Adult Comics

Roger Sabin

The New Accent Series

Adult Comics

In a society where a comic equates with knockabout amusement for children, the sudden pre-eminence of adult comics, on everything from political satire to erotic fantasy, has predictably attracted an enormous amount of attention.

Adult comics are part of the cultural landscape in a way that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. In this first survey of its kind, Roger Sabin traces the history of comics for older readers from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. He takes in the pioneering titles pre-First World War, the underground 'comix' of the 1960s and 1970s, 'fandom' in the 1970s and 1980s, and the boom of the 1980s and 1990s (including 'graphic novels' and *Viz.*). Covering comics from the United States, Europe and Japan, *Adult Comics* addresses such issues as the graphic novel in context, cultural overspill and the role of women.

By taking a broad sweep, Sabin demonstrates that the widely-held notion that comics 'grew up' in the late 1980s is a mistaken one, largely invented by the media. *Adult Comics: An Introduction* is intended primarily for student use, but is written with the comic enthusiast very much in mind.

Roger Sabin is a freelance arts journalist, living and working in London. He has written about comics for several national newspapers and magazines, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *New Statesman and Society*.

THE NEW ACCENT SERIES
General Editor: Terence Hawkes

Alternative Shakespeares 1, ed. John Drakakis
Alternative Shakespeares 2, ed. Terence Hawkes
Post-Colonial Shakespeares, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin
Re-Reading English, ed. Peter Widdowson
Rewriting English, Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, R. O'Rourke, Chris Weedon
English and Englishness, B. Doyle
Linguistics and the Novel, Roger Fowler
Language and Style, E. L. Epstein
The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, Keir Elam
Structuralism and Semiotics, Terence Hawkes
Superstructuralism, Richard Harland
Deconstruction ed. 2, Christopher Norris
Formalism and Marxism, Tony Bennett
Critical Practice, Catherine Belsey
Dialogism, Michael Holquist
Dialogue and Difference: English for the Nineties, ed. Peter Brooker/Peter Humm
Literature, Politics and Theory, ed. F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iversen, D. Loxley
Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History, ed. Peter Humm, Paul Stigant, Peter Widdowson
Criticism in Society, ed. Imre Salusinszky
Fantasy, Rosemary Jackson
Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching, Patrick Parrinder
Sexual Fiction, Maurice Charney
Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan
Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, Patricia Waugh
Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction, Steven Cohan and Linda Shires
Poetry as Discourse, Anthony Easthope
The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon
Subculture, ed. 2, Dick Hebdige
Reading Television, John Fiske and John Hartley
Orality and Literacy, Walter J. Ong
Adult Comics, An Introduction, Roger Sabin
The Unusable Past, Russell J. Reising
The Empire Writes Back, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin
Translation Studies ed. 2, Susan Bassnett
Studying British Cultures, Susan Bassnett
Literature and Propaganda, A. P. Foulkes
Reception Theory, Robert C. Holub
Psychoanalytic Criticism, Elizabeth Wright
The Return of the Reader, Elizabeth Freund
Sexual/Textual Politics, Toril Moi
Making a Difference, ed. Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn

AVAILABLE AS A COMPLETE SET: ISBN 0-415-29116-X

Roger
Sabin

Adult Comics

An introduction

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1993
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

This edition first published 2003

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

First issued in paperback 2010

© 1973, 2003 Roger Sabin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 978-0-415-29139-2 (hbk)
ISBN 978-0-415-60689-9 (pbk)
ISBN 978-0-415-30026-1 (set)
ISBN 978-1-134-55799-8 (ebk)

Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

Contents

	List of figures	vi
	General editor's preface	ix
	Acknowledgements	xi
	Introduction	1
	What is a comic?	5
	PART I BRITAIN	
1	The first adult comics	13
2	Kids' stuff	23
3	Underground comix	36
4	*2000AD*: 'The comic of tomorrow!'	52
5	Fandom and direct sales	62
6	'Comics grow up!': dawn of the graphic novel	87
7	From boom to bust	96
8	*Viz*: 'More fun than a jammy bun!'	116
9	The future	127
	PART II THE UNITED STATES	
10	Strips and proto-comics	133
11	Comic books for everyone	144
12	1954 – seduction of the experienced?	157
13	The years of collapse: survivors and adaptors	163
14	The modern era	171
	PART III ASPECTS	
15	Worldcomics	183
16	Adult comics and other media	210
17	Women and adult comics	221
18	The graphic novel in context	235
	Conclusion	249
	Appendices	251
	1 Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc.	251
	2 Ready reference dates for key British and American comics	254
	Notes	261
	Bibliography	293
	Index	307

Figures

0.1	A schematic illustration to show the passage of the reader's eye over a panel from a romance comic.	6
0.2	Panel from the horror comic *Reaper of Love* (1991).	7
0.3	The first page of *Watchmen* (1987).	8
1.1	'"The Friend of the People" and his Petty New Tax Gatherer Paying John Bull a Visit' (1806) by James Gillray.	14
1.2	Cover to *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, no. 1 (1884).	17
1.3	'At It Again', *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (1884).	18
1.4	Cover to *Illustrated Chips* (1902).	20
2.1	Panels from the 'The Bash Street Kids', *Beano* (1958).	24
2.2	Cover to the *Eagle* (1954), featuring Dan Dare.	25
2.3	Cover to *Girl* (1956).	27
2.4	Cover to *Haunt of Fear*, no. 1 (1954).	29
2.5	Dust-jacket to Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955).	30
2.6	Cover to *The Hulk*, no. 1 (1962).	31
3.1	A selection of covers of solo comix by Robert Crumb.	38
3.2	Panels from 'The Freaks Pull a Heist!', *The Collected Adventures of The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, no. 1 (1971).	39
3.3	Panels from 'Trashman', *The Collected Trashman*, no. 1 (1970).	40
3.4	Cover to *Cyclops* (1970).	42
3.5	Cover to *Street Comix*, no. 5 (1978).	44
3.6	Advertisement for a Birmingham headshop.	46
3.7	Panels from *The Trials of Nasty Tales* (1973).	47
3.8	'Komix Comics', *Street Quomix* (1977).	48
4.1	Cover to *Action* (1976).	53
4.2	Cover to *2000AD* (1980), depicting future lawman Judge Dredd.	54
4.3	Panels from 'Nemesis the Warlock', *2000AD* (1983).	56
4.4	Cover to *Warrior*, no. 7 (1982).	59
5.1	Advertisement for the Dark They Were shop.	65

