Memories of a medium: Comics, materiality, object elicitation and reading autobiographies

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Abstract:
In researching the history of comics and childhood, I have interviewed a number of adults who were childhood readers of the medium. What is evident from the interviews is that people remember comics as objects, not simply the narratives and artwork they contain. This article looks at the use of interviews, particularly those using images and objects to elicit responses, in investigating reading practices and engagement with texts. Additionally, it indicates how all interviews about comics, even those without object elicitation, touch on comics as material objects and stimuli for reflections on the place and time of reading. It also looks at an example of how object elicitation and interview might be used to open intergenerational dialogue about reading and identity.

Key Words: Comics, Memory, Interviews, Object Elicitation, Materiality, Reading Autobiography, Childhood, *Jackie.*

Introduction

In researching the history of comics and childhood, I have interviewed a number of adults who were childhood readers of the medium (Gibson 2008, 2015, 2018). This interview activity began in the late 1990s alongside research that focused on the textual analysis of comic content. These complementary approaches offer very different histories of this medium, especially given that the former allows for understandings of the comic form beyond what the texts themselves can tell us.

My decision to research comics and comics reading reflects the fact that they were a hugely popular medium for young people and children throughout the twentieth century, when titles like *The Beano* (DC Thomson 1938-date) sold over a million copies a week, so forming part of generational understandings of childhood and culture. They have also been, until comparatively recently, dismissed as ephemera of little interest, particularly with

regard to material aimed at children. Research emerging now in this area typically engages with an analysis of the depiction of children in comics, or focuses on comparing depictions internationally, so indicating how constructions of childhood, or aspects of culture, differ, as in Ian Gordon's *Kid Comic Strips* (2016).

That textual analysis has dominated, however, does not mean that there has been no interest in readers and reading. The work of Martin Barker (1989, 1993, 1997) and Angela McRobbie (1978a, 1978b, 1997), whilst offering contrasting analyses of comic content and ideology, both pointed towards the need for work with readers, with, for example, McRobbie indicating that *Jackie* (DC Thomson 1964-1993) formed part of communal activity amongst girls (1978b).[1] This, in turn, led to Elizabeth Frazer's article incorporating interviews with *Jackie* readers. Frazer employed the notion of the discourse register, described as 'an institutionalized, situationally specific, culturally familiar, public way of talking' (1987:421). The idea of a contract between text and reader was central, Frazer argued, establishing a dialogue where readers used the contents of the title in a particular way. All three were able to work with current readers, but the slow decline of the comic for children in Britain, a situation that began to change in the mid-2000s with the growth of graphic novels for younger readers, has meant that interviews about children's comics now focus on memory.

This research offered the initial stimulus for my own, as did the fact that I was, and still am, a reader of comics.[2] In addition, the fact that children's comics in Britain were increasingly falling out of publication, and their fragility, as they were largely printed on poor quality paper, gave me a sense of urgency in trying to gather accounts of what comics had meant to people. However, there is still, as yet, minimal work on memories of comics, as is indicated by Ahmed and Crucifix (2018), a fascinating collection where depictions of memory in comics appear much more frequently than memories of comics.[3] This current article, then, is intended to generate more research in this area.

At the same time as contributing to work on memory, this article is also a contribution to the small body of literature on materiality and comics. Roger Sabin (2000) has made a particularly significant set of points whilst discussing the differences between electronic and physical comics. For example, Sabin (2000: 52) argued that comics 'can be bent, rolled-up, roughly opened or whatever. They can be held in different ways: cradled in your hand or gripped at the edges. We know how far into a comic we've read because we can feel how many pages are left. There are also smells: of dust, glue and paper'. These insights have helped others to focus on materiality, including me, leading to my writing an article which began exploring these ideas in 2008. In turn, this contributed to the development of the work of Ian Hague (2012, 2014) who has made a hugely important contribution in this area, exploring how all of the senses are, or can be, employed in engaging with comics, not just vision.

This article discusses my use of interviews to explore how adults remember the comics of their childhood and integrate comics into their reading autobiographies. However, whilst the article begins with qualitative interviews, aligning it with Barker (1989, 1993,

1997) and Frazer (1987), it predominantly discusses interviews that incorporate actual comics, a form of object elicitation, thus combining materiality and interview. This became part of my practice in response to early interviews that indicated that people remember comics as material objects, not simply the narratives and artwork they contain.

