Comic Books and AIDS

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Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome deserves immediate and serious attention from all bodies of higher education, from the most “pure” of the sciences to the most interpretive of the humanities. But two fields are especially relevant to understanding and intervening in AIDS issues: mass communication and popular culture. These fields are crucial for at least two reasons.

First, understanding the optimal uses of mass-mediated educational messages is vital for intervening in the AIDS crisis. Communicating to those who engage in risky behavior and seeking to educate these people about their behavior have been objectives of those interested in health communication and health promotion. Any possible vehicle for disseminating needed information—educating relevant publics to the nature and spread of AIDS—should be explored. AIDS education is more than the communicating of knowledge; it is also the saving of lives.

Second, all portrayals of AIDS in mass media and popular culture are extremely important for study, even those portrayals created for “pure entertainment.” The distinction, after all, between entertainment and education is to a large degree tenuous: children may learn as much from MTV as they do from PBS. But also the very nature of AIDS in our society demands that media scholars understand and critique images of it. AIDS seems to be a phenomenon that has been designed for sensationalistic media images: the final stages of AIDS are often discussed as always fatal; one main way the virus associated with AIDS is transmitted is through sexual contact; AIDS can cause the deaths of people during the prime of their lives; groups considered “deviant” to the ideological mainstream—intravenous drug users and gay males—have been labeled as especially at risk to the condition; but, at the same time, scares over a “wildfire” general plague were and are present; this condition, linked with sex, was discovered during an era dominated by a wave of conservatism in the U.S. What is, then, the nature and the role of AIDS media images given these factors? As one important scholar of the AIDS phenomenon, Simon Watney, notes, “Fighting AIDS is not just a medical struggle, it involves our understanding of the words and images which
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load the virus down with such a dismal cargo of appalling connotations” (3).

This paper attempts to contribute to our understanding of AIDS words and image by analyzing how the comic book has been involved with AIDS issues. The most well-known portrayals of AIDS in comic art have come via daily newspaper comic strips (in “Doonesbury”) or editorial cartoons. In addition, though, comic books as a medium have dealt with AIDS images and education in three ways: (1) the creation of new comic books or comic book campaigns which are specifically designed to educate about AIDS; (2) the integration of fictional People Living With AIDS and AIDS issues with established comic book storylines and characters; and (3) the donation of profits made from the sale of AIDS-related comic art to AIDS causes. After briefly discussing why it is valuable to study comic books and AIDS, this paper will describe each of the three comic book forms. Then the advantages and disadvantages of comic books for successful AIDS intervention and education will be discussed.

Why Comic Books?

As noted above, AIDS is of such importance that all possible forms of message and image dissemination are worthy of study in order to help cope with this issue. This includes the study of the comic book. In fact, there are more specific reasons why this medium is especially relevant to AIDS. Mass produced and distributed comic books have already been created which feature AIDS portrayals, as will be discussed, and because of their very existence deserve consideration as part of the diversity of AIDS discourse. But also, previous research focusing on the comic book has noted two characteristics which make this medium particularly suitable for those interested in studying the mass media’s role in the AIDS crisis. First is the comic book’s use as an educational tool, and second is the social commentary and criticism found in comic books.

Of all the different academic fields, perhaps education has been the one to focus the most attention on the comic book. As early as 1942, articles were published in such journals as Journal of Educational Sociology about the possible role of comic books in pedagogy. One article, written by W.W.D. Sones, attempts to focus in on the peculiar educational advantages of the comic book:

When taken apart the picture continuity [of comics] has the following features: the narrative is presented in a sequence of pictures or cartoons; the focus of the narrative is always on people and rarely departs from the central character; animation is effected in the succession of pictures; sensory appeal usually is heightened by the use of colors; attention is held by brevity; finally, the theme and story are humanized to deal with popular feelings, thoughts and actions. Each of these structural elements caters to the popular inclination, in reading activity, for vividness, action, brevity, and personalization. Perhaps the latter,
the personal and human elements, because of identification and empathy, explains the moving influence of the medium. (236)

More recently, the work of Larry D. Dorrell has pointed to the use of comic books as reading motivators in school libraries. In one article Dorrell describes the use of comic book characters to educate children about social problems, for example The New Teen Titans and Spider-Man addressing drug use and child abuse, respectively (31). More specifically, there is precedent for the use of comic art to promote health education in children. 'Comic books have also been used as educational tools for adults, most notably in Japan where adults find "the how-to-do-it comic book a quick and handy way to learn about legal problems, adult diseases, office etiquette, personal computers, tourism abroad, and other useful subjects"' (Duus).

