Panels in the Ivory Towers

By Karen Green

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Last month, the eye, the arts magazine section of the Columbia Spectator (Columbia University's student paper since 1877), published an article on the graphic novels collection in Butler Library. The reporter—a tall, lanky, and enthusiastic fellow named Tommy Hill—interviewed Ben Katchor, Columbia professor Richard Bulliet, and me. It's a terrific piece of writing, engaging and thoughtful; you can read it here.

I was pretty chuffed when the piece came out, not least because it was so much better written even than I'd hoped (despite a sporadic use of "illustrator" for "artist" that may irk some). The true source of my delight, however, was in the approach the article had taken. When the article appeared in the eye, I had sent the link to a variety of family, friends and acquaintances, some in the comics biz, and one industry professional had replied, "Pow sock comics aren't for kids anymore!" At first I thought this was a gently humorous jab, but I eventually realized that this person had dismissed the article as yet another mainstream-press piece that marveled, "Golly gosh, look what's happened to comics; they're all grown
up!" Lord knows there are a lot of these CAFKA articles out there (hat tip for the acronym coinage to The Beat and its commenters), mostly written by people who are still stuck in some kind of Frederic Wertham mindlock, assuming that all comics are read by budding juvenile delinquents, even comics that win National Book Awards or special Pulitzer Prizes.

But this wasn't a simplistic "comics aren't for kids anymore!" slant on the collection; this was about the role that a comics collection can play in an academic milieu. Academic libraries contain hundreds of thousands of books that can be read either for entertainment value or in close-readings for study. They can be explored for their artifactual qualities or for the cultural or social historical weight they bear, as I discussed last year. The money quote for me was from Hill's interview with the brilliant scholar and fanboy Dick Bulliet:

Bulliet has a theory that posits comic books as keenly accurate depictions of the inner lives and imaginations of the teenage boys of that particular era. "What distinguished the comic book industry of the 1960s and '70s from the book publishing industry was that it was more demand-driven than supply-driven," he says. "Stores were very cautious about what they stocked. Owners knew their stock very well, and they paid attention to what boys were buying." The output of the industry became totally reflective of the desires, fears, and dreams of the boys who were fueling it. "You can watch, in the comics of the era, the evolution of a sensibility that is specific to a demographic," continues Bulliet. In Bulliet's view, comics provide a window onto an otherwise undocumented history.

This isn't about comics being not just for kids. This is about comics having a meta-life as objects of study. Columbia is not, of course, unique among universities in valuing comics on this level; really, we're just in the embryonic stages. I've written before about the Cartoon Research Library at Ohio State University, the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University, among others, where enormous resources are devoted to preserving comic and cartoon art for research. And now Japan is kicking our collective academic asses with the planned Tokyo International Manga Library at Meiji University, expected to hold fourteen million items, starting with Yoshihiro Yonezawa's collection of 140,000 comic books. Shucks, Columbia's only spent about $27,000 on comics so far; Meiji is sinking the kind of cash that represents more than just an interest in scholarly study, but an investment in Japan's patrimony.

During the time I spent with reporter Hill, I took him on a tour of our collection. In Butler Library, oversize books are shelved in a special folio section at the west end of every floor of the stacks, so after I showed him the bulk of the collection in the regular stacks, we walked down to the large-format area. There one can find books like Little Nemo in Slumberland: so many splendid Sundays! or Storeyville. I pulled out some Winsor McCay to show him and his response to it was immediate and almost visceral. One could argue that Little Nemo was never simply for kids, nor for that matter were most of the early newspapers comics. Nor are many newspaper comics today, although we tend not to have cultural critics of the standing of Gilbert Seldes trumpeting the virtues of For Better or Worse, as Seldes did for George Herriman's Krazy Kat, saying "With those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic" and comparing Herriman to the Primitive painter Henri Rousseau. The
The comics published in the *New York World*, the jewel in Joseph Pulitzer's crown, appealed to readers across all economic, social, ethnic, and generational boundaries. The *World* page below, by George McManus, features characters from his strip, *The Newlyweds*, which was based on McManus' own family life—making it more akin to today's sitcoms than to Saturday morning cartoons.

