making meeting the people involved easier for children, the idea of comics as a tangible community does reduce the space between reader and maker, encouraging children to see themselves as potential creators. This agentic model of the child reader has not entirely replaced the idea of the child in need of protection, but does counter it<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> It could also be argued that concerns about media effects and moral panics that once applied to comics have been replaced by adult fears about social media.

Many of the adult creators draw on their passion for current titles for adults and children and their history with comics as a younger reader. When these creators are respected for their work in other media, such as novelist Philip Pullman, there is an increasing sense of respectability generated about the comic as a medium. Pullman, who has been an advocate for comics for many years, worked on a strip called 'The Adventures of John Blake: The Mystery of the Ghost Ship' for *The Phoenix* with illustrator Fred Fordham, subsequently published in book format by David Fickling Books (2017). This is described by Stuart Jeffries (2016) as 'a high-seas adventure involving the crew of a time-travelling schooner, a device that seems to riff on the legend of the Flying Dutchman'. What this comment also suggests is that the intertextuality of comics, drawing on other types of text both visually and in narrative is serving to change the view of the medium in Britain to one that grasps the possibilities of the medium.

The John Blake narrative lasted for 30 weeks, one of four ongoing narratives supported by shorter stand-alone stories, before being published as a graphic novel. This approach, mentioned earlier, is indicative of the European tradition of publishing hardback albums after serialisation<sup>7</sup>. This gives an indication how publishers are drawing on their international knowledge of comics with regard to UK publishing in the medium, again changing the space inhabited by the medium.

### **Internationalism, Adaptations and Children's Book Publishers.**

There has also been a shift in how children's book publishers more widely engage with comics, including their having a greater understanding of how illustrators work across different forms. For example, most children's publishers originally best knew Dave McKean as the Illustrator of several of David Almond's books, most notably, *The Savage* (2009). The acknowledgement of his work in comics by this publishing sector might be seen as the medium achieving a kind of respectability. However, there are examples of publishing before the start of the current century of graphic novels for children, such as the work of Raymond Briggs<sup>8</sup>. His publisher, Walker Books, have offered graphic novels in parallel with their picture books and novels for some time. That Briggs' books were seen as picturebooks, but are now identified as comics/graphic novels, shows another shift, this time in how professionals such as librarians see the medium. As familiarity with the medium developed, the firm published editions of a number of graphic novels originally published outside Britain, such as Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's (2009) *Skim*, a young adult title originating from Canada. In addition, they have

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<sup>7</sup> For example the 'Asterix' series, such as *Asterix in Britain* by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, was first published in serial form in *Pilote* magazine, issues 307-334, in 1965, and in album form in 1966.

<sup>8</sup> There is a huge and ongoing debate about the use of the term 'graphic novel'. Whilst I prefer 'comic', the use of 'graphic novel' did serve to open up different spaces, as I suggest above.

worked with specific authors on developing graphic novel adaptations of their works, most notably, perhaps, Anthony Horowitz through several of his series including 'Alex Rider' and 'Power of Five'.

Adaptations can be seen as having an educational as well as entertainment function, so the growth of this in traditional children's book publishing means that the medium can be seen as useful by teaching and other professionals in that it can act as an introduction to challenging texts. This is a change from how comic adaptations have been seen in the past. In Gibson (2015) for instance, adult interviewees described how reading comic books adaptations of classics was seen as 'cheating' rather than supporting them into understanding complex texts. Walker have adapted a range of material, from Shakespeare to *The Odyssey*, the latter adapted by Gareth Hinds (2010) who has most recently adapted some of Edgar Allan Poe's best known work (2017). Walker also extended, briefly, into commissioning original work, including novelist Marcus Sedgewick's (2013) graphic novel *Dark Satanic Mills*, Andi Watson's 'Gum Girl', a series for younger readers, and stand-alone volumes such as Viviane Schwarz's (2013) *The Sleepwalkers*, but it is adaptation that dominates their engagement with the medium.

### **Specialist graphic novel publishers and self-publishing.**

A major change in relation to the field is growth of a number of publishers in Britain that specialize in graphic novels for both adults and children, whether through adaptations, original work, or both. For example, SelfMadeHero, launched in 2007 by Emma Hayley, made their initial breakthrough with the 'Manga Shakespeare' series. This involved a number of creators influenced by manga, and was intended to appeal to young manga fans, as well as being seen as a useful by professionals in schools, so reintroducing comics to the space of the curriculum and the non-fiction areas of the school library. The launch of the series was a reflection of the shift from manga as cult reading to being much more part of mainstream culture internationally. This change is charted by Casey E. Brienza (2009, p. 103), who describes how 'Viz Media, now the largest manga publisher in the United States, only began licensing Japanese titles such as *Mai the Psychic Girl* for US release in the late 1980s'. Brienza (2009, p.103) adds that '...the market for manga did not really take off until the beginning of the twenty first century; manga sales grew a remarkable 350% from \$60 million in 2002 to \$210 million in 2007'.

