



Weekly comics: what's what

Article Author:

[Imogen Russell Williams](#) [1]

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Byline:

Weekly comics reviewed by **Imogen Russell Williams**

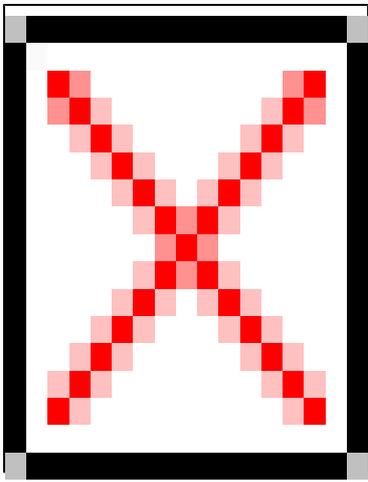
Brought up on **Bunty**, Imogen Russell Williams rifles through the current comics offering to find something that will thrill her daughter as much.

As a child of the 80s, I vividly remember the excitement of weekly comics and magazines from the newsagent ? pocket-money treats, full of stylised excitement, impossible competitions and stories about boarding schools, ghosts and ponies. (I'll still while away a happy hour if I find a stack of old [Bunty](#) [3] annuals in a second-hand bookshop.) But although [The Beano](#) [4] is still going strong, albeit after some wavering along the way, **Mandy**, **Jackie**, **The Dandy** and many others like them have long since bitten the dust.

Today's children aren't conditioned, as I was, to the delayed gratification of the weekly mag; instead, they have myriad entertainment sources jostling for their immediate attention. Children's TV, with its dedicated channels and round-the-clock availability, the bewildering richness of the internet, and gaming on tablets, PCs and consoles have all helped nail home the coffin-lid for kids' comics and magazines. Some have managed to make the leap to online while keeping their print incarnation going; some have tried and failed, and some are now online only. Although magazines for young readers still line newsagents' lower shelves, they're now much more likely to be TV tie-ins than indies with long-running stories and characters of their own.

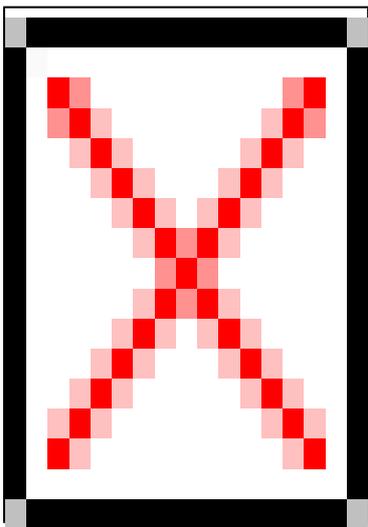
As the parent of a pre-schooler, I'm grimly inured to being pestered for these tie-ins, which may promise a wealth of educational activity, but are inevitably decked out with seductive plastic tat. I'm not immune to their lure ? they will often buy some peace on a long train journey, at least ? but I really dislike the flimsy, gimcrack toys, a hastily-forgotten waste of resources for which their purchasers shell out up to £6.

Amid my rose-tinted nostalgia for the days of weekly kids' comics and my daughter's determination to possess every Thomas-themed toy, complete with wonky sticker, that the lower racks have to offer, [Storytime Magazine](#) [5], [The Phoenix](#) [6], [Okido](#) [7], [Aquila](#) [8] and [Stew](#) [9] shine forth like good deeds in a naughty world. None offer toys or free gifts, other than those you construct yourself out of the magazine's contents, but all are enticing enough to offset this parent-pleasing worthiness with considerable child-appeal.



The monthly **Storytime** is dedicated, as the title implies, to the celebration of stories ? old favourites, fairy tales and legends from around the world, as well as ?taster? excerpts from classic ?brilliant books?, brought to life by skilled, accessible illustrators like [Steven Lenton](#) [10] and [Mirdinara](#) [11]. Considering that my daughter invariably leafs through the TV mags searching for the stories, and then demands that they be read and reread, this is a bit like a sweet packet with only the ?good ones? in it ? especially as these stories actually stand up to repeated rereading. There is a brief section for story-based games and activities at the back of the magazine, but the narrative is definitely the main event. It?s probably best suited to children of 4 and up, as the ratio of text to picture is quite high, and toddlers? patience may be tested by the long-form tales.

