

The Comics Come to College



SURELY YOU REMEMBER the scene: After midnight, the morning of the final exam. Ashtray full (“I only smoke during finals, Mom.”), coffee pot empty as your head, which you tried desperately to cram with facts and concepts as you read over your comic books one more time.

Comic books?

No kidding. Some things are a little different now, at least in John Ahern’s Italian 103 class. Ahern is getting serious about Italian comic books, and his reasons appear quite sound.

Ahern’s former students were returning from trips to Italy with mixed reviews of their college language training. Sure, they could speak Italian and discuss Dante and Machiavelli, but they couldn’t talk to an Italian about Italy because they knew nothing of the distinctly Italian experiences of the last 30 years. Many things taken for granted in Italy were beyond their comprehension. Ahern began designing a third semester reading course that would help fill the void in Americans’ knowledge of modern Italy.

“I was reading an Italian magazine called *Christian Family*,” Ahern says, “and I saw an article on the role comic books are playing in schools in Italy. They have a tradition of the comic book as an art form which we don’t have. I looked at some of the things they were using to teach Italian kids about the history of the past 30 years. This period is so controversial in Italy that they try not to teach it in school because they don’t want to awake old bitterness. Contemporary Italian history is not even taught at Italian universities. But there is a series of comic books that deal with these subjects. I found them informative, graphically well done — and I liked them because they could put an American student in much the same position he would find himself in had he been an Italian.”

In order to use the books as language teaching aids, Ahern had to provide exercises, vocabularies and notes. He is well-qualified for the task. He earned his BA in English and Latin at Harvard and his PhD in Italian at Indiana. He lived for three years in Italy and is married to an Italian woman. The Aherns spend three months every year in Italy while John teaches in the Indiana University summer program at Bologna and his wife visits her family.

Most of the comic book stories are exploit-suspense stories about Resistance heroes. They are exciting, and Ahern knows from past experience that students often read more than the assigned pages just to see how the story ends.

“The strange disadvantage to comic books,” Ahern says, “is that the Italian in them is far more difficult than that in an ordinary short story or novel because it is so idiomatic.”

Comic books provide only about a third of the course material though. Students start by reading folk tales collected by scholars from people living in the Italian countryside.

“These stories have lasted because they are grip-

ping,” Ahern says. “They are fascinating; they’re amusing; they express the values of the people in the country. They are hard to put down once you start them. And they are relatively quick and easy.”

After the folk tales come children’s stories by the Italian author Rodari, a winner of the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award for children’s literature, whose work has been translated into more than 20 languages.

“He’s loved and read by children all over Italy,” says Ahern. “These stories transmit specific social values. There is a space travel story, called ‘The Cosmic Chicken,’ about future shock, about how children should prepare themselves to live in the world of the future and not in the world of their parents’ past.”

When the students have cut their teeth on children’s stories, they move on to the comic books about the Resistance and the Fascist years. They also read and hear folk songs and Fascist popular music of the period and compare them. And they will read a collection of letters by Italians condemned to death by the Nazis and Fascists. The letters come from all levels of Italian society and each is prefaced with a short biography of the writer.

“They have a great fascination,” Ahern says. “This is not something cooked up by some professor. This is written by a man or woman who was going to be shot and knew it. And by following those biographies, you learn a lot of social background.”

The final segment of the course is devoted to a short novel by Calvino, an internationally famous Italian author and a former Resistance fighter himself. While the novel is not set during the Resistance, it deals with the values of war and peace and is written for people who have just lived through that period of Italian history.

THE COURSE IS satisfying because the parts all fit together and they lead the student to Italian literature over the same path a native Italian would follow. The novel the students ultimately read refers to folk tales they encountered earlier in the course. The comic books make allusions to the folk songs and popular music. The letters were written by relatives of people still living in Italy, and the letter writers are now local folk heroes, although their names may never appear in a history book.

“A course of this kind should give a broad exposure to many kinds of Italian,” Ahern says. “A student who completes this course will realize that for Italians living today, the most important experience of this century is what happened from 1939 to 1946.”

Ahern’s Italian 103 offers a new approach to the third semester foreign language reading course. It is being offered for the first time this semester, so it is too soon to judge its success. But certainly Ahern’s students will have a different understanding of Italian than if they had read only a collection of stories and poems. — *Dave Holman*