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Chapter 1

‘It’s *the* girl!’: Comics, Professional Identity, Affection, Nostalgia and Embarrassment

Mel Gibson

Introduction

This chapter explores relationships between gender, professional identity and personal history in relation to the comic strip medium. I take an autoethnographic approach to this topic, outlining my uniquely individual perspectives as a female British library professional intensely engaged with graphic novels in the 1990s, a contemporary development in the medium at that point, and that of being a girlhood comics reader from the 1960s onwards. In discussing both I look at tensions between child and adult, but also my experience of the conflicts between ideological and lived identities. This links the chapter with the others within this volume and in some ways sets the scene regarding individual remembered experience. The chapter goes on to locate the tensions I experienced around gender and comics in a wider context in which I played a significant role, that being the development and promotion of graphic novel collections in British public libraries during 1990s and into the twenty-first century.

After that I analyse why there were uneasy or uncomfortable responses from other female librarians when they encountered graphic novels in the training courses I ran. It was needful to acknowledge and support the exploration of the emotions that informed these responses, as they might otherwise hinder professional engagement, knowledge of

the form and, in turn, collection development. Unpacking this discomfort often involved investigating forgotten memories of girlhood memories of reading comics as few were (or would admit to) reading contemporary comics as adults.

These memories typically centred on gendered (and age-related) understandings of the medium and included both a deep affection for the genre of British girls' comics which the majority had read, embarrassment about the stereotypes of those comics and their readers (including their younger selves) and a nostalgic response that was understood as both enjoyable and discomfiting. I next offer a case study about the editing, content and marketing of a nostalgia reprint that exemplifies one way that girlhood and publications for girls have been positioned. Whilst the way that girlhood is framed changes slightly according to time period and generation, this nostalgia reprint for adult women suggests that embarrassment and nostalgia about girls' comics were often intertwined due to negative cultural constructions of both girlhood and girls' popular culture.

Why Autoethnography?

According to Garance Maréchal, "autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing" (43), and Carolyn Ellis defines it as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (xix).

I must admit that I am uncomfortable when using autoethnography, exploring anecdotal and personal experience and then connecting it with wider cultural, political and social meanings and understandings. This discomfort is possibly because my peers and I were told as children not to draw attention to ourselves or make our experiences central to conversation. It could also be because, as an academic, I tend to write about subjects where I am not personally involved, in an attempt to maintain objectivity. Even in making that comment I flag up one of the criticisms of the approach, which is that it has been seen as self-indulgent or narcissistic. As Andrew C. Sparkes states, "The emergence of autoethnography and narratives of self [...] has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic" (22).

Nonetheless, I felt this approach was useful in unpacking cultural views about comics and gender, and around profession and comics. This is because I played a part in the history of librarianship and comics. Given my insider knowledge, using an autoethnographic approach means that personal elements of that history are retained. This approach is also key in Thierry Groensteen's analytical account of his publishing house experience. Equally, as a girl reader of comics, I experienced key incidents which I share to give insight into how I thought I was seen and understood. I consequently reflect on

having passed, or visited, formative cultural stations (whether objects, texts or activities) in the past and so consider comics, graphic novels, comic shops and their staff, along with libraries and training courses, as cultural stations in this chapter (Bolt). This links with, as Andrew F. Herrmann wrote, the way that “[o]ur identities and identifications with popular culture artifacts assist in our creation of self. Our identities and pop culture have a long-term recursive relationship” (7).

I am also aware that in this chapter I apply an academic lens to historical events and objects, and in editing and selecting narratives about the culture of groups of which I have been a member. Here, then, I use autoethnography to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences whilst also acknowledging my relationships with others.

Alongside this I employ critical discourse analysis, a method which argues that social practice and linguistic practice constitute each other (Fairclough). In exploring gender, age and comics and how they intersect with professional roles, I investigate how power relations in society are established and reinforced through language use (Fairclough). In doing so I highlight power imbalances in normative metanarratives about gender and comics which meant that my personal experience, and those of other women, were downplayed or dismissed.

On Failing to See Oneself as a Valid Comics Reader, Fan or Professional

I begin by talking about my experience over time as a reader, and my practices, thus partly exposing a history of comics and gender.

