

## Chapter the 14th, in which Karen is Revealed to be a Vile Ingrate

By Karen Green

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I will also be revealed as chronologically impaired, which is why this column did not appear last week, as it should have (ahem). Um, Happy New Year!!

But let's put that aside for the moment: I'd rather talk about the two major challenges I face in building the Columbia University graphic novels collection: **money** and **scope**.

The money challenge is easy to understand: there's never enough. Because my "real" job—that whole Ancient and Medieval History gig—involves buying books that tend to range from \$60 to \$200 a pop, I had felt kind of cocky about taking on collection responsibilities for an area where the books tend to run more like \$12 to \$50. (I mean, *Kramer's Ergot 7* is an outlier, isn't it? Please tell me it's an outlier!) That contrast in book prices is why the initial \$4,000 fund in 2005 had seemed so flush to me. But it wasn't. Really, really wasn't.

Whether we are currently in another Golden Age or not, there is no denying that there are So Damn Many titles coming out that keeping up with the output AND doing good retrospective collecting is a monumental and expensive task. The funds I have are not as expansive as I would like: I have only a little over \$11,000 to spend on graphic novels this fiscal year, and that's including secondary literature like the terrific *Conversations with Comic Artists* series published by the University Press of Mississippi or Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics*. That means that I'm REALLY EXCITED when I get GIFTS. Gifts allow me to stretch my flimsy budget!

And everybody loves gifts, right? After all, what would birthdays and Christmas be without prezzies? Sometimes, publishers shower me with freebies at conventions. (Well, I've gotten as many as six: does that constitute a shower? For my purposes, I believe it does.) Sometimes the artists themselves will press a copy upon me, excited to know their work is going to end up in Columbia's collection. (It's fun to work in the Ivy League!)

Sometimes reviewers will donate their review copies, which often results in unfortunate duplicates (I can be kind of quick on the trigger when buying—once something's mentioned in *The Beat* or *PWCWI*'m usually off to fill in the order request), but also allows me to add to the collection titles I might not otherwise have prioritized...hel-LO, EC's *Creepy Archives*, volume one!

And sometimes people send me things. I am more grateful than I can say to comiXology for the exposure this column has given me (thanks, Peter and David!), and to Laura

Hudson and Nicole Boose, who have also helped raise the profile of the Columbia libraries collection. So as a result people send me books...and this is where the question of scope comes in. Because while it's wonderful to get gifts, sometimes what they send me I just can't add to the collection—which is why I am a Vile Ingrate.

When I began buying for Columbia three or so years ago, I had to write a collection development policy. All of us subject librarians have these policies, for each of our collecting areas, that enumerate why and what we collect. In that policy, which I wrote about four years ago, I said, "The libraries' collection will concentrate on titles that have won awards or otherwise received critical and/or scholarly notice—with a specific focus on the role of New York City as setting or inspiration—as well as secondary scholarly literature."

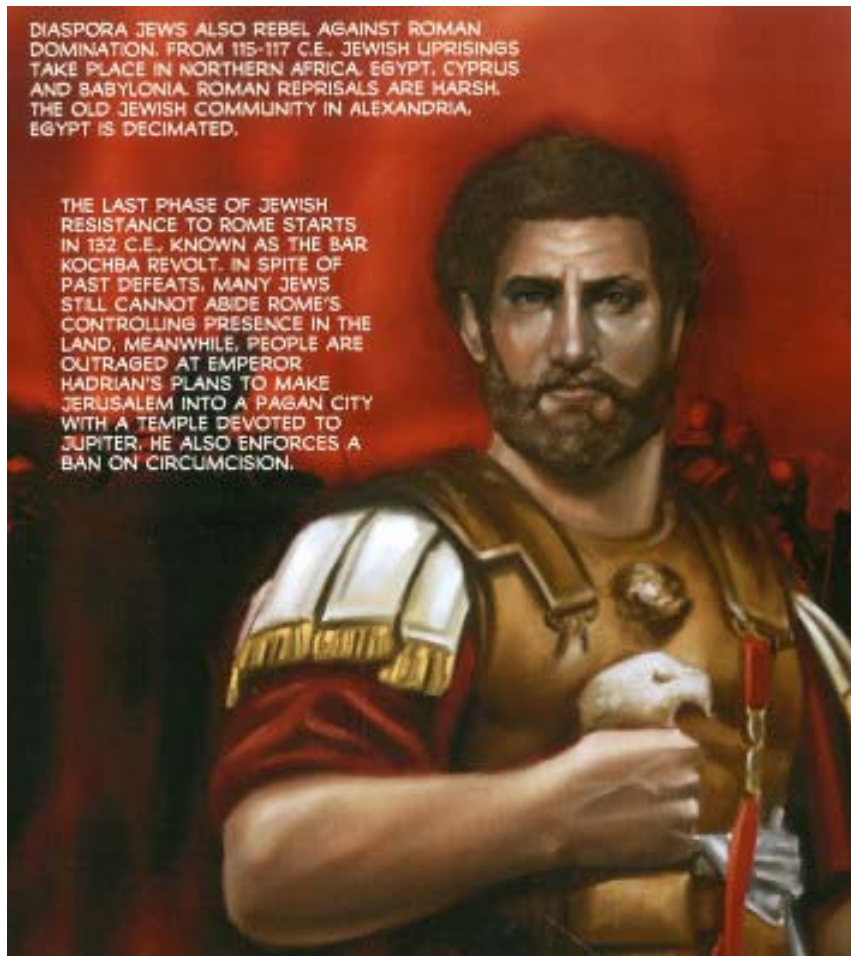
Well, I confess that concentration's gotten a little diluted in the past couple of years. Once you buy one title that's received critical attention or an Eisner, it makes sense to try to add the creator[s]'s entire oeuvre. We don't handle other literary work much differently, after all. But to me the crux of the policy is this: "The collection supports the needs of undergraduate, MA/MS and Ph.D. students, the teaching faculty, post-docs, and researchers in the areas of literature, art, film, and cultural history." And this is where scope comes into play.

