

Drawn to the Form

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What do Popeye, Wolverine, Nick Fury, Sherlock Holmes and Smiley Bone all have in common? All of these characters have appeared smoking in comics.

The depiction of characters smoking in children's comics is a contentious subject.

A number of years ago, Jim Ottaviani, creator of *Two Fisted Science: Stories About Scientists* spoke at a comic-related event. He talked about the pressure he faced to avoid showing the characters smoking cigarettes, when writing a comic about the space race in the 1950s and 1960s. While it was true and common back then for the scientists characterized in the comic to be smoking, it concerned the publishers. No company wanted to be seen as condoning the habit, even though it was an accurate reflection of the work environment at the time.

There are very few kids' comics today that feature smoking. *Hikaru No Go* contains minor instances of alcohol use and cigarette smoking by adults, and this warranted a "Heads Up" in the book, *A Parent's Guide to the Best Kids' Comics: Choosing Titles Your Children Will Love*. Why is it such a big deal? Scott Robins, author of *A Parent's Guide*, offers his theory. "I don't think there's any easy answer here: Does material that kids read influence their current and future behaviour? Perhaps. Is there a tendency to overprotect and shield children from negative or 'bad' things? Absolutely. Kids are pretty good at

making decisions in their reading — if they're uncomfortable with something, they'll often stop reading it. I think it's important for parents to be aware of the content that their children are reading and to engage them in dialogue about things like smoking, even at a young age."

"Scholastic didn't want Smiley Bone [from the graphic novel *Bone*] to have a cigar in his mouth, and Jeff Smith had to fight to keep it in," Peter Birkemoe, owner of The Beguiling, described in a phone conversation about this topic. "The cigar was important to help readers tell one character from another — it was a key visual cue."

Peter elaborates that a lot depends on the character seen smoking in the comic. "Is it a good guy or a bad guy smoking — that's key to distinguish. Nick Fury is one of the few heroes to be still seen smoking, but he has the excuse that he's a WWII vet. People didn't care if super villains smoked." There has been a real push to eliminate the portrayal of smoking by "good guys" but, at the same time, readers can get a good indication about how bad a character is supposed to be based on how he/she smokes — is it a cigarette, cigar, or pipe? Does the villain use a cigarette holder? Other characters that used to smoke seem to have "kicked the habit," such as Wolverine. "It's okay to show him killing, but not with a cigar in his hand — that's a tiny bit hypocritical," Birkemoe observes.

The challenge to comic creators and publishing companies is how to incorporate classical characters in popular culture and literature, such as Popeye or Sherlock Holmes, and transition them into family entertainment in a way that maintains their iconic symbols while respecting today's views about smoking. The experts at the Beguiling report that a new Popeye comic has been released, and although the spinach-loving sailor still possesses his pipe, he never lights up. Apparently the new Popeye's creators are hoping that, like Bill Clinton, Popeye never inhaling will make a difference!

Looking for the societal influences in comics and graphic novels makes for a great media literacy lesson. Examining who and how characters smoke, not just in comics but also in film and novels, can give insight to how society has changed ... and encourages critical literacy in your students too! ■