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Historically, graphic novels have held a precarious place in public library collections. In the past, public libraries were envisioned as institutions for education and moral improvement, and library materials were required to prove their quality; arguments have been made against genre fiction, and even against fiction in general. As public libraries have shifted their focus to become more driven by user demand, genre fiction and graphic novels have gained increasing amounts of respect and visibility within library settings. By means of qualitative interviews with local public librarians, this study seeks to examine how librarians view the role of graphic novels in libraries. The interviewed librarians have largely positive views on graphic novels, and believe that they can serve as an important motivator for reluctant readers.

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Librarians' Attitudes and Perspectives Regarding Graphic Novels

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Introduction

The debate over the role of "pulp" fiction in libraries actually consists of two arguments that are separate and not always easy to untangle. First, there is the question of genre-as-literature: is it possible that "pulp" genres such as science fiction, horror, romances, and comic books actually do have the potential for true literary quality? Second is the question of the role of libraries. Are they to be institutions of high culture for public education, dispensing Dickens and Eliot on demand, or can (and should) they be equally guided by public desires?

The past century has brought a dramatic shift in the way that popular genre fiction has been used and perceived in public libraries. Previously, public libraries had an expressed purpose of education and moral improvement that frequently placed them in opposition to fiction that was seen as cheap and trashy; adventure stories, science fiction, romances, and sometimes even fiction in general were widely perceived as having no place in the public library. In the words of Frederick M. Crunden, of the St. Louis Public Library, a public library's purpose is "The intellectual advancement and the moral betterment of the community" (141), and Herbert Putnam wrote, "I doubt the wisdom of doing it [supplying the demand for light literature] at the public expense through the libraries. Even if their circulation should be cut down one-half, the libraries ought to reform on this matter" (94). Children and young adults, especially, were seen as being in need of good literature to mold their intellects and characters. Miriam Braverman writes, "A strong tone of moral uplift, similar to that of public education advocates, was expressed in the early years of public

library development… The librarians in the Robert Louis Stevenson Room [Cleveland Public Library], regarding nonfiction as a more beneficial type of reading for the individual, sought until 1934 to discourage the reading of fiction" (244). Along with this assumption about the role of the public library, there has been the assumption that there is good reading material and bad reading material, and one of the primary purposes of the librarian's work is to lead young people away from bad reading material and towards good reading material.

However, in the last few decades the trend has shifted towards a more inclusive view of literature and a more demand-centered philosophy, and popular series fiction and graphic novels now form a significant part of most juvenile and young adult collections. Patrick Jones writes that the way to improve adolescent literacy is to "show respect for the reading choices of young people. We compliment; we don't condemn…. To say or to convey the attitude of 'at least they are reading something' is to show disrespect for what the teen, for whatever reason, has chosen to read" (35). As years have gone by, not only the previous characterization of a library's purpose, but also the line that clearly demarcates "good" from "bad" reading material, has blurred. Leslie Fiedler writes of comic books as an icon of a popular culture that is distinguished "by its refusal to be shabby or second-rate in appearance, by a refusal to know its place" (124); much the same could be said for other forms of genre fiction.

Comic books and graphic novels occupy a precarious place in libraries and in the field of literature more generally. On one hand, it is acknowledged that teenage boys and others who will read only under extreme duress will quite happily devour issues of *Batman* or *Spider-Man*. As is shown in my literature review, comics are consistently one of the most popular types of reading material for late elementary and middle school children, and research has shown that children labeled as "reluctant" readers are often, in fact, not

reluctant at all when reading material that is not usually considered to be real literature, such as popular magazines, light nonfiction, and comic books. On the other hand, comics are frequently thought of as being absolutely devoid of literary value, only a step up at best from reading the back of the cereal box. While there is a growing push to make comics that are of genuine literary value, even such comics can end up being reflexively devalued because of negative perceptions of comic books.

Indeed, the valuation of comics has changed greatly. Once, they were thought to be horrible in terms of both education and aesthetics; not only would they make children stop reading in favor of dropping out of school and turning to a life of crime, but they were also bad art. Because comics combined text and image, they were thought to lead to a devaluing of reading, and eventually the abandonment of literacy altogether. Even as literacy research has shown the potential usefulness and high interest level of comic books, a stigma against them remains. Thierry Groensteen writes, "Comics were no longer accused of harmfulness [after the 1970s], but the stigma of artistic mediocrity would stick" (35). "Humor has been regarded as the opposite of harmony and of the sublime" (Groensteen 40), and humor is the domain of comic books; comic books are "systematically lowered to the level of para- or sub-literature" (Groensteen 39) because so many comics function in a world of "irreality," with talking animals and super powers, which has been considered "intrinsically stupid" (35). At the same time, there is a growing recognition that "two separate literacies" (Carrier 69) are bound up in reading comic books: that the failure of comics to either be a "real text or just a proper image" (ibid.) is not a failure at all, that it is the interaction of text and image that creates the story, and the real story is formed between the gaps of word and image. The images and the text need not follow each other in lock step; when text and image are interdependent, when there is even a tension between text and image, each can become freer

to convey ideas that neither could convey alone (McCloud 155). Scott McCloud makes the case that the world of comics is framed between the realistic, the iconic, and the artistic: that is, between "art-as-depiction-of-reality," "art-as-depiction-of-idea," and "art-as-aesthetic-experience" (55-57). In that context, comics aren't merely a juxtaposition of word and image, but—since the images are usually iconic and "cartoony"—a new medium using icons, which, because of the information they leave out, demand viewer participation to "create and recreate" them (McCloud 59).

