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This paper surveys the attitudes of librarians towards efforts to restrict and censor comic books in the period from 1949-1955. This period includes the years leading up to and just beyond the creation of the Comics Code in 1954, an event that censored comic books determined to be obscene.

The analysis finds that librarians in the late 1940s and early 1950s were divided over exactly how to approach the issue of comic books and children. Part of this ambivalence stemmed from the inconclusive research regarding relationship between violent comic books and juvenile delinquency. Moreover, the anti-censorship position that is fundamental to librarianship further complicated the actions of librarians. The study concludes that librarians were no better or worse than other cultural ambassadors of the era in their reaction to comic books.

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“Why *don't* they read a good book instead?": Librarians and Comic Books, 1949-1955

by  
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## Introduction

Michigan State University librarian Randall Scott once mentioned to a retired professor that he was head cataloger at the largest comic book repository in the United States. The professor responded, “That’s interesting. My first job as a student library assistant had to do with comics. I was the one who had to go through the newspapers every morning and rip out the comics, before the papers could be put out in the reading room.”<sup>1</sup> Much had changed in the cultural appraisal of comics when Scott wrote his seminal book, *Comics Librarianship*, in 1990; much more has changed in the fifteen years since that book was published. Perennially dismissed as crude, obscene, and anti-intellectual, comic books are at long last making their way into public and academic repositories around the country. Librarians have led the charge, arguing successfully that comics-related materials appeal to young patrons, reluctant readers, and a readership reared on both word and image.

Such a widespread appeal, however, was not always the case. From the innately reductive coinage of the form’s name—“comics” were originally called such because their content consisted of sight gags, punch lines, and other elements borrowed from the Vaudeville era—to the critical oversight of its historical importance, comics is perhaps the most maligned medium in American history. To be fair, all new media—the novel, film, television—have been met with skepticism and contempt by educators, academics, and cultural watchdogs. However, each of these forms has succeeded in shedding the

mantle of triviality. Comics, on the other hand, continue to be downgraded to children's literature, isolated in the scholarly community as a subgenre of cultural studies, or ignored altogether.

The irony of this phenomenon is that, while comics have been scorned by the cultural elite, the medium has historically been, and continues to be, a wildly popular literary form, particularly among children. No better example of this contradiction exists than in the 1940s and 1950s, a decade in which comics reached their highest popularity and met their most intense vilification. Until graphic novels rose to prominence, the dominant mode of comics storytelling existed in the form of the comic book. An extension of the comic strip, which first appeared in newspapers around the turn of the century as a means of promoting color ink,<sup>2</sup> the comic book arose from stories in science fiction pulp magazines, which contained fantastic and lurid plotlines. As Bradford W. Wright succinctly puts the shift from comic strips to comic books in his indispensable history of the comic book, *Comic Book Nation*, "humor was giving way to crime-fighting."<sup>3</sup> Many of the comic books created in this, the "Golden Age" of comics—including *Action Comics* (starring Superman), *Detective Comics* (starring the Batman), and *Whiz Comics* (starring Captain Marvel)—have carved an indelible image on the cultural consciousness and featured characters that continue to dominate the comics industry.

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The ascendance of comics was undoubtedly supported by the industry’s largest readership base, teenage males. To this end, following World War II the industry began to cater its storylines to young American readers as a conduit for postwar propaganda, ignoring the older audiences that had read and enjoyed the comic strips as they appeared in early newspapers. The illustrative technique had wearied more savvy readers as well; the need to shrink images to fit 8x10 pulp paper posed a practical obstacle to comic book artists, resulting in the need to focus less on detail and more on iconic representations. Many aesthetes considered this style crude, further eroding the respect of comics by the adult readers. The trend towards a juvenile readership had consolidated by the late 1950s, when obscenity laws decreed by Congress further stymied the art of comic making.

Much has been written about the culture of paranoia that was cultivated in the 1950s. The 1950s saw assaults on all major forms of media: books, movies, television, radio, and comics. Much of the criticism stemmed from an assertion that the subject matter of this media proved harmful to children. Gilbert (1985) argues that much of the anxiety derived from the preponderance of delinquent acts among children who were from middle class families; in other words, “no longer was [juvenile delinquency] confined to slum or immigrant families.”<sup>6</sup> Parents and educators felt their grip loosening on an increasingly empowered generation of young consumers, whom the entertainment industry intentionally courted.

