

Building the Femorabilia Special Collection

Methodologies and Practicalities

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Abstract: In this article I examine the potential of the Femorabilia Collection of Women's and Girls' Twentieth Century Periodicals for the study of girlhood in Britain and the Commonwealth of Nations and I explain why the collection was originally created and describe its current purpose and policy to promote future research. I consider the importance of material and reading cultures as well as approaches to understanding the content of these varied publications and discuss the difficulties of working with mass culture, ephemeral texts, and the problem of obtaining examples, and I consider the collection's particular focus on popular fiction. I consider the development of the collection, examples of methodology and practice, and its use in pedagogy, research, and public engagement.

Keywords: archives, comics, research methods, oral history, popular culture



What do we mean when we talk about a reading culture and ask how important this is to the study of twentieth-century girlhood? Contemporary scholars indicate that this is significant through their examination of how ideas, pleasures, sites of tension, opinion formation, consideration of alternative lifestyles, and reassessment of the past have taken place in relation to book clubs, fan fiction, internet reviewing, blogs, literary festivals, and the reinvention of the bookshop (Ramone and Cousins 2011). The twentieth-century reading culture of girls and young women has also been seen to be negotiating ideologies about femininity, social mobility, national identity, and citizenship. However, despite its significance it is very much in danger of being lost and spoken for only by the academics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who have had access to these texts as they were published, if not to the culture itself.



The Collection and its Purpose

The Femorabilia Collection of Women's and Girls' Twentieth Century Periodicals is a contribution to ensuring that female reading culture does not get lost, and a contribution to the recovery of this culture in Britain. It exists as a publicly accessible special collection housed at Liverpool John Moores University. It has been given university support to expand its holdings, having been judged suitable for both academic and public engagement. Its purpose is to preserve women and girl's popular culture published in Britain, although circulation has often extended much further, and to contribute to other initiatives and research across interdisciplinary fields. In the past three years it has expanded from an initial teaching collection of three hundred examples to over three thousand. These have come to us through donations and thanks to a small budget from the university. The collection policy is focused on twentieth-century British publications for women that feature serial (and complete) short fiction.

The original collection took as its starting point the premise, outlined by Angela McRobbie (1982), of the presence and significance of a feminine reading career, one which socialized women into accepting the contradictions of romance. The first items were collected to act as examples of such periodicals, but also served to prevent this popular media form from being understood as a homogeneous mass. This diversity is illustrated by our good fortune in inheriting magazines collected by the Liverpool School of Art as examples of illustration, and others that focused on craft, child rearing, and fashion.

Its purpose, as a teaching collection for a Media and Cultural Studies department was to act as source material for undergraduate modules. The magazines have been used to teach across the curriculum. This has allowed students to take a hands-on approach to popular culture in analysing representation, ideology, and models of the audience, and through applying conceptual approaches directly to popular texts. The collection has also provided the starting point for considering methodology and designing schema for different types of qualitative research methods such as content analysis, focus groups, and interviews. Most significantly, perhaps, the collection has allowed the presentation of ephemeral popular culture as accessible source material. This has been used to look at archival research and to help students to understand the relevance of samples sizes, the choice of indicative examples, and to contextualize textual material within cultural practice, production history, and consumption.

However, the module for which the collection has, so far, been predominantly used was one that encouraged students to challenge theoretical perspectives and models about popular cultural products. In this instance the focus was on youth culture, media consumption by young people, and constructions of adolescent masculinity and femininity. In assignments undergraduates were asked to critique formative studies in the fields of media and cultural studies. They were also asked to adapt these theoretical conclusions and research methods so that they could be used to analyze later twentieth-century media forms and twenty-first-century popular culture. For a section of this module, for example, students were asked to look at the work of McRobbie (1978), Valerie Walkerdine (1984), Martin Barker (1989), and David Buckingham (1996), and to think about how this encompasses the relationship between young people, imaginative engagement with forms of fiction, and the competing interests of the magazine format as well as the place of reading for pleasure in everyday lived culture.