Besides the comic book's role as a possible AIDS educator, the medium is relevant for study by scholars interested in the sociology of AIDS because of comics' potential for dealing with social issues. Although several scholars, including Thomas Andrae, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, describe how comic book characters such as Superman and Donald Duck tend to reproduce the dominant ideology, social criticism is also found in certain comic books. "The "underground comix," reaching their peak in the late 1960s, were perhaps the most extreme example of social argumentation in comic books, in many cases arguing for revolution as a reasonable solution to social problems. But even in the "overground," or mainstream books, social commentary is evident. In separate essays, for instance, Salvatore Mondello describes how the character Spider-Man comments on social problems from a liberal perspective in that superhero's comic books, even in conservative times, and Donald Palumbo argues that Spider-Man conveys a subversive, existential view toward life (232-38; 67-82). Currently the degree of social argument in comic books may be increasing, as symbolized by the success of the more adult-oriented independent comic book publishers, such as First Comics and Eclipse Comics. Both First and Eclipse, for example, have published comic books dealing with the struggle in Nicaragua and the role of the US in this struggle."

Given, then, the comic book's potential for education and social commentary, it would be valuable to study the medium's role in the AIDS crisis. As mentioned above, comic books have in fact dealt with AIDS. One of the ways the medium has played a part in the AIDS phenomenon is as an educational device. That is, there are comic books or comic book campaigns specifically designed to educate different audiences about AIDS.
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Comic Books and AIDS Education

When the comic book was at the height of its popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, it was almost exclusively a children's medium. Although a few adult underground pornographic comix existed at the time, nevertheless as Coulton Waugh said of the early comic book medium, "the children regard these as their books" (334). However, as implied by the rise of the independent comic book publishers mentioned above, this is no longer exclusively the case. There are comic books for many different age and demographic groups, with various degrees of complexity and sexual explicitness. Comic books designed to educate about AIDS reflect this diversity: there are those aimed at grade school children, those aimed at high school adolescents and those aimed at adults. Each of these will be discussed briefly.

In December of 1988 the first AIDS educational campaign to be organized by a children's comic book publisher was launched. Archie Comics, in cooperation with the AIDS Action Council, began to include in its comic books and comic digests (the latter being smaller but thicker collections of comic stories) a full-page public service message arguing for AIDS education. The campaign lasted one year, reaching an estimated thirteen million children worldwide (which is the total circulation of Archie publications in one year). In addition to the one-page announcement running in Archie publications, full-color posters were made available for display in comic book shops.4

Figure 1 reprints this effort. As can be seen, the top of the message announces that this page is "A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM ARCHIE COMICS." The setting is a classroom with such characters as Archie, Veronica and Jughead listening to their high school principle, Mr. Weatherbee. Mr. Weatherbee points to a chalkboard which reads, "HEALTH EDUCATION. AIDS is a serious worldwide problem that affects people of all ages, in all walks of life. Until a cure is found, there is only one effective weapon against this problem. And that weapon is . . . EDUCATION." In the bottom left-hand corner of the page, there is a small box that states, "PARENTS: For More Information Call, The Centers for Disease Control's Hotline, Toll Free 1-800-342-AIDS."

Other AIDS educational comic book efforts are also designed for the adolescent. Funded by various organizations, over 200,000 copies of AIDS News, a full-color comic, have been published by an AIDS organization, POCAAN (People of Color Against AIDS Network), and drawn and written by Seattle cartoonists Leonard Rifas and Mark Campos. Four hundred copies of the AIDS comic book were distributed free in 1988 with The Comics Fandom Examiner, (a small-press comics newsletter published by the Seattle Four ("'Comics F/X'" 50).
A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM Archie COMICS

HEALTH EDUCATION

AIDS IS A SERIOUS WORLDWIDE PROBLEM THAT AFFECTS PEOPLE OF ALL AGES, IN ALL WALKS OF LIFE. UNTIL A CURE IS FOUND, THERE IS ONLY ONE EFFECTIVE WEAPON AGAINST THIS PROBLEM. ...AND THAT WEAPON IS...EDUCATION!!

PARENTS: For More Information Call, The Centers For Disease Control's Hotline, Toll Free 1-800-342-AIDS

Figure 1. Archie Comics' PSA, from Archie, No. 357, 1988. © 1988, Archie Comic Publications Inc.
Also, besides POCAAN, other AIDS organizations have been involved in the production and distribution of AIDS educational comic books. The San Francisco AIDS Foundation, a non-profit group funded by various organizations in California, has produced large amounts of AIDS educational material, including comic books. One such book, entitled *Risky Business*, is targeted for teenagers in the thirteen- to seventeen-year-old range (Figs. 2 and 3). Like *AIDS News*, *Risky Business* is a color comic and has been subsidized with money from a major corporation, in this case the Pacific Telesis Foundation. Incorporating humor, *Risky Business* features two stories. The first, “AIDS Virus,” explains the nature of AIDS (and, as Figure 2 shows, with a liberal dose of humor, T-Cells are personified as “Mr. T-Cells”) and describes safer and riskier behaviors. The second, “Risky Business,” shows how teenagers may incorporate AIDS information into their lives.

AIDS educational comic books have also been produced for adults. The San Francisco AIDS Foundation, in fact, has made available two such books, both aimed at I-V drug users. The first, *The Adventures of Bleachman*, has “Bleachman” (a comic book superhero with a bleach bottle for a head) demonstrating how to sterilize needles with bleach. The second, *The Works: Drugs, Sex and AIDS*, “presents five different scenarios that stress the importance of not sharing needles, using condoms and spermicides, cleaning needles, antibody testing, pregnancy and homophobia” (*AIDS Educator* 6).

Perhaps, though, the most well-known adult-oriented AIDS comic books are those produced by the Gay Men’s Health Crisis of New York City. These books, called *Safer Sex Comix*, have been termed “the most-requested safer-sex material developed by any AIDS service organization in the world” (Grover 118). *Safer Sex Comix* show, in sexually explicit stories, how gay men can have safer sex and how they can eroticize the idea of safer sex. Patterned after the small, eight-page pornographic comix of the 1930s and 1940s (“Tijuana Bibles”), these comic books were created in the mid-1980s by famous gay comic artists such as Gerald Donelan (Fig. 4) and Tom of Finland. Although *Safer Sex* Nos. 1-8 are available for one dollar through the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, they originally were passed out at gay bars in order to distribute safer sex information among gays. Jan Grover has pointed out how the small size of *Safer Sex* encouraged gay bargoers to save the books by placing them in their pocket (122). As will be discussed later, *Safer Sex* became an object of turmoil in the United States Senate in 1987.

But besides comic books or comic book campaigns that have been created explicitly for education, AIDS has shown up in comic books in at least two other forms. The second form is through the portrayal of AIDS in existing comic book stories.
Figure 2. AIDS Education for Teens, from *Risky Business*, 1988. © 1988, San Francisco AIDS Foundation.
Figure 3. How to Use a Condom, from Risky Business, 1988. © 1988, San Francisco AIDS Foundation.
Figure 4. AIDS Education for Adults, from Safer Sex Comix, No. 4, 1986. © 1986, GMHC Publications.
AIDS in Comic Book Stories

With the increased tendency of comic books to deal with social issues, it should not be surprising that AIDS has been written into several comic book story lines. Even the mainstream, “Big Two” comic book publishers, the Marvel Comics Group and DC Comics, have incorporated AIDS stories into their already existing comic books. In fact, the two publishers have used AIDS at least four times, each one publishing two comic books with story lines dealing with AIDS.

Marvel was perhaps the first, incorporating a condition which at least seemed like AIDS in issue Nos. 37-50 of *Alpha Flight*, which were published beginning in 1986. Alpha Flight is the “officially-sanctioned” superhero group of Canada, organized to protect that nation from superpowered threats. One member of the group, a half-human/half-elf character named Northstar, was apparently gay—at least Bill Mantlo, the writer of *Alpha Flight* at the time, implied this: “What would you know of real love,” one super-adversary asks of Northstar (7). Northstar, in this storyline, contracts a “mysterious illness” which breaks down his “body’s systems” (Fig. 5). Later in the series, Northstar moves to an elf-world, where the germ-free environment allows him to live.

In Marvel’s *DP-7*, a supporting character contracts AIDS. “DP” stands for “displaced paranormals,” or people who have developed superpowers as a result of a mysterious phenomenon called the “white event.” In *DP-7* No. 24, it is revealed that the husband of one DP, Stephanie, was infected by HIV as a result of his affair with another woman (Gruenwald 24). The husband, Chuck, does not tell Stephanie about his condition and stays with her only because her “paranormality” is special “healing power” that he believes will help his condition (Fig. 6). Later in the series, she leaves Chuck, and the series was cancelled before it was resolved whether she was also HIV-positive.