Comic books were the most popular commodity for children in the 1950s. Within this billion-dollar industry, the publisher EC comics was king. The EC comics line also contained some of the industry’s most morally-dubious titles, including *Weird Science*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *Crime Does not Pay*, and *Crime SuspenStories*. Critics argued that these comic books glorified violence, cultivated anti-authoritarian sentiment, and corrupted the minds of its most avid readership, children. With such notoriety and popularity, It comes as no surprise, then, that EC was the object of the most fervent attack on comic books in the era. The most vocal assailant was Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist whose 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* drew a compelling—if flawed—relationship between juvenile delinquency and comic book readership. *Seduction of the Innocent* was a runaway hit, leading to published excerpts in *Parents* magazine and inspiring a successful lecture circuit for Wertham.

*Seduction of the Innocent* has been credited with compelling the United States Senate to take note of this alleged culture of violence and its effect on children. A Senate

subcommittee was formed in 1954 to investigate the link, if any, between comic books and crimes committed by children. The result of the inquiry took the form not of censorship, but of regulation: the Comics Code was established by comics publishers in 1954 and helped usher in a new era of a less violent—and, some would argue, less compelling—comic book market.

The traditional history pits Wertham and the Senate against the William Gaines, publisher of EC Comics, and his comic book imprint. Gilbert claims, however, that the entire cultural infrastructure of United States fell prey to this culture of paranoia: “During the 1950s, there were a great number of other incidents suggesting the strength of popular assertions of a link between delinquency and the media, including radio debates, popular books and articles, and a host of state and municipal laws barring graphic violence in films and published material.”<sup>7</sup> Many of the “incidents” of which Gilbert speaks come from our own profession, librarianship. Libraries have historically maintained an uneasy relationship with popular materials and their readership. Benjamin Franklin’s Free Library of Philadelphia sought to bring books to the masses, albeit under the rubric of their usefulness, not as a facilitator of leisure. Garrison (2003) acknowledges that “all institutions...perpetuate their power by disseminating their own cultural values, and this is true even in political democracies.”<sup>8</sup> Libraries are no exception.

In 1953, the ALA drafted a strong statement against censorship. However, the reality was that the war against comics was fought at the local level. Many school and public librarians asserted that comic books were not a bad influence on children. Many more argued the opposite. Still even others reluctantly accepted the popularity of comic books and sought to incorporate them into collection development policies. In short, the

reaction among librarians in the 1950s towards comic books was diverse, and an analysis of these attitudes warrants greater scrutiny. It is this analysis that this paper seeks to consider.

My research will focus on a specific period, 1949-1955. While this sort of selectivity will forever remain innately arbitrary, I am most interested in the ideas among librarians that either challenged or reinforced the skepticism over comics that ultimately led to the creations of the Comics Code in 1954. I will analyze specific comments regarding comics, philosophies regarding children's librarianship, influential studies from outside the field, and other literature leading up to this seminal moment in the history of comics. I believe the literature will reveal a fractured, fervent debate over comic books that reflects the larger cultural discourse of the era.

For the sake of specificity, I will provide some definitions of terminology that will appear in the subsequent research:

**comics:** the medium, defined as a series of images presented sequentially for the purpose of telling a story. Comics, as Scott McCloud puts it, is “a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images.”<sup>1</sup> The word “comics” looks plural but takes a singular verb, much like the term “series.” “Comics” is also used informally to encompass all forms of the comics medium, including comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels.

**comic book:** a serial told in comic form, normally taking the shape of a tabloid magazine. Informally, comic books are referred to as “comics” by many of the professionals surveyed in the following research. To avoid confusion in my own

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<sup>1</sup> *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 6.



analysis, however, I have tried to hew rigorously to the term “comic book” when discussing the serialized comics of the era.

## **Literature Review**

The following discusses three major areas concerning the role of comics in libraries. I will first survey the topic that most directly concerns my research, comics librarianship. I will then review the literature written about the history of libraries and the role of censorship in libraries. Finally, I will attempt to place comics within the larger historical discourse of American popular culture.