Serial Fiction: Comics

Comics in the collection, in particular, bring to the table their own academic and public concerns about regulation and the suitability of their content for young people—something students have been encouraged to explore and critique. There is a history in Britain of concerns expressed by adults about children's engagement, especially that of girls, with comics, as exemplified in the 1950s by George H. Pumphrey's (1952) work that sought to encourage children away from the medium, and into what he considered more wholesome reading. The appeal of the comic can be understood, in part, through the analysis of children's engagement with other media. In the 1990s, for instance, Buckingham's (1996) empirical research with children and television found that children were very interested in programmes from which regulators sought to protect them but that these encounters with the adult world had a social function. Children wanted to test their own maturing in coping with troubling emotions and such mediated experience allowed them to do this, hence their appeal. In particular, he found that "children are bound to be drawn to texts that speak to their fear of loss and abandonment, of disgrace and humiliation and offer them ways of coming to terms with them" (3). Certain themes that Buckingham identified for television such as the disruption of the family (bereavement and loss), pity towards those who were vulnerable and defenceless, violence towards ani-

mals, and violence towards children regularly feature in girls' comics, suggesting what their appeal and function might be for young readers.

Specifically, in relation to comics, the work of McRobbie (1978) and Walkerdine (1984) examines how publications for girls and young women address those areas of girls' lives where dreams, hopes, ambitions, fears, and desires are formed. The narratives play out existing tensions. Walkerdine's (1984) argument focuses on how the protagonists of these narratives become victims. She considers how the narratives place an emphasis on self-sacrifice, self-denial, externalizing selfish desires and then conclude with their re-insertion into a proper family. Therefore, the hero of the girls' comic is a passive victim of circumstance. She is rewarded for silence, selflessness, and for helplessness.

Barker (1989) examines how the stories in comics, particularly for girls, dramatize in fantasy conflicts of desire about parents, responsibilities, and moralities. He refutes Walkerdine's account by re-examining one of the most popular stories in *Judy* (1960–1991). He argues that it exhibits the shared characteristics that Walkerdine identified but not the same organizing principles. Instead, Barker places greater emphasis on the struggle made by the hero to understand what is happening around her when those in positions of authority or responsibility cannot or will not; he notes that this is also acknowledged as an organizing principle of the bestselling horror films of the 1980s. Moreover, the significance of the endings of these stories can be given a different interpretation. The restoration of stable family units, explanations, and final resolutions to the psychic dilemmas are not uniform. Like detective fiction, the endings are not the focus of the narrative engagement. Therefore Barker (1989) argues that the endings are unmotivated by these stories.

Comics: Readers and Students

Engaging students with these accounts of comics and with the comics themselves in the collection, then, allows an exploration and analysis of both. Other student explorations focus on these texts as bestselling fiction—certainly the case with the girls' comics given that the most popular titles sold from 800,000 to over a million copies a week. John Cawelti (1976) proposes that bestselling fiction is largely consensual because it needs to align the world it creates with existing interests and attitudes. However, to make an appeal to a heterogeneous audience and to be meaningful to its readers it must deal with ambiguity and address contested cultural values. Its aim is

to resolve tensions that result from the conflicting interests of different groups (but in doing so it often allows the audience to explore social taboos). Therefore, popular fiction also enables the creation of new imaginative constructs that assist changes in cultural values to take place. Moreover, readers may dwell upon, extrapolate, produce their own creative response, or reject sections of a serial story. By its very nature readers are provided with time to speculate on the story and the contents of each episode. Therefore, it may be minor characters, the initial situation, the controversies and injustices, fleeting ideas, or illustrations that are of most significance to a reader's engagement with, and memory of, the story. Textual analysis may place emphasis on the story's closure. However, consideration of the culture of reading suggests other ways in which these stories could have been consumed by young readers. How they engaged with the fiction, transformed it through play and by talking about it with others may have been the most important contribution these publications made to how young people learned to understand themselves, other people, and society.