The most important thing about these theories is that they account for comics not as a genre, but as a medium that encompasses many genres; not as a description of content, but as a description of form. This is particularly important because, for the casual reader, the word 'comics' has for so long been limited to superhero comics and newspaper comic strips. America has developed a tradition of artistic story-comics in the same way that Europe and Japan have, but this tradition has been limited by commercial concerns and censorship, and thus has not won wide mainstream recognition. In recent years, more artistically ambitious comics by Neil Gaiman (*Sandman*), Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta*), David Mack (*Kabuki*) and others have appeared, and a few comics have come to be widely acknowledged as 'art,' such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*; however, until recently the most 'artistic' comics have tended to be underground or foreign works which most librarians might have little knowledge of and little access to.

Allen Ellis and Doug Highsmith highlight this attitude, in pointing out what library professionals have written in the past about comic books and the public library. Before 1970, negative articles outnumbered positive articles by a ratio of 3 to 1. Librarians tended to find comic books to be lurid, badly written and illustrated, and furthermore, to make generalizations about the effects of comic books on youth. These opinions often did not

refer to specific examples, or have any grounding in fact; Leslie Fiedler notes, "in none of the reports of ladies' clubs...or statements of moral indignation by pastors, have I come on any real attempt to understand comic books" (Heer and Worcester 123). Much research has taken it for granted that comics are, or have been in the past, widely perceived as unliterary and unsuitable for library collections. This assumption shows up in both the articles that praise particular comics with the intent of proving that *these* comics, surprisingly, do have literary value, and those that take a more negative tone toward comics. However, although Ellis and Highsmith use literature to indirectly examine attitudes of librarians towards comic books, little research has directly examined them by asking questions of people rather than examining texts. In this research project, I examine the question of what opinions and attitudes public librarians hold concerning comic books and graphic novels and their role in library collections.

For this, it is necessary to define what I mean by comics and graphic novels. Comic theorist Scott McCloud defines comics as "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). His is an intentionally broad definition, but the key point is that meaning is created not just by the images themselves, but by the pattern and sequence of images. Panels are arranged to achieve a variety of effects with angles, close-ups, and gaps between the panels that carry implications of time, distance, and meaning. This definition leaves out most other types of illustrated books, as well as political cartoons; also, for the purposes of this study, I will be considering only those comics published in book format or in serial format, excluding newspaper strips such as *Garfield* and *Calvin & Hobbes*.

Specifically, I examine the following things, as well as related questions: Do librarians perceive comics as having literary value, or the potential for literary value? Do they perceive

them as having value of a non-literary nature (For example, in getting reluctant readers to read)? Do librarians think that comics belong in libraries? Do librarians themselves read comics for pleasure?

One of the major challenges for youth librarians in the 21st century is to make a place for libraries, and fiction, in a world where video games, the internet, television, and other sources of entertainment constantly compete for the attention of children and teens. Graphic novels have the potential to be part of the solution, but librarians must be prepared to take advantage of the opportunities they present. It is my hope that this study, by exploring the attitudes that librarians have towards comic books, can highlight ways in which libraries can improve their outreach to young adults and disaffected readers, and ways in which librarians can rethink their own attitudes and broaden their knowledge.

Literature Review

In considering the role of comic books in public libraries, it is important to consider the research that has been done on the value of comic books, whether in aesthetic terms or educational terms. The argument for providing children with access to stigmatized materials, whether those are comic books, magazines, or series horror books, is often that, bad as they may be, at least they get children to read. But Patrick Jones makes the point that "to convey the attitude of 'at least they are reading something' is to show disrespect for what the teen, for whatever reason, has chosen to read"(35). Is it fair to dismiss comic books as having no value beyond encouraging reading in otherwise reluctant readers?

Much of the research on comic books as educational or motivational with regards to reading comes from the field of literacy education. These studies are primarily concerned

with the instrumentality of comic books; that is, are they useful? This is a perspective that has a tendency to diminish any consideration of comic books as valuable for reasons of aesthetics or pleasure; comic books are seen as good only insofar as they are "useful," since it's already been assumed that they won't have any significant aesthetic or artistic value.

There are two main types of studies that have been conducted on the usefulness of comic books, as well as other popular culture materials, in an educational setting. The first is concerned with direct effects of reading comic books on reading comprehension and reading behavior; the second is more concerned with the relationship between reading these types of materials and reading attitudes and motivation. My first group of articles explores the former topic, and shows that researchers have generally found comics to have weaknesses in some areas, but to have not nearly as pernicious an effect on reading skills as has been hypothesized in the past.

Much has been made of comics being overly easy to read and unchallenging; Wright (1979), however, found that not to be the case. The Fry Readability Graph was used to measure three 100-word samples from a number of different comics. A wide range of readability scores was found in these brief samples, from as low as a grade level of 1.7 to as high as a grade level of 9.2 in one issue of *The Incredible Hulk* (160). Certain titles, such as *Batman*, *Star Wars*, and *Superman*, were rated at over a sixth-grade level as a whole. While this study does show that comics are not necessarily unchallenging to read, it is questionable whether as small a sample as 300 words can really be used to evaluate the readability level of a comic as a whole, which may contain as few as 2000 words or as many as 10,000. For example, one 100-word sample of *Spider-Man* was rated at 7.4, while another sample from the same issue was rated at 2.8. Similar discrepancies appear in many of the other superhero comics (which tend to have long stretches of "technobabble," or pseudo-scientific words,

interrupted by long stretches of fight scenes containing nothing more challenging than brief interjections and onomatopoeia).

As early as 1947, studies on comics and their effects on readers were being conducted. Heisler (1947) compared students who read comic books and those who did not, in grades 2 through 8. These students were evaluated learning the California Short-Form Test of Mental Maturity, the California Test of Personality, and the Stanford Achievement Test. In particular, the study focused on scores for word meaning, average reading, and language. These tests showed comic book readers scoring slightly lower than non-comic-book readers, but the difference is not significant; also, this difference might be explained by the socio-economic status of the parents, which tended to be higher for non-comic-book readers. Heisler reports, despite the discrepancies she found, that "the reading of comic books seemed to have no effect educationally on the children" (464), and raises the possibility that some of what children learned from comics was not measured by the achievement tests given.