My first comics were a mixture of monthly superhero comics (and other comics from the United States), British *Girl* annuals (published by Hulton Press in the 1950s and 1960s), gift books and annuals focusing on newspaper strip characters Rupert Bear and Teddy Tail, and albums of classic *bandes dessinées* focusing on Tintin, Asterix and Lucky Luke. All but the first were either gifts from family and close family friends or passed down from older relatives. The albums, gift books and annuals were robust bound volumes, most of which I still have today. These formative cultural stations served to suggest that comics existed in several formats, came from many places, that they were for both male and female readers and that they had a history going back before my birth. How they came to me also suggested that I was part of a community of readers, albeit a junior member given the power imbalance between adult and child, as I did not choose the texts but had them chosen for me.

However, ownership and purchase being attached to agency in childhood, it was the former category, the more fragile monthly floppies, that I was most attached to. In addition, I liked them because they were a point of contact with my father, who shared his

enthusiasm about the medium with me, seeing it, in Michael Thompson's (273) terms, as creating objects, art and narratives that were "durable" rather than "transient", or "rubbish". This was not a common view at the time. All the same, my ownership was compromised, for despite his enthusiasm for comics, my father would sometimes cut elements out of "our" comics for use in the collage-based artworks he created early in his career (Gibson, 2018, 38–39). I would keep the remainder, reading around the gaps, as it were. So, although these were texts that we shared, the older male partner had control of the physical comic. This emphasised that these were texts for adults, although children might also access them.

To address these gaps and to follow my developing interests, I started to buy my own comics when funds allowed. These initially came from two sources. In England in the 1960s and 1970s, comics were available in newsagents' shops, which, as their name suggests, sold newspapers along with periodicals of all kinds, sweets, cigarettes and sometimes a few household supplies like tea and biscuits. One of Benjamin Woo's respondents talked about a similar system in North America in that period, where new comics were sold through news stand distribution, a system

which had significant drawbacks for dedicated readers [...] [for, as the interviewee states, it] was usually a little bit difficult because you couldn't get all the comics you wanted, or you had to go to several places, or they wouldn't get very many and they would sell out. (127)

This chimes with my memories of having to visit a lot of shops to find titles I wanted and creates another formative cultural station in embedding, informally, the idea of collecting and acquiring comics as a major project demanding commitment. It was also a solitary experience, although that could also be read as independence, which moved away from the notion of community that the bound volumes implied.

Comics were also available in Britain from covered markets like Jacky Whites Market in Sunderland and Grainger Market in Newcastle. In these spaces a broad range of stalls would sell goods of all kinds, from food to furniture. Both markets contained second-hand book stalls, which stocked long boxes of older editions of comics. These may not have been second-hand in the sense of having been owned by an individual (although some were, as evidenced by owners' names being written on them), but instead may have been sold on to the second-hand shops by newsagents. Given that these were titles which had not sold in that first set of shops, more obscure titles featured quite heavily. Searching through these boxes took time and necessitated carrying a list of what (ideally) one would want. This, too, might be recognised as proto-collector behaviour.

These behaviours were also accompanied by a commitment to travel to locations, so travel costs might be involved as well as the cost of the comics. This was a major undertak-

ing, especially for a ten-year-old. I had a bicycle and would use that to get from my village (about four miles away from Sunderland) to the various newsagents and Jacky Whites. However, going as far as Newcastle (about eight miles in the opposite direction) meant making a bus journey.

This collecting tendency continued in later years, although how I accessed comics changed. As a young teenager in the mid-1970s I witnessed the start of the shift from sales via newsagents to specialised comics shops. The specialist shop I would visit was in Newcastle and was called either Timeslip or Son of Timeslip. I was mostly reading Marvel at this point and had a particular love of the X-Men. This shift to direct marketing via specialty retailers developed in the 1970s in North America too, and as Woo states, “the system was firmly entrenched by the 1980s” (127). I also very occasionally visited what quickly came to be seen as iconic comic shops, such as Dark They Were and Golden Eyed and Forbidden Planet, both located in London (either on school trips or on family holidays).