5.2	Cover to *Métal Hurlant*, no. 1 (1975).	71
5.3	Cover to *Near Myths*, no. 5 (1980).	74
5.4	A page from *American Flagg!*, no. 2 (1983).	75
5.5	Panel from 'Locas', *Love and Rockets*, no. 13 (1985).	76
5.6	Cover to *Daredevil*, no. 184 (1982).	78
5.7	Cover to *Raw*, no. 2 (1980).	79
5.8	Cover to *Escape*, no. 3 (1983).	81
5.9	Panels from *Alec* (1984).	82
5.10	Cover to *Fast Fiction*, no. 12 (1984).	83
5.11	Panels from 'Uncle Bob's Mid-life Crisis', *Weirdo*, no. 7 (1983).	84
6.1	Panels from *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).	88
6.2	Panels from *Watchmen* (1987).	89
6.3	A page from *Maus* (1987).	90
6.4	The press discover a fresh arts story, 1986–7	92
7.1	Cover to *Hate*, no. 5 (1991).	99
7.2	Page-panel from *Vietnam Journal*, no. 4 (1989).	101
7.3	Cover to *Black Kiss*, no. 1 (1988).	102
7.4	A page from 'Shadowplay', *Brought to Light* (1989).	103
7.5	Cover to *Crisis*, no. 39 (1990).	107
7.6	Panel from 'Dare', *Revolver*, no. 4 (1990).	108
7.7	Cover to *Deadline*, no. 4 (1989), featuring cult heroine 'Tank Girl'.	109
8.1	Cover to *Viz*, no. 1 (1979).	118
8.2	'Roger Mellie, the Man on the Telly', *Viz*, no. 6 (1982).	119
8.3	Panels from 'Norbert Colon – He's the Meanest Man on Earth!', *Viz*, no. 16 (1986).	120
8.4	Illustration from a *Viz* readership survey, 1988.	122
8.5	Panels from 'Sid the Sexist', *Viz*, no. 9 (1982).	123
8.6	Panels from 'The Fat Slags', *Viz*, no. 41 (1990).	124
8.7	Just a few of the *Viz* copyists	126
9.1	Panels from *Signal to Noise*.	128
10.1	'Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend', syndicated to various newspapers in 1905.	135
10.2	Panel from 'Krazy Kat', syndicated in 1926.	136
10.3	Panels from 'Flash Gordon', syndicated in 1939.	139
10.4	Cover to *Famous Funnies*, no. 1 (1934).	141
10.5	Page-panel from *Sexy Sadie in: Sadie Steps Out* (c.1935).	142
11.1	Title page from 'The Elevator', *The Spirit* (1949).	149
11.2	Cover to *Murder Incorporated*, no. 2 (1948).	150
11.3	Cover to *Young Romance*, no. 2 (1947).	151
11.4	Title panel from 'Contact!', *Frontline Combat*, no. 2 (1951).	153
11.5	Cover to *Mad*, no. 9 (1954).	155
12.1	Cover to *Shock Suspenstories*, no. 6 (1954).	160
12.2	The Code stamp of the Comics Code Authority	161

13.1	Cover to *Sad Sack*, no. 78 (1958).	164
13.2	Panels from 'The Hold Up', *Help!*, no. 2 (1961).	167
13.3	Cover to *Eerie*, no. 8 (1966).	168
14.1	Panel from 'E Pluribus Pinhead: The Zippy Campaign Part 5', *Zippy Stories*, no. 2 (1980).	172
14.2	A page from *Blood on the Moon* (1978).	173
14.3	Cover to *American Splendor*, no. 14 (1984).	177
15.1	Cover to *L'Epatant*, no. 9 (1908).	185
15.2	Cover to *Pilote*, no. 628 (1972).	188
15.3	Cover to *L'Écho des savanes*, no. 1 (1972).	191
15.4	Panels from 'Adele Blanc-Sec: Le secret de la Salamandre', (*A Suivre*), no. 30 (1980).	194
15.5	Panels from *Corto Maltese in Irelande* (1980).	195
15.6	Cartoon by Joost Swarte, *Pilote*, no. 65 (1982).	196
15.7	Cover to *El Vibora*, no. 10 (1988).	198
15.8	A page from *Lone Wolf and Cub* (1972).	204
15.9	A page from *Golgo 13* (1979).	205
15.10	A page from *Akira* (1988).	207
16.1	Original cinema poster for *Fritz the Cat* (1972).	212
16.2	Animation-still from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.	213
16.3	Cover to the Lancer paperback *Conan the Buccaneer* (1971).	214
16.4	The changing face of record-sleeve art.	217
17.1	Cover to *It Ain't Me Babe* (1970).	225
17.2	Cover to *Heroine* (1978).	227
17.3	A page from 'The English Lesson', *Dirty Plotte*, no. 3 (1990).	232
18.1	Cover to *Call for Barracuda*, Fleetway Super Library, no. 4 (1967).	237
18.2	A page from *A Contract With God* (1978).	239
18.3	Cover to *Church and State* (1987).	240
18.4	Panels from *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, book 2 (1987).	241
18.5	Panels from *When the Wind Blows* (1982).	242
18.6	A page from *Empire* (1978).	244
18.7	Advertisement for Titan Books' range of graphic novels (1987).	245

General editor's preface

How can we recognise or deal with the new? Any equipment we bring to the task will have been designed to engage with the old: it will look for and identify extensions and developments of what we already know. To some degree the unprecedented will always be unthinkable.

The *New Accents* series has made its own wary negotiation around that paradox, turning it, over the years, into the central concern of a continuing project. We are obliged, of course, to be bold. Change is our proclaimed business, innovation our announced quarry, the accents of the future the language in which we deal. So we have sought, and still seek, to confront and respond to those developments in literary studies that seem crucial aspects of the tidal waves of transformation that continue to sweep across our culture. Areas such as structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, marxism, semiotics, subculture, deconstruction, dialogism, postmodernism, and the new attention to the nature and modes of language, politics and way of life that these bring, have already been the primary concern of a large number of our volumes. Their 'nuts and bolts' exposition of the issues at stake in new ways of writing texts and new ways of reading them has proved an effective stratagem against perplexity.

But the question of what 'texts' are or may be has also become more and more complex. It is not just the impact of electronic modes of communication, such as computer networks and data banks, that has forced us to revise our sense of the sort of material to which the process called 'reading' may apply. Satellite television and supersonic travel have eroded the traditional capacities of time and space to confirm prejudice, reinforce ignorance, and conceal significant difference. Ways of life and cultural practices of which we had barely heard can now be set compellingly beside – can even confront – our own. The effect is to make us ponder the culture we have inherited; to see it, perhaps for the first time, as an intricate, continuing construction. And that means that we can also begin to see, and to question, those arrangements of foregrounding and backgrounding, of stressing and

repressing, of placing at the centre and of restricting to the periphery, that give our own way of life its distinctive character.