To date there has been only one historiography of comic books in library literature. Allen and Highsmith (2000) surveyed the history of librarians’ attitudes towards comic books as they appeared in library literature, decade by decade. The authors searched both print and electronic editions of *Library Literature*, using the term “comic books” and its variants (i.e. “comics,” “children’s periodicals,” the LC subject heading “Comic books, strips, etc.”). According to the authors, the first known instance of a comics-related article that appeared in the index came from 1940 (under the subject heading “Children’s Periodicals – Bibliography”) and continued to the date of the study. The authors found that, with a few exceptions, librarians perceived comic books at best with a resigned acknowledgement of their popularity and at worst active hostility. Beginning in the 1960s was a movement towards mitigating the library’s position on comic books, with many librarians advocating comics-specific collection policies. With the emergence of the graphic novel as the dominant mode of comics storytelling, Allen and Highsmith conclude that librarians gradually became more accepting of comics.

Recent articles indexed in *Library Literature* suggest that “few writers spend much time overtly advocating or justifying their pro-comics positions.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, librarians write about practical issues such as comics-centered collection building policies. The authors attribute this shift in philosophy to a number of factors, including “a more democratic, less elitist ethic,” the number of working professionals who grew up reading comic books, the elevated status of popular culture materials, and the popularity of the graphic novel.<sup>10</sup>

Allen and Highsmith’s article provides a useful survey of what librarians were writing and, continue to write, about comics. The authors cite the paucity of comics-related articles written in the first half of the 1950s as reason for their admittedly superficial analysis. An initial scan of the library literature of that period reveals otherwise; over thirty articles appear that deal with child reading habits in general and over thirty articles that consider comics in particular. In short, more analysis is required to understand this important period in full.

Furthermore, Allen and Highsmith’s methodology could be expanded and improved upon. By restricting their literature search to articles that only specifically mention comics, they fail to reconstruct the *zeitgeist* in which librarians were debating—or, significantly, perhaps *not* debating—the value of comics. Articles that do not directly address the issue of comics in libraries should not be ignored; rather, the absence of that issue might reveal critical information regarding the priorities of many librarians in the 1950s.

With the exception of Allen and Highsmith’s flawed study, no major analysis of historical attitudes of librarians towards comics has come from within the industry. Most

of the “scholarship” on this subject comes in the form of unsubstantiated anecdotes that invariably portray librarians and academics as ignorantly hostile towards the comic book as a worthy cultural and intellectual pursuit. In library journals, these stories generally occur at the beginning of an article as a sort of an ice-breaker to alert readers—generally other librarians—to the sort of environment with which they must contend. The article then moves onto more practical matters, such as the proper way to build a comic book collection for a library, or how to reach out to reluctant readers with comic books.<sup>11</sup> For example, as part of a special issue of *Serials Review* devoted to comics-related issues, Griffin (1998) outlines a glossary to help librarians speak knowledgably and intelligibly about comics; terms include “panel,” “splash page,” and “independent comics.”<sup>12</sup>

While for practicing librarians these articles prove invaluable, an historical analysis of comics in libraries (or their absence) never moves beyond a general identification of the historical denigration of comic books. Consider, for example, the above remarks of Randall W. Scott that open his indispensable book *Comics Librarianship: A Handbook*. I do not dispute the validity of Scott’s account. However, more analysis is required to decide if policies to censor comics materials were culturally embedded or merely the work of one woefully misguided professional.

As mentioned above, libraries have had little to say about the part comics have historically played in their collection policies. Furthermore, a more general critique of historical practices in libraries is not a popular issue in scholarly literature. One can attribute this to a number of reasons. Librarians as professionals tend to like literature that offers real-world advice that directly relates to their daily operations—hence, the multitude of graphic novel collection guides. Moreover, the scholarly research conducted

in the field focuses more on user studies and models, research that tends to ignore the larger historical factors that may have informed previous research. As a result, relatively few library journals provide forums for critiques of library history.

However, some librarians have acknowledged this omission. In 1977 an ALA round table convened to discuss the efforts the librarian profession were undertaking to analyze the history of its practices. The following year, Phyllis Dain, one of the members of that round table, reiterated her position that library scholarship was not performing enough self-criticism of its procedures. Inspired by the movement known as “New History,” which sought to interpret history through the lens of social science theory and from the perspective of minority groups, Dain argued that librarianship was far from apolitical. Using an method of inquiry similar to those of the New or “revisionist” historians, Dain called for her colleagues “to build interpretations that integrate the particular within the general and that will tell us what happens and why, rather than what we imagine to have happened or wish would have happened.”<sup>13</sup> Library scholarship has always oscillated between two dominant camps: the practicality of case studies and the abstraction of communication theory. Critiques of previous research, which are found universally in articles in the form of the literature review, tend to cite a failure of methodology than a failure of circumstance as the reason for dated results.