After analysing aspects of an interview which did not employ object or image elicitation, but did address materiality, the focus of this article moves to my use of comics as objects in stimulating discussion about comic reading, offering two examples that emerged from rather different contexts. The first was a group discussion/interview where I used researcher-selected comics with adults. In contrast, the second was a workshop on the 'agony aunt' aimed at girls, but also including older female participants. Finally, the article concludes with a brief summary of some of the implications of the use of objects in support of interviews and intergenerational group discussions, flagging up the wider significance of interviews of various kinds in the study of reading.

The Qualitative Interview

I use semi-structured qualitative one-to-one interviews in much of my comics-based research to explore what comics adults read as children, what social use they made of them, and how they are located in their reading autobiographies. Unlike the survey interview, the epistemology is constructionist rather than positivist in that participants are viewed as meaning makers, not 'passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995:83). The purpose of qualitative interviewing, then, is to 'derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk' (Warren, 2001:83). I should add that I have also worked with emails and handwritten letters from adults about their memories of comics, but whilst one can set up a chain of correspondence, this does not offer the same kind of spontaneity. For example, facial expressions may suggest the need for further questions immediately, as is the case with the incident of revulsion described later.

The interviewees in my initial project, published as a monograph in 2015, were aged from 19-73 years old and from all over Britain. They were mostly women, reflecting that the research was about girl's reading, although some men who had read girls' comics also contributed interviews. They all identified as British, saw themselves, typically, as working class, or from working class families who had aspired to being middle-class and they worked in a number of sectors, from beauty to teaching. They were recruited via a range of routes, some from public talks, others in response to newspaper articles, others again from training courses I ran on the medium. In turn there was a snowball effect, where they suggested other contacts, a process that continues in my research to this day. Many had only read comics in childhood, typically British girls' titles, and had not returned to comics as adults. The few who did re-engage with the medium became interested in exploring what those comics had contained. In effect, they became unaffiliated researchers. In contrast, those who liked superhero comics as children tended to continue engaging with comics in some

form as adults. Amongst this latter group, some were casual readers, but others were passionate about the medium, and even, in a couple of cases, had become collectors.

As my research has continued I have started to gather more interviews with male comic readers who have not returned to comics as adults and it is an example of one of these interviews that I explore now. The following does not cover all that we discussed, but makes some key points about what can emerge in interviews.[4] I tend to start from a set of straightforward 'main questions'.[5] The following excerpts are from an interview with 'Mike'[6], a taxi driver in his mid-fifties, including his responses to some of these questions, starting with 'What comics did you read as a child?' His response indicated how the materiality of comics is significant even when object elicitation is not employed. Mike immediately mentioned *Commando* (DC Thomson, 1961-date). Initially struggling to recall the title, he began by saying 'Ah read them little war ones', flagging up the size of the comics, which had a distinctive format (7 × 5½ inches and 68 pages), as well as the genre. After checking with me that he had not imagined them, and expressing surprise that they were still published, he followed up with a long list of humour comics. Through this query, Mike positioned me as someone who also knew about comics, making me an 'insider researcher'. This reflects Ann Bonner and Gerda Tolhurst's (2002) assertion that being an 'insider researcher' means the interviewer has a greater understanding of the culture being studied, ensuring the credibility of the researcher. They argue that this means that the flow of social interaction is more natural in interview and establishes an intimacy that promotes both the telling and the judging of truth, as Mike's question to me suggests.[7] In summary, such researchers have knowledge that would take an outsider a long time to acquire (Smyth & Holian, 2008).

Mike's attachment to *Commando* was later explained as being because 'ya could sneak them into school, with them being so small' adding that 'they stopped school being boring', a comment he offered in response to my asking 'Did you share or swap comics with anyone?' and 'Where did you like to read them?' Again, materiality is central to his understanding of the comic and its function in his life. This led on to a long discussion about sharing comics with friends, and using them to avoid engaging with school lessons, even whilst attending classes. In effect, this reflects Frazer's notion of using the comics in specific ways, including peer group solidarity and resistance to adult agendas (1987). Content was not important beyond genre, and it was remembered as a material object instead. It was also more significant in terms of relationships than in itself, having a kind of symbolic function representing group values regarding education.

