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The

# Reader's Digest

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# THE COMICS... Very Funny



Condensed from  
*The Saturday Review*  
of Literature

AN anxious mother consulted me some time ago. Her four-year-old daughter is the only little girl in their apartment house. Whenever they get a chance, the boys in the building, ranging in age from three to nine years, hit her, beat her with toy guns, tie her up with rope. They manacle her with handcuffs bought with coupons from comic books. They take her to a vacant lot and use her as a target for bow and arrow. Once they pulled off her panties, to torture her (as they put it).

What is the common denominator of all this? Is this the "natural aggression" of little boys? Is it the



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manifestation of the sex instinct? Is it the release of natural tendencies or the imitation of unnatural ones?

The common denominator is comic books.

I examine in the clinic a boy of 11, referred to me because he fights in school and is inattentive. He says: "I buy comic books every week. They kill animals, sometimes they kill people. One of the girls is the best fighter. Sometimes they tie her up and sometimes they put her in a snake cave so that the snakes would kill her."

A boy of 17 is referred to me by the Juvenile Aid Bureau because in an argument he stabbed a boy of 13

*Do you think that books which stress murder and mayhem and blood-and-thunder are good fare for youngsters?*


"with full intent." He says: "I don't read many comic books—only about ten a week. I like crime comics. Sometimes they kill the girl. In one of the books the girl wanted more money so they stabbed her in the back." Was it "full intent," or was it imitation that motivated him?

A boy of 13, a comic-book addict, is a problem at home and at school. He says: "They have some kind of guns that shoot out a ray and kill a lot of people." Is that a natural fantasy? Or is it a kind of reality that many adults dread now and which these kids will have to face sooner or later?

Think of the many violent crimes committed recently by young boys and girls. A 12-year-old boy kills his younger sister; a 13-year-old burglar operates with a shotgun; another 13-year-old shoots a nurse and is sent to a reformatory (where, incidentally, he will read more comic books); a 17-year-old killer leaves a note signed "The Devil"; two 12-year-old boys and one of 11 shoot a man on the street with a semiautomatic; three 16-year-old boys kill a 14-year-old "for revenge."

In a public school in New York City two police officers circulate on the grounds and in the corridors to prevent violence; a mathematics

### *Make-Believe or Reality?*

 R. WERTHAM is not impressed with the argument that comic books are no worse than classical fairy tales. Fairy tales, he holds, present a world removed from the everyday life of the child. The magic wands convert pumpkins to coaches or beasts into handsome young princes. This is clearly a world of magic. But in comic books men play with super-machine guns and atomic energy, bringing the terrors of today's adult world close to the child.

Furthermore, he insists, children do not recognize comic books as a world of make-believe. He challenges anyone to find a make-believe world in this summary made by an eight-year-old clinic patient: "The two I like best are about crooks. The crooks rob a liquor store. They stab two women with a knife. One crook started killing people: five cops, six women and 18 other people. If anybody crossed him he didn't give them no chance. He found himself in the electric chair."

—Judith Crist in *Collier's*

teacher has to have a policeman present in the classroom during examinations. In another school older pupils threaten younger ones with violence and with maiming, rob them of their money, watches and fountain pens. When two of the victims were asked the names of their tormentors, they refused to answer, explaining: "We don't want our eyes cut out." One 16-year-old boy in this school was beaten with a broken bottle and cut so severely that seven stitches had to be taken around the eyes. Adults, horrified at this attack, were unaware that this is old stuff for comic-book readers. In one of the so-called "good" comic

books (*Classics Illustrated*), a rendering of Eugene Sue's novel *The Mysteries of Paris* depicts a man whose eyes are gouged out; blood runs down from beneath the bandage.