Bimonthly **Okido**, ?the arts and science magazine for kids?, on the other hand, is focused more on games and

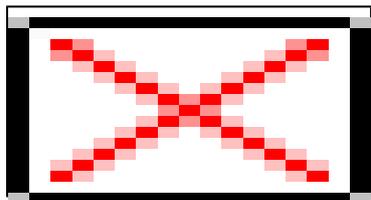


making throughout, with each issue devoted to a different, broad theme, such as Health, Machines or Celebration. There are fun, not-too-taxing board games, and exercises in which kids are encouraged to think laterally ? matching up ?old? and ?new?, for example, where ?old? is a picture of a steam-train and ?new? a high-speed diesel. It?s perfectly pitched for 3 to 8-year-olds, with something to appeal to every age within the bracket ? it being an explicitly gender-neutral publication also appeals strongly to me, and makes good sense to my train-loving daughter. It?s hard to tell which of us is a bigger fan of this jolly mag, thought-provoking, inspiring, and charged with a joyous, riotous sense of possibility.

For slightly older kids, there?s the educational monthly **Aquila**, ideal for more academic 8-plussers who like to soak up every bit of trivia going, and who want something more in-depth than Wikipedia, albeit with links included to broaden their study on the Web. Again, its themes vary by issue, although they tend to be more specific and closely-focused than **Okido**’s, in keeping with its older target audience; examples include Fascinating Fungi, Pompeii, or The Mechanics of Music. There?s a story section and a letters page at the back, but the focus here is on broad-based learning, approaching a topic from several different angles. The Mechanics of Music issue explores, for instance, the amazing Landfillharmonic Orchestra in Paraguay, whose child members play instruments made of recycled rubbish, as well as the science of sound (including its use as an offensive weapon), and the history of Mozart.

The bi-monthly **Stew** (?For Curious Kids?) takes a similar approach to **Aquila**, although it?s broader and chattier, with slightly more of a ?round-up? feel. It boasts a news section, a Things to Do, book reviews and plenty of interwoven

fiction, general knowledge and history, as well as ethical weighings-up of issues like contemporary piracy or tourism. The double-page articles are well-written and absorbing, and the matte paper appeals to the fingertips as much as the muted but colourful cover-design appeals to the eye. Much to my delight, there's even a comic strip, Daisy the Daydreamer (tagline 'She's Always Drifting Off!') at the back ? and a readers' dilemmas page, providing thoughtful advice from a professional counsellor.



The clearest successor to the mags I miss, however, is definitely [The Phoenix](#) [12], a 'weekly story comic' published by David Fickling. Long-running strips, including **Evil Emperor Penguin** (featuring Keith the flying unicorn who farts rainbows), **Corpse Talk**, in which famous historical figures are disinterred and 'interviewed?', and the stellar adventures of Troy Trailblazer, astro-archaeologist, impart an anarchic, hilarious, febrile feel to this glossy beauty. My younger self would have rejoiced to collect every issue of The Phoenix ? I fervently hope it will stay afloat long enough for my daughter to be bitten by the bug.

I might yearn in vain for another **Bunty** fix, but there's no denying the thoughtful, high-quality work and passion that informs publications like **Okido** and **Stew**. Perhaps there's a silver lining to the loss of so many weeklies: that the bar for children's print magazines has been reset considerably higher. And, with email's inexorable rise, the excitement of post plopping onto the doormat at appetite-whetting intervals also increases tenfold. Bearing this in mind, I think 2015's birthday gifts may just have taken care of themselves.

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant, specialising in children's literature and YA. She writes a trend-spotting biog for the **Guardian Online**, and seasonal round-ups for **The Metro**.

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