

## 1 Situating This Study: Young People's Reading Practices and Comics As a Reading Choice

Historically, comics have been denigrated as a reading choice and with them, their readers and their readers' experiences.<sup>1</sup> This situation is slowly changing for comics: media are paying attention to new releases and adaptations; libraries are including comics in their collections and doing programming around them, especially dedicated to youth; scholars are studying comics and their creators; and educators are finding ways to integrate comics into classrooms. However, little is known about comics' readers, something this Element tackles. With readers at the center of this Element and seeking to intersect two different fields of study, I have a twofold objective:

1. In relation to the study of the reading experience, I am looking to show how comics readers, especially young people, are valuable contributors to our understanding of contemporary reading; moreover, I believe the study of comics reading provides invaluable insights about how reading fits into the busy lives of young people.

<sup>1</sup> I touch briefly on this status in Section 1.2, but if the reader would like to expand on this aspect of comics and reading, the following texts support this exploration: Gabilliet (2010) and Wright (2003) contextualize comics among historical, social, and cultural developments in the United States, and Lent (1999) focuses on international anti-comics campaigns; Nyberg (2016, 1998) examines in depth the Comics Code and the relationship between adult gatekeepers and children's comics reading (2002); Tilley (2012) debunks Fredric Wertham's research project that guided many of the attacks on comics reading during the 1950s; Cedeira Serantes (2013) connects librarians' past attitudes regarding comics and comics reading with present stereotypes.

2. In relation to the study of comics, I am seeking to open up the discussion about comics reading beyond the experience of the fan and to explore the role of comics as reading materials for young people.<sup>2</sup>

The literature review that follows is not meant to be comprehensive but targeted, pointing to the studies and scholars that are in direct conversation with this study and that also situate its origins and boundaries. Before starting, a note about terminology is also needed. The term *comics* is used as an umbrella term to bring together the many material formats that the medium assumes. Although I chose primarily to use *comics*, the terms *comic books* and *graphic novels* might also be used because they are heavily represented in the discourse of specific fields and research projects, such as media studies and library professional literature. For discussions focused on the medium and its terminology, the reader can start with Scott McCloud's classic text *Understanding Comics* and then move to other scholarly discussions (e.g., Sousanis, 2015; Stein & Thon, 2013; Hatfield & Svonkin, 2012; Goldsmith, 2010; Heer & Worcester, 2009; Chute & DeKoven, 2006).

Finally, to avoid disappointing some readers, in this Element, one is not going to find results of large reading surveys or closed readings of any particular titles or genres. As I expand in Section 1.3 dedicated to methodology, this is a qualitative study focused on the experiences of a group of readers who care for and enjoy different types of comics. They speak about how they became interested in this medium, how comics reading fits into their

<sup>2</sup> The concept of reading material extends from library and information science and education, both in their scholarly discipline and in their professional practice. *Reading material* is used as an encompassing term to refer to any type of document (books, magazines, newspapers, websites, etc.) that could be read by library patrons or students. To avoid confusion, I use the term *materiality* to discuss aspects related to physical and digital attributes of comics.

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lives, what they like in comics, and what they look for in a comics reading experience. With these themes as guidance in our interviews, other more specific and unintended topics emerged, such as comics and their materiality and the importance of gender issues for female readers. To know more about the participants before starting reading, you may move on to the methodology section.

*1.1 Readers and the Reading Experience: Bringing Comics  
Readers into the Discussion*

This Element sees itself as part of a larger body of scholarly literature that focuses on looking at reading, mainly reading for pleasure, with the reader and the reading experience at the center. Reading is not a one-dimensional or disconnected practice and there are many ways of reading and many materials to read, a point that has provoked recent calls for a multidimensional approach to the study of reading (Arizpe & Cliff Hodges, 2018; Cliff Hodges, 2016; Mangen & van der Weel, 2016) and the reading experience (Rothbauer, Skjerdingsstad, McKechnie, & Oterholm, 2016). One of the characteristics of this reader-centered research is that it reveals the complexity, situatedness, and multilayered nature of the reading experience, something that I am not the first one to note (i.e., Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2013; Howard, 2011, 2009; Mackey, 2011; Rothbauer, 2011, 2004; Collinson, 2009).

