Comic Books in Libraries:  
An Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction and Scope

The following bibliography concerns scholarly literature discussing comic books and graphic novels in libraries. The articles cover collection development, cataloging, recommendations and educational value. While some of the articles concentrate on graphic novels in school libraries, others talk about their inclusion in public and academic libraries. The authors have a great deal of bias regarding the definition of graphic novel—some distance it from comic books, others embrace the relationship. The bibliography's articles were published from 1994 to 2010; with a handful of exceptions, the majority of the articles were published in the United States. A broad spectrum of scholarly articles was chosen to better understand librarians' current thinking on the inclusion of graphic novels and comic books in their collections.

Description

Wagner (2010) considers comic books to be one of the few American art forms. She provides a concise history of the medium and industry—the medium enjoyed immediate success in the 1930s, as superhero adventures joined “the existing genres of romance, mystery, horror, and western comics” (p. 42). Following World War II, comic book readers’ tastes changed—crime and horror titles became far more popular. The popularity of these violent, realistic stories led to public outcry. Fearing government intervention, publishers agreed to self-police the industry (Ellis & Highsmith, 2000, p. 23). Ellis and Highsmith (2000) go on to discuss the reinvention of the superhero in the 1960s bringing about increased popularity in the medium—much like, as Wagner (2010) points out, Superman started the boom in the 1930s. O'English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006) identify 1978 as an important milestone with the creation of the graphic novel. Since then, comic books and graphic novels have been “beginning to move to center stage of acceptance” (Matz, 2004, p. 96). Today, Wagner (2010) identifies the box office success of movies based on comic books and graphic novels as evidence of “an appeal and a relevance beyond the traditional format and audience” (p. 42).
Summary of Findings

For the most part, the scholarly literature about comic books in libraries splits into two groups. First, articles by and about comic book librarians who discuss how to catalog and preserve comic books and graphic novels. Second, articles recommending what graphic novels or comic books to include in a library collection. Most of the graphic novel articles act as obvious sales pitches for the format, while articles about comic books as special collections do little or nothing to advocate the medium’s place in libraries.

Articles discussing comic book librarianship talk very specifically about the practices and procedures of establishing and maintaining collections—sometimes as specifically as record format. For example, Serchay (1998), Fee (2008) and Markham (2009) all show sample records. Scott (1998) concentrates on his experience establishing Michigan State University's comic book collection since the 1970s. He discusses cataloging and preservation—Serchay (1998) talks broadly about such collections, examining the various comic book libraries throughout the United States. Markham (2009) eschews the importance of cataloging, instead concentrating on making the materials in his collection immediately available to patrons. These articles principally discuss comic books—the small magazine format—as cultural artifacts. Each collection is patron accessible, but not as materials for patron checkout. But the collections themselves, specifically Scott's, contributed to a change in librarians’ thinking about including the medium in general collections. Ellis and Highsmith (2000) talk about libraries reexamining their comic book policies based, in part, the existence of comic book collections in research libraries and bibliographic records for those items appearing in OCLC.

Matz (2004) suggests the acceptance is universal—comic books, he says, have finally been “acknowledged as delivery mechanisms for genuine art and literature and included with great works without qualification” (p. 96). He goes on to identify university campuses—professors using comic books in their courses—as a major factor. Fee (2008) opines these professors never grew out of their “keen interest” in the medium and want to bring it into the “literary mainstream” (p. 175). Vergueiro (1994) provides a bridge as far as items and intent—even though he talks about his experiences in Brazilian
libraries—in bringing comic books into libraries for patrons. He offers reasons behind the inclusion of the medium, notably as a literacy tool, but he also makes it simpler—patrons want the item. Ellis and Highsmith (2000) identify the patrons desiring the material as, primarily, teenage males. Wagner (2010) points out the medium’s increased popularity is due to broadening appeal—not the “stereotypical demographic of young men and boys” (p. 42). Behler (2006) talks about the popularity of Japanese comic books, manga, with teenage girls.

The North American articles about graphic novels (note, not comic books) frequently discuss the educational value of the materials. Ireland (2004) goes so far as to advocate graphic novels as “an alternative to the traditional novel” (p. 21). Other authors prefer to remain hopeful—Downey (2009) posits a graphic novel adaptation of a literary work might lead a student to pursue the original text. Behler (2006) does not call graphic novels replacements, but does not discuss them as a stepping-stone. Instead, she extols their virtues as literacy tools based on having “twice as many words” as children's books (p. 17).

