

SUMMERAGE

“I saw a bale of comics. I thought that was the coolest thing my nine-year-old brain had ever seen, so I actually wanted enough comics to fit a bale. That’s why I started collecting.”

KARL UEBERGANG

IN BASEMENTS all over Victoria, there is a tribe of people who can name every earth in the DC Universe, explain the varieties of kryptonite and its effects and know who would win a fight between a caveman and an astronaut (and get the Joss Whedon reference). These people are comic-book geeks.

This evokes images of Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*: fat, middle-aged, male, overly critical with bad facial hair and an urge to keep Lucy Lawless in mint condition.

Unfortunately for journalists who wish to categorise and make fun of this minority, the stereotype is wrong and these people are disappointingly normal. They’re more like slightly less-witty versions of Xander and Oz

Comic culture

In the world of comics, writes Alice Clarke, there is even a connection to Charles Dickens.



...from Buffy the Vampire Slayer or, more lamely, Seth Cohen, from *The OC*, or even George from *Grey's Anatomy*.

"Obviously there's a stereotype of the fan, and it's always true for a certain group of people, whether it's a large group or a small group," says Mitch from the Comics 'R' Us city shop. "I'd say 100% it definitely exists. There are nerds that read comics. There's tall, there's fat ones. They're normally guys, they may have bad skin, they might have body-odour problems, but the majority of people reading stuff obviously don't fit that category."

Melbourne has more comic shops per capita than any other state in Australia. According to geek Karl Uebergang, they are the focus of the comic community. The internet may have taken over from the old-style comic club, but, Uebergang says, "for years and years and years, if I wanted to talk about comic books, I'd come into Comics 'R' Us and I'd meet other people who come in here, and I'd go to the other stores." It's more than just going to a retail outlet. In a self-deprecating nod to the stereotype, Uebergang said: "The guys behind the counter are, in some ways, like adult child-minders... These guys are your friends. You come in every week, week in, week out. These people are part of your life. It's much closer to a bartender than to anything else."

And with great power comes great responsibility, as Mitch and the other adult child-minding bartenders well know. They're responsible for getting many people addicted.

Uebergang was watching TV when the radioactive bug bit him. There was a report on the opening of Minotaur, a pop-culture shop in Melbourne, almost 30 years ago. "I saw a bale of comics. I thought that was the coolest thing my nine-year-old brain had ever seen, so I actually wanted enough comics to fit a bale. That's why I started collecting." He has since fulfilled his ambition several times over.

And it's not just boys. Girls read



comics too, but TV examples are few and far between, unless you include Alyssa from *Chasing Amy*, but her voice was annoying, so let's not.

Someone who knows all about women who read comics is Mary Borsellino, founder of girl-wonder.org, a site dedicated to women who read, write, illustrate and are in comics. "There's a cliché that says girls don't read superhero books, and I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you that's total bull. Ninety per cent of the women I know who read comics adore superhero books."

Borsellino, another Melburnian, started her website shortly after being enraged by a sexist remark made by the editor-in-chief of DC Comics. "There was so much equally incensed reaction from other feminist comics bloggers who commented, that I thought, 'Wait, we really need to do something with this rage we're feeling. Something that will change things'. So I registered the domain, and we went from there."

DC Comics seems to have finally noticed that its readers are not just men and have set out to diversify the DC Universe over the past decade or so. Batgirl got shot and paralysed from the waist down and is now in a wheelchair watching Gotham City and helping out the Justice League as well as running her own all-girl group of superheroes, The Birds of Prey. There is now a new



Name: Karl Uebergang

Age: 32

Occupation: customer service.

How you first got into comics: I saw a story on a comic store opening in Melbourne in about '83 and they showed a bale of comics and I wanted a bale of comics of my very own.

Favourite series: Starman by James Robinson and Tony Harris.

Series you're currently collecting: The Flash, Action Comics, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, The All New Atom, Thor, Countdown (a weekly comic), Ultimates.

