

## **The Secret Life of Comics: Socializing and Seriality**

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*Dr. Carol Tilley delivered a vision session to the 32nd annual meeting of NASIG in Indianapolis, Indiana, on the history of comics readership and libraries, particularly in the United States during the mid-twentieth century, and the relevance of comics to libraries in the present. It raised awareness for the audience about progress that has been made on comics collecting and programming, as well as the need for librarians to continue and heighten their enthusiasm for this work. It also reminded us that comics tell stories and communicate ideas. They are part of our cultural heritage and they have been for decades. In questions and answers, the audience discussed both the challenges and the rewards of acquiring and organizing comics at their own institutions.*

(After the introduction by Steve Kelley on behalf of NASIG): It helps me to acknowledge the ground on which I stand by connecting the personal with the professional. Let me start here: Steve mentioned that I'm a native of Indiana and I was born and raised in Vevay, Indiana, near to but a little cut off from Indianapolis by the hills and the river. I was really fortunate as a kid growing up to be living on the same block as the library. Because the library and my parents' house were the only buildings in town with the same dark red wire-cut brick, and the same red Spanish clay tile roof, I assumed that it was a link between the library and me. I was there every day that it was open, from the age of 3 all the way through high school. Then I would walk a block farther to Sullivan's Pharmacy (now a visitors' center in town), to sit on the cold tile floor and read comics, and I would occasionally buy some as well. Now, as a kid, I loved newspaper strips, editorial cartoons and comic books like Richie Rich and Archie, and I grew up to be a comics nerd, but, I am not as much a comics nerd as your own Steve Kelley, who came out to you last year owning over 35-40,000 comics in his basement. I really cannot compete with that!

Because I primarily teach courses that are aimed at people who want to work with young people in school and public libraries, a lot of my thinking about comics is aimed at the nexus of kids and comics and libraries. It's a good time to be someone who connects with kids and teens, because approximately one third of comics and graphic novels are aimed exclusively at young people. Raina Telgemeier, who is a creator of a variety of acclaimed graphic novels, *Smile* and *Sisters*, and others, has legions of girl fans from 8 to 18 and, last year, sold more than one million copies of her books, in a single year. She accounted for something like 5-6% of comics sold in the US. And Gene Luen Yang, author of *American Born Chinese* and co-creator of the *Secret Coders* series, was named a MacArthur Fellow last year. These are things that when I became a librarian, 20 or 30 years ago, were largely unimaginable. In public and school libraries across the US, there has been extraordinary growth in comics collecting and in programming aimed at young people, as well as adults. Much of this has been aided by a corollary growth in acquisitions and reader advisory resources, and a movement of comic book readers into the library profession. Plus, librarians are finding that, regardless of what kind of library they're working in, putting comics into their collections makes for significant growth in circulation and library use. Today, though, I want to focus on issues that are more relevant to academic and special librarians, as well as issues more relevant to technical services. That said, libraries share common threads, regardless of who they serve, and technical services and public services have a symbiotic relationship, so, whatever sort of library you work in or service position you hold, there's something for you in this talk.

I'll draw on examples from young people's relationships with comics over the past century, to help me to articulate and illustrate issues of access, intellectual freedom, public good, and the role of libraries. My focus will be on US libraries and comics published in the US, but, please know that comics are not just a US phenomenon. Whatever your starting point, I hope you will leave today's talk with a heightened enthusiasm for comics as a rich portion of our cultural heritage here in the US. I hope, too, that you will understand how much librarians and archivists have ahead of them in terms of work with comics. Now, a quick note: I use the term comics to refer to everything from newspaper comic strips to Japanese manga, from floppy comic books to graphic novels, from web comics to hybrid format picture books. All of those things are comics to me.

With that in mind, I want to start with the good news, some of the markers of progress, some good things that libraries and librarians have accomplished with regard to comics. Some of you, I suspect, will be at the American Library Association annual meeting in a couple of weeks and if you've been there, you'll know that in the past decade, the ALA has really brought comics and graphic novel programming to the forefront. At this year's conference, for instance, there will be a full day of panels focused on comics and an artists' alley with a dozen creators of comics set up to sell their wares. ALA is co-hosting programs regularly at the New York Comic Con (NYCC) and the Chicago Comics and Entertainment Expo (C2E2). There's also a member interest group on comics. And almost all of this has happened in the past 8 to 10 years.

