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ORIGINAL PAPER

"Superman Says, 'Read!'" National Comics and Reading Promotion

Carol L. Tilley

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Abstract Between the years 1935 and 1946, National Comics—the leading comic book publisher in the United States—experimented with various strategies such as book lists and juvenile book reviews in order to encourage children and young adults to read books other than comics. This paper surveys these strategies and the work of key persons such as Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, M.C. Gaines, and Josette Frank, in the context of the broader landscape of children's reading and comics publishing. In addition, the paper argues that National's efforts serve as further encouragement for contemporary scholars to reevaluate the role that comics played in the cultural and literary lives of young readers.

Keywords Comics · Reading promotion · History · Children's literature

In *Superman* #4 (Spring 1940) Superman stepped out of character and told his audience to "Get into the habit of reading at least one good book a month" (Superman Says, 1940, n.p.) The full-page letter which seemed to originate with the Man of Steel himself listed more than sixty books: conventional classics such as Melville's *Moby Dick*, children's titles like Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows,* and

Carol L. Tilley (Ph.D. in information science, Indiana University, 2007) is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois. She teaches courses on youth services librarianship. Carol's research focuses on the intersection of children, comics, and libraries in United States. She presents regularly at conferences including Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing and Children's Literature Association. Her work has appeared in journals including *Information and Culture: A Journal of History* and *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*. She is co-editor of the peer-reviewed journal, *School Library Research.*

C. L. Tilley (✉)
The Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA
e-mail: ctilley@illinois.edu

even pulpier works such as Anthony Hope's *The Prison of Zenda.* If readers followed his advice, Superman promised them that they would develop "agile quick thinking mind[s]," which were key to having powers like his. In urging readers to seek out "good" books along with their comic books, Superman and his publisher National Comics[1] seemed to be arguing that "real" reading was something different than comic book reading. This message was heightened by similar admonishments from Superman to eat a good breakfast and exercise regularly: comics were junk food and indolence, and the real meat of life was to be found elsewhere. Yet one would be mistaken in making such a shallow interpretation of National's message or even to view Superman's missive as an oddity.

For National Comics, the page filled with book recommendations was rather ordinary. Between 1935 and 1946, through a series of adaptations, columns, campaigns, and reviews, National pushed its readers—especially its younger ones—to broaden their sources of leisure reading and to make use of local libraries. In this effort, National was unique. Other popular comics publishers of this period such as Fawcett made no similar efforts during these years to promote non-comics' reading. Publishers of juvenile books did not use popular series fiction characters like Nancy Drew to recommend specific book titles, although lists of additional titles in that character's own series or related books from the publisher might be printed on a book's cover or in its back matter. Prominent children's media including radio and movie serials also did not urge their audiences to go to their local libraries. Even in today's literary landscape where one finds superheroes on library bookmarks and comics distributors at library conventions, you will not find suggested book lists in the pages of comic magazines.

This paper uses archival and other primary source materials to document National Comics' decade-long efforts to promote reading to its young readers. One goal of this survey is to address what Hatfield (2011) referred to as the elision of children's comics history. Although some of National's activities described in this paper have been documented in popular and academic histories of comics, these activities are typically considered secondary or tertiary concerns compared to the creative development of popular characters and genres or the moral panics focused on comics in the 1940s and 1950s.[2] This paper reclaims National's activities related

[1] National Comics began as National Allied Publications, a company founded by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson in 1935. The company's name changed several times—ultimately to DC Comics—as the result of mergers and acquisitions. Despite historical variations in its appellation, this company is designated consistently as National or National Comics in this paper. All-American Comics owned some of the publications discussed in this paper including *Flash Comics*. All-American and its chief Max (M.C.) Gaines benefitted from National's branding, distribution, and financing, so during the time period discussed in this paper, publications from All-American were essentially National publications, even though their indicia bore All-American's name. For this paper, All-American's publications are considered part of National Comics' assets as they were after National purchased Gaines' interest in All-American in 1945.

