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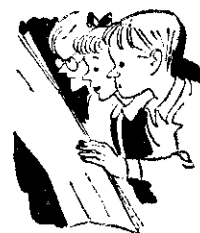
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SHOULD CHILDREN READ COMICS?



RECENT window-displays announcing "Children's Book Week" in many New Zealand bookshops will have re-opened in the minds of some people the old argument "Should children read comics?" Although answers to this problem (by parents and educators alike) vary considerably, and have been thrashed out often enough, there is still room for debate, not only because comics are apparently as popular as ever, but also because of certain new (and perhaps disturbing) trends in the fantasy world of children's reading.

DURING the war, because of paper shortages and supply difficulties, the old familiar English comics so dear to childhood were rather scarce. But this period saw, on the other hand, an expansion in the production, by Australian and New Zealand firms, of such comics of American origin as *Brick Bradford*, *Hurricane*, and *Climax*.

Another recent feature is the so-called *Classic Comic*, which seems to enjoy a phenomenal popularity at the present time.

The first question which comes to mind on this subject is, "Has there been any adequate survey of the comic-reading tastes of primary school children in New Zealand, from a sociological, literary or educative point of view, which can be used as a guide by parents and teachers in their advice to children?" If not (as appears to be the case) one can then proceed to such questions as: Is the comic-reading habit a harmful one? Can comics be adequately replaced by other forms of reading or by, say, film cartoons? Do they inculcate wrong social attitudes in children? Have they any educative value? Do they stimulate interest in reading generally, or in good literature? Do comics take children away from the good books which are to be found in libraries and shops?

What is "Undesirable"?

It is necessary first of all to have some idea of what is understood by "undesirable fiction." Lewis Terman and Margaret Lima, of Stanford University, who made a survey of children's reading in America in 1926, divide undesirable books into two categories: (a) worthless, and (b) directly harmful. By worthless they mean that the child gains "nothing either in information, inspiration, or literary appreciation," and state further that this applies to "a large part of children's reading to-day." Direct references to comics can be found in such statements as "impossible adventure, pseudo-heroism, athletic prowess, or unreal school life." They say that this reading matter has "no regard for literary style," but gratifies the child's desire to be heroic; and so on. "When a child is stimulated to useful activity by the stories of accomplishments of others the result is well worth while; but when the exploits of the hero are too fantastic to admit of duplication in real life, the results may be extremely harmful." They then cite as an example the boy who, instead of learning to swim, was content to read about the daring aquatic feats of others. Of girls they say that the sentimental attitude must be guarded against, and also the giving

of a false conception of reality, for "girls are especially prone to seek their companions in books rather than in real life."

What is "Desirable"?

The extent to which these statements can be applied to the comics read by primary school children in New Zealand is a matter for the experts to decide, but let us first see what Terman and Lima understand by desirable reading. They list four necessities:

(1) It should inculcate worthy ideals of conduct and achievement which can actually motivate the child's life. (2) It should serve to cultivate an appreciation of the beautiful. (3) It should add to the child's fund of desirable knowledge. (4) It should arouse a desire for further reading of good literature.

What it seems necessary to find out is whether these criteria can be satisfactorily applied to such all-time favourites as *Rainbow*, *Chick's Own*, *Comic Cuts*, *Girl's Crystal*, *The Champion*, and others like *Classic Comics*, and the *Brick Bradford* and *Red Ryder the Fearless Cowboy* type of paper.

Librarian's Viewpoint

In a series of interviews *The Listener* discovered conflicting opinions. The supervisor of the Children's Section in the Wellington Public Library admitted that comics were, from her point of view, "a problem." She said the Library's policy was to "attempt as far as possible to crowd them out" of children's reading, and to inculcate better reading habits by displaying on the shelves attractive editions, containing plenty of pictures, of the great classics.

When the so-called *Classic Comics* were mentioned she said that in her opinion these were of ephemeral value and did not provide a lead-in to the actual works themselves. She did not think that comics of this type would necessarily encourage children to read more classical literature when their minds were more developed. She considered that if there were no comics on sale the children would buy more good literature, and come to the libraries more. On the other hand, she admitted it to be possible that the children who read many comics were also great readers of books generally. "But if we didn't have comics in the country our problem would be much easier," she concluded.

Opposing Opinion

Almost exactly the opposite point of view was presented (with qualifications) by a bookseller who specialises to a certain extent in the sale of comics. His qualification, which should be stated first, was "I don't handle the Buck Rogers type of comic." But he was all in favour of the two other types of

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