There are academic libraries with extensive and longstanding comics-related special collections, including the especially noteworthy Michigan State and Ohio State. Michigan State has been collecting comics since the 1970s. They now have more than 200,000 comics and an extensive collection of related materials from the US and abroad. Ohio State is home to the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, which got its start in 1977. They now hold more than 300,000 pieces of original comics art, along with lots of books and serials. They also have 7,000 linear feet of comics-related manuscript materials. There are other academic libraries, including Bowling Green State University, San Diego State University, Indiana University, as well as the Library of Congress, which also have extensive comics and comics-related collections.

Some academic libraries have established digital special collections for comics; for instance, the University of Nebraska, which has a 200+ item digital collection of government and industry-produced comics (one I've used frequently). The Catholic University in Washington, DC, provides digital access to more than 30 years' worth of the Catholic-focused *Treasure Chest* comics. If you have never had a chance to read *Treasure Chest* comics, I would suggest it -- they're kind of fun; instead of superheroes and adventure stories, you get the tortured lives of saints. Which I think is lovely in its own special weird way.

Other libraries have specialized physical collections. At my home institution, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we now have the largest collection of Indian and South Asian comics

anywhere, thanks to the efforts of Mara Thacker, a South Asian Studies Librarian, who travels to India, and will be going to Bangladesh soon, on buying trips. One of the things Mara has told me is that there are Indian scholars who are coming to Illinois to use our Indian and South Asian comics collection. Because there are no libraries in India that have these materials, scholars are coming to the US to use their own national cultural heritage materials. At the University of Michigan, librarian Dave Carter has been building a specialized collection focusing on mini comics and small press comics, which are typically do-it-yourself low print run materials. They're things that are not easily found from book jobbers. And libraries of all kinds are now taking advantage of digital tools and resources with strong comics and comics-related content; for instance, Alexander Street Press has an excellent collection of underground comics from the 1960s and 70s, along with digital copies of the long-running *Comics Journal*. *Hoopla* and other electronic platforms give patrons access to digital comics, and resources such as *NoveList* help provide readers guidance on what to read next.

These are all tools that I wish I had 20 years ago. And of course, there is now decent support from jobbers like Ingram to help libraries add comics to their collections, something that was unimaginable until the last decade. *Booklist*, *Choice* and other review journals recommend comics and comics-adjacent materials; H.W. Wilson has come out with a collection guide for comics and graphic novels, and comics distributor Diamond has a dedicated librarian website and magazine. Now I would also be remiss not to mention the Library of Congress, which, as the US copyright depository institution, has the largest publicly accessible collection of comics in the world, along with a collection of original comics art. If you ever find yourself in Washington, DC, I recommend that you make an appointment with Sara W. Duke or Georgia Higley to take a look at some of the beautiful things they have. In the last few years, they've also been working to collect materials from creators at Maryland Small Press Expo or XPS. And I think that, with Dr. Carla Hayden at the helm, comics will have an increasingly bright future at the LC.

As libraries have built out their comics collections, their institutions' academic courses have also begun to include comics in classes, or comics as a focus of classes. Back at my home institution, University of Illinois, one can find comics-related content in courses from gender and women's studies;

comparative literature and rhetoric, education, East Asian languages and cultures, history, art history, art and design, and, of course, in my home department, Library and Information Science. This is part two of my origin story. At Illinois I'm fortunate enough to get to teach two comics-focused classes. One is Comics and Libraries; I've only offered it once, although I do hope to offer it again, soon. The other, Comics Readers Advisory, is offered every spring (and sometimes during the summer) for the last 7 years and it's been filled with students each time I've taught it. It draws students from across the school, students who are interested in academic librarianship, public librarianship, data science, special collections, youth services, and more. Now, not all, but many of my students have come to this class comic readers, like I am. And even though they have chosen to take a class that is clearly focused on comics, many of them still feel guilty about enjoying comics and know that in the libraries where they end up working, they may still have to justify purchasing and programming with comics. For that reason, I've started telling my students a simple truth about why comics matter. About why comics belong in libraries and it's this: Comics tell stories and communicate ideas. They are part of our cultural heritage and they have been for decades.

