

Talkin' Comics Up In Morningside Heights

By Karen Green

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Our columnists are independent writers who choose subjects and write without editorial input from comiXology. The opinions expressed are the columnist's, and do not represent the opinion of comiXology.

As you know, if you've been reading these pieces for any length of time, I've been building the graphic novels collection at Columbia for over six years now. A gradually increasing circle of faculty, in a gradually widening range of disciplines, have been using the collection in teaching and research, and students have been writing senior theses and masters essays that use our comics holdings as well. But there's nothing that says a topic has arrived like an academic symposium. Am I right?

COMIC NEW YORK
a symposium


Cartoonists & Scholars Talk NYC Comics

Panel discussions featuring:

- Al Jaffee
- Paul Levitz
- John Romita Sr. & John Romita Jr.
- Louise Simonson
- Ben Katchor
- Ariel Schrag
- Dean Haspiel
- Peter Kuper
- Molly Crabapple
- and many more...

Saturday & Sunday
March 24 - 25, 2012

Columbia University
Low Memorial Library

 COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
For more info: conferences.cdrs.columbia.edu/comicny

The "Comic New York" symposium had its genesis well over a year ago, out of conversations between a School of Visual Arts professor and Columbia PhD, Chris Couch, and a long-time comics professional,

Danny Fingeroth. The two thought that Columbia should host some sort of major comics event, and they gathered several academics and comics industry folk around a lunch table to figure out what that should be. By the end of the lunch, we'd run some ideas up a flagpole, but no one saluted, so it was decided that Danny Fingeroth, Columbia professor Jeremy Dauber, and I would assume responsibility for planning and figure out something satisfactory.

There ensued a series of lunches. It's always good to plan over lunches! Food stimulates the brain cells. I don't recall whose idea it was, in the end, to focus on New York and comics. It was probably a function of our having no actual budget, and wanting to concentrate on the plethora of comics talent that's here in our own back yard. And when we started to think of the huge supply of talent here now, it became inevitable that we would eventually begin to think of the huge supply of talent that has been here always. And once we started thinking about the twinned and intertwined histories of comics and New York City...well, the ideas for panels practically started generating themselves.



How many times have you been to a panel about the legends of the medium, for example, and heard mention of the High School of Music and Art (left) or DeWitt Clinton High (right)? I know I've heard it a million times. Al Jaffee and Will Elder were sent to the High School of Music and Art when it first opened, and it was there that they met Harvey Kurtzman, Al Feldstein, and John Severin. Stan Lee, Will Eisner, Irwin Hasen, Bob Kane, and Bill Finger went to DeWitt Clinton. What are the odds of so much talent congregating in a couple of NYC schools?

Today, nearly all the comics talent seems to come out of (or move into) Brooklyn. You can hardly throw a rock in Williamsburg without hitting a cartoonist. I found myself thinking about the Graphic NYC website, where Chris Irving and Seth Kushner have been chronicling the current crop of cartoonists, and how much fun it would be to have a panel of creators from those old schools along with new collectives like Act-I-Vate or [the late, lamented] Pizza Island. And, lo, the idea of a "New York as Breeding Ground" panel was born.

We thought about how Marvel Comics used New York, undisguised, in their stories; we thought about cartoonists who were Columbia alumni; we thought about the early newspaper strips and the war between the Hearst and Pulitzer empires; we thought about the comics zines in Barnard College's library and how some have grown into the graphic novels in my library; we thought about the community that has produced World War 3 Illustrated for thirty years and all the NYC political history it chronicles...and

we started working out a format. We didn't want people presenting papers—we wanted conversation. We wanted stories. And we wanted creators—lots of them. But we also wanted this to tie-in with academia, so we decided that we would have cartoonists as panelists and academics, if possible, as moderators.

In the middle of all this planning, I was also working with a Columbia curator, negotiating with Chris Claremont for the donation of his archives to our Rare Book and Manuscript Library, or RBML. (This has been a year filled with newly-acquired skills.) Chris and Beth, his wife, were both [rightfully] concerned that, once the archives were on-site and processed, we should take care to promote and publicize their use, both to aid scholarship and to attract the archives of other creators. The director of RBML had been incredibly supportive on this front, and had assured me that he wouldn't be as interested in taking the Claremont archives unless we were likely to enhance our holdings with similar collections—no point in having one lone comics archive.

Columbia University Libraries Finding Aids: Rare Book & Manuscript Library

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William Seward Burroughs Papers, 1957-1976.

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Summary Information

Abstract

Author, artist, spoken word performer, and founding member of the Beat Generation. The William S. Burroughs Papers contain manuscripts and galley proofs of some of Burroughs's novels, as well as biographical material on Burroughs.