[2] Useful histories of National Comics and the early comics industry include Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2010), *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen) (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi); Paul Levitz (2010), *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (New York, NY: Taschen); and Bradford Wright (2003), *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press). For coverage of moral panics and comics, consider, Bart Beaty (2005), *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of*

to reading promotion as part of the history of childhood and children's print culture. In doing so, it encourages contemporary scholars and practitioners in the areas of children's literature and education to reevaluate comics' historical role in the cultural and intellectual lives of young readers. National's unique perseverance in guiding young people's reading through book lists, serializations, and other reading promotion features helped to move comic books, at least for a portion of their early history, into the same sphere as traditional literature so that comics and classics received equal attention.

The Early Years: Classics Adapted And "The Book shelf"

In National's earliest publications—sandwiched among comic book stories of scheming magicians, adventurous cowboys, and unruly children—readers could find serialized adaptations of classic adventure novels. Albert Kanter's *Classics Illustrated* series, begun in 1941, is perhaps better-known for its comic book abridgements of famous titles in literature, but National Comics had already adapted and serialized at least six novel-length works before any of Kanter's books were published. The earliest and longest running adaptation, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, started in National's *New Fun Comics* #1 (February 1935) and continued through *More Fun Comics* #26 (November 1937); Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* also enjoyed a lengthy serialization, beginning in *New Comics* #4 (March–April 1936) and finishing in *New Adventure Comics* #25 (March–April 1938). National adapted other well-known titles including Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island,* Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers,* and H. Rider Haggard's pulp novel novel *She*. Unlike the more animated and visually appealing superhero adventures that defined comics of the 1940s, the novel serializations were seldom more than captioned pictures, sequenced to highlight pivotal moments in the books. Similarly, National also visually embellished poems such as John Greenleaf Whittier's "Barbara Frietchie" (*New Comics* #8, September 1936), under the banner "Famous Poems Pictured" during 1936 and 1937. Librarians and teachers during these years would not have approved of all the books National serialized or recommended for readers below secondary school level. *The Three Musketeers,* for instance, did not appear at this point in H.W. Wilson Company's *Children's Catalog,* a widely used library selection tool, but for many readers these books and poems were touchstones that they would likely have encountered in school and everyday life.

Another early reading promotion endeavor was "The Book Shelf," a chattily written column that highlighted recently published books for children and appeared

Footnote 2 continued
Mass Culture (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi); James Gilbert (1986), *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950 s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press); David Hajdu (2009*), The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York, NY: Macmillan); and, Amy Kiste Nyberg (1998), *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi).

in at least seven consecutive issues of *New Comics* during 1935 and 1936.[3] One to three pages in length, the column often contained small black and white illustrations and several reviews. The four women who wrote the column during its publication addressed their readers in direct, familial tones, thereby creating the perception that a gregarious older sister was dispensing reading advice. As most book guidance for young people during this period was meted out by stereotypically prim teachers and librarians who emphasized the importance of careful book selection in service of fortifying literary tastes, the columnists' approach stood in bold contrast. Of course, there were lapses in this approach, as one writer reminded her readers, "Books are good for the mind, provided you choose worthwhile or 'fresh fruit' kind" (Knight, 1936, n.p.); presumably comics were not the 'fresh fruit' kind.

"The Book Shelf" columnists recommended a motley assortment of texts, which perhaps signaled comics' broad audience or National's uncertainty about its audience. One installment, for instance, recommended a dense novel about life in Hungary prior to the First World War (Kate Seredy's Newbery Honor book *The Good Master*), a gaily illustrated picture book with an anthropomorphized elephant protagonist (Jean de Brunoff's *Babar the King*), and a craft/do-it-yourself selection (a tin can craft book). Other fiction titles recommended in "The Book Shelf" reflected then-contemporary publication trends by focusing on stories set in history—such as Paul Anderson's *Swords in the North* about a young Roman warrior—as well as stories about children from other lands and cultures—such as Chesley Kahmann's *Tara, Daughter of the Gypsies*, which had added appeal through Tara's trained bear. While the novels highlighted in the columns were balanced in their likely appeal to boys and girls, the few nonfiction selections, such as Goodwin Swezey's *The Boys' Book of Astronomy* and Howard Mingo's *Flying for 1936*, had seemed to have targeted boys primarily.

