

Stephen Smith

ARH 580

Betty vs. Veronica

American Archie-types

## Archie's World

Archie Comics Publications, Inc. introduced its first openly gay character in September 2010. The cover of *Veronica* #202 (fig. 1) exclaims, “meet the hot new guy.” The homosexual Kevin Keller enters a world that is nothing if not wholesome, middle American, and uncontroversial. The mainstream press responded to Kevin as little more than another human interest or business story.<sup>1</sup> The gay press applauded the move<sup>2</sup> but, in general, the lack of outrage and criticism by the usual suspects<sup>3</sup> is a clear sign of the social progress of American culture. The character of Archie An-



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drews is designed to be the most “average” of all possible American teenagers. He lives in the average town of Riverdale and attends the unremarkable Riverdale High. He is not particularly wealthy or poor, intelligent or dumb, athletic or nerdy, large or small. He is the absolute center of the bell curve of the American teenage boy. The main female characters, Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge, along with Archie, form a love triangle that has gone unresolved for almost seventy years. These characters have represented the “norm” as the “norm,” itself, has dramatically changed. What effect do Archie, Veronica, and Betty have on the establishment of gender identities among their readers? How have *Archie* comics evolved as American society, as a whole, has become more inclusive? It is fair to say that the

1. The Associated Press, “Archie Comics Unveils Gay Character,” New York: The Associate Press, (April 27, 2010).

2. David Rogers, “Archie’s Closet,” *Cue Pittsburg* (July, 2010): 26.

3. Nina Kester, Archie Publications, Inc., telephone contact, November, 29, 2010.

publishers, writers, and artists at *Archie* comics have made an admirable effort to be socially responsible with regards to these issues. The creators of the unique cast of characters that populate Riverdale have attempted to reflect the tremendous social changes that have taken place in real-life cities and have constantly done so with humor and a nonchalant acceptance.

### **Red-Headed, All-American Boy**

Who should be given credit for the creation of the *Archie* characters is a matter of dispute. What is not in dispute is that, with few exceptions, the artists and writers have been men. The often repeated story of Archie's origin is that just as America was entering the Second World War, John Goldwater, a publisher of superhero comics went to his art department and asked who could come up with a new kind of character. Goldwater was looking for a sort of everyman, or rather everyboy, type like the one portrayed by Mickey Rooney in the wildly popular Andy Hardy series. A very young, and extremely talented Bob Montana (1920-1975) rose to the occasion. In 1996 Montana's estate filed a lawsuit against Archie Comics Publications to settle who exactly should be given credit for the character's origins. The decision, and its undisclosed terms, resulted in Goldwater being named "creator" and Montana "creator of the original character's likenesses."<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the legal



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decision the artist, rather than the publisher, is generally considered the father of the brand by comic book collectors and fans who, in fan publications and on the internet, still universally give Montana credit for creating Archie and the gang.

4. Jim Windolf, "American Idol" *Vanity Fair*, vanityfair.com (December 20, 2009), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2006/12/archie200612>.

## Once Upon a Time in Riverdale

Archie Andrews made his debut in a comic book titled *Pep* #22 (fig. 2) in December 1941. Soon after the debut Joe Montana was drafted into the Army, but his characters would immediately grab the public's imagination. *Archie* quickly expanded into a number of comic book titles and was soon followed by a weekly radio program and eventually a number of television series and every sort of merchandising product. In the mid-1950s the publishing company that produced *Pep*, MLJ Magazines, would officially change its name to Archie Comics Publications, Inc. to reflect the success of their most popular character. Today the company is the only family-owned and independent publisher in the industry.<sup>5</sup> Though in decline, Archie Comics still maintains a healthy circulation of roughly half a million comic books a month<sup>6</sup> in addition to a newsstand magazine called *Life with Archie* that began publishing in August 2010. Comic books, in general, are only a shadow of their former selves. "In the mid-1940s... the comic book was the most popular form of entertainment in America. Comics were selling between eighty million and a hundred million copies every week... By 1952 more than twenty publishers were producing more than 650 comic titles per month."<sup>7</sup> The fictional rock band spawned from one of the *Archie* cartoon series even managed to create a pop hit, *Sugar, Sugar*, in 1969 that made it to the top of the charts in the United States, England, and Canada. *Sugar Sugar* was written by Jeff Barry and Andy Kim would be covered the following year by Bob Marley and the Wailers.

## Methodology

Without venturing too far from the strict confines of the analytic tradition how can one explore the presuppositions of feminist and queer theory? "Because gender roles do not easily translate into an observable set of behaviors, studying the media's influence on

5. Tina Gant, *International Directory of Company Histories*, Vol. 63 (Farmington Hills, Michigan: St. James Press, 2004), <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/Archie-Comics-Publications-Inc-Company-History.html>.

