

Alberta's Forgotten Censor: The Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications (1954-1976) and the Continued Campaign against Comics Post-1954

Released in spring 1956, the fourteen-page pamphlet *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* (fig. 1) served as a warning to parents, educators, and young readers about the dangers of comic-book reading.¹ The bulletin opens with an urgent call to action:

The "comic" book problem is of world-wide concern. It has assumed such serious proportions that many governments, including those of Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the United Nations, have appointed committees to study this matter. In response to a growing outcry from parents, educators, religious leaders and others, the Government of the Province of Alberta issued an Order in Council in 1954 which states: "[I]t is deemed advisable and in the public interest to establish a Board to be known as the Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications to study and investigate the question of crime and other objectionable comics and salacious magazines and to recommend effective action to prevent their sale and distribution in the Province."

Previous scholarship on comics censorship has focused on the 1954 US Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency comic-book hearings and the testimony of Dr. Frederic Wertham as the fever pitch in the North America-wide comics moral panic.² Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), had been one of the most strident anti-comics voices since the late 1940s, and in 1954 his message found an even wider audience during the televised US hearings. Following the hearings, comic books were censored—by their own industry. The Comics Magazine Association of America introduced a comprehensive new Comics Code for content—sanitizing depictions of violence, marriage and sex, and criminality (Nyberg 166-69). Jean-Paul Gabilliet describes the period after 1954 as a "calming of passions" in which "even if Dr. Wertham continued his crusade, he did so increasingly alone as mass media and, consequently, the public lost interest in this exaggerated moral panic" (237). Bradford Wright similarly notes how Wertham's crusade "generated little interest beyond his own shrinking audience" in "the second half of the 1950s" (178). However, this spotlight on the US hearings and singular figures such as Wertham overlooks what happened after 1954—specifically the continued and collective efforts of citizen action committees in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere to continue the comic-book fight.³

regions such as Alberta. Further, by reinvestigating the anti-comics fight after 1954, this work examines how a concern for child health normalized censorship and gatekeeping behaviour on the part of community organizations well into the 1960s and 1970s. This analysis also complicates intellectual freedom history on a broader level. Generally known as *defenders* of intellectual freedom and vanguards of reading, librarians and educators were a cornerstone of ABOP leadership and operations. Serving as a self-appointed community standard on decency and “good reading,” the ABOP functioned as a de facto censor and newsstand monitor in Alberta for decades with influence across North America—influence which was sustained and reinforced by library and educational leaders and networks.

Additionally, this work on historical censorship seeks to better understand the present through the past. In 2021 and 2022, more book bans and challenges were reported to the American Library Association (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom than at any time in the last twenty years. At the same time, award-winning comics, including Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991), Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer* (2019), and Jerry Craft’s *New Kid* (2019), have been deemed “objectionable” and pulled from school and library shelves—often by parents, educators, and librarians.⁴ I would argue that it is impossible to discuss comic-book reading and scholarship in the present without contextualizing the deep, complicated, and intertwined histories of citizen action committees and censorship—particularly in libraries and education.

An Emergency of Crime Comics (1954)

When it “was created on December 29, 1954, by Order-in-Council (O.C) [*sic*] 1801/54 through Section 3 of the Cultural Development Act” (“Provincial Archives”), the ABOP joined a larger constellation of citizen action committees already fighting the comic-book battle. This included American colleagues, such as the National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL), which was founded by Bishop John Francis Noll and served as a lay organization within larger Catholic civic networks (Hajdu 75-77; Nyberg 23). This network of American committees also included the Citizens’ Committee for Better Juvenile Literature in Chicago (Twomey) and the Committee for the Evaluation of Comics in Cincinnati (Ash). In Canada, the Crime Comics Committee of the British Columbia Parent-Teacher Association, led by strident anti-comics activist Eleanor Gray, was amongst the most well-known and influential groups (Glegg). Further, these groups did not operate in a vacuum. They were in active contact with each other and were aware of international movements, such as the UK Comics Campaign Council, which was underpinned by the National Union of Teachers and targeted horror comics (Barker 14-15). These committees were not only united in their anti-comics fervour but also in their belief that they could objectively evaluate materials and uphold what they perceived to be “community standards.” As John Dutton expressed it during an ABOP meeting on June 23, 1955, “we are

carrying out the will of the people.” In postwar Canada, these standards centred on preserving heteronormative family values and protecting youth morality (Adams 136-54).

These concerns collided in November 1948 when two children in Dawson Creek, BC, took potshots with a rifle at passing motorists on the Alaska Highway, fatally striking one. Though initial inquests in the case considered explanations for the juveniles' behaviour, including lack of parental supervision at home, on December 2, 1948, the *Peace River Block News* announced, “Juveniles in Fatal Shooting Nov. 12, Sentenced: Comments of Crown Counsel and Presiding Judge—Reading of ‘Comic Books’ Held Responsible for Crime Committed by Two Boys” (“Juveniles”). Spurred on by constituents in Kamloops, BC, Member of Parliament E. Davie Fulton introduced a private member's bill to include “crime comics” under obscene materials in 1948 (Glegg 29; McGinnis 9-10, “Bogeyman”). A little over a year later and bolstered by national coverage of the Dawson Creek incident—including a front-page headline in the *Toronto Daily Star* that proclaimed, “Blame Comic Books as Boys 11, 13 Charged with Murder”—the “Fulton Bill” passed into law in 1949. Section 163(1)b of the Criminal Code made it a crime to possess, print, publish, or sell “crime comics” for the purposes of sale:⁵

Until 2018, the Canadian *Criminal Code* used the term *crime comic* to refer to a magazine, periodical, or book that exclusively or substantially comprises matter depicting pictorially (a) the commission of crimes, real or fictitious; or (b) events connected with the commission of crimes, real or fictitious, whether occurring before or after the commission of the crime. (“Justice Laws”)

The label *crime comics* was first introduced to target the perceived “how-to” crime comic manuals such as *Crime Does Not Pay*. By the late 1940s or early 1950s, however, it had become an all-encompassing moniker for any comics content deemed obscene or otherwise problematic. By means of an expanded definition of obscenity law and a widened interpretation of the term *crime comics*, even classic comics such as *Dick Tracy* were pulled from newspapers (Connery 172).