Much of the useful theoretical writings about libraries came earlier in the twentieth century. German library historian Alfred Hessel (1955) takes an international approach to this early history of libraries. Hessel understands the American Library, which he calls the “people’s university,” as part of a tradition that began in Enlightenment-era philosophy and continued through the War of Independence.<sup>14</sup> Other

manifestations of this culture of liberalism include the public university and the public school system.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Dain's pronouncements and Hessel's writings, library history largely remains relegated to the pages of interdisciplinary journals, having made considerable inroads only into two peer-reviewed library journals, the aptly-named *Library History* and *Libraries & Culture* (formerly *JLH*). Much of the library-centered critique continues to come from outside the profession. Perhaps the most widely-cited book on library history, *Apostles of Culture*, was written by a historian, Dee Garrison. Garrison (2003) challenged the argument that librarians have throughout history stood as fervent advocates of popular culture. Looking at library policies towards popular materials in the early twentieth century, Garrison adopted a more nuanced stance on the issue of whether librarians inhibited or promoted undervalued and potentially subversive literature. Garrison acknowledges the position that "all institutions practice social control and that the upper-class orientation and administration of the public library should come as no surprise to anyone."<sup>16</sup> However, Garrison counters, "there is considerable evidence to suggest that a significant segment of library leadership during this period held a favorable view of mass culture and welcomed the dissolution of Victorian morality."<sup>17</sup> While the scope of Garrison's analysis stops at the 1920s, her general comments about the nature of librarianship in the face of political turmoil potentially informs a study of how librarians appraised and practiced their craft in the 1950s. First published in 1978, *Apostles of Culture* was hailed—and possibly lamented—in its 2003 reprint as "the most recent and authoritative account...of the American public library story in book-length form" (*APS*, xxix).

Where library historians have not gone, American studies scholars continue to go. In his introduction to a special issue devoted to writings about libraries, Augst (2001) underscores the role ritual plays in the everyday happenings at a library, and how that role is reflected in culture at large. Libraries, as Augst sees them, are places where “often lofty, ideological claims about the value of knowledge collide with seemingly mundane problems of access, management, and technology.”<sup>18</sup> Of interest in Augst’s historical research is that it implies that the library has always been a site of cultural negotiation, where librarians have struggled to supply material that is in some way useful while its public has struggled to declare its interests amongst the din of elitist criticism. His general comments about the cultural role of libraries in American culture provide a theoretical basis for more specific case studies.

Cullen’s book, *The Art of Democracy: A concise history of U.S. popular culture* (2002), analyzes popular culture from a social perspective. Cullen begins in Colonial America, where the so-called “folk” culture of the disparate groups that settled in New England, Pennsylvania, and Virginia were the earliest examples of an American popular culture. Cullen presents the popularity of the early novel as the first major conflict of interest between the elite members of society and the underclass. The elite dismissed the novel as inferior to books about philosophy and history. Like other historians, Cullen points out that this attitude partially stemmed from anger over the primary audience for the novel, women. The elite folded its mistrust of fiction into more deeply held prejudices about a woman’s role in society to create an all-out assault on leisure. Cullen presents this as a model that can be applied to every important cultural struggle in society, including the rise of movies, television, and the computer age.

Cullen only mentions libraries once in his book, but the comment he makes draws an insightful relationship between the library and mass production. Talking about Benjamin Franklin's founding library in colonial Philadelphia, Cullen remarks that the library, with its intentional courtship of the working class, "contributed dramatically to an expansion of literary culture: as more books became available, growing numbers of people read them, and publishers then increased production."<sup>19</sup> Not everyone was happy about this publishing boom, however: "Wealthy merchants referred to lending libraries as 'slop-shops of literature'."<sup>20</sup> This comment shows the joint effort of libraries and publishers to loosen the grip the upper class held on cultural expression, and the negative reaction of the elite toward that loss of control.

