

Why Aren't We Talking About The Beano?

Mark Hibbett, m.hibbett@arts.ac.uk

This article will attempt to answer the question 'Why aren't we talking about the Beano?' by first of all explaining what *The Beano* is, who 'we' are, and why there is a popular perception, in the UK at least, that the latter should be discussing the former. It will then provide empirical evidence that we are not talking about *The Beano* and offer a number of explanations for why this might be, before finally demonstrating why any of it matters.

The Beano is the United Kingdoms' longest running comic, first published in 1938 by DC Thomson (Sabin 2001, Gifford 1984). The same company has published it ever since, with a new comic every week for over 85 years, apart from a period of fortnightly publication from 1941 to 1949 as a result of paper rationing (Riches 2008). It is a humour comic for children featuring short stories about characters such as Dennis The Menace, Roger The Dodger, Minnie The Minx, The Bash Street Kids and many more, most of which have been appearing in the comic for decades (McLaughlin 2022).

The Beano has always been sold in newsagents rather than bookshops or dedicated comic shops at so-called 'pocket money' prices, making it a relatively cheap, easily accessible text for younger readers. The most recently available circulation figures for *The Beano*, for July-December 2022, show that it sold an average of 54,876 weekly copies (ABC 2023). This is tiny compared to its peak of almost 2,000,000 weekly copies in 1950 (Riches 2008). However, *The Beano* has always been shared between readers - today DC Thomson estimate that it is actually read by 659,000 individuals, whereas in its heyday it was thought to be more like 8,000,000 (McLaughlin 2022).

This longevity and availability has made *The Beano* a core part of British culture (Jeffries 2021). Indeed, for many British people, it is the first thing they think of when comics are mentioned (Gibson 2020). Figure 1, below, gives some examples of its appearances in popular culture, advertisements and government communications over the years.



Figure 1. Clockwise from top left: Eric Clapton reads *The Beano* on an album cover (Bluesbreakers 1969); appropriated image in Peckham Town FC supporters' sticker (Unknown 2023); *The Beano* as part of UK government campaign (Department for International Trade 2023); news story about DC Thomson sending a 'cease and desist' order to an MP (Bloom 2018); advert for sofas (Isobal Agency 2023); UK stamp celebrating *The Beano* (The Chase 2012).

There is an expectation, both amongst the general public and other colleagues, that 'we' - UK comics scholars - will, at least to some extent, be concerned with studying such a key part of British culture. Most of us will have had the experience of telling somebody our field and hearing the reply 'Oh, you mean the Beano?' However, as this article will show, this is almost never the case.

The lack of academic research in this area can be seen most clearly by querying academic databases. For example, a search for 'The Beano' in Scopus - a database which advertises itself as 'The largest database of peer-reviewed literature' with details of over 9 million items - yielded only 8 results (Elsevier 2023). Most of these were from medical or sociological journals with only two coming from those situated in Comics Studies. The first was an article discussing the current status of *The Beano* as a transmedia product in the twenty-first century (Caro 2020) while the second was a book chapter about violence in Dennis The Menace (Thompson 2019).

A search of the archives of *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* at Taylor & Francis online found only five articles which contained the word 'Beano', out of a total of approximately 900 in the journal's 13 year history (Taylor & Francis Group 2023). Even then, none of these articles directly examined *The Beano* - four mentioned it in a list of other British or European titles, while the other was a review of the book containing the previously mentioned chapter about violence in Dennis The Menace.

The archives of *Studies In Comics* contained 10 articles which mentioned *The Beano*, from a total of 329 (Intellect 2023). Again, most of these only mentioned the comic itself in passing, although there were two which dealt with it directly, with one being the article on transmedia identified in Scopus and the other examining the character Lord Snooty (Pursall 2020).

Checking through the contents lists for *International Journal Of Comic Art* found only one article out of the 1436 listed that included the word 'Beano' (International Journal of Comic Art 2023). This article was called 'Before The Beano -- The Prehistory of Dundee Comics' (Jarron 2008), which specifically looked at other comics, rather than *The Beano* itself. Thus, out of a total of over 2,600 articles across three Comics Studies journals which are either UK-based or regularly feature British academics, there were 16 (0.6%) which mentioned *The Beano* in any way.

As has been previously noted, much of the presentation of scholarly work on comics takes place at Comics Studies conferences, and here the situation is very similar (Beaty and Woo 2016). To demonstrate this a thorough analysis was undertaken of all presentations during the past ten years of *The International Graphic Novels And Comics Conference* (IGNCC). This conference and timeframe was chosen because the IGNCC is the UK's longest running and largest academic conference, and a full programme for each conference held in the years 2014-2023 was available on the IGNCC website (IGNCC 2023).

To begin with the titles of every presentation were downloaded and put into a spreadsheet, creating a list of 902 papers. These were then gone through individually, making note of all publications, characters and creators mentioned. This found that there were 292 texts specifically named, with 25 appearing more than once. There were also 49 characters (11 more than once) and 229 authors (22 more than once), demonstrating the wide range of different topics covered.