It's this aspect of comics in the university—not comic history, not why comics are for grown-ups, but comics as scholarly object—that informs work such as Dave Purcell's recent Columbia master's essay in American Studies, *Superheroes of the pastoral: the development of American mythology through the landscape's liminal spaces*, in which he traces the development of American mythological archetypes from western frontier heroes through urban noir superheroes, paralleling the nation's transition from rural to urban pre-eminence. Academic prose isn't going to be to everyone's taste, obviously: I'm thinking of Tucker Stone retching as he pages through *A comic studies reader* (see 1:06, 4:13 and 7:36); yeah, this kind of writing is definitely not for everybody. Even I...well, my job is to help scholars with their research, so you could probably say I'm more of an enabler than a practitioner. I mean, there's a reason I prefer to write these columns rather than present papers at the Modern Language Association on the meta-narrative of Pogo as a multivalent transcultural signifier. But my point is that the *eye* article—along with my own efforts—isn't
about comics being read by different audiences, it's about their being read for different purposes.

This is the impetus behind an exhibition that will soon be on view in Butler Library at Columbia. This past summer, I was asked to plan a display on graphic novels to be mounted for the spring 2010 semester. I was given total freedom on how it should be framed, and I sketched out some rough ideas, all of which I trashed after a fruitful discussion with friend-of-comics and tenured faculty member, Jeremy Dauber. Dauber pointed out that I didn't need to explain the history of comics or talk about why they were worth reading. I had unwittingly created a fairly CAFAKESque concept, but we decided that that was altogether too defensive—too much "why" and not enough "how." Why not operate on the principle of how comics can be used in an academic setting?

So, when the exhibition goes up in January, it will look at themes that are explored in college-level curricula. Each of the eight display cases will present a concept and then trace how artists have addressed it, both in more traditional art and in comics. So, for example, one theme might be "didacticism," or works created for the purpose of instruction. First up could be an image from the 1735 Hogarth series, A Rake's Progress. In this series of eight paintings, later rendered as engravings, Hogarth presents wealthy ne'er-do-well Tom Rakewell, who fritters away his inheritance on wicked and wasteful pursuits, ending up first in debtors' prison and finally in an insane asylum. In the first engraving, below, Tom is busy: he's getting measured for new clothes while ignoring both the servants who are preparing his father's office for the wake and also his pregnant fiancée and her outraged mother. Hogarth fills the image with telling details, such as the defaced leather binding of the Bible in the lower left, out of which Tom's penny-pinching father has cut a new sole for his shoe, and the anthropomorphic family arms on the wall at upper right, three vises (vices; get it?) over the word "Beware."
Did comics embrace such didacticism? Short answer: did you grow up reading *Mary Worth*? I know I did, and I always resented what seemed like the endless busybody-ism of that silver-haired know-it-all. While early strips establish that her advice was not always unsought, and was often clearly on-point—witness the panels from a 1947 strip below—when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s she tended to come off as a more genteel version of the voice of the Establishment.
Another example, with a far more serious intent, is a recent comic developed specifically for returning war veterans who face difficulty in reintegration to civilian life. Coming Home: what to expect, how to deal when you return from combat, by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón—the same team that created the graphic novel adaptation of the 9/11 Report—was commissioned by Military OneSource, a resource created by the Department of Defense to offer support to current and former members of the armed services as well as to their families.
The 32-page comic tells the story of three friends, Iraq War vets who are experiencing various symptoms of PTSD, rage, alcoholism, alienation—a virtual mini DSM-IV of psychological trauma—and where, when, and how they get help. Two final pages list contact info for a variety of support services—from the Veterans Administration, from individual branches of the military, and from independent organizations. The comic is free in print to members of the military, although anyone can read the online version.

All of these images both tell a story and provide a lesson, in the same tradition as John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress or Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged. There are a host of other options for this theme, and a host of other themes, as well, many of which I’ve referred to here from time to time: perceptions of war, sexuality and gender, religion, visual rhetoric. In fact, I’d love to hear from you all, in the comments or in emails, about themes and examples you think would work, too. Let’s make this a group effort, shall we? Because exhibitions aren’t just for kids anymore!

Image credits

Illustration by Rebekah Kim from the eye, October 8 2009
George McManus, The Newlyweds, March 10 1909, in The World on Sunday, p. 117
“A Rake’s Progress,” panel 1, in Engravings by Hogarth (Dover 1973), plate 28.1

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