And yet, the first positive sustained discussion anywhere in the library world that started building the case for comics, that helped librarians understand how comics publishing works, that dealt with descriptive issues -- that conversation only happened 20 years ago in the pages of *Serials Review*.<sup>1</sup> It was 1998, when three comics-focused issues of *Serials Review* appeared. I'm glad they exist, but I want you to think about something. In 1998, it had already been 12 years since Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* had been published. It had already been 12 years since Frank Miller's influential *Batman the Dark Knight Returns* was published. It had been 12 years since Alan Moore's equally influential *Watchmen* was published. Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* (which helped me navigate my own coming out as gay) was already 15 years into its run in 1998. Those *Serials Review* issues came 20 years after the publication of Will Eisner's groundbreaking book, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, which was one of the first to carry the moniker of graphic novel. 1998 was 30 years after Bob Crumb debuted his first issue of his underground masterpiece, *Zap Comix* in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. 1998 was 46 years after *Mad*, which started as a comic book, but burst onto the scene and began inspiring a generation of cartoonists such as Art Speigelman, readers

like me, and even, perhaps, paved the way for media like the *Daily Show* today. 1998 was 57 years after the world met Wonder Woman, the Amazonian princess who came to teach the world the value of loving submission. 1941 was also the year the world met a bumbling, redheaded teen named Archie Andrews; it was also, amazingly, the year that Stan Lee began as an editor at the company that we now know today as Marvel Comics. 1998 was 68 years after a squeaky voiced mouse named Mickey began his daily run as a comic strip. 1998 was 85 years after George Harriman began dazzling readers, including the poet e.e. cummings, and much later, Bill Watterson of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame, with his colloquial comic, *Krazy Kat* – a comic that proves, even today, a cat, a mouse and a brick can provide nearly endless entertainment and amusement. Those issues of *Serials Review* came 96 years after the debut of Buster Brown, inspiring pageboy haircuts, and providing inspiration for both Buster Brown shoes and what we now call today Mary Janes. It was 109 years after Henry Jackson Lewis, born a slave in Mississippi a few decades earlier, began a gig as the cartoonist for the *Indianapolis Freeman*, one of the country's premier African American newspapers. And 1998 was 156 years after the debut of the US publication of the Swiss comic, *Monsieur Vieux Bois*, known here as the *Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*. Now I mention these publications, these distances, between some notable comics and those issues of *Serials Review* because I think it's important to understand that, until those articles appeared, librarians had done a credible job of trying to pretend, sometimes even wishing with all their might, that comics didn't exist. It was in the 1890s that Hearst launched the first newspaper comic supplement for the *New York Journal*. He billed it as "Eight Pages of Iridescent Polychromous Effulgence That Makes the Rainbow Look Like a Lead Pipe!" And it was, it did. And of course, the comics supplements in those early newspapers had commercial aims. Colorful, playful images would draw in readers and sell newspapers. At the same time, in the pages of Hearst's papers and those across the US, the color comic supplements on Sundays became incubators for innovative story telling and design. As syndication practices developed in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, newspaper comics became an early source for water cooler conversations, as people across the US could converse about the antics of Mutt and Jeff, or the Katzenjammer Kids, helping create a coherent national culture.

Many librarians weren't fans of newspaper comics. Between 1905 and 1915, for instance, one could find recurring complaints about the evils of the Sunday supplements. Some librarians refused to put

out the comics with the rest of the Sunday newspapers, because they didn't care for the contents. Even more so, they found that the readers who came to look at the comics messed things up, were too noisy, too boisterous, and they didn't like that either. Some librarians, in these early articles, even bragged about tossing the comics supplements in the library's furnaces, saving everyone the trouble of looking at them.

Newspaper comics strips continued to grow in popularity and number. By the late 1920s, the section was, for both adults and kids, the most frequently read portion of daily newspapers across the country. The publishers Cupples & Leon knew how much people enjoyed comics, so, beginning in 1904, they repackaged popular strips as 50-page hard bound books. They issued more than 100 of these and between 1904 and 1933, Cupples & Leon sold 35 million copies of these strip reprints. Still, librarians resisted comics, as they did most "light" materials. Sales and popularity, quite frankly, be damned. Comics may have been perceived as especially pernicious for children, but adults didn't need to read them either.

The late 1920s and early 1930s were a time of experimentation with visual storytelling. For instance, artist Lynd Ward created several wordless novels in woodcut, inspired by the work of European artists including Frans Masereel and Otto Nückel. Ward's books met with critical acclaim for his efforts, but libraries seem not to have collected them widely. And they certainly didn't spend a lot of time collecting Milt Gross's parody of the wordless novel, *He Done Her Wrong*. Influential Pittsburgh library director, and who I like to think of as a perpetual curmudgeon, Ralph Munn, summed up many librarians' resistance to providing materials like Cupples & Leon's books: "That the taxpayer has a right to what he wants is an argument often heard, yet it is also been pointed out that tax supported art galleries do not feature comic strips, and municipal band concerts are not given over entirely to jazz, nor in my opinion are tax supported public libraries compelled to devote a considerable part of their energy and funds to second rate novels simply because part of the tax paying public want them."<sup>2</sup> He repeated this argument a number of times, but this is my favorite instance of it.