Humour comics, in contrast, were linked with specific stories, or characters rather than the whole object. When I asked, 'Are there any comics or characters you experienced that you think young readers today would enjoy?' Mike assumed that I would know exactly who he was talking about when he mentioned 'Little Plum' and 'Plug' (of story 'The Bash Street Kids'), both from *The Beano*. He was particularly fond of the latter, arguing that 'ah was a bit Plug, me'. This assumption of knowledge on my part could have been about my supposed expertise, but Mike's use of the characters as a shorthand for emotional and

physical understandings of childhood emphasised his expertise and knowledge rather than mine. Whilst 'Plug' is a tall, gangly character with a large overbite, buck teeth and a wide nose, his actions in the narratives are often about defending those he feels have been unjustly treated and making peace in group conflicts. Mike argued that what people did was more important than appearance and that whilst he thought Plug was uglier than he had been as a child, he felt he had been in a similar role. This implies that Mike read the character in an empathic way, but also saw him as a close representation of himself, so seeing himself in the narrative, irrespective of the humour genre. In addition, he had not realised that Plug is a current character, which indicates his lack of engagement with comics today.

Mike also mentioned that he had really engaged with 'Johnny Cougar', whose popular comic strip lasted from 1962-1985, saying 'he was right good' and had 'mad adventures'. This character appeared in *Tiger* (IPC, 1954-1985) a mainly sports-themed comic. Cougar was a stereotypical Native American character, a professional wrestler whose matches tended to be very outlandish. However, despite his attachment to the character, Mike had stopped buying the comic because of the inclusion of the 'Roy of the Rovers' strip. His rejection came from his childhood revelation that Melchester Rovers were a version of Manchester United, whom he hated on principle, being a keen Newcastle United supporter. Reading, then, was interrelated with other commitments and activities, including sporting loyalties. His rejection was not fanciful in that it was based around the perception of some elements of the narratives as realistic, especially the use of the structure of the actual English football season and league system. Reading was not an isolated, or isolating, activity to Mike but one interwoven with other aspects of everyday life.

Reading comics was part of a network of other reading experiences. In response to the question, 'What else did you like to, or do you like to, read?' Mike said that he had predominantly read newspapers alongside comics as a child, getting the papers after his father had read them, but before they got 'cut up for loo paper for the outside netty,' a rather different understanding of reading and material culture. He also used his local public library, and started to read historical non-fiction and autobiographies. Whilst he found little time to read, as an adult, he had an ambition to write a novel that charted a family throughout the twentieth century, so integrating his love of history, something in part derived, he stated, from his love of war comics.

As the questions and responses above suggest, interviews can be used to develop understanding of real world practices in relation to reading, in this case what was done with comics and their symbolic function in childhood. In effect, interviews allow the researcher to understand 'the meaning of respondents' experiences and life worlds' (Warren, 2001:83). Whilst Mike's account did refer to comic content, his interview primarily emphasises how comic reading functioned as part of a wider experience of childhood, and how the materiality of the comic was important, forming one element amongst a number of texts and practices.

Image and object elicitation

Having started my research using interviews based simply on a set of questions, I later began to make use of actual comics in addressing memories of reading, as noted earlier. This engages with two other approaches, image and object elicitation. The former is frequently linked with the use of photographs, which have been used to elicit responses in a number of disciplinary spaces, as Douglas Harper (2002) notes, particularly in research on living with illness (Bell, 2013).

In some cases I used photocopied pages from comics, or included them as part of a slideshow. Jon Prosser states that all images should be regarded as polysemic and that 'the visual, as objects and images, exists materially in the world but gains meaning from humans' (2006:3). In interacting with imagery, the interview gains another dimension, one in which a shared understanding of possible meanings of an image is co-constructed by interviewer and interviewee, thus going some way towards breaking down the power differential between these parties. Here though, unlike photographs, which are object and image at the same time, pages from comics are decontextualized, elements rather than a whole object. Nonetheless, they can be useful stimulus, particularly front and back covers. For example, girls' comic *Bunty* (DC Thomson 1958-2001) had a distinctive and consistent style incorporating a cut-out doll on the back cover. A number of respondents talked about these dolls, often moving their hands as if holding scissors and cutting out the doll, arguing that it took a degree of manual dexterity, another aspect of materiality.

More typically, I have employed object elicitation techniques, a comparatively unfamiliar approach in many disciplines as Sonja Iltanen and Päivi Topo (2015) argue. This means that interviews may engage directly with what Anna Moran and Sorcha O'Brien (2014:xiv) describe as the 'emotional potency of objects in our lives and the relationships that exist between people and objects'. This is also an approach in line with Sherry Turkle's study of evocative objects, where she argues that objects are things we think with (2007). Whether working with the sensory world of feelings or seeing objects as tools for thinking, these writers' comments are suggestive of the qualitative insights that meditation on objects can invoke.

