

*The Saturday Review
of Literature*

The Comics . . . Very Funny!

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AN ANXIOUS mother consulted me some time ago. Her four-year-old daughter is the only little girl in the apartment house where they live. The boys in the building, from about three to nine years old, hit her, beat her with guns, tie her up with rope whenever they get a chance. They hit her with whips which they buy at the circus. They push her off her bicycle and take her toys away. They handcuff her with handcuffs bought with coupons from comic books. They take her to a vacant lot and use her as a target for bow and arrow. They make a spearhead and scare her. Once, surrounding her in this way, they pulled off her panties to torture her (as they put it). Now her mother has fastened the child's panties with a string around her neck so the boys can't pull them down.

What is the common denominator of all this? Is this the "natural aggression" of little boys? Is it the manifestation of the sex instinct? Is it the release of natural tendencies or the imitation of unnatural ones? The common denominator is comic books.

I examine in the clinic a boy of eleven, referred because he fights in school and is inattentive. He says:

I buy comic books every week. They kill animals, sometimes they kill people. One of the girls is the best fighter. Sometimes they tie her up and sometimes they put her in a snake cave so that the snakes would kill her.

I examine a boy of fourteen referred to the clinic for stealing. I ask him: "Do you think your stealing had anything to do with the comic books?" He answers: "Oh, no. In the comic books it is mostly murder." This is like the arguments used by the experts under subsidy from the comic-book industry.

A boy of seventeen is referred to me by the Juvenile Aid Bureau because in an argument he stabbed a boy of thirteen in the right arm "with full intent." He says: "I don't read many comic books—only about ten a week.

I like crime comics. Sometimes they kill the girl. In one of the books the girl wanted more money so they stabbed her in the back." Was it "full intent," or was it perhaps imitation that motivated him in his own actions?

A boy of thirteen is a problem at home and at school. He is a real comic-book addict. He says: "They have some kind of guns that shoot out a ray and kill a lot of people." Is that a natural fantasy? Is that a penis symbol? Or is it a kind of reality that a lot of adults dread now and which these kids will have to face sooner or later?

A boy of fifteen took a boy of twelve up a fire escape and threatened to push him down if he didn't give him a quarter. He says: "I read two comic books a day." A thirteen-year-old boy is referred to me by the State Charities Aid Association. He was caught stealing five dollars. When asked why he took it he confided to me that the older boys in school got up a gang and threatened him. If he did not get them the money they would beat him up. So he stole the money and gave it to them. (I verified this later.)

The experts of the comic-book industry tell us that what the children read in comic books is pure fantasy. But when I examine these many children and adolescents who tell me what they read in comic books, I ask myself with Bernardo in "Hamlet":

"Is not this something more than fantasy?"

THINK of the many recent violent crimes committed by young boys and girls. A twelve-year-old boy who kills his younger sister; a twelve-year-old boy who kills his older sister; a thirteen-year-old burglar who operates with a shotgun; a seventeen-year-old boy who kills a thirteen-year-old boy and leaves a note signed "The Devil"; a public school in New York City where two police officers circulate on the grounds and in the corridors to prevent violence; a mathematics teacher who has to give examinations with a policeman present in the classroom; a thirteen-year-old who shot a nurse and was sent to a reformatory (where, incidentally, he will read more comic books); a gang of adolescent bandits led by a fifteen-year-old girl; two twelve-year-old boys and one of eleven stopping a man on the street and shooting him with a semi-automatic; a fifteen-year-old boy third-degreeed as a suspect in a murder case; three sixteen-year-old boys killing a fourteen-year-old "for revenge"; a New York City school where the older pupils threaten the younger ones with violence and with maiming them, robbing them of their money, watches, and fountain pens. The young victims don't dare tell the names of their tormentors. When two

