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Repository Citation

Hughes, M. J. (2021). Comics plus. *The Charleston Advisor*, 23(2), 8-11. <http://doi.org/10.5260/chara.23.2.8>

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ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Comics Plus

doi:10.5260/chara.23.2.8

Date of Review: September 3, 2021

Composite Score: ★★★★★

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Abstract

Comics Plus offers subscribers a digital library of comics, manga, and graphic novels licensed from more than 100 different publishers, including such indie gems as IDW, Boom Studios, Dark Horse, and Kodansha Comics. Its all-access package includes more than 20,000 titles, about 14,000 of which are appropriate for K-12 readers. Granular title control gives admins the power to customize Comics Plus to suit the readers they serve. But some titles aren't included at all, namely the best-selling books of the industry's top players. Comics Plus may someday persuade these publishers—Marvel, DC, Image, and VIZ Media—to play ball. Until then, most librarians will need to supplement Comics Plus with other methods of acquisition.

Pricing Options

Subscribers are charged one of five price tiers that range from \$2,100 to \$16,000 depending on audience size and level of access. To obtain a quote, write to <info@librarypass.com>.

Product Overview/Description

Comic books once ruled American newsstands. In 1948, sales cleared 60,000,000 copies across 400 different titles. In 1960, *Uncle Scrooge* and *Walt Disney's Comics & Stories* sold more than a million copies per issue. But apart from occasional sensations like *X-Men* #1 (1991), which sold an eye-popping 8.1 million copies amidst a mania for speculation, comic books have long since settled into a hobbyist niche. No longer found in drugstore spinner racks, comic books are now sold by specialty retailers with shibboleth names like Dragon's Lair and Alien Worlds. Today, it's unusual for floppies, as they are affectionately known by fans, to sell more than 100,000 copies in a single month.

But if we zoom out, as we must, to account for sales of comics in other formats and through other channels, the news is downright giddy-making. Comics today are read mostly in collected editions known as graphic novels, the pretentious but persistent name for a category that spans the hierarchies of taste and genre, from superhero yarns to literary fictions like Ebony Flowers's *Hot Comb* and Kevin Huizenga's *The River at Night*. In 2020, the graphic novel had its best year ever, benefiting from a need for escape (about which need I say more?) and spillover interest from an ongoing anime boom. Publishers Weekly reports that 16.2 million graphic novels were sold last year, good enough to make them "the second-largest adult fiction subcategory." Of the top ten bestsellers, seven were manga, and five of those seven were volumes of *My Hero Academia*, a nonsense known to every teen librarian in the country.

And that's the point, really: the interest that librarians bring to the medium and vice versa. Strong sales are of obvious welcome to publishers and their partners in retail, but libraries, too, are major buyers of comics. We may be some distance from the dominance of what David

Hajdu dubbed the ten-cent plague, but we've also left behind the bad old elements of that era, including librarians who joined in the effort to suppress and censor comic books. Librarians today aren't just eager to press comics into their hands of their patrons, they're avid readers of the stuff (the author being no exception). Such popularity is a recipe for regular replacement. Cheaply produced, graphic novels quickly yield to the various indignities that all library materials face. And many series run to volumes in the double digits, a major problem for flat or reduced resource budgets. Consider the aforementioned *My Hero Academia*, now on its thirty-first volume. Unlike a soap opera's essential ephemerality, manga accretes, and concatenates. Importunate fans, desperate to know what happens next, gather outside library branches like the apocryphal readers of Dickens's serial novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who were said to have "thronged the New York docks, greeting a ship arriving from England" to learn the fate of sickly Little Nell. Fresh installments must be purchased and processed at great cost—and then repurchased when the volumes are returned in too sorry a state even to be sold at the Friends of the Library yard sale.

Enter Comics Plus, which aims to solve, or at least mitigate, the woes of comics management. Plus offers subscribers a digital library of more than 20,000 comics, graphic novels, and manga. It maintains no waiting lists, and its titles can be read an unlimited number of times by many users simultaneously. And its holdings are indeed vast. But deep though it may be, and despite the generosity of its terms, the contents of Comics Plus all but ensure that it will be supplementary for most subscribers, not a solution unto itself.