Acting in parallel and often complementary ways in this period were diligent initiatives by various community associations, women's institutes, and educators, whose purposes were to police moral standards and children's reading. These initiatives included more than a dozen resolutions from the Catholic Women's League between 1929 and 1960 targeting the dangers of “immoral reading matter” and “salacious literature,” including a 1951 resolution against “crime comics” (“Archived Resolutions”). Educators were also very active, including an August 1949 resolution from the Ontario Federation of Women Teachers Association that included the claim that reading comic books “contributes to juvenile delinquency and the lowering of moral standards and taste” (“Women Teachers”). These organizations also encouraged youth participation in anti-comics fervour. Two notable examples

include the “monster bonfire in the schoolyard,” which was lit in October 1949 by students at Our Lady of Mercy Separate School in Coniston, Ontario (“Children”), as well as the oratorical prize won by then ten-year-old future prime minister Brian Mulroney for a speech on the dangers of crime comics (Bell 94-95).

These initiatives also aligned with long-standing campaigns since the 1920s by public and school librarians both to codify “good reading” practices and to integrate them into an emerging sense of Canadian citizenship. In *Picturing Canada: A History of Canadian Children’s Illustrated Books and Publishing* (2010), Gail Edwards and Judith Saltman describe the importance that early-twentieth-century librarians, especially children’s librarians, placed in guiding young readers and shielding them from the objectionable (40-41). As Edwards and Saltman narrate it, librarians did not perceive these forms of guidance as a type of censorship but rather as preventing moral harm (52-53). This focus on “good reading” was explicitly intertwined in anti-comics endeavours. A vital part of the Citizens’ Committee’s comic-book control in Chicago was Operation Good Reading, a partnership with the Chicago Public Library that included recommended reading lists, a children’s story hour, and the Vacation Jamboree summer reading program (Twomey 626). While definitions of good reading varied, many groups (including the ABOP) cited all-age prose classics like Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894) or Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) as exemplars of good reading, juxtaposing these “good” titles against the “bad” and harmful reading of comic books and other salacious literature.

Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, the question around moral harm and youth comic-book reading continued to percolate in Canada and abroad. In Canada, the comics debate was covered in popular reporting, including a feature story in *Macleans* by Sidney Katz in December 1948, a CBC Radio citizens forum in January 1949, and in May 1949 a spotlight article in *Chatelaine*, “Are the Comics Really a Menace?” In April 1952, a UN conference on press, radio, and cinema for children called for a world ban on “sex and crime comics,” concluding that such reading impacts responsible youth citizenship and creates the potential for juvenile delinquency (Castell). In 1952 and 1953, the Canadian Senate staged its own Special Committee on Sale and Distribution of Salacious and Indecent Literature. This increased scrutiny of the dangers of crime comics found the support of Fulton but also of future prime minister John Diefenbaker (McGinnis, “Bogeymen” 8-10).

In 1954 Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* was published and brought renewed attention to the Canadian comics situation—chapter 11 is entitled “Murder in Dawson Creek: The Comic Books Abroad.” When testifying in the US comic book hearings, Wertham speaks to the situation in Canada in the following terms: “All I know is that they are very much worried about the effect of comic-books on delinquency, that they have not been able by this one amendment to the criminal code to curb this situation” (91).⁶ Wertham’s

claims were further bolstered by the testimony on June 4, 1954, of a special invited guest, Fulton, who described the current Canadian situation as an “emergency of crime comics” (United States, *Juvenile Delinquency* 253). Echoing Wertham’s plea for action, Fulton disclosed that the Canadian government was looking at complementary mechanisms for enforcement, including a campaign by the Home and School Federation to raise awareness about the dangers of comic books and youth (251). The Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications was Alberta’s answer to this “emergency.”

The Alberta Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications (1954-1976)

Six banker boxes of unprocessed materials at the Provincial Archives of Alberta make up the archival memory of the Alberta Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications: typewritten board minutes, handwritten notes, copies of purchase orders, newspaper clippings, colour-coded index cards used for title evaluation, and extensive correspondence. Among the letters in the Board’s archive are messages from government officials, including Fulton and Governor General Vincent Massey, notes from chiefs of police, and ongoing correspondence with other citizen action committees in the United States, especially branches of the NODL. Tucked in among the creased folders is also correspondence from *Playboy* creator Hugh Hefner in 1962 and *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner in 1969 in which both query why their magazines—targeted at adult readers—had been removed from newsstands.

The Board files possess an exhaustive amount of literature and research on obscenity law in Canada and the United States, newspaper clippings (often from the *Edmonton Journal* or *Calgary Herald*) that mention the Board, and detailed notes on best practices for publicity and marketing campaigns. Contained in the folders is an abundance of source works that the Board used for inspiration and information, including lists and pamphlets from the NODL, as well as a reprinted supplemental copy of Wertham’s 1953 article “What Parents Don’t Know about Comic Books,” which was originally published in *Ladies’ Home Journal*. The board meeting minutes register a common complaint among the members: that outside critics do not understand that they are an advisory board, not a censorship board. Yet the carefully repeated actions of twenty years to restrict newsstand sales and gatekeep standards around good reading—under the guise of a fear of comic books—tell a different story.