The women who wrote "The Book Shelf" were as eclectic a group as the books they recommended, but they sincerely attempted to connect young people with books they might enjoy reading. Two did contract work for National: Connie Naar (*New Comics* #1, December 1935), who eventually pursued work as a children's book illustrator (Robbins and Yronwode, 1985), and Rosemary Volk (*New Comics* #2, January 1936). Volk seemed poised to write more columns, as she encouraged young people to write her if they needed help "with [their] book problems" (1936, n.p.). Marjorie Knight (*New Comics* #5, May–June 1936; *New Comics* #6, July 1936; *New Comics* #7, August 1936), had already published several children's books including *The Doll House at World's End*. Most surprising among the four "Book Shelf" writers is Carson Smith, who included the title "Librarian" in the byline for her two columns (*New Comics* #3, February 1936; *New Comics* #4, March–April 1936). Smith was not a librarian; instead she was a nineteen-year old creative writing student at Columbia, soon to come to acclaim as a superb crafter of literary fiction under her married name, Carson McCullers. Her particular selections for "The Book Shelf" betray little of the eccentricity and loneliness that were

[3] A similar, but less spirited, column—"Books, Books"—ran in National's *More Fun Comics* for at least two issues, #8 (February 1936) and #10 (May 1936), with Edith Brittin credited in the byline of the latter issue.

hallmarks of her fiction, but those characteristics are evident in an opening paragraph of one column. "Did you ever stop to think," McCullers wrote in the February 1936 issue, "that a book is a great deal like that magic carpet? You open the covers and start to read, and instantly you are whisked away to another world. You meet strange people, some of them heroes, and some not; you live for a short time a life entirely unlike your own" (Smith [McCullers], 1936, n.p.)

In these formative years for comics, experimentation was the norm; consequently, a funny animal feature, a science fiction strip, and movie news coexisted in *New Comics'* pages.[4] Classic novels and familiar poems, then, were safe choices for a fledgling company experimenting with a new medium. Beyond the safety that recognizable texts provided, these selections announced to National's youngest readers that comics were powerful vehicles for storytelling, capable of interpreting and translating canonical literature, a belief imparted by National's founder "Major" Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. Wheeler-Nicholson viewed comics as a "blooming art form" (Amash, 2009, p. 19) and aspired to create long-form and complex comics similar to today's graphic novels. A self-styled intellectual, who lived in a book-filled house and encouraged his children to read Shakespeare and Tolstoy from an early age, the Major's familial practices seemed also to inspire the "Bookshelf" columns. Of course, he was an entrepreneur, so the choices of materials to adapt—Stevenson and Dumas, for instance—reflect his profit concerns. As Wheeler-Nicholson's son Douglas recounted, these adventure-style stories "were things that he had given my brother and me to read as young kids. I think that, to the degree that we loved them, he used that as his marketing gauge for what he should be using" (Amash, 2009, p. 15).

Focused Efforts: Readers' Reviews And The Superman Good Reading Project

Following Wheeler-Nicholson's departure from the company in the late 1930s, National ended its serialization of classic literature and book review columns but it did not forsake the role it had established in guiding young people's reading. In 1940 and 1941, spurred by M.C. Gaines (1941), National reviewed classic literature in publications such as *Action Comics*, *Detective Comics*, and *All-American Comics*. Gaines, by some accounts a former school principal,[5] headed the All-American line of National's comics and explicitly wanted to broaden the reading scope of comics' younger readers. He "never gave up on the potential for comic books as a teaching tool" and willingly forsook profit for his vision of comics publishing (Diehl and Kaestle, 1996, p. 20). The reviews appeared as half or full pages of book-report style

[4] Although it did not originate the comic book—Eastern Color Printing's *Famous Funnies* (1933) holds that distinction—National Comics was the primary innovator of the form. *New Comics*, first published by National in 1935, was one of the first two comic book series (National's *New Fun: The Big Comics Magazine* was the other) to feature original material rather than reprints of newspaper strips.