Preserving and Studying Comics

The growth and development of the collection was initiated when Femorabilia was temporarily stored in Special Collections and Archives while the Media and Cultural Studies department moved to another building in 2012. On review and following a discussion about storage and preservation it was decided that it fitted in with existing library special collection themes. This allowed for the expansion of titles and resulted in there being over 125 different examples currently. We prefer to place them in consecutive runs so that researchers can understand the format, discursive register, and flexibility of the periodical as well as changes within the periodical over time. The editions of the first two years of the girl's weekly comic, *Bunty* (1958–2001) which began publication in the late 1950s, constituted one of the initial purchases. They had been read by a girl when she was recovering from a serious illness and they had survived because her father had had them bound for her. Their arrival coincided with a Heritage Open Day Tour visit to the Special Collections reading room. The visitors were audibly delighted to see these childhood favourites, proving the wider appeal of this collection and acting as an endorsement of our preservation of such material.

This initial purchase has been followed by a number of others. For example, we have also taken in the first three years of *Just 17* (1984–2004),

a weekly magazine for older teenage girls and young women; these were brought to us as a result of a house move. Further, we bought a full run of *Misty* (1978–1980), a significant weekly horror publication for girls, which was the subject of one of our most popular tweets on the @FemorabiliaJMU twitter account. The development of the collection has also changed the practice of dealers. Two dealers who regularly find runs of material for us in attics and garages during house clearances, for instance, have expressed guilt over their previous treatment of women’s magazines. One was originally cutting them up for their twentieth-century advertisements or, in the case of *Women’s Pictorial* from the 1920s and 1930s, their beautiful cover illustrations of babies and childhood.

The survival of these texts is the crucial issue. When Mel Gibson started her doctoral research into mid- to late-twentieth-century British comic culture in the 1990s she found it very difficult to locate girls’ periodicals in the North East. Talking to dealers she discovered that they routinely burned girls’ comics and women’s magazines because they lacked market value. Boys’ comics which had been, as one dealer put it, “read to destruction” rather than carefully stored, could be sold to older nostalgic comic collectors. Women, however, were presumed to have moved on rather than caught up in wishing to return to the world of pre-adolescent girlhood.

Femorabilia’s Role

Femorabilia, therefore, has a role to play in preserving a form of women’s culture that has been disparaged both academically and publicly for its popular appeal and which, because of its ephemeral nature, is vulnerable to complete loss. This would mean that the understanding of its consumption and influence would be reliant on speculation, on spectacular examples rather than quotidian ones, and on the few academic studies that exist. Another issue is that the sheer volume of titles, weekly, monthly, seasonal, and annual publications, publishing companies, and range of formats make it difficult for most university or public archives and libraries to make any commitment to develop significant and coherent holdings. There are attempts to work around this. For example, Gibson is currently preparing a list of different institutions that hold collections related to British comics associated with different research interests; this will be invaluable for promoting further investigation.

Future Research

Femorabilia is unusual in making a commitment to these periodicals for the reasons outlined above, but also because it does not exist to support an ongoing research project. Rather, it exists for future researchers. Many of these texts were also originally sold around the Commonwealth of Nations, so they offer much to scholars internationally regarding, for example, notions of cultural imperialism. This material is no longer published and the archives of publishing companies that produced it are rarely accessible, are often not in a coherent form, or indeed, even still in existence. An additional issue is that the artists and writers are seldom acknowledged by the publishers themselves and this makes their contributions hard to identify or understand, but there is growing scholarship in this area. For example, Jenni Scott and Mistyfan contribute articles to “A Resource on *Jinty*: Artists, Writers and Stories,” a blog that aims to index the comic *Jinty* (1974–1981). Part of the project addresses the problem of attribution and has sought to resolve this by identifying creators and, on occasion, interviewing them. This work makes a vital contribution to an understanding of the production context and the involvement of women in writing and illustrating British girls’ comics. There are other initiatives such as the “Girls Comics of Yesterday” that is a fan site that is indexing long running twentieth-century publications as well as producing articles on specific stories and publications. Alongside this lies the UK Comics Wiki which is crowd-sourcing information, opinion, debate, and analysis about print-based comic books. Abigail De Kosnik (2016) describes this engagement with cultural memory as a rogue archive, one that preserves the performative nature and political potential of popular culture. It is an extremely appropriate term to describe Femorabilia and its anticipation of future research.

