

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Northumbria at Newcastle		
Unit of Assessment: 27 (English Language and Literature)		
Title of case study: Improving recognition, perception, and visibility of comics as a tool to facilitate learning, literacy, and creativity		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Melanie Gibson	Senior Lecturer / Associate Professor	16/03/1998 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Children’s comics use compelling visuals and accessible narratives that enable young people to develop, learn, and explore unique worlds. Yet for much of the late twentieth century, comics were considered problematic as an educational tool. Research by Dr Melanie Gibson challenged this conventional wisdom, demonstrating to museum professionals and educational practitioners the neglected importance, accessibility, and function of comics. Gibson’s work (1) was instrumental in establishing the UK Comic Laureate, a biennial appointment made to a distinguished creator of comics to promote the medium to mainstream audiences. Gibson’s research determined the Laureate’s ongoing strategic focus, resulting in extensive ambassadorial activity in schools, libraries, and other educational settings since 2014. This successful work (2), combined with an ongoing collaboration between Gibson and Lakes International Comic Art Festival, has changed perceptions of, and provided greater visibility for, comics, including demonstrating their value in supporting things such as literacy. The work also helped to promote greater gender parity in what has traditionally been a male-dominated medium. Finally, (3) working with Seven Stories (the National Centre for Children’s Books), Gibson’s research improved curatorial understanding at the organisation regarding the importance of comics in the social history of children’s literature. These insights were used to develop a first of its kind national exhibition, attracting over 49,670 visitors, supporting their goal to inspire a love of reading across generations.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Gibson is a pivotal figure in UK comics scholarship whose work focuses on changing attitudes towards children’s comics and developing awareness of the rich history and culture of comics for children in Britain. From the 1950s onwards, comics were widely believed to undermine literacy and possibly to be morally corrupting. As a result, they were routinely dismissed as unworthy of attention or serious scholarship. Gibson’s two-decade research career at Northumbria has generated the insights to change these attitudes. Gibson was the first academic to research the extensive, yet previously neglected, genre of British comics for girls and young women [R1-R3]. Gibson’s research challenged the suppositions commonly held in Britain in the late twentieth century that comics were aimed solely at male readers and that girls’ comics either did not exist or were insignificant. Gibson’s research has been an important process of recovery, revealing the appeal and popularity of comics for girls: weekly titles enjoyed a circulation of up to a million between the 1950s and 1980s [R1-R3].</p> <p>Commonly, analysis of the British girls’ comics that dominated girlhood reading between the 1950s and 1980s has focused on only one kind of protagonist – the victim – but Gibson’s research uncovered a wider range of protagonists, many emphasising aspiration, activity, and resilience rather than passivity. Titles from the 1980s and 1990s were often reactions to, or extensions of, the perceived limits of earlier titles. In some cases, these presented caustic</p>		

responses to what might be seen as a hugely dominant discourse about an idealised construction of girlhood and the narratives and protagonists appropriate to it [R1]. The research also investigated the scale and influence of this genre and the centrality of it to girls' comic reading in Britain, with age and other niches resulting in a wide range of titles such as *Twinkle* for 'little girls' through to *Jackie* for teens. Further analysis of these titles explored how they depicted girlhood agency, class, and popular culture. The periodicals show different degrees of engagement with popular culture, varying according to adult constructions of girls as vulnerable and in need of protection. Some were more permissive and the voice of the girl appeared in them, in others there was a more paternalistic approach. This, in turn, impacted the kind of content that they offered [R4, R5].

Gibson revealed the importance of the emotional effect (or affect) of comics on popularity through two strands of research. One strand has led her to explore comics as a form of reading for pleasure that takes place beyond the classroom. While humorous short strip comics like *The Beano* (DC Thomson 1938-date) dominate understandings of British comics, Gibson [R4, R5] emphasised that there were, and are, a range of genres, from influential horror comics like *Misty* (Fleetway 1978-1980) to specifically educational titles like *Look and Learn* (Fleetway 1962-1982). The second strand of this research demonstrated that comics have a continuing appeal to large numbers of older adults, often through memories of childhood comics [R1, R3]. Gibson's interest in the relationship between memory and comics, and the affective experience of reading and remembering them, is extended by her exploration of historical attitudes about comics with adults. This research used impactful participatory methods – notably object elicitation – where participants engage with physical copies of old comics to encourage discussion [R6].