Floppy comic books arrived on the scene in the early 1930s, and, in the first decade or so, there were no conventions about what should appear on the pages, about what they should include, or even what they should be, or who they were for. Some publishers played with things like book reviews for kids,

which often encouraged kids to go find the books at their public libraries. They included movie reviews, writing contests and even a song titles cartooning contest. But neither those features nor the introduction of original characters like Superman could keep literary critic Sterling North from complaining that comics were, “Badly drawn, badly written and badly printed—a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems—the effect of these pulp-paper night-mares is that of a violent stimulant. Their crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color; their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories.”<sup>3</sup>

I mention Sterling North and this criticism of comics for one particular reason. Only a year before he wrote this editorial, which was reprinted in newspapers across the country, and as a handout in public libraries and schools across the country, he had served on a three-member committee appointed by the ALA that helped to draft the Library Bill of Rights, which launched our profession's commitment to intellectual freedom.

Comic books found quick purchase among young readers in 1940, and in 1940 when many schools lacked libraries, and a third or more of young people lacked public library access, comics were already outselling kids' books by a margin of 5 to 1. That's in terms of dollars and it's pretty amazing. So the average kids' book in 1940 was \$1.50 to \$2 and the average comic was 10 cents, though there were some that cost only a nickel, so you're looking at 10 million in sales in 1940 for comics and only about 2 million dollars for traditional children's books. Throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s, more than 95% of all young people, children and teens, read comics. It didn't matter whether you were a boy or a girl, rich or poor, black or white or brown, or a young person who was housed in one of the Japanese internment camps. If you were under the age of 18, you read comics. And it wasn't that you just read an occasional issue. A lot of kids were reading, maybe, 20 to 30 different comics titles regularly, and not only that, they were reading an equal amount of comics strips in daily newspapers. This was a lot of reading, and it wasn't just kids: More than 60% of adults read comic books, too.

Rather than working to capture some of this excitement around comic books and comic strips, many librarians actively assailed the medium. This is one of my favorite article titles: “Youth's Librarian Can Defeat Comics.” Jean Gray Harker, at the point that she wrote this, was no longer a librarian



although she had worked as one.<sup>4</sup> She actually encouraged librarians, in this article, to work with their state and national legislators to find ways of restricting the sale of comics to young people. Now, in all fairness, plenty of adults found comics irritating. It wasn't just Jean Gray Harker or Sterling North. Others, like librarian Elizabeth Kuhlo Hunter, viewed comics in a more pathological manner. To her, comic book reading was like a childhood disease. She said, "A severe case of comics often leads to a serious aftermath of disinterest and disability in other reading. The antidote is not 'good comics.' There are *no* good comics."<sup>5</sup> Now, undoubtedly, this led some adults to encourage kids to bundle up their favorite reading materials and toss them into bonfires. There were at least 100 public comics burnings in the late 1940s in the US, all across the country. Some kids, like Roy Thomas, who grew up to be an editor and writer for Marvel magazine, were smarter about things. Roy took his comics to a bonfire in Missouri and he dutifully tossed his in, like the other kids were doing. Except, first of all, he only took comics that he didn't care about, and second of all, he waited until some people were leaving, and then he started pulling some comics out of the fire to take home with him.

This widespread disdain, coupled with an observation that almost all of the young people whom he treated read comics, encouraged psychiatrist Fredric Wertham to take up the study of comics in 1947. Wertham had been, from the 1930s, a psychiatrist who worked in the New York hospital system. He spent a lot of time working with criminals, finding ways of assisting them as they worked through mental health programs in the city, and in the 1930s, he set up a couple of clinics. One, notably, the Lafargue Clinic, was the first psychiatric service to be available to people in Harlem, people of color, both Latinx and African American, and he charged a quarter for you to come. He had teams of volunteer social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists, and others who worked with people who needed assistance. And as he began to treat patients, both at this clinic and elsewhere in his practice, he noticed that kids were reading comics. And something about that triggered him. It's still not really clear to me what happened, but in late 1947, and then into early 1948, railing against the evils of comics became his primary professional role. And so, throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s, Fredric Wertham was everywhere. He was on the radio, on TV, in the newspapers; he was in women's magazines like *Ladies Home Journal* and general interest publications like *Readers Digest*. He spoke at professional associations, he spoke at librarian and teacher gatherings, and all of this was about the evils of comics.