A youth in New York City recently killed a policeman. Is that so astonishing in view of the typical comic-book cover showing a man and a woman shooting it out with the police to the accompaniment of "We'll give those flatfeet a bellyful of lead"? A 13-year-old Chicago boy who murdered a playmate tells his lawyer that he reads all the crime comic books he can get hold of. He is sentenced to 22 years in prison; while the comic-book publishers who filled his mind with thoughts and methods of murder continue as before.

Recently in a crowded section of New York City I saw a sign on a movie theater, "On Saturday Morning Comic Books Will Be Given Out Free to the First 500 Attending." The two films featured were *The Son of Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein*. Posters showed girls in various stages of being overpowered. I was reminded of the little boy who, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, replied enthusiastically, "A sex maniac!"

What is the case for the comic books? It is said:

(1) That the children have their "own choice" in selecting this literature. (But go to any candy store or newsstand and see what other books you can get for ten cents.)

(2) That they reflect the child's mind, and if he goes wrong he must

have been neurotic or unstable in the first place. (That reminds me of the owner of the dog that killed a rabbit, who claimed in court that the rabbit had started the fight.)

(3) That comic books are a healthy outlet; it is good for children to find release for their aggressive desires. (On the contrary, they stimulate unhealthy sexual attitudes such as sadism and masochism. And where in psychological literature can one find anything to indicate that it is advisable for children to see over and over again pictures of violence and torture?)

(4) That they are educational. (Let's look again at one of the "good" comic books. In the comic-book version of Dickens' *Great Expectations* the first nine pictures show a gruesome, evil-looking man threatening a little boy with a big knife. The child cries out: "Oh, don't cut my throat, sir!" Is this educational, in the opinion of comic-book publishers?)

(5) That "educational" comic books lead children to read the classics. (Many children have told me that when they have to make a book report in school they use the comic-book version so they *won't* have to read the book.)

(6) That the children identify themselves with the good characters in the comic books. (There are comic books where girls are bound and burned, sold as slaves, thrown to the animals, and rescued only at the last moment by a good and faithful elephant. Do the experts of the

comic-book industry claim that the children identify themselves with the elephant?)

(7) That the children don't imitate these stories. (But the increase of violence in juvenile delinquency has gone hand in hand with the increase in the distribution of comic books.)

(8) That in comic books children are never threatened, killed or tortured. (But they are.)

(9) That they improve reading skills. (But since all the emphasis is on pictures and not on printed matter, teachers know that they have to get rid of comic books to make children read real books.)

(10) That comic books make a lot of money. (They do! Comic books are the greatest book-publishing success in history. Children are bombarded with at least 60,000,000 copies a month.)

(11) That any curbing of comic books would mean interference with free speech. (Censoring what adults read has nothing to do with planning for children the kind of reading matter that will not harm them.)

(12) That "experts" have approved of comic books. (These apologists function under the auspices of the comic-book business.)

It is pretty well established that 75 percent of parents are against comic books. (The other 25 percent are either indifferent or misled by propaganda.) Since the comic-book industry enjoys second-class mailing privileges, the parents, as taxpayers,

THREE U. S. cities have acted against the sale of comic books deemed harmful to youth, reports the American Municipal Association. Working together, Indianapolis magazine distributors, city officials and civic groups have banned 35 comics. Detroit police have forbidden newsstand sale of 36 comic books. Hillsdale, Mich., has banned the same books prohibited in Detroit.

— AP

are paying for what they do not want. The mass production of comic books is a serious danger to the production of good inexpensive children's books.

My own clinical studies and those of my associates at the Lafargue Clinic have convinced me that comic books represent systematic poisoning of the well of childhood spontaneity. Many children themselves feel guilty about reading them. In a Chicago school recently the pupils collected and burned all the comic books and then went around in groups and persuaded dealers in the neighborhood not to handle them any more. Some other schools in Chicago followed their example.

When I recently conducted a symposium on the psychopathology of comic books I was blamed for not allotting more time to a representative of the comic-book business who was there. I am even guiltier than that: I once conducted a symposium on alcoholism and didn't invite a single distiller.