Whether comic books—or graphic novels—are valid reading materials has been under discussion for some time. Downey (2009) touts study results showing reading graphic novels is no more effective than reading prose in terms of understanding the narrative. She flips the emphasis to make the results sound positive, as a defense of the medium. But Ellis and Highsmith (2000) determine the lack of damage was established in both the 1990s and as far back as the 1950s. In fact, in the 1950s, the emphasis was on “helping the student improve” his or her reading (p. 30). O'English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006) do not discuss helping school-age children read, rather they think graphic novels would help college students read—as pleasure reading is growing less popular with young adults.

But O'English, Matthews and Lindsay (2010) also talk about graphic novels only being for young adults—graphic novels “clearly are inappropriate materials for many lessons and classes in middle school and high school (p.179).” The question of audience—clearly important given violence and sexism in comic books—is one many authors ignore... or take very strange positions on. Lavin (1998) argues comic books and graphic novels should be assumed to be for adults unless proven otherwise. His article

“Virtually none” of the mainstream comic books and graphic novels Lavin (1998) surveys feature nudity or sex (p. 41). Violence, on the other hand is “often gratuitous, excessive, and graphic” (Lavin, 1998, p. 41). Ellis and Highsmith (2000) identify violence as one of the traditional arguments librarians had against comic books. Heaney (2007) and Downey (2009) dismiss concerns about violence for the same reason they dismiss misogyny claims; Downey (2009) says the graphic novel illiterate will “misinterpret the intent,” leading to not just to complaints about sex and violence, but also to concerns about “underage patron’s access” to the materials (p. 181). Williams and Peterson (2009) note, while some graphic novels are intended for youthful audiences, “others are definitely for adults” (p. 167).

Lavin (1998) and Ireland (2004) both talk about the guidelines for buying comic books and graphic novels and being watchful for sex and violence in the content. Fee (2008) talks about the importance of separating comic books for age levels. Matz (2004) echoes the idea comic books need a special reading ability, discussing the idea of their “inherent complexity” (p. 96). He never mentions sex and violence, instead focusing on the dangers of relying on library trades for reviews and recommendations. These reviews “tend to be geared towards Young Adult collections of public libraries”—and presumably school libraries—and they “perpetuate the marginalization of comic books as juvenile fare” (p. 97). Heaney (2007) dismisses the idea of guidelines, but suggests interested librarians consult comic book shops as experts in recommending items, as does Lavin (1998).

The authors of these articles have no consistent definition of a graphic novel. Williams and Peterson (2009) point out the term itself maybe be the cause for confusion. While “novel suggests fiction, the term graphic novel describes the format of the books, not their content” (Williams & Peterson, 2009, p. 167). However, examining the
definitions in other articles, this confusion does not seem to be the reason for a lack of agreed definition.

According to Ireland (2004), graphic novels “rely on a mixture of words and pictures to tell” their stories (p. 18), which she considers different from how comic books convey their narrative. Fee (2008) calls graphic novels a “book-length variation” of comic books (p. 176). He also specifies a difference between trade paperbacks and graphic novels. Wagner (2010) provides straightforward definition of all the formats. She identifies comic books “magazines of 32 to 48 pages sold as serials,” trade paperbacks as “collections of the content of several comic books bound together and sold as monographs” and graphic novels as “long works issued in a monograph without prior serialization” (Wagner, 2010, p. 43). O'English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006) point out the term was created as “a marketing technique” to allow comic book creators to publish non-traditional (i.e. non-superhero) material (p. 173).

Whether cultural artifacts for researchers or reading material for patrons, comic books clearly belong in libraries. As artifacts and special collections, the only disagreement seems to be over cataloging. Markham (2009) finds the traditional comic book cataloging too time consuming and Fee (2008) feels it needs an overhaul to take advantage to improvements in MARC. However, the disagreement regarding comic books as reading material is much more significant. The discussion in the literature suggests librarians fundamentally disagree about how content should affect collection development. More strikingly, none of them even acknowledges the disagreement exists.
Bibliography

Entry 1:


