

## Review

Mel Gibson, *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood*, Leuven University Press, 2015. 223pps. ISBN: 9789462700307. €55.00 (£48.00).

It is somewhat commonplace in reviews to say that a book ‘fills a gap’ in existing literature. But in this case, I think it is specifically true – in two definite ways. Mel Gibson in *Remembered Reading* both recovers a good deal of the detailed history of British girls’ comics, from 1945 until their effective demise in the mid-1990s; and she also allows the voices of their readers to be heard, if not for the very first time, then in a far more substantial and thoughtful way than previously.

A substantial claim of the book indeed is to ‘break a silence’ around girls’ comics, which have for a long time been quite seriously sidelined and neglected in favour of more ‘masculine’ traditions and genres. What Gibson does very effectively in this book is to invite us to inspect a great variety of publications (often, helpfully, with illustrations of stories which she then comments on) for the ways in which they negotiated with emerging ideas of ‘girlhood’ – a distinctive cultural space between childhood and womanhood with shifting ideas of their interests, and desires (always risky things to handle!), strongly policed along not only sexual, but also class lines for ‘appropriateness’.

Gibson positions her own research generally among comics researchers, girlhood studies, memory studies, media and cultural studies, and critical feminist research. Her own history, as comics fan, collector, scholar, and teacher is also vital to her work. Very unusually, she has not only studied and taught comics at university, but she has also worked to promote the medium as an effective tool for use in libraries and education through training events (she recounts interestingly moments of resistance to allowing comics ‘in’).

Her book covers the rise of distinctively girls’ comics, from their beginnings in *Girls’ Own Paper* (1880-1956) with its strong religious bias and others such as the ‘mill-girl’ *Girls’ Friend* (1899-1931), picking up the story particularly with Marcus Morris’ *Eagle’s* stablemate *Girl* (1951-64), the more chummy *Schoolfriend* (1950-63), via the key title *Jackie* (1964-93) – key, both because of its sales, its influence, and the amount of critical attention it has received – through to the declining years exemplified by the short-lived but exceptional *Misty* (1978-80) and a range of photo-romances such as *My Guy* (1978-94). Her checklist of titles is itself valuable for recovering nearly-forgotten but still interesting titles.

Gibson's argument is that girls' comics had to negotiate their way through a series of competing pressures. On the one hand, the changing position of girls themselves (as social spaces and opportunities for them generally developed through shifting employment possibilities, expansion of higher education, the Sixties' sexual revolution, etc). On the other hand, cutting against these were general fears of out-of-control girls' sexual desires, interlaced with a sense that comics were 'low status', anti-educational, and possibly harmful. Before she comes to her own audience research, and indeed usefully framing it, she has a particularly valuable section in which she traces the history of mixed condescension and condemnation that girls' comics underwent at the hands of, variously, teachers, librarians, scholars and even feminists – all contributing to a 'policing of girls' reading' (p.76). (Mind, I was unconvinced by a repeated tendency to summarise all critiques of the comics as amounting to a 'blank slate theory' (eg, pp.50, 78, 81) – this loses a lot of the complexities inside theories of the 'harm' that reading things like comics can do.) Girls' rising 'sense of adventure' was something to be worried over. She insists on seeing girlhood as simultaneously 'social construct and interpretive frame' (p.96)

But to me the heart of her book has to be her accounts – gathered from interviews with a considerable number of women – of their memories of reading comics at different periods of their lives. These assemble into reading histories, more than detailed studies of the meanings and significances of particular titles. Often told with self-irony, but almost always with remembered affection – and also some delightful counter-intuitive reports on brothers and fathers making off with girls' copies – these stories fill nearly 100 pages demonstrating the value that these comics had for women as they formed their sense of self, and of their place in the world. Her account of these opens with a long, thoughtful interrogation of one interview with a woman, 'Pru', whose complicated story opens up Gibson's way of hearing her women-interviewees. Pru's reading history included old *Annals of Schoolfriend*, got going with *Bunty* and *Judy*, included the less gendered *Beano* and *Dandy*, eventually 'graduating' to graphic novels with a strong political edge like *The Tale of One Bad Rat*. Her analysis of the interview says things which in one sense are obvious, but perhaps still need resaying:

The notion of individual identity in this interview, like the girl reader, is difficult to pigeonhole. This account offers shifting and blurred identities rather than a unified self. Pru moves in and out of various child, professional and adult selves ... during the interview. (p.100)

It's not entirely clear to what extent Gibson is tying herself to a 'theory of self' in here, or simply noting complexity. What is good is the way in which, out of this and subsequent interviews, she is able to elaborate on some very particular features of girls' reading of comics. There is the value of seriality, the mixed feelings about but-outs, the pleasures of poor paper and cheapness (which means that *Annals* 'mean' differently), the tensions

around collecting and keeping (with mothers often throwing them out, when they got the opportunity). All these and more very material factors are well addressed.

I did have some distinct regrets, reading the book. I really wished for just a little more methodological apparatus and specification. We never learn how many people she interviewed, for the book, and get no reflections on the significance and likely impact of the fact that almost all her interviewees became professional women. That may be all she could get, but it deserved some reflection. While her way of listening to her readers is always thoughtful and insightful, it also at times seems chancy – we get no hint of any methods of analysis, and no interview ever seems to puzzle her. Why and how did she choose her two ‘prime suspects’, Pru and (later) Robyn?

Perhaps related to this is my unease at the way, at certain points, unexplained large concepts: we are told that girls are subject to a ‘dominant ideology’ (p.47), and that ‘middle-class values’ (p.120 – though this latter does get qualified and unpacked a bit in subsequent pages) have dominated. These don’t quite belong to the same theoretical universe. At times she seems to me to overuse traditional cultural studies motifs of ‘resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ (eg, p.114).

Mel Gibson is to be congratulated on breaking open this under-considered area, and it is good to see another publisher joining University of Mississippi Press in developing a series in this area.

Martin Barker,  
Aberystwyth University, UK