Arlin and Roth (1978) conducted an experiment wherein 42 students in two classes were randomly assigned to a "book" group or a "comic" group. They wanted to measure how comics compared to books in the areas of "time on task" (that is, time spent looking at reading material rather than looking around the room, talking with classmates, hitting classmates, and so on), "time on reading" (that is, time spent actually reading, rather than flipping through the pages and glancing at the pictures), and gain in comprehension over the period of the study as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test. Their results were mostly positive. They found a strong correlation between time-on-reading for comic books and gains in comprehension, but a much weaker correlation between time-on-task and gains in comprehension. Also, the good readers made much larger comprehension gains with

comics than the poor readers did. According to Arlin and Roth's findings, this is because poorer readers typically spent much of their comics-reading time flipping through the pages or only looking at the pictures, whereas the stronger readers spent more time reading the words, and thereby improved their comprehension. These findings contradict the writings of anti-comic activist Fredric Wertham, who wrote that comic reading is predominantly characterized by picture reading, which "consists in gazing at the successive pictures of the comic book with a minimal reading of printed letters. Children may read the title, or occasionally an exclamation when the picture is particularly violent or sexually intriguing. This kind of picture reading is not actually a form of reading, nor is it a pre-stage of real reading. It is an evasion of reading and almost its opposite." (139-140). Arlin and Roth suggest that picture reading does occur, particularly with among poor readers, but it is far from the only way comics are read.

Norton and Vanderheyden (2004) deal with comic books and second language learners, using questionnaires and interviews to explore the uses of comics (focusing primarily on *Archie*) with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Researchers surveyed 55 students in grades 5 through 7; 13 of these were ESL students from various linguistic backgrounds who were readers of *Archie*. The students surveyed found Archie comics valuable in several ways. First, they combined a low reading level with a high interest level; the vocabulary was simple, but unlike many instructional texts, the situations in the comics were entertaining, humorous situations that took place in a high school setting. Secondly, both the situations in the comics and the comics themselves provided a gateway into North American popular culture; the comics were a shared interest with their peers, and they also depicted daily American high school life, including aspects that the ESL students hadn't been exposed to. Finally, the interplay between the pictures and the text allowed the pictures

to act as guideposts to unfamiliar vocabulary in the text (211), providing "multiple cues" towards meaning (218).

Joanne Ujiie and Stephen Krashen (1996) surveyed 292 seventh-grade students in order to determine whether comic books caused any harm or took the place of more serious reading. In previous decades, the idea that they harmed children's reading habits and literacy prevailed, but Ujiie and Krashen's results were not consistent with this. They found that 68 percent of students surveyed read comics at least occasionally, and this percentage was the same among students in gifted and regular English classes. The results also showed a significant gender gap: "82 percent (113/137) of our male subjects read [comic books] 'always' or 'sometimes,' compared to 56 percent (86/154) of our female subjects" (Ujiie and Krashen 28). Also, a correlation was found between reading for pleasure and reading comic books; 65% of heavy comic book readers read for pleasure daily, compared with 37% of non-comic book readers, and 65% of heavy comic book readers reported liking to read, compared with 48% of non-comic book readers. Ujiie and Krashen imply that comic book reading is "a conduit to more challenging reading," and is good for students rather than harmful; however, this isn't the only possible interpretation of the data. Perhaps reading comic books doesn't make one more inclined to like reading and read for pleasure; perhaps the cause and effect are reversed, and those children who already like reading assimilate comics as just another type of reading material to be devoured, and become heavy comic book readers because they're heavy readers of everything else. That aside, the data do at least suggest that comic books will not turn students into functional illiterates, in opposition to Fredric Wertham's assertion that "A very large proportion of children who cannot read well habitually read comic books… Among the worst readers is a very high percentage of comic-

book addicts who spend very much time "reading" comic books. They are bookworms without books" (122).

The gender gap found by Ujiie and Krashen is especially significant in view of concerns that boys do more poorly overall in English class and are less likely to read for pleasure. This is supported by the findings of McKenna et al. (1995) in a national survey of children's attitudes toward reading; on a scale of attitudes toward reading, girls scored higher at all grades than boys, and this difference was especially marked in later elementary grades, and for recreational as opposed to academic reading (McKenna 949).

Other articles explore the effects of reading comics and popular cultural materials on motivation and attitude towards reading in general. The persistent observation that what students read and what teachers want them to read are frequently at odds calls into question the idea of a literary "canon," which students, particularly less proficient ones, often see as boring books that are foisted upon them without students having any choice in the matter.

Millard and Marsh (2001) also explore whether comic reading affects reading choices on the part of students in the same age group, between elementary and secondary school. They note, like Ujiie and Krashen, that "concerns are frequently based on a deficit model whereby those who choose to read books in graphic forms are seen as denying themselves encounters with more 'nourishing' material (1). It is assumed that only those who are sub-literate would need or want books that are primarily graphical (3), despite some comic theorists who believe that much of the pleasure and skill of comics lie not in the graphics but in the gap between the text and the graphics.

Marsh performed a case study involving 3 classes, of 69 students in all, wherein a comic book lending library was introduced to the school environment. Teachers reported that several children involved, most of whom were boys, had increased motivation to read

and literacy because of the comics; 28% surveyed said that borrowing comics had made them want to read more at home (Millard and Marsh 8). The survey also raises the possibility that for lower-class families, comics may fit in to family literacy practices better than books that carry the connotations of social capital and "difficulty."