6. These figures are based on publicly available publisher's statements. <http://comicsworthreading.com/2010/03/19/archie-sales-figures-for-2009/>.

7. David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 5.

gender-related behavior is difficult.”<sup>8</sup> Postmodernism and more specifically “[d]econstruction is antiessentialist not only in viewing the search for universal definitions as useless, but also in actively challenging the traditional boundaries between oppositions such as reason/emotion, beautiful/ugly, and self/other as well as between disciplines such as art, science, psychology, and biology.”<sup>9</sup> If, as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and others have taught us, gender roles are the result of power relations and ultimately social constructs, who is doing this construction? It is fair to say that, in America, some indeterminate percentage of this gender creation must fall in the laps of the of the creators of *Archie* comics. Though Betty and Veronica are far from admirable role models, they are also far from objectified victims. They are average. It can be argued that they are average in the sense that they have helped define the status quo. “The concept of teenagers was still pretty new when Archie came along.”<sup>10</sup> One can safely assume that the idea of the American teenager has been shaped by, but has also contributed to, the creation of popular culture. As technology has increased it has become possible for ever smaller groups to affect larger and larger portions of the population. Certainly the ever increasing feedback loop between the speed of production and reproduction and customer demand has allowed Americans, and American teenagers in particular, a level of control over their consumer culture that would have been impossible in earlier times. The soft science of advertising and marketing seems to always follow an increasingly empowered audience whose consumption dictates which products will succeed and which will fail.

### **Pals and Gals**

Among Archie’s “pals and gals” we find a cast of teens that are stereotypical but far from two-dimensional. The overconfident and egomaniacal Reggie Mantel is both Archie’s fast

8. Monique Ward and Kristen Harrison, “The Impact of Media Use on Girl’s Beliefs about Gender Roles, Their Bodies, and Sexual Relationships: A Research Synthesis,” in *Featuring Females: Feminist Analyses of Media* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005), 7.

9. Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 219.

10. Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Comics From Teen to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 11.



friend and primary foe. The two are locked in an eternal struggle for the affections of, alternately, Betty or Veronica. Yet often they will double date or change partners from one storyline to the next. Archie's constant and devoted, best friend is the woman-hating, gluttonous Jughead Jones. When rumors began circulating about the introduction of a homosexual character into Riverdale, the often-heard joke in the gay community was, "it must be Jughead."<sup>11</sup> As fashions changed over the years Archie lost his bow-tie but Jughead's crown has remained. This particular headgear is the remnant of a short-lived fad in the early 40s when a boys would take their father's old fedoras and cut them into individual and unique shapes. When the company tried to update Jughead's look with a backwards baseball caps fans of the comic revolted.<sup>12</sup> Though Jughead professes no sexual interest in the female gender, there is one girl that has always had her eyes on him. The awkwardly tall, buck-toothed Big Ethel Muggs has historically been drawn in an exaggeratedly homely fashion, but as the franchise has become more sensitive to its role in identity building, Ethel has had a dramatic makeover. She now appears rather cute (fig. 3). The



11. Rogers, *op. cit.*, 26.

12. Kester, *op. cit.*



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impossibly smart Dilton Doiley's inventions and Veronica's immensely wealthy father, Hiram Lodge, are classic comic strip types that are used as vehicles for any number of adventures. In the late 90s Archie comics introduced a plus-sized girl to Riverdale, Brigitte Reilly (fig. 4). The hulking bully, Big Moose, long considered dumb, has now been diagnosed with dyslexia.<sup>13</sup>

Though quintessentially American, *Archie* readership is all over the globe. In Spanish speaking counties he is known as Archi Gómez, and there are even Japanese-style manga versions of the *Archie* characters. Flipping through almost any *Archie* comic today one finds that African-American characters are ubiquitous. Archie has an Asian-American friend named Tomoko Yoshida and a Puerto Rican pal, Frankie Valdez. There are also two Hispanic girls in Archie's universe, Maria Rodriguez and Ginger Lopez. The Indian-American Raj Patel is often

grating on the other character's nerves because of his obnoxious obsession with filmmaking (fig. 5). These non-Caucasian characters are far from "token" or milquetoast.



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13. Ibid.