DC Comics has also incorporated AIDS as a plot device in selected comic books. *Green Arrow*, for example, a comic book carrying the disclaimer “Suggested for Mature Readers,” included the condition in one of its stories. In *Green Arrow* No. 6, a black mobster, Kebo, organizes “gay bashes” because he blames gays for the HIV that he was infected with in prison (Grell 6). Later in the story, Kebo is murdered by his boss in the crime organization.

But probably the most extensive portrayal of AIDS in mainstream comic books occurs in DC’s *The New Guardians*. The New Guardians is a group of superheroes put on earth by benevolent aliens to ensure the continuation of the human race. In issue No. 1, the group is attacked by a vampire-like creature called the Hemogoblin, who bites one of the characters, Jet, and scratches another character (a gay man, Extrano).5
Figure 5. Northstar Is Stricken by “Mysterious Illness,” from Alpha Flight, No. 49, 1987. © 1987, Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.
Figure 6. Stephanie Discovers Her Husband Has AIDS, from DP 7, No. 24, 1988. © 1988, Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.
Later in that issue, it is discovered that the Hemoglobin has AIDS. Jet and Extrano consider themselves to be at risk of exposure to the virus, and so does another character, Harbinger, who is “symbiotically linked” to Jet. In issue No. 3, which apparently takes place no longer than a month later, the three New Guardians begin counseling sessions at an AIDS clinic. Jet’s HIV antibody tests turn up positive; she is given a “new experimental” drug but begins to manifest immune deficiency. In issue No. 4, it is mentioned that Extrano and Harbinger are also HIV positive and that Jet “was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS.” Later in the series, Jet dies fighting an alien invasion, and Harbinger is cured of HIV by exposure to the alien’s “gene bomb.” This left Extrano, the gay male character, as the only one in the series as HIV positive.

But besides the portrayal of AIDS in mainstream books, AIDS has also appeared in alternative comics. In particular, comics produced by gay creators for gay readers have portrayed AIDS and its effects in many diverse ways. Basically, the gay-oriented comics have three avenues in which they see print: (1) in “underground” gay comic books such as *Gay Comix*, begun in 1980 and originally edited by Howard Cruse (and, since 1984, edited by Robert Triptow), (2) through the gay newspapers and magazines such as *The Advocate* and *Seattle Gay News* and (3) in bound collections which are usually reprints of the first two forms. The focus of the rest of this discussion, then, will be on the first two vehicles which concentrate on first-run gay comics.

AIDS has, of course, impacted on the gay community in tremendous and horrifying ways, and this impact is reflected in the comic art that is produced by and for this community. For example, in *Gay Comix* No. 4, published in 1983, Howard Cruse created the first published extensive work of comic art which centered on AIDS. Entitled “Safe Sex,” it was a six-page montage of images featuring the various effects of the AIDS crisis on different publics. Although it incorporates humor in places, “Safe Sex” also dealt with the many tragedies of AIDS: in one panel Cruse informs readers that a sympathetic character he had previously created, Billy, has died from AIDS.

For gay comic artists, the portrayal of AIDS in their work represents a moral dilemma. The following quote by Cruse reflects many of the conflicts faced by gay comic artists when dealing with AIDS:

I made several tries at doing a narrative, but felt that everything I came up with was trivializing the disease. This was something that people were dying horrible deaths from. I couldn’t just make it a casual comic book plot device. (qtd. in Groth and Fiore 298)

This tension is also felt by gay cartoonists whose major outlets are the gay news publications. Although this paper focuses on comic books, a brief discussion of gay comic strips which deal with AIDS is warranted. Cruse, for example, included the anxieties and tragedies created by AIDS
in his strip “Wendel,” a strip which focused on a gay relationship, and was published until recently in the Advocate. As another gay comic artist, Jerry Mills, notes, “Wendel’s pairing with his boyfriend Ollie was probably the first extended comic examination of gay relationships” (12). One series of “Wendel” strips involved Wendel coping with the news that his first lover, Sawyer, has AIDS.

Indeed, the pervasiveness of the AIDS phenomenon in the gay community has completely altered some artists’ approaches to their work. Originally, the strip “Poppers,” created by Mills and published in In Touch, had as a major source of humor the sexual adventures of one character, Billy. But because of AIDS, Mills had to reevaluate the message of the strip. As he explains,

Actually, the whole slant of the strip is sexual promiscuity, and that, of course, changed overnight, so I had to do a lot of soul-searching. I decided to address the problems within the comic strip itself. There hasn’t been one strip that I’ve done since AIDS that I don’t stop and think, “Am I doing the right thing? What can I have Billy do?” (qtd. in Triptow 63)

Besides Cruse and Mills, gay comic artists Vaughn, in his “Watch Out” for Seattle Gay News, Kurt Erichsen, in his strip “Murphy’s Manor,” a self-syndicated national weekly, Bruce Billing’s “Castro” and Gerald Donelan’s strips for the Advocate, among others, have dealt with AIDS issues.