Operating from 1954 to 1976, the ABOP’s “effective action to prevent [comics and magazine] sale and distribution in the Province” included two public outreach pamphlets: 1) the widely circulated *What’s Wrong with Comic Books?* (1956), with a print run of over forty thousand copies, and 2) the more modestly circulated *The Choice Is Yours* (1962), with a print run of ten thousand copies. The ABOP consisted of seven citizen members from around the province who were appointed for two-year terms and represented different geographic, demographic, and professional sectors of Alberta. Members

included librarians, educators, housewives, and lawyers. The Board met six times a year to discuss their ongoing list of over one hundred publications that they deemed objectionable and recommended against provincial distribution.

Parallel to the Board's actions to restrict sales on the newsstands, was its mission to safeguard young people from reading unwholesome material and to promote the benefits of "good reading." The ABOP worked with the Canadian Library Association, Young Canada's Book Week, and public libraries and schools throughout Alberta. In one instance, the ABOP partnered with Grade ten students at St. Basil's School in Edmonton to develop a student-created code and rubric for evaluating good reading. The code, created by and typed up by Grade ten students, stressed that, "good literature builds up the morality of teenagers so that they will be better citizens and better fit to run the government of tomorrow" ("Code"). This commitment to "good reading" was reinforced by the ABOP's membership. At every juncture in the Board's twenty-year history, at least one member was a prominent provincial librarian, including Anna Maure (ABOP Chair 1954-1960) and Aleta Vikse (ABOP Chair 1969-1971), as well as Bruce Peel, Louise Riley, and John Dutton ("Provincial Archives").

What's Wrong with Comic Books? (1956)

Printed in three eye-catching colours by Edmonton printer Hamley Press, and ironically featuring comics-like illustrations throughout, *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* persuasively pulled together many popular anti-comics arguments and solidified the Board's position on the need to guide children to good reading. After opening with a declarative statement about the worldwide comic book problem, the second page of *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* asks, "Do You Know What Your Child Is Reading?" Featuring quotes from the Canadian Senate Special Committee on Salacious and Indecent Literature (1952-1953), Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, and Governor General Vincent Massey, this section points to the crucial importance of parents safeguarding the physical and mental well-being of their children. *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* then lists its six major objections to comics: 1) In glorifying "crime and criminals, they encourage the commission of crime and contempt for lawful authority"; 2) "Some 'comics' present a distorted, unhealthy and immoral concept of sex and marriage," while 3) others "foster prejudice against class, race, creed, and nationality"; 4) "Some 'comics' portray violent death, [and] grotesque, fantastic and unnatural creatures with repulsive realism"; 5) "Most 'comics' are inartistic," but 6) all of them "are detrimental to good reading skills."

Each of these six objections includes supporting testimony—what the pamphlet describes as "selected opinions of recognized authorities"—from sources such as law enforcement, Canadian and American government officials, and educational stakeholders at local and national levels. Included as an expert on objection 4, C. W. Mellish of the Canadian Home and School and Parent Federation remarks, "One wonders what place [comics] have in the life of a child

other than to fill him with unnatural fears and forebodings." In support of objection 5, H. G. Glyde, Head of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Alberta, declares, "Most comics could not be called artistic by any stretch of the imagination . . . The pictorial content seems to me most damaging to growing children, especially those with sensitive artistic notions." As seen in fig. 2, objection 5 is also accompanied by an illustration of a child reader straining their eyes with a look of consternation on their face as they read a comic book.

What's Wrong with Comic Books? closes out its major objections with a reminder that *all* comics are harmful to student success. As seen in fig. 2, objection 6 features an illustration of a worried parent clutching a report card, their hand on the shoulder of a child with a downcast face. In the background of the image is an enlarged graphic of the student's C grades in spelling, language, English, and oral reading. This sixth objection concludes with an empathetic admonition from the Senate Committee on Sale and Distribution of Salacious and Indecent Literature that "[a] people who thrive on comics will never progress beyond the digest stage and a nation of digest readers will never be a cultured nation."

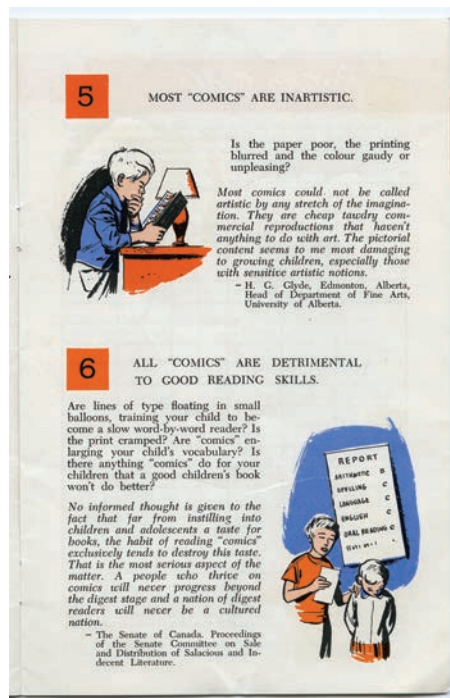


Figure 2. Objection 5 and objection 6 in "What's Wrong with Comic Books?" (1956) Provincial Archives of Alberta, GR1992.0197, p. 6.