The growth in Britain of sales of manga in translation was significant too, and the choice of publishers to translate titles which predominantly appealed to young people, meant that, in effect, manga became fashionable. The creators working on titles for SelfMadeHero included Sonia Leong and Emma Vieceli, had been core members of Sweatdrop Studios, a comic collective that emphasised manga, although it was not exclusively dedicated to it, along with Paul Duffield and Kate

Brown amongst others. Here, the combination of texts in a form that young readers would engage with for pleasure and the concept of supporting understanding of complex texts and language meshed effectively. What subsequently happened was that the success of this series amongst young people and in schools allowed expansion for the publisher into a number of additional spaces, including adaptations aimed at adult readers, plus graphic biographies and other original work.

The emergence of new publishers is a significant element in the rebirth of comics in Britain. These companies tend to be focused on the creation of new work and on translated work from across Europe. They may not specialize in publishing work for children and young people. For example, Blank Slate Books, whilst dealing predominantly with work for adults has published several books for younger readers including *Playing Out* by Jim Medway (2013) which focuses on three friends walking around their city in their school summer holidays.

In contrast, Improper Books founded in 2009 has specifically worked on developing titles for young people and children, rather than publishing for adults. This, like Sweatdrop Studios, functioned originally as a collective, a model that appears quite frequently in contemporary comics. Another approach is followed by Nobrow, a company that describes itself as a 'visual publishing house' and publishes creators from around the world. It has a children's imprint named Flying Eye Books, established in early 2013, which incorporates both picturebooks and comics. The latter are characterized by the series 'Hildafolk' by Luke Pearson. This imprint has had an impact in spaces beyond comics in being shortlisted for, and winning, the Greenaway Award. In addition, a 'Hilda' series is now available on Netflix, having launched in September 2018. The publishers' see themselves as free to work across comics, picture books and illustrated biographies, with a mixture of work in translation and texts commissioned specifically for them. Their approach emphasizes the international aspects of comics, but also champions British creators.

Self-publishing and creating webcomics add a further element to the mixture of spaces for comics. Small press and self-publishing have long been important to comics. Individuals can easily create and distribute material internationally. There is also a tendency to begin as a webcomic and then, profits allowing, publish a book containing the same material, or work with a publisher to do so. The two are not antithetical. For example John Allison's (2012) *Bad Machinery: The Case of The Fire Inside* was initially published online and then by Oni Press. Dan White (2011-2016), in contrast, opted for self-publishing of paper copies with his series *Cindy & Biscuit*.

What these varied approaches and companies show is that there is not a single dominant model in the sector and that virtual space is important in the new culture of comics for children. At the same time, all of the publishers see creating work for children as part of their output.

## Competitions for Creators.

The popularity of manga amongst British young people in imported English language editions, particularly girls and young women, has had a ripple effect with regard to the perception of all comics in Britain. This is the case regarding both as readers and creators. Many of the younger creators mentioned above took inspiration from the diversity of manga rather than comics from the USA (and did not, as outlined, have access to many British comics). With regard to readers, I work regularly in schools across Britain and find that young people who attend the sessions I run want to share their enthusiasm and creations with an older reader, often informing me, for instance, about manga I have missed. This intergenerational engagement and debate regarding the medium, as I suggest above in relation to *The Phoenix*, is common. This may also be linked to fandom, where knowledge of the medium is what signifies seniority, not biological age. In addition, as Henry Jenkins (1992) says, 'for most fans meaning-production is not a solitary and private process but rather a social and public one' (p.75). There are now a significant number of women involved in comic creation, as the names mentioned in relation to *SelfMadeHero* suggest. The increased diversity of the creators and the range of narratives they create have stimulated a broader interest in the medium. The popularity of manga encouraged a much wider understanding that comics are a medium, not a genre, and that they can be used to create any kind of narrative for any age of audience, so moving away from the very close association of comics with, say, the superhero genre.