However, my engagement was cautious, as when I went into Timeslip/Son of Timeslip, the owner would always address me by saying “it’s *the* girl!”, with a heavy emphasis on the word “the”. To be so singularly addressed was embarrassing, and whilst I persisted with buying comics from the shop, the impression that the medium was not for me became part of that formative cultural station. It was not age that was important in terms of accessing comics, I learnt, but gender. In addition, my understanding of comics as an inclusive community evolved into one where being female was problematic, particularly, although not exclusively, in relation to the superhero genre. This was also noted in the research about female readers that emerged in the 1990s. Amy Kiste Nyberg’s study of female comic book fans, argued that they perceived themselves as “trespassers” within the male-coded culture of comic books. As Nyberg states, “[w]omen readers try alternately to fit into the role constructed for the predominantly male comic book reader and to resist that construction” (205). Similarly, Stephanie Orme, writing in 2016 of the experience of later female readers and the depiction of comic stores in popular culture, states that they “are portrayed as a male space where female patrons are an anomaly” (403). Whilst she adds that this did not fit the reality of 2016, her comment nonetheless is in line with my historical experience.

Being told that I was singular, and that I was “wrongly” gendered, plus the fact that I knew of no other girls of my own age who read superhero comics (or even *Asterix*), meant that I came to have an increasingly uncomfortable relationship with the medium, as the normative metanarrative seemed to imply that I either did not, or should not, exist. This lack of comfort remained an issue for later readers, for as Orme reports, one of her interviewees, Doreen, stated that going into a comic shop “definitely felt like something that I wasn’t supposed to do. I think being a girl is a big part of that” (411), adding that she stayed away from the local comic shop, as “I don’t wanna be talked down to. I don’t want them to assume I know nothing, which is what happens” (411). Despite the different time

periods and geographical space, gender stereotypes and assumptions about media and gender are in play in both accounts.

What also comes into play at this point is a feeling that if I were to stay involved with comics, I should keep quiet about liking superhero titles. This self-silencing and reluctance to be visible was historically common in female readers. This could be seen as linked with Orme's theory that "many female comic book fans render themselves invisible in the comics community out of fear of stigmatization, from both non-comics fans as well as male members of comics fandom" (403).

Simultaneously, I shied away from the weekly British comics for girls, such as *Bunty* (DC Thomson, 1958–2001), despite having enjoyed reading *Girl* annuals. This genre was a popular one, and many girls would have their comics delivered to their homes, in a vastly different kind of engagement with the medium. It meant that such reading tended to be tied to what Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber identified as girls' bedroom culture (and so was invisible in other ways, a point I will return to). I was aware from comments made in comic shops that some staff felt I should be reading those comics and not reading superhero titles. In addition, these shops typically did not stock material like *Wimmen's Comix*, or indeed comics aimed at women in general, which I only discovered in later visits to specialist feminist bookshops in London, so that was not part of my formative cultural station. This is in line with Orme's assertion that "Stereotypical representations of what a comic book reader looks like and acts like, gendered language, such as *fanboy*, [...] codes geek culture as something belonging to men" (404). This was accompanied by value judgements about British girls' comics, as the staff considered them less important and of poorer quality. This was not hostility, exactly, but was a kind of gatekeeping via an assertion of an assumed superior male cultural capital about comics, male ownership of genre and medium, and related spaces, and a condemnation of anything coded female (including me). Thus, in my formative encounters with comic shops and their employees, I came to understand that I was not seen as a valid fan or reader.

Jumping forwards a few years, when I studied librarianship in the early 1980s, comics were not mentioned (this also applied to students training to be teachers and typically is still the case in training for both professions today). This silence in librarianship about comics may have been linked to historical constructions of comics as a stigmatised low or mass culture (Brown). That meant that after qualifying as a librarian, my internalised feeling of being "other" regarding comics culture, combined with professional cues, meant that I did not connect my private comic reading with my professional self or talk about what I read. One might occasionally hear of comic swap boxes in libraries where children could bring in what they had read and exchange it free for something new, but that was typically the full extent of the intersection of libraries and the medium.