[5] Though there is some uncertainty about Gaines' actual employment history, his work as an elementary school educator is noted in various sources including Arie Kaplan (2008), *From Krakow to Kryptonite: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society) as well as Digby Diehl and David Kaestle's (1996), *Tales from the Crypt: The Official Archives* (New York, NY: Macmillan).

summaries of familiar works such as Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*; on occasion, they were accompanied by a black and white illustration. The prose was dull: the review for Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* began, "Tom Brown was a prankish schoolboy. His father, a rich English Squire, sent Tom to Rugby" ([Monthly Book Review], 1940). The effect is *Cliff's Notes*, not cliffhanger. In prominent lettering, though missing Superman's commanding visage, each of the reviews urged their readers to "Read a Good Book Every Month." Gaines intended for the reviews to run monthly in National's publications but they appeared intermittently except for those in *Flash Comics*.

The reviews in *Flash* were distinguished not only by their regularity, but also by their writers.[6] Like the other National reviews, the "*Flash Comics* Monthly Book Review" began as unsigned reviews of familiar books such as Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Yet, in the second review feature (#5, May 1940), *Flash* invited its readers—no age requirements were specified—to participate in the reviews, offering five dollars and a byline to the writers of any reviews published. George Robbins of Brooklyn was the author for the first reader-submitted review; his choice was *The Mysterious Island* by Jules Verne (*Flash Comics* #10, October 1940). The subsequent eleven issues contained reader-submitted reviews of books including Charles Hawes' Newbery-winning pirate tale *The Dark Frigate*, Shakespeare's comedy *The Tempest*, Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ*, and Paul de Kruif's stories about microbiologists, *The Microbe Hunters*. Although the works reviewed by readers deviated from the canonical inspirations of National's creators, they retained a focus on adventure.

National embarked on another reading promotion project in 1940 that traded on growing enthusiasm for Superman, the company's preeminent character. The Superman Good Reading Project, attracted the attention of the esteemed reading scholar William Gray (1942, p. 652), who described its aim "to stimulate interest in reading library books through the use of posters and book lists." Mary Lucas (1941), a librarian who reported on the project,[7] recounted how Elizabeth Hart, a librarian for Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, purchased several comic books from a newsstand during the spring of 1940 to better understand young readers' interests. Hart stumbled onto a recommended book list—most likely the one that appeared in *Superman Quarterly* #4 —clipped it out, and posted it on the library's bulletin board. The boys and girls in this working class neighborhood responded eagerly to Superman's advice, which Hart supplemented with active reader's advisory. Hart also developed a window-sized poster of Superman along with flyers to publicize the titles. In her library's newsletter, Hart (1940, p. 2) recommended "advertising juvenile classics" with the help of the Superman book list. Although Hart was neither named nor interviewed in the piece, the *Baltimore Evening Sun* (9 March 1940, p. 16) published a brief article, "Superman Does Super Job for Library Circulation," about the project and revealed that, "Superman has

[6] Although some other National titles including *All-American* included reader-submissions, *Flash* was the only title to print the reviews consistently.

[7] A letter by Mary Lucas (1941, 5 October) to Josette Frank, whose work with National is discussed at length in the last half of this paper, raises the possibility that the article Lucas wrote for *Library Journal* may have been done at the encouragement of National.

succeeded in a project wherein the library's success was limited—he has convinced the library's young readers they should read books that the library has been recommending in a select list for young readers" (p. 16). Although librarians had been recommending many of the same titles from the Superman book list, simply having Superman suggest them resulted in an immediate circulation boost.

