Dave Nearing

Professor Hull

English 103

09/03/10

Comic Books Aren’t Books-What?

What makes a book a book? The debate over where the fine line between art and literature should be drawn is far from an agreed-upon point. Some, like author Scott McCloud, argue that comic books are literature communicated in a visual format. Others, including Constance Carr, take the position that comics are the written/illustrated equivalent of children’s toys, to be used for a short time during the early years and then discarded in favor of more “advanced” forms of literature as soon as possible. However, when subjected to close scrutiny, many of the arguments central to Carr’s position don’t make logical sense, which leads the reader to question whether or not her opinion is worthy to carry any weight in the great comic book debate.

Carr’s “Beyond the Comic Books-What?” is at the same time both an anti-comic book manifesto and a how-to guide for teachers interested in eliminating their pupils’ interest in reading comic books. The piece appears to be written in response to a communiqué between “Miss C.” and “Mrs. A--.” regarding a veritable epidemic of comic books and comic book readers that has infected Miss C’s class. Carr’s main offensive centers around attacking comic books for providing a quick and easy balm for many developmental needs that children experience. After providing a few examples of these needs and the ways that they are met through the liberal application of comic books, Carr moves on to a long-winded treatise extolling the innumerable ways that “books…satisfy [the] same needs with a more wholesome product that can ever be met in comic books,” (Carr 11). Whether or not books truly are superior to comic books in this respect remains to be seen.

From thence, the author moves on to how the newly enlightened acolyte of her philosophy might go about providing access to “real” books for book-deprived children, even going so far as to suggest several ways a person might go about obtaining funds for the purpose of starting a library. The tail end of Carr’s argument concerns itself with how the concerned reader can most effectively arm themselves with knowledge of what books to provide for their children, with special emphasis on developing English courses for them. It is doubtful that forcing children to read “real” books will make them any less likely to read comic books. In fact, the opposite may prove true because when it is made so that comic books are something they can’t have, they might want them more by virtue of their scarcity.

I was different than the children Constance Carr refers to in her article. When I was a child, not so long ago and far away, all I did was read. I read constantly, ravenously, devouring page after page of novel after novel like a fairytale dragon unleashed upon a tiny Arthurian hamlet. To put it in the simplest terms possible, reading was my passion. I loved going to the library, perusing the endless stacks of used books in the many shady bookstores I frequented, smelling the spicy scent of a musty old tome, hearing the little *snik* sound a brand new book made when I cracked its spine for the first time. In those days, when I read, the words hijacked my senses, whisking me away to faraway lands and plunging me headfirst into new and exciting worlds. Every detail, every subtle nuance of a story sprang invariably sharp and clear to my mind’s eye. I stood disheveled and downtrodden alongside David Copperfield in front of Aunt Betsy’s house, I traipsed improbably across the galaxy with Arthur Dent in search of tea. I watched, with bated breath, as the woodland creatures of Redwall repelled wave after wave of would-be invaders, I stood on the brink with Frodo; I weathered the eons with the Foundation.

As such, I know that Carr’s position that comic books are invalid based on the fact that “[a] child identifies themselves with the hero of a book, and…the heroes of comic books dare and do…” (Carr 11) is ridiculous, Huck Finn dared and did, Robinson Crusoe dared and did; nobody (except perhaps Constance Carr), would read any fictional story unless there was somebody daring and doing in it. Her further argument against comic books being a valid form of literary expression based upon the premise that comic books “…are filled with action, adventure, and danger. They move swiftly from one climax to another…” (Carr 11) is at the very least illogical. Those criteria apply to most if not all of the books that I loved as a child. However, not much later on, she praises *picture books* as a valid substitute for comic books. What are picture books? Books filled with action, adventure, and danger (at least what passes for action, adventure, and danger at the tender age of two), that move swiftly from one climax to another (along a simplistic plotline), carried along by pictures which only need the conversation printed (and more often than not only have descriptions of what anybody with eyes can clearly see is going on in the pictures printed).

The fact that the comic books had pictures in them certainly did not rob me “of opportunities to build [my] own impressional pictures to words,” (Carr 11) but rather seems to have enhanced that ability! Knowing what the characters in a story were “supposed” to look like allowed me to skip that part of the reading process and dive straight into the action, and the pictures that appeared in my mind’s eye were all the more vivid for having a stated subject. My reading went beyond simply staring at pictures in order to glean a rough understanding of a story, I “read” the pictures, taking in every element of a scene, just like I would have if I had been reading a description of the same scene in a book. Best of all, the ability to stop and examine the expressions and motions of the characters as the author originally intended them to look allowed me to experience the story as it was originally conceived in the mind of its creator, rather than using the lens of my “past experiences to interpret the emotion” (Carr 11) that the story was trying to convey.

Despite what Carr seems to think, comics are undoubtedly a valid form of literary expression. Sure, some of them might be “cheap, disposable kiddie fare” (McCloud 3), but the majority of them have something to offer, whether it be a rich backstory, expressive art, good writing, deep characters, interesting situations, complex plots, or just the good old-fashioned good vs. evil stories that all of us crave deep down inside. Despite all this, however, there will always be the Constance Carrs of the world who will decry comic books as being harmful to children, morally corruptive, or just not mentally stimulating enough to be considered proper literature. Unfortunately, the two sides will probably never be able to come to an agreement, but that won’t stop them from trying; as Scott McCloud would say: “Here’s to the great debate!” (McCloud 23)

Works Cited

Carr, Constance. "Beyond the Comic Books--What?" *The Reading Teacher 5.2* (1951): 11-13. Print.

McCloud, Scott. "Setting the Record Straight." *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (Paperback)*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. 2-23. Print

1225