

NOT long ago the General Electric Company had a display stand at a trade exhibition in Chicago. On a table in front of the exhibit were placed large stacks of the Adventure Series, comic books which tell the story of the jet engine, of the atom, and of the many services of electricity. They were there to be taken away by any child who wanted them.

Nobody was surprised to see them going quickly; what did seem strange was that certain of the kids were com-

to show how important is the part that science plays in what we do every day. The familiar characters with words coming out of their mouths in balloons make you feel at home right away.

The first book was produced in 1945. It was a straightforward story of the generation of electricity. G.E. provided the technical information and called upon the experts of Pictorial Media, Inc., to animate the story. Two characters were created—Johnny Powers, an energetic teen-ager, and his brother Ed,



A Social Boost for Comics

ing back every day for more and more copies of the same issues. Finally an attendant collared one of them to find out why it was that his curiosity for science was so hard to satisfy. The answer came reluctantly. "Well, you see, they're given away free here; but over on our side of the town we can sell 'em for a nickel apiece."

People at General Electric could hardly approve of this new kind of enterprise, but they had to admit that they were flattered. When kids are prepared to pay good money for something designed for their enlightenment, you can be sure that the compliment is sincere. For the books were planned not as recreation but as education. Bright colors and strip action give facts a life they cannot have on the pages of a textbook. People and situations like those the reader sees around him help

an engineer working with General Electric. Johnny started by visiting his brother's laboratory and had a lot of questions to ask about the equipment he found there. Ed told him about the forces that made it work, and unfolded the history of power through the ages. Since that day the two of them have covered a lot of ground together.

Science fiction had long been popular, but here was something new—science fact, and just as good to look at. At first the artists, used to the old way, sometimes had a little difficulty with the new material. Once, when Ed had to show how repairs were made on power lines, an artist wanted to have him shinny up the pole there and then

and fix it himself. He had to be told that this just could not be done. This was a restriction that had not bothered the artist in the past.

Because the originators were a little nervous about the success of such a venture, only 300,000 copies were printed in the first instance. Samples were sent out to teachers with a covering letter. It was left to them to decide whether a book like this could be a valuable aid to learning or whether they thought it would debase the standards of education. The response was excellent. Most teachers welcomed it at once as an illustration to their lessons. One or two of the more conservative sighed and wondered what teaching was coming to, but they still asked for copies. Over the years, as more titles have been



added, requests have built up to a volume of five million copies a year.

Every attempt is made to meet the requirements of the teacher. From a mid-western school for partially sighted children came a special request. For the benefit of pupils who cannot see well enough to read ordinary books the teachers wanted copies of the comics eight feet tall to use in their classes. Enlarged photostats were made and tinted by hand, so that now the children are able to make out the pictures, coming up close if necessary, while the teacher explains the story for those who cannot read it.

Comics with a Purpose

Originally it was planned that the comics should supplement the regular textbooks. This they did well enough. But, when the comics got on to such subjects as the story of the jet, it was found that they contained information more complete and up-to-date than that in the ordinary schoolbooks. In a field where rapid advances are being made, a comic book can be put together quickly and each edition can be brought into line with the latest knowledge, but the compiling of a full-scale textbook is a slower and more painstaking process.

Faced with the responsibility of issuing an actual source book for schools, the writers take every possible care to insure accuracy. Where, as often, a story delves back into history to find the origins of the principles of modern science, careful research on costumes is made in the New York Public Library so that the pictures may have complete authenticity. When *Adventures*

Inside the Atom was planned, top scientists in the G-E Research Laboratory provided the material, and the writers even went to call on the Atomic Energy Commission in Washington, D. C. Some of the biggest names in American science enthusiastically collaborated to give them their story.

For Grown-ups, Too

The reception of the comics among adults is a delicate matter. A full-grown man does not like to be seen carrying around a publication which at a distance might be mistaken for Dick Tracy. A few who are bolder than the others have been ungrudging in their appreciation. An engineer in Canadian General Electric acknowledges that when his copy of the x-ray comic arrived he cheerfully scrapped all the notes he had made for a talk on the subject and used the booklet instead. He had been striving to make a straightforward presentation of the story, but here was something which was better than anything he had achieved. Professors in America's leading colleges are not ashamed to use the comics for similar purposes.

As new stories have been added, new characters have been created to illustrate them. Outstanding among these is Jane, the girl next door who attends the same school as Johnny Powers. She has found that electricity has a great influence on a woman's tasks and interests. More and more the books have been showing not just an exposition of science but a picture of a whole way of life.

It was because of this that a United Nations educational magazine, the

UNESCO *Courier*, printed in March 1950 an article on what these books were doing. By arrangement with General Electric they announced that the comics would be made available for publication in other countries. A system is now in operation whereby G.E. gives away reproduction rights to any reputable foreign publisher and sells, at bare cost, reproduction copy for the pictures.

Comics International

Today the well-known characters often pop up in far corners of the world with words hovering above them that American children would find difficult to understand. Stories have appeared in France, in New Zealand and in Denmark, and negotiations for them are under way in Australia and Brazil. The latest order comes from Finland. In this country of lakes and snows within a stone's throw of the Iron Curtain, Finnish children will be able to learn in this pleasant and realistic way about how Americans are living.

So Johnny and his brother Ed are getting around quite a bit. We can be sure that, like all comic book characters, they have a long and full life before them, with many more adventures. For the onlooker an incidental interest is centered around Jane. When Johnny's exhibit won first prize at the high school science display, she showed a pleasure and pride that could not be entirely composed of an enthusiasm for science. One picture shows her with arms placed lightly around his neck in congratulation. It may be that for Johnny, as for Li'l Abner, the wedding bells will some day ring out.