In contrast, there was mention of work with children and young people on the programme, although that only consisted of one module. This led to a desire to work in that

sector. However, later I was often asked by other professionals and the public, when in post as a children’s librarian, what I wanted to be “when I grew up”. The implication was that working with children meant one was childish and, again, lesser, in this case in relation to those librarians who were based in the adult, reference or local history sections of the library. This was a different normative metanarrative, but one which also served to locate power and control with another group of professionals (one that was, much as the comics shop staff were, much more dominated by male personnel). There was, then, a kind of stigmatisation around working with young people and their texts, which comics were assumed to be in wider cultural discourses, even whilst they were unmentioned in a professional context, something I was aware of throughout my library career in the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Why, and against What Background, Did Library Graphic Novel Collections Develop in the 1990s?

In the 1990s public services were under threat due to central government cuts to local government funding. Public libraries had been perceived as inessential by central government for years, given the neoliberal ideology of the Conservatives between 1979 and 1997, and had become seriously underfunded as a result. Indeed, Nick Moore’s research shows that in 2000 “the total expenditure on the public library service per thousand population was no greater than it had been in 1985” (Ayub and Thebridge 66). Consequently, as Moore argued, “if the public library service had been stagnating during the 1980s, during the 1990s it began to seriously decline” (64).

Simultaneously, libraries were under pressure to prove their relevance to all groups within communities, given a very valid high priority being placed on social inclusion. One of the groups seen as poorly served given this agenda were young people, despite the existence of specialist librarians and stock. Historical assumptions of libraries as a valuable aspect of community coherence, and of education in the broadest sense, were discarded given inconsistent commitment to these ideals in favour of validation via statistical data, combined with the need to provide proof of value. This created a tension that was challenging to manage, in that attracting new users, especially younger ones, often meant having to take risks on stock that might not prove popular, whether in the form of new formats or technologies, so potentially increasing pressure on limited funding.

However, even given the financial issues, there were positive developments and initiatives, for, as Ayub Khan and Stella Thebridge argued, in the 1990s libraries had, “an almost unique opportunity to ‘legitimize’ a mass of cultural material and the interest of many publics” (61). There was also a shift towards librarians demonstrating that they were, as Rachel Van Riel stated in 1993, “proactive and educative in their approach to

fiction” (81). Van Riel’s initiatives around reading fiction, along with those of other partners working with libraries, were the start of the reader development movement, which asserted that fiction was valuable. These two arguments are indicative of a quite dramatic change, as libraries were seen as having previously failed to positively promote fiction stock, instead favouring non-fiction.

The emergence of graphic novels, a format more suitable for library stock, enabled the development of collections. This was one of the ways in which fiction was foregrounded, along with, amongst other initiatives, the increased purchase of paperback novels. This returns us to Thompson’s (273) argument, in that these were versions of comics that were coming to be seen as culturally “durable”, as well as physically so. The arguments about legitimisation and fiction mentioned above were widely discussed in the early 1990s and were empowering for some library staff, including myself. Further, given assumptions about young people’s lack of library use, material like graphic novels was seen as potentially addressing issues around social inclusion. This assumes a link between comics and younger readers which was, of course, itself problematic, but was a useful threshold concept regarding professional engagement with the medium. As someone who was a branch librarian, working in an area where library use was not necessarily part of family or community culture, in a service point attached to a high school as well as serving the general public, I felt I could seek permission to develop a collection. I did so in conjunction with a member of school staff and some pupils who were interested in comics, which meant “coming out”, as it were, as a comics fan. The pupils involved, who were all male, declared me an “honorary male” in my role as librarian, which was meant kindly, although this still pointed to ideas of difference and ownership of the medium.

The popularity of that collection, and my involvement with the local branch of the Youth Libraries Group (YLG), a national network of librarians working with young people that was part of the Library Association (now the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), meant that I began to talk professionally, for the first time, about comics and graphic novels. The success of the collection and the need to address the agenda outlined above meant that I was not primarily seen as an oddity, but as someone who might have useful professional knowledge. This amounted to another formative shift in my understanding of self, one in which professional identity and comics started to coalesce.