Store of choice: First choice will always be Comics 'R' Us city store.

Batwoman, a character originally introduced in the 1950s to make Batman seem a little less interested in Dick (the Robin at the time). The 1950s Batwoman carried a handbag

of such gender-appropriate weaponry as poison lipstick; the new Batwoman is a lipstick lesbian dating troubled ex-cop Renee Montoya, who is the new Question, replacing Charlie, who was the original fedora-wearing faceless fighter of felons. And in the new DC Universe with 52 alternative earths, Earth 11 is a world of gender reversal where Superwoman and Batwoman are fighting Wonder Man and his manly Amazons.

Charles Dickens released his books in chapters; comics are released in chapters, too. The main difference is that, with comics, it's month-by-month and if you want to get the whole book bound in an actual book, the wait is much longer. *Buffy* season 8, now being released in comic form, is pretty much the same as it always was on TV, only now ad breaks last a month and can be far more frustrating. If comic readers want to get to the end of the story, they become collectors by default.

Karen Healey, president of girl-wonder.org, is well aware of the difference between the traditional collector and the reader who wants to know what happens next. "Collecting is kind of a '90s phrase, actually, which was when the big comics speculator boom happened. Collectors were grabbing any comic with a variant cover or by a hot artist with the hope that it would become worth a lot of

money, and not necessarily reading them. A lot of people felt that this kind of naked capitalism detracted from the enjoyment they got out of the books, so the more common term for someone who likes reading comics became fan or reader."

The main reason for the comic speculation boom was the sudden appearance of rare wartime comics



Name: Jason Badower

Age: 32

Occupation: comic-book artist

How you first got into comics: A huge box of comics has always been there since I was a kid.

Favourite series: All Star Superman

Series you're currently collecting: Astonishing X-Men, Buffy, Ex Machina, All Star Superman, Umbrella Academy.

Store of choice: Comics 'R' Us and Classic Comics.



PICTURES: MICHELE FERGUSON, ROB BANKS

going for large amounts of money at auction. What made those comics so rare was that, during the Second World War, Superman encouraged kids to recycle their comics to help the war effort. Many people who saw the prices these comics were going for, without understanding the reasons behind the extra zeroes, suddenly decided to buy tonnes of comics they were sure would be worth lots of money one day, increasing demand, which increased print runs, which made sure that the comic would never be rare or worth all that much.

There are those, such as Healey, who claim cave drawings and hieroglyphics are where comics got their start. "Cave drawings show that sequential arts are the earliest form of recorded storytelling we have. The superhero comics of Marvel and DC comprise the longest and largest continuous narratives in human history. Not even the great Hindu myths equal the sheer amount of story that's gone into *Superman* or *Wonder Woman*. Comics can be on any subject, in any style, from any culture, and they've adapted very well to internet technology, quite a few people are making their living creating webcomics. A lot of them are crap, but 90% of every artform is crap, and even the crap is saying things about the human condition and how we perceive the world."

But others, such as Melbourne comics artist Jason Badower, argue they have their true origins in the 20th century. "I go as far back as two guys called Will Izman and Jack Kirk. Will Izman started doing his stuff in the '30s and '40s and created a comic book called *Spirited*, which is still going now in some fashion." Badower sees these artists as his biggest influences.

Badower, who is one of the five rotating artists on the *Heroes* official webcomic, is about to release his own original book, called *Zero G*, on which he does the story and art.

Continuing the tradition of *Felix the Cat*, Melbourne exports comics artists: Badower is leaving to make the big time in Los Angeles.

But we'll still get Badower's comics first, because comics all over the world come out on Wednesday (provided the shipment is on time) and Wednesday in Australia is still before Wednesday in America.

Mothers and partners of comic fans lament the space taken up by comic collections, bagged, boarded and boxed. I don't want to reinforce the stereotype, and I'm sure most of these arguments have amicable resolutions. But I did hear about one guy who moved his mother out of the house to make more room for his comics. Watch out, mum, you're next.