## Art Smart

American comic strips have historically worked within a constructed language of signs and symbols. The word balloon is incorporated into the artwork as a graphic element. Emotion is illustrated by exaggerated gesticulation and facial expressions along with creative execution of the dialogue and lettering. Motion and emotion are expressed by lines radiating



Bob Montana

from the figures. This is a specific language that has been developing in earnest through trial and error over the course of the past century. Even as comic strips have become more individualized, certain fundamentals have remained constant. The dialogue is almost exclusively executed in all capitals and virtually every sentence ends with an exclamation point. The old, tedious method of cutting and angling screens to produce color was replaced by computers in the 80s but hand lettering is still a major part of the aesthetic of many comic strips, including the *Archie* line.<sup>14</sup> Most comic artists work with a brush and ink that owes



Bob Montana

14. Ibid.



as much to eastern as western tradition. Though usually handled with a mastery that disguises the difficulty, anyone who has tried to create the confident line work common in *Archie* comics should appreciate the skill of its many artists. Today there averages around fifty free-lance artists working at any given time on the various *Archie* titles.<sup>15</sup>

For a comic strip whose primary readership is pre-teen girls, it might seem odd that almost all the artists that have drawn *Archie* comics have been men. This is arguably due to the recruitment of talent from historically male-dominated institutions like the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art<sup>16</sup> and the fact that these artists might also work for other comic lines aimed at boys. Besides Bob Montana some of the most celebrated and gifted of these artists have been Al Hartley (1921-2003) and Dan DeCarlo (1919-2001). One of Hartley's most significant contributions to the *Archie* universe has been the Spire group of Christian comics. Besides producing comic strip adaptations of popular Christian titles such as *The Cross and the Switchblade* and *God's Smuggler*, Hartley also created a number of Christian titles featuring the *Archie* characters. In the Spire series Betty is presented as the most pious and Bible-believing of the characters and is thus the object of Archie's affection rather than the self-centered Veronica. The *Archie* Christian comics were published in the early 70s before that religion began its continued move to the political right in America. Archie and Betty pray to a non-materialistic Jesus concerned with love yet silent about abortion and homosexuality. In one Spire title, *Archie's Something Else*, a cynical television crew comes to Riverdale High looking for the "drug problem," "occult activity," and "sex education." They demand that Principle Weatherbee show them some "perverts" and "radicals." When the crew sees Betty with her head bowed they assume she had been worked too hard by the "oppressive system" and are shocked to find out she is praying. Hoping to find some racial discrimination they are led to a meeting of the Riverdale Bible Club where a smiling African-American teen with a large Afro hairstyle informs them that

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.



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racial differences were “settled 2000 years ago.”

Unlike Al Hartley, it is unlikely that Dan DeCarlo would view what many might consider soft-core pornography as a problem. Before going to work for *Archie* comics and “[u]nbeknownst to many, DeCarlo also populated another world, which he filled with cartoons featuring girls in lingerie (and sometimes less), and often bearing and uncanny resemblance to his perennial blonde next door and rich-bitch socialite (fig. 6).”<sup>17</sup> It would be Dan DeCarlo who

would be credited by comic strip fans with creating the most cheesecake of all the *Archie* franchises, *Josie and the Pussycats*. Josie is the lead singer for a three-person, all-girl band that dresses in skimpy cat costumes that are reminiscent of those worn by *Playboy* bunnies. In 1961 DeCarlo presented six dailies, or newspaper strips, of *Josie* to Richard Goldwater at *Archie* comics. According to DeCarlo, Richard, “showed it to his father, and a day or two later I got the OK to do it as a comic book...I designed all the characters...I didn’t have any more input on what direction they were going to go with *Josie*...After about twenty issues of *Josie*, they decided to pay me.”<sup>18</sup> Ownership and creation issues finally came to a head when the *Josie and the Pussycats* movie began production and it looked as if a lot of money was going to be made. DeCarlo was let go from *Archie* comics at this time as issues of who would be considered creator of *Josie* went to court. “That’s the problem today: Who is the creator? Because someone who comes in and says, “I want to do a girlie book,”

17. Fantagraphics Catalog, product description, *Innocence and Seduction: The Art of Dan DeCarlo* (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, November 2004), 12.

18. R.J. Carter, “Interview with Dan DeCarlo,” in *The Trades* (January 1, 2002), <http://www.the-trades.com/article.php?id=1645>.

and you come up with the book, you come up with all the characters and give them all the names, they still call themselves the creators.”<sup>19</sup> The lawsuit was decided against DeCarlo but comic strip fans he still considered him to be *Josie and the Pussycat's* creator and he is cited as such in the movie's credits.

