

CRIME COMICS— Outlet or Incitement?

AT this moment the New Zealand public is agitated about some recent manifestations of delinquency among adolescents, and tormented by the question, Why? Simultaneously comes a renewed demand that the Government should exercise control over the more lurid types of "crime comics" freely imported, distributed and read in great quantities. There is a growing conviction that this abnormal "literature" has something to do with abnormal actions.

These comics are a focal point because of their unremitting emphasis, in the most sordid fashion, on violence, sadism, unhealthy sexuality, cruelty, guile and race hatred. Much of what is charged against them is true, in greater or lesser degree, of many books, radio plays, and films. We cannot dodge the fact that many youngsters feed mentally on a solid diet of this type. How, and in what way, can this influence their daily living?

Only one defence of the crime comic has been seriously raised. It is, that we all contain a primitive being within our civilised exterior: that impulses towards violence occur naturally, and that they receive an outlet through violent literature (or other arts), so that in our actual daily life we behave peacefully and morally.

If this theory is correct, it follows that without such outlets in comics, books, films and radio plays, there would be far more anti-social behaviour than there is. Alternatively, if certain types of violent literature were to be suppressed, the innate urge for such an outlet would in some way or other create new and perhaps worse devices for its satisfaction.

In support of this argument there is the plain fact that violence has a large place in classic, time-honoured literature. We begin from the humble nursery tale. Red Ridinghood's grandmother gets eaten by a wolf, who is finally killed himself; the giant falls to his ruin when Jack cuts down the beanstalk; Hansel and Gretel, barely escaping being eaten alive, push the witch into her own hot oven. Toddlers receive these stories with equanimity as soon as they are old enough to take them in, and artificial attempts to revise them into sweet gentility have always missed their mark. Further up the age scale, what story has more cruelty than *Alice in Wonderland*? And then the classics . . . *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Inferno*, *Oedipus Rex* . . .

I think there is no doubt that child and adult alike do reach a surer adjustment to social life through these classic stories. If it were not so, folk tales and great creative works involving violent themes would not have survived the test of time. What, then, is the difference between Red Ridinghood and Hamlet on the one hand, and "Guns" or "Gangsters" on the other?

There are two main differences: in proportion, and in quality.

In the crime comic there is little else besides violence and sordidness—buckets of it, splash after splash. The devouring of Red Ridinghood's grandmother and the subsequent slaughter of the wolf are but a part of the story, and a lightly-passed-over part at that. Little Red Ridinghood is quite a personality. She obviously enjoys taking goodies to her grannie: she stops to pick flowers on the way: her questions of the

wolf in grannie's nightcap are nuggets of poetic wonder. The toddler isn't frightened by the wolf. The fear of violent ends is laid low by the wood-cutter's axe, and the predominant feeling is of homeliness and charm.

In *Hamlet*, the play ends with bodies strewn around the stage, but it is not a play about murder. It is about human character, its greatness and its weaknesses, and what we remember about Hamlet is not his corpse but his noble, tortured, indecisive soul. We have yet to find a rounded "character" in a crime comic.

But there is another factor, far more sinister and dangerous. The folk stories and the classic epics of the past were never deliberately fostered by anyone. It seems obvious that their survival is due directly to the satisfaction they gave to successive generations: for had it depended on someone organising their circulation, they would rapidly have perished before modern book-publishing came on the scene. No factor but merit can account for the success of *Hamlet* and of *Little Red Ridinghood*, an infinitesimal proportion of the millions of stories that have at some time been invented.

Today the production of crime comics and other violent literature owes little if anything to spontaneous inspiration. It's a business—a highly commercialised business. In the United States, no less than 50 million dollars are invested in it. One out of every three trees cut down in Canada for paper pulp ends up purveying stories of murder and crime. If crime does not pay in real life, it certainly pays as fiction. A handsome margin of profit is assured also to the wholesale distributing firms and to the little shops which sell them over the counter. Big circulation combined with cheap production make those profits secure and easy.