The next step was accidental, if fortuitous. I was told at a local YLG branch meeting that there was an opportunity to be a contributor to a possible national publication on graphic novels in libraries. Eventually, this became *Graphic Account* (1993), edited by Keith Barker, and published by the YLG. However, I recall there was a tension in the meeting and that one person said, disparagingly, “why don’t you do it? You like that sort of thing...” – a quite dismissive statement. In effect, some of my professional peers were unsure that they wanted to be associated with what they considered problematic texts. Here, the comic

medium, to non-readers, was stigmatised, and there was a concern that there might be a dual stigmatisation of working with comics (as low/mass culture) and with children, possibly undermining their professional status.

In the end, *Graphic Account* (1993) had an impact upon library services nationally and resulted in an increased interest in the medium. In personal terms this resulted in my professional identity becoming further intertwined with comics and graphic novels, as I was invited to run training for YLG branches. The demands of keeping the training fresh and my knowledge up to date meant that I needed to buy a lot of material and read widely, leading me to describe myself as an advocate for the medium, rather than a fan of a specific genre, in effect a return to my original childhood identity in relation to comics when I had engaged with a wide range of titles.

However, the growth of a wider interest in graphic novels was accompanied by increased tensions regarding professional identity, something which became apparent in training sessions. Some staff, particularly the female ones, who formed the majority of staff in YLG and other youth-focused library sectors, felt threatened or insecure. This could have been related to this being another new initiative in a period of funding cuts, but seemed to have other roots, as I will shortly discuss. The first round of training sessions led to more, and I got to work with the School Libraries Association (SLA) and School Libraries Group (SLG), literacy charities, museums, art galleries and educational umbrella organisations like the British Educational Research Association. Consequently, between 1993 and 2000, I ran over two hundred trainings and other events, developed bibliographies and wrote for various professional journals. This reflects the slow growth and spread of an acceptance of the medium in non-comic reader circles.

In effect, I came to be seen as an expert, although I preferred the term "advocate", as I was more comfortable with the connotations of the latter. Thus, even as I became considered by some to be a national authority, the issue around gender and expertise continued to have an impact upon me, leaving me unwilling to challenge the idea of comics as male space. To position myself as expert would have led, I felt, to continuous challenges from male comic fans, whether within fandom, or within libraries and being labelled, as Orme says of later female readers, as a "fake geek girl" within comics culture (412).

How Might Emotions, Professional Role and Gender Be Linked in Relation to Graphic Novels and Comics?

Working with my largely female peers in YLG, SLA and SLG in building library collections and developing their understanding of and familiarity with graphic novels (and later manga in translation) involved engaging with powerful emotional responses linked to constructions of self. As mentioned, there was often an uneasiness about graphic

novels. Fear was often apparent at the start of training sessions, with a typical argument being “we are word people, not picture people”, or stereotyping the graphic novel as either inherently sexist, or “nasty”, or “violent”. This was because of the perception of the comics medium as unfamiliar, hostile and, above all, a male preserve, with there being minimal understanding that comics had been created for women or could be feminist. Acknowledging and unpacking these responses revealed echoes in their adult and professional selves of understandings around formative cultural stations regarding gender and medium.

In part this was about the history of cultural ambivalence about comics. Although, as I mentioned earlier, a movement emerged in libraries in the 1990s about engaging with fiction and a wider range of materials was becoming seen as appropriate library stock, the commentaries on comics in Britain from the 1950s onwards had often labelled comics as invalid or even dangerous. The librarians I worked with would have, in many cases, come across this normative metanarrative in childhood, one which reflected the hostility on the part of some in Britain towards popular culture. In part the uneasiness, then, was tied to understandings of libraries as preserving and protecting significant aspects of knowledge and culture, another kind of cultural gatekeeping. One might be seen as failing as a gatekeeper if popular materials were included in collections.

However, there was another significant element – that of gender. The concerns around comics in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s were tied in with ideas about appropriate reading for girls. This was clear in librarian and campaigner George H. Pumphrey’s *What Children Think of Their Comics*, where girls were seen as particularly morally vulnerable to what they read (a blank slate model of girlhood encouraging adult censorship or control of both girls and any media texts they might encounter). Consequently, he praised titles which he saw as promoting useful information and occupation, such as cookery, home decoration and dress patterns, such as *Girl*, as mentioned earlier. This helped to create a discourse in which comics and girlhood could only be linked if the comic focused on the performance of traditional femininity, because otherwise the connection would be stigmatising. Thus, anything except comics specifically for girls was inherently a problem, although the problematic status of the medium itself meant that even these titles were compromised.