Without delving too deeply into rejected differentiations between “high” and “low” art, it should be noted that any value judgement between the *oeuvres* of Bob Montana and, say, Pablo Picasso will ultimately be subjective and arbitrary. It should seem self-evident that, in the past century, Montana and his colleagues have created art that has contributed to gender rolls in a way that the more aloof works of “high” art would be hard-pressed to match. This is simply the result of to whom the work is directed and the sheer number of people being exposed to it.

Sandra L. Langer has written that “the objectification of women in a sexist culture is such that it need not be substantiated by visual illustrations; they are all around us everywhere we look.”<sup>20</sup> To what degree we are victims of the creators of this culture of objectification is impossible to gauge; but one would hope that some level civic responsibility accompanies the production of the popular culture. It is fair to say that the artists and writers who produce *Archie* comics have at least made an fair attempt to avoid gross objectification of women. Betty and Veronica are cute, but never sexual. Because they never age they remain in a state of arrested development. They are boy crazy, but Archie is also girl crazy. Betty and Veronica may bounce down the beach in bikinis and be ogled at by the boys, but these same boys are also the objects of desire. In the world of *Archie* comics all is subservient to humor, the ultimate goal of the stories. The self-imposed limits of age appropriateness certainly make for a more difficult job of creating a funny story. *Archie* comics have never resorted to the easy “I can't believe they did that humor” of so many other

19. Ibid.

20. Sandra L. Langer, “Against the Grain: A Working Feminist Art Criticism,” in *Feminist Visions: Toward a Transformation of the Liberal Arts Curriculum*, ed. Diane L. Fowlkes and Charlotte S. McClure (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1984), 89.

cartoon franchises such as *Southpark* and *Family Guy*. An honest recognition of sexuality is not, in itself, evil. One would be hard pressed to find sexual exploitation in Riverdale.

### Betty and Veronica's Double Digest

Betty and Veronica can be seen as two-sides of the same idealized, average American girl. It is easy to conceive of how the pair could be used as an example of binary opposition. This concept was satirized in *Archie's Girls Betty and Veronica* #199 published in July of 1972. In a story titled "Split Personality" (figs. 7-8) it is claimed that, "there are like two sides to some girls," and continues "Betty and Veronica are just like two sides of the same girl. But the one thing they have in common is this silly Archie fella!" The story explains that while the good half, Betty, "worships the ground he walks on!" Archie prefers Veronica. And "the worse Veronica treats him the better he likes it." It is hard to find any worthy role models or moral high ground in this scenario.



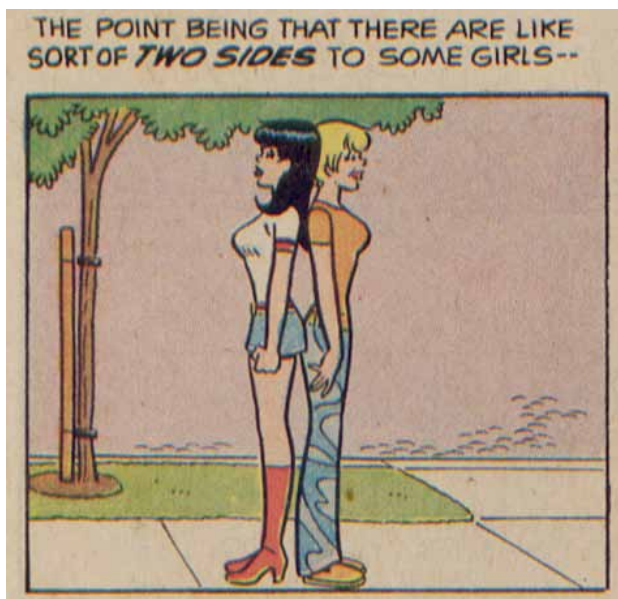
Dan DeCarlo

But that is not necessarily the goal. The goal is humor, a fundamental aesthetic quality of *Archie* comics.

One can imagine that while earlier schools of feminism might have looked upon Betty and Veronica with distrust, third-wave Girlie culture would embrace them. "[I]t is a feminist statement to proudly claim that things are feminine."<sup>21</sup> While most of the male characters are drawn with unique features, Betty and Veronica are rendered, with the exception of their hair, exactly the same. Like Superman, Popeye, and to a larger degree Mar-

21. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, "Third wave Girlie Culture," in *Women's Culture in a New Era* (Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005), 195.