User Interface & Navigation

Comics Pass counts school, public, and academic libraries among its customers, but the first two are its target market if the interface is any indication. Visitors to the site are greeted by carousels of featured comics, most of which are intended for children or young adults. Which isn't to say that Comics Plus contains no works for mature readers, only that the site, for understandable reasons, does not flaunt the access it provides to, say, *Heavy Metal*, the long-running magazine of softcore space opera. Comics Plus sorts comics into four age tiers: kids and children; teen; young adult; and adult. Adult comics constitute about 30% of the library at time of writing.

Indecisive readers will find many avenues into the Comics Plus library (see Figure 1). Themed collections fill its front page, some conventional (Spooky Reads, Historical Fiction), others out of left field (Graphic Medicine, For When You Feel Alone). Readers can also browse by popularity, recency, genre, or publisher. The last two are especially valuable for discovery: the latter because publishers assiduously cultivate brand identity, strengthening their association with certain kinds of content; the former because Comics Plus is admirably granular in its sorting. Major genres are all on offer, but you'll also find particular kinds of manga—josei, shoujo, and yaoi—and subgenres catering to nerds and weirdos of every stripe. Being both a

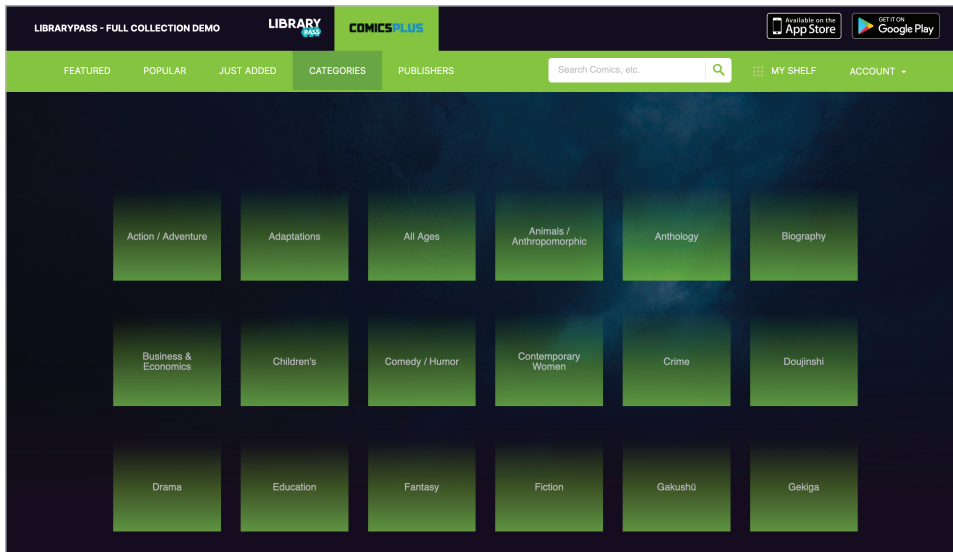


FIGURE 1 Comics Plus Library with categories

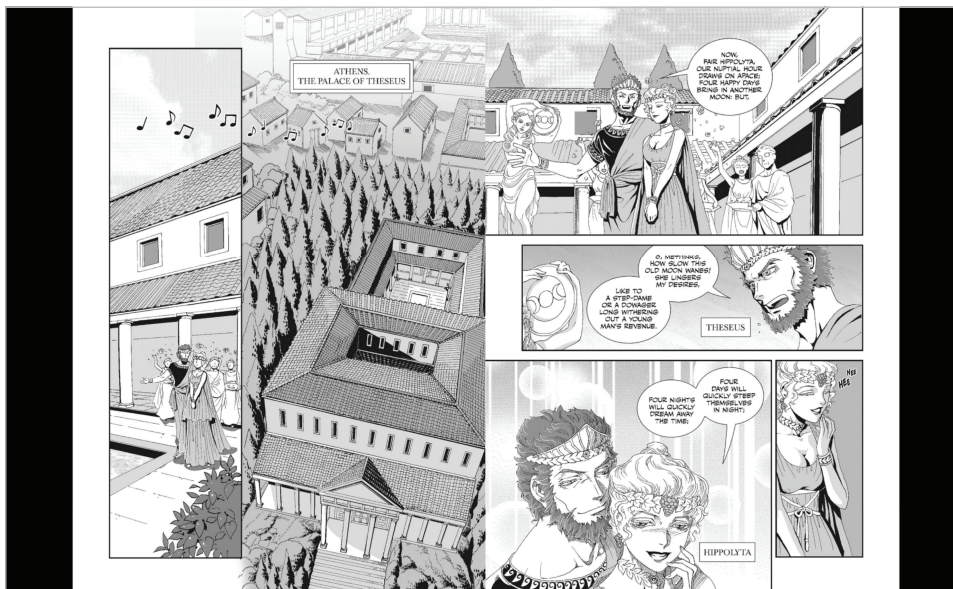


FIGURE 2 Reading a comic via Comics Plus

nerd and a weirdo myself, I use these terms with the greatest respect and admiration.

There’s a search field, of course, allowing readers to find known titles, and item records give each book’s essential details, its author(s), publisher, language, genre, age rating, and a 100-word summary. But it’s not clear that search terms are matched against all of this content. My key words mostly matched titles, and occasionally turned up peculiar results. Searching “Christian,” for example, produced no books about Christianity, but did retrieve several issues of Crackdown, an adaptation of an Xbox game (and not because “unholy” appears in the plot summary, presumably). I fared better by searching “Christianity,” which matched Kingstone Comics’ 101 Questions About the Bible and Christianity. Librarians who rely on subject headings for research or reader’s advisory are restricted, at least for the moment, to the top-level categories that Comics Plus provides.

Reading on the platform is straightforward. Select a title, then click Read Now, indicated by the universal symbol for play. Doing so launches the Comics Plus reading interface, an unobtrusive frame

that keeps readers fixed on the panels in front of them (see Figure 2). Clicking anywhere on the page will summon an overlay with zoom tools, a progress indicator, and thumbnails of the book’s pages laid end to end, allowing readers to jump forward or backward. There are no share options, no bookmarking or annotation tools. The interface is mercifully free of such clutter. The sole exception is an option to display one or two pages at a time, a welcome addition but one that can inadvertently squash pages together if images bled beyond the trim edge.