Small wonder if, nowadays, we frequently find ourselves at the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable: peering into an abyss out of which there begin to lurch awkwardly-formed monsters with unaccountable – yet unavoidable – demands on our attention. These may involve unnerving styles of narrative, unsettling notions of 'history', unphilosophical ideas about 'philosophy', even un-childish views of 'comics', to say nothing of a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names.

In this situation, straightforward elucidation, careful unpicking, informative bibliographies, can offer positive help, and each *New Accents* volume will continue to include these. But if the project of closely scrutinising the new remains nonetheless a disconcerting one, there are still overwhelming reasons for giving it all the consideration we can muster. The unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts.

TERENCE HAWKES

Acknowledgements

I have a great many people to thank. Because secondary sources are few, I have had to make extensive use of interviews. The following very kindly gave their time for questions – sometimes minutes, sometimes hours – either for articles I have written for the press, which I was later able to make use of, or specifically for the book: (in no particular order) Paul Gravett, Lee Harris, Alan Moore, Gilbert Shelton, Dave Gibbons, Hunt Emerson, Bryan Talbot, Mick Farren, Melinda Gebbie, Angus McKie, Neil Gaiman, Julie Hollings, Myra Hancock, Ed Pinsent, Dave Huxley, Igor Goldkind, Steve MacManus, Grant Morrison, Ray Lowry, Carol Bennett, Tony Bennett, Martin Skidmore, Nick Landau, Jean 'Moebius' Giraud, Dez Skinn, Stuart Green, Thierry Groensteen, Enki Bilal, François Vié, Catherine Yronwode, Gary Groth, Denis Gifford, Will Eisner, Paul Hudson, Art Spiegelman, Peter Milligan, Archie Goodwin, Don Melia, Mark Nevelow, Bob Burden, Dick Hansom, Pat Mills, Angie Mills, Pepe Moreno, Phil Clarke, Dominic Wells, John Brown, Frank Wynne, Michael Bennent, Eve Stickler, Duncan McAlpine, Charles Shaar Murray, Frank Plowright, Ravi Mirchandani, Graham Keen, David Lloyd, Carol Swain, Guy Lawley, Seiji Horibuchi, Leo Baxendale, Dave Thorpe, Chris Donald, Thomas Harrington, Dave Sim, Michael O'Donaghue, Heidi MacDonald, Trina Robbins, Jean-Marc Lofficier, Alan Grant, Trevor Hughes, Lionel Lambourne, Don Donahue, Denis Kitchen and Suzy Varty.

Above all, for assistance, advice and encouragement: Martin Barker, Paul Dawson, and Steve Edgell.

Finally, thanks also to Janice Price and Terence Hawkes for their patience, Sally Townsend for those early commissions at *MT* and *NSS*, the staff at Senate House Library, and my flatmates Sue and Chris, the dynamic duo. Apologies for any omissions.

Comics are reproduced as historical illustrations to the text, and grateful acknowledgement is made to the publishers and creators. Copyright is credited according to the original copyright date as printed in the comics. Any omission or incorrect information should be notified to the author and publisher, who will be pleased to amend any future edition of the book.

Introduction

The traditional image of a comic in most people's minds is of a cheap, throw-away periodical for children – if you're British, that invariably conjures up memories of knockabout characters inflicting unspeakable violence on each other; if you're American, of brightly-costumed superheroes dispensing two-fisted justice. The Oxford English Dictionary definition until recently was 'A children's paper . . . having as its express aim to excite mirth.' Comics are not seen as the most sophisticated of media, but then they don't have to be, orientated as they are towards the juvenile and uncritical.

But in recent years, that image has been challenged as a 'new breed' of adult comics has come to the fore. Their aims are much more ambitious: today it is common to come across examples that are expensively produced (often in book form), and which deal with subject-matter ranging from political satire, to erotic fantasy, to eyewitness accounts of the Nazi holocaust. Such publications are reviewed in the quality press, and are available from newsagents, bookshops, specialist comics shops and even local libraries. The latest dictionary definition has been modified to: 'a children's periodical [or] . . . similar publication intended for adults'.

The media has called it a 'revolution'. The press, and to a lesser extent radio and TV, have all made much of the story that comics 'grew up' in the mid-to-late 1980s and are no longer 'kids' stuff'. From being the preserve of 8- to 15-year-olds, we are told that suddenly comics are respectable reading matter for post-adolescents. It was, and is, a seductive interpretation of events, and has become one of the recurring clichés of arts journalism.

But what the media did not do (could not do) was to provide any sort of context for events, any kind of informed background to the current boom. Which is why *Adult Comics* exists. The intention here is to show that the history of comics for older readers stretches back a long way before the mid-1980s, to the nineteenth century in fact, and to show that the 'adult revolution' is actually just one stage in the long and complicated evolution of the form. The method will be to survey the

main titles from the past, and thereby to map the contours of an adult comics history. The book is intended above all to be an introduction to the subject, and assumes no prior knowledge.

It is also intended to plug a gap. In the 1990s, with the new sophisticated titles, comics are beginning to be taken seriously, and can find themselves co-opted as a subject for study on to courses in literature and cultural studies at every level (a similar kind of assimilation happened to pulp novels in the 1960s, and to science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s – comics were bound to be next). Although this process is still in its early stages, there is nevertheless a need for a primer-textbook that treats adult comics as an identifiable area for discussion.

Having said that, it is necessary to define our boundaries. First, this is a history of comics periodicals – not strips or cartoons in newspapers and magazines. These areas are linked very closely, of course, as each uses a combination of words and pictures to communicate (additionally it could be said that the newspaper is the principal place where adults come into contact with such a form). Yet, cartoons and strips ultimately conform to very different aesthetics – in the case of the former, this might involve the need to be topical or to make some kind of political point; for the latter, to get to a punch-line in three or four panels; and so on. As such, distinct traditions are involved, which are not the concern here.

Nor is the book about all comics. It is about 'adult' comics – a particular, and historically minor, sector of the industry. Children's comics have constituted the vast majority of titles published since the beginning of the form, and although a chapter has been included on them in order to provide background information, they are not the focus here. Readers wishing to find out more about them are advised to consult one or other of the general histories listed in the bibliography.

