

***Riverdale, Season 1* (CW, 2017) and
Frank Tieri and Michael Walsh, *Jughead: The Hunger* (New York: Archie Comic
Publications, 2017)**

Since its conception in 1941 by John L. Goldwater and Bob Montana, the *Archie Comic* series has been known for its wholesome and comedic image. The characters are sweet-natured young teenagers who endure high-school tribulations with a lively spirit and a keen eye for zany adventures. The storylines centre on adolescence and are often successfully structured around slapstick humour. In contrast to the original series, however, the recent renditions of this fictional world — specifically both the television series *Riverdale* and the comic *Jughead: The Hunger* — are anything but comedic and wholesome. Long gone is the family-friendly spirit of the mid-twentieth-century comics; now, Archie and his friends are entering the darker and more sinister worlds of the twenty-first-century gothic.

Comic-book fans have been following the exploits of Archie and the gang since they made their first appearance. The original *Archie* cast is comprised of Archie Andrews, the all-American teenager; Betty Cooper, the sweet girl next-door; Veronica Lodge, the wealthy heiress; Jughead Jones, the sensible and witty best friend; and Cheryl Blossom, the attractive yet conniving classmate. At the height of superhero and fantastical comics' popularity, Goldwater created a series with which the adolescent readership of mid-twentieth-century America could identify.¹ Through the years, the comic series has reinvented itself in various spin-off projects, such as the *Americana* comic series, which focuses on a range of different decades; the *Archie Meets* comic series, which centres on meeting various pop-culture artists; the *Life with Archie* comic series, set in alternate universe; the *Weird Mysteries*, a cartoon television series reminiscent of *Scooby Doo*; and many other adaptations that explore a variety of genres but all retain the wholesome light-hearted nature of the original series.

However, in October 2013, the Archie Comics company decided to take the comic series in a rather new and adult-centred direction by collaborating with horror writer Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and illustrators Francesco Francavilla and Robert Hack to create the *Afterlife with Archie* (2013) comic series, set in an alternate horror realm, where a now-undead Jughead overruns Riverdale and initiates a zombie epidemic. *Afterlife* explores adult themes including sexuality, incest, and aggression, through the utilisation of gothic tropes such as necromancy, zombies, and demons. It is the first of the *Archie* series to have a mature 'Teen+' rating due to its graphic nature. The success of the *Afterlife* series paved the way for

¹ See Talia Smart, 'Superhero Popularity in Past and Present America', *PIT Journal*, Cycle 7 (2016) <<http://pitjournal.unc.edu/article/superhero-popularity-past-and-present-america>> [accessed 9 September 2017].

further horror-comic adaptations, such as *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2014) and *Archie vs Predator* (2015). Also following on the success of *Afterlife*, the CW greenlit the production of a live-action, TV-14-rated television series written by *Afterlife*'s Aguirre-Sacasa, titled *Riverdale*, and following *Riverdale*'s success, a standalone comic horror special titled *Jughead: The Hunger* was created.

Unlike the original comic series, *Riverdale* is dark, suspenseful, brooding, and sexy. The show begins with the mysterious death and murder of Cheryl's (Madelaine Petsch) twin brother, Jason Blossom (Trevor Stines). The town is shaken to its core by this violence, resulting in accusations and tensions among the residents. In keeping with this subject matter, the characters in *Riverdale* are radically re-imagined to fit the mould of contemporary teen soap operas like *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-17). For instance, the charismatic and morality-driven Archie (K. J. Apa) is engaged in an illicit affair with his music teacher; good-natured Betty (Lili Reinhart) now displays erratic and self-destructive behaviour due to her strained relationship with her family; the wealthy and spiteful Veronica (Camila Mendes) is now far more sympathetic as a character, and flees with her mother to Riverdale after her father's financial scandal; and the easy-going and comedic Jughead (Cole Sprouse) is now a sullen teenager with a dark past.

