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THE GOLDEN AGE OF COMICS

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My childhood coincided with the last “golden age” of children’s comics and magazines, and its particular manifestation in Australia. It’s a period that began with the slow easing of wartime paper restrictions after 1945, and passed its peak by 1960 as television and social change began to relentlessly erode its market. Comic strips and comic papers for young people emerged in the late 19th century and became a major publishing phenomenon within a few years. The field has evolved into specialized forms today, but survivors of the golden age have endured in often surprising ways by broadening their appeal to adults as well as children. Of course, the best comics, like the best animated cartoons and children’s books, were never created solely for children.

My collection began in childhood and is still growing. Nostalgia is a respectable reason for collecting anything, but in my case it’s not the only reason. I have always found the comic strip medium fascinating in itself. It’s an undervalued art form, with its own pantheon of great exponents and classic creations, and its own literature. Its grammar mirrors that of the cinema. Its cultural influence is immense, though often unappreciated. But large parts of its history are already lost, because like other cheap mass produced publications, comic books and papers were not designed for preservation.

Comics and children’s magazines were for my generation a means of self-expression, interaction and intellectual growth. I drew my own comics and swapped them with school friends who did the same. I imbibed from comics a feeling for design and layout, and a knowledge of printing. My first commercially published writings appeared in *Junior Digest*: my first competition prize was gained in the *Australian Eagle* and I proudly wore its club badge. My imagination soared in the classic *Donald Duck* and *Uncle Scrooge* epics of Disney’s Carl Barks. I read the weekly *Film Fun* surreptitiously during boring school lessons. Comics, not books, fed my literary hunger – I found the local public library an uninviting place. (Ironically I later gained a diploma in librarianship).

Comics were also forbidden fruit. They were disparaged by parents and teachers, and sometimes confiscated when one was “found in possession” at school. And that made them all the more attractive. Australian children could choose from a wide range of British comic papers, and a vast number of Australian titles – most of them black and white reprints or adaptations of American material, but many also of Australian creation. At prices between sixpence and a shilling (ten cents) they consumed a significant proportion of one’s pocket money. Then there were the daily newspapers and the Sunday comic supplements, in colour, which of course were free – at least as far as one’s pocket money was concerned! You could even tune in to Charlie Chuckles on the radio and follow the *Sunday Telegraph* comics as they were read by actors.

But this was a fragile industry. The flowering of Australian childrens' magazines – *The Silver Jacket*, *Australian Boy*, *Junior's Journal* and the others - was glorious but brief, our population being too small to sustain them. From 1956 onward, television widened the entertainment options for children. Then, when the ban on importing comic books from America was lifted in 1959, the protected Australian industry wound down and eventually called it a day. Why would you buy an Australian black and white reprint when you could have the imported American equivalent, in colour, for the same price?

Were comics pernicious trash or did they have an influence for good? There's no better example than the British comic paper *Eagle*, which in the 1950s and early 1960s may be fairly said to have defined a generation. Edited by an Anglican clergyman, Marcus Morris, it outsold every other title in the market and set new standards in artwork, scripting, typography, colour printing and editorial content. It promoted high ideals and engaged its readers. Today many of its strips – especially its lead feature, *Dan Dare* - are regarded as classics. They are reprinted in book form, re-read and celebrated on numerous websites. There is an active club of ex-readers who produce their own magazine.

Or consider the remarkable phenomenon of *The Phantom*, the last surviving traditional Australian black and white pulp comic book, and the longest running *Phantom* comic book in the world. It began in 1948; 57 years later its format is essentially unchanged. Why has it endured while its contemporaries are long gone? Is there something about the character that resonates with Australians?

Like any private collection, this one reflects personal preferences. I collect in the genres that have appealed to me and influenced me. Principally, these are the local product in all its forms, the Sunday comic supplements, the English tradition, and the “funny animal” comics best exemplified by the work of the great Disney artists. Horror and war comics – a vast field – have never attracted me: nor has the even vaster field of superheroes. (Unlike Superman and his countless descendents, the Phantom is not a superhero!)

Ah, but does the collection get *used*? Yes. It's a family resource. Our children were brought up on (among others) the Disney classics, *Dan Dare*, *Krazy Kat* and *Tintin*. Sometimes I even get the chance to read, for the first time, comics and stories I was too busy to read as a kid. But it's good to re-read favourites, too. A private collection is an affirmation of a life journey.