But even narrowing down the compass of the book in this way, the subject-matter remains very broad. As we shall see, the history of comics for older readers is a surprisingly rich one, and it has been impossible to give anything but a very selective account. Indeed, whole genres have had to be ignored – educational, propagandist and religious comics to name three. Moreover, in respect of those titles that have been mentioned, comment has had to be kept to a minimum, space being dictated more-or-less by historical importance, and by the extent to which they have been covered in sources elsewhere. Therefore it is only fair to warn any reader expecting a detailed analysis of fifteen years of *Cerebus*, for example, that they are likely to be disappointed.

Where an 'adult' comic begins, and any other kind ends, however, is much harder to say. The fact is that comics, like any other medium, can be read on a number of levels. It would be silly to deny, for instance, that a number of children read adult comics, or that some

adults read the *Beano*. For this reason, many comics fans find the 'adult' distinction patronising ('the last time I said I was "adult"', as one fan said to me, 'I was 6 years old'). More usefully, they claim, the split should be made between children's comics and comics for a general readership: after all, we don't have 'adult TV' or 'adult libraries'. This argument undoubtedly has some validity.

And yet, 'adult comics' is the terminology the industry itself prefers. It is in widespread use in advertising, marketing and wherever else comics are discussed, and has been taken up wholesale by the press. It is an easy shorthand, and in general terms describes a comic with a mature bent, in contra-distinction to titles in the traditional pre-adolescent and adolescent categories.

To be more specific than that, however, raises the issue of precise age-groups – and here even the industry itself is not so definite. The biggest publishers of adult material for the British market, for instance, DC Comics, Marvel, Titan Books and Fleetway, target the over-16s, and generally include a 'Mature Readers' label on their comics; but the label 'Adults Only' that appears on many other American and British titles is an indication to retailers not to sell to anybody under 18. To confuse things further, there are a variety of other labels, such as 'Not For Sale To Children', which are also not age-specific. The whole question is set against a background of ambiguity in British society as to where adulthood begins; the school-leaving age is 16, but the voting age is 18. Such confusion suits some publishers of course. So long as boundaries remain blurred, they can seek to maximise the age-range that will buy their comics. Indeed, a few have openly admitted that they use labels such as 'For Mature Readers' specifically to generate curiosity among a younger audience.

Thus, for the purposes of our discussion, we are forced to take a somewhat arbitrary stance, and to consider an 'adult comic' to be any title orientated primarily towards an over-16 readership, and a 'children's comic' to be for any age younger than this. It should be noted that within these categories the historically predominant target age-range for an adult comic is 16 to 24, and for a children's comic 8 to 12 (comics falling between the two camps, i.e., 13 to 15, are sometimes, though rarely, referred to as 'adolescent comics', and below 8 years as 'nursery comics'). Any instances of titles targeting a 'general' readership or of the occurrence of 'crossover' readerships – for example, where a children's comic picks up an adult following or vice versa – will be noted as we go along.

Finally, the book has two underlying idiosyncrasies. First, it is written from a British perspective, which may be an obvious statement since the author is British, and bound to bring a British sensibility to his subject. But it is necessary to bear in mind the overwhelming impact American comics have made in Britain in the last two-and-a-half

decades (the 'adult revolution' itself, as we shall see, was built almost entirely on American-originated titles). For this reason, comics history is too often seen as 'American comics history' – a distortion reinforced by the fact that almost all the secondary sources on the market are themselves American and largely ignore comics originating in other parts of the world.

Second, an effort has been made to get away from the predominant treatment of comics as collectable commodities. Most books about the subject tend to treat it from a 'fan' perspective – that is, informed by a combination of artwork appreciation, nostalgia, 'trash aestheticism' and, increasingly, investment potential. There is nothing wrong with this on its own terms, of course. But in order to explore comics' wider role, and their place in modern society generally, it is necessary to approach them from another angle, one which stresses historical and cultural imperatives. Indeed, some historians are beginning to reverse the equation, and to ask what comics can offer as an historical source. Significantly, then, *Adult Comics* is not written by someone with a fan background, and is not intended primarily for fans. Indeed, at a time when fan culture is becoming more and more business-orientated, perhaps it is more appropriate than ever to stress that comics have a value beyond that which a dealer might put on them.

Methodology

Adult Comics is divided into three parts. The first two attempt to put the 'adult revolution' in historical context by giving a general chronological account of adult comics in Britain and the USA. The third endeavours to give a wider contextual picture by looking at adult comics in other parts of the world – particularly Europe and Japan – as well as at the relationship of adult comics to other media, the role of women and the significance of the 'graphic novel'. Suggestions for further reading are given at the end of each chapter, and a select bibliography appears at the end of the book, broken down into categories including sources in English, foreign language sources, fanzines and videos.

Names and dates

Where a comic is a collaborative effort, the name of the writer will be given first, followed by that of the artist (space forbids the listing of inkers, letterers and editors where involved). Dates given are of the first date a comic appears; this is simply due to the sometimes erratic nature of comics publishing – titles have been known to cease, restart, cease, merge with another title and restart. Full dates for key comics are given in Appendix 2.

What is a comic?

It seems a simple enough question – after all, we've all read comics, so we all know pretty much what they are. But actually to define one is a little more difficult. Terms tend to mean 'what they have come to mean', and putting a neat definition on a 'common-sense' idea can often lead to descriptive contortionism. All we can do is work backwards, in a sense, trying to fix certain essentials that hold true for most examples of the form – old and new, adult and juvenile.

The fundamental ingredient of a comic is the 'comic strip'. This is a narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures – usually, but not always, with text. In length it can be anything from a single image upwards, with some strips containing thousands. A 'comic' *per se* is a publication in booklet, tabloid, magazine or book form that includes as a major feature the presence of one or more strips.[1] Comics are usually published regularly (weekly, monthly, occasionally quarterly), and are generally cheap in order to be accessible to the widest possible audience.

Strips usually share certain conventions. In terms of graphics, the most obvious are bordered panels, which serve to break down the action into readily-understandable segments. These are like windows, through which events are seen, and are occasionally expanded or enlarged to emphasise a dramatic moment. Other visual conventions include speed-lines, speech-balloons, think-balloons and various forms of graphic symbolism such as bulging eyeballs to suggest surprise.

The text too has conventions. There are three basic types of language in comics – narrative, dialogue and sound effects. Narrative often appears in a box at the top of the panel, usually to introduce a situation depicted therein. Dialogue is typically presented in speech-balloons, which issue from characters' mouths (it has been argued that this device originates from the appearance of 'steam clouds' when a person speaks on a cold day). Finally, sound effects are often onomatopoeic – 'pow!', 'ker-splat!' and so on. The size of the lettering in each case is sometimes varied to suggest loudness.

