



ARCHIE LOVES KEVIN

THE ARCHIES – A 75-YEAR-OLD TEEN COMIC BOOK FRANCHISE IS ABOUT TO MAKE A SERIOUS 21ST CENTURY COMEBACK WITH A STRONG GAY CHARACTER. SUPERFAN, MATT MYERS, REPORTS.

ARCHIE THE COMIC book series stretches back to 1941 when the goofy teenage redhead was first created by artist Bob Montana and based, somewhat, on the popular Andy Hardy movies starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. Over the decades, the perennial teenager and his friends have lived through World War II, the Cold War, consumed Coca-Cola, screamed for The Beatles, boogied at discos, worn KISS face paint, became yuppies, and sent texts via mobile phones.

While the storylines and artwork have reflected the changing times, one continuing theme has been the Archie/Betty/Veronica love triangle. Along with regulars Jughead and Reggie, other characters who've evolved from the series include Sabrina, a teenage witch and Josie And The Pussycats, an all-girl pop band who dress as cats, their plotlines often intertwining.

Cut to 2014 and the gang from Riverdale High became well and truly immersed in the next Millennium with contemporary stories and new characters. But, in one of pop culture's most shocking and tragic twists, Archie Andrews was killed off! What's more, he died defending his gay friend from an assassin's bullet, offering the tween readership some fairly challenging subject matter.

Meet Kevin Keller.

Over the last decade, *Archie* writers have taken the series down a more contemporary and dramatic path. When Kevin Keller debuted in 2010 he became the first gay character in the series. Created by artist Dan Parent (who won a GLAAD Award for his work), the handsome, buffed and blond Keller turned up in the storyline *Isn't It Bromantic?* He became the object of affection for series regular Veronica, who soon discovered their common interest was men. It was originally thought that Kevin had a crush on series regular Jughead (the alt-music loving, loveable misfit) but the two boys eventually bond over a mutual love of hamburgers! Meanwhile, like many gay boys at high school, Kevin's true BFF was a girl, Archie's on-off girlfriend, Veronica Lodge.

The introduction of a positively portrayed gay character into such a conventional pop-cultural

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Kevin's introduction into the series gained so much interest that the issue sold out, leading to the first ever reprint of an Archie comic.

institution, naturally, attracted attention.

The issue sold out and remains the first and only edition of an *Archie* comic to ever go to reprint. Kevin became so popular that he had his own 15-issue spin-off comic book in 2012. In the *Life With Archie* series, the characters become adults and Kevin made comic book history again, by marrying his partner Clay Walker. Taking diversity seriously, the writers created Walker as African-American. The One Million Moms, an anti-gay group, threatened a boycott of Toys 'R'

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Us for carrying Kevin’s gay wedding issue.

Taking the story even further, when Clay is innocently shot during an attempted robbery, Kevin is prompted into taking a stand on gun control and runs for the American Senate. When he wins he becomes the toast of Riverdale but an assassination attempt results in the death of Archie, making Archie not only a hero, but also concluding the beloved series – though not for long.

Archie Comics is a family owned franchise, a little like the Broccoli family with the James Bond series. In recent times Archie Comics have gone through a major change, with new company CEO Jon Goldwater coming on board to make Riverdale High more diverse and look and feel more inclusive. Subsequent storylines have touched on single-parenthood, politics and the death of a much-loved older teacher, Miss Grundy. And, of course, the introduction of the first gay character.

According to his creator, Dan Parent, Kevin was created as a “boy next door” who just happens to be gay. “Not everybody’s particularly happy about it, but from where I’m sitting it’s been about 98 percent positive,” he says.

Parent, an *Archie* fan from childhood, has been working for the organisation for 27 years and is often greeted with applause by gay fans at conventions. One such fan includes George Takei of *Star Trek* fame, and Facebook gay activist. A fan of the series, Takei took the opportunity to meet Kevin himself, in comic book form! In the plot, Kevin writes an essay about how the TV star is an inspiration, not only as an advocate for gay rights but also to Asian-Americans. Takei was impressed with Parent’s cartoon rendition, pointing out that in the past Asian-Americans were usually drawn with buck teeth, thick-rimmed glasses and made to look fearsome.

When Archie Comics was given a reboot last year, beginning with Issue No. 1, the whole gang returned in a reimagining of the franchise not unlike that of James Bond, Superman and, yes, *Star Trek*. Along with Archie and Jughead, Kevin has also returned in plotlines kick-started from scratch. Other comic series *Jughead*, *Betty And Veronica*, *Josie And The Pussy Cats* and *The Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina* have all been similarly revamped – and so has Kevin Keller.

Setting another first, *Life With Kevin* is a digital online series. The story sees an older Kevin living in New York City after graduation from college and, of course, his BFF Veronica Lodge also appears. In the first edition, Kevin moves into his new apartment, and there will be plenty of dating along with all the classic capers. The first edition even has a reference to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

The Archie universe is now also to make its live action debut with the television series *Riverdale*. Distributed by Warner Brothers and produced by Greg Berlanti, the series takes a more dramatic approach, showing the hidden underbelly of the youngsters’ school lives. CEO Jon Goldwater has promised fans, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Berlanti is well known for his progressive television work. In 1998 he produced *Dawson’s Creek* (included a gay teen character, and a notable gay screen kiss), and later created *Brothers And Sisters*. His early film work includes the indie gay classic, *The Broken Hearts Club*, which he wrote and directed.

For *Riverdale* the role of Kevin Keller will be played by newcomer Casey Cott, the younger brother of Broadway star Corey Cott. The handsome actor is joined by a notable cast of

other head-turners including Cole Sprouse (*Friends*) as Jughead, Ross Butler (*Chasing Life*) as Reggie Mantle, and New Zealand actor KJ Apa (*Shortland Street*) as Archie Andrews. Former *90210* heartthrob Luke Perry plays Archie’s dad, bringing his career full circle.

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In this switched-on, *Grand Theft Auto*, digital device age, it is truly odd to see a 75-year-old ink-and-paper hero still resonating with an audience, but that is testament to the respectful diversity of characters now gracing the pages (and screens). If only we could all remain as ageless as Archie and Kevin.

MORE *Life With Kevin* is available at archiecomics.com

Riverdale screens in the USA on CW Network and will screen in Australia on Fox 8 later this year.