At a Glance

Call No.: MS #0174
Bib ID: 4078569 [View Citation](#)
Creator(s): Burroughs, William S., 1914-1997.
Title: William Seward Burroughs Papers, 1957-1976.
Physical description: 2 linear ft (5 document boxes and 1 oversize item).
Language(s): In English
Access: This collection is located on-site. [More information >](#)

Arrangement

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in four series.

- [Series I: Correspondence, 1952-1973](#)
- [Series II: Writings, 1958-1969](#)
- [Series III: Photographs and Realia](#)
- [Series IV: Victor Bookris Material Relating to Burroughs, 1965-1975](#)

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Description

Scope and Content

The William S. Burroughs Papers contain manuscripts and galley proofs of some of Burroughs's novels, as well as experimental prose, including early examples of Burroughs's cut-up technique, and a small amount of correspondence. The collection also contains a series of biographical

http://findingaids.cul.columbia.edu/ead/mc-ib/dod_4078569/summary4/4/2012.5.07:40 PM]

(This is an example of the first page of an online finding aid for our William S Burroughs archive; the Claremont papers will have one like this when they are processed)

So it seemed natural to feature Chris in the symposium, and we offered him the keynote spot. (And this is when the entire symposium became more of a libraries event, as we realized that we could make an appeal to all these NYC-area cartoonists to consider depositing their archives at Columbia.) We weren't sure whether we wanted a Claremont-focused panel, where colleagues would talk about his work, or whether we would have an academic chatting with him about his significance, but Danny came up with the perfect solution when he suggested that Chris's longtime editor, Louise Simonson, sit in conversation with him. And what a wonderful idea that was! Louise's enthusiasm, as well as her affection for Chris, was palpable, and she seemed as eager as any fan to hear his answers. Everything that Chris said was as thoughtful and considered as one might expect, although the two big news-stories turned out to be the alternate Sara Grey story that never happened and the James Cameron/Kathryn Bigelow X-Men movie that also never happened.

But back to the planning—which began, slowly, to coalesce. We wanted a real mix of young and old, of indie and mainstream; we wanted to show the amazing variety of this medium, even when just taking a sampling from a narrow geographic slice of a single country. We wanted diversity, too: I remember returning to my office to revise our panelist wish-list and realizing with dismay that every last name on it was male.

We didn't get everyone we asked, of course. How could we? But, you know what Harvard's admissions department always says about their freshman class? That even if they tossed out the entire list of first picks, and cobbled a new class from what was left over, it would be just as high quality as the original list? That's kind of how we felt about our lineup. It made us a little giddy, quite frankly, when we looked at the names we had.

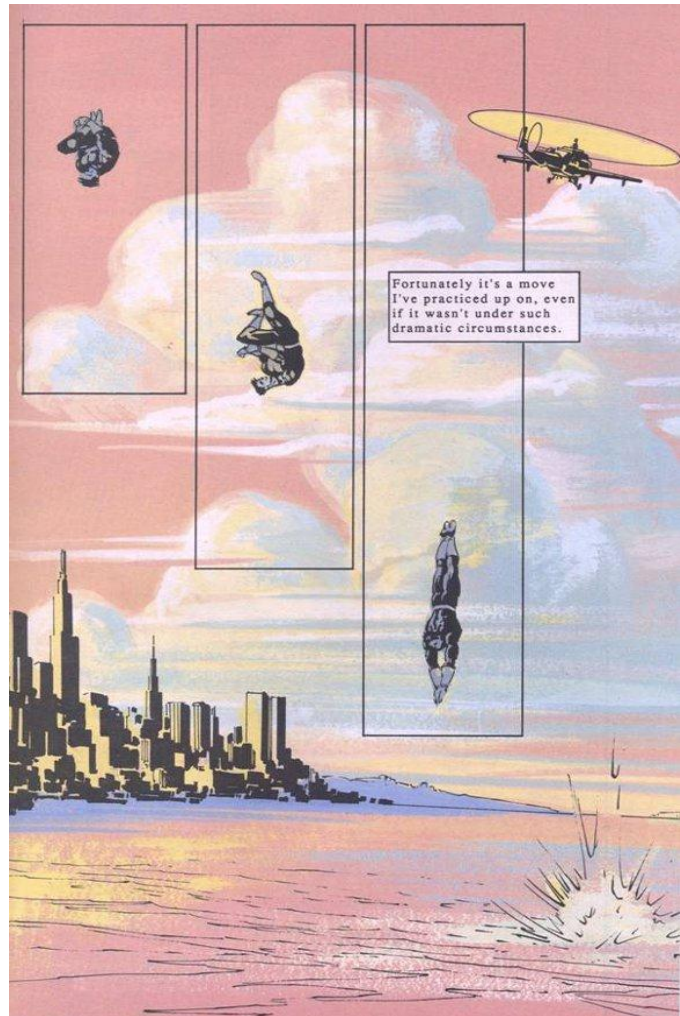
So whom did we get?