The significance of Femorabilia is manifold, but one major contribution it may make is to facilitate research on transitions in the representation and cultural values associated with women and girls across the twentieth century. Specific areas are the question of girls’ education in the interwar period, women’s role during the war (Winship 1996), the representation of young women during the 1960s, the response to comprehensive education in the 1970s and 1980s, the role of problem pages for adolescent readers, the representation of black and ethnic minority readers, characters, and pop stars in the 1990s, and the reasons for the decline of this entertainment medium at the end of the twentieth century.

Research on Early Publications for Girls and Young Women

The collection, as suggested above, has much to offer the future study of girlhood. Access to a large range of material, of course, enables an in-depth understanding of a specific period. One previously existing example of large scale research that exemplifies what we hope Femorabilia will be able to stimulate is that of Penny Tinkler. While Femorabilia was being established Tinkler (1995) published her research on popular magazines for girls that were in circulation between 1920 and 1950. She examined leisure reading as a social process that contributed to the cultural construction of adolescent girlhood in England during this period. Her work is interesting because it employs an analytical framework that recognizes the intersection of class and gender in cultural production. She identifies specific categories of publications for girls, and issues in the representation of young women that are extremely relevant to continued study across the twentieth century.

Tinkler (1995) examines a range of interwar publications for a differentiated adolescent market and identifies four categories of magazines and story papers. The first of these appears in the early part of the twentieth century as magazines for the business girl exemplified by *The Girl's Favourite* (1922–1927). Mill girl papers are represented in her textual analysis by *Peg's Paper* (1919–1940) which was the most successful of these. A bound volume of the early issues of *Peg's Paper* was one of the first purchases made by Liverpool John Moores University for the collection. Students exploring this volume are often struck by illustrations alluding to the white slave trade, women firing guns, and fiction that attempted to advise girls about sexual harassment at work. Tinkler also found a distinct group of periodicals for unmarried working girls. The example considered for this category is *Miss Modern* (1930–1940). However, this type of publication was replaced, largely, during the 1930s by a new range of magazines that focused on home-making and romance designed to reach a wider audience of mothers and daughters.

In terms of methodology, Tinkler (1995) notes that the intended readership should not be considered synonymous with the actual readership. Significantly, she argues, first, that analysis must negotiate the congruence of magazine content and the characteristics of different social groups. The principal element of these is the occupation of the reader as either being at school or in some form of paid or unpaid labour. Second, the publications also visualize the readers' place in the heterosexual career. This range of publications targeted an audience of young people aged between 12 and 20,

distinguishing between the school girl and the young adult reader. Competition in the leisure reading market produced flexible categories of girl readers across the interwar and wartime periods. These distinctions are significant, particularly since this shows a shifting construction of girlhood over time.

To understand the distinctive characteristics of each publication it is necessary to consider all its content editorials, illustrations, adverts, articles, and even marginalia. This makes access via the collection to complete texts important. All these elements in the periodicals, on the one hand, specifically address an intended readership and the concerns and considerations of girlhood which were perceived to be relevant to them. On the other, fiction, which Tinkler (1995) examines in detail, offers something “often designed to transcend experience” (47). This makes it less useful regarding the readers’ identity but may suggest why they read it and how they consumed it. Letters pages are varied across the different publications but also problematic as a way of understanding the reader. They may, however, reveal certain concerns facing the editor. Moreover, the paucity of information about publishers and the production process, which still waits to be resolved by contemporary scholarship, is another limiting factor for understanding the material and ideological nature of the magazines.

