


## Book review: Comics and critical librarianship

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Piepmeier, Olivia & Grimm, Stephanie (2019, eds.) *Comics and critical librarianship: reframing the narrative in academic libraries*. Sacramento: Library Juice Press. ISBN: 9781634000802

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“Comic book cataloguing is frequently distinguished by its absences, those fields and descriptions left off bibliographic and authority records.”  
(p. 185)

I don't know how many UK academic libraries have comic or graphic novel collections (my own academic library certainly has a range available), these mediums are perhaps more readily found in public libraries unless specifically curated for research or teaching purposes, but from what I have learnt from this book they can also be used to help represent a more diverse population in the library than some of the books on our shelves.

The idea for the book stemmed from a session one of the editors attended at the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2017 at Baltimore, Maryland. The session she attended was about using comics within information literacy training, helping new students become more comfortable with asking questions. Thus, the idea for a volume on comics and librarianship was born. It should be noted that all the contributors are based in the US or Canada.

There is only one chapter on cataloguing comics sadly (from my point of view), but as the book encompasses a wide approach to comics and academic libraries this is not surprising. There are sections on the basics, collecting, organising, teaching and reaching; with chapters looking at representation, stereotyping, information literacy, exhibitions, censorship and empowering workshops, etc. they appear to have included something for everyone.

The 'cataloguing' chapter is not a basic 'how to' – you can find information elsewhere about that after all, but through the description of a project, the authors Liz Adams and Rich Murray explore the issue of inclusive cataloguing and the problems arriving from limitations with LCSH. “Apocalyptic comics, women detectives, and the many faces of

Batgirl: creating more inclusive comic records through flexible cataloguing practices” looks at the Edwin and Terry Murray Collection held at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, at Duke University. This is a large collection of 3500 titles, with 50,000 issues, and when it was originally acquired it was catalogued archivally with many parts grouped together in boxes under one title. This meant it was near impossible to search for and locate individual issues; later on, it was decided to catalogue each title individually.

There is a Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) manual instruction sheet for cataloguing comics (H1430) and at the time of the book’s publication it was quite limiting in what headings could be applied to records for comics. This sheet was subsequently updated in 2022, providing special provisions for increased subject access to fictional comics (bringing into scope some of the practices utilised by the authors). Prior to this update, for the Silver and Golden Age superhero comics that comprised the majority of the collection being discussed they would predominantly have only been able to add the heading “Comic books, strips, etc.” which would not help in differentiating individual issues.

“Cataloguers thus not only lose opportunities to disambiguate but also to have discussions about representation of characters who are not cisgender, heterosexual white men, and to situate these characters and comics in the world(s) in which they were created.” (p. 188)

At the time the inability to add headings for most characters meant that Harley Quinn was excluded from having a subject heading on her self-titled series, although it was possible to add the supporting characters Batman and the Joker, who did have headings. In approaching their collection the authors of this chapter made the decision to ignore the instructions of H1430 (at that time) stating that headings should not be added for fictional characters, believing that subject access was the only way to provide access. They also broadened thematic access and used genre headings which had more detailed headings available for comics.

This chapter demonstrated the tension for cataloguers between accurately sticking to the rules versus making items accessible to library users. Ultimately the path they followed was more time-consuming and sidestepped some rules but opened up the collection to wider audiences with better searching and contextualisation. It appears they weren’t alone in finding the approach to cataloguing comics limiting as the updating of H1430 demonstrates.

Inherent in the limited recommendations for fictional characters was the lack of representation for those that weren’t white, cisgendered, heterosexual male characters.

In 1954 the Comics Code Authority brought in criteria censoring elements of sex, violence, horror, and moral ambiguity – mainstream comics needed this seal of approval for successful distribution, advertising and sale but as a result an

underground movement of comics (styled as 'comix') developed. A chapter by Kamaria Hatcher discusses independent comics and the significance of the diverse authorship that resulted, noting that: "...the presence of diverse narratives in the media has specific benefits, and the lack of it does specific harm." (p. 22). Hatcher also discusses the positive empathetic affect having access to multiple diverse perspectives has (as embodied in a wide range of comics).

Several chapters focus on the benefits of curating comic collections to better reflect their students or patrons. Callison, Sinclair & Bak discuss the Mazinbiige Indigenous Graphic Novel Collection at the University of Manitoba – which is the first ever indigenous graphic novel collection in an academic library and was developed to "...inspire critical discussion about representations of Indigenous people..." (p. 47) as well as to support relevant research and teaching. They emphasise the benefit of telling stories in a different way and how comics can provide a different emotional understanding to a subject alongside an academic text. Interestingly they note the difficulties that arose for the acquisitions team in acquiring some of the material, which was often from a small print run, by independent artists/authors, or historically rare.

There are chapters on African American comics, Afrofuturist comics and South Asian comics, and chapters exploring representations of gender and sexuality. Some of these collections are housed within the main library space and some occupy space within Special Collections. Descartes & Johnson explore feminist curating and the principles of intersectionality within the context of a specific exhibition, as well as more widely. They reference "...queer resistance to institutional categorization within academic libraries." (p. 338) as written about by Emily Drabinski and note that "Queering classifications acknowledges that truths and identities are ever-evolving, multi-layered and individualistic." (p.338) Their displays avoided using 'rigid classifications' and were installed to be site-specific, changing to reflect whichever space they were held in, with multiple collaborations.

I would recommend this book to broaden your understanding of the use and value of comics and graphic novels within a library setting, and to highlight the role they can play in bringing diverse representation into libraries. Although there is only one 'cataloguing' chapter it makes a lot of valuable points. This book would be ideal to share with all your library colleagues – particularly those involved in collection management, information literacy and EDI work.