

ARCHIE IN EXILE

Comic books face red ink as more stores drop them

By Julia Keller

TRIBUNE CULTURAL CRITIC

Jim Marcus, 34, remembers what motivated him to learn to read — and it wasn't "War and Peace."

"I wanted to find out what Spider-Man was saying," says the Chicago resident. His children, ages 3 and 4, now flip eagerly through his comic book collection, he reports, and he sees the same hunger in them to figure out those funny black squiggles in the little white bubbles.

Hence the circle of life, comic book-style: Kids learn to read by reading comic books, grow up, then their kids learn to read reading comic books.

Despite this happy picture, and despite the current box-office success of "X-Men," a film based on a comic book, the comic book industry is in turmoil. It faces not only declining sales, but also significant changes in the way comic books are created, packaged and distributed.

Walgreen's, the Deerfield-based drugstore chain, recently began phasing out comic books from its 3,079 stores in 43 states and Puerto Rico. "Comic books have not shown a real strong profitability for the space they take up," said Michael Polzin, spokesman for the chain, which has 325 stores in the Chicago area. "As we've remodeled and relocated stores around the country . . . in a lot of

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Comic relief These boys of the 1980s satisfy their hunger for tales of the original web master.

Comics

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cases, we've decided to replace comic books with other items in that space."

Drugstores and supermarkets were traditionally the places where kids could buy comic books. Tagging along with dad and mom on a shopping errand, kids could slip the latest "Archie" or "Superman" into the cart, hiding it between the lettuce and the gallon of milk, or the toothpaste and the panty hose, until the checkout counter was reached and the wheedling could commence.

Increasingly, however, drugstores, convenience stores and supermarkets are dropping or reducing their comic-book racks, ceding sales of the product to specialty comic-book stores.

"We still have a small selection," said Karen Ramos, spokesman for Jewel and Osco stores. "But comic-book sales are not what they were in the past." Dominick's does not stock comic books, a spokesman said.

The problem with stores that specialize in comic books, as opposed to drugstores and supermarkets, is that many are not kid-friendly venues. Some maintain the ambience of adult bookstores, with prominent displays of material obviously designed for mature audiences, and their proprietors are frank about their dislike of children handling the merchandise.

"Comic shops serve a predominantly male-oriented, adult market [and they do not] cater to girls and families," said Michael Silberkleit, chairman of Archie Comic Publications, based in Mamaroneck, N.Y. "The classic comic-book shops — you wouldn't want to use the bathroom in them."

Shawna Erwin-Gore, a spokesman for Dark Horse Comics, which publishes "Star Wars" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" comic books, made the same complaint: Comic-book shops often seem misogynist and anti-child, staffed by comic book aficionados who are experts in adult comic books and sneeringly condescending about traditional favorites.

"Weird vibes," Erwin-Gore said, describing the problem with comic-book stores. "If I walk in and ask for an 'Archie and Veronica,' I don't want to deal with attitude from someone who thinks I'm not reading edgy enough stuff."

"I want to say, 'Hey, how about you dust off your shelves and take down the 3-year-old posters in the window?'"

Many owners of comic-book shops will, in moments of candor, own up to the somewhat offputting atmosphere of their emporia, one that uncharitable observers might be tempted to call "scuzzy." In their defense, owners point to the fact that as merchants, they only care about appealing to their desired clientele: adults.

"We don't encourage kids to come in," said Shappy Seasholtz, an employee at Quimby's, a Chicago comic-book store.

So if you're a kid who loves comic books, your choice of where to get



Comics specialty stores are becoming a last refuge for buyers of the younger set.

the goods seems to be dwindling.

Ironically, the crisis in the industry — lower sales and fewer places to buy comic books — comes as the genre itself enjoys a spectacular creative boom. There are more independent comic-book publishers than ever before, and a greater range of topics, approaches and artistic styles. No longer is the comic-book business dominated by the superhero genre and its "BAM!" and "KABOOM!" dialogue — although superhero stories continue to lead overall comic-book sales.

"There are some amazingly good stories today, some outstanding things," said Eric Kirsammer, owner of Chicago Comics and Quimby's. "It used to be only 'good-guy-vs.-bad-guy' plots. Now it's much richer."

He pointed to comic-book creators such as Alex Ross, Jessica Abel and Daniel Clowes, whose visually stunning work is infused with ironic, realistic dialogue.