One of the interesting things about this case study is that even at the age of 7 or 8, children seemed to realize the low status of comic books in scholastic settings. Eighty-three percent of the children surveyed thought that teachers would be opposed to letting them borrow comics (Millard and Marsh 9), for various reasons; one eight-year-old is quoted as saying, "Teachers don't like children to have fun, they just like you to work" (ibid.), and others cited the violence in comics.

If children are so aware of the low status given to comic books, one has to wonder what effect this disparagement of their reading choices will have on their attitudes toward reading. Worthy (1999) notes the absence of reading materials preferred by children in classrooms and school libraries. A survey on reading preferences found that cartoons and comics were the second most popular reading material overall among sixth-grade students, with 66% of students reporting that they read them often; 28 students reported comics and cartoons as their number one choice for reading material, in third place behind scary stories and sports information (Worthy 19). At low and high achievement levels, among students with positive and negative attitudes toward reading, and at all income levels, comics were the number two reading preference of students (Scary stories, at the height of the R.L. Stine craze, scored highest). However, classrooms and school libraries often have limited availability of materials that aren't of literary or academic interest. Librarians felt that some popular materials had too much sexual or violent content (Worthy 21); others felt that comic books were "inappropriate for reading in school" (Worthy 22). Popular materials were more

likely to be lost or stolen; they were ephemeral and had limited long-term value. Worthy found comics and cartoons to have "very limited" availability (22); if they were available in libraries at all, they were not circulated.

This gap between true reading preferences and what is available in libraries, which holds true not just for comics but also for popular magazines and sports information, is problematic because low-income students may have no way of obtaining reading materials outside of a school context, according to Worthy (23). But it also sends a very clear message to students that these popular materials aren't respectable choices, which can be problematic.

Bintz (1993) pays particular attention to "resistant" or "reluctant" readers, interviewing 44 students chosen from four different locations; these groups were segmented into students with increasing reading achievement scores, students with decreasing scores, and students with stable scores. One of Bintz's principal findings was that "reluctant" readers often aren't. Many have an interest in reading popular materials, but those interests are discounted because they have little to no interest in textbooks and academic reading. Students experienced a disconnect between how they felt about school-based reading and how they felt about reading in other contexts; their low reading ability scores did not indicate an inability to read effectively, but rather, a choice not to read effectively in the case of materials they found boring or irrelevant, using shortcut strategies to get through the material as quickly as possible at the expense of comprehension.

Worthy, Bintz, and Millard and Marsh highlight the gap between school-sanctioned reading, which consists of literature and textbooks, and student-directed reading, which is often made up largely of popular magazines, comics, and series or genre fiction. Students are, perhaps too quickly, labeled as poor or reluctant readers when they are only reluctant to read school-assigned materials; setting up a dichotomy in this way has the potential to

further discourage reading and promote an adversarial attitude between students and teachers. Bintz observes, "We need to focus less on student deficiencies and more on student strengths. In order to do that, however, we need to value and legitimate what students are currently reading out of school, rather than bemoan what they are not reading in school" (614).

Jo Worthy's "On every page someone gets killed!" (508) is a case study of two such readers, labeled as reluctant readers by teachers but not necessarily so. The two boys involved are sixth-grade students in Texas who generally read only what was necessary to complete school assignments. They read books by authors such as John Grisham, Stephen King, and Michael Crichton, but "hated" (513) most of what they read in school. Their greatest complaint about school reading was the lack of choice they had in selecting reading material, and based on that, Worthy advocates for more student choice, pointing out that "many times students' chosen materials are more complex than teacher-chosen materials" (515) and that they develop confidence and motivation for reading. Yet she is not entirely comfortable with sixth-grade students reading books that have deaths on every page.

Stephen Krashen, in *The Power of Reading*, makes the case for light reading as part of the "cure" for the literacy crisis; the most significant predictor of literacy, he says, is not any specific type of educational program, but time spent in free voluntary reading. However, many would argue that letting children read whatever they want, however badly written, is a far worse approach to free voluntary reading than teaching them to appreciate and enjoy classic literature.

These articles help to clarify the often grudging and ambiguous attitudes that teachers hold towards comic books. However, these attitudes are driven by purposes and value systems that are quite different from those held by public librarians. While schools

have a mission that is explicitly focused on education, public libraries tend to have broader goals, such as encouraging the enjoyment of reading. This suggests that librarians might have more positive attitudes than teachers towards comic books; however, determining whether or not this was the case would require further research.

Methods

For this study, I conducted interviews with seven librarians involved in youth services. Because I was concerned mainly to find out how attitudes towards comic books play out in the public library context, I interviewed librarians with responsibilities in public service, readers' advisory, and collection development; librarians whose responsibilities were only in cataloging or other technical services, whose opinions and attitudes on various genres of literature are not at issue, were not included.

Because of time considerations and logistical difficulties with extensive travel, I used a convenience sample of seven librarians within approximately a 40-mile radius of the Raleigh-Durham area, mostly in Orange, Durham, and Wake counties. Because I used such a small sample size, and a convenience sample rather than a random sample, my results are not generalizable; however, I did conduct interviews until I reached the point of redundancy to mitigate the effects of using a convenience sample. Additionally, generalizability is not as large an issue in qualitative research (Creswell 195), and I believe that my findings are useful even if not widely generalizable.

Participants were recruited by phone and e-mail, informed about the details of the study, asked to sign a consent form, and interviewed at their places of work. This allowed me to supplement my interviews by observing first-hand the graphic novel collections at each

library. Each interview took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Interviews were audio tape recorded for later transcription.

The interview schedule, attached as appendix A, included a mix of questions that were designed to directly address my research questions from several different angles. I wanted to explore opinions on the value of comic books, both in terms of literary value and in terms of instrumentality, that is, whether comic books are useful; opinions on the role that comics should have in library settings; and the librarian's own comic reading habits. In addition, the interview format allowed me to be able to probe further and ask follow-up questions when that seemed useful and appropriate.

