



Comics: no m

Comic books used to be the sole domain of grubby pre-teens and limited to a lone comic rack in the back of some convenience store next to the potato chips; but not any more. Today, your typical comic book reader is quite a bit older, more sophisticated and is putting demands on the publishing industry that is changing the quality, content and even the marketing technique of their four-color funny books.

"The average age for comic readers is about 17," said Wes Vermeer, assistant manager of Hobbits II, the city's oldest comic book speciality shop. "The average age used to be about 13, but the trend in comics is more to the adult flavor and the younger kids just aren't getting into it — they can't understand the stories, or it just turns them

off. "If you look at all the right-wing violent comics, there aren't all that many cute ones left," he said.

Peggy May, the publicity and special events manager for DC comics agrees on the aging of comic book readers, estimating that "The direct sales market is composed of readers going from 15 years of age to their mid-twenties. That's a lot older than it was a few years ago."

This trend to adult flavor comic books has more to do with the changing population demographics than anything else. Comics were the product of the baby boom: a baby boom that produced 30 years of children, all eager and affluent enough to afford comic books. But in the late 70's the comic industry saw its readership shrink and for the first time in almost two generations, profits declined.

By the early 80's the baby boom generation (or at least the swollen bulge of the boom) had grown too old for comic books, and the traditional market for comics — the eight to 12 year olds — had been decimated.

The comic book publishers decided that if the traditional market couldn't keep up the profits, they would follow the readers that had kept their books in the black over the 60's and early 70's. In short, the comics decided to age with their readers. Just as the aging of the baby boom babies forced the closure of kindergartens and elementary schools, so it also forced the hand of the comic book publishers and tossed their industry in turmoil.

Marvel comics, for example, is actively trying to expand its market on both ends pursuing both adult and younger readers.

"Comic book publishers are aiming for a wider audience," said Steve Saffel, Marvel comics Assistant Promotions Manager for Direct Sales. "Marvel comics, until recently, just published Marvel comics: Spiderman, Captain America, the Avengers, the Fantastic Four, and characters like that. Then about three years ago, Marvel began publishing Epic comics and somewhat before that Epic illustrated. These are comics that are printed on a higher quality slick paper (as opposed to the traditional news stock) with adult-oriented material. Then about a year ago Marvel began publishing the Star line of comics — a line aimed at a younger audience, starting at age 5 and up."

Both Marvel and DC have made tremendous inroads in product quality. Comics have a polished magazine look — heavier paper and crisp clean art work — but with a price tag. While you can still buy a comic book for 95¢, the new improved books on

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