Abstract: (summary) “Demonstrating her commitment to student outreach, she is the co-chair of the libraries' annual open house, an event that welcomes more than four thousand students to the libraries each year, and is involved in the library's pilot effort at providing remote reference services in the university's student union building (the HUB). 1 With roots in the serial comic strip, during the 1970s and '80s, comics began to take on a more literary tone; many publishers moved away from the serial publication of short comic books to focus on more complex book-length titles, and as a result, comic readership expanded from children to young adults and adults, who found their preferred format maturing along with them. The evolution of comics from Sunday-morning strips to comic books to graphic novels—"book-length comic books that are meant to be read as one story"—has drawn much critical attention. 3 Several titles have won prestigious book awards, beginning with Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize. Graphic Novels Are Never Dull-Try Saying that About Most Works of Prose Fiction,” in which writer Nick Hornby relates (when comparing his pile of “proper books” to his pile of comic books) “[C]omic books are never dull, in the excruciating way that prose fiction can be, and it's as hard to imagine half-reading most graphic novels... as it is to imagine half-reading a sonnet.””

Annotation: The article is principally a list of recommended titles, along with annotations from author Behler (an academic librarian). The introduction from the editor implies Behler will be discussing suitability of titles, but she does not. In fact, she does not even recommend the first title she discusses. However, when discussing the vast genre differences in comic books, Behler does it without attempting to validate the medium showing that variety of choices. There is some valuable discussion of comics in libraries.

Search strategy: I was searching Social SciSearch for graphic novels and libraries and found a number of articles. I used Dialog to bring up their cited references and found Behler's article cited in two different articles. On Web of Science, I further investigated the article, finding the full citation, after which I checked Ulrich's to determine Reference & User Services Quarterly's status as a referred journal. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: N/A

Method of Searching: Citation

Entry 2:


Abstract: “Graphic novel collection and use has become a popular topic in the library community; most of the literature has focused on collecting in school and public libraries. The number of academic libraries that carry graphic novels has increased, but those collections and the few articles addressing graphic novels in academic librarianship have focused on serving the recreational reader or the pop culture historian. Meanwhile, the education community has begun to embrace graphic novels as a way to reach reluctant readers; engage visual learners; and improve comprehension and interpretation of themes, literary devices, and social issues, among other topics. As graphic novels are increasingly used in the classroom, students majoring in elementary and secondary education should have access to these materials as they prepare for their future careers. Making graphic novels a specific part of the curriculum and instruction collection supports the academic library’s mission to meet the research and training needs of the faculty, staff, and students.”

Annotation: The article discusses the need for and creation of graphic novel collections in academic libraries. Downey talks about the existing literature on the subject—even giving a literature review of mostly trade articles—and how it fails to discuss graphic novel collections intended for educational purposes (existing articles concentrate on pleasure reading and historical collections). Downey makes some outlandish claims about the medium, including dismissing charges of sexism—saying readers are at fault; they do not pay enough attention.

Search strategy: I searched the Social SciSearch database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: Social SciSearch [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Keyword searching

Search string: ss graphic()novel?

s s3 and librar?

Entry 3:

**Abstract:** “The comic book, a native US art form and industry, has a tradition of being looked down upon by the library profession. Professional library literature from the 1940s into the 1960s was located using the HW Wilson index, Library Literature. This review reveals an evolution of the library profession's attitudes toward comic books, from rejection (though not universally so) to acceptance (though not universally so). This change in attitude reflects a concomitant change in the library profession, from gatekeeper of fine literature to champion of free speech.”

**Annotation:** The article reviews the articles in library literature regarding comic books from the 1940s through the 1990s. The authors include trade publications and regional library publications, not just scholarly work (there is almost none before the 1980s). The article stays focused and concise, only once belittles the shockingly negative (and culturally close-minded) authors of the reviewed articles. As the article has more literature to cover in the 1980s and 1990s, it becomes verbose, including discussion of changes in libraries' purviews.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search string:**
- ss comic()book?
- ss graphic()novel?
- s (s3 or s6) and librar?

**Entry 4:**


**Abstract:** “This article provides a background for Comics Librarianship and the sources which can be, and are, used. The author describes the application of FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) for serials to the cataloging of the comic book format and ways to adapt these methods to flat MARC records, to aid in retrieval of items. Sample records are included for illustration of methods.”

**Annotation:** The article discusses cataloging a comic book collection and how to adapt for modernizing database systems. Fee uses the second half of the article to show the
reader his choices for how to best catalog comic books, which present a number of cataloging issues as serials. The first half of the article talks a lot about comic book librarianship, its history and the differences between it and graphic novels in libraries.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Social SciSearch database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Database:** Social SciSearch [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search string:** ss comic()book?

s s3 and librar?