Most of the useful comics scholarship continues to come from the writings of a small but fervent subgroup of cultural studies scholars. William Savage's book (1990) assumes the most common form of comics scholarship, namely that written from a cultural studies perspective by a scholar whose topic is exclusively comics. Savage's unit of analysis are not comic books as such; more specifically, he uses comic books as texts through which to understand postwar American culture. However, in order to give his research context, he discusses the artists, writers, editors, and publishers who created those comics and key members of the public who responded to them. These include Frederic Wertham, who spearheaded the crusade against comics in the late 1940s and early 50s, the Senate subcommittee that investigated Wertham's assertion that crime and horror comic books contributed to juvenile delinquency, and the heads of the comic book industry that revised and strengthened efforts to censor comic books of questionable material in the formation of the Comics Code of 1954.

One strength of Savage's argument is his attempt to understand why crime and horror comic books were so wildly popular in the fifties. Savage argues that, in the period preceding World War II, the public accepted literature of escapism, in the form of costumed superheroes battling aliens and unequivocally villainous arch-enemies who possessed superhuman strength. Following the devastation of the war—particularly the unreality of the Jewish holocaust and nuclear holocaust in Japan—readers accepted that horror existed in the world.<sup>21</sup> In position, and ready for consumption, were crime and horror comics, which validated—and, some would argue, glorified—the grisly horrors of postwar America. Were children susceptible to this new attitude? Or was reading crime and horror comic books just a new form of escapism? Savage's thesis serves as a catalyst for a more concentrated analysis of comic book readers in the fifties.

Sabin (1993) offers a class critique regarding the comic strip:

Because Hearst, Pulitzer and other tycoons were using the strips to reach an ever-wider audience (often an immigrant audience), they were branded as 'low-class' and accused of 'dragging the press down.' This was closely tied to a religious objection: for many critics it was a point of principle that the sabbath was not meant for enjoying the Sunday funnies (the fact that immigrants happened to be non-Christians was not entirely unconnected). These complaints, inaudible at first but frowning much louder by the First World War, constituted the beginnings of articulated opposition to the strip medium in America, and left an unfortunate legacy for the future comic book industry.<sup>22</sup>

Sabin describes a culture of conflict that had gestated since the birth of the comics medium, emerging fully formed with the onset of McCarthy-era paranoia.

Peaches M. Henry's entry in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia* (2001) provides evidence that efforts to censor reading materials was an early challenge to collection policies in libraries, cresting in the 1940s and 1950s. Cold-war paranoia and the McCarthy-helmed investigations into so-called "un-American activities" gave credence



to efforts by parents, congressmen, and professionals to restrict and even ban books and periodicals for a variety of reasons, including vulgarity and political subversion. The ALA responded in 1939 by adopting a Library Bill of Rights, which declared that libraries should refrain from collecting books based on the writer's politics, race, religion, or nationality. In reality, however, many librarians refused to honor the edict, causing the ALA to revise and strengthen its stance on censorship in 1948 and 1953. School libraries, Henry argues, were particularly susceptible to the censorship strategies of parents, since their role has traditionally been folded into "a larger educational community whose goal is to mould young minds."<sup>23</sup>

Henry places censorship efforts in the 40s and 50s within the larger efforts to monitor perspectives that could undermine American foreign policy. The result, Henry implies, was not a safer nation, but one which restricted personal liberties and stunted creativity. Despite continued efforts by the ALA to fight censorship, many individual librarians in the McCarthy era chose to defy the organization's stance on censorship and joined the cultural watchdogs in the fight to ban perceived vulgar and subversive materials from their library's shelves. There is no mention of the role libraries played in the formulation of the Comics Code, but her analysis remains a good primer on censorship in American life.

As the above examples suggest, much of the criticism of early librarians claims that they were hostile towards new media and popular culture and tried to censor it. After a careful analysis of library literature, statistical analysis of library records, and published accounts from librarians and patrons, Johanningsmeier (2004) concludes that libraries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century "were sites of intense, Gramscian 'cultural

negotiation,' not places where librarians successfully exerted their hegemonic wills from above."<sup>24</sup> His unit of analysis is the periodical, the sheer abundance and variety of which caused librarians and other members of society to conclude that some periodicals were "good," and some were "bad."<sup>25</sup> Also like comic books, a hierarchy of quality developed, where libraries collected magazines, newspapers, and journals with the "widespread belief (or hope)...that patrons would gradually move up an imaginary, evolutionary ladder of reading materials from the sensational and ephemeral to the serious."<sup>26</sup> While libraries stopped short of banning the wildly popular periodicals, some did adopt policies to discourage their use, like placing periodical reading rooms on the top floor or isolating periodical readers from the other library users. Johanningsmeier's methodology is sound and his findings are eerily similar to those regarding attitudes towards comic books in the 1950s.