Well, the panel about Marvel Comics' use of NYC morphed a bit, into an examination of the New York we know and the New York that appears mythically, or incognito: "New York, Real and Imagined." One of the first names that had occurred to me was Ben Katchor, because the city of Julius Knipl had always seemed like an alternate New York to me—the strange businesses Knipl visited might be around the corner, on one of the streets I'd never ventured down. But Katchor ended up on a different panel completely, so we kept thinking.



Happily, we ended up with Ariel Schrag—a Columbia alumna, no less, who left the moderator and the audience helpless with laughter from her story of a fight at a gay prom held while she was a student here—and Molly Crabapple, who has a view of New York which, she explained in her panel, was most informed by Hieronymus Bosch. Danny Fingerroth managed to score us not one, but TWO Romitas, and I'll tell you that watching father and son banter back and forth was one of the most winning moments of the entire weekend. And one of our earliest choices for that panel was actually not a cartoonist but an academic, Kent Worcester, who has presented quite a bit on New York in comics, and contributed a series of examples of comics' use of the city's grid as well as its verticality—stunningly captured in this Punisher page.

We thought that the World War 3 Illustrated idea might be better served by being about political comics in general, so we chose only Peter Kuper and Sabrina Jones from the WW3 family—two cartoonists for whom my admiration falls into the "unabashed" category. We wanted to provide ideological balance, though, which was tricky—we don't actually find a lot of conservative political cartooning particularly...funny. What were we going to do, bring in the Mallard Fillmore guy? That's not even about New York! A New York Post editorial cartoonist? Those cartoons aren't even funny! But Denis Kitchen has a biography of Al Capp coming out, and Capp's journey from ardent New Dealer to crotchety reactionary would make for some interesting discussion. (Not to mention that Denis Kitchen talking on just about anything makes for pretty compelling listening.) And David Hajdu, the Columbia Journalism School professor, and author of *The Ten Cent Plague*, who was moderating, asked us to include the terrific John Carey, an editorial cartoonist who provided a nice history of New York political cartooning to complement Peter Kuper's slideshow, together tracing subjects from Boss Tweed to Donald Trump.





We had thought we'd have a panel on New York's underground comics community, but we had a hard time fielding a team. Of our A-List, only Bill Griffith joined us, which was, admittedly, quite a get. But Kim Deitch, Gary Panter, Art Spiegelman, and Françoise Mouly all said no, so we had to rethink our theme. "Underground" was perhaps a dubious label—as Griffith himself noted, "Zippy the Pinhead" is distributed by the largest and oldest syndicate in comics, which is hardly "underground"—so we zigged a bit, pondering, "What IS the modern 'underground'?" In the end, we chose local cartoonists whose work could be thought of as "alternative," instead. In addition to Griffith we had the masterful R. Sikoryak, who has made his monthly "Carousel" slideshows one

of the must-see features of any NYC comics festival, and Julia Wertz, whose "Drinking at the Movies" was one of my favorite books of 2010. And finally, to contextualize underground and indie comics, and to address the challenges those creators have faced—and still face—we added Charles Brownstein, director of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, who had stories to make the blood run cold.

The panel about newspaper comics and the Pulitzer-Hearst circulation wars was also expanded, first to include newspaper comics across time, and finally to include magazine cartoonists and web-based content, too. Basically, a range of people who create comics periodically: "Periodical New York." We had wanted Art Spiegelman for this one, because of his encyclopedic knowledge of early newspaper comics, but he was too busy. It was Art who suggested Ben Katchor for this panel, though, saying he'd be a far better choice. What?! Who am I to know better than Art Spiegelman? And, after all, Ben Katchor had a long history with the NYC periodical press. And is a really interesting person! Emily Flake, who is a regular cartoonist in The New Yorker, not to mention a really, really funny person, joined us, along with Lauren Weinstein, whose blog regularly showcases her new work.



But the glue that held the lineup together, and the undisputed star of the panel itself, was the irrepressible Irwin Hasen, creator of the long-running newspaper strip, "Dondi," among other notable feats. Irwin is 93 years old now, and he is indomitable. Irwin has stories, he does. He wants you to hear them and, trust me: you want to hear them. Irwin is a crowd-pleaser—but he was just as much a panel pleaser. When you watch the video, look for the lovely rapport that developed between him and Emily Flake. I'm rooting for those two crazy kids to make a go of it.

Remember that "New York as Breeding Ground" panel? Remember the names that went to those two NYC high schools? Al Jaffee and Stan Lee are the only two still working in the medium (or still with us)—

but only one of them lives in New York, and was gracious enough to agree to participate. Yes, the wonderful Al Jaffee agreed to take part in our symposium. Who else? A lot of cartoonists are New Yorkers, born and raised, after all. One who combines two elements of the city, though, is Dean Haspiel, who grew up in Manhattan and then made the move to Brooklyn. And is always entertaining on a panel.