It was my hope that interviews would provide greater insight into the motivations and attitudes of the participants than can be addressed by looking at quantitative data alone. Rather than simply finding out whether comic books are considered to have value or not, this has given me an opportunity to find out how the participants' experiences of comics were formed, in what contexts they encountered them, and the reasons why participants felt as they did.

I expected one great limitation of my research method to be self-selection bias. Interviews represent a fairly significant time commitment on the part of the participant, and I anticipated that those who had strong opinions on comic books and their place in the library would be the most likely to participate. In practice, I found this not to be the case; the majority of potential participants whom I contacted, whatever their opinions on comic books, were willing to be interviewed.

It is possible that the interview questions, and the way I conducted myself during interviews, led to bias. I made an effort to construct my questions in a neutral manner, but I do have my own bias regarding the issues, and I think it's very possible that this bias could

have come through subconsciously, particularly in an interview setting where tone of voice and body language can become an issue. Additionally, there may have been pressure to answer the questions one way or another, regardless of the truth of those answers, because of people's feelings about which answers are more acceptable than others. It wasn't even possible to predict which way participants would be pressured to answer; because of the pressure on librarians to be "cool," it may actually have been harder to express negative opinions about comic books than it otherwise would be. I would expect this pressure to be greater in an interview setting, where it's possible to pick up on body language and interpret that as pressure to answer one way or another. Especially when dealing with participants whose opinions differed from my own, I tried to emphasize that I was keeping a nonjudgmental perspective insofar as was possible, and was motivated to conduct this study by intellectual curiosity and not ideological axe-grinding.

By nothing more than coincidence, all of the participants fit the stereotypical profile for librarians, female and between roughly thirty and fifty years of age. This is not a demographic that usually is expected to read a lot of comic books, or have very positive attitudes towards them, simply because the comics that were being published twenty to forty years ago were almost exclusively marketed towards boys.

Once recorded, interviews were transcribed, grouped thematically, coded, and analyzed.

Results

The responses to my questions revealed a stark contrast between the librarians I interviewed and the librarians of fifty years ago. All of the libraries I visited had at least small graphic novel collections for both youth and adults, and none of the librarians went so far as

to state outright that libraries should not collect comic books; the most negative opinions offered were ones of slightly grudging, ambivalent, suspicious acceptance. "I have some mixed feelings about it," reported one librarian, "but as I've been thinking about it, I pretty much feel like--anything that will get kids to read is a good thing." Another said, "At first, I thought, why are we collecting this? But part of our mission statement is to encourage reading."

When asked about whether libraries should collect graphic novels extensively, the majority of responses were positive. Reasons for this fell into three basic categories: encouragement of reading and library use; responding to patron demand; and valuing graphic novels as simply another type of reading material, to be collected for the same reasons and by the same criteria as any other material in the library.

The most common responses were those that indicated that graphic novels encourage reading or library use. "We all experience troubles getting teen guys, especially, to read," one librarian said. "I was always on the lookout for books I could recommend, or that might hook readers into that department." "Learning to read is not an easy thing, and I think they definitely help kids who are interested in reading and know there's something exciting in the books, to open them up." "I think the graphic novels are really a great way to get some of the kids that maybe are not into wordy, lengthy books still involved in reading and enjoying books." All seven of the librarians whom I interviewed indicated that there was something about comic books that would interest young people who didn't normally have a great interest in reading recreationally. Some cited the "graphic design" and "visual impact" of the comics; some characterized them as a "quick read"; others pointed to characters that are familiar from television and movies. "The characters in them are familiar, and the books

that we have in the library that are related to TV shows are very popular in general, even like the fiction chapter books."

However, one librarian indicated that "the mangas attract more sophisticated readers because they're more difficult," as compared to other comics in the collection. This may be related to a number of things, such as the largely white and middle-class manga subculture, manga plots that often are hugely complicated and run on for twenty volumes, and even the publishing format itself; most publishers currently publish manga in the original format, so that they are read back to front and right to left, and it takes a certain amount of effort to adapt to reading comics published in this format.

Among librarians who view comics as positive because they encourage reading, some place importance on the potential for comics to be used as a stepping stone to move on to better things. In some ways, comics are viewed almost as bait to lure young people into the library: "It gets people in here, and hopefully they'll find other stuff too." "I see it as a way to get kids in here and get excited about coming in here to circulate books…Once they're in here they'll realize that it's another kid-friendly place and there might be other things that they could do." In this context, several of the librarians mentioned the Illustrated Classics series, graphic novel versions of literary classics such as Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." "It makes the classics more accessible," one librarian said. On the other hand, this isn't certain to be the case; "I don't see that they circulate as readily as maybe the manga do," I heard, and speaking of the graphic novel version of "The Metamorphosis," another librarian said, "I do not think that it would entice anyone to read the actual book by reading that."

A second common reason for collecting graphic novels was their popularity, and demand by patrons. "Once we added the graphic novels to the collection our circulation statistics skyrocketed," one librarian reported. Another said, "They're just so hot right now.

The kids beg for them, they ask for them." Another reported getting over thirty requests for a popular manga title, Naruto, in a single week, all from the same person, via the library catalog's automated title suggestion system. One specifically cited a system-wide collection development policy of responding to patron demand. All of the librarians I interviewed said that graphic novels were a popular part of their collections.

Finally, a few librarians said that they didn't feel that the presence of graphic novels in their library collections needed to be justified; they asked, "why not?" rather than "why?" "We collect across the spectrum and graphic novels are a part of that," one said. "There's no reason not to collect them as far as I'm concerned." Libraries frequently collect other types of light or ephemeral publications, such as periodicals and books based on TV series; graphic novels simply fit somewhere inside that spectrum. In the words of another librarian, "I guess it's just like another book on the shelf. I don't see it any different than the paperback books we have, or the hardback books, or the magazines we have."