Some of the aforementioned studies are focused on young people, and in the following I lay out an intellectual path of sorts that this Element shares with some of these studies. The scholarly research of Paulette Rothbauer provided much guidance, inspiration, and motivation for this project (2011, 2009, 2004). She studied the reading experience and being a reader as an identity in the lives of queer young women and young people in rural environments. For instance, from her work on a Canadian rural municipality four spatial factors emerged that influenced the reading lives of young

people: the physical availability of reading selections and its positive/negative impact on the reading lives of young people, the public library as a place of childhood reading and as a place evaluated by what it does not offer, the default place of the Internet as a site to make and enact reading choices, and the lack of time and space for reading (2009). An outcome of the combination of these factors is the idea of the nonactive teen reader: “the limited reading choices found throughout the municipality combined with few opportunities to enact a reading identity make the concept of the teen reader unviable” (p. 479). Her conclusions highlighted the situatedness of the reading experience, making the context of reading (spaces, temporal structures, institutions, etc.) indispensable to consider when one is exploring the reading experience. Equally inspiring was her work with seventeen young queer, lesbian, and bisexual women, which challenged some commonplaces related to the reading experience. The voices of these readers situated Rothbauer in a privileged position to question commonplaces in regards to the functions of reading. For instance, the metaphor of reading as escape did not adequately describe some of the roles that reading played in their lives (2004, pp. 55–56), since some participants seemed to read “less for *escape from* than for *engagement with* the worlds in which they live” (p. 65). Another of Rothbauer’s themes explored the use of reading as a way to increase social participation in larger communities, a theme that connects strongly with her overall idea of reading for possibilities. As she explains it:

Reading for possibilities gives them a coherent and perhaps, cohesive, sense of self. Reading for community represents their desire to move this “self” into a larger social arena to make connections with other lesbian, bisexual and queer women. (p. 111)

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As I discuss later, my participants practice reading both as something social and as something solitary, depending on what role comics reading is playing in their lives at a precise moment. In the end, both Rothbauer and I are finding ties between the reading experience and the lives of our participants, trying to interrogate, explore, and challenge common understandings about an often neglected population (young adult readers) and, in my case, an undervalued practice (reading comics).

Rothbauer has also worked with McKechnie and Ross (Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2018, 2006) in a project that sought to provide scholarly support for the work of librarians and educators in explaining why reading for pleasure is “a Good Thing” (Ross et al., 2018, p. vii). One of the first issues that Rothbauer tackles about young people’s reading is the “do they read or not” question (pp. 104–109). This debate is a common starting point in conversations about teen reading; its importance rests on its direct connection with definitions of what reading is and what is considered acceptable reading. Comics, as well as series books or genre reading, have been central in these discussions. Elsewhere I have explored in depth the narratives that librarians construct around comics readers (Cedeira Serantes, 2013) that have historically also been strongly tied to the discussions about “what is acceptable to read.” It is important, then, to briefly note the stereotypes that surround comics reading and young people. As I noted at the beginning, comics (under the label of *graphic novels*) are increasingly characterized as rich, complex, challenging, diverse, and multilayered reading material, but it is commonplace to introduce teen readers of comics as misfits, loners, reluctant readers, and patrons who lack reading skills or discriminating tastes. The richness of the material should imply a similar richness in comics’ readers (Cedeira Serantes, 2013, pp. 130–131). Based on the complexity of the reading material, teen readers could be portrayed or studied as savvy, complex, experimental, multimedia readers.