Yet comic-book sales recently have shown "a clear and steady pattern of decline," according to Dallas-based comic book industry analyst Carl Henderson. Average monthly sales dropped from \$20.3 million to \$16.8 million between 1997 and '99, an almost 17 percent decline, he said.

The industry has always been volatile and even controversial, Henderson and others noted. In 1953, a book titled "Seduction of the Innocent" by Frederick Wertham linked comic-book reading and juvenile delinquency. Despite its dubious scholarship, the book's charge threw the business into a tailspin as concerned parents yanked comic books out of their children's hands.

The comic-book business bounced back, though, in the early 1960s, with the creation of appealing new superheroes such as Stan Lee's "Fantastic Four" in 1961. The comic "revitalized the industry and revolutionized the form," wrote Frank Houston in a biography of Lee in *salon.com*, the Internet magazine.

But other challenges lay in wait

for the comic book-business, like a vengeful super-villain. The collecting craze in the 1980s, which would seem to have been an unalloyed good, actually undermined the industry, as speculators bought wildly and prompted overproduction of some titles, only to lose their shirts when the bottom dropped out of the comic-book market.

"When DC put out the 'Death of Superman' issue in 1992, everyone thought they were going to put their kids through college with it," recalled Vic Bertini, a former comic book store owner who now lives in Las Vegas. Millions of copies were scarfed up. "Today, that issue is worthless."

Yet another blow was the 1996 bankruptcy filing by Marvel, once an industry giant.

Today, Marvel is back, one of four companies (the others are DC, Archie and Dark Horse) that control more than half the comic-book market. Marvel's "X-Men" franchise remains popular, an appeal upon which the current film capitalized.

Yet the comic-book industry is in flux, conceded Silberkleit, who followed his late father, Louis Silberkleit, into the business of produc-

ing Archie Comics.

"The industry has been going up and down — mostly down," he said. "The whole industry is flat or going negative, but I'm not jumping out the window. Kids still want to read."

The Internet, blamed for imperiling other print-based businesses, isn't the culprit, Silberkleit insisted. "The Internet may hurt us a bit, but in the 1950s, so did television." And most comic-book publishers maintain lively, enticing Web sites (check out www.archiecomics.com; www.dccomics.com; www.marvel.com; or www.darkhorse.com) with news about upcoming issues that seem to spur rather than hamper sales of the hard copies of comic books, many believe.

"Our business is a great business," Silberkleit declared. His enthusiasm is understandable, since the comic-book genre is flourishing creatively.

Why, then, are comic books disappearing from Walgreen's and other kid-friendly locations?

It is an exceedingly complicated question, involving what Erwin-Gore of Dark Horse Comics termed a "screwy distribution system" and

other factors.

Since 1995, a single distributor — Diamond — has dominated the comic-book market, serving as sole distributor for all major comic-book publishers, according to Henderson, who has studied the comic-book industry for more than a decade.

Some observers have complained about what they perceive is a monopoly. Others simply say that the way comic books get from the inspired creators to the eager readers is substantially flawed and needs an overhaul.

Also, while comic-book prices for consumers have risen (the industry average today is \$2.75-\$2.95 per book), the cost of an individual comic book is still too low for a retailer to realize a desired return, based on the space comic books occupy in the store.

The solution may lie in compilations of comic-book art sold, in effect, as graphic paperback novels, which have higher cover prices and consequently bring in higher profits for retailers.

Henderson said the problem has always been at the business end rather than the creative.

"Finally, many people are saying, 'We're going to have to change the way we're doing business.' The major publishers are looking into it, at last."

He predicted that, when the shake-out is over, most comic books will be sold in trade paperback form rather than as traditional comic books — which Henderson derisively calls "pamphlets" because they have become steadily thinner over the years — and over the Internet. "That's the future," he said.

In the meantime, kids should probably get used to the idea that the only place to buy comic books is a comic-book store — where they're about as welcome as a flash flood.

"Eventually, we're going to reach that," Kirsammer said.

The disappearance of comic books from Walgreen's and other drugstores and supermarkets is "sad," acknowledged Marcus, who was shopping for comic books at Chicago Comics on a recent afternoon.

"I do bring my kids in here occasionally. But I've been in some comic-book stores where they're definitely not welcome."