Many of the librarians I spoke with engaged in at least some promotional activity related to graphic novels. Two of the libraries I visited were sponsoring comic books contests; one had brought in a cartoonist to do a workshop, and another was currently trying to negotiate something similar. Several of the librarians I spoke with mentioned conducting programming specifically related to graphic novels, or including graphic novels in their booktalks. One said, "When I'm doing a program, like another teen program that has nothing to do with graphic novels, I'll bring them in, because the issues in them might relate to something they're interested in." Promotional activities related to graphic novels can also include talking with parents and teachers: "I was speaking to a middle school ESL teacher... and any time someone asks for that kind of guidance I also mention graphic novels as a possibility." Another librarian felt that part of her reader's advisory duties involved

"explaining to parents that graphic novels aren't bad. There is a benefit to them." Many librarians, however, felt that promoting graphic novels was not necessary: "They sell themselves." Additionally, several of the librarians I spoke with felt that their patrons tended to be less knowledgeable than they were themselves in regards to graphic novels, and especially in regards to manga. "I think a lot of the people that work here are intimidated by graphic novels, I know I am," said one librarian. Several referred to discussions with children, either in the library or in bookstores, as helpful in collection development. Some felt that their own lack of knowledge hindered their ability to effectively promote graphic novels, such as one librarian who said, "I don't read graphic novels extensively so I feel like that's probably a hole in my ability to promote a graphic novel series." However, many acknowledged that children and young adults were better informed about graphic novels while they were, while still valuing activities that promote graphic novels, perhaps because such activities signal the library's acceptance of graphic novels and promote the library as a place where graphic novels can be found.

In general, the librarians I spoke to did judge graphic novels to have educational value. "Pictures support text, and that really helps with literacy, and so I really appreciate that side of it," one said. "It does make it a more involved process to engage both the visual part of things and the text, if there is text." Yet whatever direct benefit was derived from reading comics paled in comparison to the indirect benefit of motivating reluctant readers to read— by far the most common reason cited for why graphic novels should be included in library collections.

On the subject of the literary merit of graphic novels, however, reactions were much more mixed and uncertain. The librarians I spoke with seemed reluctant to answer, out of either a lack of specific experience or a hesitancy to take a stand on the idea that some

reading materials have more inherent aesthetic value than others. They tended to hedge their answers, or set the bar for literary value so low as to have little meaning; "They have plots. They have a beginning, middle, and end." Most of the participants did not consider themselves well-read enough to answer in more detail than to say that some graphic novels had been very well-reviewed and could certainly be considered as having literary merit; several cited the Illustrated Classics series; two cited specific titles, among them Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marianne Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World*. One librarian was less ready to accept comics as literature, saying, "I'm not convinced yet… I know a lot of people think really highly of them. But I'm not quite there."; but most librarians seemed willing enough to embrace the possibility that comics could have literary value, in a theoretical and generalized way.

One commonality shared between six of the interviewed librarians was that they rarely read comics as a child, and continue not to read them recreationally on a more than occasional basis. The only librarian who considered herself to presently be a comic fan, saying "I go to the comic book store; I know what things are coming out, and there are things I can't wait for the library to get, so I have to get my own copy first," also reported reading comics in large numbers as a child: "I have very distinct memories of reading *Asterix* and *Tintin*… I remember reading the GI Joe comics. One of the X-men, the blond-haired girl on rollerskates, was my idol! I loved her!" The other librarians reported reading only *Archie* as children, or only the newspaper comic strips. This is not particularly surprising, considering the demographics of the interviewed librarians; when they were growing up, the majority of comics were targeted mainly at young boys, and comics with subjects other than superheroes had yet to reach many readers.

When asked whether they read comics recreationally, some said a lack of time prevented them from doing so, or a lack of interest in the subject matter, but a theme of lack of comics literacy emerged, as well. Comics were judged to be "overwhelming" or "intimidating," with "too much going on." This suggests that comics are associated with their own reading protocols and reading skills; the ability to mentally integrate all the disparate elements of a comic book page, including layout, the sequence of text and images, and the relationship between text and image, is a skill that takes practice to develop, and may not come naturally to those who did not develop it as children. (If this is true, it is especially so in the case of manga, which have to be read right-to-left and front-to back).

However, even if librarians only read comics occasionally in their recreational reading, most said that they did make an effort to keep up with popular titles and trends in graphic novel publishing. This included reading reviews in professional journals, but since most graphic novels are not widely reviewed, it also included trips to bookstores, trips to comic book stores, and conversations with patrons. Several said that the large number of titles being published made it "hard to keep up" with current trends; this was particularly true of manga, which have become dramatically more popular and widely published within the last five years.

Because they did not read large numbers of graphic novels themselves, the interviewed librarians seemed generally reluctant to make sweeping statements about sex and violence, or depictions of women and minorities, in graphic novels. While admitting to a lack of firsthand knowledge, most took the side of freedom to read as a general principle. In sharp contrast with Fredric Wertham, one declared, "I don't know that I'm concerned that violent comics are going to cause the downfall of society or anything like that." As one librarian said, "I think that if they are housed in the adult section, I don't see a problem with

it. To each their own." At the same time, because each of the interviewed librarians worked with children or young adults, they were aware of their responsibilities in regards to selecting age-appropriate material. One librarian commented that "little kids want to come over here and read all the YA graphic novels. And we don't really have a great collection for them to look at in the J graphic novels. And sometimes when there's a younger child who's like ten and under, I might mention to the parents that they are graphic novels, they might have graphic scenes in them." One librarian did think of graphic novels as characterized by sex and violence, saying that "that's sort of their thing," but for the majority, concerns about objectionable content in graphic novels were somewhat mitigated by the idea that these things weren't specific to graphic novels; "There's violence but there's violence everywhere, on TV. I don't necessarily think that it's any different than the other stuff they're exposed to." Echoing Jo Worthy's article, "On Every Page Someone Gets Killed!", one librarian even reported hearing that middle-school children would often seek out "something with people dying and killing each other," and felt that it was better to react with acceptance rather than shock.