Thus, this paper has discussed two ways AIDS has pervaded comics—through AIDS educational comic books and through the portrayal of AIDS in comic storylines and characters. But a final way that comic books have been involved with AIDS is through the donation of profits made from the sale of AIDS-related comic art to AIDS causes.

**AIDS Charity Comic Books**

It is not unknown for artists to donate their work for AIDS causes. Such efforts as “Art Against AIDS” have raised much money for AIDS medical research. But perhaps lesser-known efforts have come from comic artists. Comic book practitioners—both from the mainstream and the alternative comics—have donated some of their work to comic books, the proceeds from which went to AIDS charities. There are two explicit examples of this, the first from Great Britain called Strip AIDS and the second from the US called Strip AIDS USA. A less obvious but nonetheless relevant example is the collection of donated work found in AARGH! (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia), which was organized in reaction to Clause 28 in Great Britain, a government action designed to repress gay rights.
Strip AIDS was organized in 1987 by two British comic book practitioners, Don Melia and Lionel Gracey-Whitman, to raise money for a special medical AIDS unit in Britain called the London Lighthouse (Stangroom, "Strip Aids" 70). Strip AIDS was a one-shot, black and white comic magazine featuring the donated art and stories of over 100 practitioners, including such well-known comics figures as Alan Moore. Most of the work contributed dealt with AIDS-related topics, for example, the portrayal of prejudice and individual coping mechanisms. Also, much of the practitioners' original artwork for the magazine was donated to the Strip AIDS cause, being shown in galleries in Great Britain and used to illustrate educational brochures and magazines (Robbins, Sienkiewicz, and Triptow).

In the Spring of 1988, the American equivalent of Strip AIDS was published. Edited and organized by Trina Robbins (an underground comix creator), Bill Sienkiewicz (an "overground" artist who has worked for such publishers as Marvel) and Robert Triptow (editor of Gay Comics), Strip AIDS USA was a 140-page trade paperback featuring work contributed by a variety of gay and straight comic artists and writers, including Neal Adams, Howard Cruse, Gerald Donelan, Nicole Hollander, Harvey Pekar and Garry Trudeau. As with Strip AIDS, all of the work features AIDS related images—for example Trudeau's "Dr. Whooppee" strips from "Doonesbury" were reprinted in Strip AIDS USA (Fig. 7). Also, profits from the sales of Strip AIDS USA went to the Shanti Project, an organization which, among other activities, provides education about AIDS and support services to People Living With AIDS. In fact, the first edition of Strip AIDS USA sold out, earning the Shanti Project over $11,000 ("Strip AIDS USA" 69).

Finally, an indirect example of AIDS charity comic book is the British originated AARGH!, produced by Debbie Delano and Phyllis Moore and published by Mad Love (Publishing) Ltd. AARGH!, published in October of 1988, was a 72-page black and white, magazine-sized comic book featuring art which exposes the injustice and homophobia of society. Several practitioners who donated work for Strip AIDS and Strip AIDS USA also donated work for AARGH!, including Harvey Pekar and Alan Moore. AARGH! was organized to protest Clause 28 of the Local Government Act in Great Britain. The Clause was written "to withdraw public funding from any local government authority which uses the funding 'to promote the homosexual lifestyle' " (Stangroom, "AARGH" 48). Obviously, then, the Clause outlaws AIDS education explicitly aimed at gay men and, in fact, was probably written in reaction to such educational programs. As stated in the inside cover, profits from the sale of AARGH! "will be given to the Organization for Lesbian and Gay Action to be used to fight oppression" (Delano and Moore).
The preceding three sections have described three ways that comic books have been involved with AIDS. But descriptions of such images are of little use without an accompanying analysis of the images. What, then, are the strengths and weaknesses, the potential benefits and dangers, of comic books and AIDS?

_Advantages and Disadvantages of the Comic Book for AIDS Images_

Surveying the types of images produced in comics focusing on AIDS and speculating on the potential for comic images of AIDS, several characteristics of the comic books seem to be very beneficial to the cause of AIDS awareness, compassion, understanding and education.