There are few other reading options. Books in progress are automatically added to a reader’s bookshelf, and a progress bar appears at the bottom of each title, indicating how much remains to be read. But this asceticism seems downright virtuous given the way websites now besiege readers with pop-ups, pop-unders, banners, minders, pleas, notices, and embedded videos, each of which helpfully plays itself without so much as a by-your-leave. But Comics Plus’s competitors have a few bells and whistles to distinguish them. Hoopla in particular has two ideas worth cribbing. Its reading pane dynamically expands to

display splash pages (widescreen images filling two full pages), a feature called action view. And Hoopla's pointer functions like a magnifying glass, giving readers fluid control over image enhancement. This is especially helpful for artists in training who wish to observe the finer details of a master's work, or for readers who enjoy luxuriating in filigree.

Fans of Comixology's Guided View, which "cinematically shift[s] from panel-to-panel at your own pace," will miss that feature when reading on Comics Plus. But I hazard to guess that only smartphone readers will be disappointed by the lack. It's useful to break comics into their constituents when reading on a surface six inches wide, but I never enjoyed having my attention so forcibly directed. The magic of comics inheres precisely in the way that meaning is created when the eye travels across the gutter separating two images, "transform[ing] them," per comics sage Scott McCloud, "into a single idea." Better that readers exercise these fundamentals of comic book literacy.

Critical Evaluation

Content is king, as Bill Gates once wrote, and his dictum applies no less to Comics Plus than it did to the internet startups he described in 1996. Comics Plus has gobs of content, to be sure, more than 20,000 books in its full collection, some of them perennials like *Bone*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. But CP's armoire is missing a few articles, viz. certain capes and cowls and knee-high boots. Readers can blunder down blind alleys and never find Batman. Nor will they hang with Spider-Man or shamble with the Walking Dead. That's because their publishers—DC, Marvel, and Image respectively—are not among Comics Plus's 100+ partners. The same goes for VIZ Media, the biggest publisher of manga in the United States. Moreover, many books from these publishers can be found on Hoopla and Libby, Comics Plus's primary competitors. This means Plus is more likely to supplement than supersede your current method of buying comics. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily. It's a reality familiar to e-resource specialists, and increasingly to ordinary subscribers of streaming services, each of which seeks competitive advantage by locking up hot properties. The situation is little different for Comics Plus. Each title being something of a monopoly unto itself—Chainsaw Man is Chainsaw Man, accept no substitutes—most subscribers will have to stick with whatever licensing-and-purchasing mix their budgets will allow. Even those publishers who partner with Comics Plus, like manga giants Tokyopop and Kodansha, will sometimes embargo best-selling titles so as not to lose out on potential sales. Kodansha's *Quintessential Quintuplets (Go-Tobun no Hanayome)* was the sixth best-selling manga last year, but it can't yet be found on Comics Plus (or Hoopla and Libby, for that matter).