Echoing the takeaways of earlier comics critics like Sterling North, who proclaims in 1940 that “the antidote to the ‘comic’ magazine poison can be found in any library or good bookstore,” the fourteen pages of *What’s Wrong with Comic Books?* also feature several sections on encouraging and promoting “good reading”:

- A one-page rubric or “rating scale” for parents to gauge how “the ‘comics’ in your home rate by these standards,” asking questions such as, “Does the ‘comic’ glorify crime and criminals?” or “Does it overemphasize sex?”
- A two-page guide to “inexpensive books” that explains to parents how “[l]imiting ‘comics’ should not deprive your child of reading material. You can substitute inexpensive good books for bad ‘comics.’” These good books include selections “for older boys and girls” from Dent’s Children’s Illustrated Classics, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), and from the Puffin Story Books series, with titles such as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Recommended texts for younger readers include the Little Golden Library Books series and classic titles such as Helen Bannerman’s *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899)—which the Toronto School Board removed “from all classrooms and school libraries” in February 1955 due to objections from Black parent organizations that it promotes racial prejudice (Plummer). Many librarians, though, including Jean Thomson of the Toronto Public Library, believed that in their experience this title was not objectionable to young readers (Plummer). It is perhaps surprising to see the Board’s recommendation of this title in light of its third objection that some comics “foster prejudice against class, race, creed, and nationality.”
- A three-page “prescription” entitled “Rx for ‘Comics’: Guiding Your Child to Good Reading,” authored by Louise Riley, chairperson of the Alberta Library Board. This section directs parents to two recommended guides for “good reading”: *Books for Boys and Girls* edited by Jean Thomson of the Toronto Public Library, and *Junior Bookshelf* compiled especially for the children of Alberta by Grace McDonald and Dorothy Rogers, Children’s Librarians of the Public Libraries of Edmonton and Calgary.
- A one-page list of resources “For Your Further Information,” with three selections from Frederic Wertham, a guide to “Acceptable Comics” from the NODL, and “An Evaluation of Comic Books” by the Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books.

The last page of the pamphlet includes a call to action for diligent readers to “do everything in your power to make better use of good reading material obtainable from your Public Library and other sources.” While the final takeaway of *What’s Wrong with Comic Books?* may not have been as strident as North’s assertion that “[t]he parent who does not acquire that antidote for his child is guilty of criminal negligence,” its mix of expert testimonies and attention to child health and success works to create a sense of accountability on the part

of the pamphlet reader and that urgent action and attention was needed.

Between 1956 and 1957, more than forty thousand copies of *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* were sent out by the ABOP and the Alberta Department of Economic Affairs. Of note is the large number of intimately connected transnational women's organizations, religious groups, and youth fellowships who were the recipients of the fourteen-page pamphlet. Copies were dispatched to the NODL, the Cincinnati Committee, and the United Parents Association of New York City. One hundred copies of *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* were also distributed to attendees at the 1956 Canadian Library Association Annual Conference in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

Providing a snapshot of the organizations with which the ABOP was in communication on a provincial level, the following table (fig. 3) details the circulation of roughly fifteen thousand of the forty thousand copies of *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* dispersed April and May 1956 in Alberta:

Alberta Federation of Home and School Associations	5000
Public Libraries	3400
• Edmonton Public Library (1000)	
• Medicine Hat Public Library (200)	
• Lethbridge Public Library (400)	
• Calgary Public Library (1000)	
• Rural libraries in Alberta (500-750)	
Edmonton Members of the Advisory Board and Office	2000
Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire headquarters, Calgary	2000
Farm Women's Union of Alberta (FWUA)	800
Government Publicity Bureau (Mr. E. Bryant)	500
Boy Scout Association (Alberta)	300
Council on Child and Family Welfare, Calgary	300
Alberta Women's Institute	200
Girl Guide Association (Alberta)	200
Edmonton Ministerial Association	175
Catholic Women's League	140
Catholic Diocese of Edmonton	100
Junior Hospital League	100
Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues	55
YMCA (Edmonton)	25
YWCA (Edmonton)	25

Figure 3. Table detailing circulation of *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* April and May 1956 in Alberta. Compiled by author.

The Board received enthusiastic correspondence on this mailout from the NODL's John S. Brennan, who in a letter to ABOP Chairperson Anna Mauer writes, "Congratulations on your success with the distributors in Alberta who are withdrawing publications at your request," as well as from University of Alberta Faculty of Education lecturer L. Doris Baker, who thanks the Board

for their work while noting that “this problem of the comic book is a plague in my home province also.” They also received a message from Fulton, who writes,

Since the *Criminal Code* now provides penalties, I would like to see the pattern established that any of those who persist in selling publications which offend under the Code will be prosecuted . . . The efforts of organizations such as yours in pointing out so clearly to the public the dangers will be very helpful in creating the demand for effective enforcement. Once again may I express my congratulations and appreciation.

However, this support of the Board’s actions was not universally shared. An editorial in the *Calgary Herald* of June 13, 1955, argues that parents should have the right to choose children’s reading materials and that, further, the Board was acting in secretive and restrictive ways, “which seems to afflict all officialdom in this province” (“Lulling Parents”). A second op-ed piece entitled “The Report” appears in the same issue, criticizing the millions of dollars made in Alberta oil profits while the province’s school debts increase and its “out of date” temperance liquor laws persist. It concludes that although the Social Credit Party claims to be “sound” and “good” for business, it seems anything but. While Alberta in the 1950s had a film censor, a liquor control board (“mixed” drinking between men and women was not commonplace until the late 1960s), a significant eugenics and institutionalization program, and a long-standing conservative leadership under the Social Credit Party (1935-1971), it also had strong beliefs around government interventions and individual rights (Wood).⁷ Aritha van Herk describes Alberta’s paradoxical politics as simultaneously pluralist, grassroots, populist, and “mean and ornery” (349). This push and pull is both reflective of local Alberta politics and larger censorship discussions—how do ideas of harm and intellectual freedom intersect, and who gets to choose and how?

***The Choice Is Yours* (1962)**

By 1962 few objectionable comic books—or comics at all—populated Alberta newsstands. However, the ABOP’s follow-up pamphlet entitled *The Choice Is Yours* continued to declare the urgent need for “constant vigilance of the public” around undesirable materials—including comics—and for parents to carefully monitor their child’s reading:

Do you set an example to your children for reading good books, using public library facilities, and purchasing and making available in the home interesting and well written books for your children? Do you assist your children in selecting reading material? Do you advise them and give guidance to them in their selection of library books? Do you place reasonable and enforceable restrictions on your child’s reading of comic books and magazines? Do you know what your child reads in his or her spare time, both inside the home and away from home? If every parent could answer “yes” to the above questions there would be no

necessity for the creation or continuance of the Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications. What it all comes down to is—the choice is yours.