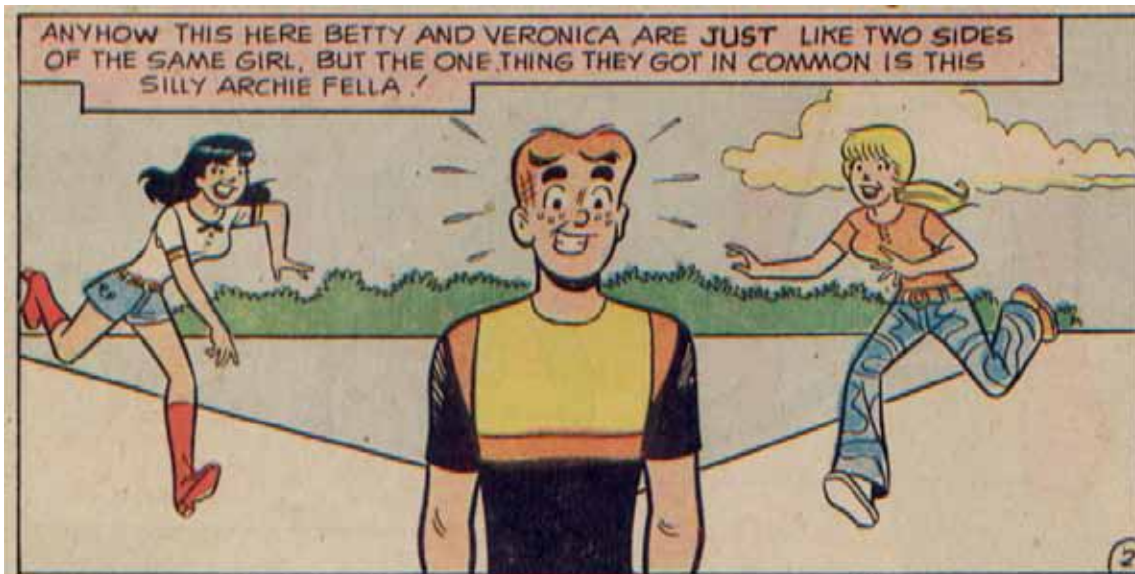
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ianne and Ginger, Betty and Veronica are classic Americana. So ingrained are these characters in the societal imagination that even the reversal of the order of their names, Veronica and Betty, sounds awkward. The girls compete for Archie's affections in a love triangle that, if ever resolved, might spell the end of the franchise. Occasionally there will be an storyline where the creators imagine Archie marrying either Betty

or Veronica but one can remain confident that the next issue they will all be back to where they have always been.

Betty and, to a larger degree, Veronica have always had a certain power over the red-headed protagonist. They are as free to come and go as the boys. But this is the world of the American teenager. Workplace inequality and the simplistic gender roles prescribed by the ideals of the nuclear family do not have an effect where the main characters are concerned. Parents play a supporting role. Holding true to the once-common fashion, fathers tend to work and the mothers are generally stay-at-home cooks and housekeepers. "Although showing a woman as a loving mother or sexual being is not inherently problematic, it becomes a problem if they are almost always shown this way, which normalizes objectification and provides a limited perspective on women's humanity."<sup>22</sup> The workplace most represented in the stories is the school itself, Riverdale High. Teachers are both male and female and are portrayed as peers. The principle of the school is the obese, and very masculine, Waldo Weatherbee. Coach Kleats is also obese and masculine. The school's cook is unsurprisingly a woman, Bernice Beazley, whose concoctions are always notoriously foul.

22. Ward, *op. cit.*, 3.



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So unlike the teenagers, the adults in the *Archie* universe fall into certain classic gender roles. Certainly a large part of this is due to the fact that they were created when these sort of gender roles were expected. In a world where the characters never age Mr. Weatherbee will always be the boss.

Unusual for any comic book line, 60% of the *Archie* readership is girls.<sup>23</sup> And though there is a considerable audience of older, mostly male, comic book fans the bulk of *Archie* readers are between the ages of 8 and 12.<sup>24</sup> Betty and Veronica must certainly have an appeal that these young girls can identify with. The female protagonists have managed to stay popular long after other comics primarily directed towards girls have stopped publishing.<sup>25</sup> The dynamic between Betty and Veronica oscillates between best friends and bitter rivals, always at the mercy of the storyline, which, in turn, is at the mercy of the punchline. This is fundamental to the aesthetic that was established by Bob Montana in the early 40s. From its beginning, the *Archie* line of comics have always maintained a consistently high level of quality in both the writing and artwork. But it is also very likely that

23. Bonny Norton, "The Motivating Power of Comic Books: Insights from Archie Comic Readers," *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Oct., 2003): 141.

24. Kester, *op. cit.*

25. Robbins, *op. cit.*, 104.

because the franchise has catered to an underserved demographic, the female comic reader, they have managed to remain successful in an extremely competitive medium.