The storyline's enigmatic tone and melodramatic characters create the fundamental structure for a teen gothic drama, while the compelling comic characters remain only vaguely familiar. The majority of the characters maintain a physical semblance to their comic counterparts; however, their characterisations and back-story differ from the original. Furthermore, in comparison to the comics, the narratives are no longer reliant on juvenile comedic antics, but centre instead on disturbing adult themes from statutory rape and undertones of incest to self-harm, all themes which are wholly absent from the original family-friendly comic series of the 1940s. In addition, the marriages between the parents are now portrayed as unhappy and dysfunctional, while the relationships between the teenagers and their parents are, for the most part, markedly strained, in distinct contrast to the harmonious relationships in the original series. Furthermore, the murder-related premise and eerie tone of *Riverdale* is reminiscent of the cult television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91). Both series centre on the murder of a teenager and the consequent erosion of a community's wholesome façade. In addition, *Riverdale* is filmed in the Pacific Northwest region where *Twin Peaks* was filmed, thus utilising this environment to evoke the sombre and uncanny atmosphere found in David Lynch's work. Aguirre-Sacasa also borrows from the *Afterlife*

comic series by reviving in *Riverdale* the themes of incest, sexual exploration, and murder. Other references to the *Afterlife* series include the appearance of Archie's zombie killing dog, Vegas, and the murdered Jason appearing in Cheryl's nightmare in a zombie-like state. The show also pays homage to its horror predecessors by employing playful episode titles which directly reference classic films about murder, such as 'Anatomy of a Murder'.

Due to its drastic re-imagining of the original *Archie* gang, *Riverdale* has met with praise and some decidedly mixed reviews from fans familiar with the comic series. Some Generation-X and early millennial fans were not pleased with the darker storylines and re-configuring of the comic characters' physical and personal traits.² For instance, the series premiere ratings were 'down 58% among adults 18-49' compared to previous offerings.³ Nonetheless, I would argue that, though the idealistic mid-twentieth-century American values are lost along with the comics' mixture of morality and humour, the adolescent tribulations central to the original are still evident. However, the combination of dark storylines and brooding characters captivated CW's teen target audience, the mid-post millennial generation. Masked as a teen soap, *Riverdale* explores current socio-cultural themes that many teens encounter, from teenage sexuality and diversification, to the generational divide between teenagers and parents, in a gripping narrative that builds suspense and drama.

Due to the popularity of *Riverdale* with teens, and the slow production and distribution of *Afterlife with Archie* issues,⁴ a single, stand-alone horror-comic special titled *Jughead: The Hunger* was released on 29 March 2017 to please the masses and revive Jughead as a ravenous monster, in keeping with his last role as a zombie in the *Afterlife* series. *The Hunger* was written by Marvel Comic writer Frank Tieri (*Wolverine*) and illustrated by design artist Michael Walsh (*Secret Avengers*), colourist Dee Cunniffe (*Dregs*), and letterer Jack Morelli (*Peter Parker: Spiderman*). The plot of *The Hunger* centres on Jughead's transition and struggle with lycanthropy.

The comic opens with the violent, gruesome death of the students' teacher, Ms Grundy, at the hands of the unknown Riverdale Ripper, who is in fact the now-lycanthropic Jughead. This opening scene is gripping and disturbing, and sets the tone and pace for the

² Deborah Krieger, 'Riverdale Has Yet to Justify Its Continued Existence', *popMATTERS*, 31 January 2017 <<http://www.popmatters.com/review/riverdale/>> [accessed 9 September 2017].

³ 'Riverdale Ratings Debut Soft, Scandal Returns Down but ABC Tops Night', *Deadline*, 27 January 2017 <<http://deadline.com/2017/01/riverdale-ratings-debut-soft-scandal-down-greys-anatomy-tops-night-abc-1201895535/>> [accessed 9 September 2017].