In some instances of object elicitation, participants choose to bring comics into interview that they acquired in childhood and have kept over time, their own visual cultural artefacts. These objects, as argued by Daniel Miller, may be seen as invocations of the 'tactile, emotional intimate world of feelings' (2010: 40). Alternatively, object elicitation may involve selecting from a pre-designed collection drawn together by the researcher. In both cases, the aim is to explore the significance or meaning of their choices.

Respondent-chosen texts can be seen, as Prosser suggests, as objects that act as a neutral or third party (2006). When one is talking about an object one is handling or making, one talks through it, mediating the interaction between respondents, rather than directly to another person. This can also enable emotional responses to objects to be discussed rather than simply expressed, through allowing the object to be the focus. Further, these small selections are what Prosser and Andrew Loxley (2008:3) might term 'respondent generated

visual data', and what Mark Doel (2018:7) describe as charged objects. As Doel suggests 'Individuals have their own charged objects—a teddy bear that has survived from infancy, a hat owned by a deceased parent, an ornament whose biography traces their own' (ibid). Thus, he argues, the 'charge derives from its being *the* object' (ibid, author's emphasis) and linked with personal and social identity. Indeed, interviews revealed that there were usually personal links with comics, often because of who the comic was read and shared with, and so the text became a symbolic representation of the reader as the centre of a network of reading relationships.

The idea of the comic as charged object may also come about because the chosen title has personal significance because the readers' name was printed in it, whether as a competition winner or letter writer. Interviews suggest that seeing one's name in one's favourite comic changed the nature of both ownership and reading. That comic readers were encouraged to participate in creating content for the comic, having a direct impact upon it, generated a feeling of power, engagement, and of social recognition. Seeing a response to a letter sent to an agony aunt was a stimulus to developing a sense of self as listened to, as agentic and as part of the wider world. That readers knew others would see what they had written suggests a sense of the circulation of titles, an awareness emphasized in interviews by accounts of practices like swapping comics, which created a secondary form of circulation in addition to sales. Indeed, George Pumphrey argued that every comic was read by eight readers in addition to the purchaser (1955). In addition, in interviews where object elicitation was not used, respondents would often mention the copies of comics they had kept, again usually as they had featured in them. In a very small number of cases, copies were personally important because the interviewee had appeared as a character in a photo-story. This linked a professional self with a reading self, as they were engaged to act out the narrative for each photographic panel, a form of modelling, and the comics that the stories appeared in were ones that they purchased and read.

For other interviews, I would create collections loosely based on the age of the interviewee. Alternatively, taking a collection aimed at a younger generation often resulted in narratives about family reading, so the aim of the interview determined selection. This latter approach, of sharing researcher generated material, or what might be termed researcher curated material, was important given that so many of those interviewed reported that their parents had destroyed their comics as a signifier that they were no longer children. Losing objects, as noted by Doel may be significant as such loss can harm the sense of personal identity (2018). The significance of comics to childhood suggests that the loss of a childhood collection might be a further line of research, as it creates a disconnect with a personal history of popular reading. I explore this, in part, in relation to the reading identity of librarians (Gibson, 2015) where the reading of comics was forgotten along with their destruction, although childhood novel and picturebook reading was retained, along with the texts that generated that set of reading memories. This means that the presence or absence of the physical object can be important in shaping reading memories and so reading and materiality are linked.

Whilst working with images taken from comics is productive, as I suggest, comics chosen by reader or researcher, as outlined above, often give richer results. Further, material objects generate different responses from other kinds of interview. The appeal of the object to all of the senses, in particular, results in comments and discussions that are often unexpected, as I will now explore.

Materiality and encountering the unexpected

Bringing actual objects into an interview allows questions to be pared back, as the comic itself creates a set of responses. As mentioned, these are not necessarily about the narratives or art. Instead, another set of associations appears, mostly about relationships, but also about physical aspects of the publications, such as the size and shape of the comic, whether one owned by the participant, or that the researcher has provided.

