

Many read 'soap-strips,' but some won't admit it

By Hilary Hauer
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In one series, the main character is a wife who travels on business and her husband worries about her health and mood swings. For good reason — the wife is hooked on cocaine.

In another series, our heroine has just found an arrest for school graduate who needs employment, but she also has just learned that her apartment in another city has been trashed. So she's about to leave town to check out the report.

In yet another series, an attention black medical student dwelling in an apartment surrounded women has a football that interested to her, but she has a habit of telling him off.

The foregoing episodes are the respective plots of "Flex Morgan, M.D.," "Mary Worth," and "Hart to Hart" — daily comic strips some people won't admit to reading.

An informal survey of local readers of these "soap opera strips" reveals that many are closet readers — secretly getting their daily dose of Flex, Mary and the apartment girls while buying their own papers. Right so that others think they are taking in more intellectual paper back at the editorial or opinion sections.

But those who do admit to reading in this direction say they have

read comics since childhood and aren't about to stop now. And they'd rather take in their daily ration of the "soap-strips" plots in a column, instead of the full hour it takes for each plot to unfold on daily television.

The suspense in these not-so-longy dramas is very slow, said one reader, but it is suspense nonetheless.

"On the face of it, it's probably underpaid," said Jack Gibbs, a local carpenter. "The only thing that happens in one strip is some subtle thing that happens in the last frame. The next day, they repeat what happened the day before, which is a repeat of the day before that."

Gibbs reads them, because he likes to "find out what happens."

Darry Beck, an East Coast construction major visiting for the summer, said the reads all three comic strips every morning.

"After I get them out of the way, I can proceed with the work," she said. "Until then, I feel like I'm missing something. Just look at what's happening in Flex Morgan — is that woman going to give us more trouble, or what?"

In the series, the character of wife was being investigated by her employer about her failure to close a sale, and she is "about to start up in the ladies' room between questions," Mr. Beck pointed out.

"Who knows what will happen?" she said. "She's already passed up

one, or a party."

When a soap-strip plot comes to a resolution, another situation takes its — and for Peter Lange of Oxnard, these resolutions are "dove times," when the interesting plots become less interesting.

It takes a while for the new developments to get up to speed, said Mr. Lange. "You get attached to what's happening, both that resolution."

Mr. Lange said she has been reading the papers for years and reads all of them, but just the soap strips.

Dr. Gerald White, a local pediatrician, said newspaper appeal to the "dreamer, escapist, fantasy, voyeur" is universal.

"We're all composed of various combinations of sub-ethics," White said. "Soap operas may appeal to the dreamer as we, because they enable us to act out fantasies. They may appeal to the voyeur as we, because they allow us to get involved in other realities — to get away from daily pressures and responsibilities."

Soap operas can also be learning experiences, White added.

"People who live somewhat distorted lives can learn through projections of what life's all about — for example, how people manipulate each other," he said.

Curiosity about other people's lives is another subtle projection



In a recent episode of Mary Worth, the heroine is about to leave town to check out reports that her apartment has been trashed.

While in Flex Morgan, M.D., a wife whose husband doesn't know of her cocaine addiction is about to help herself to a dose.

for participating in soap operas, White said.

"There's the little voyeur — the little project — it's all of us," he said. "We like to observe things that are fascinating, that have to do with the unknown. We project our lives to

see what the neighbors are doing about. We want to know what people are really like when they let down their barriers."

As the comic strips, they may be a way people recognize some of their own childhood — when someone

were a primary source of entertainment.

"The people who read these today probably enjoyed comics in their youth," White said. "They can't live it without heavy involvement of time and energy."