Though entitled *The Choice is Yours*, the Board's second pamphlet continues to reiterate the need for a committee such as the ABOP to exist and to choose proper children's literature for and on behalf of its community members. However, though the ABOP's belief in its mission remained largely unchanged, the public tenor towards the Board was turning, foreshadowing the de facto end of its operations in 1973 and its official demise in 1976. Though originally convened to address the problem of youth comic book reading, by the 1960s and 1970s the Board's focus had migrated to adult periodicals with a singular focus on obscenity. This expanded newsstand censorship of adult materials—and the Board's lack of transparency in their process—would be its undoing.

One of the strongest public criticisms in this period was the Board's opaque process for identifying and removing titles from Alberta newsstands. Though the ABOP often looked to best practices developed by the NODL and the Cincinnati Committee, they did not follow a similar strategy in regard to objectionable materials lists. Whereas the NODL publicly promoted their list of objectionable titles, and the Cincinnati Committee published their work in popular platforms like *Parents' Magazine* (Nyberg 23), the ABOP did not release or publicize their objectionable list—even to allies in other provinces. When asked to share the ABOP list of restricted titles with a colleague in Victoria, BC, who was hoping to start a similar committee, the Board said no. They did, however, agree to share with their BC colleague “the subjects we watch for—namely, perversion, sadism, and undue exploitation of sex” (Board meeting minutes, 1965).

Among the Board's files, few complete lists of objectionable titles exist. One list of 141 titles survives from May 1962 (two months before *Playboy* was deemed objectionable). While some comics appear (including *Amazing Detective* and the romance comics *My Love Secret* and *My Story*), what is notable is the large number of adult periodicals. This includes a number of men's magazines such as *Ace: The Magazine for Men of Distinction*, *Male Life*, *Man's Best*, and *Men's Digest*; true crime and adventure stories for adult readers such as *Challenge for Men*, *Battlefield*, and *Manhunt: Detective Story Monthly*; and salacious celebrity tabloids *Hush-Hush* and *Top Secret*. Surprising too is what is not on the list. Although a concerned parent reported it to regional ABOP member M. Parker as objectionable for youth audiences, the Board concluded that though “somewhat shallow in content,” *Mad* magazine was not objectionable (Parker). In correspondence on the matter in December 1960, Board secretary Louise Lalonde notes that the criterion they were looking for in objectionable materials involved obscenity and brutality. Missing from this assessment are earlier concerns from *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* that

centred on youth reading and other objections including contempt and ridicule of lawful authority.

Such broad powers of censorship—with shifting objectives and standards—had been a concern since the proposed addition of “crime comics” to the obscenity clause in the late 1940s. Though supportive of limiting the availability of crime comics, BC Attorney General Gordon S. Wismer worried that expanded Criminal Code parameters of “obscene” materials in Canada could create the “possibility of a censorship board”—a prospect that he deemed would set “a very dangerous precedent” (“Censorship”). Nonetheless, the ABOP continued to maintain that their powers were advisory only, a stance that increasingly brought frustration from vendors and distributors. In a 1967 *Calgary Herald* editorial entitled “Nobody Will Claim Censor’s Role: But Books Get Banned,” the writer Bill Musselwhite observes how there was no public appeal process to challenge ABOP decisions. In the editorial, Musselwhite also paraphrases ABOP representative J. D. Palmer as effectively saying that “persons would have no reasons to appeal to the provincial board” because it was the distributors who were withdrawing the materials; the Board was merely advising.

How voluntary was this removal by distributors and retailers? Throughout its history, the Board maintained strong working partnerships with law enforcement and the Attorney General’s office. In a 1956 letter to D. J. MacEachern, a colleague in Nova Scotia who hoped to start a similar committee, ABOP chairperson Anna Maure baldly states, “The attorney-general in Alberta will prosecute distributors on the recommendation of the Advisory Board.” In the ABOP board meeting minutes of November 24, 1958, the Deputy Attorney General of Alberta reiterates support for the organization’s actions and the Attorney General’s commitment to prosecuting non-compliant distributors. While few prosecutions for “crime comics” ever occurred in Canada (McGinnis, “Police”), the ABOP leveraged the threat of prosecution and capitalized on the widespread fears of crime comics to strong coercive effect during the majority of their tenure. Board chairperson Aleta Vikse was particularly thorough with correspondence to law enforcement, sending alerts to police departments each time a new title was added to the objectionable list. More than fifty of these memos can be found in the Board’s archive files. Often, Vikse postmarked these memos on letterhead from her day job as Associate Director of the Edmonton Public Library.

For the years 1971-1973, there is little correspondence and few actions of note in the ABOP files except for discussions at a provincial level about the Board’s future and the need for such a group at this time. These discussions coincided with other social and legal changes enacted by the newly elected Progressive Conservative government and Premier Peter Lougheed to modernize Alberta. These changes included repealing the Alberta Eugenics Board and Sexual Sterilization Act (1928-1972), updating Alberta’s “archaic” liquor laws, and reinvesting oil and gas profits into provincial arts, culture, and educational programs—the latter a long overdue promise made by the Social

Credit Party (Wood 91-92).⁸ After debating the ABOP's future for several years, the province moved to officially disband the organization on November 2, 1976, by Order-in-Council (O.C.) 1194/76 ("Provincial Archives").