Consequently, for some of my professional peers, graphic novels reminded them that as children the comic medium was considered inappropriate for them and that reading comics could be seen as contaminating or immoral. This creates multiple reasons why comics might be seen as problematic, something that continued to resonate with the adult self. This was rarely extreme, although I met two individuals during training for whom comics were associated with Satan and so they felt that reading them imperilled people’s souls. Whilst that was not a position that offered any hope of compromise, it became my aim to get most people past their unease and help them negotiate emotional responses

tied to years of experiencing anti-comic rhetoric. Few had read superhero comics as children or read comics as adults, so they had journeys quite different from mine, although on the rare occasions that someone else who liked the medium attended training, participants seeing a colleague (rather than an outsider like myself) who had knowledge and expertise would extend and deepen discussion.

Yet with my increasing awareness of comics history, especially about how popular girls' comics had been, I was faced with a puzzle. It seemed unlikely that any of the female professionals I was working with had never read a comic before, yet this genre was not mentioned, and there appeared to be a gap in memory (like the literal gaps in some of my childhood comics) where they should be. There was another form of silence and invisibility here, where memories of girlhood reading had been lost, replaced by dominant cultural and professional discourses about comics. This act of forgetting could also be seen as a gendered and quite literal interpretation of the injunction to "put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). Yet in this context this seemingly only applied to women and girls, as male collecting of both historical and contemporary titles was firmly in place and seen as a valid, if odd, cultural activity.

To try to address this puzzle, I tentatively began to mention titles of girls' comics in training, hoping to chart whether British girls' comics were familiar texts in my professional peers' childhoods. I hoped that remembering these comics and having a sense of ownership of them would remind them that they had knowledge of the medium. This was intended to build their confidence to explore other aspects of it and appreciate that contemporary comics and graphic novels might have a similar significance for readers.

Whilst my practice was to use contemporary texts in training, over time I began to include older titles too, largely publications from the 1950s to early 2000s, to connect past and present via medium. I would now identify this as object elicitation, engaging directly with what Anna Moran and Sorcha O'Brien describe as the "emotional potency of objects in our lives and the relationships that exist between people and objects" (xiv). It can also, as Wesseling suggests, reflect how "childhood nostalgia has come to depend on the availability of tangible memorabilia" (4).

Mentioning girls' comics, and examples of the actual historical texts, was productive. It became apparent that, despite frequent claims of never having read comics, few training participants had no familiarity at all with the medium. This only occurred when reading comics had been forbidden and the girl had accepted this cultural and familial control of her reading. I would add that others who had not been allowed comics found ways around this stricture (Gibson 2015).

However, whilst this strategy was successful in supporting engagement and understanding, invoking girls' comics also had risks. This was because, given the points above and the historical male denigration of girls' titles, alongside a deep affection for girls' comics once remembered, there was also embarrassment (as well as nostalgia) about them (Gibson

2015). Using aspects of historical girls' material culture, realia, in training, relates to Henry Jenkins's comment about "the emotions, sentimental attachments and nostalgic longings that we express – or hold at bay – through our relationship with physical objects" (15).

On Visibility, Embarrassment and Nostalgia

The conversations in training sessions about girls' comics were positive, and people frequently discovered shared titles or narratives. This training, unintentionally, had become a public recognition of British historical girls' bedroom culture (as well as of print culture). The discussions made visible female knowledge of comics and engagement with the medium. This was a good outcome, in addition to the positive impact of the actual graphic novel training. All the same, whilst embarrassment is much easier to work with than fear, it, too, is a powerful emotion.

Embarrassment appeared to relate to several distinct aspects of women and girls' relationships with the comics medium. Although my choice of comics was different, I very much understood that emotion. The first variant, which I had experienced, was about being a female reader of comics seen as part of male-coded comics culture. Reading graphic novels, for the participants in training, could have evoked similar feelings, but in labelling this as reading for professional purposes, the potential for this to be embarrassing became neutralised.

In contrast, the second type of embarrassment was specifically about comics for girls. Here stereotypes of girls' comics and their readers were central, along with the idea of girls' culture as lesser. Whilst this might not have reflected the reality of the content of the titles, the dominant discourse around girlhood and girls' comics culture contributed to both silence and forgetting.