Taken together, these conventions constitute an abbreviated

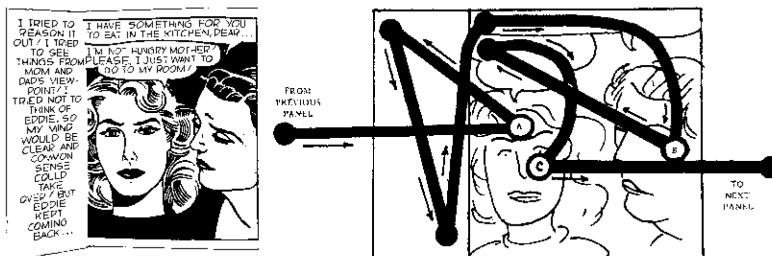

Figure 0.1 A schematic illustration to show the passage of the reader's eye over a panel from a romance comic. Reproduced from research published in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, no. 19, 1986. © 1986 Lawrence Abbott

style or shorthand that allows the reader to fill in the gaps using his or her imagination. Like anything else, reading a comic is an acquired skill. It takes an amazing number of eye-movements to understand a panel – flicking from picture to text and back again – though the strip itself is invariably read traditionally, left to right, like a book (see Figure 0.1). Since comics require this high level of reader-participation, newcomers sometimes find them tiring to read for any length of time.

In terms of content, strips basically tell stories. Most are fictional, and most conform to a formula – working through a series of typical phases and ending in foreseeable fashion. They characteristically star a number of regular characters, who appear in every issue of the comic and who act within relatively predictable ranges of behaviour. Historically most, though by no means all, have been humorous (hence the origins of the word 'comic').

In telling these stories, strips predominantly utilise a 'cinematic' approach (the analogy with cinema is a useful one, although it should be noted that the two forms developed independently).[2] Compositionally, they often make use of 'establishing shots', 'close-ups', 'panoramas' and so on; different 'camera-angles' can add greatly to the drama of a strip. Editing techniques also associated with film are similarly used: for example, 'segueing' – the device of echoing the image in the final panel of one page in the first panel of the next; and 'jump-cutting' – flashing abruptly from one scene to another. (The advantage of a comic over film, of course, is that entire universes can be created with the stroke of a pen – with just the price of the ink to consider.)

Finally, because comics involve text and pictures, most are produced not by one person, but by a team – a writer and an artist, with sometimes an inker, colourist and letterer. These team members are known as 'creators'. In addition, there may be another member, the editor, whose job, among other things, is to be in overall control of the strip and to cut out superfluous material.

Many of these points may seem obvious, but we should pause here for a moment to consider some qualifications. Above all, any definition is an 'evolving' concept, and characteristics will accrue or disappear over time. Hence, fixing an archetype has its limitations: all

we can really say is that a clearer idea of 'what a comic is' at any particular time will emerge as the book progresses chronologically.

Similarly, there are exceptions to the rules, and even the most seemingly self-evident characteristics are open to question. The key word in the definition thus far has been 'most' – what most strips and comics are like. Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that there are strips in existence that are not 'sequential', and have 'jump-cuts' every panel; there are strips that are not narratives, and feature a series of unrelated abstract images; there are strips that do not use conventions, and do not star a recurring cast; there are comics that are not cheap (£20 is not unheard of), and that do not come out regularly. The list could continue.

Nevertheless, flawed as it may be, this definition is a starting-point. It allows us to go a stage further and to look briefly at some of the storytelling possibilities a comic can suggest.

To begin with, a strip can compress or extend time. For example, in the detail from the horror comic *Reaper of Love* (Figure 0.2) the assailant mutters '. . . and disable . . .', while in the process of slamming down a large club on to his victim, who simultaneously screams 'Gar!! . . . My Leg . . .' Clearly this is not 'real time'. A compression has taken place to create the maximum dramatic effect.

Figure 0.2 Panel from the horror comic *Reaper of Love* (1991). Art/script: Berni Wrightson. © 1991 The creator

By the same token, strips can compress information in a clear and understandable fashion. Recent research into the production of military training manuals by the US Defense Department concluded that, out of all of the options – plain text, illustrated text, text with photos and comic strips – comic strips proved the most effective in getting the requisite information across.[3] The research showed it is possible in comics to convey enormous amounts of information in a very limited space.

Finally, strips are capable of innumerable narrative 'tricks'. Words and pictures do not have to refer to the same thing, and creators

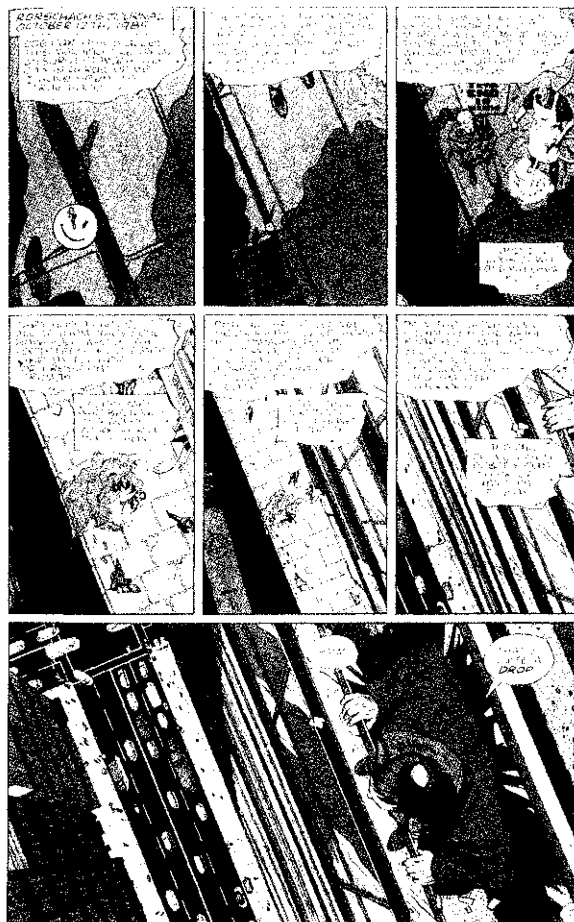

Figure 0.3 The first page of *Watchmen* (1987), demonstrating several comics techniques and characteristics: narrative, dialogue, 'camera positioning' (in this case going from close-up to long-shot), and an expanded final panel for dramatic effect. Art: Dave Gibbons. Script: Alan Moore. © 1987 DC Comics Inc.

can play with juxtaposition to create a variety of dramatic moods (for example, a nursery rhyme in caption-form over an image of a vicious murder would produce a disturbing and chilling effect). Strips are a great form for metaphor, and ironic or dramatic counterpoint is a frequently used technique.