Comic book artist and historian Trina Robbins writes that, “Betty and Veronica are hardly role models for young girls, wasting as much time and energy as they did fighting over boys.”<sup>26</sup> This is certainly true, but is Archie much of a role model for boys? Is Reggie, Jughead or Big Moose? Dilton is smart, but he is socially awkward. There doesn’t seem to be any real role models in the *Archie* universe at all. But is this necessarily a bad thing? Superman might be a good role model but anyone who wants to be like Superman is destined for disappointment. Ultimately, the entire concept of role models hints at a rather naïve version of pop psychology. It would seem that there should be a more subtle place to fall on these issues. The concept that popular culture has some effect on identity development and gender roles appears inescapable. “If girls’ gender belief systems are shaped by media use, the most immediate outcome is likely to be their striving to adhere to dictates of the traditional female role.”<sup>27</sup> But is the “traditional female role” just another rarely questioned social construct? Here analytic philosophy and postmodernism must part ways. Some things simply appear too ill-defined or complex to measure. The inseparable give-and-take between popular culture and the development of identity in America appears so hopelessly intertwined that it might be unwise to make any distinction between the two at all. On the surface it would seem that culture has an inescapable control over identity. But how can one define oneself or others without some sort of yardstick or language that is already steeped in culture? And, it can be argued, that, to some degree, the American self-identity *is* comprised of popular culture. We are what we consume. But if this is so, doesn’t that put more of a burden on the creators of cultural products to be socially responsible? These sort of ideas have historically cast a shadow over the comic book industry.

26. Robbins, *op. cit.*, 14.

27. Ward, *op. cit.*, 14.

### Approved by the Comics Code Authority

When Frederick Wertham published his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, blaming any number of social ills on the comics, *Archie* escaped the devastation that led to the shutting down of many of its fellow publications. This ordeal was spelled out in all of its dramatic detail in David Hajdu's best selling 2008 book *The Ten-Cent Plague*. While many comic book companies have abandoned the self-imposed comic code authority symbol that was adopted after the public trials that followed the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, every *Archie* comic still proudly displays



the code's approval on its cover. The franchise has always prided itself on being as clean-cut as its main character. In Archie's universe first base is considered a home run. When *Josie and the Pussycats* was made into a movie with a PG-13 rating in 2001 by Universal Studios the publishers were outraged and stopped licensing its characters to outside companies.<sup>28</sup>

Archie is always the gentleman. As the world outside of Riverdale went through the sexual revolution Archie would never expect anything beyond a kiss. He may have dropped his bow-tie for wide lapels and bell-bottoms for a time in the late 60s, but a word of profanity would never leave his mouth and no pill stronger than aspirin would ever enter it.

### State of the Research—Where's Archie?

“How does repeated exposure to the media's often stereotypical images affect girls' beliefs about gender? Over the past 30 years, dozens of works have attempted to answer this question.”<sup>29</sup> One study on the effects of *Archie* comics on young children was conducted by Dr. Bonnie Norton from the Department of Language and Literacy Education

28. Windolf, *op. cit.*

29. Ward, *op. cit.*, 5.



at the University of British Columbia. Norton's 1997 study sought to answer three basic questions, "[w]hy do children read *Archie* comics? . . . [h]ow do the readers of *Archie* comics relate to one another?" and, "[h]ow is the reading of *Archie* comics contrasted with school-authorized literacy practices?"<sup>30</sup> Norton's conclusions were generally favorable to the comics. She recognized that the humor in *Archie* is the primary appeal. The comics encouraged children to read while their assigned school texts were usually seen as a chore. Furthermore, the reading of *Archie* comics "provides an opportunity for the girls to refute official expectations and negotiate social roles within other powerful circles."<sup>31</sup> Norton believes that while reading *Archie* comics the children were involved in "meaning making."<sup>32</sup> She continues, "[f]or *Archie* comic readers, their goal in debating the merits of characters, events, and stories is not to second-guess other interpretations and critiques, but to draw on their own knowledge and experience to reflect, engage and defend."<sup>33</sup> Norton concluded from her research that reading this type of material helped children, and girls in particular, gain a sense of "ownership" over the literature. It seems reasonable to assume that some level of empowerment would follow.