Size did matter, with pocket size material being able to be smuggled into school more successfully than larger titles like *Eagle* (Hulton, 1950-1969), or *Girl* (Hulton, 1951-1964), both broadsheets that could not easily be hidden. As Mike's interview suggested, this was linked with both rebelling against classroom practice (reading behind the covers of a text-book), and also with bonding with peers through sharing narratives, reading together and exchanging titles. This type of memory also reinforces the illicit nature of comic reading, given the disapproval of many older adults, as exemplified by the Comics Campaign Council that emerged in Britain in the 1950s. Larger comics were often seen as generous, proportion implying luxury, but could also be found intimidating, sometimes described in interviews as 'not for the likes of us' which suggests a link between class and comics. In contrast, smaller comics, both the pocket size titles but also ones sized around A4, were described by respondents as 'mine' in a way that was suggestive of their understanding of themselves as working class readers.

The texture of paper it was printed on, whether soft newsprint, or hard and shiny higher quality paper also encouraged narratives about the perceived class position of the comic (and by inference, that of its' readers). As I have previously noted, the 'fuzzy' paper *Bunty* was printed on was seen as friendly, welcoming and working-class appropriate by some readers in comparison to the 'hard', shiny and 'posh' paper of *Girl,* a title aimed at predominantly middle-class readers (2015:181). Many readers also smelt the comics, if this was a collection they were encountering rather than their own material, claiming that ink had a different smell, depending on the comic. The scent of a title was sometimes considered nostalgic and comforting by respondents, or it might trigger memories of childhood that were challenging.

These sensual responses to reading material as objects indicate that texts have resonances beyond their contents, and so flag up the complexity of reading autobiographies, for as Moran and O'Brien (2014:xiv) argue, objects hold multiple meanings and narratives for those who have possessed them. This understanding of texts as objects is complemented by work on embodied reading, such as that by Mackey and Kokkola (in Harde and Kokkola, 2018). Engaging with the comic as an object resulted in different kinds

of responses and could also throw up surprising insights. One example of such a reaction, regarding the possible cultural position of comics reading, was an instance of distaste in response to the action of smelling comics. This occurred in a recent small group discussion between four older women who had read comics as children, offering an understanding both unexpected and informative. One participant wrinkled her nose when confronted with a pile of comics that the others were enthusiastically smelling. She remarked that it was a reminder of visiting her uncle and his family. When followed up, her narrative focused on the fact that a pile of comics was kept beside the toilet, to be read in situ. The respondent, who was a child in the 1950s, argued that awareness of healthy eating was not widespread in the past and so having reading material nearby helped to pass the time, whilst waiting for something else to pass. There was much laughter in the group and others recalled similar practices, jokily noting that cleanliness and health awareness had moved on too, and that 'surely the germs won't have survived this long!?'

The way comics became, for this reader, a physical reminder of constipation, and of uncleanliness, meant she was reluctant to swap or borrow comics as a young person, instead preferring to save up for new copies of her own. This biological aspect of comic reading had not previously been mentioned in any interviews, perhaps simply from politeness, but the shared laughter and the fact that this respondent recalled visiting many relatives' houses where the practice was similar implies it was more widespread. This might suggest that distaste about comics as reading material had a secondary set of sources related to their location. She was also insistent that this reading was for everyone in the house, not simply younger family members, emphasising the intergenerational and shared nature of comic reading. Comic reading and ownership was not only, she insisted, about children and childhood, a rather different narrative to the accounts of the destruction of a child's comics, which locates this reading practice firmly within, and as belonging to, childhood. In addition, this provided an alternative narrative to that about treasured personal comics and the place of reading, in that these 'special' comics tended to be kept in bedrooms, especially if one had had a letter published.

I periodically use group discussions as a counterpoint to individual interviews, as they too result in a different kind of talk about comics. Of course, these groups can be dominated by an agreed cultural view of a topic or object, rather than a personal response, or by individuals taking over the conversation, and it may be that the example outlined above was intended by that respondent to control the group narrative. However, the insight from this group discussion suggested new lines of enquiry about the places of reading, and about intergenerational practices around reading material. As Graham Smith argues, 'group interviews, including the risk and trouble they can generate, can also be used to generate evidence of the relationship between and the processes involved in individual remembering and 'collective' memories' (2016:193). This group discussion can also be seen as a concrete example of what Annette Kuhn described as the 'collective nature of the activity of remembering' (1995, p.5).