**Entry 5:**


**Abstract:** “Purpose - Provides a comprehensive review of the significance attributed to the usefulness, practicality and appropriateness of graphic novels in the school library media center with specific implications for collection development. Design/methodology /approach - A careful review of recent literature provides the school media specialist with an overview of graphic novels including definitions, challenges, benefits, helpful resources, curricular connections and collection development issues. The sources reflect the recent trends in the increasing popularity of graphic novels and their use and benefit in school media centers. Findings - Presents information on the definitions of graphic novels and the challenges and benefits specific to the school media center. Notes that while challenges exist, the benefits of including graphic novels in the school library media center are many, including engaging reluctant readers. Offers practical information for collection development and provides useful sources that serve many purposes. Practical implications - Offers background information for the school library media specialist about graphic novels. Includes advice and practical strategies for building a graphic novel collection in the school media center. Originality/value - This paper reflects recent trends toward increased interest in graphic novels and offers the school media specialist practical advice on how to best meet that growing interest by including graphic novels in the school media center.”

**Annotation:** The article, ostensibly a literature review, argues for the inclusion of graphic novels in libraries, particularly school libraries. Heaney includes a number of weighted excerpts from other articles—including blaming misogyny in comic books on the reader's misunderstanding—in an attempt to “sell” the medium. As a review of existing literature, the article falls short, as Heaney is using the format to propagandize. There are some
interesting points, when she discusses her experience integrating graphic novels into her library’s collection.

Search strategy: I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Keyword searching

Search string: ss comic(book)?
ss graphic(novel)?
s (s3 or s6) and librar?

Entry 6:


Abstract: “The article answers various questions related to graphic novels in school libraries. Part of the reluctance of librarians to stock their shelves with graphic novels may be based on the mistaken notion that a graphic novel is simply a comic book with a fancier name. Graphic novels share with comics the conventions for text and pictures but are not serial in nature. A graphic novel is a complete story and stands alone. It is a novel in the true sense of the word. It is published in book format, on quality paper and as such, is much more durable than a comic book. It can be a series of comic books bound together that tell a complete story.”

Annotation: The article discusses the reasons for including graphic novels in school libraries. Ireland spends a lot of time arguing the benefits of the graphic novel as well as its separation from traditional comic books (seemingly understood to be a collection of comic strips). The author also stresses the need for a careful system of title selection, before deciding graphic novels are perfect substitutes for traditional novels.

Search strategy: I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Keyword searching

**Abstract:** “Contribution to an issue devoted in part to part 2 of a special forum on comic books and graphic novels in US libraries. Few libraries maintain browsing collections of current comic books, and fewer still have created retrospective research collections. Summarises some of the major benefits of establishing a current comic book collection, then reviews the challenges of creating such a service. Describes the structure and history of the comic book industry. Gives an overview of major comic book genres, complete with examples of current titles in each genre. Raises concerns about age appropriate material. Provides examples of comic books aimed specifically at younger children and at teenagers, then explains the various methods libraries can use to acquire and maintain a comic book or graphic novel collection. Concludes with guidelines for selecting comic book titles for the library.”

**Annotation:** According to author Lavin, the purpose of this article is to educate librarians on modern comic books as so they know what to buy when it comes to both comic books and graphic novels, which are often collections of comic books. Lavin goes through a wide variety of titles, briefly explaining each. Lavin frequently mentions the importance of audience appropriate material. For selection help, he suggests librarians primarily seek out local comic book retailers.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Abstract:** “Libraries receiving the corpus of a comics publisher are presented with challenges, especially regarding preservation and access for special and circulating collections. Libraries must consider user research needs and collection relevance. Library literature is consulted and recommendations are made regarding bibliographic description, subject analysis and non-traditional practices.”

**Annotation:** The article discusses the process of the Portland State University Library cataloging its new collection of comic books and related materials from a local publisher, Dark Horse Comics. Markham writes about the decisions behind some of the cataloging techniques—primarily, a thorough catalog being less important than rapid availability. He also compares comic books to pornography a couple times, which is rather shocking.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search string:**

ss comic()book?
ss graphic()novel?
s (s3 or s6) and librar?

**Entry 9:**


**Abstract:** “Comic books are finally being recognized as a scholarly medium in literature, art, history, popular culture, and many other fields of study. Blanket disapproval of comic books, however, continues in all but a few academic libraries. Librarians do face philosophical and practical challenges to acquiring comic books, but it is both possible and desirable to do so. Valuable selection tools and Internet resources are examined, along with annotations of significant comic book creators.”