What the publishers of manga also did which had a significant impact in Britain was to establish opportunities for young creators to compete for awards. This created a clear link between reading, writing and illustration. This is shown by the way that on the *SelfMadeHero* website many of the creators cite competition achievements. For example, Sonia Leuong's achievements include being the Winner in *NEO* magazine's 2005 Manga Competition<sup>9</sup>, and second place winner of publisher TOKYOPOP 's first Rising Stars of Manga UK and Ireland competition<sup>10</sup>. Emma Vieceli was also one of the winners of that competition, as was Paul Duffield, who also won the International Manga and Anime Festival grand prize. *Rising Stars of Manga* was an English-language comic anthology published by TOKYOPOP from 2002 to 2008, and a contest held by the same company. Originally American, but expanding to Britain and Ireland, the prizes typically involved money, but also a chance to submit a proposal for series of books, usually lasting three volumes. Such opportunities

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<sup>9</sup> Neo is a 100-page monthly magazine published in the United Kingdom and Ireland by Uncooked Media. It focuses on various aspects of East Asian entertainment.

<sup>10</sup> TOKYOPOP, founded in 1997 is an American distributor, licensor, and publisher of manga, manhwa and anime

suggested to young readers that they too could become creators, linking reading, creating and potential careers in a positive way.

This approach has also been used more recently by *The Phoenix*, through their Young Phoenix Artist competition in 2015. As described by Heather Sandlin (2015) the competition was 'open to children in two categories: 6-9 and 10-13 year olds. The younger entrants will be asked to enter a one line strip of their work, while the 10-13 entrants must create a strip of three to five panels'. The prize was for the work to be published in the comic. Other competitions have focused on coming up with characters or narratives to be drawn by professionals, emphasizing that it is not only drawing which is a worthwhile activity.

### **Awards for comics.**

Another factor creating a new atmosphere around comics for children is the development of awards. One example are the British Comics Awards (2011-2015) which incorporated the Young People's Comic Awards begun by Leeds Library Services in 2010. The Young People's Award continued after the main element ended<sup>11</sup>. Winners have included Luke Pearson's (2011) *Hilda and the Midnight Giant* and Garen Ewing's (2012) *The Complete Rainbow Orchid*. What these two books epitomize is, once again, the range of publishers now involved in the field, with Egmont Books, who published Ewing, being very large scale and publishing books and magazines, whilst, as discussed, NoBrow, who publish 'Hildafolk' is comparatively small scale and more specialized.

The Young People's Comic Awards is chosen by young people via reading groups based in schools, Scout groups and elsewhere. This is also the case with the Stan Lee Excelsior Award, which now has two elements, one for 11-16 year olds, and another for 8-11 year olds, and is predominantly run through school libraries. However, the latter, although it does promote comic reading, uses a range of international titles rather than focusing on British ones. All the same, what the contrasting awards indicate is, firstly, a willingness to allow young people to show agency in relation to reading comics, and secondly that professionals, whether teachers or librarians, are engaging in a positive way with the idea of comics as reading for pleasure.

A final element regarding awards which is a factor in the new children's comic culture is that awards which are not located within the world of comics have also moved towards an acceptance and celebration of comics and graphic novels. However, unlike most, the Kate Greenaway Medal, awarded by CILIP: the Library and Information Association, described by the award website as 'the

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<sup>11</sup> The larger set of awards stopped when the person running them had to step down. Had funding been available, the awards could have been sustained.

only prize in Britain to solely reward outstanding illustration in a children's book' has a long history of engaging with comics, starting with Raymond Briggs's *Father Christmas* in 1973. That this book was seen as a picturebook, not a comic, suggests that the latter medium was subsumed into what was a more respectable form at the time.

### **Family Friendly Events and University Links.**

The growth of family friendly comic events has also been a stimulus for this new culture. For example, Thought Bubble, the major festival held in Leeds, offers space to all-ages titles and panels. The Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF), held in Kendal, has taken a similar approach. There has been a shift away from older male fans of the medium being the vast majority attending comic festivals across Britain, as these festivals are intent on attracting broader audiences. There are also a growing number of events focused solely on comics, rather than on wider popular culture, creating more of a sense of coherence and community around the medium.

What the increase in comics-specific family events does is create connections, and build relationships, as well as market products. Such events make aspects of comics as an industry transparent and accessible. They also make younger readers aware of the simple, but significant, fact that comics are created by people. For example, Sandlin (2015) reported that one of the young creators for the 200th edition of *The Phoenix*, Jordan, said that 'He was inspired to create his own comic strip, The Red Crow, after meeting the Phoenix team at Leeds comic festival'.