He synthesized his ideas that comics were vicious, that comics were violent, that comics created readers who were maladjusted, in his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*.<sup>6</sup> This book was a true polemic. It was (and still is) hyperbolic and frenzied, and he drew, in this book, on what he said were clinical case studies of the young people he treated. He advocated, in this book, to restrict the sale of what he called violent comics; not to allow anyone under the age of 13 to read these comics. The only problem, Wertham said, was that 90% of comics were what he called violent, so those Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck comics, Superman, Batman, Westerns, science fiction, jungle comics, all of those were, to his mind, violent. There was pretty much nothing safe. He did make a distinction for newspaper comics. Those were okay, he said, because he believed they had editors who kept the worst content out.

This book was reviewed in places like the *New York Times* and *Library Quarterly*. Bruno Bettelheim, another psychiatrist, reviewed it for *Library Quarterly*. C. Wright Mills, writing in the *New York Times*, said it was a most important book. The National Education Association named it the most important book of the year and encouraged parents, teachers and librarians to read it. It got a lot of traction. And it was in part because, simultaneously with the publication of his book, Wertham appeared as an expert witness before a public hearing of the US Senate judiciary committee subcommittee on juvenile delinquency. This committee had been empaneled to investigate the link between comics and other mass media and juvenile delinquency. This wasn't the first time that comics had been targeted by a Senate hearing, in the late 1940s, there had been hearings that looked at comics, pornography and racketeering; there had been various state hearings across the country; and there had been local municipal attempts to regulate the sale of comics. But the Senate hearings, which were occurring about the same time as the Army-McCarthy hearings, were quite captivating. They brought in other expert witnesses than Wertham, although he was perhaps on the stand the longest of any of the experts.

Now, the kids who read comics were not so likely to be juvenile delinquents, as they were, simply, to be ordinary kids. Some of them, such as Bhub Stewart, used their fascination with comics to launch self-published fanzines, which they distributed throughout the US. I got to know Bhub late in life; he died a couple years ago. When he was a teen, creating this fanzine and others, he was working with kids his age from across the country. He then went on to work in the comics business as a critic and a historian.

He reviewed comics and graphic novels for *Publishers Weekly*, and wrote a wonderful biography of EC comics creator Wally Wood. Bill Spicer, whose artwork was on the cover, grew up to be a comics historian. There were about two dozen kids reading this fanzine, and Bhub wasn't the only young person doing this, this was happening in communities across the country. One of the subscribers and contributors to this *EC Fan Bulletin* is one of my intellectual heroes, M. Thomas (Tom) Inge, who is perhaps the founder of comic studies in modern academia. A lot of these kids, whom adults worried were becoming juvenile delinquents, also took the time to write the Senate, in hopes of keeping their beloved comics safe. I found, in the National Archives, more than 400 letters with about 600 names in all, from kids ages probably 9 to 18, and some adults who wrote letters to the Senate committee, describing their love for comics and telling the Senators that they were not juvenile delinquents. They read comics because the stories were good, because the art work was good, and because there were topics and characters that they found captivating. And they begged the Senate not to restrict the sale of comics.

Now, it turns out that their efforts mattered very little, because comics publishers were eager to stave off any potential government intervention, and so, they created that same year, their own editorial body to censor comics content. That body was called the Comics Code Authority, and it existed from 1954 to 2011. In order for a comic to be sold on a newsstand, (in the 1950s and '60s, the primary way of selling comics) you had to submit your artwork and story, your original pages, to the Comics Code Authority. There, they had hired a band of retired librarians and teachers who really *were* little old white-haired ladies, and who would sit in the office and stare at your pages, and then they had a little well with ink and whiteout or whatever was the equivalent of whiteout then, and you would go fix things while you were there, then eventually get the stamp of approval on your comic. That was the only way you could get a comic distributed. The only problem was, the Comics Code Authority created by the publishers, was only a segment of publishers, and so it really worked to squelch a lot of creativity in the industry. The Comics Code Authority restricted stories that included, for instance, vampires, werewolves and zombies. If any of you are fans of *The Walking Dead*, that story couldn't have existed in the comics in the 1950s. You couldn't show people who were divorced, or show criminals getting away with their criminal behavior; couldn't show kids being disrespectful of civil authority, couldn't use too much slang or use profanity unless it was absolutely necessary. They didn't want to see people who had physical disabilities

represented in the comics. They didn't want to see women either, really, unless they were central to the story and appropriately attired. There was a whole list of things. Over the decades when the Comics Code Authority existed, things changed in the way comics were distributed, and so, they became less relevant and also made the code less onerous over time.