As with any other form of production, from washing machines to breakfast cereals, the manufacturer's interest lies in persuading the public to buy his goods, and he uses a large part of his capital in creating his market. That fifty million dollars (and its equivalent in pounds sterling) constitute a massive battering-ram behind the crime comics' assault on the community. It is not a question of casually picking them up: they are purposefully pushed under the noses of every prospective buyer.

An occasional reading of the very worst type of printed matter would never do the slightest harm to a healthy, normal mind. But what happens when it is read over and over, day in and day out, year after year? It is natural for the human body to crave sweet food. Dates, honey, sugar, are universally sought after and enjoyed. However, since in modern times such foods have become easily obtainable, health authorities have had to warn us against acquiring the habit of over-eating them to the exclusion of wholesome proteins, grains and vegetables. Whoever indulges an over-developed taste for sweets quickly loses his sound teeth and robust health. It's a matter of moderation, of giving each factor in our diet its right proportion.

A mental diet can be just as bad. Taken in moderation, violence in our reading-matter is no doubt beneficial. Taken in excess, it can cripple our mental and moral development and our social attitudes. Like excess sugar, it is

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most dangerous to the growing child and the young adult. And we should note again that unwholesome mental diets are not just occasionally left lying around; they are deliberately foisted on us by agencies which profit enormously by our picking them up. Can there be any doubt that warped attitudes to other people and to society are at least intensified by such mental diets?

The American investigator Dr. Fredric Wertham, in a book *Seduction of the Innocent*, from which extracts appear in the *Ladies' Home Journal* for November, 1953, shows that since 1947 the juvenile delinquency figures in the U.S.A. increased by 20 per cent, keeping pace with the phenomenal increase in crime comics. But, he says, it is not the figures but the nature of the crimes that are revealing: and he goes on to quote case after case where comic-book plots were re-enacted in real life. Wrote Judge Liebowitz: "The defendants in crimes of violence in recent years are getting younger and younger, and nowadays they include mere children who should be in knee pants—at an age when in former years they would have come into contact with the law only for swiping apples or upsetting push-carts."

No, there's nothing "normal" in this set-up. Nothing like an "outlet" in floods of crime pictures fed to children too young to know that they are swallowing corrosive poison. Commercialised violence is utterly different in quality and in scope from nursery rhymes and stories, *Alice in Wonderland*, Dante and Shakespeare.

Fortunately, there are counter-forces. The child whose home life is full and rounded, whose energies have their development in sport, games and hobbies and in a sound cultural environment, will generally tire of crime comics and turn to good books. The home, the school and the library—assisted by various agencies, not forgetting the responsible bookseller and "children's book week"—are in the forefront of the battle all the time. Many people think that these front-line defences are sufficient, that any form of censorship and control might be a dangerous precedent and that voluntary action alone should be encouraged. They forget that fifty million dollars and its corollary in pounds sterling.

In the U.S.A., there are also good homes, schools' libraries, clubs, churches and so on. Yet so terrific has been the avalanche of half a billion comics yearly since they made their first appearance in the late 1930's, and so drastic their habit-forming effect that: "During the war, comics-books were the favourite, and practically the only, reading of the American soldier, outselling at P.X.'s, by ten to one, *Life*, *Liberty*, *Readers' Digest* and *Saturday Evening Post* combined." (G. Legman, *Love and Death*.)

I have no doubt that the enlightened home will always defeat the crime comic: but what of the children whose homes, otherwise good, are thoughtless or careless in this respect? They are unprotected. And not only these children, but other citizens may suffer from distortion of their outlook.

We already protect children from unsuitable films by censorship, without expecting the parents to carry out a preview. Those who hesitate to advocate control of comics, on the ground that it opens a door which might be used by bigots against masterworks by Boccaccio or Rabelais or any modern equivalents, should realise that the precedent already exists—in film censorship. And comics can be dealt with as firmly and sensibly as films, in the public interest.

"... and this is the expurgated edition"



(C) Punch

N.Z. LISTENER, SEPTEMBER 3, 1954.