### **Library Literature about comics, 1949-1955**

The most obvious observation one draws when looking at comics-related discourse among librarians of this period is that the issue dealt exclusively with the effect of comic books on children. The popularity of comic books among adult readers is never mentioned by librarians. The general consensus was that adults read comic strips and children read comic books. As a result, there was a qualitative discrepancy between strips and comic books. A teacher who participated in a panel discussion of *Seduction of the Innocent* voiced this distinction:

[B]oys and girls are the chief readers of this kind of comic that emphasizes crime. Adults, on the other hand, read comic strips in the newspapers and Sunday newspaper supplements that feature sports, animals, humor, and incidents of everyday living of the "average" American. For this sort of adult reading, violence is purposely minimized; the adult is "protected" from the more vicious

influences of crime comics.<sup>27</sup>

One children's illustrator interviewed in a 1951 issue of *Wilson Library Bulletin*, echoed this sentiment, waxing nostalgic about the comic strips on which he was reared; material that, in his opinion, opposes the "barrage of assembly line stuff directed toward children today....They are a far cry from the funny papers."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, no matter how seemingly "adult" the content, librarians maintained that the target audience for all comic books was children. Frederic Wertham's assertion that the comic book industry was "the greatest corrupter of children's minds in history" did little to abate the equation of all comic books as children's literature.<sup>29</sup> To draw such a broad qualitative distinction between comic strips and comic books suggests an innate skepticism of a new medium as much as consternation over a portion of that new medium's subject matter. Furthermore, to associate the comic book "problem" with children transformed it into an issue of control, an effort for which librarians, parents, and educators felt compelled to take action.

Exactly how, and to what extent, comic books should be challenged remained a subject of divisive debate in the years leading up to the establishment of the Comics Code. The range of positions were limited, however, running from open hostility to cautious acceptance. Nonetheless, no librarian in this era whole-heartedly endorsed comic books as a literary form on par with traditional literature. Even in her support of comic books as a gateway "to more complicated folk tales and hero tales and epics," librarian Elizabeth S. Margulis wondered with exasperation, "Why *don't* they read a good book instead?"<sup>30</sup>

Part of this ambivalence derived from the lack of conclusive evidence that comic books were bad for children. Other than Wertham, many psychiatrists, educators, librarians, and even comics readers had an opinion regarding the psychological effects of comic books. Margulis summarized these often contradictory positions as follows:

“There is absolutely no excuse for comics in any form.”

“They are an integral part of our American life.”

“They are very light entertainment and diversion.”<sup>31</sup>

In her own assessment of the research, Margaret E. Brady concluded that the literature regarding the effects of comic book-reading on children was inconclusive, arguing that “it is evident that to most young people comics are only temporary—exciting and entertaining in childhood, but likely to be outgrown as older and more important interests arise.”<sup>32</sup> On closer inspection, however, Brady’s use of value-added language—particularly her inclusion of the word “important”—suggests the deep prejudice among librarians regarding comic books. Marguerite Dieckhaus worried in 1949 if allowing children to “indulge their passions without guilt of hindrance” by reading comic books would lead to deviant behavior.<sup>33</sup> She continued, “This type [of group] is not fully understood by psychologists but there are reasons to believe that its value and validity may be as real as its dangers.”<sup>34</sup> However, she admitted, some children simply “read for fun.”<sup>35</sup> Dieckhaus’s conflicting statements underscore the ambivalent attitudes of librarians concerning comic books.

Apart from Wertham’s notorious—and, it must be added, hugely successful—studies, the psychological research conducted in the 1940s and ‘50s suggests reasons why librarians seemed unable to reach consensus on the effect of comic books on children. A much-cited study by Bender and Lourie in 1941 interviewed 75 at-risk youth who were