Materiality, authenticity and talking across generations

Intergenerational interviews often have an object at their centre, including Matt Connell's (2012) use of vinyl records and DJ technology to analyse generational musical identities from the 1940s and onwards. This brought together teenagers and older people through a range of workshops sharing what music means to them through physically exploring music technology. The research engaged both groups in collective discussion about the social and personal aspects of music. In contrast, Göran Bolin (2016) employed focus group interviews incorporating four generations in talking about media technologies that they felt passionate or nostalgic about, particularly those considered defunct, like music cassettes and the portable Walkman, and how that linked with youth and generation. What this research does is enable comparative histories to emerge and the emotional charge surrounding the relationships the objects represent. However, that the focus is on the object diffuses the impact that talking directly might evoke, making discussing objects a safe space for emotional talk.

A slightly different use of object elicitation was engaged at a day-long event linked with the International Day of the Girl run by Girl-Kind NE.[8] This involved a number of events including three workshops on different themes. In 2018, the girls who took part came from seven schools across the region, were aged 12-14, and the final event was attended by over 80 young participants. Each girl worked on a double-page spread on the topic of each workshop in a mini-zine developed throughout the day.

My contribution to the event was a workshop based around *Jackie*, a title that, as noted earlier, contained comic strips alongside articles and pin-ups. Whilst we looked at all aspects of the title, the focus was specifically 'Cathy and Claire' the 'agony aunts' who responded to letters on the problem page. The mini-zine pages consequently centred on the problems girls face today. The main aim was to explore with contemporary girls how girls in the past found and accessed information about health, sexuality and other issues. The workshop I ran, then, was predominantly about reading for information, rather than reading fiction for pleasure, thus taking in another aspect of reading practices. It also combined reading with making and talking, bringing it in line with David Gauntlett's (2013) work that argues that people engage with the world and create connections with each other when they create objects.

The workshop ran several times during the day and combined two kinds of object elicitation. Firstly, it brought contemporary girls into contact with objects from the past, stimulating discussion about their potential meanings and significance with myself and the teachers and librarians who accompanied the girls. Secondly, it enabled the older participants to engage with reading material that they remembered, so supporting their engagement with the event. *Jackie* was chosen due to its dominance in the field of teenage periodical reading until the 1990s and its continuing legacy through reprinted collections.

In developing the workshop, I drew together several different categories of object. The first was an edited selection of letters to 'Cathy and Clare', by Lorna Russell, published in 2006 by Prion Books. Given that *Jackie* received around 100 letters a day and ran from

1964-1993, the selection of 67 letters simply represented a summary of key themes. It was designed as nostalgic, targeting older readers. This was indicated by the introduction by a former 'Cathy and Claire', Kerry MacKenzie, who reminisced about her role, and having been a reader as well as a contributor (2006:6-7). Alongside this, I employed another Prion publication, an edited collection of items from *Jackie* annuals (2006).[9] This offered 'Cathy and Claire' specials on 'Confidence' and 'Charm' alongside comic strips, quizzes, pin-ups, features, knitting patterns and fashion. However, I counterbalanced these recent reprints with some original *Jackie* annuals from the 1970s and copies of the weekly *Jackie* from the 1960s, 70s and 80s, in part because I felt that they represented a different kind of reading experience given that these were material objects from those periods rather than a collection mediated by a modern editor.

The younger readers, after remarking on how old the originals were, and how they 'even smell old' as one, Jo, said, again indicating how it is the whole object rather than simply the content that is involved in reading, engaged with all of the variants with a great deal of curiosity and, increasingly, pleasure. Descriptions of the content included 'so sweet and innocent' and 'dead good fun' and there were a number of requests to take pictures of pages to share with friends who were not at the event. They engaged with the comic strips, quizzes, horoscopes and problem pages fairly equally, although the quizzes about relationships were most favoured. The fashions were seen, perhaps inevitably, as largely archaic, although one item did prompt the comment from Ann and Laura, 'but -we- wear stuff like that'. They read the texts in groups, just as Frazer (1987) observed when working with readers in the 1980s, often reading aloud and passing material from table to table. However, reading *Jackie* did not have the rebellious charge or exclusivity that it had for the original readers. The girls included their teachers and librarians throughout, asking questions about whether they had worn these kinds of clothes, enjoyed these stories, or had similar problems to those in the problem pages. This talk about reading and identity served to make intergenerational and informal links about shared aspects of the experience of girlhood.

