Comics are good for you!

Vanitha Saravanan and Ilsa Sharp

GROW: The Magazine for Parents, Teachers and All Who Care, August 1980, pp. 21-25, 27

Ministry of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.
Comics are good for you!

Vanitha Saravanan (Institute of Education) and Iku Sharp

I happen to be a firm believer in comic books, gory adventures, nauseating melodramas and every other type of story that attracts young readers and encourages them to read. I also believe that good taste in literature has to be taught as it must be taught. There is a place for so-called trash literature. After all, most of us still enjoy reading adult trash.

Finally, Vitalstatistix, the chief of the tribe. Majestic, brave and hot-tempered, the old warrior is respected by his men and feared by his enemies. Vitalstatistix himself has only one fear; he is afraid the sky may fall on his head tomorrow. But as he always says, 'Tomorrownever comes.'
NOT all comics are bad. There are comics and comics — bad ones and good ones. In the West, comics are no longer the preserve of children, but also an adult craze, accepted as a new and valid art form in their own right.

But can they possibly be educational?, the worried parent will ask. It all depends on what you mean by "educational", of course, and even more, it all depends on the individual personality of your child. Maybe, for your child, From "Hands" (China), a typical Chinese "sequence-picture-book" or lian-huan-tu.

comics will prove an easier introduction to reading books than plunging him straight into a sea of unrelieved text.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that words are the only way in which education can be transmitted to a child. Not so — images and pictures are equally, if not more, powerful tools of communication. The dramatic drawings in a good comic may not only communicate information to your child but also serve to stimulate and enrich his visual, artistic imagination; sometimes the development of his imagination will feed back into the quality of his written work, sometimes it will just surface as pure artistic talent, in drawing and painting. But it is all "education."

It is true that comics thrive on slang at worst, colloquialisms at best, and so do not demand too much of their young readers. But for youngsters still unfamiliar with the skill of reading books and who find most book prose both formal and difficult, the comic is the best take-off point for true reading.

But which comics? Most widely read are the Beano, Dandy, Superman and Tarzan variety, but these are the least desirable in terms of their language level and their star characters are mere stereotypes who appear in stock situations. "Drawn by a robot, not a human being!" snorted one critic, a friend of mine.

Good comics not only tell a story but also try to depict the better side of human nature, concentrating on healthy, meaningful subjects, avoiding the gratuitous violence of some other comics; they are beautifully illustrated and well printed, with careful attention to the quality of language, although the language naturally remains simple.
Into the "good" category fall comics like "The Adventures of Tintin" by Hergé and "Asterix" by René Goscinny, both from France but translated into lively English.

Tintin, the carrot-haired reporter-detective with his faithful little white dog, Snowy, are for ever involved in a series of cliff-hanging thrillers, solving mysteries of sunken ships and missing treasure. The illustrations point to meticulous research into details of geography, costume, architecture and so on. The Tintin series has recently been translated into Malay, among more than 10 other languages.

Both series are witty, but perhaps the "Asterix" series is a little more so — it has attracted a substantial adult following and Frenchmen (or Englishmen) love it particularly for its sly digs at the cultural differences between France and England. The occasional use of common Latin words in the middle of English-language dialogue (since the series is set in the days of Julius Caesar's Roman Empire) may bother some Singaporean children, but they do not seriously disturb the sense or flow of the main plot. Asterix can be appreciated on many levels, some of them surprisingly intellectual.

Another outstanding western comic-strip creator is Raymond Briggs, whose "Father Christmas" has been much acclaimed. He is also responsible for "Gentleman Jim." He is known to put a great deal of careful pre-planning into his work and uses subtle signals to indicate messages about his comic characters — for instance, if the tail of a dialogue "bubble" is drawn right across the face of one of his characters, you can take it to mean that this is a "repressed" character.

Still others worth looking at are Ardizzone's "Diana and Her Rhinoceros" which uses the realistic speech of adults in its bubbles; Ahlberge's "Brick Street Boys," Mark Kahn's "It's a Dog's Life," and Heinemann's "Guided Readers for Beginners."

Our own cultures too are rich in comic-format teaching. A particularly strong moral education range is the 150-title "Amar Chitra Katha" series on Indian classics and folk heroes. These
are distinguished by their detailed attention to historical settings, costumes, furniture etc and their quietly formal, simple English (they are published in both Tamil and English versions). Although there is the constant background of the Hindu culture, the stories are of the sort that should appeal to children of any race. The series can be bought in single small paper-backs, or bound into a 20-volume (still growing!) hard-back collection.

Comic presentations of Chinese classics have been popular for some time but are enjoying a strong revival now that the current concern with cultural heritage and moral education has really gained momentum: many new comics are being created now to meet this new demand.