A reading material that has experienced a similar path to comics is series books. Both were attacked in comparable ways by cultural gatekeepers accusing them of physically and intellectually harming innocent youth; both were not considered real reading and they were missing from educational and cultural institutions. In the midst of the success of the criticized *Goosebumps* (R. L. Stine) series, Ross published an article defending the role of series books in the life of adult avid readers (1995). The originality and strength of her research comes from the voices of the readers who helped her discover the supporting and entertaining role that series books had for them. Ross pointed to the importance of familiarizing oneself with the conventions of reading, acquiring a “literary competence” (p. 228). Series books support the development of this familiarity because of some of the characteristics they are criticized for, such as their formulaic plots and structures as well as their stereotyped characters. These elements provide a familiar and safe reading experience, one that is easy to engage with and enjoy. If we conceptualize reading and/or being a reader as a practice that accompanies readers, especially young readers, in their life development, any kind of reading should be considered valuable because it helps the reader to develop or cement literacy (and literary) skills as well as it provides early exposure to and awareness of contextual aspects of reading such as varied reading formats or the difference between assigned and pleasure reading.

Building on Ross’s research, Howard (2011) confirmed that young readers often choose “a book for pleasure and then find in it insights related to themselves, their lives, and their problems” (p. 53). Howard carried on a series of focus group discussions with a total of sixty-eight twelve- to fifteen-year-olds at junior high schools to explore the role of pleasure reading in their lives, concluding that pleasure reading brings three broad benefits: it enhances academic performance, social engagement, and personal development (pp. 47–48). As I discuss later, comics can also function as channels for social

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engagement, and they are definitely entangled in the personal development of some of my participants.

Margaret Mackey is another important researcher to bring to the conversation. Although her work connects more strongly with the study of literacies, the curiosity about the rich media ecology young people live in makes it central for any contemporary discussions of young people's reading. Mackey makes young people's participation central to her research projects but does not focus on a specific age range or reading/viewing format (2011, 2007a, 2007b), making her work perfect to highlight the differences, interrelations, and commonalities among a rich variety of texts and formats (novels, short stories, e-books, graphic novels, videogames, movies, or poems) and also among rich groups of participants: elementary and junior high students (2007a), undergraduate students (2011), and adults and young adults (2007b). In *Literacies across Media* (2007a), Mackey concentrates on the experiences of a group of students with a variety of texts: picture books, novels, movies, computer games, and e-books, including some titles in more than one format. Note that, even though Mackey chose a variety of texts, comics are not represented in her selection. However, the two students who are the focus of her analysis in two chapters briefly mention reading comics as part of their media consumption (pp. 35, 48). Evidently Mackey could not feasibly study every media text available in contemporary culture. In contrast, she offered comics in her research project with older readers (2007b), and I focus on her treatment of the topic later. The concepts of personal salience and fluency of access revealed themselves as basic in the process of selection among texts, especially in a saturated media landscape (2007a, pp. 88–92). Participants judged each text according to its own characteristics and merits and they decided which materials to read based on interest (salience) or familiarity with the medium (fluency). These two ideas are relevant when one thinks about comics. They mix text and image, something that we are familiar with as children because of picture books,

but that many young adults, and especially adults, leave behind or are encouraged to leave behind after childhood. Reading comics activates a series of different skills than reading plain text does, so fluency of access is an idea to consider when interviewing readers. The diversity of styles and conventions, among titles not just from different countries but also from different genres, confirms the importance of the idea of fluency. Another relevant idea is that of the physicality of reading. Mackey dedicated a chapter to the physical differences between reading print and digital texts, and, more precisely, the role of hands. Comics are published in variety of formats. If one visits a comics store, he or she can encounter, for example, a thirty-two-page softcover comic book, a trade paperback that collects several comic books, the standard format of a European album, and a hardcover graphic novel in landscape format as thick as 300 pages long. With the advent of digital platforms like Comixology or Izneo, digital reading needs to be added to this list of physical formats. Evidently the experience of reading any of these materials is different, both intellectually and physically.