## Race



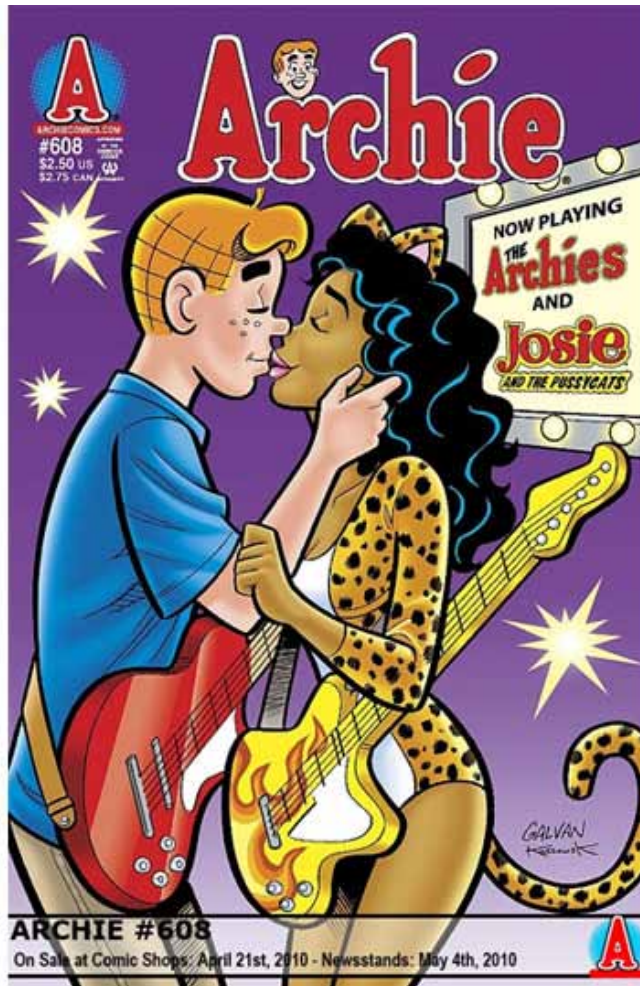
30. Norton, *op. cit.*, 141.

31. *Ibid.*, 143.

32. *Ibid.*, 145.

33. *Ibid.*, 146.

The comic strip, in general, has historically had an unfortunate relationship with ethnic minorities. “Representations of African Americans have largely adopted a single stereotypical image, of Sambo.”<sup>34</sup> Whether the result of the creator’s political leanings or the nature of the product, *Archie* comics has done an unusually commendable job in this area compared to other humor publications. *Archie* #608 (fig. 10) published in June 2010 featured the first interracial relationship in the franchise.<sup>35</sup> The cover of the comic book depicts Archie and Valerie, the African-American member of *Josie and the Pussycats*, in a tender embrace. The *Pussycats* had a racial makeover in 1969 just before



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the launching of their Saturday morning cartoon series by Hanna-Barbera on CBS. One of the band members, Pepper was replaced by the African-American Valerie Smith. This change was rather seamless in that both Pepper and Valerie represented the brainy member of the group. One has to wonder how much older Valerie, the career girl, is than Archie, the high school student. The reading public, as apposed to Betty and Veronica, accepted the relationship with little notice.<sup>36</sup> If anything, the reaction has been to ask why an interracial relationship would be newsworthy in 2010.

34. Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 60.

35. Kester, *op. cit.*

36. *Ibid.*

The introduction of African-American characters was not totally without self-reflection. The first African-American to join the Archie crew at Riverdale High was Chuck Clayton. In *Everything's Archie* #23 (figs. 9 & 11) published in the spring of 1973 the creators of *Archie* comics chose to have Chuck confront his unique role in an historically all-white world. In the story, "10 Feet Tall," Dilton Doiley notices a forlorn looking Chuck putting on his jacket to leave a party. Later Dilton gets a desperate phone call from Chuck's parents wondering why their son has not returned home. Dilton immediately runs out to search for his friend and finally finds him at the bus station. Chuck tells Dilton that he wants to leave town for "any place where [he is] not a minority." Chuck asks his friend if he knows "what it's like to be black in an all white community."



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Dilton answers, "[w]ho cares what color you are? You're a part of our crowd." He continues in typical 1973 slang, "[t]here were plenty of chicks for you to dance with."

"Are you for real, man? How could I ask a white girl to dance with me... a black fellow? I'd just make her feel uncomfortable," replies Chuck.

Undaunted Dilton continues, "What about me? I'm short! I have trouble asking girls to dance with me too!"

Chuck, now seated answers, "[b]ut at least you're white! You belong!"

Pleading for his friend not to get on the bus and run away Dilton reveals an unchar-

acteristic indignation. “It takes a real strong person to stand up for what he feels is right and fair!”

“That’s a real cool speech, but you don’t know what it’s like to be black.” Chuck replies that “[b]lack is beautiful,” but he is “talking about how he relates to white people.”

Dilton answers that “[w]e all have trouble relating to other people.” Finally having convinced Chuck not to run away Dilton declares, “[i]n years to come people won’t care if you’re black, green, yellow or blue.”

It is worth noting that the optimistic Dilton Doiley is only the fictional mouthpiece of the uncredited creators of Archie comics. It is clear that the company, as a whole, has a sense of social obligation. “10 Feet Tall” is one of the rare *Archie* stories that doesn’t strive for laughs.



12.

### **New Kid in Riverdale**

Riverdale’s first gay character, Kevin Keller, (figs. 12-14) proved to be so popular that the comic book he appeared in sold out and demanded the first reprint in *Archie* comics history.<sup>37</sup> He will also be getting his own miniseries that is planned for release in the summer of 2011.<sup>38</sup> When asked what the reaction in Riverdale would have to a gay character Dan Parent, the author and artist who created Kevin Keller, answered “the reaction is go-

37. *Archie News*, (Mamaroneck, New York: Archie Comics Publication’s Inc., Sept. 27, 2010), <http://www.archiecomics.com/blog/news/2010/09/sold-out-kevin-keller-demands-first-reprint-in-archie-history.html>.

38. *Archie News*, (Mamaroneck, New York: Archie Comics Publication’s Inc., Oct. 26, 2010), <http://www.archiecomics.com/blog/news/2010/10/hot-kevin-keller-in-his-own-comic-book-mini-series-at-archie-comics.html>.





13.

ing to be that there is not going to be a reaction. There is just going to be an acceptance.”<sup>39</sup> He also stated that the reaction to Kevin has been 99.9% positive.<sup>40</sup> In the story, “Isn’t it Bromantic,” when Veronica first sees Kevin she cries out, “Wow! He’s one Hot Tamale!” This first encounter is followed by Veronica constantly chasing after Kevin with the classic cartoon hearts floating around her head.

Later Jughead warns the new kid to “watch out for her...she’s a royal pain.”

Kevin explains that he is not interested in dating Veronica, “It’s nothing against her! I’m Gay!” Jughead decides to seize the opportunity to play a joke on Veronica.

When she thinks Betty has eyes for Kevin, Veronica agrees to back off from Archie so she can be free to pursue “the hottest guy to ever walk the earth!!” Kevin’s average-looking parents appear in one panel greeting their son’s new friend, who his father mistakenly calls Junkhead. Kevin’s developing personality reveals him to be as gluttonous as Jughead and an aspiring journalist. He is also constantly texting someone named William on his cell phone.

39. Fausto Fernós, “Feast of Fun” podcast (April 19, 2010), <http://www.feastoffun.com/tag/dan-parent/>.

40. Ibid. (Oct. 12, 2010).



14.

Veronica sends her new crush a large heart-shaped box of chocolate covered fruit, which turns out to be one of the few things Kevin doesn't like to eat. Betty finally tells Veronica that her new obsession is gay just as she sees Kevin offering Jughead the candy. "I've lost boys to Betty! That I can deal with!" she exclaims, "But when I start losing to Jughead--! ARGH!" Realizing that they both have been fooled by

Jughead, Kevin and Veronica bond and decide to shun him and head off together to the mall. It is noteworthy that Kevin's homosexuality is in no way whitewashed, but is rather used as a vehicle for humor. Similar to his love for food that rivals Jughead's, and his desire to be a journalist, Kevin's homosexuality is just another aspect of his personality.

### **The End**

*Archie* comics have held a continuing presence in the American imagination since their inception at the onset of World War II. Riverdale is now a racially diverse and LG-BTQ friendly community. The bullies are sympathetic and the unattractive and overweight kids are accepted without ridicule. The love triangle between Betty, Veronica, and the red-headed, all-American, teenage boy, Archie Andrews remains unresolved. With such a well-developed mythos it is easy to forget that *Archie* comics are the product of individual artists and writers and a company that continues to make business decisions that might have a direct effect upon its fiscal viability. Comics are both an art form and, in most cases, a serious financial enterprise. When *Archie* comics decided to introduce an openly gay character to its cast they took a serious risk that might have resulted in an Evangelical

backlash that could have done tremendous damage to the company's sales. As disturbing as it might be, there are still elements in American society that consider homosexuality a "sin" or defect that can be overcome. Not that gay characters are unusual in today's pop culture, but Archie Comics Publications is perceived as, and prides itself as, wholesome, uncontroversial and kid-friendly. To the publisher's credit they have chosen to embrace diversity. The unprecedented sales of *Veronica* #202, where America was introduced to the "hot new guy" have shown that, in the comics, the good guys can still win.

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