Conclusion

Though widely reported on throughout the 1950s and 1960s in Alberta newspapers like the *Calgary Herald*, the *Edmonton Journal*, and the *Herald Tribune*, no historical or retrospective biographies, library or local histories, or educational documents consulted for this study reflect the Board's existence from 1954 to 1976. Moreover, the ABOP was not alone. Based on correspondence in the Board's files, similar organizations operated in the 1940s to 1960s in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec, and New Brunswick. Though further research is needed to determine the scope and membership of these groups, the presence of the ABOP and the possibility of other such citizen action committees complicates the narratives of anti-comics movements in North America. Save for the work by a few scholars like Marie Louise Adams, Bart Beaty, John Bell, and Mona Gleason, the Canadian anti-comics campaign remains under studied, and the work that has been done focuses primarily on individual figures, such as E. Davie Fulton (McGinnis, "Bogeymen") or Eleanor Gray (Glegg). Additionally, there is minimal discussion or mention of the Home and School Federation campaign or government-aided support of this endeavour by politicians like Fulton, who was later appointed Minister of Justice under Diefenbaker.

Moreover, this paper opens up an investigation of how "good reading" initiatives operated as censoring mechanisms in postwar Canada. These findings critique ideas of libraries and librarians as historically and politically "neutral"—a critique that is also a focal point in current library and information science research. Studies such as Schlesselman-Tarango (2016), Ettarh (2018), and Steele (2018) bring a *critical librarianship* lens to library-archival power structures, examining how and what materials are collected and how this gatekeeping functions as soft censorship. These studies also interrogate the vocational norms of a historically white, heteronormative, and often socially conservative profession, with Ettarh's concept of *vocational awe* further querying assumptions "that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique." Additional study is needed on the pedagogical impact of prominent educators and librarians working with faculties of education and librarianship on such censorship endeavours. How has this impacted vocational ideas of "good reading" and intellectual freedom?

Presently, libraries and schools are not only weathering a twenty-year high in book bans and challenges but also enduring legacies of soft censorship and gatekeeping. In 2018, the Edmonton Public School Board's "Books to Weed Out" list included the graphic novel *7 Generations* (2012) by award-winning Cree author David A. Robertson (Derworiz). The School Board

maintained that they were not removing these titles from classrooms; they were only advising that “the series was not recommended for use in Edmonton public schools because it contains ‘sensitive subject matter and visual inferencing of abuse regarding residential schools’” (Derworiz). In May 2022, another title from Robertson, *The Great Bear* (2021), was pulled from shelves in the Durham District School Board due to content that does “not align with the recently updated DDSB Indigenous Education policy and procedure” (DDSB qtd. by Follert). The DDSB did not provide further information, and later said that it had removed the book due to concerns from Indigenous community members—but it also declined to provide further details (Follert). Each of these instances—with its use of the phrase “not recommended” and its opaque processes for removal—echoes the ABOP’s “advisory” actions that were actually censorship and gatekeeping.

The comic book moral panic peaked in 1954, according to popular memory and research on the period. For many, this panic was rooted in nationalism and a fear of American comic books.⁹ Yet the reaction to this panic was undeniably Canadian, and it lasted for longer than previously documented, with impacts on Canadian legal and social history. Re-examining the comics moral panic through a Canadian lens illuminates how the reaction can linger long after the threat has passed. In 2018, Section 163 of the Canadian Criminal Code was finally updated; removed were the words “crime comic.” No longer in Canada would the sale or distribution of an “obscene or crime comic” be a criminal offence (“Justice Laws”). However, from 1948 to 2018, it was.¹⁰

Notes

1. A reprinted copy of *What's Wrong with Comics Books?* is available for purchase from the Provincial Archives of Alberta website at atms.alberta.ca/paa/store/Selection.aspx?item=871. A digital copy is also available to view or download via the website *Internet Archive* at archive.org/details/P010878.
2. See, for example, Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics*, Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, and Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*.
3. *Citizen action* and *civic action* are phrases used by the Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books (Cincinnati) and the Citizens’ Committee for Better Juvenile Literature (Chicago). I use these phrases to refer to groups of private, non-comics-industry-affiliated citizens who—in their commitment to upholding what they perceive as “community standards”—work in a volunteer capacity towards an “objective” evaluation of comic book materials. This definition builds on the Cincinnati Committee’s description of their work in the US Congressional report *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*.
4. *Gender Queer* was the most challenged book of 2021 (“Top 10”); however, as the ALA cautions, “82-97% of book challenges—documented requests to remove materials from schools or libraries—remain unreported and receive no media” (“Top 10”). Notably, the high-profile removals of *Maus* and *New Kid* do not appear on the ALA top-10 list, but they were extensively covered by news networks, including CNN (Boyette) and NBC News (Li). For additional information, see also the Comic Book