identified as avid comic book readers. Bender and Lourie found that comic books largely served as an emotional outlet for the troubled youth. The authors refuted the claim that comic book reading caused criminal behavior. The article closes with a surprisingly progressive comment: “The comics may be said to offer the same type of mental catharsis to its readers that Aristotle claimed was an attribute of the drama.”<sup>36</sup> Bender and Lourie encouraged parents to accept comic book reading as an integral part of childhood development. Also in 1941, R.L. Thorndike compared his father’s widely-used Thorndike Word List, a list of educational words, against the words used in a comic book. Thorndike concluded that comic books should be used by educators to lead children “to higher and better things.”<sup>37</sup> J.R. Cavanagh, Professor of Medicine at Georgetown University, conducted his own study in 1949, just as the debate over comic books was gaining steam. He suggested that “we stop trying to hold back the tide [of comic books’ popularity] with emotionalism and that we approach the problem realistically.”<sup>38</sup> Like Bender and Lourie, Cavanagh concluded that the “phantasy” of comic books helps sublimate the aggression that is a natural part of a child’s everyday life.<sup>39</sup> However, he does close with a modest checklist of elements that comic book publishers should avoid: a disrespect for the police, crimes committed against children, sexually suggestive material, and sensationalist advertising.<sup>40</sup> Also in 1949, a popular guide published by a Cincinnati group of educators in 1949 to help parents and librarians purge comic book collections of sex, crime, and slippery categories like “morbid emotionality,” served to confuse rather than enlighten librarians on the comic book controversy.<sup>41</sup>

Yet another issue that complicated librarians' attack on comic books was the specter of censorship. At the local level, no librarian endorsed censorship, but the rhetoric was more subdued than the anti-comics language. Margulis called efforts to censor comic books "not entirely satisfactory, as no prohibition is, since the outlawed books are dispensed under counters and the titles are changed from issue to issue to avoid bans."<sup>42</sup> Significantly, it is unclear if Margulis doubts the moral or merely the practical consequences of trying to censor comic books. Brady also responded to efforts to ban comic books, arguing that "[c]ensorship should be avoided."<sup>43</sup> The comments of Vancouver librarian Isabel McTavish illustrate the challenge of librarians to fight comic books in libraries without being branded as censors:

"Librarians are naturally reluctant to see censorship introduced at any level...so our belief is that should make books as easily obtainable as comics have been and that parents should take the initiative in bringing books into the home."<sup>44</sup>

Given the existence of these references to censorship, it is surprising that only one library journal, *Library Journal's Junior Libraries* supplement, reported on the creation of the Comics Code in 1954.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the "natural reluctance" McTavish speaks of helps to explain why even condemnations of comic books were measured in their opinion on censorship.

A survey of the theories of children's librarianship also reveals positions that may have mediated librarians' opinions of comic books. Speaking at a conference of school librarians in late 1949, Dieckhaus emphasized that foisting reading material on children serves to dissuade children from reading.<sup>46</sup> "Children will read and enjoy what they are interested in," argued Phyllis R. Fenner, an elementary school librarian from New York. "Surely, there is no harm in that."<sup>47</sup> Fenner took note of the relationship between

commercial and intellectual empowerment: “By letting children buy books for themselves once in awhile, even if the choice isn’t what the parent would want,” Fenner argues that children will learn to discriminate on their own.<sup>48</sup> One article from *Library Journal* in 1955 reported on a study in which a children’s librarian devised a survey to determine “what the children were reading and what they thought of the books they read.”<sup>49</sup> The article concluded that greater autonomy should be given to children regarding the operations of the library, namely in the areas of book selection and reading festivals.<sup>50</sup>

In competition with the theory that librarianship should not prescribe literature was a rooted commitment to the theory that reading habits should, in some way, imply usefulness. David Kaser has written on the role of utility that underpinned reading in the colonies: “Reading was viewed as more than a cultural pasttime; it was also a requisite tool for life.”<sup>51</sup> Books that circulated widely included the Bible, books on agriculture and farming, and law books. Thus reading was an activity practiced by all strata of colonial American society. This philosophy extended well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the advent of the novel was assaulted for inciting idle, useless thoughts in women, some of the same criticisms levied on comic books much later.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most important influences on librarians at the time was the anti-comics argument of Frederic Wertham, customized for the field of librarianship. A 1955 issue of *Wilson Library Bulletin* printed an address Wertham gave at the Free Library in Philadelphia in late 1954. The lecture provides a snapshot for Wertham’s persuasive and condemning rhetoric regarding comic books. “‘Childhood literature,’” Wertham said, “‘makes one think of something bright and cheerful and idyllic.’”<sup>53</sup> Wertham set out to