All of these devices highlight the fact that a strip does not 'happen' in the words, or the pictures, but somewhere in-between, in what is sometimes known as 'the marriage of text and image'. The strips may be just a mix of words and pictures, but the permutations of the two are almost endless – limited only by the imaginations of the creators. In short, strips have their own aesthetic: they are a language, with their own grammar, syntax and punctuation. They are not some hybrid form halfway between 'literature' and 'art' (whatever those words might mean), but a medium in their own right.

Having come to this simple but crucial conclusion, it follows that, technically speaking, there is no good reason why comics should be confined to any particular age-group. They are capable of the same range of subject-matter as novels, films or any other media – as well as the same degree of depth in artistic and literary expression. Theoretically at least, comics have the same potential as a means of communication for adults as for children. How theory and practice have matched up historically is one of the key themes of this book.

Further reading

Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamacac, Florida: Poorhouse Press 1985) is an excellent 'how-to' guide to storytelling from a creator's point of view, a masterpiece of instructional simplicity. Alan Moore's essay 'On Writing for Comics', *FA*, 92–5 (August 1985–February 1986), reprinted in *Comics Journal*, 119–21 (January–April 1988), contains useful insights into the thought-processes of one of today's top *auteurs*. The best study in English of the semiotics of comics is Lawrence Abbott's article 'Comic Art: Characteristics and Potentialities of a Narrative Medium', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 19 (spring 1986), pp. 155–73.

part I

BRITAIN

1 The first adult comics

For the Benefit of Old Boys, Young Boys, Odd Boys Generally and Even Girls
(Subheading, *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday,* 1884)

The first comics in the world to fit our basic definition are generally acknowledged to have appeared in Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century. Born out of economic opportunism, they were designed as cheap and cheerful entertainment for the working classes. At the time, Britain was one of the chief industrial nations of the world, and not only did the economic capacity exist for mass-produced leisure publications, but the level of literacy among the population was relatively high. To maximise the audience, the comics were orientated not solely towards children, but had a mixed market in mind, with white-collar, male adults as their main target readership.

The distant historical origins of comics are disputed. Certainly they did not just appear out of a vacuum, fully-formed, but evolved out of previous forms of visual narrative communication. It is a common starting-point for histories of comics, for example, to trace them to ancient beginnings, such as the Bayeux Tapestry or Egyptian hieroglyphics – sometimes even to paleolithic cave paintings. However, this kind of historical extrapolation is dubious in its logic, and often used to 'justify' comics by association with more culturally-respected forms.

More usefully, some historians have looked to illustrated literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for roots. One popular theory traces comics to the growth of children's book illustration; another sees comics as an outgrowth of (or reaction to) the 'penny dreadfuls' – sensationalist, illustrated, bit-part novels – that flourished in Victorian Britain. But although both forms have tangential links, they constitute historical tributaries rather than the mainstream.[1]

For the first comics were above all intended to be funny. It is, therefore, necessary to place them in the context of the developing humorous publications of this era, a genre that can be said to begin with the emergence of prints, broadsheets and illustrated magazines dealing with satire. Here were to be found not only the origins of modern satirical joke-telling, but also the widespread use of techniques such as captions, speech-balloons and drawn-in panel borders.[2]

Technology played a major part in the satire boom. The

dominant eighteenth-century method of printing involved etching a design on to a copper plate by means of a special tool: prints and broadsheets produced by this method were occasionally advertised as 'comic cuts' (a 'cut' being the traditional name for an engraving). This process gave way in the 1820s to 'lithography', based on the chemical reaction between ink and grease, which made multiple reproductions possible without any deterioration in quality. As humorous lithographs became common, so the term 'the comicals' became the established colloquialism, sometimes abbreviated to just 'the comics'. Thus the word 'comics' itself was in frequent use long before the category as such had been invented.

In terms of the content of these early publications, the tone was set by four outstanding talents. William Hogarth (1697–1764) is today recognised as the founding father of modern satire, and refined the use

Figure 1.1 '"The Friend of the People" and his Petty New Tax Gatherer Paying John Bull a Visit' (1806) by James Gillray, the first political cartoonist in the modern sense (the 'friend of the people' caricatures the statesman Charles James Fox, and the 'Petty Tax Gatherer' the Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Petty)

of sequential images for his scathing didactic images of poverty and affluence. Thomas Rowlandson (1757–1827) belonged to the next generation of social commentators, and took the art of caricature to new levels, creating outrageous likenesses of public figures – among them royal dukes, actresses and auctioneers. James Gillray (1757–1815) is today acknowledged as the first political cartoonist in the modern sense: his acidic attacks on the social injustices of the reign of George III still have the power to shock. Finally, George Cruickshank (1792–1878) was arguably the finest draughtsman of the four, and produced many penetrating party-political satires in a meticulously-rendered style.

Audiences were of two basic types. Traditional prints and broadsheets had small print-runs and were well-produced and expensive (by 1820, this usually meant 1 shilling a time, rising to as much as 6 shillings for a colour version). They tended to be highly political in orientation: a print might depict a single caricature or cartoon of a public figure or politician, while a broadsheet typically consisted of a page of a variety of such images. The readership was thus intended to be monied, educated and middle class; and moreover to have a better than average knowledge of politics. Similarly, the few magazines that utilised such illustrations were expensive and select.

But there were also lower-class prints and broadsheets aimed at a much wider audience. Usually these were more slapstick than satirical, and much cheaper (prints usually retailing for 1 penny), with bigger print-runs. Big names like Gillray, Rowlandson and Cruickshank still featured fairly regularly, though usually in pirated form. The Seven Dials region of Holborn in London was the centre of this kind of publishing in the early nineteenth century, and sometimes the circulation of a particularly popular sheet from here could top 100,000.