National ostensibly learned of the library's experiment through the *Sun*'s article and developed additional book lists ("Good Books Suggested by Superman") in the hopes that other libraries would make similar trials.[8] The selections comprised a diverse mix of older works not readily identified as children's literature such as Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, traditional children's adventures like Howard Pyle's *Men of Iron*, and newer juvenile books that met with librarians' approval like the Newbery Medal-winner, *Smoky the Cowhorse* by Will James. In the summer of 1941 a handful of libraries initiated brief experiments with the Superman materials (Lucas, 1941). The librarians at each location reported increased circulation of the titles that Superman recommended. For instance, in Reading, Pennsylvania, circulation for the titles on this list increased threefold in less than three weeks; some librarians suggested that had the trial not occurred during summer, circulation figures might have risen further. Not all librarians were enthusiastic about this project, despite increases in circulation. Apparently some of the early materials that National distributed tried to include Superman in many of the books' descriptions—a bit of hype and false advertising, which the company discontinued when the materials were reprinted (Frank, 1941, October 30). Children, too, were not uniformly impressed with Superman's suggestions, especially on learning that the Man of Steel himself was absent from the libraries' collections. Young patrons at Queens Borough Public Library's Central Children's Room asked, "Where are the comics?" (Lucas, 1941, p. 826). Still, the experiment met with enough success that an article, "The Comics and Their Audience," in *Publishers' Weekly* (1942, p. 1476) the following spring remarked that many libraries used the Superman posters [Superman Says: "Read a Good Book Every Week"], causing more children to read more library books, just as "Popeye…induced thousands of children to eat spinach."

Josette Frank and "Good Books for You"

Although the Superman Good Reading Project did not seem to have concluded officially, National again changed its tactics in promoting reading in 1941. Beginning in August 1941 and continuing through April 1946, Josette Frank crafted reviews of children's books that appeared in more than four hundred issues of National's comics. Frank was staff advisor to the Child Study Association of America's (CSAA) Children's Book and Radio Committees, which offered

[8] It's not clear whether National responded to Elizabeth Hart's work or if National quietly sponsored Hart's reading promotion work, although I tend to believe it was the former. To date I have found little archival evidence touching on the Superman Good Reading campaign. One letter from Josette Frank (1941, 30 October) to F. Marie Foster expresses her regret, however, that National failed to provide more books on its list for younger readers.

guidance for young people's reading and viewing to parents, educators, and librarians; she was also the author of a widely respected book, *What Books for Children? Guideposts for Parents* (1937).[9] National approached Frank in early 1940 to vet the scripts for its new Superman radio program, although she did not become a formal advisor until the spring of 1941, when she also agreed to write book reviews for the company (Frank, 1940, 3 January; 1941, 14 April; Childs, 1941, 15 April). As the stated goal for these reviews was to encourage young people to read other texts in addition to the comics, the reviews seem to have been an effort to extend and strengthen the Superman Good Reading Project. National executive Harry Childs also intended to keep up the spirit of the reader-submitted book reviews that had appeared in *Flash Comics* and other titles because the spring 1941 proposal included a call for child-submitted reviews for which a monetary or book prize would be awarded.[10] This last element was implemented only marginally, as this paper describes later.

Frank's first reviews appeared in the August 1941 issues of National's titles. She wrote this first pair—a book review of John Tunis' baseball tale *The Kid from Tompkinsville* and a movie review of *Night Train [to Munich]*—and enclosed them in a letter to Harry Childs dated 14 April 1941 that confirmed her understanding of the reviewing arrangement with National. Ultimately Frank contributed only a few movie reviews, but the book reviews flourished. With its straightforward action, contemporary plot, and male protagonist, *The Kid from Tompkinsville* set the standards for many of Frank's later choices for materials. Boys and girls read comics with equal fervor during these years, but Frank viewed boys as her primary audience. Consequently many of the titles Frank reviewed featured sports (e.g. Frank Graham's *Lou Gehrig: A Quiet Hero*), outdoor adventure (e.g. William Heyliger's *S.O.S.! Radio Patrol*), or military life (e.g. Gregor Felsen's *Some Follow the Sea*). Unlike many titles on the Superman posters and recommended by readers in the *Flash Comics* reviews, Frank's choices tended to skew more modern as she drew on the growing numbers of books published specifically for young people: Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Jules Verne had no place in the ranks of her recommended titles.