Overall 'Alan Moore' was mentioned most, appearing in 12 presentation titles, followed by 'Tintin' (11), 'Doctor Doom' (5), 'The Walking Dead' (4), and 'Wonder Woman' (4). It should be stated here that no recoding or regrouping was done with this data, so for instance when 'The Dark Knight Returns' was mentioned in a title it was not included in the 'Batman' total, and nor was 'Watchmen' added to Alan Moore's, and so on. It's also worth mentioning that the high result for 'Doctor Doom' was entirely due to one researcher (myself).

In all of this data there was only one presentation that mentioned *The Beano* in the title, and that was the original conference presentation upon which this article is based. However, from personal experience I was aware that there had been other presentations that mentioned *The Beano* in their actual texts and so the titles were searched through again, looking for all presentations that appeared relevant and then reading through their abstracts for a mention of anything to do with *The Beano*, including characters and creators. These uncovered four more presentations, one of which was directly related to *The Beano* (presented by the author of the Lord Snooty article previously mentioned) with others mentioning it in lists of British children's comics.

Thus out of 902 presentations delivered over ten years, just over 0.4% could be shown to have mentioned *The Beano* at all. This was even lower than the 0.6% of journal articles, and demonstrates fairly conclusively that the field of Comics Studies in the UK is not talking about *The Beano*.

There are several potential practical explanations for this. For instance, it might be that the texts themselves are unavailable, making it difficult for researchers to access them. It is true that DC Thomson do not have the same active reprint schedule as other UK publishers such as Rebellion, but *The Beano* is still available in most local newsagents and all branches of the UK's main retailer WH Smiths. In addition, the annual *Beano Book* sells hundreds of thousands of copies every year, and the accumulation of comics, specials and annuals sold over the past eight decades of publication means that it is not difficult to access a copy (McLaughlin 2022).

Another possibility is that Comics Studies does not concern itself with children's comics. Certainly there has been an historical wariness around children's comics, both from comics scholars and in the field of children's literature studies, but in recent years this has begun to change (Hatfield 2006). The evidence of the data shows this to very much be the case, with Tintin, for example, being one of the most discussed topics at IGNCC. Being a British comic was no barrier either, as other publications such as *2000AD*, *Misty*, and *Eagle* were widely discussed, and similarly there were many presentations about humour comics.

However, while children's comics, British comics and humour comics were all covered, titles that fell into all three categories definitely were not, with only one presentation of this kind - my own, previously mentioned - listed in the entire ten years of the IGNCC conferences. Searching the journal databases for other series or comics similar to *The Beano* uncovered only one article, in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* about the character Beryl The Peril from *The Dandy* (Shail 2014), and nothing in the other journal archives.

Despite this evidence it seems counterintuitive that British comics scholars should be so assiduously avoiding discussion of an entire strata of British comics, especially when, as discussed, there is a

public assumption that this is something they would be looking at. However, I would suggest that there are particular reasons for this which have their roots in the history of Comics Studies as a field.

Comics Studies first began to emerge as an academic discipline in the UK during the 1960s but did not begin to properly establish itself, with dedicated courses, conferences and journals, until the early twenty first century (Horton 2017, Murray 2015). The current population of British comics scholars therefore tend to come from, and often still work within, other academic departments, such as English, Film and Media Studies, Sociology, and Art and Design (McNicol, 2013). Here, as in other countries, Comics Studies 'continues to rely on terminologies and theories handed down from other disciplines' (Beaty, 2011, p. 108) and finds itself constantly seeking ways to legitimise the study of this 'historically marginal art form', such as using the term 'graphic novel' rather than 'comics' (Beaty & Woo, 2016). Comics studies has come a long way during this period, but still sometimes struggles for respectability, and is often looked down on by academics in other fields, and sometimes even mocked (Sabin and Miers 2019, Sabin 2022).

Within the UK there is also an ongoing, and understandable, fear that the presence of Comics Studies courses at an institution will bring derision and threats of funding being removed by central government. For example, when Dundee University announced its MLitt in Comic Studies a local MP claimed that doing so 'plays right into the Tories' hands... That'll show those who say degrees are being dumbed down!' (Freeman 2011). Both the initial press release for the course and the MP's response mentioned Dundee's historic links with DC Thomson, naming *The Beano* and *The Dandy* as texts created there, but the official response to the accusations specifically ruled out their study, saying 'Whilst we are proud of Dundee's contribution to the comics industry, the much-loved publications Mr Harris so derisively refers to will not actually feature on the course.' (Freeman 2011)

Instead the University gave *Maus* (Spiegelman 1986) as an example the sort of more respectable 'graphic novels' that would be discussed. *Maus*, along with *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, form what Roger Sabin called 'The Big 3' graphic novels (Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* 1993). These were all published in the mid to late 1980s and gained critical interest and acclaim, giving so-called 'graphic novels' a legitimacy which persuaded retailers to stock them alongside other more conventional literary texts (Hague 2015).