The interviewed librarians seemed less concerned with the sex and violence stereotypically associated with comic books, and more concerned with portrayals of women. The women in comic books were variously described as "scantily clad" "bimbos" with "big boobs," and several librarians felt that they imposed specific ideals of beauty and body size. In particular, some of the manga, coming from a culture that is still very patriarchal, had problematic portrayals of women. One librarian mentioned *Mars*, which had a scene involving rape or near-rape, comparing it to Luke and Laura on *General Hospital*; another mentioned *Oh! My Goddess*, in which an unexceptional college student is, through mysterious magical circumstances, given a sweet, submissive, polite goddess for a girlfriend. "Is that

really how we're going to make the girl look? I don't think that's an awful depiction of women in general, I just think that this character was kind of an airhead. But it made me kind of wonder, how many volumes do I really want to own?"

Discussion

Science fiction scholar James Gunn suggests that one of the reasons for science fiction's status as "paraliterature" read by a specific subculture is that it has its own set of reading protocols; he claims that "good reading is a matter of learning the protocols and applying them with understanding and sensitivity to a particular genre" (Gunn), and that reading *Macbeth* as if it were, for example, a murder mystery, leads to misreadings and a mismatch between the reader's comprehension and the writer's intent. It is not enough to know how to read; a reader must learn to anticipate the questions works in a particular genre ask, the assumptions that they rest on, the landscape that they exist within. If this is the case with science fiction, it is even truer for graphic novels. Some are highly self-referential; others rely on knowledge of twenty years of back-story; others are particularly ambitious in the way they use layout and image, in an effort to be surprising and original. However, what is surprising and original to devoted readers of comics is likely to be inaccessible to non-readers; it is not entirely surprising, in this context, that comics fandom has a reputation for being insular and confusing.

If comics reading makes use of its own unique set of reading protocols, this may have interesting implications for the future of literacy and reading. There seems to be a sharp generational divide between those who are comfortable making sense of the cacophony of words and pictures that make up the average page of a comic book, and those who are not—a divide that is perhaps related to the rise of video games, which require processing a

huge amount of visual information quickly, and the internet, where hypertext and multitasking reinforce the practice of leaping from one thing to another in much the same way as comics leap from one image to another unrelated one. This is only speculation, and might be a worthwhile avenue for future research, but if there is any truth in it, then it may have significant implications for the use of graphic novels in libraries and the *kind* of literacy and reading protocols that we teach and encourage in young people.

If it is true that librarians are by and large not fans or wide readers of comic books—and it may not be, because it is hard to draw any meaningful generalizations from a small convenience sample of interviews—then that may not be entirely a weakness on the part of libraries. While the most enthusiastic comic fan among the interviewed librarians felt that her enthusiasm was an asset to her as a librarian, and those less knowledgeable about comics acknowledged that as a liability, one also has to consider the frequent responses that comics were extremely popular and essentially sold themselves. Librarians do face limitations on their time, and have to prioritize some things at the expense of others. It could be argued that more benefit can be derived by promoting those materials that are unpopular, and need promotion, and might not otherwise be discovered by many readers. If graphic novels are hardly in danger of going unread, and fiction and poetry are—and if young patrons are more knowledgeable about graphic novels than librarians are—it is likely that the benefits of promoting graphic novels are mostly symbolic, in that such promotional activities may help to position the library as "cool" and non-elitist.

While most of the interviewed librarians reported having generally positive and even enthusiastic attitudes towards graphic novels, few read them themselves more than occasionally. This suggests that the increasing tendency of public libraries to collect graphic novels springs not exclusively from a new and more positive view of graphic novels, or their

increasing artistic respectability, but also from trends in collection development that put an emphasis on patron demand. This is debated in a series of editorials in *Library Journal* in the early 1980s, in which Nora Rawlinson makes the case for using circulation as a primary criterion in selecting materials, while Murray C. Bob argues that libraries should be more interested in giving patrons what they "need" instead of what they want (1709), and "over-emphasizing the lowest common denominator" (1708) shows contempt, not respect, for patrons. Most of the interviewed librarians considered it uncontroversial to say that materials should be selected if patrons want them; observing the graphic novel collections at the libraries that were visited for this study seems to confirm that selection decisions were largely made based on demand.

Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for this kind of demand-driven collection policy is that a more subjective and quality-driven collection policy requires those who select materials to be experts. It is all well and good to say that, in a perfect world, a librarian would be familiar with Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Osamu Tezuka, Brian Michael Bendis, and others who have written graphic novels of high quality. In practice, librarians have limited time and resources; a small, public library staffed by one or two librarians is not likely to have on staff experts on science fiction, romance, mysteries, and every other genre. Furthermore, if there really is a generational divide in the ability to successfully master the reading protocols of comic books, the inherent subjectivity of a quality-driven collection policy is likely to weed out most graphic novels without regards to quality.

What is particularly interesting is that arguments like Bob's for collecting books of high quality tend to single genres out for disdain. Bob writes, "With light romance, formula fiction, pornography, westerns, mysteries, science fiction, and comic 'books,' we can always raise our circulation—but to what end?" (1709). The scare quotes on comic 'books' are

especially indicative of the esteem in which graphic novels are held. Nowhere is the possibility raised that there might be mysteries that look seriously at issues of crime and punishment, science fiction books that raise issues about technology and its effect on society, or superhero comics that address the costs of vigilantism. On the other side of the coin, it is rare for arguments for collecting more popular materials to make the case that such materials might have real, inherent artistic value, beyond what might be visible at first glance to librarians. Rawlinson argues that books that circulate should be bought because they circulate; it is seen as almost elitist to look deeper than that.