Thus we can speak of a satire 'industry' by the second decade of the nineteenth century, catering to a wide spectrum of the population. Taking the middle-class and working-class markets together, it employed many hundreds of cartoonists and caricaturists, most of whom toiled for little money, and less esteem. Many indeed remained anonymous for the whole of their careers, and assumed a cultural status somewhere on a par with sign-painters. According to one historian:

> As a mere draftsman, illustrator or engraver, [the cartoonist] was not admitted to full membership of academies; nor was his work exhibited, except in a peripheral and subordinate way, for his engravings and comic sketches were not considered art like painting.[3]

As printing technology became ever-more sophisticated, so certain humour magazines began to concentrate on pictorial content. One

in particular set new standards in production – *Punch*, a monthly founded in 1841. Named after the popular puppet, *Punch* belonged to the middle-class tradition, and apart from a brief period at its inception was not 'radical' in the recognised sense, but gently satirical – a humorous vein the magazine tapped until its demise in 1992. It featured a mix of funny prose stories, cartoons (the forerunners of today's newspaper editorial cartoons) and occasional strips (usually with the text running underneath). A number of brilliant cartoonists and caricaturists were showcased, among them John Leech, Richard Doyle and John Tenniel, but although their work was often outstanding, their craft was still not held in great respect: as Leech commented '[I] would rather be the painter of one really good picture than the producer of any number of "the kind of things" [I do]'.[4]

Punch was a huge commercial success, however, and pioneered a formula that others would soon follow. By the 1860s some publishers had come to the conclusion that a readership for similar humour magazines might exist among the working and lower middle classes. (Even before the famous 1870 Education Act, which introduced the principle of elementary education for all, the level of literacy among these classes was reasonably high.) Hence, more 'popular' versions of *Punch* began to appear. These included *Fun* (1861), *Judy* (1867) and *Funny Folks* (1874). Like their working-class broadsheet predecessors, they tended to be cheaper than their middle-class counterparts (usually 1 penny), less politically sophisticated and more inclined towards slapstick. They also featured a greater number of strips.

There were other, less obvious differences. In order to keep costs down to within the range of working men and women, corners were often cut. In particular, cheap paper was used, and cartoons and strips were sometimes 'borrowed' from foreign publications. This latter exigency caused much resentment among the regular staff (being openly compared on occasion to the hiring of scab labour), and led to even more depressed rates of pay. This trend towards cost-trimming and exploitation was one that would intensify over the next few years, leaving an unfortunate legacy for the comics industry.

In the 1870s, however, the British working class itself began to change. Historians have shown that complex economic and social forces converged to 'remake' the class, especially in the south, with the result that a new culture was born, based on pubs and music halls. It has also been persuasively argued that this culture was politically conservative; that after the collapse of Chartism, working-class radicalism was stifled, and that thereafter the tendency was to accept class divisions and the distribution of wealth as the natural order of things. From the point of view of popular publishing, a publication that could tap into this new mood of political fatalism, but make a joke of it, was bound to have an enormous impact.

That publication was *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* – the first modern comic – published by Gilbert Dalziel in 1884. Like the working-class humour magazines, it had strips, cartoons and funny stories. Like them it was cheap (1 d), and aimed at a primarily adult readership. What made it different, however, and gives it its claim to being the first of a kind, was that it was based on a recurring character – the eponymous Alexander Sloper.[5]

Ally Sloper was a conman-cum-tramp with a bulbous nose and spindly legs who was always scheming, always getting into trouble, but always coming out on top. He appeared first as a character in *Judy*, created by comic novelist Charles Ross, and was probably influenced by a number of sources: almost certainly by Dickens's Mr Micawber, to whom he had a strong physical resemblance, and possibly by various of the contemporary musical hall acts about tramps and misfits. At the

Figure 1.2 Cover to *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, no. 1 (1884), the first ever comic and the first adult comic. Art/script: various. © 1884 Gilbert Dalziel

start of his existence, Sloper was nothing more, and nothing less, than a feckless layabout from working-class origins.

When the character was given his own magazine, however, Ross was replaced by a number of other artists (the most famous being W. Baxter), who went on to modify the character in certain respects. Sloper now became a 'man of the people', a social commentator who took on a 'mock gentrified' appearance (he was still identifiably working class and kept many elements of his previous persona, but it was a significant shift in emphasis).[6] In this way, two further precedents were set: it was the first occasion a creator had lost control of a character; and the first time a character had undergone a revision.

But there were certain constants to Sloper's behaviour that were crucial to his satirical appeal. Drink was an undisguised feature of his life, and he was often depicted with a bottle sticking out of a back pocket or in close proximity (his nose was undoubtedly meant to be swollen by gin, his favourite tipple). This may not seem terribly daring now, but the temperance movement was still at its height in the 1880s. Moreover, his name was a pun on the Victorian practice of sloping up alleyways to avoid the rent-collector. Again, this has to be seen against a background where the penalty for rent evasion was a spell in one of Her Majesty's less-than-humane jails. In short, Sloper was the ultimate Victorian anti-hero, and articulated a side of working-class life rarely touched upon in other publications. Today he seems charming rather than trenchant, but to a contemporary audience he was a sensation.

This is not to say that the comic was 'radical' in the same sense as some of its broadsheet ancestors. On the contrary, as an expression of the new working-class culture, it was ultimately quite conservative. There was no suggestion of class struggle, and the depiction of the rich was comic rather than hostile, with no reference to the source of their income. Similarly, the contemporaneous rise of socialism was seen as something to scoff at, and the comic was proudly monarchist. On the occasion of the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 1887, for example, a

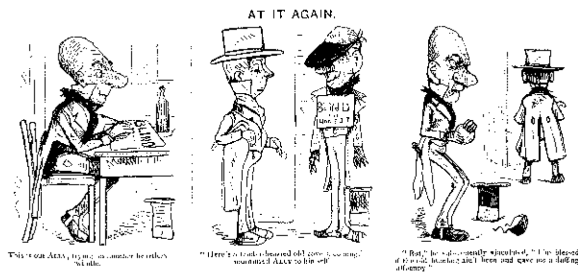

Figure 1.3 'At It Again', *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (1884). Art/script: Charles Ross. © 1884 Gilbert Dalziel

celebratory song-sheet was given away free.[7] Thus, the character of Sloper, for all his cheekiness, was like that of many popular music hall acts (notably Dan Leno and, later, Charlie Chaplin) – namely, the 'little man' who 'knows his place'.

But it was because *Half Holiday* articulated people's feelings that it became such a success. The readership was mainly male, in their teens and 20s and white-collar (clerks and office juniors), though there was a vast variation outside this. From the start the publishers were careful to point out that the comic could be read by everybody: it also had a large blue-collar readership and was a cult among the intellectual middle class (William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones were known to be avid fans).[8] With such a broad constituency, it soon became, in its own words, 'the largest-selling penny-paper in the world', with estimated sales at the height of its popularity of 350,000 per week. Sloper, for his part, became a veritable institution – spawning Sloper mugs, watches, pipes and all manner of other paraphernalia (disproving the widely-held belief that comics merchandising began in the 1950s). Ally Sloper was truly Britain's first comics star, and *Half Holiday* lasted, with minor interruptions, until 1923.

However, it wasn't until 1890 that the success of this pioneering comic was capitalised upon. Alfred Harmsworth, the 25-year-old proprietor of the magazine and story-paper publishers Amalgamated Press, had some spare space on his presses, so decided to exploit the new craze. He felt the only way to make a real impact was to keep the price of his comics down to ½d, in order to undercut rivals (*Half Holiday* and the humour magazines) by half. This was an enormous risk, and went against the wishes of many newsagents, who couldn't envisage making any profit with prices so low.

Harmsworth's flagship comics were *Comic Cuts* ('One Hundred Laughs for One Halfpenny!') and *Illustrated Chips*, both launched in 1890. They followed the basic style laid down by *Half Holiday*, and starred their own working-class anti-heroes (this was blatant plagiarism, and in its first editorial, *Comic Cuts* paid specific homage to its predecessor). Hence a new range of tramps, bungling thieves and misfits was foisted on the British public – all of whom were in the same basically 'cheekily conservative' mould as Sloper. These comics, too, were aimed primarily at adults but, like *Half Holiday*, had one eye on a younger readership.

To keep to the all-important ½d price, further corners were cut. For the first few issues Harmsworth 'borrowed' material from other British magazines and American Sunday paper strips, without permission or recompense. The editorials claimed he was using good quality paper, but that was manifestly not the case. As for the conditions of his staff, we can presume that they were routinely exploited, as was now customary for this kind of work.

It is paradoxical, in the light of the above comments, that *Cuts* and *Chips* were also notable for refining comics art. In particular, *Chips* had an outstanding artist in the person of Tom Browne, who created two picaroons in the established fashion, 'Weary Willie and Tired Tim', who were to become almost as well-known as Sloper. What was unique about them was that Browne eschewed the conventional Victorian drawing style, with its heavy shading, in favour of a much more up-beat, uncluttered technique. He had grasped that strips flowed better when unembellished, and thus set an example that a whole generation of future comics artists was to follow. Browne can therefore be seen as Britain's first major comics creator.[9]

Despite the fears of the newsagents, Harmsworth's gamble paid

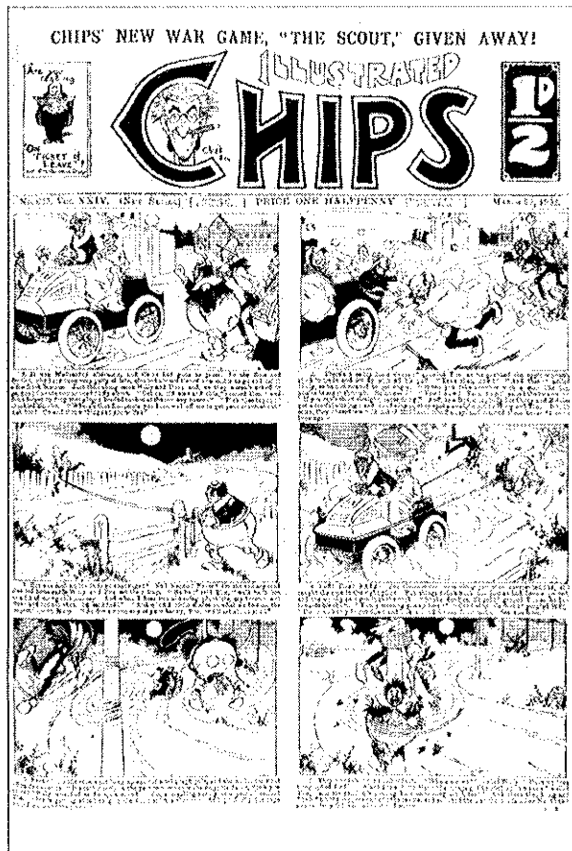

Figure 1.4 Cover to *Illustrated Chips* (1902), featuring Tom Browne's ground-breaking 'Weary Willie and Tired Tim'. © 1902 Alfred Harmsworth

off. *Cuts* and *Chips* proved to be extremely successful, and were soon selling over half a million a week between them. Harmsworth had shown that, even with unprecedentedly low prices, if the circulation was big enough sizeable profits could be made. It is usually agreed that their spectacular sales mark the point historically where comics became a 'mass' medium.

They were followed by a number of emulators, of varying quality, some more 'adult' than others. Most attempted to keep to the ½d line set by Harmsworth and thus were under the same pressure to economise and exploit staff. Most were satirical – *Comic Life* was particularly notable for its jokes about 'new women' and socialism – while others appealed to adults in different ways – *The Joker*, for example, included pin-up cartoons of female music hall stars. However, all kept to the broadly conservative consensus of the day.

Though other publishers joined the fray in this period, Amalgamated Press retained its primacy, and by 1892 Harmsworth was boasting of overall sales of 2.5 million. He went on to launch the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail* on his comics' proceeds, and in the process became 'Lord Northcliffe', one of the biggest tycoons on Fleet Street. It would not be the last fortune to be made out of the comics medium.

Thus, within a decade, a whole new kind of publication had emerged on the British cultural scene. Gradually two sides to the definition of a comic took shape. On the one hand, comics were seen as 'what they said they were' – jolly, lightweight, gag-orientated entertainment. Although the term 'comic' had been in use for about seventy years, it was only now that it came to mean a specific kind of amusing publication with strips about recurring characters (*Comic Cuts* had been the first to use the word in its title).

On the other hand, comics were not 'respectable', and in the pantheon of Victorian and Edwardian literature, they came at or near the bottom. Previously this dubious distinction had belonged to the penny dreadfuls, but with their decline in the 1880s, comics became the next worst thing. The reasons for this were many and complex, but were rooted in prevailing middle-class prejudices. At worst, comics were considered to be base ephemera: working-class, mass-produced, often shoddy-looking and essentially flippant. At best, they were 'railway literature', mildly diverting lowbrow entertainment to read between stops on a train.[10]

But more than this, being heavily visual, comics were considered by some to be detrimental to reading, a 'threat to literacy'. The 'threat', of course, was to the working class, since the middle-class audience was relatively small. Middle-class paternalists thus decreed that working-class literacy and educational standards were at stake, and that British working men and women should be encouraged instead to read 'improving literature', which is to say texts without