Frank sought to reach young boys at the lower end of the nine-to-fourteen year old age spectrum. As Frank wrote in July 1942 to Della McGregor, Supervisor of Children's Work at the Saint Paul (Minnesota) Public Library, "For the younger range I have had great difficulty finding really exciting books, and have, of course, drawn heavily on all the Phil Stong stories and LeGrand," which was a concern shared by many persons connected with the world of juvenile books during this period (Jenkins, 1996). Reflecting concerns Frank expressed to her, librarian Mary Lucas (1941, 5 October), responded, "I hope that some of the juvenile editors will look into the problem and try to find a different type of manuscript for the young boys. Paul Brown and Armstrong Sperry have both made a pretty good try at it in 'Piper's Pony' and 'Taktuk the Arctic Boy.'" Perhaps Frank failed to agree with

[9] In later editions, it was retitled, *Your Child's Reading Today*.

[10] Harry Childs' nominal affiliation was with the Juvenile Group Foundation, an organization that advocated for the educational uses of comics, but was a National subsidiary.

Lucas' assessment, as she reviewed neither title, although she did promote other books by these two authors. In addition to Stong, LeGrand, Brown, and Sperry, Josette Frank also frequently promoted books by Gregor Felsen, Howard Pease, Sanford Tousey, and John Tunis.

Frank's entries were brisk and enticing, written in a style commonly associated with booktalks in today's libraries, and entirely unlike the pedantic unsigned reviews that appeared in earlier National titles. For instance, Frank opened her recommendation of Stephen Meader's *Who Rides in the Dark?* thusly:

> A great, black horse and a heavily-cloaked rider on a lonely New Hampshire stagecoach road! This was the beginning of a dangerous adventure for young Dan Drew as a notorious band of robbers terrorized the small New England town. Mystery and excitement run from beginning to end of this story of horses and strong men. (Frank, 1941, n.p.)

Some reviews were illustrated by staff artists at National. Most of the illustrations were tame black-and-white affairs, especially in comparison to the artwork these artists typically created. On occasion, though, they offered up more vigorous images such as the ominous color depiction of a U-Boat in the guise of a giant Swastika-adorned cobra rising from the sea, which accompanied Frank's review (*Action Comics* #67, January 1944) of another Stephen Meader title, *The Sea Snake*. As had the writers for *The Book Shelf,* Frank often spoke directly to her young readers, encouraging them to "Ask your librarian about it" or "Ask for this book at your neighborhood library." Unfortunately, Frank found it almost impossible to gauge the response to her entreaties. In a January 1942 letter to Mildred Batchelder, the head of the School and Children's Library Division of the American Library Association (ALA), Frank wrote:

> It has been very difficult to get any kind of check-up which would tell me whether children are really reading these reviews, or whether they are skipping them for the more exciting pictures that follow. We have, of course, had a few postcard requests from children, asking us to review this or that favorite book, and I understand that each such post card from a child reader must be interpreted as representing about one thouseand [sic] who read, but do not write in.

