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Mel Gibson. Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2015.

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Abstract

Review of Mel Gibson. *Remembered Reading. Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood*. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2015.

Keywords

Comics, children, gender, memory studies, history

Mel Gibson. *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood*. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2015. 244 pp.

I will keep this review as brief as possible, so you can quickly turn to what matters most: reading Mel Gibson's book. *Remembered Reading* is a study of comics read by girls published between the 1950s and 1990s in Great Britain. Gibson discusses comics especially written for girls, but also other publications such as superhero and humor comics. Despite some of these publications selling up to a million copies every week (before being replaced by lifestyle magazines), the girls' comics genre is largely forgotten nowadays (often also by its readers), and academic interest in the matter has remained rather limited. Gibson's book charts the rise and fall of these comics, which often aspired to convey particular images of girlhood. The book also examines their reception and mediation, as well as British women's memories of their reading. As such, the book combines very different discourses on girls' comics that might appear incompatible: academic discussions of the subject and personal accounts of actual reading practices (occasionally including those of the author). It proves to be a productive and fruitful exchange that makes *Remembered Reading* worthwhile reading.

Following an introduction with a compelling close reading of a four-page comic called "Belle of the Ballet in Little Miss Nobody" (which, as a service to the reader and as an act of preservation, is included in full), Gibson organizes the discussion into five chapters. The first three chapters constitute the more academic account of girls' comics, while the final two chapters consist of women's recollections of their reading. In a "methodological" first chapter, Gibson describes the challenges her research posed. The author relates how she did or did not manage to obtain copies of the comics under consideration (girls' comics often do not have the same collectible status as their "male" counterparts). She describes how she got into contact with readers and got them to reminisce about their reading, all the while addressing issues that arise when one works with readers and memories. Here as in the following chapters, Gibson combines a wealth of critical insights in a fluent and organic way that preserves the coherence of her own writing.

The second chapter is an historical overview of British girls' comics. It tells the story of their rise and fall, but also places the genre in a broader history of publishing for girls (as a specific category of consumers). Throughout her historical outline, centered on a number of titles, Gibson pays due attention to production contexts and to paratextual and material features of the comics. This type of information casts more light on how these texts functioned and how readers engaged with them. In addition, the chapter shows how these comics and other publications promoted certain models of girlhood and class, or how they constructed British girlhood following the war.

The third chapter discusses the mediation of comics. It investigates how the often negative appreciation of comics voiced by several commentators, particularly academics, teachers, and librarians, influenced people's reading of

and responses to these texts. Gibson not only eruditely enumerates many of these critical voices—thereby creating a microhistory of the institutional reception of girls’ comics—she also adds necessary nuances or manages to refute some critiques altogether based on her own research.

The next chapters turn to women’s personal accounts of their childhood reading. By conversing with readers, Gibson explores “how reading comics had an impact on how the reader was perceived and how reading choices were part of social and cultural positions of class and femininity” (97). Her aim was to investigate the actual reading processes and to contrast them to academic and other discourses about comics, “juxtaposing ‘real’ readers against an implied reader” (97). The fourth chapter focuses on women’s recollections of reading girls’ comics and charts how these comics functioned for the interviewees. It also shows that their memories of reading often sparked off a set of other memories. In a similar vein, the fifth chapter discusses women’s recollections of reading other types of comics not primarily aimed at girls: boys, mixed gender, and humor comics. Gibson also looks at related issues, such as swapping comics and fandom.

After a general conclusion that further addresses issues related to memory, Gibson’s book contains two appendices. The first is a note on the differences between interviews with children on their reading conducted in the 1960s and the present-day recollections of past reading by adults in Gibson’s book. The second is a “checklist” of titles of comics and magazines, stories and characters, which lists publishers and dates of publication. This is a valuable encyclopedic tool for anyone who wants to further explore the field of girls’ comics.

All in all, *Remembered Reading* tells a little-known story worth (re)telling: that of postwar British girls’ comics. It does so by combining academic accounts of girls’ comics and personal, “real-world” accounts. In all their respective limitations—which Gibson acknowledges, for instance, by pointing out that academic accounts are equally determined by their cultural moment (189) or by addressing issues related to working with readers and memory—both discourses fruitfully complement one another. They yield a more complete picture of what girls’ comics were and how they constructed girlhood, of how readers engaged with them, of how their reading was perceived by others, and of how they are remembered. At the same time, the book provides more general reflections on memories of reading and memory itself. All of this makes it a valuable read for people working in many fields, not just comics studies, gender studies, memory or popular literature. It is an illustration of how literary studies in general can benefit from taking audiences’ memories of actual reading into account. On top of that, *Remembered Reading* is written in a fluent language that is a pleasure to read, including some witty observations. Don’t take my word for it, just read Gibson’s book.

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