- Legal Defense Fund webpage “Banned Comics,” the PEN America webpage “Banned in the USA,” and the National Coalition against Censorship “Youth Censorship Database.” At present Canada does not have equivalent organizations that track book bans. The closest is the Canada Border Services Agency’s *Quarterly List of Admissible and Prohibited Titles*, which does not track or account for titles that have been internally banned in Canada. See also the Freedom to Read webpage, “Censorship at the Canadian border, 1985-2021.”
5. In the early 1950s, “crime comics” and “obscene materials” fell under Section 150 of the Criminal Code. By the 2010s, as additional sections were added, these materials fell under section 163. For more on the legal history of crime comics, see Fodden, “Crime Comics,” McGinnis, “Bogeymen,” and the Government of Canada “Justice Laws Website,” which archives historical changes to section 163.
 6. For Wertham’s full testimony, see United States, *Juvenile Delinquency*, pp. 79-97.
 7. For a history of eugenics and institutionalization in Alberta, see Claudia Malacrida, *A Special Hell*.
 8. See also Fil Fraser, *Alberta’s Camelot*.
 9. For discussions of the relation of nationalism to Canadian comic book legislation, see Bart Beaty, “High Treason,” and Mona Gleason, “They Have a Bad Effect.”
 10. What follows is an ABOP list of objectionable titles from May 1962: *Ace, Adventure All Man, Amazing Detective, Art Advertiser and Studio News, Bar Room Tales, Battle Cry, Battlefield, Best Photography, Best True Detective, Big Adventure, Blast, Bold, Caper, Carnival, Cavalcade, Celebrity, Challenge for Men, Champion for Men, Chicks & Chuckles, Complete Police Cases, Confidential Confessions, Contour, Crime Confessions, Danger, Dare, Demi-Gods, Detective Cases, Escapade Annual, Escape to Adventure, Epic, Expose, Expose Detective, Feminine Form, Flash, Follies, Frolic, Fury, Gala, Giant Manhunt, Glimpse, Guilty, Guy, Headquarters Detective, Helios, Helios Fotoprint, High, Hi Life, Hit, Hit Show, Hush, Hush Hush, Illustrated Detective, Inside Story, Intimate Story, Jem, Joy, Justice Weekly, Keyholes, Light and Shade, Lovelies, Low Down, Male Life, Male Point, Manhunt, Man to Man, Man’s Action, Man’s Adventure, Man’s Best, Man’s Conquest, Man’s Daring Action, Man’s Day, Man’s Life, Man’s Look, Man’s Smashing Stories, Man’s Story, Man’s Time, Men’s Digest, Men’s Pictorial, Men Today, Midnight, Modern Sunbathing, Monsieur, Mr., My Love Secret, My Story, Offbeat, Official Police, Official Police Cases, Ogle, On the Q.T., Peril, Personal Romances, Photo Crime, Picture Scope, Picture Spotlight, Picture Week, Police Detective, Police Dragnet, Pose, Pulse, Quick, Rage, Real Adventure, Real Crime Detective, [typewritten name obscured in archival record], Scamp, Scan, Scene for Men, Secrets, Sensational Exposés, Show, Showdown, She, Sir, South Seas Stories, Special Detective, Spur, Suppressed, Sunshine and Health, Swank, Tab, Tempo, Top Secret, Trapped, True Action, True Adventure, True Affairs, True Crime, True Men’s Stories, True Mystery, 21, TV Girls and Gags, Uncensored, Uncensored Confessions, Untamed, The Vagabond, Valor, Vice Squad, Vue, The Young Physique.*

Works Cited

- Adams, Mary Louise. *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality*. U of Toronto P, 1997.
- Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications. Annual report. 1969.
- . Board meeting minutes. 24 Nov. 1958. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- . Board meeting minutes. 26 Feb. 1965. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- . *The Choice Is Yours*. 1962. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- . List of objectionable publications. ABOP Sous-Fonds.

- . *What's Wrong with Comic Books?* Cultural Division of the Alberta Department of Economic Affairs, 1956.
- Advisory Board on Objectionable Publications Sous-Fonds. GR0065.001SF, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton. Unprocessed.
- "Archived Resolutions." *Catholic Women's League: A National Sisterhood*, cwl.ca/archived/. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Ash, Evan. *Objectionable: The Cincinnati Committee for the Evaluation of Comics and the American Anti-Comics Movement, 1940-1956*. 2019. Miami U, MA thesis.
- Baker, L. Doris. Letter to Anna Maure. 18 Apr. 1956. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- "Banned Comics." *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*, cblfd.org/banned-comic/. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- "Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students' First Amendment Rights." *PEN America*, pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Barker, Martin. *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign*. 1984. UP of Mississippi, 1992.
- Beaty, Bart. "High Treason: Canadian Nationalism and the Regulation of American Crime Comic Books." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 62, fall 1997, pp. 85-107.
- Bell, John. *Invaders from the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe*. Dundurn, 2006.
- "Blame Comic Books as Boys 11, 13, Charged with Murder." *Toronto Daily Star*, 2nd ed., 23 Nov. 1948, p. 1.
- Boyette, Chris. "A Tennessee School Board Removed the Graphic Novel *Maus*, about the Holocaust, from Curriculum Due to Language and Nudity Concerns." *CNN*, 28 Jan. 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/01/27/us/tennessee-school-board-removes-maus/index.html. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Brennan, John S. Letter to Anna Maure. 25 Apr. 1956. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- Canada, Senate. *Proceedings of the Special Committee on Sale and Distribution of Salacious and Indecent Literature*. Queen's Printer, 1952.
- Castell, Horace. "UN Group Urges Ban on Sex and Crime Comics." *Globe and Mail*, 17 Apr. 1952.
- "Censorship at the Canadian border, 1985-2021." Freedom to Read, <https://www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/censorship-at-the-canadian-border-1985-2020/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- "Censorship Seen in Banning Comics." *Edmonton Journal*, 19 Nov. 1949.
- "Children Burn 200 Crime Comics." *Globe and Mail*, 27 Oct. 1949.
- "Code Drawn Up by a Committee of Grade 10 Students Attending St. Basil's School, Edmonton, Alberta." Undated memo found within papers and folders from 1954-1956. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- "Comic Books: Seduction of the Innocent?" 1949. *CBC*, cbc.ca/player/comic/1791222292/. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Connery, Allan. *As Reported in the Herald*. Calgary Herald, 1982.
- Derworiz, Colette. "Board's 'Not Recommended' Book List Angers Award-Winning Indigenous Author." *CBC*, 25 Sept. 2018, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-public-school-book-list-review-indigenous-1.4837289. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Edwards, Gail, and Judith Saltman. *Picturing Canada: A History of Canadian Children's Illustrated Books and Publishing*. U of Toronto P, 2010.
- Ettarh, Fobazi. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 10 Jan. 2018, inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/. Accessed 15 June 2022.

