

The Origin Story

By Karen Green

Friday December 7, 2007 09:56:15 am

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.



So, how does an Ivy League university's library decide to collect comics and graphic novels, anyway?

For some, it's easy. Yale University, for example, has a splendid array of *bandes dessinées* in their Special Collections, so their decision to add comics and graphic novels to their general collections isn't surprising. But, at Columbia University, there was no such incentive. Our holdings were spotty at best, and consisted either of random comic collections from the early 20th century—Crockett Johnson's *Barnaby*, for example, or Winsor McCay's *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*—or the sort of graphic novels that support the curriculum, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* in the Humanities and History Library or Joe Sacco's *Palestine* in the library for the School of International and Public Affairs. University libraries tend to get their books from large vendors according to a subject outline known as an approval plan, and let's just say that Columbia's approval plans didn't include material from DC Comics, Fantagraphics, or First Second—these publishers simply weren't on our radar. If a professor requested a graphic novel for a course, it would be bought—otherwise? Not a chance.

I didn't really have any say on the matter, myself. My formal subject training is in medieval history, and I was hired to buy materials in Classics, Ancient and Medieval History, the history of Christianity, and modern Greek literature. The funds at my disposal were only for titles in those subjects. I could recommend titles, but I had no control over any sort of

systematic acquisition. I had to formulate...a cunning plan.



So, I arranged a librarian meeting. I invited the Director of the Humanities and History Division (my boss), our Assistant Head of Collection Development (i.e., the guy who controls the money), our Anglo-American History and Literature librarian, our Fine Arts librarian, and our Rare Book librarian. I came armed with visual aids. I brought *Watchmen*, Miller & Sienkiewicz's *Daredevil: Love and War*, Edward Gorey's *Amphigorey*, and *The Death of Gwen Stacy*. I also brought recent book reviews of David B.'s *Epileptic* from *The New Yorker* and *New York* magazine. I added an email from a Columbia professor of Middle East history who also happens to be an out-and-proud comics geek, and who'd written a lovely summation of the scholarly significance of generations of men whose adult worldviews had been shaped in their youth by comic books. Finally, I went into the *MLA Bibliography*, an online database that indexes articles on literary criticism, and printed out a list of every title I could find on Frank Miller and Alan Moore.

Then I made a little speech. I pointed out that New York City was the natural home of the comics—not just of the newspaper strips, as Art Spiegelman made so graphically clear (yeah, pun intended) in *In the Shadow of No Towers*, but also of the mainstream comic books, whose first publishers were located here, in the city (or its surrogate) in which so many stories have been set—and that no New York institution was making a concerted effort to collect this kind of material. I waved my book reviews, and argued that graphic novels had reached a place of real legitimacy in literary culture. I pointed out that Columbia has a film school, and that graphic novels are increasingly the source material for Hollywood and that, even when they're not, the imagery and style of the comics were pervading conventional films, leading film students to need to study them.

Fortunately, I was to a great extent preaching to the choir. That copy of *Gwen Stacy* had

been donated to me a week earlier by the guy from Collection Development. The Rare Book librarian had grown up in a house full of brothers, and she confessed to an adolescent fondness for the Silver Surfer. Our Anglo-American librarian was a harder sell: when I pointed out the stylistic differences between the traditional comics look of the Spider-Man story and the artistic influences in Sienkiewicz's work in *Daredevil: Love and War*, he said that they looked the same to him.

Oh well. You can't win 'em all.

But—I won enough of 'em. The faculty support had been crucial, even though the professor in question wasn't teaching about comics directly. It would be two years later, in fact, that Columbia's Heyman Center for the Humanities named Art Spiegelman one of their New York City Fellows, and brought him in to teach a course called "Comics: Marching into the Canon," so the library's just a tad ahead of the university's curve. And, in the end, a Graphic Novels fund was established and—as I'd hoped—it was assigned to me as selector.

How do I make my choices? What dilemmas do I face? How do my issues in an academic research library differ from those of my colleagues in public libraries? How did a medievalist end up collecting comics? Tune in next month....

Top: *Daredevil: Love and War*

Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz

© Marvel, 1986

Bottom: *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121

Stan Lee and Gerry Conway, writers; Gil Kane and John Romita Sr, artists

© Marvel Comics, 1973

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

Comic Adventures in Academia is © Karen Green, 2010