⁴ Mark Peters, 'Archie Comics Howls at the Moon in *Jughead: The Hunger*', *Paste*, 29 March 2017 <<https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/03/archie-comics-howls-at-the-moon-in-jughead-the-hun.html>> [accessed 15 September 2017].

narrative. The Riverdale Ripper, who aggressively mutilates his victims, is a transparent reference to Jack the Ripper, the Victorian serial killer. This analogy is used to reinforce the gothic tone of the storyline and break from the wholesome image found in the original *Archie* universe. *Archie* fans are familiar with Jughead's rapacious lust for food, preferably the burgers from Pop Tate's diner. In the *Afterlife* series, Aguirre-Sacasa exploits readers' knowledge of Jughead's hunger and re-situates it as the monstrous trait of a zombie, playfully illustrating Jughead's transition from devouring burgers to the delights of human flesh. By contrast, *The Hunger* borrows storylines found in gothic literary works such as Alexandre Duma's *The Wolf Leader* (1857), Carl Lasson's 'Little Red Riding Hood' (1881), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* (1933), which pit werewolves against werewolf hunters. Furthermore, Jughead is not the only character whose depiction deviates from the original comic series. In the classic *Archie* universe, Archie is the central hero, but Tieri surprises us by making Betty our unlikely heroine in *The Hunger*. Those familiar with the *Archie* comics know Betty as the epitome of innocence and propriety; in Tieri's world, she is instead a gun-wielding, fist-punching heroine, much more akin to the heroines of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Teen Wolf* (2011-17).

In keeping with these thematic changes, Walsh and Cunniffe's artwork is atmospheric, evocative, and heavily gothic in tone, not least thanks to the juxtaposition of vibrant reds with dark and diluted blue shades throughout the comic. The colour palette is reminiscent of cinematographic gothic adaptations, such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and Joe Johnston's *The Wolfman* (2010), where similar dark tones of red and blue are utilised to establish an atmosphere of dread and suspense. The depiction of Jughead's werewolf is akin to the werewolves found in John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) and BBC's *Being Human* (2008-13). *The Hunger* therefore successfully transitions the wholesome image of Archie and his friends to the gothic comic-book genre, where our characters find themselves in darker storylines and conceal secretive pasts. The comic ends with the gruesome death of fellow classmate, Reggie, possibly at the hands of werewolf Jughead, who has mysteriously left town, thus leaving the series at a cliff-hanger and purposefully open for a sequel. If the *Archie* comics were intended to encourage the readership to identify with the characters, it would seem that readers now seek instead to achieve a cathartic state of stimulation and excitement that they may not receive in everyday

life.⁵ Such a trend is certainly suggested by the popularity of works such as Robert Kirkman's comic-book series *The Walking Dead*.

Overall, *Jughead: The Hunger* is a creative and gripping addition to the *Archie* horror universe. In July 2017, as a result of its impressive storyline and dimensional artwork, this outstanding standalone comic was extended into a full comic series. The success of *Riverdale* and *Jughead: The Hunger* demonstrates the versatility of the *Archie Comic* series, allowing them to reach new audiences by tapping into the current fascination with gothic and horror. *The Hunger* comic series will return to stands on 25 October 2017, with a promise of 'more twists and turns', and the integration of undead-related storylines from *Afterlife with Archie* in the second season.⁶ As Aguirre-Sacasa has stated, 'anything is possible'.⁷ While fans wait for Season 2, Season 1 is currently available on the CW, Netflix, Google Play, and iTunes. Given the popularity of *Riverdale* and *The Hunger*, it is likely that further gothic adaptations or crossovers will soon follow.

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⁵ Noel Carroll, 'The Nature of Horror', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46.1 (1987), 51-59.

⁶ Aaron Long, 'Archie Unleashes JUDGEHEAD: THE HUNGER Ongoing', *COMICOSITY*, 12 July 2017 <<http://www.comicosity.com/archie-unleashes-jughead-the-hunger-ongoing/>> [accessed 9 September 2017].

⁷ 'Riverdale Executive Producer Teases Tonight's Finale and Season 2', *KSite TV*, 11 May 2017 <<http://www.ksitetv.com/riverdale/riverdale-executive-producer-teases-tonights-finale-season-2/151739/>> [accessed 23 June 2017].