- Fodden, Simon. "Crime Comics and the Remnants of a Moral Panic." *Slaw: Canada's Online Legal Magazine*, 7 Dec. 2013, www.slaw.ca/2013/12/07/crime-comics-and-the-remnants-of-a-moral-panic/. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Follert, Jillian. "DDSB Responds to Criticism after Book by Indigenous Author Pulled from School Library Shelves." *Peterborough Examiner*, 18 Apr. 2022, www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/local-oshawa/news/2022/04/18/ddsb-responds-to-criticism-after-book-by-indigenous-author-pulled-from-school-library-shelves.html. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Fraser, Fil. *Alberta's Camelot: Culture and the Arts in the Loughheed Years*. Lone Pine, 2003.
- Fulton, E. Davie. Letter to Anna Maure. 20 Apr. 1956. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- Gabilliet, Jean-Paul. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*. 2005. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, UP of Mississippi, 2010.
- Gleason, Mona. "'They Have a Bad Effect': Crime Comics, Parliament, and the Hegemony of the Middle Class in Postwar Canada, 1948-1960." *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, edited by John A. Lent, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999, pp. 129-54.
- Glegg, Alastair. "The Child's Education to Violence': Mrs. Eleanor Gray and the Canadian Crusade to Ban Crime Comics." *Education Matters: The Journal of Teaching and Learning*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 26-36.
- Hajdu, David. *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. Picador, 2009.
- Hefner, Hugh M. Letter to Donald V. Steele. 21 Dec. 1962. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- Herk, Aritha van. *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*. Penguin Canada, 2002.
- Jukes, Mary. "Are the Comics Really a Menace?" *Chatelaine*, May 1949, pp. 6-7.
- "Justice Laws Website." *Government of Canada*, 29 June 2022, laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/section-163-20030101.html#wb-cont.
- "Juveniles in Fatal Shooting Nov. 12, Sentenced." *Peace River Block News*, 2 Dec. 1948.
- Katz, Sidney. "What about the Comics?" *Macleans*, 1 Dec. 1948, archive.macleans.ca/article/1948/12/01/what-about-the-comics. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Lalonde, Louise. Letter to M. Parker. 12 Dec. 1960. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- Li, David K. "Texas School District Pulls Books by Acclaimed Black Author amid Critical Race Theory Claims." *NBC News*, 6 Oct. 2021, www.nbcnews.com/news/usnews/texas-school-district-pulls-books-acclaimed-children-s-author-n1280956. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- "Lulling Parents Back into Apathy." *Calgary Herald*, 13 June 1955.
- Malacrida, Claudia. *A Special Hell: Institutional Life in Alberta's Eugenic Years*. U of Toronto P, 2015.
- Maure, Anna. Letter to D. J. MacEachern. 8 May 1956. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- McGinnis, Janice Dickin. "Bogeymen and the Law: Crime Comics and Pornography." *Ottawa Law Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1988, pp. 3-24.
- . "Police Wield Obscure Law in Comic Raid." *Calgary Herald*, 27 Sept. 1987, p. C6.
- Musselwhite, Bill. "Nobody Will Claim Censor's Role: But Books Get Banned." *Calgary Herald*, 1 Nov. 1967, p. 15.
- North, Sterling. "A National Disgrace: And a Challenge to American Parents." *Chicago Daily News*, 8 May 1940, p. 56.
- Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. UP of Mississippi, 1998.
- Parker, M. Letter to Louise Lalonde. 23 Nov. 1960. ABOP Sous-Fonds.

- Plummer, Kevin. "Historicist: Banning *Little Black Sambo*." *Torontoist*, 25 Jan. 2014, torontoist.com/2014/01/historicist-banning-little-black-sambo/. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- "Provincial Archives of Alberta." *Hermis: Heritage Resources Management Information System*, hermis.alberta.ca/paa/Details.aspx?ObjectID=GR0065.001SF&dv=True&deptID=1.
- Schlesselman-Tarango, Gina. "The Legacy of Lady Bountiful: White Women in the Library." *Library Trends*, vol. 64, no. 4, spring 2016, pp. 667-86.
- Steele, Jennifer Elaine. "Censorship of Library Collections: An Analysis Using Gatekeeping Theory." *Collection Management*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2018, pp. 229-48.
- "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists." *ALA: American Library Association*, www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10. Accessed 15 June 2022.
- Twomey, John E. "The Citizens' Committee and Comic-Book Control: A Study of Extragovernmental Restraint." *Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1955, pp. 621-29.
- United States, Congress, Senate. *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency: A Part of the Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States: Interim Report of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency to the Committee on the Judiciary*. Government Printing Office, 1955. 83rd Congress, 1st and 2nd session.
- United States, Congress, Senate. *Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books): Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary*. Government Printing Office, 1954. 83rd Congress, 2nd session.
- Wenner, Jann. Letter to Aleta Vikse. 27 Jan. 1970. ABOP Sous-Fonds.
- Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth*. Rinehart, 1954.
- . "What Parents Don't Know about Comic Books." *Ladies' Home Journal*, Nov. 1953, pp. 50-53, 214-20.
- "Women Teachers Open New Attack on Crime Comics." *Globe and Mail*, 25 Aug. 1949, p. 15.
- Wood, David G. *The Loughheed Legacy*. Key Porter Books, 1985.
- Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. John Hopkins UP, 2001.
- "Youth Censorship Database." *National Coalition against Censorship*, ncaac.org/youth-censorship-database. Accessed 15 June 2022.

Amie Wright (she/her/hers) is a PhD student in public history at Carleton University (Ottawa, Ontario). Her SSHRC-funded research explores the under-studied legacy of comics censorship in Canada and its impact on vocational practice and norms in schools and libraries. Other research interests include the teaching of history, visual and popular culture, critical librarianship, and the history of education. Amie is the former manager of school outreach at the New York Public Library and the past inaugural president of the American Library Association (ALA) Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (GNCRT).