To stimulate greater interest in the reviews on the part of young readers, Frank enlisted two prominent New York librarians, Irene Smith and Grace Cartmell, to suggest lists of books for young readers to review themselves. The lists appeared in multiple issues[11] and included titles such as Eric Knight's *Lassie Come Home* that the respective librarian recommended. To enter the contest, have a chance to win a $5 prize, and see one's writing in print, readers had to submit a review of one of the books on the lists. In correspondence about the contest with Smith, Frank (1942, 10 January) enthusiastically suggested: "That ought to get 'em!" Young readers responded to the competition, but not in the numbers Frank hoped. The names of

[11] For instance, Cartmell's list was published in issues that included *Detective Comics* #68 (October 1942), *Superman* #19 (November–December 1942), and *Batman* #13 (December 1942–January 1943).

various winners and runners-up appeared in several different issues, but in each instance, the lists of names are the same, with only a different winner identified, suggesting a limited response.[12]

Many of the nearly one thousand juvenile titles published each year by the early 1940s tended towards what children's literature expert May Hill Arbuthnot termed "sweetness and light" (Jenkins, 1995, p. 238). Julia Certain (1941, p. 160), the editor of *Elementary English Review,* conceded the following year,

> [T]oo many of the books issued, especially for younger children, are trivial in content. Exceptionally beautiful in format, prepared and presented with meticulous care, they are shallow and inane in substance. What child is going to enjoy reading about Betty and Billy who went to Grandfather's farm and fed Spot and Pussy and the fluffy chickies when he can follow the adventures of Gang Busters and The Spirit?

Unfortunately, children who did visit libraries could seldom find the serialized stories of adventure they so loved in both comics and pulp books such as Nancy Drew, as librarians frequently objected to these materials' formats, sensationalism, and questionable literary value.[13] Through Josette Frank's book reviews, National Comics helped direct its younger readers to titles that teachers and librarians deemed appropriate for consumption but also had enough vigor to rise above the pablum Certain described in her editorial. By early 1946 with Gaines and Wheeler-Nicholson both gone from the company, Frank's reviews—National's final experiment in using comics as an explicit means of connecting young people with books—ended but for five years in the early 1940s, Frank was likely the "most widely read woman critic" (Marcus, 2008, p. 155).

Discussion

Comics are sometimes treated ahistorically as a medium that has real significance only in the past couple of decades. Yet such a narrow lens obscures comics' ubiquitous presence in young readers' lives in the 1930s and 1940s. Comics were not all intended for young readers and not all comics readers were children. Nevertheless, market surveys and other research from the 1940s consistently demonstrated that child readership of comics was pervasive: more than ninety percent of elementary school aged children and more than eighty percent of adolescents read comic books regularly (Zorbaugh, 1944). Some respondents among

[12] Ibid.; In another letter to Smith from May 1942, Frank mentioned having read a total of seven reviews submitted by readers in response to the initial competition. She noted her "surprise" at the number of responses, which were apparently more than she had expected, and mentioned as well that, "Other reviews are down at the office which have not yet come to me."

[13] Good overviews of librarians' disdain for the types of materials children often loved best as well as discussions of the types of books librarians preferred can be found in Esther Jane Carrier (1985), *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1900–1950,* Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited; Carol L. Tilley (2007), Of Nightingales and Supermen: How Youth Services Librarians Responded to Comics Between the Years 1938 and 1955, Diss. Indiana University, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI; and, Mark West (1988), *Children, Culture, and Controversy*, Hamden, CT: Archon, 1988.

the more than 8,000 children surveyed in Duluth Minnesota, by McCarthy and Smith (1943) had read as many as forty comics in the preceding week with fewer than one in ten reading none. In terms of gross sales, comic books—widely available on newsstands and in drugstores, enormously appealing to young readers, and affordably priced—outsold conventional children's books by a five to one margin as early as 1940 (Bechtel, 1941). According to at least one survey (Witty, 1942), more than half of the boys and girls in fourth through sixth grade made original comics.