First of all comic books because of their dominant mode of presentation lend themselves very well to the illustration of processes. The linear-panel structure and visual orientation of comics make the form an ideal educational tool for showing how to do things. Thus, panel one of a comic book may show the first step in a process, panel two may show the second step, etc. With AIDS education, the illustrating of processes is especially crucial. Educating people how to have safer sex, how to use a condom, how to clean needles, how to understand the HIV/AIDS infection process and other processes associated with AIDS are necessary in the creation of awareness and even the saving of lives. As Hess, Kleinhans and Lesage argue, “all AIDS education needs to offer a complete and graphic description of the range of sexual practices, and an indication of how those practices can be modified to prevent an exchange of bodily fluids” (117). Examples of how comic books may do this have been described earlier. The Gay Men’s Health Crisis _Safer Sex Comix_ utilized the “process” characteristic of comic books to show gay men how to have safer sex (Fig. 4). The San Francisco AIDS Foundation, in its comic books, have shown how to wear a condom (Fig. 3) and how to clean needles with bleach (Fig. 2). Thus, comic books may illustrate, because of their very nature, specifically how to alter risky behaviors, and many organizations have taken full advantage of this characteristic.

Secondly, as the earlier quotation by W.W.D. Sones notes, comic books combine visual and verbal forms of communication. Because of the visual reinforcement of the written text, comic books can be adjusted to various age levels. This is especially valuable in the communicating of messages that are so important as to be a matter of life and death. The messages are not dependent solely upon the written text: comic book messages may be reinforced both verbally and visually. Because the effectiveness of purely written texts is questionable when dealing with some of the key publics relevant to AIDS education, such as young children and IV drug users, a medium that uses both words and pictures is worthy of consideration. For example, the comic book _The Works:_
Drugs, Sex and AIDS, produced by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, was designed to be distributed to and read by I-V drug users with low reading levels.

Also, the comic book is a very non-threatening medium. Articles and brochures, perhaps, may create too much anxiety, especially with such an emotion-laden topic such as AIDS, and this anxiety may be detrimental for the acceptance of the message. Comic books, again perhaps because of their visual aspect or perhaps because of their child and humor connotation, may deal with frightening subjects in a very down-to-earth yet non-threatening manner.

Finally, comic books are a personalizing medium. Sones argues that the personal and human aspect of the medium is the characteristic that explains its ability to hold the attention of readers so well. Comic books combine the visual advantages of video and film (we are able to see the individual characters featured) with the psychological advantages of literature (we are, through word balloons, able to read feelings and thoughts of these individual characters). In comic books, because of this combination of elements, stories tend not to focus on high levels of abstraction, but rather they focus on people, on individuals, and may be a very effective tool in creating empathy and compassion for People Living With AIDS and for those who have been labeled as “at risk” by the medical and other institutions. Those labeled “at risk” include the gay community, drug users and, more and more, the poor: groups which traditionally are delegitimized and even dehumanized by dominant, traditional forms of discourse. Any medium which may create compassion for such groups is a powerful tool. In the case of AIDS, the comic art of the gay community, works by Howard Cruse, Jerry Mills, Kurt Erichsen and others, have been outstanding in conveying the terrifying effects of this phenomenon on individuals—not just the medical effects but the political, social and cultural effects as well. Also, because many people feel “isolated” from the AIDS crisis (i.e., “it can’t happen to me”), comic book portrayals may drive home the impact of AIDS for these people. Works such as Cruse’s “Wendel” strips, which have been called by Village Voice writer Richard Goldstein “the most accessible work of gay fiction yet created,” may build empathy for the gay community’s anguish because of AIDS, empathy that is missing from those who consider gay people as “other” (qtd. in “St. Martin’s Press” 38).

Thus, there are some major points to be made for the involvement of comic books, as a mass medium, with the AIDS crisis. But there are also some major disadvantages. Any comic book practitioner must be aware of and deal with these disadvantages when working on AIDS issues. First, for those creators working in the “mainstream” comic book industry, there is the very real danger that economic/industrial/organizational constraints will mold the AIDS images and portrayals
to be bland, trivial or even detrimental. For example, with the requirement of turning out a twenty-three to twenty-five page story monthly or bi-monthly, the temptation might be, as Howard Cruse warned, to use AIDS as a mere plot device, a literary tool, at the expense of compassion and accuracy. This temptation has, it could be argued, manifested itself with all four mainstream AIDS portrayals described earlier. With Marvel’s *Alpha Flight*, for example, Bill Mantlo, the title’s writer, was given instructions to pare down the number of members in Alpha Flight because of the large number of characters already present and, more importantly, the poor sales of the book (McKinney 32). One way this was done, apparently, was to give the “implied” gay character, Northstar, “implied” AIDS. Likewise, in *Green Arrow*, a character, Kebo, was given AIDS apparently to explain why he hated gay men and arranged for a series of “gay bashes”: no social comment was made to explain or criticize his specific hatred but apparently the writer felt Kebo’s condition made an effectively dramatic plot twist. The danger is that such portrayals of AIDS and People Living With AIDS are strictly utilitarian: AIDS is portrayed—and exists in the story—so long as it advances the plot and provides interesting twists for next month’s story. Social responsibility, accurate information, fair and compassionate renderings are not the main criteria for success in this industrialized realm.