What it lacks in comprehensiveness, Comics Plus makes up in ease of use and freedom of access. Say I want to borrow Grant Morrison's and Andy Kubert's *Batman and Son* from Hoopla. I have 21 days to finish the book before it's automatically returned. And my

library pays whether I read the book or not, thanks to Hoopla's cost-per-checkout business model. These aren't issues for Comics Plus subscribers, each of whom enjoys unlimited, simultaneous access to all titles in its library. This makes Plus ideal for community reads or classroom instruction, all participants being able to read the same book at the same time.

What's more, the novelty of the Comics Plus catalog may be an asset in its favor. Movie studios once counterprogrammed blockbusters by opening smaller, tonally opposite pictures against them. Comics Plus likewise benefits from original stories untrammelled by the commercial dictates of corporate characters. Batman stories must conform to a strict set of parameters handed down by his owner. Not so with the independent works favored by publishers like Boom! (*Lumberjanes*) and Dark Horse (*Hellboy*, *Usagi Yojimbo*), both of which are major Plus partners. In fact, the five biggest contributors to Comics Plus, in descending order, are Dynamite Entertainment (3,626 titles); IDW (2,056); Archie Comics (1,942); Boom! Studios (1,344); and Dark Horse (1,341). Taken together, these publishers license 10,309 books to Comics Plus, about half of the platform's total contents. Yes, there are oodles of licensed characters here, from My Little Pony to the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, and Xena, Zorro, and G.I. Joe. But the greatest rewards will redound to those readers who venture off the beaten path. For them, Comics Plus may be the passport that grants entrée to universes other than those governed by Marvel and DC. But some readers will need to train under Batman just the same. I did, once upon a time.

Purchase & Contract Provisions

Just about everything a would-be subscriber needs to know can be found on Comics Plus's website. Famished for legal language? Scroll to the bottom of the homepage and feast upon a cornucopia of terms and conditions and policies on everything from privacy to DMCA compliance. Libraries that require formal contracts are encouraged to send a standard vendor agreement, but Comics Plus requires only that clients provide their billing details and method of authentication.

Authentication

Comics Plus offers five authentication methods, each of which is rated by ease of use and strength of security. Details on each method can be found at <<https://support.librarypass.com/portal/en/kb/articles/library-authentication-options>>.

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Producer URL: <<https://librarypass.com>>

Product URL: <<https://comicsplusapp.com>>

Free Text Keywords: digital comics | graphic novels | manga

Primary Category: Language and Literature

Type of product being reviewed: App for mobile devices; Ebook collection

Target Audience: Secondary; General public

Access: Subscription



Comics Plus Review Scores Composite: ★★★★★

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★ ★ 1/2

Comics Plus has a vast library featuring faces both familiar and fresh. But books from the biggest names in comics aren't included, and some readers will regret the lack.

User Interface/Searchability: ★★ ★ 1/2

A no-frills interface keeps reader attention on the page where it belongs. Behind the scenes, Comics Plus would benefit from greater indexing, especially as its library continues to grow.

Pricing: ★★★★★

Tiered pricing makes Comics Plus affordable for libraries of all sizes. And because the platform offers truly unlimited access, subscribers will never experience the invoice shock of pay-per-view pricing.

Purchase/Contract Options: N/A

Standard stuff, thus nothing to score. Nevertheless, caveat lector!

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About the Author

Michael Hughes is an instruction librarian and associate professor at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. His has written for First Monday, the San Antonio Express-News, Portal: Libraries and the Academy, the *Charleston Adviser*, and VGMO: Video Game Music Online. He is currently researching depictions of the Falklands War in video games. ■