Knowledge Pictorial, Good Student, Junior Readers, and Nanyang Children, as well as the classics - "Romance of the Three Kingdoms", "Dream of the Red Chamber," "Adventures of the Monkey God" and "All Men Are Brothers" - for instance, are all well known and have in some cases been translated into Malay too. These titles are all available at the National Library.

Teachers may like to try using comics in a visual approach to teaching language. They can devise several formats beyond the obvious one of asking sequence questions such as "Describe what happens in picture one, two, three..."

Here are some suggestions for other teaching techniques using comics:

**Oral presentation**

The children are asked to express in their own words, the actions and emotions shown in the pictures. They can be helped by question and vocabulary lists drawn up by the teacher.

**Dialogues**

The teacher or pupil acts as a commentator or reporter, asking questions about the events in the pictures, and the pupils join in by developing dialogues - but this method demands a skillful teacher who can draw interesting responses from the class.

**Guided Language Practice**

Instead of going through tedious exercises and drills unrelated to any specific "story," pupils can indirectly be encouraged to use a variety of language structures and idioms while describing a comic-strip.

**Guided Composition**

The process of putting picture stories from comics into words could act as the first step towards written language - pupils could be encouraged to write down their version in composition form.

Even advanced second-language learners could benefit from comics. Certain writing skills such as sequencing, cause and effect relationships, compare and contrast relationships and summary work could be taught through such materials.

For the innovative teacher and the thinking parent, there is no doubt - comics can be good for you!

"There is a definite place for comics in encouraging reading development at a particular stage. They can stimulate reading speed when children need lots of clues in the pictures to help them to read with understanding. Maybe you can remember when you "graduated" from reading only the words in the balloons, to the longer text that used to be printed underneath.

"The RUPERT books are a good example, I would certainly never condemn children's comics, although it would be a pity to squander a child's book allowance on them, as their cost very quickly amounts to the same price as some very good paperbacks, although THE OLD JOKE BOOK by Janet and Allan Ahlberg combines the corniest playground jokes with witty comic strip pictures and is well worth purchasing.

"In my family, Dad provides comics occasionally and we always have a good supply for long train journeys. The best headmistress I know relies on them absolutely for those awful wet dinner times and playtimes.

"Many parents tend to become a little muddled and worried in their thinking about comics, and manufacturers are quick to play on what might be called guilt feelings about the reading of comics by producing what have come to be called 'educational comics'. Personally I still think the old fashioned BEANO and DANDY type are most to be recommended.

"Raymond Briggs has raised the comic format to a new height of excellence with his engaging FATHER CHRISTMAS, and more recently with his SNOWMAN."


"Teachers can and should encourage their students to bring selected books and magazines to class - not to be read surreptitiously but to be..."
Page 25

discussed, analysed, criticised and praised in class. Why does a book become a best-seller? What are its good points? What are its deficiencies? Does it have ‘redeeming literary merit’? Comparison is one of the best ways, if not the only way, to create an awareness of what is good or bad. It’s time for Jacqueline Susann to come to class.’

New Nation leader, March 24, 1980.

HOW TO GET THE COMICS:

ASTERIX series (Hodder Dargaud, Hodder and Stoughton Children’s Books, London)
FATHER CHRISTMAS (Hamish Hamilton, London)
DIANA AND HER RHINOCEROS (The Bodley Head, London)
IT’S A DOG’S LIFE (Jonathan Cape, London)

In Singapore, all the above are available from United Publishers’ Services, 110F/114F Blk 5, Boon Keng Road, Singapore 1233, Tel: 258207, and from leading bookshops.

FATHER CHRISTMAS is also available as a Picture Puffin paperback, from Federal Publications, 1-C New Industrial Road, Singapore 1953, Tel: 2848844, which also handles


TINTIN series (Methuen and Co, London) — In Singapore, from MPH 71-77 Stamford Road, Singapore 0617, Tel: 363633

AMAR CHITRA KATHA series (India Book House, Bombay), in English or in Tamil — In Singapore, from R. Harumal and Sons, 54 Winchester House, Singapore 0104, Tel: 92340, or at 6A Jago Close, Singapore 1542, Tel: 405011, and from leading Indian bookshops.

CHINESE COMICS FROM HONGKONG — In Singapore, from Shanghai Book Co, 81 Victoria Street, Singapore 0718, Tel: 360144, or IN ENGLISH, from MPH.

KNOWLEDGE PICTORIAL (Chinese) — from Chee Tze Poh Press, 554 (3rd flr), Havelock Road, Singapore 0316, Tel: 2210657.

MALAY COMICS FROM MALAYSIA, Mediaseni Series — In Singapore, from H. Hashim, 134 Arab Street, Singapore 0719, Tel: 2587196, and from leading Malay bookshops.

Most of these comics (in many cases, actually comic-books) are reasonably priced, ranging from $1 for the Indian ones to about $8 for the English ones.