But going back to 1954, we had Wertham's book that came out arguing for age restricted sales, we had federal public hearings about the evils of comics, and we had the creation of an industrywide censoring body, and all of this happened in a 6-month period. So necessarily, the ALA had something to say about all of this, right? Nothing. I looked through archives, bulletins for the ALA; the library profession, as a whole, was pretty contented to watch the contraction and restriction of the comics publishing industry from afar. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise. In 1954, comics, which were the real best sellers for children, were almost unrepresented in the library collections. I suppose if libraries didn't collect comics, then why be concerned about them when they're threatened with restrictions and censorship? And for the next 30 years, comics largely disappeared from librarians' concerns. Occasionally, one might find a brief article or a news note in a professional journal, suggesting, for example, that libraries could reach teens by adding comics to their collections, or providing contact information for underground comics publishers, in case your library wanted to spend 50 cents or a dollar picking up a couple of items for its collection. At some point in those intervening years, libraries began to buy books about comics. Librarians were buying stuff about comics but we weren't buying comics. Enough so that, in 1991, Keith DeCandido wondered if perhaps librarians would eventually start spending some money on stuff that those books were written about.<sup>7</sup>

And thus, we come to Part Three about my origin story. With a newly minted MLS, I took a job with a school library in the area surrounding Indianapolis. Larry Gonick's *The Cartoon History of the Universe*, was the single comic in my library's 16,000 volume collection. I bought a few more comics for that library during the time I was there, but, more importantly, I started thinking, why weren't there comics? Why weren't there comics in my school library where I was working, why weren't there comics in my childhood public library? Why did I spend so much time in my childhood public library, but I had to go to the drugstore to get these things I was also excited to read?

When I went back to school to work on my doctorate, I kept on thinking about these things. And after a long, strange journey, I finally decided to think about those questions in a sustained way for my dissertation. In the ten years that I've been a faculty member at the University of Illinois, I've continued to think about those questions still, and it's been a privilege to be able to be promoted and tenured as an LIS faculty member almost solely on my comics research. This is something, again, as a practicing librarian 20 some years ago, I could never have imagined. In my pondering and research of the last 20 years, I wound up in the papers of Fredric Wertham at the Library of Congress. He'd been dead since 1980, but they were not opened to the public until 2010. I went there, not because I wanted to do Fredric Wertham's legacy any intentional harm. He's been made the whipping boy of many comics fans, some of the derision deserved, some of it not. I went there to read the correspondence he claimed to have had with teachers and librarians. But within the first day, I knew I was going to leave from my time at the Library of Congress with a much bigger story – that is, he made stuff up. In 2012, I published a scholarly article.<sup>8</sup> I wrote this story about his falsifications. I didn't want to, and I actually put it off for a while. I spent really a full year debating whether or not I wanted to tell this story, but ultimately, I decided it was important to write about Wertham, to write about his falsifications, because he abused the trust that his young patients placed in him. It was important because Fredric Wertham's distaste for comics and his campaign against them, is a big part of why it took until 1998 for librarians to start thinking about comics in a serious way. It's Wertham's specter that keeps my students, my pre-professional library students, second guessing about whether it's okay to like comics. It turns out that my work seems to be important to a lot of other folks. It's opened a lot of doors for me, professionally, to speak to other people and audiences, including folks like you, about the world of comics and it's also been a vindication of sort for other comics readers and comics creators, knowing that, maybe, they hadn't wasted their life.

I'm really happy that we are finally figuring out the whole comics in libraries thing, but at the same time, we need to recognize that we are really, really late. As robust as comic sales are today – you can't miss the hype around movies like *Guardians of the Galaxy* and around the new *Wonder Woman* movie. Yet, even with movies and tie-ins and cross promotion, comic sales are nowhere near the unit sales there were in 1953. We have missed peak popularity. The per person sales of comics in 1953, for school age

children, was about 32-33 per person, but today, it is about 3 per person. When we look at the numbers overall, we also see that sales have shrunk.

