



Comics and Cartoons: a missed opportunity?

I vividly remember rushing downstairs every Saturday morning to beat my younger brother to our weekly comics; if I was quick enough I could pick up his *Victor* and *Beano* ahead of my *Bunty* and the inevitable choice of the ambitious parent: *Look and Learn* and read them all before he had even emerged from his blankets (no duvets that long ago!). I was also an avid book reader, renowned for spending children's parties perusing the bookshelves rather than learning to be a sociable extrovert. So, I'm not sure I agree with the snobbish reaction you occasionally hear when comics and graphic novels are mentioned in the same breath as literary works of fiction.

Surely any reading is better than no reading? And comics hold a place in my heart and, I imagine, of many others, from childhood. But, it is certainly true, that, as a reading adult, I never buy or open a graphic novel or an adult comic now and I suspect that is a common situation. Graphic novels and adult cartoons are still a fabric of French and Japanese culture but no longer within the UK – might this be a lost opportunity?

It was, therefore, with much interest, some trepidation and a distinct lack of knowledge, that I arrived at the University of Hertfordshire's first Comics Festival, celebrating all kinds of comics for all kinds of people, organised in partnership with St. Alban's Children's Book Group.

But I needn't have worried - it was just like Conference! There were children's illustrators, families with children of all ages and authors all celebrating reading, drawing and books.

It was fascinating to hear the links between the picture books we all read with our children and the cartoon and comic style. St. Albans had organised a visit by Marcia Williams earlier in the week, whose comic strip style appeals to many younger and early independent readers and this synergy between comic style and picture book illustration came to life with the event, also organised and sponsored by St. Alban's Children's Book Group, with Sarah McIntyre.

Sarah attracted a packed audience of 75 adults and children, mainly aged between 3 and 7, and managed to keep all of them (including adults) quiet for an hour, not only describing how she creates her comic style of illustration, but also getting everyone to take part in a *Comic Jam* – a fantastically innovative story-telling structure, rather along the lines of *Comic Consequences*. Visit Sarah's website, <http://www.jabberworks.co.uk/>, for more information and for ideas for creating your own comic cartoon characters.

Sarah was also one of the afternoon panel talking about creating comics for kids, which included Gary Northfield, creator of *Derek the Sheep* in *The Beano*, and Dave Shelton, past contributor to the now defunct DFC (see page...for an opportunity to buy some of the DFC library). The panel talked about their influences, ranging widely and rather improbably from the European and Japanese comics through Laurel and Hardy, Maurice Sendak and Ronald Searle to Tolkien. It was fascinating to hear of how integral to the process the computer has become and how comic characters have helped children in a French psychiatric hospital. It was also axiomatic to have drawn comic characters from an early age – almost all members of the panel had sold or gave away comics to unsuspecting neighbours, family and friends.

But, if we think back to our favourite comics, it is the characters we remember best and all of the comic illustrators agreed that strong characters are central to the story line. If you listen to them, they said, they will write the story for themselves. So, comics are as much about story-telling as traditional

books and picture books – why not pick up a graphic novel and open up new reading experiences for yourself and your children?