Related to this constraint, what can be said in a mainstream book about AIDS because of the condition’s connotative linkages with sex, drugs, morality and deviant behavior is very limited. Even at their most bland, mainstream comic book portrayals of AIDS are risky propositions for comic book companies, especially those companies which target for younger readers. As Michael Silberkleit, Archie Comics Productions Publisher, said about their unremarkable campaign: “We took a long, long time to come to this decision, but what the heck? We’re not going to show the Archie characters in sexual situations; we’re just going to inform our enormous audience about a life-threatening situation” (Thompson 20). Although it is not essential that an educational campaign show “characters in sexual situations,” it is essential that at least some specific information is provided, at least more than “AIDS is a serious worldwide problem, etc.” The safer (for the company) but practically contentless Archie campaign is reminiscent of the “Don’t Die of Ignorance” campaign in Britain—the ambiguity of the campaign itself assured that some people would die of ignorance, as Simon Watney and others have pointed out (Watney 137).

Similarly, the reason that the sexual orientation and the condition of Northstar in *Alpha Flight* was implied rather than explicit was that the organization was concerned that such open portrayals would offend readers. As Bill Mantlo stated, “When the company found out what we were doing [with the character of Northstar], an edict came down declaring
that not only could Northstar not die of AIDS, but we couldn’t even have a gay character because it was controversial” (qtd. in McKinney 33). Thus, the particular economic-industrial context of the very mainstream Marvel Comics Group worked to severely constrain the discussion of AIDS, especially in this 1986 storyline that was created before an “AIDS as plot device” precedent had been established in an overground comic book.

Also, when discussing AIDS, decisions made about what language to use—how to describe and label modes of transmission, for example—are extremely important. These language choices are important because misinformation could be life-threatening and also because it is very easy with hastily and irresponsibly chosen words to unfairly label groups associated with AIDS. Certain comic book portrayals, especially but not exclusively those produced by the mainstream comic book publishers, have been inexcusably careless with their use of language in AIDS images. Part of this may be due to the fact that comic book writers for the majors are not well-informed about AIDS and do not have the time nor the space to do justice to the complexity of AIDS.

In *The New Guardian*, for example, in a recent 1988 story, the very important distinctions between virus exposure, HIV antibody positive and “full-blown AIDS” are not made clear; in fact, they seem to blur. The character Jet is described in one issue as being tested positive for HIV and in the next issue is described as having “full-blown AIDS” without the chronology of events being made clear. In fact, judging from the sequence of events, Jet goes from exposure of the virus to testing positive for HIV antibodies to developing “full-blown AIDS” in less than a month, which is, according to current medical knowledge, very unlikely. Also, it is strongly implied in the story that HIV may be transmitted from one person to another by a scratch, since one character, Extrano, becomes HIV positive because of a scratch from the villain, Hemogoblin. When one letter writer criticized *The New Guardians* for such a false portrayal, the editors responded that “without specific proof, no doctor...can say for sure how a person contracts the virus” (“Editorial Reply”). Although the editor’s response is true, nevertheless the action of the story may lead readers to believe that Extrano was infected by a scratch, and medical ambiguity does not relieve the storyteller of responsibility for the events in the story.

Other producers besides the majors have also made language choices that are disadvantageous. The title of one story in the *Risky Business* comic book is “AIDS Virus.” Although this is a simple term that the teen readers of the comic book may easily grasp, it is nevertheless a misnomer because there are those who are HIV positive but who do not have AIDS—for those in this situation, the linguistic distinction between the two concepts is crucial. Also, the back cover of *Strip AIDS*
USA features a page of work by Will Eisner. Eisner’s creation, the Spirit, tells readers “ Victims of AIDS need help, not rejection.” Yet as several writers, including People Living With AIDS, have argued, the term “AIDS Victim” is a negative one for these people, signifying passivity, symbolically discouraging activism and denying them a legitimate voice in the discourse.