The workshop reading led in all cases to a recognition that whilst the dominance of social media may have changed some things, most of the concerns, fears and aspirations in *Jackie* were ones the younger participants recognised. Many said that they would like a similarly authoritative source of information, given the difficulties of finding useful information electronically, saying that they thought their teachers 'were dead lucky' when they were young. What did startle them, though, was the content of some of the 'Cathy and Claire' letters, particularly one about a girl kissing her sister's boyfriend. They expressed shock at her putting that kind of information in a public place, Tonia saying 'did she not think, like?' and expressed more shock at the realisation that the letter and response may have been read by over a million readers. Here their contemporary understanding of the need to manage both image and information overwhelmed their empathic response.

Turning to the older readers, they took pleasure in seeing 'their' childhood texts responded to so positively by contemporary readers, as they had assumed that *Jackie* might

occasion laughter. One, Martha, also reported that she had 'never had such meaningful discussions with the girls before today' (referring to the whole event), adding that she was determined to use a similar approach in the classroom to teach recent history and gender through objects. There was also an enthusiasm, given how gently the older publications had been treated, to bring their own into class if appropriate. This dialogue was a mixture of professional responses to the potential of object elicitation, but also something of a validation or recognition of their younger selves.

Equally, though, nearly every teacher and librarian took the opportunity to return after the workshop to look through the original *Jackie* publications again, without the younger readers present, so enabling them to speak more personally without undermining their professional role. Most of the discussions that emerged from these later visits focused on a network of relationships, of shared reading and particularly, on relationships with sisters. Molly, like the younger readers, took a number of photographs of content and covers, insisting on placing objects nearby to give a sense of scale, commenting 'I thought I'd made up how big the old *Jackies* were and I want to show my sister'. The title had been a major point of connection to them in their early teens and they still reminisced about it. This respondent had also recognised some of the content of one of the weekly editions, as it focused on local places she had visited as a young person. The discussion became about geographies of childhood, as well as reading and materiality, interweaving them.

Another teacher, Elaine, talked about the relationship of *Jackie* with conformity, and how as a girl involved in sub-cultures, her relationship with *Jackie* was ambivalent, characterising it as both 'useful, embarrassing and excluding' and adding 'you wouldn't want to be caught with it on you. It'd never leave the bedroom'. It was compared, unfavourably, with music magazines of the same era, particularly *Sounds* (1970-1991, Spotlight Publications) so comparing reading across genre, and indicating how reading autobiography and sub-cultural identity might link. What is also important here is how the reading object is seen as symbolic, as having a cultural currency that can be used to consolidate or undermine a sense of self beyond reading.

Conclusion

Given their long history as supposedly ephemeral and disposable products, comics have sometimes been thought of, as Thierry Groensteen (2006:66) suggested, as 'art without memory', and somehow outside memory. However, the narratives, characters and art comics contain are remembered, as these various kinds of interviews indicate. In addition, these memories are significant in the adult reconstruction of a reading childhood self. Furthermore, as this article has indicated, materiality is also a significant aspect of memories of comics, incorporating, for example, the size of titles, how they felt and even how they smelt.

My work on reading and memory began by particularly addressing female readers' experiences, so being located as part of the projects of feminist oral history and cultural studies from the 1980s and on, such as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984).

However, unlike Radway's research, which centred on a genre, I focus on a medium. Engaging with a medium often means that respondents mention titles that range far beyond those specifically aimed at them, so offering a more holistic picture of childhood reading.

In this research, I intentionally use a range of approaches, having become aware of the different kind of responses they evoke, although all reveals aspects of how readers use specific comics to create a narrative of a reading self, a reading family or a network involving swapping and sharing. Even where interviews do not involve actual objects, materiality still appears, emphasising how significant comics are as objects. Having objects physically present does enable material to emerge that would be unlikely to do so in, for instance, written responses, such as the group discussion of smell, with all its implications. This is perhaps because it would feel too personal, intimate or embarrassing to write down such an understanding of comics in an email or letter to a stranger, the researcher. In this case, discussion also emerged in response to another person's actions, not their words, which would not appear in an interview with a single individual. It also arose spontaneously, something that could not be replicated through written responses, and could be followed up on immediately by the researcher.