Collection philosophies driven primarily by user demand have almost certainly been good for graphic novels. They have allowed the questions of whether graphic novels are good for children, or good as literature, to be bypassed completely, rather than debated. At the same time, Bob is not entirely wrong to assert that libraries "by definition…have nothing to sell" (1709), and that to judge libraries by the same criteria as large retail bookstores is to ignore their different purposes and roles within a community. The collection philosophy that essentially leaves its selection decisions in the hands of the library's patrons allows librarians not to have to take a stand. Librarians never have to position themselves as elitists, or as low-brow pop-culture junkies, if they can assert that the quality of materials is completely irrelevant. One is forced to wonder if a collection development policy that accepts everything neutrally squeezes out, not just condemnation and disdain, but excitement and enthusiasm as well; true respect for patrons' reading choices demands something more than pure neutrality.

Conclusion

To argue for the increased availability and visibility of graphic novels in public library collections is not to dismiss the importance of other types of reading materials, to suggest that there is no such thing as literary quality, or to dismiss literary quality as irrelevant. Literary, realistic novels do have virtues that are hard to find in other areas of culture that children consume, and in other types of reading materials. However, it is possible that these novels require a specific set of reading skills that many children don't have, just as many librarians acknowledge that they have not acquired the reading protocols of comics. Without those skills, even good books can become boring, dense, and a source of friction between teachers and students, who may come to believe that teachers want them to be bored.

Teachers and librarians have historically looked down on comic books and worried about children choosing comics to read instead of books they deemed to have literary value. Instead, it might be more accurate to think of children choosing to read comics instead of reading nothing at all. Furthermore, if students can feel that their reading choices are validated and accepted, however they may go against traditional notions of literary value, they might develop more positive attitudes towards reading overall. Contrary to some of the predictions of teachers, librarians, and moralists, studies have shown comics not to be harmful to reading skills. Additionally, it has shown how the opposition between valued and devalued literature can be counterproductive in instilling positive attitudes toward reading. A review by Ellis and Highsmith of library literature relating to comics shows steadily more positive attitudes towards comics developing in the past decades, and this study provides additional evidence for those conclusions. There is a stereotype that librarians are opposed to all types of "bad" literature, and some of the library literature from the 1970s and earlier would seem to support those stereotypes. But the library literature increasingly shows an

attitude that, while it may appear somewhat naïve or ignorant to comics fans, is ready to accept comics as a positive source of reading material, and this is also true of the librarians who participated in this study. This is an encouraging sign for those who believe that respect for young people's opinions and reading choices ultimately empowers them and equips them to develop skills in literary and library use.

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Appendix A: Interview schedule

Could you tell me about the comic/graphic novel collection at your library?

-Does your library collect comics for adults? Young adults? Children?

-How extensively does your library collect them?

-What are the reasons for this?

At your library, do you actively try to promote comics, through reader's advisory, displays, etc? Why or why not?

How do you see the role of comics in libraries? Do they belong there?

What kind of value do you think that comics have?

-Do you think that some comics have high literary value, or the potential for high literary value?

-Do you think that comics can have educational value, in terms of motivating reluctant readers, providing visual cues for low-level readers, and so forth?

-Tell me about your experiences reading comics in the past. Did you read comics as a child or teenager? What did you like to read?

-Do you read comics now, recreationally? Why, or why not?

-What kind of comics do you read?

-Do you like to read manga? Independent comics? Superhero comics?

Are there any specific titles that you like to read?

-Do you try to stay up to date on popular comic books, for readers' advisory and collection development purposes? How do you stay up to date?

-What do you think about the amount of sex or violence that some comics may have?

-What do you think about depictions of women and minorities in comics?

Appendix B: Consent form

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Participants
Social Behavioral Form

_____

IRB Study #___ LIBS 05-095
Consent Form Version Date: ___Jan.31, 2006_____

Title of Study: Librarian Attitudes Regarding Comic Books

Principal Investigator: Emily Horner
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Email Address: ehorner@email.unc.edu
Faculty Advisor: Brian Sturm
Funding Source: None

Study Contact telephone number: (919) 967-4459
Study Contact email: ehorner@email.unc.edu

_____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary.
You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any
reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help
people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research
study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this
information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.
You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named
above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at
any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research study is to learn about the attitudes of public librarians
towards comic books and graphic novels.

How many people will take part in this study?
If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 7-10 people in this

research study.

How long will your part in this study last?
Your part in the study will last no more than 1 hour.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
You will participate in an interview approximately 30 minutes long, which will be audio tape-recorded. You will have the right not to answer any question for any reason.

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?
While there may be no personal benefit to you by being involved in this research study, an understanding of how youth librarians perceive comics and graphic novels should be useful to the field in developing library collections and policies.

What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?
There are no known risks.
There may be uncommon or previously unknown risks. You should report any problems to the researcher.

How will your privacy be protected?

Only I will have any access to individually identifiable data. Interview transcripts will only be identified with codes, and the master file will be secured in a locker in a separate location from the transcripts. Interview transcripts will be locked and password-protected.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

Tapes will be kept locked up, and destroyed immediately after transcripts are made.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?
You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?
There will be no costs for being in the study

What if you have questions about this study?
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Title of Study: Librarian Attitudes Regarding Comic Books

Principal Investigator: Emily Horner
- -

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_____   _____
Signature of Research Participant   Date

_____
Printed Name of Research Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent