January is conference month in academia.

Well, in my corner of academia, anyway. The first weekend in January I went to the APA in Chicago: APA stands for American Philological Association, and it's the scholarly association for those who study the authors of classical antiquity. The second weekend in January was ALA Midwinter, in Philadelphia. The ALA is the American Library Association, and while scholars only need to meet once a year, we toilers in their fields meet twice—once in January and again in June. Meetings like these are called conferences—because we're academics, you see—but they're really conventions, and the highlight of most of these meetings is the chance to network, just like any other convention, and to learn what people are working on.

At the APA, I discovered that one of the things people are working on is comics. There was an entire panel devoted to comics, and the response to the organizers' call for papers was so overwhelming that they're planning a book. George Kovacs of the University of Toronto and Professor C.W. "Toph" Marshall of the University of British Columbia collaborated on this panel with the APA Outreach Committee, whose goal is to bring in attendees from outside the classicists' world. Marshall, himself one of the panelists, is a scholar of ancient Greek performance and stagecraft, who studies how an audience approaches a text. He told me that reading Sandman made him a better reader of Ovid—the way Dream's role is often
incidental to the actual story led him to think about the way Ovid personifies change, but never refers to it—and that reading Scott McCloud on the function of the gutter between frames on a page made him a better reader of Greek red-figure vases. Kovacs, currently finishing his dissertation on the reception of Euripides' play Iphigenia at Aulis, is devoting a small portion of his work to one modern exemplar, Eric Shanower's Age of Bronze: Sacrifice. With credentials like these, you know the panel had to be going to some interesting places, and it did: four scholars talked about Frank Miller's Sin City and 300; Neil Gaiman's Sandman stories, "Calliope," "August" and "The Kindly Ones;" and Greg Rucka's Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia.

The problem with Shakespeare's plays, someone once complained, is that they're so full of quotes. Of course, one has to have some familiarity with the plays in order to realize that they're full of quotes; it's that familiarity that allows us to understand the quotes when we hear them, to comprehend the world of context that surrounds "North by northwest" or "Something wicked this way comes." A decent knowledge of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, for example, will enlighten anyone to the context for probably close to half the book titles from the last 150 or so years. Popular culture feeds off and reacts to the high culture that precedes it, and Miller's, Gaiman's, and Rucka's work is no exception to that rule. It's their knowledge of, and fascination with, mythology and ancient history that fuels their work—which then introduces a new generation to that history, in a kind of endless funhouse mirror of investigation and repetition.

Frank Miller is probably the comics creator most obviously linked to antiquity in people's minds, due to 300. When the hardcover compilation of this story was released in 1999, reviewers in Publishers Weekly and Entertainment Weekly sniped at the way Miller's preference for blood and violence led to abandonment of historical accuracy. Emily Fairey, the scholar who worked on this subject at the APA panel, however, wanted to study Miller's visual depiction of the Persians and the Spartans. While the Spartans adhere closely to Hellenic iconographic tradition, for example, the Persian Xerxes looks less like the bearded figure known to scholars and more like "a cross between a punk rocker and...a Zulu warrior." All the Persians in 300 tend towards the grotesque, like the villains in most any Frank Miller
story: pierced and tattooed and maybe more than just a little bit crazy. Fairey speculates that this may be Miller's way of depicting our own modern-day attitudes towards modern-day Persians and their neighbors in the Middle East. As another scholar, Vincent Tomasso, noted, Miller's fascination with Thermopylae, and the Spartans' stand, finds a brief but startling place in *Sin City: The Big Fat Kill* as well, as Dwight McCarthy, siding with the Old Town prostitutes against the Mob, takes his inspiration for battlefield advantage from a Spartan hoplite.

And these are just the classicists! In April, Boston University will hold a conference on religion and comics, which will examine not only comics that explicitly use religion or religious traditions, but also how comics might be used in the teaching of religion.

This is the kind of scholarly engagement with comics that makes my blood sing, my friends—not to mention justifies my library's collection. Which leads me to my second January conference, ALA: where the exhibits hall has had an entire section devoted to comics publishers for a few years now, and where the choice of topic for this year's Popular Culture and Libraries Discussion Group was "Graphic Novels and Manga: Should We Add Them to Our Collections?" (This particular discussion group is under the aegis of ACRL—the Association of College & Research Libraries, the academic wing of ALA—so I knew the discussion would have relevance to my needs, as opposed to those of public libraries.) Discussion was lively, and was enhanced by the presence of Jenny Robb, associate curator of the Cartoon Research Library at Ohio State University, where all the best comics go to live, and one of the best resources for the study of comics on the planet. Turnout was large and interest ran high, so with any luck we'll start seeing more academic libraries launch comics collections soon.

Now, I know after last month's column on pornography it was going to be a little tricky to hold your attention, and maybe this subject doesn't get you as giddy as it gets me. But think about this: comics like *Maus* and *Persepolis* and *Safe Zone Goradze* have won awards and acclaim and have been used in university curricula for a while now. I didn't have to fight to get those titles in my collection—they were there before I was. But when scholars start
looking at Wonder Woman and Batman, and thinking about Euripides' *Hecuba*...well, that's a sea change (into something rich and strange), and that's what collecting comics in an academic library is all about.

Image credits:
Dwight McCarthy reflects on the nature of battlefield advantage
*Sin City: The Big Fat Kill*, chapter 5, p.133
*Dark Horse* (2nd ed.), 2005

Wonder Woman ponders the meaning of the bond of supplication
*DC Comics*, 2002

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