As I tried to explain in my very first column, I want to build a research collection. Graphic novels, as I've tried to demonstrate over the past 13 months, are as rich in artistic and literary themes as any other creative work on our shelves; they can act as transmitters of culture, as commentaries on society—but not everything that's published has these qualities. Not everything that's published WANTS to have those qualities. So, it's up to me to determine how what is published does meet the scope I've determined for the collection.



And this is where my vile ingratitude comes in. People send me lovely things; books they've worked on themselves, books that mean a lot to them. Often, the books are religious-themed. So, for example, the *Eye Witness* series, by Robert James Luedke, kindly sent to me by the artist, in which he weaves the Greatest Story Ever Told into an archaeological action thriller. One back cover blurb reads, "Luedke is one of the leading lights in evangelical [sic] comic circles." But I don't even buy evangelical testimonies in my role as Religion Librarian (our theology library collects those, where appropriate). We don't buy thrillers, either, for the most part—although we have many in the stacks, also because of donations.

I'm not sure what the *Eye Witness* series adds to our collection. It's not radically odd, like the *Left Behind* series, which a colleague of mine is planning to add as a sort of cultural artifact. Narratively and artistically it is pleasant but not outstanding. The action story is fun—but lots of stories are fun while not likely to serve as fodder for scholarship. It's a giant step above the Bible Comics of my youth, but it serves a similar function. So how do I respond to Mr. Luedke, who sent it to me so generously?



Another gift was sent to me by Nachshon Press: *Homeland: the Illustrated History of the State of Israel*. This won a lot of awards, according to the press kit—the National Jewish Book Award, Independent Publisher Book Award for Multicultural Non-Fiction, Moonbeam Book Award. All of these awards are in the young adult (YA) category.

Here is where graphic novels navigate tricky shoals. Comics for a "young adult" audience can be anything from sweet tales of tweener life to any story that doesn't include a nipple. In other words, it can be intentionally YA or inadvertently YA. *Homeland* is definitely intentionally YA, which makes it of less interest to me. But what's more, despite its press kit telling me it is, it's *not* actually a graphic novel. It is what its subtitle promises: an illustrated history.

As you can see from the page, there is no interdependence of text and image. It's *nice* to have the painting of Bar Kochba, but it is not *essential* to have the painting of Bar Kochba. It is an illustrated book of Israeli history, geared for a secondary school market, and I'm betting my nephews will either love it themselves or love donating it to their synagogue's library. But it adds no intrinsic value to my collection. So how do I respond to the nice people who sent it to me?

Here's another story. I got an email from a publisher in the UK, Stephen Robson of Fanfare/Ponent Mon. He wanted to let me know about their title list, which included several manga translations. Well, manga is a problem for me. My comics money comes from a gift fund designated very specifically for American studies. Theoretically, even authors such as David B. or Alan Moore should be bought by other funds, though I still buy them, because they are part of American comics discourse. Manga, though, is pushing the envelope a bit past easy rationalization. We do have an East Asian Library, separate from my library, where such things ought to reside, but their space is constrained and manga is a space hog.

I've bought a lot of Osamu Tezuka for my collection because, well, it's Tezuka, and also because his work offers a strong argument for the cross-cultural pollination of American and Japanese comics styles. (That's how I justify buying *Bat-Manga* as well.) But I don't seek it out—even as a gift. Mr. Robson persisted, however, saying that he would send me a sampling of titles, including *Disappearance Diary*, which, despite being unfindable at Amazon.com, had just been named number one in the Top Ten Graphic Novels in *New York Magazine's* year-end issue. I was apprehensive, nevertheless, which made the experience of reading *Disappearance Diary* all the sweeter. Because this is a terrific book.



In it, Hideo Azuma tells how, in 1989, despite a successful career as a manga artist, he basically willingly dropped out of life and family and became homeless. In the story he scrounges, drinks heavily, does hard labor for a while, and ends up in the alcoholic ward of a psychiatric hospital. It's an amazing story, not least because he draws it in the perky, adorable style of *Shin Chan* or *My Neighbors the Yamadas*. As Azuma notes in a quote on the back cover: "This manga has a positive outlook on life, and so it has been made with as much realism removed as possible." That giddy cynicism allows him to balance the happiness of finding udon noodles in the garbage with the displeasure of discovering a cigarette butt and a lighter mixed in with the rest of the ingredients. The simplicity of the presentation keeps the horror of the experience at bay, without ever promising more of a happy ending than the fact of the book's existence itself.

So, this I can add to my collection gratefully, happily—along with Jiro Taniguchi's *The Walking Man* and Kazuichi Hanawa's *Doing Time*, which are next up on my reading list.

These are the kinds of gifts I welcome. They introduce me to otherwise unknown material, they allow me to spread my budget around, and they enhance my collection in interesting ways. Thank you, Stephen Robson!

But what AM I going to say to Mr Luedke??

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