

From virus to bait: comic books, graphic novels, and their readers in Library Science professional literature (2000-2004)

Lucia Cedeira Serantes
Ph.D. candidate
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
The University of Western Ontario

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 in terms similar to those previously used for dime novels and pulp fiction. The remarks against these materials were mainly based on issues of aesthetics and quality. Thus the debate was focused on the texts and their possible effects on readers. However, Wiegand points to the lack of information about those readers as a problem that sustained pejorative behaviour by library professionals. He says, "we have never bothered to investigate seriously why people want to read them" (314). Comic book readers were and are part of this group of readers that are not being studied, even though currently the form itself, comic books and graphic novels, are part of library collections. In order to balance this lack of knowledge, in recent years scholars in Library Science and other disciplines have shown an interest in past and present librarians' attitudes towards comic books and their readers (Ellis & Highsmith 2000; Horner 2006; Nyberg 2002; Steele 2005; Tilley 2007). The goal of this research project is to contribute to this body of literature concentrating on the analysis of the way librarians are constructing comic books and their readers in the library professional literature from 2000 to 2004.

The design of this project is inspired by the approach previously employed by Ellis and Highsmith (2000). First, I have situated and summarized librarians' historical discourses about comic books, both positive and negative. Second, using the databases LISA and Library Literature, I have searched for articles about comic books and graphic novels in libraries. I focused my search on the following professional journals: *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, *Voice of Youth Advocates*, *Young Adult Library Services*, *School Library Journal*, *Children and Libraries*, *Knowledge Quest*, and *Library Media Connection*. The selection of these journals is based on the prominent use of comic books and graphic novels in public and school libraries as well as with youth. Also, in these environments, librarians are still forced to justify the value and interest of these materials, revealing in the process past and present discourses around comic books. Ellis and Highsmith (2000) did not use a specific approach for the analysis of the articles; for this project, I have adopted Gee's (2005) approach to discourse analysis. Gee identifies seven building tasks that help to single out the connected components of a certain situation where language is in use. These tasks are: significance, activities, roles or identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems and forms of knowledge (2005, 97). The situation in this project is defined as a sample of articles offering guidance and information about graphic novels for the library community.

Discourse analysis should, among other objectives, contribute to "important issues and problems in some 'applied' area (e.g. education)." (Gee 2005, 8) I examined these articles focusing primarily on three topics: the discourse about the medium itself, (i.e. definition, content, and main characteristics); the role of graphic novels in libraries; and the readers of graphic novels, especially the attributes ascribed to them. A challenge encountered early on in the analytical process was locating clear and direct commentary about readers; it was most often embedded in the discourse about the texts.

The results of the analysis show that most of the historical discourses are still prevalent in current publications. Comic books are still constructed as literacy tools for reluctant and poor readers or as catalysts to grow an interest for traditional literature. A struggle still persists between presenting comics and their readers as sophisticated and complex and the need to justify their use in front of educational or library boards, and parents. An instance of this struggle is found in the description of comic book readers. They are often portrayed as immature, reluctant readers or non-readers, sometimes students with limited English proficiency who do not make friends or have difficulties integrating in the school community. Despite this faulty portrayal, most articles also recommend consulting with patrons to help with collection development and readers are described as interested and experts, in many situations more knowledgeable about the medium or new titles than the librarian.

Kat Kan's column "Graphically Speaking" published in the *Voice of Youth Advocates* emerged as a slightly different approach to both the medium and the readers since her analysis often goes beyond the validation discourse. Kan examines these materials like any other reading materials, pointing at how they might support the daily work of librarians and reading interests of potential library users. Finally, 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. This acceptance of graphic novels in libraries' collections means that libraries and librarians support and validate the cultural and reading tastes of the current generation. However, a reflection needs to be done about how this acceptance is implemented. This project contributes to the understanding of how librarians define and use graphic novels and to a future intervention in order to increase the awareness about the overall literary value of these materials.

References

- Gee, James Paul. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Ellis, Allen W., and Doug Highsmith. 2000. About face: Comic books in library literature. *Serials Review* 26, (2): 21-43.
- Horner, Emily C. 2006. Librarians' attitudes and perspectives regarding graphic novels. MSLS., Univ of NC at Chapel Hill.
- Nyberg, Amy Kiste. 2002. Poisoning children's culture: Comics and their critics. In *Scorned literature: Essays on the history and criticism of popular mass-produced fiction in America* eds. Lydia Cushman Schurman, Deidre Johnson. Vol. 75, 167-186. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Steele, Christopher J. 2005. "Why don't they read a good book instead?": Librarians and comic books, 1949-1955. MSLS, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Tilley, Carol L. 2007. Of nightingales and supermen: How youth services librarians responded to comics between the years 1938 and 1955. Ph.D., Indiana University.
- Wiegand, Wayne. 1997. Out of sight, out of mind: Why Don't we have any schools of library and reading studies? *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 38, (4): 314-26.