To give an indication of what dominant discourses around girls' comics might look like, I turn to how nostalgia publishers of girls' comics presented and marketed texts, as they exemplify them. Prion Press, an imprint of Carlton Publishing, were the main publishers of such material in the 2000s. Prior to that girls' comic nostalgia publishing, like the idea of women collecting comics or being part of fandom, was not widely part of comics culture. On the Prion Press website (since taken down¹), whilst reprints of boys' comics were promoted in a straightforward way, as a celebration of boyhood and re-engagement with texts marked as significant, there was considerable ambivalence around titles for girls.

To begin, titles for girls were placed in the humour section, which implies that the texts should not be taken seriously. One example, *Mother Tells You How: Essential Life Skills for Modern Young Women – Girl 1951–1960* (Russell) focuses on a short weekly strip that appeared in *Girl*. It was a colour strip consisting of six to nine panels, which focused on a specific topic. It was bound up with the performance of middle-classness and domestic

femininity. On the website the marketing began by stating, “Each week Mother would teach her exemplary-in-every-way daughter, Judy, one of life’s essential skills, such as how to decorate biscuits, how to prepare a grapefruit or how to do the washing up” (“Mother Tells You How”). The choice of task and juxtaposition with the term “essential” serves to imply triviality and a kind of prissy conformity.

This does not reflect the material elsewhere in the actual publication, which incorporated working-life comic strips, adventure, school, comedy and mystery narratives and a considerable number of depictions of independent girls. However, Prion chose this strip in constructing a narrative about a historical version of girlhood, one that is homogenised and lacking nuance. The site added that whilst it appears to be a “spoof [...] [it is] a wholly genuine period piece, and it’s its authenticity that provides such high comedy” (“Mother Tells You How”). In effect, the historical constructions of girlhood that girls were offered, the women who are assumed to be the main readers of the volume, and the texts of the period are all to be laughed at, rather than with. The implication is also that the adult reader should be a “good sport” and recognise the ridiculousness of their girlhood.

This is also emphasised in other marketing comments, which describe the publication, and the readers, in patronising terms. For example, the site stated that “*Girl* readers weren’t to have their little heads filled with science they didn’t understand [...] [instead] they were kept busy sorting out their small odds and ends into a shelf-tidy, and experimenting with unusual sandwiches” (“Mother Tells You How”). Again, the emphasis is on the small world girls inhabited, a patronising assumption that does not reflect the overall tenor of the publication or the range of girlhood experiences it contained in non-fiction items. Additionally, the use of the word “little” serves to imply a lack of intellect.

Further, the idea of these titles as lesser compared to boys’ print culture was clear from the rest of the initial marketing, which directly and disparagingly compared *Girl* to the comparable title for boys, *Eagle* (Hulton, 1950–1969). For example, the site stated that whilst

Eagle, featured new inventions and clever conjuring tricks, *Girl* had Mother telling Judy how to make a shelf-tidy. *Eagle* subscribers read about shark fishing off the coast of Australia, while their sisters would turn to *Mother Tells You How* for wise words on how to care for goldfish. (“Mother Tells You How”)

Here the emphasis is on the limited nature of what girls were and of what they were offered. There is also a focus in the marketing on *Eagle* as a whole and an emphasis on its diverse content, whereas *Girl* is reduced to a single strip presented in an essentialist manner.

Moving on from how nostalgia publishing replicated and extended negative views about girlhood and girls’ culture, a final element of embarrassment was about the dominant discourse of comics as for children and so a discourse about adults reading them being seen as somehow childish, or non-professional (a link established in relation to my professional

experience earlier in the chapter). Orme, in interviewing female comic readers in the United States, for instance, noted that one of the participants reported that her “desire to be taken seriously in her profession [...] makes her conscientious about participating in an activity perceived as frivolous and inappropriate for adult women” (410). This clearly articulates what might be at stake regarding comics and female professional identity. This could be seen as compounded (as noted earlier) by being a librarian who worked with children and young people, resulting in a form of professional stigmatisation based on both medium and role.

