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British counterparts differ

by Richard Watts

Like their North American counterparts, British comics can be divided into two categories: humour and adventure.

The humour comics, like the *Beano* and the *Beezer* are peculiar from our North American viewpoint since they are not funny. The strips last from ten to twenty frames and do not build up to a punch line in the last frame. The characters go through their motions accompanied by little written asides; a pansy-ish character will have "teacher's pet" written beside him with an arrow pointing towards him; a character may sit down with the word "sit" next to him. This means the artist is less constrained to make the situations crystal clear through the artwork and dialogue.

The characters, in the British comics, unlike the American characters, are never cute. Look at American comic strips. Charlie Brown, Richie Rich, and Dennis the Menace are all cute. If the American strip heroes are not cute they are at least sort of endearing. Their British counterparts, however, at least from our North American sensibilities, are ugly.

Not only are the British comic characters ugly, but quite often they delight in being nasty. Featured in the *Beano* is a British Dennis the Menace. Unlike the American Dennis, who is a cute little kid who sometimes gets into trouble, Britain's Dennis the Menace is an ugly juvenile thug who delights in being a nasty little prick. He calls in "menacing". Dennis has a female counterpart, also in the *Beano*, called Minnie the Minx; she calls her exploits "minxing".

Dennis the Menace, Minnie the Minx, The Bash Street Kids, Oor Willie (featured in Scotland's *Sunday Post*) all spend their time trying to get out of doing their homework, their chores, causing trouble or giving a hard time to "softies" i.e. pansies.

There is a clear line drawn between the heroes of these comics and softies. Dennis the Menace, or the Bash Street Kids will spend whole issues terrorizing sissies, chasing prissy cats, or deliberately making themselves dirty so as to avoid being seen as a softie. In one issue I can remember a Minnie the Minx recipe which gave instructions for making itching powder, ink blots for firing at the teacher's pet, and of course, mud-pies. Contrast Dennis's behaviour with the softies. The softies do well in school; Dennis does not. The softies skip or prance; Dennis just moves without any notations. The softies say "mumsy", play with sissy dolls, knit or take sissy violin lessons. Dennis plays his part by wrecking their fun.

This makes the British sound like a twisted group of people, but give them their due: even Dennis never gets away with his menacing. Dennis's schemes always backfire, or Dad (drawn with a moustache, as are all British cartoon dads) finds out, and gives Dennis a beating with his slipper. Minnie the Minx, Oor Willie, Roger the Dodger, always end up getting beat with Dad's slipper. The Bash Street Kids are a class in school and they get caned. As far as I know, the British don't use corporal punishment on their children any more than we do, so I don't have any explanation for the inevitable outcome of their comic stories. If I was a sociologist, I might be pointing at Britain's punk rockers, skin heads, or soccer hooligans.

Their adventure comics are a different matter. The characters, except for the villains, are neither ugly, nor nasty. Like American comics the heroes often get their powers from a fluke of magic or



circumstances. After all, it was just luck that got Superman where he is today. In addition, where one issue of *Batman* will contain one episode of the Dynamic Duo making Gotham City safe for democracy, the British comics will have about ten different strips, with different characters which never overlap. Britain's Captain Hurricane will never be aided by the boy with the magic football boots, while Superman might show up in Gotham City to lend Batman a hand.

The ads are different too. The American comics will always have an ad offering a couple of hundred plastic soldiers, or urging kids to free enterprise through greeting card sales. The British comics more commonly have ads offering stamps or coins for sale, a classified section in which boys can search for pen-pals, and admiralty and army recruiting ads. The British army and navy still retain the institutions of boy-sailors and boy-soldiers who begin their training at fifteen.

The heroes of these adventure comics are more often boys than in the American adventures. Spiderman and Batman, despite their silly outfits, are after all adults. In Britain a boy will find a pair of magic football boots which make him star of the game, a boy will be launched backwards in time, a boy will receive the power to become invisible. I suppose it makes sense, boy heroes for boys.

There are adult heroes in British adventure comics but they are much more understood than American heroes, and they lack the ludicrous muscle development which all the American good guys seem to have. Except for perhaps Hotspur's Captain Hurricane, who is a Royal Marine Commando in the Second World War. But even he is sort of beefily brawny, rather than an overdeveloped version of Michaelangelo's David, like Superman.

Captain Hurricane is part of British adventure comic's preoccupation with the World Wars. I suppose this is natural, the Wars destroyed Britain's power so it makes sense that they should seek out some heroism or glory in them. Hotspur, for example, always features on the front and

back some depiction of a true war story in which British combatants perform some heroism and win a medal, often posthumously.

Yet, although they are dealing with violent situations, the violence is less explicit than in America's *Fight Stories* or *Action Comics* or even the super hero strips. Captain Hurricane, for example, is always turned into a "raging fury" by some backfiring scheme of his cockney batman. He goes dark in the face, grinds his teeth, and then rushes in and bodily beats up on the "sausage knosher" (the Germans). To see Captain Hurricane bellowing briny oaths, picking up six German soldiers in one hand and tossing a jeep with his other is more funny than violent.

Compare Captain Hurricane with America's *Fight Stories*.

The violence in the American comics is explicitly all in, bayonet to the guts, boots to the balls amidst graphically drawn spurting blood. American comic patriotism is often ugly and gritty; "It's a tough job bet somebody has to keep Old Glory flying."

British comic patriotism is depicted as a cleaner performance of duty, with the violence and death more understated.

I do not know which ones are worse. I would never state that comic books pollute the minds of youngsters. Although I have to admit, unlike my colleagues in this issue, I have never seen any sort of literary merit in comic books. I stopped reading them, British and American, when I was about 13. Nowadays I do not find their simplicity "relaxing" or "easy". Rather I find them boring at best, and irritating at worst.

Anyway, British comics are different. The British see humour in nasty quirkiness unlike the Americans who like their humour clean and cute or mildly sarcastic. The British are less expert in depicting violence and have not quite resigned themselves to the modern day where patriotism is a pretty useless emotional appendage.

If you wish to read a much better discussion of British comics, read George Orwell's essay entitled *Boy's Weeklies*. If you actually want to read British comics, HUB Newsagents on Whyte Avenue carries the *Beano*.