**Annotation:** The article discusses the growth of comic book collections in academic libraries. Matz somewhat concentrates his discussion on the growth at his own library, the University of Memphis. He also discusses the biases against comic books and some reasons for them. His argument for their inclusion is on literary terms, not as cultural
documents. He discusses evaluative resources and important comic book writers and artists, but does not make specific recommendations.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search string:** ss comic()book?
ss graphic()novel?
s (s3 or s6) and librar?

**Entry 10:**


**Abstract:** “This article addresses graphic novels and their growing popularity in academic libraries. Graphic novels are increasingly used as instructional resources, and they play an important role in supporting the recreational reading mission of academic libraries. The article will also tackle issues related to the cataloging and classification of graphic novels and discuss ways to use them for marketing and promotion of library services.”

**Annotation:** The article discusses the inclusion of graphic novels in academic libraries. The authors offer advice as how to promote graphic novels as pleasure reading for college students, arguing providing pleasure reading now needs to be encouraged in students. They also cover some general history of graphic novels in academic libraries and discuss the problems of cataloging the items. The academic benefits of graphic novels are also discussed.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Social SciSearch database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Database:** Social SciSearch [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching
Search string: ss graphic()novel? s s3 and librar?

Entry 11:


Abstract: “Describes how the term “graphic novel” includes fiction as well as non-fiction text with pictures—”comics” in book format. Discusses how in any subject area, studying a graphic novel can bring media literacy into the curriculum as students examine the medium itself.”

Annotation: This article makes a number of graphic novel recommendations. Schwarz makes these recommendations to cover a variety of topics, showing how graphic novels can be used for learning and discussion in any course. She occasionally makes activity recommendations for pre-college classrooms. She argues for the inclusion of graphic novels in educational settings and uses her examples to make her case.

Search strategy: I noticed a citation to this article in a different one. I checked the footnote, investigated the journal's credentials on Ulrich's and went ahead and found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: N/A

Method of Searching: Footnote chasing


Entry 12:


Abstract: “Contribution to an issue devoted in part to part 1 of a special forum on comic books and graphic novels in US libraries. The Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University is widely regarded as one of the finest special collections of its type in the world. Provides a capsule history of its development, a description of the collection's holdings, and an explanation of the methods used to acquire, classify, catalogue, and preserve the materials. Also discusses the Collection's Web site, including its unique Reading Room Index. Explores the importance of cataloguing as a catalyst for the development of comic book libraries.”
**Annotation:** The author discusses the history of the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University. Scott talks about the state of the collection over the years and its change in purpose—the university hesitantly accepted a donation to create the collection and now it has become the premier publicly accessible library of comic books in the country. Scott also discusses how computer cataloging changed how the collection could be cataloged, as well as its academic applications as popular culture research.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Database:** Library Literature and Information Science [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search string:**

- ss comic()book?
- ss graphic()novel?
- s (s3 or s6) and librar?

**Entry 13:**


**Abstract:** “Contribution to an issue devoted in part to part 1 of a special forum on comic books and graphic novels in US libraries. More than 50 libraries worldwide maintain significant special collections of comic books and comics related materials. Surveys 13 of these comic research libraries, comparing their holdings; collecting focus; cataloguing, classification, and preservation methods; and reference policies. A separate appendix provides a directory of major comic research libraries in the USA, plus listings for some foreign collections.”

**Annotation:** The article discusses the comic book research libraries around the United States (and some international ones). It discusses the history of their collections, their acquisition methods and their indexing techniques. Because of the subject (the physical libraries), Serchay does not discuss the validity of comic book libraries throughout the article... until the end, when he makes an absurd conclusion regarding the validity of comic books in libraries.

**Search strategy:** I searched the Library Literature and Information Science database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

**Abstract:** “Library collections are now providing materials other than books to their customers. The number of libraries that have a varied range of materials in their collections increases every day. Special collections of a variety of non-book materials can now be found in any library around the world, not only in those directed to the needs of researchers or scholars working in very limited fields. Comic books are now becoming a part of many public library collections. In Brazil, public libraries are organizing special branches or departments for comic books, calling them Gibitecas. The reasons for public libraries to collect comic books are discussed. The range of motives that compel Brazilian librarians to provide comic books to their customers are reviewed. In addition, the difficulties of collecting and disseminating comic books are analyzed, with special attention paid to the characteristics of comic book publishing.”

