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Archie and the Unexpected Virtue of Forgetfulness

By Noah Berlatsky

We live in an age of serialization. The current Golden Age of Television is built on great arcs of episodic drama—the slow accretion of catastrophic detail as morally ambiguous antiheroes strangle themselves and others in cyclopean plot strands. Novels have embraced serialization too, as the multi-volume fantasy series has turned into YA and gone mainstream. Even films have re-accessed their long-past, adventure serial roots. Big-budget superhero films have dipped their super-toes in comic-book cliffhangers, or at least super-teasers, while warhorses like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* chug along with their own more or less convoluted continuities. As Dr. Manhattan told Ozymandias toward the [conclusion of one masterpiece of serialized fiction](#) (which has latterly experienced an [extended afterlife](#)), "Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends."

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Serialized fiction is the focus of so much critical attention that it can sometimes seem like the only form of fiction going. Comics scholar Bart Beaty, though, reminds us that there are other options in his new study *Twelve Cent Archie* (which, full disclosure, is in the same Rutgers comics studies series as my own [book](#).)

Beaty's monograph focuses on the *Archie* comics of the 1960s—roughly the period during which the comics cost 12 cents. The book is divided into 100 different self-contained sections—and as that form suggests, one thematic point Beaty keeps returning to is the startling lack of continuity in *Archie*. But that non-continuity goes beyond the simple fact of self-contained stories. Reality in the comic is actively inconsistent—what happens in one episode has no bearing on what happens in the next. At the

end of a story, everything that occurred is utterly forgotten, erased, and reset.

As Beaty writes, "Since the comics lack any real sense of continuity, any given character may be a great bowler one day and a complete novice the next." In one comic, Betty and Veronica are incompetent bowlers, and Archie and Reggie have to teach them from scratch. In another story, Betty is "an expert bowler," Beaty says. In a third, she's not an expert, but is nonetheless a good bit better than Archie. "As all Archie stories exist independently of all other Archie stories ... this is not a case of Betty having improved her skills over time," Beaty explains. Rather "it is a reflection of the fact that different stories have different needs, and if it is narratively useful to have Betty excel at a sport, it is just as easy as having her fail at it."

Examples abound. Sometimes, Archie speaks French; sometimes, he doesn't understand a word of it. Even Riverdale's geography is subject to silently vacillating retroactive continuity. When the story needs the kids to go to the beach, Riverdale is near the beach. When it needs them to go skiing, Riverdale is conveniently near the mountains. "Story logics are circumstantial and they stem from the collision of characters that retain a roughly fixed form with an endlessly generative series of new story prompts that can be infinitely recycled," Beaty says. There's no history and no memory in Riverdale; the characters are archetypes adrift on an amnesiac gag-reel.

As Beaty points out, Archie's non-continuity fit its marketing needs—the comics were aimed at younger readers, who would pick them up casually rather than systematically. The goal was to make sure that every Archie story was complete in itself; you didn't have to read a ton of backstory to enjoy an Archie comic. The fact that every episode was utterly independent from every other episode also made it easy to repackage and reprint stories. You can see the same logic in other humor series aimed primarily at casual rather than obsessive viewers, like *The Big Bang Theory* or *Phineas and Ferb*—though even those shows tend to have some memory from episode to episode.

Serial continuity, on the other hand, bets on gripping more dedicated (and often somewhat older) viewers. Part of the appeal of continuity, too, to that older demographic is the way it feels more real, or true. In everyday life, if someone is a great bowler on Sunday, they're also a great bowler on Monday. Real people have continuity and memory; they have pasts and futures. Continuity thus adds further verisimilitude to gritty, grim shows like *Breaking Bad* and a veneer of world-building reality to frankly fantastic narratives like *Harry Potter* or Marvel's *Avengers* franchise films. Flying broomsticks and magic hammers may be improbable. But they're not as hugely improbable as a narrative in which Archie is an A student one day and an F student the next without anyone ever noticing that there's been a change.

But is lack of continuity really always and in every way less realistic? Yes, people remember what happens—but, on the other hand, the truth is that, for most people every day, there isn't necessarily anything *to* remember. Continuity, by its nature, requires that things occur; otherwise why bother carrying over from episode to episode? Harry Potter has to have catastrophic events occur every single year, and practically every day, at Hogwarts. Some scheme or disaster is always occurring in prison in *Orange is the New Black* even though, surely, the experience of prison most of the time for most people is of one day being almost exactly, grindingly like the last. Perhaps all the boring stuff happens offscreen—but the result is still an awfully eventful vision of incarceration.

Lack of continuity provides Archie with the realism of mundanity. You can have episode after episode

of the kids going bowling, or swimming, or skiing, or campaigning for school president, and, just as in real life, none of those episodes actually matters that much, or is of enough note to remember. Serial adventures tend to be suffused with significance and incident; they focus on people like *The Hunger Games*'s Katniss Everdeen, who's more important than anyone else in the world, or Walter White, who faces serious moral and existential crises every hour on the hour. Serial stories have to make things happen, week in and week out—you can't just have an exciting incident or event, you have to have weeks or months worth of them, resulting eventually in the extended evil twin doubles and plot switchbacks of soap operas or superhero comics. The Archie gang, freed of continuity, are also freed from the need to matter on schedule. They lack the realism of memory, but in compensation are given the vacuous realism of inconsequence.

Beaty suggests that, in the 1960s, lack of continuity was a matter of ideology as well as marketing. Feminism and the civil rights movement barely register in Riverdale, where there is no past, and therefore no progress. Timelessness, in the Archie comics, was conservative.

If Archie was afraid of change, though, does that mean that serial fiction is afraid of stasis? Archie provides the comfort of frivolous triviality; maybe there's a comfort too in serial's insistence that the past and the future are stitched together with important doings and plot. When we follow continuity, we like to think we're going somewhere, perhaps because in part we fear we're stuck there in Riverdale, bowling without meaning.

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