These events, as noted above, help to develop the culture by enabling young people to meet older creators, something that is potentially empowering. Further, these events enable young people to present themselves as creators. I have met child creators as young as ten years old who have sold their own comics at both Thought Bubble and LICAF.

Another element in growing these new spaces for children's and young people's comics culture is that some university courses book tables for their students. In addition, the expansion of university courses that focus on, or incorporate in some way, the study of comics can also contribute to a perception of comics as respectable or worthwhile. Such bookings serve as marketing for the university, whilst also enabling students to gain experience. For example, one of the key points on the website for the Cartoon and Comic Arts BA (Hons) at Staffordshire University is that, 'You will have the opportunity to visit, network and sell your work at comic cons in London and Leeds, as well as travel abroad' (<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/course/cartoon-comic-arts-ba> accessed 24/7/18). The students are, in this context, observers, participants and observed. From the point of view of a younger child, meeting such students may develop awareness that courses exist that they, if

economically possible, might be able to take, again making aspects of the world of comics seem more transparent and accessible.

### **Reviewing comics and graphic novels.**

An additional change in perspective can be seen in newspapers, particularly *The Guardian*, in relation to giving space to reviewing graphic novels. Historically, newspapers (and, indeed, British culture more generally) tended to be dismissive about the medium. British hostility towards comics is indicated by Martin Barker's (1984) account of the major anti-comics campaign in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. This had a number of results, including the passing of, as Gibson (2015, p. 73) states, 'the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act 1955 which made publication or distribution of the wide category 'horror comics' ... illegal'. This actually related to all comics, especially American superhero titles, being at root a moral panic about media effects upon children. This serves to suggest what a huge change acceptance of comics in Britain is. When the newspapers first engaged with comics in a positive way this tended to be with high-concept international titles predominantly aimed at adults, such as Marjane Satrapi's (2000) *Persepolis*, but this has broadened out to include British work for young people. Recommendations of graphic novels and comics now appear in Review sections and listings, so, for example *MeZolith*, by Haggerty and Brockbank (2010) was one of The Times's Graphic Novels of the Year in 2010. There are also articles specifically addressing the medium, such as that by Amy Cole (2016) in *The Guardian* which offered some suggestions of titles for new readers. Whilst still not hugely common, this has shifted perceptions of the medium and offered wider publicity.

### **Conclusion.**

There are a number of factors involved in the growth of spaces for a new children's comic culture in Britain in the 21st century. Some of the older comics still survive and these are now celebrated as important aspects of British children's culture, rather than seen as insignificant and ephemeral. In effect, a bigger cultural space has been made for them. There has also been a shift in perceptions regarding pre-existing work, such as that by Raymond Briggs, which has resulted in some of his books being re-categorized from picturebooks to graphic novels or comics. However, although *The Phoenix* seems to be thriving, there have been few other attempts to create weekly comics. This suggests that this mode of publishing comics will not reappear. This title has, however, brought a large range of new creators to the attention of wider audiences via a range of spaces, whether in newspaper reviews, or at events.

The other factors, as discussed, include the impact of manga in Britain, which has resulted in new and younger audiences and creators and the rise of a number of publishers who specialize in graphic novels and include work for children and young people. As with manga in English, there is a definite international set of links which have contributed to the development of the current scene in Britain. Technology plays a part too, especially in allowing electronic publishing and inexpensive, high quality print self-publishing. As Jamie Smart said in interview in 2018 'Now comic creators can build audiences online, and sell their own comics at conventions, out of which a really vibrant and supportive community has grown. It's a great time to be a young cartoonist, there are so many creators doing it for themselves, and that should be so inspiring'.

However, there are still aspects of this growth that could be considered fragile, or may not be sustainable. For example, as Zainab Akhtar, publisher and editor, argues, there are still weaknesses regarding resources and infrastructure, with single individuals often maintaining an entire initiative (Twitter thread, 6/8/18). She adds that publicity and stocking, especially of independent work, is very uneven.

All the same, the importance of institutional spaces such as comic specific events, competitions and awards cannot be underestimated in building communities where children and young people can participate, or develop an awareness of the wider industry. The comparative respectability of the medium is, in part, because of the involvement of 'mainstream' publishers, universities and other institutions beyond comics.

Finally, the most important change is that there seems to be a change in British attitudes towards the medium, which has moved from a profoundly negative one, to one which is more accepting. This is related to a movement away from seeing comics as a threat to young people's morality or literacy. It is to be hoped that all this will continue and allow the culture to develop further.

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