Thankfully for us, while we as a profession were busy ignoring comics and hoping that comics might just go away, some comics fans helped save us from ourselves. Between the late 1950s and until his death around 2006, Bill Blackbeard collected tons, *literal* tons, about 30 tons of castoff newspapers from libraries, because he loved comics. He knew what so many librarians didn't know, that comics were valuable and were worthy of historical study; yet, he knew there was no way of accomplishing that study, because not only were there no indexes to comics, but sometimes, libraries had not even bound comics sections with the rest of the newspapers -- in part because they probably tossed them in the furnace. Other libraries were disposing of bound newspapers as they microfilmed them, which includes the Library of Congress, to some extent.

Bill Blackbeard also understood that all of the microfilming that libraries did throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s had limitations. Microfilming didn't show color. Microfilming is a low fidelity solution for the high fidelity medium of comics. And so, for instance, if the only versions of Sunday comics available were on microfilm, we would only see a Lyonel Feininger comic strip from 1926 in black and white. For years, Feininger, like other artists, only worked for one paper. It was only the *Chicago Tribune* that carried his comics. He created a beautiful strip called the *Kinder Kids*. Feininger was a German artist who did a lot of other fine arts work, including sculpture throughout his career, but, for a while in the 1920s, he did comics. The color detail, the ability to interrogate printing methods, all of that is lost when we only have a black and white microfilmed or digitized record. Plus, in historical newspaper collections, there is no comic section in the *Chicago Tribune* for this date, probably because the newspaper morgue was incomplete. If Bill Blackbeard hadn't been saving those comics, we might not know today, that something this beautiful exists.

Science professor and comics fan Jerry Bails created a *Who's Who*, a history of early writers, artists and editors in comics. He helped create a long running fanzine *Alter Ego* with one-time Marvel editor Roy Thomas. Bails also helped launch CAPA Alpha, the comic amateur press association, which provided the starting point for serious criticism and study of comics around 1960. But perhaps most

important, Jerry Bails, using his own money, photographed and microfilmed complete comics from the 1940s, '50s and '60s. He wanted to be able to share them with other comics fans, because it was difficult to get copies of early comics. He knew that, if people wanted to study comics, they had to have access to them. For more than 30 years, an extensive network of volunteers has indexed more than 1 million comics, which is the Grand Comics Database, which is a resource for fans, scholars and librarians.<sup>9</sup> Although it's still incomplete, it still collects information about publishers, theories, characters, creators, etc., in a relatively searchable format, so you can find on-sale dates of a particular comic book issue, or figure out where particular stories were reprinted. It's a resource I use almost every day. Volunteer fans have also created sites like the Digital Comic Museum, where people scan public domain comic books and upload them to the website.<sup>10</sup> Most of them are only in places, such as Michigan State University, where you'd have to go to find them, but sites like this allow scholars like me to trace reader participation and practice. Private collectors and fan researchers also make available glimpses into publishing practices, by sharing their ideas online in places like Facebook and listservs. I came across, in a Facebook group I participate in, recently, a printing mockup that would have been sent to a printer to create a plate for a letter page in an old EC comic from the 1950s. This was put up for sale, a friend of mine purchased it, and he decided to peel off the letter page from its cardboard backing. What he found, covered in mucilage, is the handwritten penciled story breakdown for another story in a EC comic. So he's been able to tell what went into the creative practice, what went into blocking out the story, and how it might have changed over time.

What do we need to be doing in libraries with regard to comics? How do we, as people who are interested in preserving the record of cultural heritage that comics is, what can we be doing? There's plenty yet to be done. Those feel-good examples that I talked about at the beginning of the presentation, those projects are a start. But many academic libraries are still not collecting comics to a significant degree. Not every library can be a Michigan State. But it's difficult to imagine there's not something comics-related that every library can collect, even if it's a decent reading collection. Quite honestly, it can be difficult to keep up with the volume that's produced. In the last few years, if you look at production statistics, there are about 800 or 900 new comics, graphic novels, trade collections, that are published each month. Each month! And those numbers don't even include some of the prolific variant formats such