There were also, for those who had read girls’ comics, cultural concerns about appearing nostalgic. Nostalgia has, as Elisabeth Wesseling notes, “not fared well with the critics and that is putting it mildly” (2), adding that “most discussions of this disreputable sentiment pivot around a truth-falseness dichotomy, relegating nostalgia to the negative pole of the opposition” (2). However, she goes on to argue that it need not be solely read in that light, pointing to the work of Svetlana Boym, who argued that two types of nostalgia exist, with very different connotations, and that one type could be seen as productive. Boym divided nostalgia into “restorative” and “reflective” types, stating that the former “does not recognize itself as nostalgia [...] but mistakes itself for truth or tradition” and so links with critiques of nostalgia as an imaginary past (Wesseling 3). The latter, in contrast, “does not want to return to a past that never was, but it likes to dwell on alternatives to the present, out of fundamental discomfort with the idea of linear historical progress” (Wesseling 3), troubling the status quo.

Encouraging a form of reflective nostalgia, then, was something I had accidentally stumbled into. The discussions amongst the librarians, once historical reading and contemporary texts were linked, tended to be playful and humorous rather than conflicted, also in line with notions of reflective nostalgia. What they additionally did, through a recognition of girls’ culture and comics that challenged dominant discourses about both, was encourage questions about why silence and invisibility, even at the internal level, was dominant regarding girlhood. In effect, this was a recognition that embarrassment and nostalgia were often mixed due to negative cultural constructions of girlhood and girls’ culture.

To Conclude

Tony Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis write of reflexivity as part of autoethnography that it “includes both acknowledging and critiquing our place and privilege in society and using the stories we tell to *break long-held silences* on power, relationships, cultural taboos, and forgotten and/or suppressed experiences” (103). In this chapter stories of identity and power are linked with emotions and memory and reveal the complexity and pressure of holding conflicted identities. In looking at forgotten memories the chapter also explores various forms of silence around comics and girlhood, the idea of comics as

taboo, and the resonances that had for women professionals in the 1990s when engaging with potential library stock that was linked via medium with that silence.

Additionally, I outline that I broke my own silence about the challenges of being a girlhood reader of comics and a professional working with them as an adult. As a last point I would like to flag that working with comics in libraries enabled me to invite creators into my space, but also allowed me to avoid being involved in fan culture. This was because, as a young library professional, I assumed that comics fandom (which was depicted as male-dominated) would be unwelcoming. This fear, then, resulted in another form of invisibility, and it was only after my career in librarianship had ended that I felt confident enough to engage with fandom.

Given that I have been able to contribute to establishing and developing major comics-focused events that are female-friendly and family-friendly, my experience of fandom in the last fifteen years has been largely positive. However, I have sometimes met older male fans, even recently, whose normative narratives about comics have meant that I have experienced assumptions about what I have read and attempts to correct my understanding of it. A particularly striking encounter was with a male comics fan who insisted that the British girls’ comics genre, given the erotic art created elsewhere by artists who drew strips for them, was pornography for boys and had nothing to do with girls at all, an excessive way of insisting on a male-coded comics culture. This is not unlike the experience of one of Orme’s interviewees, of whom it was reported that they had met male fans who, “would assume that, as a woman, Carol lacked the geek credentials to understand and appreciate comic books” (412).

More importantly, however, in this chapter I have also started to unpack how emotional states around media and childhood might, through policing of girlhood comics culture, have had an impact upon the later professional identities and the development of graphic novels collections. Here the cultural coding of comics culture as male created tensions for the adult female professionals attempting to create services that they hoped would support contemporary young people’s reading needs.

This, then, is the background in the mid-1990s against which I encouraged librarians to engage with the medium. It can be hard to make decisions to stock material like graphic novels and advocate for the medium when lacking confidence because of having historically seen oneself and one’s texts positioned as lesser. However, having positive acknowledgements of girlhood knowledge of the medium, and hands-on experience of contemporary titles, enabled librarians to integrate their historical comics reading into their professional identities and come to terms with the challenge of graphic novels.

Notes

1. I downloaded much of the publicity from the site in 2007 before it was taken down and have kept the material on file. I can confirm that the text on the Amazon site is that which originally appeared on the Prion website.

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