Tinkler (1995) emphasizes the central role, significant in the post-war era, of the editor of these publications. They had considerable control over magazine content but were constrained by “their publishers, readers and prevalent ideas and interests concerning the position, responsibilities and behaviour of girls in society” (64). However, she argues that editors should not be understood as passive gatekeepers; they assumed an active and creative role mediating between stakeholders. She characterizes this as a process of reconciling various factors that shaped the identity of their respected publications. The most important of these competing concerns was “publishers’ objectives, directives and culture; readers’ interests as articulated by girls; editorial perceptions of readers shaped by their own experience, prevalent ideologies of femininity and girlhood” (65).

In investigating and considering the editors before examining the content, Tinkler (1995) recognizes that they are usually from different backgrounds to their readers. In commissioning and producing copy for the publications they had to address a specific cultural ambiguity and set of tensions regarding the meaning of girlhood during this period. “How,” Tinkler asks, “could they offer their young readers positive, youthful and attractive identities and at the same time avoid challenging patriarchal

expectations of girls which defined them in terms of domestic and serving roles and responsibility within the family and, potentially marriage and motherhood?" (73) She finds that in a similar manner to McRobbie's (1991) study of late twentieth-century magazines, friendships between girls are marginalized and heterosexual romance becomes their primary adolescent objective. Tinkler also notes the significance of Christine Griffin's (1993) observation that a young woman's transition to heterosexuality marks a crucial point for patriarchal control. Therefore, the way in which interwar publications gave vocational advice and placed apparent importance on a girl's being able to earn a living, prior to marriage and in case of later misfortune leading to economic hardship after marriage, is an extremely interesting aspect of their content.

Further detailed analysis of the fiction looks at how the construction of girlhood is negotiated through two specific themes—the curtailment, complexity and demands of different relationships as they are portrayed in the magazines and the regulation of the female body. Both are still being contested in publications for girls during the second half of the twentieth century. In part, Tinkler's (1995) research was prompted by finding that "the conditions and experiences of adolescent girlhood remains largely undocumented" (1) for the first half of the twentieth century. This is because of a focus on before and after adolescence for many studies but also because of a lack of research material. By examining the way in which popular girls' magazines were constructed, organized, and managed she argues that it is possible to identify the features of transition that adolescent girls experienced. The ephemeral and prolific periodical can be used to make visible the "articulation of capitalism and patriarchy in the production of popular literature for girls and the construction of representations of adolescent girls and girlhood" (4).

While Tinkler (1995) was able to use the British Library as an archive source to start to address this, as many other researchers in this field have also done, other collections are rare. Indeed, Martin Barker (1989) noted that he had amassed a collection of his own, at considerable expense, as well as visiting the British Library to engage in research on children's comics. *Femorabilia* exists so that this type of work can take place across the spectrum of interested researchers. Having similar material gathered together on open shelves, rather than having it dispersed and brought to the researcher in response to requests as is done in the British Library, enables researchers to see possible links and relationships between texts more easily.

Acknowledging the Reader: Femorabilia and Active Engagement

Tinkler (1995) considered oral history as a valuable source for the study of magazine readership but found that “recollections of popular magazines tend to be rather vague” (59). Interviews about entertainment media are likely to reveal more about cultural practices and social relations than the texts themselves. It is much easier to ask questions about the routines of working life than the experience of leisure or entertainment. The language of pleasure, imagination, fantasy, and insight in relation to fiction is often personal and not a common topic of everyday conversation. Therefore, an interviewer has to become specialized when encouraging a discussion about reading culture. The dubious status of comics and magazines also means that interviewees have concerns about judgement especially in the context of the academy. The nature of popular reading “means that the researcher is often trying to recover or explore events and instances which the participants remember as being unremarkable” (Moody 2016: 171). The interviewer discovers quite quickly that “the vocabulary for describing the qualities of a ‘good’ book is very rarely rehearsed” (175) since literary qualities are inappropriate. An interview that focuses on reading is initially difficult to sustain and needs the development of a particular kind of rapport.

