

Connections 2010 Abstract

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Abstract Title: Slighting certain kinds of readers: Searching for comic book and graphic readers in Library and Information Science Literature

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Abstract:

Wayne Wiegand in his widely cited article “Out of Sight, Out of Mind”, alludes to the tradition in librarianship of “slighting certain kinds of reading” (1997, 314). One of these kinds of reading involves comic books, a material that was attacked by librarians, educators and intellectuals based on issues of aesthetics and quality. Thus this attack was focused on the texts and their possible effects on readers. However, Wiegand points to the lack of information about these readers as a problem that sustained the pejorative behaviour by library professionals. He says, “we have never bothered to investigate seriously why people want to read them” (p.314). Nowadays, comic books and graphic novels are immersed in a complex process towards general acceptance as a literary form. Although this movement is not new, librarians are perceived as participating actively and positively in this new process. Graphic novels are reviewed in library journals, library programs are built around these materials, and comics are a key material to attract to the library the always evasive and unpredictable teenage population. However, our knowledge about the readers of these materials is still limited.

As part of my doctoral work, I have examined recent works about comic books and graphic novels in libraries in search for the reader. Despite the plethora of materials being published lately that analyzes the use and roles of comic books and graphic novels in libraries, readers tend to be a minor topic, explored in a superficial manner and mostly supported by anecdotal evidence. I have focused my analysis on Clare Snowball’s research (2008, 2007, 2005) about teenagers, libraries and graphic novels and three professional works: Lyga and Lyga’s *Graphic novels in your media center: A definitive guide* (2004), Brenner’s *Understanding manga and anime* (2007), and Serchay’s *The librarian’s guide to graphic novels for children and tweens* (2008). These three publications offer librarians information, tools, and ideas to select and acquire comic books and graphic novels as well as related program activities for the libraries which use those materials. However, their discussions about readers (or fans) of comic books are utilitarian and do not explore reasons behind the readers’ attraction for comic books, especially from the perspective of readers themselves. Snowball’s work presents a more ambivalent discourse. Although in Library and Information Science literature graphic novels and teenagers seem to be naturally drawn to each other, Snowball’s research has already challenged the notion that all teenagers are familiar with and like graphic novels. However, some of her work also perpetuates the connection between graphic novels and reluctant readers.

The situation resulting of this analysis indicates that the lack of research Wiegand pointed to in 1997 is still present. Comic books are a rich, diverse and multilayered reading material that offers works for almost any kind of reader: reluctant, visual, avid, or genre-focused. Despite this, comic book readers are still presented as reluctant or poor readers who need these materials as literacy tools or bridges towards traditional or canonical literature.

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