**Annotation:** The article discusses the realities of introducing comic books as a special collection in Brazilian libraries. Vergueiro gives some background on the problems facing the Brazilian libraries, but decides if patrons want comic books, they should be provided them. He goes on to discuss the reasons why comic books have not been library fixtures, then talks about the largest comic book library collections in Brazil.

**Search strategy:** I searched Google Scholar for the keywords and looking through the results until I found the article, on the the sixth page. I chose it because I thought international discussion would be interesting. Google Scholar provided the full text of the article.

**Entry 15:**

Abstract: “This study examines the extent to which ARL academic libraries collect graphic novels. Using a core list of 176 titles developed from winners of major comics industry awards and a library-focused “best of” list, the holdings of 111 ARL academic libraries were searched using the libraries’ online catalogs. Results suggest that most of the libraries studied do not aggressively collect graphic novels. Also examined were associations between date of publication, prior serialization, overall collection size, monograph budget, and ARL ranking and graphic novel holdings. To better serve scholarly research in this area of increasing interest, libraries will need to reexamine their collecting policies.”

Annotation: The article discusses the place of graphic novels in academic research libraries. Wagner briefly talks about the kinds of graphic novels (and their relation to comic books) then presents the findings of her investigation. She compared the holdings of various research libraries, using award-winning graphic novels as the criteria. She discusses the results and suggests methods of graphic novel collection building. She does not, however, break out her findings into genre, which would have been telling.

Search strategy: I searched the Social SciSearch database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: Social SciSearch [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Keyword searching

Search string: ss graphic(novel)? s s3 and librar?

Entry 16:


Abstract: “Academic libraries supporting education and library science programs collect juvenile literature to support courses that teach students to evaluate and use books with children and teenagers. Graphic novels have not only become popular with teens but also are being frequently discussed in both the education and library literature. This paper discusses the literature on graphic novels for teens, explores the extent to which academic libraries supporting education and library science programs collect graphic novels for teens, and concludes that academic librarians responsible for juvenile collections should evaluate their graphic novel holdings and begin actively collecting graphic novels for teens.”
Annotation: The article discusses graphic novels in the collections of higher education libraries at schools offering degrees in teaching and library science. The authors posit students in these programs will need access to such titles, as they are becoming more popular as educational tools and library holdings. The authors investigated the holdings of a number of such libraries, comparing their collections to a list of graphic novels for teens. Not only did they find the libraries generally lacking in graphic novel development, many libraries need to reconsider their collection development for juvenile literature in general.

Search strategy: I searched the Social SciSearch database because it contains articles about libraries. It was my first search in the database on this topic, so I searched by keyword. I found the article itself via the Hagerty Library’s e-journal resources.

Database: Social SciSearch [Dialog]

Method of Searching: Keyword searching

Search string: ss graphic()novel?
s s3 and librar?
Conclusion and Personal Statement

I chose this topic after touring a library branch and noticing the wide variety of comic books and graphic novels they carried. They had some in the children's section, they had a teen section and then they had an adult section. I asked the librarian how much thought they put into the selections and she implied not much.

Libraries do not only provide popular prose titles, they make selections. But with graphic novels and collections of comic books, it seemed they simply bought whatever was popular, without thought of quality or content.

My review of the scholarly literature did nothing to dissuade me from that opinion. With the exception of the special collections, where librarians have turned comic book cataloging into a specialty, no one seems to consider how graphic novels and comic books should be included in a library collection.

Most of the articles refer to non-scholarly trade journals and book reviews; there is no scholarly look at how these items are performing in libraries and how they should be performing. The suggestion for graphic novels as a way to get college students to read is an interesting one, but is the solution to young adults not reading for pleasure to give them materials with less words to read.

A friend of mine owns a comic book shop and I discussed this project with him. No librarians have ever asked him for assistance in selecting materials, as a couple articles said was essential for a good collection.

My biggest question concerns quality and collection development. If the library is not treating comic books as a special item—i.e. they are not only offering special comics—should the collection development just be the most popular items currently available, regardless of quality? All of the articles recommending specific titles recommend them based on an implication of quality.

The comic books and graphic novels in greatest demand will probably those with the least literary quality, which seems to me to be confirming all the disparaging things librarians said about the medium from the 1930s to the 1970s.

There just does not seem to be a lot of thought put into what comics should be in libraries and I was surprised. It seems like, for all the “acceptance,” the medium still is not taken seriously.