Oral History Project

Femorabilia establishes the credentials of academic engagement with, and valuing of, women’s popular culture. For Femorabilia to be meaningful to a researcher in the far future it needs to acquire and archive oral history testimony alongside the periodicals so that the nature of production, cultural practice, pleasure, dissent, and impact of this reading matter on women can be fully understood.

It is evident that the texts held by Femorabilia have already become unfamiliar to twenty-first-century students. This is despite the scale of popular periodical publishing in the twentieth century. Recovering girls’ leisure and everyday lived cultural experience via this collection is, therefore, even more important since it connects those unfamiliar with the medium to its history and enables scholars at all levels of study to open up a wider set of questions about reading, identity, the transition between child and adulthood, and British culture more broadly. For the most part, these publications are obsolete, so the cultural practices associated with them have become separated from an understanding of the text. What then becomes apparent, following

on from Tinkler (1995) and Gibson (2000) is the necessity of oral history/memory work with those who remember reading these texts. This has led to the development of a proposed oral history project that aims to secure testimony regarding how they were accessed and consumed during the twentieth century as a permanent record to complement the collection.

Reciprocity is an important aspect of this research. We aim to make the collection as accessible as possible through talks, study days, and hands-on events rather than digitization. At each one of these activities visitors have already indicated that they want to share their memories of reading and selling, their involvement in production or creation, and buying for their own children. They have expressed the desire to ask questions about the publications that they remember. Donations of texts have come to us from the public, so highly valued artefacts of childhood will have a home and will be shown to future generations.

The collection of the oral history testimonies is conceived of as a ten-year project. It is envisaged that the interview schema will start with ascertaining which periodical was the participants' first one. From there it will invite participants to talk about routines, initiatives, relationships between peers and among family members with regard to this type of reading, values associated with this publication, and perceptions about others. It will be important to consider its relative cost, how it was accessed and shared, and other material networks. The next set of topics would explore constraints on reading or choice of reading material by asking participants questions about what other people thought about this publication and investigating the development of their reading careers. From here the interview would have participants think about emotional engagement. Prompts would invite the interviewees to consider their feelings about characters and stories, rituals that they may have had for this type of reading, the physical conditions of reading and dealing with the loss or damage to particular issues and offer a space to talk about ambivalence to the magazine content. This section of the interview would also move beyond reading to think about cultural practices of participants such as dress-up dolls, competitions, sharing, writing and drawing stories, and discussing them with friends or incorporating them into play and games.

The final stage of the interview would ask readers to think about the comics and magazines themselves. Prompts would encourage participants to talk about eponymous characters, the address to the audience, the way in which they consumed the contents of the publication, and specific elements such as advice, the locations of stories, fashions, and crafts. Percep-

tions and recollections are important to the textual analysis of the collection's holdings. Asking the interviewees what they thought about the material that they read and whether it was shocking, disturbing, reassuring, exciting, timely, or exclusive offers the opportunity to respond and acknowledge different experiences and levels of engagement. The final stage of the interviews would be to ask participants how old they were when they stopped reading that particular title. The decision to stop reading either comics or a specific title, as Gibson (2015) found in her oral history, particularly in relation to girls' comics, is significant and often associated with expression of self-identity. The reasons are anticipated to be varied and associated with life stage, criticism and peer pressure, competing social activities, modality, and the continued relevance of the publication or the move to post-adolescent reading.

This oral history project is informed by several others. Polly Russell's (2012) account of the methodological perspective of "Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project," a partnership among the British Library, the University of Sussex, and the Women's Library, considers the value of the individual voice to understanding collective experience. This oral history is also concerned with archiving material for a prospective future researcher with an as yet unknown research question. They use the life story method to enable the interviewee to shape her or his own narrative and combine the individual and domestic with political and public life. The length of their interviews, from between 6 to 20 hours although 10 is the norm, contrasts with the open-endedness of small oral history projects but is still much longer than those envisaged for Femorabilia (Russell 2012). Her approach is to seek out disparate accounts as well as producing the number of interviews which will allow researchers to understand shared themes and experiences. As Russell argues, the testimony should not just be "representative and ordinary" but able to encompass the "specific and extraordinary" (134).