The research also considered what changed in the early twenty-first century to alter the perception of comics and to stimulate the growth of a new children's comic culture. This included the rise of publishers specialising in graphic novels and publishing work for children and young people. It looked at institutions such as comic specific events, competitions, and awards, as well as how comics can create participatory spaces for children and young people. The research also assessed aspects of the reputation of the medium and how it has changed. Finally, and most importantly, it tracked the shift in British attitudes towards the medium, which has moved from a profoundly negative one to one that is more accepting [R5]. Gibson's research illuminates the power of comics as a medium to facilitate change in schools, libraries, and other educational environments.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Melanie Gibson (2010), 'What Bunty did next: exploring some of the ways in which the British girls' comic protagonists were revisited and revised in late twentieth-century comics and graphic novels', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 1:2, 121-135
[doi/abs/10.1080/21504857.2010.528639](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2010.528639)

R2. Melanie Gibson, Nabadzeh, G., and Sambell, K.* (eds.) (2014) Special Issue: 'Watch This Space: Childhood, Picturebooks and Comics', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 5:3, 241-379 [doi/full/10.1080/21504857.2014.943013](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.943013) Northumbria researchers made a substantial contribution to editing. Gibson was corresponding author and made the decisions on inclusion

R3. Melanie Gibson *Remembered Reading: Memory, Comics and Post-War Constructions of British Girlhood*, (University of Leuven Press, 2015) ISBN: 9789462700307. Submitted to REF2, double weighted

R4. Melanie Gibson (2018), "Who's the girl with the kissin' lips?" Constructions of class, popular culture and agentic girlhood in *Girl, Princess, Jackie and Bunty* in the 1960s', *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 7:2, 131–46 doi.org/10.1386/ffc.7.2.131_1

R5. Melanie Gibson (2018) 'Rising from the ashes: making spaces for new children's comics culture in Britain in the 21st century', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 11:2, 212-225 [doi/full/10.1080/21504857.2018.1556175](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2018.1556175)

R6. Melanie Gibson (2018) 'It's all come flooding back' Memories of childhood comics: narratives, practices and objects', in Maheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix (eds) *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* 37-56 (Palgrave Studies in Comics, 2018) [doi/10.1007%2F978-3-319-91746-7](https://doi.org/10.1007%2F978-3-319-91746-7)

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4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Gibson's research has raised awareness of the benefits of comics as learning tools, leading to improved recognition and visibility of the genre. It achieved this by underpinning the establishment of the Comic Laureateship, an honorary biennial appointment made to a distinguished creator of comics, whose three holders have promoted the benefits of comics for improving children's literacy and creativity. Impact has also been generated through an ongoing collaboration with Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF), which has built its strategic direction on Gibson's work. Furthermore, her insights enabled Seven Stories (the National Centre for Children's Books) to improve curatorial expertise and develop a major exhibition on comics based on her research, supporting their core mission to advance the education of children and young people in the arts and literature and to inspire a love of reading across generations.

4.1 Informing the creation and direction of the UK Comic Laureate post

Before 2014, there was no official focal point for the comics medium. Gibson's research proved critical in the formation of the Comic Laureateship in 2014, establishing the core aims and remit that have made the position an ongoing success in raising the profile of comics to facilitate learning, improve children's literacy, and foster engagement with literature [E1]. Administered by LICAF, the Laureateship champions the role of comics in learning environments through a programme of educational visits, workshops, and guest appearances, increasing the acceptance of comics as a creative art form in schools and libraries in particular [E1]. The Creative Director at LICAF confirmed that Gibson's research helped to 'set the agenda and strategic focus of the comic laureate ... it is fair to say the underlining objective is one [for which] Dr Gibson's research has played a vital role' [E2].