as mini comics, webcomics, international albums, manga, locally produced comics and comics distributed via Patreon and Kickstarter. Our descriptive cataloging, cataloging and representation practices are still awkward. And I get it. Every library is different, every set of patrons is different, technical services and cataloging staff are overworked, and not everyone doing this work “gets” comics or cares. Yet, I still have to think that there is room to do more. We can figure out, as folks did at San Diego State University, when they, all of a sudden, got a donation of 46,000 comics, how we can do things creatively, how we can break old practices and kludge together new ones on comics work. We can endeavor to make our collections more visible and more accessible. Our goal has to be creating digital and tangible surrogates that people can use. I don’t even want to go in detail into a lot of the archival collections. If we were to look at libraries and archives across the country, there are probably 50 meaningful comics-focused manuscript collections in the US. That’s not very many, considering as huge and diverse and rich a field as comics is. A lot of that material - publishing records, creators’ correspondence, fanmail, original art – was either tossed out, or, it was purchased by private collectors and may never see a library and never be publicly accessible. So, I encourage you all to think: what creators, what publishers, what fans, should we be courting? What materials do we need to be on the lookout for? Who is going to be the Ransom Center for comics creators? And no, it’s not very reasonable for Ohio State and Michigan State to go on doing the heavy lifting.

Most important, we need to force ourselves to go more firmly beyond the perception that comics are infantile, peurile, the perception that Fredric Wertham wrote and helped consolidate. Comics studies is a robust and growing field. There have been theses, dissertations and critiques of comics for more than 80 years. The Comics Studies Society, for which I’m president elect, has 500 members and that’s pretty impressive, since it’s only been around for a couple of years. There are plenty more folks that may not be inclined to describe or define themselves as comics scholars. Comics studies crosses interdisciplinary boundaries to include work in medicine, cognitive science, political theory, military history, art history, speech-act theory, curriculum studies and so on. Comics can be silly, absolutely, or serious. They can be fantastical, or they can be grounded in reality. Their readers and creators transcend boundaries of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, style, format and preferences. At a time when the digital divide is still real, when racism, sexism and politics divide us, when libraries at all levels of all kinds



fight for funding and struggle to maintain adequate collections and services, it can be tempting to think that comics remain ephemeral; that comics have waited 80 plus years for us in the library world to care about them, so why not let them wait a little bit longer? But I would urge you all to remember, comics tell stories, comics communicate ideas, they are an important and valuable and indisputable part of our cultural heritage and they belong to all of us.

### Selected Questions & Answers

An audience member asked if publishers are creating digital surrogates that libraries can collect. Comics publishers are not quite ready for library markets. However, some database publishers, such as Alexander Street Press, have been looking at doing more comics – for instance, *Archie* has been raised as a possibility because it's an ubiquitous part of kids' lives in the US (till the 1980s or so) and is even coming back now.

A question was asked by a librarian who had bought a fair number of graphic novels to support academic courses. The ones added to the main collection started to go missing, until finally, most of the remaining ones have been assigned to special collections. Tilley's perspective (perhaps different than academic libraries going for long-term conservation and preservation) is that comics, graphic novels, are consumables and we need to be more flexible, although it is a challenge. It is true that when we get into some small press and mini comics, they're gone soon after they hit the shelves. Perhaps we as a profession could investigate the possibility of publisher-library partnerships, how we can be of assistance in preserving and making these available over time.

A cataloger commented on the balance between wanting to receive gifts and donations of comics from collectors, and the dearth of money and time to catalog them. Understanding that these are real constraints, Dr. Tilley recommended the approach that San Diego State University took, which is valuable in that they departed from conventions in cataloging, and instead, aimed at getting access out there as soon as possible. They trained student workers who were able to add up to 60 records per hour, borrowing metadata from the Grand Comics database and other sources, and using these data to

augment the catalog record's traditional structure. So anything like that we can do to use alternative or new approaches, or thinking of how to provide visual displays of the covers and getting people enthusiastic that they're there, it's going to take creative effort (and funding) to move beyond where we are now.

A librarian in the audience commented on growing up with bilingual comics from Mexico, which appealed both to kids and adults in the 1960s. To what extent is work being done in foreign languages, and specifically, Spanish language comics? There are some Latinx focused collections, including the nascent Hernandez Brothers Collection of Hispanic Comics and Cartoon Art at University of Texas - El Paso. Tilley noted she could not speak specifically of ongoing collecting being done in Latin America and South America, but there are comics in every culture, every language, and some growing resources online that people are beginning to create. For example, a recent website focuses on African comics and African-focused video games. It's not a library site but it is one of the few ways of finding out about comics and immersive storytelling coming from the African continent. We need more ways of finding out, and we still need to deal with that perception, when it comes to our foreign language collections, that comics are ephemeral stuff and not important or meaningful enough for libraries.

#### NOTES

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