During this period those resistant to the arrival of comics within the cultural pantheon would still use *The Beano* as a stick with which to beat them. One famous example of this was when Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan - The Smartest Boy In The World* was reviewed on the BBC's *Late Review*, with the poet Tom Paulin saying 'the colours aren't as bright as The Beano' in an attempt to dismiss both titles as unworthy of serious attention (The Late Review 2001). Meanwhile the phrase 'Bang! Pow! Zap! Comics aren't for kids anymore!' became a cliché of media coverage, with articles explicitly stating that 'graphic novels' such as 'The Big 3' had value specifically because they were not 'comics' aimed at

children (Hatfield 2006). The long-term effects of these attitudes can be clearly seen within the analysis of IGNCC presentations, with British humour comics for children almost never mentioned, while 'The Big 3' were all featured and Alan Moore was noted as the creator most often featured.

However, there was much more discussed at IGNCC than just 'The Big 3' with a huge range of texts being listed. There were 292 different texts mentioned in the titles of presentations, 267 of which were only mentioned once. Similarly there were 229 different authors listed, with only 22 appearing more than one time. Thus it can be seen that presenters at IGNCC were keen to showcase new items and authors to their colleagues.

These individual texts often fell into a category which I have labelled 'Posh Comics', so-called because they tend to be expensive, often beautifully designed, volumes from non-traditional comics organisations such as art galleries and literary publishers which are clearly intended to be treated as cultural artefacts rather than cheap entertainment for children. They are part of what Beaty and Woo call 'the consecrated avant garde, those works and creators with a lot of prestige but with relatively little commercial success.' (2016, 13) In other words, the direct opposite of *The Beano*.

The contents of such texts rarely exploit the full possibilities of the comics medium, tending to rely on simple grid layouts and a direct address from the author, perhaps because they are often created by authors and artists without previous comics experience. Rather than single out specific texts or authors, Figure 2 (below) was created to give an example of this sort of content.



Figure 2: 'Posh Comics'

The label 'Posh Comics' is designed to be provocative and is used at least partly in jest - retailers have sometimes labelled them as 'literary graphic novels', which is much more polite (Hague 2015). However it does hopefully convey the sort of publication which is discussed so often within Comics Studies at the expense of other areas - areas which, I would argue, are at least as deserving of coverage, for several important reasons.

Firstly, by failing to discuss *The Beano* UK Comics Scholars are depriving international audiences of information about a kind of text that they otherwise have little way of finding out about. From personal experience, when attending international conferences I have been astonished to find that although all colleagues from the UK are always fully aware of *The Beano*, its history and its characters, colleagues from other countries have hardly ever even heard of it.

This is important because *The Beano* was, and continues to be, a huge influence on British comics creators, as it will usually have been their first experience of comics storytelling. For example, Alan Moore has stated that *The Beano* was a key factor in the so-called 'British Invasion' of the 1980s and 1990s, stating that 'We started out ingesting the genuine anarchy of The Beano, when Baxendale was

doing all that wonderful stuff, and then we moved on to American comics... we approached those comics with a certain sensibility that home-grown US comic creators don't have.' (Gravett 2013) Other examples include Grant Morrison, a key figure in that movement, using versions of Beano characters such as Billy Whizz and Billy The Cat in his breakthrough series *Zenith* (Whitely 2015), Neil Gaiman's song collaboration 'Bash Street Worlds' celebrating The Bash Street Kids (Gaiman 2016), and Frank Quitely's repeated acknowledgement of his debt to the artist Dudley Watkins (Crae 2017).

With this in mind it seems bizarre that important artists such as Dudley Watkins and Leo Baxendale, as well as Ken Reid, Davey Law and others, are not being discussed by UK academics in the context of academic journals and conferences. Similarly characters such as Dennis The Menace, Roger The Dodger, Minnie The Minx, The Bash Street Kids and others, all key parts of British culture, are not only being not being discussed and analysed, they are not even being made available for others to examine. It would be as if American comics scholars went out of their way not to mention Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, or Superman.

Even more importantly, it is not just *The Beano* that this applies to. There are hundreds of other British children's comics that are mentioned just as rarely, or often not at all. Publications such as *The Dandy*, *The Topper*, *The Beezer*, *Buster*, *Whizzer and Chips*, *Whoopee*, *Krazy* and many many more will be remembered by millions of British people, having sold in their hundreds of thousands on a weekly basis for decades, but are entirely missing from the Academy. As well as humour comics the United Kingdom also has a long history of adventure, romance, TV tie-in and other types of comic that are being similarly ignored, to the detriment of international scholarship.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated that we - UK Comics Studies scholars - are not talking about *The Beano* in books, in scholarly journals, or at academic conferences. It has discussed some of the possible reasons for this, and outlined why this is a problem. This article has also shown that comics scholars are keen to bring new texts to light, by presenting them at conferences and discussing them in journals, and that *The Beano* is still widely available as a resource.

Therefore, in order to solve this problem, all that is needed is for UK comic scholars to occasionally turn their attention to aspects of their own cultural history. If this was done then a door would be opened onto a vast cultural archive that would inform future scholarship around the world.

All we need to do is to start talking about *The Beano*.

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