Three writers have been Comic Laureate: 2014–2017 illustrator and graphic novelist Dave Gibbons, whose artwork featured in the bestselling series *Watchmen* and *2000AD*; 2017–2018 Charlie Adlard, who has drawn *Walking Dead* since 2004 and worked on *Savage*, *The X-Files*, *Mars Attacks*, and *Judge Dredd*; and, since 2019 Hannah Berry, the award-winning creator of graphic novels *Adamtine* and *Livestock* [E3]. Berry noted 'the increased interest in comics ... also had the effect of emphasising the need for more gender parity in what was traditionally a very male-dominated medium' [E1]. These themes were central to Gibson's research, and it is Gibson's insights which Berry states 'played a crucial role in determining the outlook and goals of the Comics Laureate, something reflected in its successful ambassadorial remit and activity to date' [E1]. Indeed, Berry has cited Gibson's exploration of comics as problematic reading material, as having 'informed much of the work of Dave Gibbons [the first Laureate]', and her research into how children's libraries and schools viewed and used comic collections was similarly 'reflected in how Charlie Adlard [the second Laureate], engaged with the use of comics by education practitioners' [E1]. Berry has outlined the importance of the Laureate for promoting comics as a tool for improving literacy: 'when my post was announced ... my inbox was flooded with requests from excited teachers wanting to get comics into the classroom' [E1].

In addition, Laureates have also carried out hundreds of public appearances, judged awards, and advised other organisations about developing their use of comics and improving links to the wider comics community. Since taking on the role of Laureate, Berry alone has been interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* and BBC Radio 6 Music's *Paperback Writers*, and judged the

Art Foundation Fellowship Award, the Koestler Awards, Comedy Women in Print Awards, and the Royal Society of Literature's Literature Matters Awards. She has also advised organisations including Arts Council England, Howard League for Penal Reform, The Cartoon Museum, the Society of Authors, and the Association of Illustrators [E1]. This activity, according to Berry, provides an indication of the important role the Laureate has played in helping to change '*public perception of comics and comics creators*' [E1].

4.2 Supporting the establishment and growth of LICAF to improve recognition of comics

The Lakes International Comic Art Festival is based in Kendal, Cumbria. Established in 2013, LICAF has grown from ~4,000 attendees in year one to more than 15,000 in 2019. Despite COVID restrictions, LICAF created a virtual festival, which, by October 2020, had received ~9,000 views [E2]. LICAF is the only comic art organisation that is funded as a National Portfolio Organisation by Arts Council England and is now widely recognised as a driving force in supporting and promoting the comics medium [E2]. These successes, as confirmed by LICAF's Artistic Director, stem from their strategic goal to define the attraction as being a family- and children-orientated event: '*it is, in part at least, a direct result of our early and ongoing collaboration with Dr Gibson that has helped LICAF to position itself in this manner*' [E2].

Gibson's research has been cited by LICAF as '*a guiding force from the start, and a consistent influence ever since*' [E2]. As with her involvement in determining the focus of the Comic Laureate, Gibson's insights relating to childhood and girls in particular, was '*of considerable interest to the founders of LICAF ...because most events have for some time been "macho" in their outlook, the issues of family, children, girls, and girlhood were not sufficiently catered for. Gibson's research provided critical insights into these issues and themes, and played an important role in informing our aim, concept, and desired "feel" as a festival*' [E2]. This provides further evidence of the way in which Gibson's work has improved understanding of comics, helping to make the genre more accessible to girls and young women by demonstrating how they have historically always been a chief consumer of and contributor to the genre.

Since LICAF was established, Gibson has continued to assist them with specific projects that has supported engagement with younger audiences. The Founder Director noted how Gibson advised them on '*the use of Kendal Library, in line with her research on developing and promoting library collections for young people, ...set a pattern for its use in subsequent festivals. Our "Little LICAF Live" event is a good example of this in practice*' [E2]. Designed for children aged 12 and under, this programme involves interactive workshops, tutorials, and readings by prominent comic artists [E4]. This addition to the festival has '*drawn on Mel's insights. We are now also in discussions to begin a new focus, specifically on girls' comics, that will feature when LICAF returns to an in-person festival in 2021*' [E2].