Comic books were a means for young people to engage with the world around them: comics were more than a marketing phenomenon, more than cultural junk, more than a pastime. Many of the comics published by National during this ten-year period delved into mature topics such as war, economic unrest, and crime, and transported readers visually and textually to settings past, present, future, near, and far. As such, comics gave young readers entrée to an adult world that they seldom encountered in the innocuous books published for them by mainstream publishers. This comics-created world was neither always safe and manicured nor wholesome and innocent, just as many of the digital and print texts with which young people engage today are not. Comics, especially during the war years, perpetrated many of the racist and stereotypical images of our foreign enemies and our non-white-skinned citizens. Violence in many forms was commonplace and sometimes graphically (in both senses of the word) depicted. In fact, the prejudice and violence in comics formed the core of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's objections (cf. Wertham, 1954) to young people's readership of this medium: by reading and viewing the violent and criminal elements in comics, a child's mental and social development could not proceed in a healthy manner. Although it was not the only factor that led to the 1954 creation of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), its restrictive editorial code, and the comics slow fall from their central position in children's culture, Wertham's anti-comics work is considered by most scholars and comics aficionados as central to these developments. However well intentioned his concerns, Wertham overreached in his definition of objectionable comics, so that it encompassed any depiction of crime, writ broadly, so that Donald Duck slapping another character was as much a criminal as a gangster murdering an informant. Wertham also overreached in marshaling some of his evidence for the ill-effects of comics reading, manipulating and fabricating some of his clinical sources for rhetorical gain (Tilley, 2012).

Some of the preceding examples have nothing to do with National Comics, reading promotion, or even a need to reconsider comics as a topic in children's literature, print culture, or education scholarship and practice. Yet they speak to my purpose in writing this paper, which is that we must continue to reevaluate the historical role of comics in the cultural and intellectual lives of young readers. Unlike teacher and librarian gatekeepers, Superman and the world of the comics were accessible, vital, and trustworthy to young readers. What Superman said counted for something. I have presented, or found, little direct evidence that a child who read a recommendation for Glen Round's *The Blind Colt* in *Flash Comics* raced off to the library to check out a copy. It is impossible to ascertain with certainty whether the children who visited the Queens Borough Public Library and

checked out Will James' *Smoky the Cowhorse* did so because it was listed on a poster with an image of Superman. It is equally impossible to discover whether these children actually read the book or would have encountered it had they not seen the Superman poster. Yet, a retired attorney recounted to me with astonishing accuracy the story—text and images—he read in a *Weird Fantasy* comic book almost sixty years ago, when he was a young teenager.[14] And his recollection, coupled with the persistence with which National reached out to its readers to share recommendations for what to read and the obsessive, immersive manner in which young people interacted with comics encourages my belief that young people's literary and cultural tastes were altered, stimulated, and seeded by the titles, the reviews, and the serializations they saw in comics.

Although much of the reading promotion efforts described in this paper seem to be the initiative of two men, Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson and M.C. Gaines, that anyone during this particular era when comic books were not yet widely contested as reading materials, endeavored to make comic books sources of both entertainment and enlightenment deserves special recognition. For a brief period, National Comics leveraged the experimental and subversive nature of comics to help readers find good stories of all kinds. National helped create a different kind of community of readers, where comics and classics could co-exist, one that embraced Hop Harrigan and Sydney Carton, Batman and Ben-Hur. As scholars and practitioners who care about young people's literature and literacy experiences, we must be certain not to discount the potential influence of more marginal and subversive recommendations, whether the book reviews from the now-defunct *Teen People*, the integration of Michael Chabon's comic-book fantasia *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* into an episode of the teen television series *The O.C.,* or even the inclusion of poets Byron and Shelley in Grant Morrison's comic book series *The Invisibles*. Comics reading young people of the 1930s and 1940s were like the eighteenth century women, who through the simple act of reading novels, literary scholar Cathy Davidson (1986, p. 73) says, "expanded one's educational horizons well beyond the provinciality or even isolation of one's community and beyond the restrictions on mobility and self-expression." Superman said, "Read," and young people did.

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[14] B* M*, personal communication [telephone call], 25 May, 2012. The story was "Judgment Day," from *Weird Fantasy* #18 (March–April 1953).

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