In *Mapping Recreational Literacies*, Mackey decided to investigate adults and young adults because “[t]he concept of fully literate adulthood occupies a strange default position of invisibility – the end-point and measure of literacy education but taken for granted, under-explored, and under-described” (2007b, p. 3). Mackey recruited nine participants from nineteen to thirty-six years of age and looked at how they engage in different literate activities in their leisure time, meeting with each of them separately and finishing with ten hours of taped and transcribed sessions for each participant. Mackey included graphic novels in this work and dedicated a section to the possible challenges and peculiarities of the comics medium (pp. 108–111). She defined graphic novels as follows: “a graphic novel is something like a grown-up comic, a larger incarnation of a popular method of telling stories through words and images” (p. 108). Mackey detected a strong link between some of the abilities needed to read



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graphic novels and hypertext and digital games (p. 110). Her concluding sentences for that brief analysis of the medium, although focused on the text, are highly stimulating. She noted that “young readers are learning how to manage sophisticated forms of data-handling and interpretation from sources that have regularly been perceived as humble at best, pernicious at worst” (p. 111). If we shift the thought, can we say that the readers of these texts are also sophisticated readers? I believe Mackey certainly helps to probe this point from a literacies-based perspective, and the work that scholars from education have done to connect comics and multimodal literacies exemplifies this point (e.g., Jacobs, 2013; Hammond, 2012). To conclude the analysis, Mackey speculated that maybe her participants have an attitude toward the medium that supports the idea that “a good enough reading” is plenty for this format (p. 148) or that with the diversity of formats in current media ecology, “finding the point of good-enough is actually a reasonable survival strategy” (p. 148).

Mackey’s latest work on young adult reading, *Narrative Pleasures in Young Adult Novels, Films, and Video Games* (2011), focuses on narrative comprehension: “I want to explore some story-processing skills and strategies that generate fictional understanding in three specific media: book, game, [and] film” (p. 3). The group of participants comprised twelve young people from nineteen to twenty-two years of age, nine male and three female, who met in groups of three to read a novel, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, to watch a film, *Run Lola Run*, and to play a digital game on PlayStation 2, *Shadow of the Colossus*, always from beginning to end. Mackey describes the readers as ordinary. She also addresses the male predominance in the sample, explaining that it is recurrent in samples requiring game experience and that her priority is “to gain insight into narrative thinking that included the element of game experience” (p. 35). Even though this Element focuses on comics, discussions about movies, television shows, and other reading materials were unavoidable

during the interviews, sometimes because I asked questions about them, at other times because my participants referred to them for comparison. Mackey reaches a similar conclusion about her participants: “[t]he first fact about the young people in this project is that they cannot address any explicit question about a single medium or format, no matter how monomodally phrased or intended, from any standpoint but that of multimodal interpreter. However singular the focus, their stance is unavoidably comparative” (p. 200). In connection with the idea of media diversity, Mackey defends movements of expansion and inclusion in relation to the educational canon in order to support the potential skills youth develop in their everyday lives. Reading is an elusive process. Mackey describes it as unique, personal, and distinctive and points to the fact that “the experience inside the black box of each interpreter’s mind was specific to each of them and was *felt* and *thought* in different ways” (p. 201). This is why the more information, from varied perspectives, that we can accumulate about this intimate and particular process, the better we will be able to understand the potential needs of youth as readers, students, library patrons, and, ultimately, as citizens.

Mackey’s research shows how slowly comics were being considered as necessary when one had to represent the richness of the current media landscape. However, perhaps not surprising, there are not many scholarly intersections between the topics of reading for pleasure and comics reading, despite the fact that young adult and adult readers have been consistently reading comics as a leisurely activity since the early twentieth century (Gibson, 2015; Wright, 2003). Education and library and information studies are the scholarly fields where more studies emerge, but, due to the professional focus of both fields, most of the research has concentrated on denying or justifying the presence, use, and value of comics in classrooms or libraries. In 1944, Josette Frank highlighted the appeal of comics to “children of all ages, of high and low I.Q., girls as well as boys, good readers and nonreaders, in