The large scale is proposed so that breadth if not depth of material can be gathered while the publications still exist in living memory. The purpose is to provide service to specialists and to interdisciplinary research, to offer broader historical context and ensure public engagement, to contribute to the undergraduate curriculum, and to stand in relation to other collections that focus on popular culture. The process of collecting, sharing, and making public the oral histories will contribute to the on-going debate regarding how to configure digital access and indexing by theme and publication. It will make the testimonies available to future scholars and interested parties

(including comic fans and the general public) using the Femorabilia collection or just focusing on the cultural practices that have been recorded.

Other influential research on developing the oral history project includes Gibson's (2000, 2015) work that examines the second half of the twentieth century by combining textual analysis with oral history in order to look at the comic book. She found that textual analysis could not make visible or "evaluate issues of access, peer group, family, education and class" as well as "motives in reading or rejecting" (2000: 226) publications for girls. Between 1950 and 1970 the comic book was the prevalent publication for pre-adolescent girls but the comic strip, including *Valentine* (1957–1974) and *Jackie* (1964–1993), was also part of magazines for older female readers. These publications were produced for a working-class audience and used girl's names such as *Bunty* (1958–2001) and *Judy* (1960–1991) as titles. They were the subject of academic studies regarding women's socialization during the 1970s and 1980s.

Gibson's (2000, 2015) research, like Tinkler's (1995), explored the shifting class-based discourse about what it meant to be a girl in the post-war era. Including the experience of readers was "a process of reclaiming of very influential, but nonetheless largely forgotten material" (Gibson 2000: 212). To do so she turned to oral history about cinema and this is an extremely useful parallel resource. Gibson's use of Annette Kuhn's discussions of memory emphasized the significance of nostalgia and "how vital it is to remain aware that we rewrite our history as we age" (213). Moreover, other researchers in this field investigating women's consumption of popular culture have found that by acknowledging the experience of the reader or film-goer, the feminist academic becomes accountable for her or his methodology.

We have often seen at open days and public engagement events, and with visitors to the collection, the powerful reaction that people have to touching and holding the publications that they encountered in their youth. Gibson (2000) also found this in her interviews: "discussion about reading comics often evoked memories in all participants that were intense, revealing and sometimes painful and it was hard to know how to translate them into academic writing." Ultimately the oral history element of the research contradicted the existing literature review for the comic book since "how readers felt about and used these texts contrasts with what textual analysis suggests readers learnt from them" (214).

There were definite instances in Gibson's (2000) study which found "considerable investment by readers in the notion of rebellion" however much the comics structured the narrative to ensure conformity with domi-

nant views and values. This association was made in different ways often through active identification with strong and empowered female protagonists featured by popular publications but also by dismissing the suffering characters as “wet” (222). Some readers said they read in spite of adult disapproval of the form along with that of the wider society, but others rejected comic book reading entirely. The women who were interviewed who expressed dislike of these comics saw them as “a restrictive model of middle-class girlhood, not as liberating” and that this was a formative experience. At the same time those who liked them “were inspired in a more abstract way to exceed their limitations and take on challenges” (225). Both groups did more than simply consume the text.

Conclusion

Femorabilia has offered support to undergraduate students encountering twentieth century periodicals for the first time and extended the resources available to researchers. It has also helped to further cement the relationship of the university holding the collection with its local community through public engagement events, but also through the ownership of the collection by those who donate their childhood comics and other reading material. The proposed oral history project, as well as providing an invaluable context for reading for pleasure, will further enhance this relationship. This, then, is a collection that addresses and serves multiple audiences, as well as recovering this culture.



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