Tracy White, best known perhaps for *How I Made It to Eighteen*, and also a New Yorker by birth, was added to the list early on and, to emphasize that New York doesn't merely give birth to cartoonists but draws them here like a magnet, Miss Lasko-Gross, who left suburban Boston to find a home on the Lower East Side, joined us as well. The entire panel was dedicated to the memory of Jerry Robinson, who had attended Columbia briefly before leaving to get a job. His was a name that we'd considered for the Columbia cartoonists panel that never happened—James Romberger was another—but circumstances intervened. It's nice that we were still able to keep him on the program, even if only in memoriam.

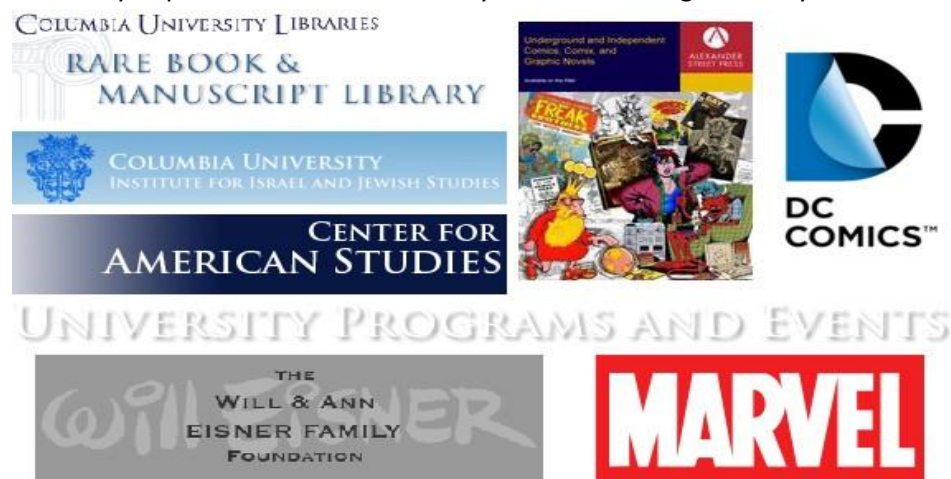
The final panel of the weekend took everything that came before and anchored it in Columbia's scholarly life. Moderated by co-organizer and Columbia professor Jeremy Dauber, it marshaled Chris Couch, Jonathan W Gray (of CUNY/John Jay), and [now Columbia's own] Paul Levitz to discuss how the comics and creators we'd discussed all weekend long are—or could be—understood and studied by scholars. "Comic New York and the Academy" touched on scholarly process, but it was also a clarion call for what the academy—and its libraries—can do to preserve and promote this unique medium.



The spirit that hovered over the entire proceeding, of course, was that of über-NYC cartoonist Will Eisner, whose love for and memories of the city infused his work. The week of March 6—Eisner's birthday—is celebrated as Will Eisner Week, with comics-related events scheduled across the country

and, while our symposium didn't quite fall into that time period, we just stretched out March into Will Eisner Month. Nearly every cartoonist at the event had either worked with or been inspired by Eisner, and his name came up frequently—not just in "New York as Breeding Ground," but throughout the weekend.

So, was it a success? It was certainly well-publicized! The New Yorker included it in their event listings, which almost made me pass out. The Village Voice did, too. We began to worry that we might not have enough space. We increased the chairs in the room from 80 to the maximum of 160. The programs I was going to print out and staple up myself, when I thought I might only need about 100, were sent to Print Services with a request for 300. We kept fund-raising almost up to the last moment, and added DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Alexander Street Press, and the Will & Ann Eisner Family Foundation to the university departments that had already contributed so generously.



And lo and behold: we were a resounding hit! On Saturday, we had standing room only. On Sunday we were about 65% full—probably close to 300 unique visitors over the two days. Publishers Weekly's Philip Turner wrote a terrific roundup. The bookstore sold a ton of books at the author signings that followed each panel. People met and mingled, made connections, smiled and looked happy and excited to be there.

We had an audience filled with scholars, librarians, students, cartoonists, publishers, journalists, and fans of every stripe. Library administration was happy. Panelists and the moderators (oh, man, I didn't mention all the moderators! Major honors to Chris Irving, David Hajdu, Gene Kannenberg Jr, Eddy Portnoy, and co-organizers Danny Fingerth and Jeremy Dauber) were happy. I was blindingly happy.

Next week, the videos of the panels should be linked at the symposium's program page. Have a look, have a listen, and tell me what you think. And leave a comment with your ideas for what kind of program we should do next...

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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