Finally, comic books will probably always be an imperfect vehicle for AIDS portrayals because of the medium’s specific image in our society. Although there are many outstanding adult-oriented comic books produced today, still the primary connotation of the comic book is that it is a medium for children. This child-image has at least two effects. One, it was noted earlier that the comic book is a non-threatening medium. However, there is a detrimental flipside to this benefit. Many potential readers may not treat comic books seriously enough to read them or to earnestly consider their message. After all, they are “only comic books” to many adults. This relationship that the medium may have to some members of its audience may limit its effectiveness as an educational tool. But also, because comics have this “child” image, any sexual explicitness, even in adult comics, may leave the medium vulnerable to external right-wing criticism. That is, conservatives noting the traditional role of the comic book as a children’s medium may point to comic books as an example of how frank AIDS education may “corrupt youth.”

The concern over the media corruption of children is not a new concern in the conservative camp. In fact, comic books in the past, because of their role as a children’s medium, have been attacked as a cause of juvenile delinquency. What is new about the dangers of AIDS issues in comic books is that it brings in another reactionary fear: that gays will corrupt children, too. Thus, there are several moralistic syllogisms at work here. One syllogism begins the formula by arguing: “All specific AIDS education promotes a gay lifestyle; some AIDS comic books are specific AIDS educators; therefore these AIDS comic books promote a gay lifestyle.” A connecting syllogism incorporates fears about children: “All comic books are read by children; gay lifestyles are promoted in AIDS comic books; therefore children are exposed to a promotion of gay lifestyle.” Finally, of course, there is the simplistic syllogism which contributes: “Children are directly affected by mass media; comic books are a mass medium; comic books directly affect children.” Thus, in conservatives’ minds, vulnerable children are not simply corrupted by gays (through sympathetic AIDS education) nor simply by media (through the children-only comic book) but by both at once.

These anxieties were given solidity by Jesse Helms, the very conservative Senator from North Carolina. In one session of the Senate, Helms used a Gay Men’s Health Crisis Safer Sex Comix (the one produced
by Gerald Donelan, Fig. 4) as an example of what he saw as material which "promotes sodomy and the homosexual lifestyle as an acceptable alternative in American society." Helms showed the comic book to his colleagues and noted that "I believe that if the American people saw these books, they would be on the verge of revolt." After using the comic book as a "visual aid" for what he saw as gay decadence, Helms then went on to introduce an amendment that would

prohibit the use of any funds provided under [a federal AIDS education funding act] from being used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote or encourage or condone homosexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs. (qtd. in Grimp 261, 259)

With some debate and revision, the amendment, essentially an American version of the British Clause 28, was passed ninety-four to two. The point is that Helms could have chosen as his "decadence example" sexually explicit brochures which used photos but instead chose the comic book. By doing so, Helms plugged into subconscious, or even conscious, anxieties about children, gays and the mass media. To some senators, then, the comic book was probably indeed shocking because of these anxieties.

The report card of comic book involvement with AIDS receives mixed grades. Clearly the comic books produced by AIDS organizations and the gay community are better and more valuable than those produced by mainstream comic book companies. However, one could argue that the awareness of AIDS by mainstream companies, and their willingness to discuss the condition, is at least a preliminary step in the right direction. Future comic book approaches toward AIDS should seek to maximize the presentational and consumer advantages of comic books while being very much aware of the dangers of language and of the image of the comic book in our society. Comic books can and have contributed positively to the discourse about AIDS: images that encourage true education, understanding and compassion can help cope with a biomedical condition which has more than a biomedical relevance.

Notes

1See, for example, the use of "Blondie" comic strips by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene as described in "Mental Hygiene Takes to the Comics," *American Journal of Public Health* 41:1 (1951): 102; and analysis of health content in other newspaper comic strips and the possible impact on health education in Arnold M. Rose, "Mental Health Attitudes of Youth as Influenced by a Comic Strip," *Journalism Quarterly* 35:3 (1958), and Alan J. Sofalvi and Judy C. Drolet, "Health-related Content of Selected Sunday Comic Strips," *Journal of School Health* 56:5
(1986). All three articles point to the potential benefits of comic strips as tools for health education.


2See, for example, Whisper, Nos. 10 and 11 (Chicago: First Publishing, 1988) and Alan Moore, Bill Sienkiewicz, Joyce Brabner and Tom Yeates, Brought to Light (Foresville, CA: Eclipse Comics, 1988).


5See, for example, the excellent discussion of the "moral panic" over juvenile delinquency and comic books in the 1950s in James Gilbert, A Cycle of Outrage (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

Works Cited

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