In addition, what the use of object elicitation as part of interview indicates is that a broader range of data about reading autobiography can be generated through encountering actual comics. With the interviews around *Jackie*, for instance, the older participants were not attracted to the reprints, but only to the originals, choosing to handle them as much as possible whilst chatting, pointing out important pages when talking about memories, so using them as mediating objects in talking about emotional and personal understandings of comics. This holistic experience of texts as actual objects, as haptic, and part of material culture seemingly creates a different resonance for the respondent. This is different again when a reader shares their own comics, as in those cases they are positioned as the expert in their own reading lives, simply revealing their expertise to the interviewer.

Further, interviews also flag up other kinds of autobiographical information regarding identity and reading. For example, comics indicated affiliations, especially in terms of class and gender. Regarding the former, for instance, readers even understood paper quality as suggestive of class, as I note above. In terms of gender, sharing and swapping meant that most young people read titles aimed at both boys and girls, although the gender specificity of the content and titles of many comics did result in many policing their own reading, either at the time, or in memory, to present a more gender-specific reading self. So, for example, Mike never touched on British girls' comics, only those for boys, and the older participants at the Girl-Kind event only discussed girls' comics with me. These memories, then, link comics as objects (as well as their marketing to specific groups and the narratives within them) to ideology.

Interviews also enable discussion of the places of reading and sometimes, as the comic as toilet reading comments mentioned earlier suggest, to the perception of comics as lowbrow popular culture. Place, then, may have wider implications regarding understandings of a hierarchy of the arts. Further, although the spaces in which reading

took place are revealed to be diverse in interview, most memories, as is the case in the examples above, focus on the home and school.

Finally, in terms of using comics in intergenerational discussions, there is the possibility of testing and exploring reading autobiographies across generations, enabling participants to potentially find similarities and build empathy. In this last point, where the object is not used as a route into history or autobiography, but as a tool for social cohesion, for connecting with others, there may be a productive extension of the methodology of object elicitation within comics studies and beyond.

Acknowledgements:

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Notes:

[1] *Jackie*, like a number of titles aimed at girls, combined comic strips with other kinds of item. As Barker (1987) describes, the amount of comic strip gets smaller as the title progresses, so it can be seen as a hybrid text, one which began as more of a comic and ended as a magazine.

[2] I am not a fan of any specific genre today, and read a number of different kinds of comic, including American superhero titles, contemporary British children's comics, and some shōnen manga. As a child I read both the *Girl* annuals (Hulton Press, 1951-1964) that had been given to my mother as a child, and the superhero comics that my father bought for himself and for me. Further, my research focuses on both historical British comics and the superhero genre, as well as contemporary titles. This breadth of knowledge also derives from my previous career as a librarian where I developed collections for readers of all ages in public and school libraries.

[3] The main exception was my own contribution, Gibson (2018).

[4] In Mike's case, this had to be a one-shot interview due to time constraints. Ideally, however, I build in several, for as Charmaz suggests, sequential interviews create a 'stronger basis for the nuanced understanding of the social process' (Charmaz, 2001: 682).

[5] The 'main questions' vary but have included: What comics did you read as a child? What stories, artwork or items do you recall? Did the titles you enjoyed change over time? Did you share or swap comics with anyone? Where did you buy them, or were they gifts? Where did you like to read them? Do you still read comics in any form today? What else did you like to, or do you like to, read? Are there any comics or characters you experienced that you think young readers today would enjoy? Are there any additional comics that I can give you more information about, or that you would like to tell me about?

[6] All respondents are anonymised.

[7] However, although there are advantages in being an 'insider-researcher', there may also be problems as the 'insider researcher's' greater familiarity can lead to a loss of objectivity. In choosing to start my work in the 1990s on readers with readers of British girls' comics, a genre I was not hugely enthusiastic about, but had some knowledge of, I hoped to maintain a critical distance on what emerged in interview.

[8] The GirlKind NE project is an initiative begun in 2017 by staff from two universities in the North East of England, Newcastle and Northumbria. In a region identified by the Plan UK 2016 report on girls' rights as the worst place to be a girl in Britain, it engages girls in a number of creative arts workshops leading up to a public day-long event highlighting what being a girl means to participants. For example, in 2017, the girls involved created a film about street harassment, for instance, and acted as 'Book Fairies' sharing books that spoke to their life experiences.

[9] Most British weekly comics, or mixed material periodicals for children and young people, offered a Christmas annual. These were hard-back volumes, whose content reflected that of the weekly comics and were popular gifts. That they were books and robust in nature meant that for most readers these were the objects that were most likely to survive into the adulthood of the owner.