4.3 Enhanced curatorial understanding of comics, to improve educational provision and remit of Seven Stories

Seven Stories is the National Centre for Children's Books, a major museum and visitor centre dedicated to '*promot(ing) children's books*' and '*inspir[ing] a love of reading across generations*' [E5]. Awarded National status in 2012 through Arts Council England accreditation, it is recognised internationally for its work preserving UK literary heritage and engaging visitors in children's literature through award winning education projects and exhibitions. Despite longstanding experience in children's literature, few comics were held in the Seven Stories archives. In 2017, Seven Stories management commissioned Gibson to develop a programme of CPD training [E6], providing staff with better understanding of the comic medium to support its charitable purpose '*to advance the education of the public in particular children and young people in the arts and literature*' [E5]. This new curatorial knowledge enabled Seven Stories to begin to develop their comic archive and curate and host an exhibition and national tour on comics in 2017–2020 [E7a-b].

Drawing on her research – in particular her monograph *Remembered Reading* – Gibson addressed a key knowledge gap among programming, learning, and curatorial staff at Seven Stories, equipping them with new skills and insights [E6]. The Collection and Exhibitions Director

noted how comic books were *'outside of our normal knowledge area, outside our collection, and an area in which we had no real professional expertise. Mel's research ... gave us insight into how comics work and a sense of their connections with children's books'* [E6]. Gibson's research on gender formed a key component of the training, the Senior Curator noted how the research helped them to *'steer a course through a complex and largely unfamiliar subject'* [E8].

This activity enabled Seven Stories to curate the exhibition 'Comics!' [E7a-b] which ran July 2017 to June 2018, attracting over 49,670 visitors, including over 4,000 school visitors [E8]. The research had helped staff to understand how to compose and balance the exhibition to ensure that it featured female creators, characters, and girl-focused comics [E7b] as well as engaging with nostalgia. Feedback stated how the comic creation area in the exhibition *'would be brilliant for older children too, and I even took away some ideas to use at work with my younger secondary school children'* [E9]. Moreover, the curatorial team noted the impact the exhibition had in appealing to a more varied audience than their exhibitions usually attract. As a centre for children's literature Seven Stories audiences are *'typically young families'*; for 'Comics!', however, *'there were more older adult visitors than is usually the case'* [E8]. The exhibition was followed by a national tour, from June 2018 to February 2020, with five venues across the UK hosting it for 2-3 months each [E9]. In these ways *"Dr Gibson's research has played a vital role in shaping"* a new public appreciation of comics which has emerged over the past six years [E2].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Ref.	Source of corroboration	Link to claimed impact
E1	Testimonial - Hannah Berry, Comic Laureate	Demonstrates contribution of research to establishment and success of Comic Laureate post
E2	Testimonial - Founder and Director, Lakes International Comic Arts Festival	Corroborates contribution of research to establishment and success of LICAF
E3	Collated Media Coverage of Comic Laureate Appointments	Evidence of comic laureate appointments and evolution of the position in line with goals of the research
E4	Webpage, Little LICAF Programme	Evidence of LICAF activities
E5	Register of Charities, Overview Statement (Seven Stories)	Confirms the objectives of Seven Stories, and how research supported organisation in its efforts to meet those goals
E6	Testimonial - Collection and Exhibitions Director and Acting Co-Chief Executive, Seven Stories	Showing contribution of Gibson's work to Seven Stories – improving understanding, knowledge, and curatorial capacity
E7	a) Press Release, Seven Stories! b) Exhibition Content List	Demonstrates how research informed exhibition content and training behind it
E8	Testimonial - Senior Curator, Seven Stories	Demonstrates how research has improved curatorial capacity at Seven Stories
E9	Testimonial and Tour Coverage - Touring Exhibitions Coordinator, Seven Stories	Demonstrates how research underpinned the success of the exhibition tour and positive feedback from attendees