

## FOR MATURE AUDIENCES?

### Teens will see Batman at the movies, but they're passing up comic books

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Just about every week, Matt Hyttenhove makes the familiar trek to Sylvania Avenue to hang out with a bunch of superheroes. And every week, the 16-year-old finds them at the Game Room, where thousands of their comic books line the walls and fill box after box.

Even in an age of high technology where PlayStations and the like reign supreme, Mr. Hyttenhove has come to love this cornucopia of comics.

"I read just about anything, anything I can get my hands on," the Start High School junior said.

As a teenage comic book fan, Mr. Hyttenhove is the exception for an industry that has become increasingly tailored to a maturing fan base. While hordes of teens will line up to see *The Dark Knight*, the newest Batman movie that opened this weekend, it's unlikely that many will have read about his adventures in comic books.

"Most of [my friends] have never read comics," Mr. Hyttenhove said.

That's no surprise to Charles Coletta, a pop culture instructor at Bowling Green State University who uses comic books in class and is organizing a conference on them for October.

"Originally, when Batman came out in 1939 the audience was boys 12 and under," he said. "I think the average age of a comic book reader today is mid-20s to mid-40s."

"It's gotten much, much older," he continued. "That's been a constant problem: how to bring new people in."

Part of the issue is that there are so many other options for kids these days with the Internet and video games, but there's also the problem of distribution. A generation ago, comic books were cheap and they were everywhere.

"You could go to any pharmacy or corner store or newsstand and be guaranteed to find comic books," said Andrew Farago, curator of the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco. "Generally you have to go to specialty shops now."

Once they were hidden away from casual shoppers — even mainstream booksellers tend to sell only graphic novels, Japanese comics called manga, or bound collections of traditional comics — it was easy for all but the hard-core fans to forget about monthly comics.

"There are parents who don't even realize that there are still Hulk comic books being published," Mr. Farago said.

The price has gone up too. What once sold for well under a dollar now requires buyers to shell out close to \$3 for each monthly issue or more for collections.

Throughout all of these changes, it's adult fans who have stuck with the medium. Tom Peters of West Toledo got into comics as a kid, thanks to their ubiquity and media tie-ins.



Matt Hyttenhove, 16, stops by the Game Room once a week to check out the comic books. (THE BLADE/ AMY E. VOIGT)

"I'm just in love with the art form," he said. "Comics is the art between panels. Your mind is making the jump between what's going on between one panel and the next."

Now 37 and with thousands of comic books in his collection, he's happy to report that the product has evolved with him.

"As I got older the industry's sort of been keeping up with me," he said. "In the last 10 years or so, there's a significant body of work out there to appeal to a lot of different tastes and adult sensibilities."

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* was named to Time's 2005 list of the top 100 English-language novels since 1923. Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* caught up with the superhero in his 50s. Other comics have gotten more mature, too, with superheroes who get divorced, use drugs, and face other human problems.

This doesn't help get a new generation of young kids interested in comics, though. For them, publishers like Marvel and DC Comics are trying a number of strategies, from unleashing titles aimed specifically at kids to putting more of their product online, according to BGSU's Mr. Coletta.

Locally, the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library is hosting a "Superman at 70!" program at 7 p.m. tomorrow to honor the "Man of Steel," who first appeared in comics in 1938. The event in the McMaster Center in the Main Library, 325 Michigan St., will feature video conferencing with comic book writers as well as a special exhibit of vintage comics and collectables. It was preceded earlier this month by events specifically targeting young people interested in the comic book industry.

The Mud Hens are getting in on the act too. At the team's Aug. 11 game, thousands of fans will receive a free comic book as part of a partnership between Marvel and Triple-A Baseball.

One might think that it would help that so many comic book creations have become central to American culture. They're featured on merchandise, on television, and at the movies. This summer alone has seen Iron Man, the Hulk, and Batman grace the silver screen. Unlike in generations past, though, these appearances aren't driving consumers to buy comics.

"The comic movies really don't have much affect on my business," said Jim Collins, owner of J.C.'s Comic Stop on Hill Avenue. "They don't stress the point that they come from a comic book."

Younger people might be more likely to check out the Spider-Man video game than the comic, and some moviegoers don't even realize that some movies were based on graphic novels/comic books, like *Sin City*, *Road to Perdition*, or *300*.

Local aficionado Eric Palicki, 29, who created a couple of online comics at [www.ericpalicki.com](http://www.ericpalicki.com), would at least like to see that change.

"These movies that are coming out, I'd like to see more people using that as a springboard to actually experience the comic book medium," the West Toledo man said. "From a storytelling perspective, [comic books] allow you to essentially make the movie with the biggest budget ever."

Mr. Collins has another wish as he considers how best to get young people into stores like his, but he sounds incredulous even asking:

"A chip that destroys all PlayStations?"

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