debunk that assumption, arguing that crime and horror comic books lead children to a host of moral lapses and even disabilities, such as one he called “*linear dyslexia*” (his emphasis).<sup>54</sup> Wertham did not blame children: “They did not ask for crime comic books,” Wertham says.<sup>55</sup> Rather, Wertham laid blame on parental neglect and the comic book industry, “the greatest corrupter of children’s (sic) minds in history.”<sup>56</sup> Unlike many other cultural critics of the time, who argued that children turned from traditional literature because of comic books’ inherent appeal, Wertham claimed that children have avoided traditional literature because comic books were actually impairing their ability to read “legitimate literature.”<sup>57</sup> He called this phenomenon “literary avitaminosis,” a term that many librarians probably did not understand but carries a scientific cachet. Wertham also appealed to the librarian’s progressive tendencies, claiming that a certain story “race-ridicules Negro children,” thereby teaching young readers racial discrimination.<sup>58</sup> Further appealing to librarians’ insistence on the importance of literacy, Wertham called reading “the greatest educational force that mankind has ever devised.”<sup>59</sup> Conversely, Wertham called comics “the greatest anti-educational force that man’s greed has ever concocted.”<sup>60</sup> Wertham tailored his singular blend of cultural critique, Marxist theory, and scientific inquiry to suggest that comic books were counteractive to every value librarians hold dear. In doing so, he demonstrated his ability to adopt his rhetoric to different groups with a diversity of concerns.

Frederic Wertham resurfaced in the *New York State Education* journal in 1955 to evaluate the success of the Comics Code had been a success. He declared, “I maintain that many comic books today are opiates and stimulants of a vicious variety.”<sup>61</sup> Wertham argued that, far from merely glorifying violence, comic books shill “the endless and



senseless exaltation of triviality.”<sup>62</sup> He also underscored the uncontrolled nature of reading that makes children susceptible to scenes romanticizing morally objectionable behavior.<sup>63</sup> Finally, Wertham returned to his assertion that the advertisements selling firecrackers and firearms between the stories were just as dangerous as the ostensible plot. All contributed to a culture of violence that was sold, literally and figuratively, to impressionable minds. Articles like these, distributed widely and in journals read by librarians, helped inform the opinions of librarians on comic books.

Comments published in library literature about comic books ranged from cautious optimism to open hostility. In remarks prepared for the New Mexico PTA in 1949, Margulis dismissed the controversy over comic books as “the comics bugaboo.”<sup>64</sup> She cited cost, variety, genuine youth appeal, the presence of pictures, and the forbidden pleasure of action as virtues of comic books.<sup>65</sup> Despite Margulis’s tentative support for comic books, her remarks do reveal what she considered weaknesses of comic books. For example, Margulis claimed that, while the preponderance of “crudely drawn” pictures require “little or no reading skill,” comic books can draw in readers who “can not read” or “lazy.”<sup>66</sup> Margulis found troubling about comic books of the time their “lurid emphasis on crime and sex;” physical ailments—namely, eyestrain and headaches—that result from looking at artwork that is “badly drawn and poorly printed so that the colors spill over the outlines;” and comic books’ corruption of classic literature.<sup>67</sup> Margulis thought that comic books material must be fought with “weapons”: “good books and parental attention.”<sup>68</sup>

Comic books were met with disdain not only from library professionals but also from academics. Ruth M. Jones, a professor of Library Science at University of Utah,

acknowledged the futility of trying “to keep this pictorial hash away from our youngsters.”<sup>69</sup> Like Margulis, Jones described the effort to draw children away from comic books in fighting language: “We decided our methods of attack were all wrong....”<sup>70</sup> She and her colleagues devised a summer reading contest to get children interested in traditional literature. Jones reported that the librarian in charge “discouraged books that were ‘too easy.’”<sup>71</sup> Jones’s case study suggests a growing effort of librarians of the time to compete with new forms of media for the attention of children.

Elizabeth Kuhlo Hunter, a school librarian from Illinois, was one professional persuaded by Wertham’s rhetoric concerning the danger of comic books on American youth. Hunter directed her readers to an article by Wertham published in a 1949 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature* entitled, “The Comics...very funny.”<sup>72</sup> Hunter called comic book reading a disease; however, unlike “chicken pox or measles...the severe case of comics often leaves a serious aftermath of disinterest and disability in other reading.”<sup>73</sup> Refuting the mitigated position that comic books vary in quality like all media, Hunter declared, “The antidote is not ‘good comics.’ There are *no* good comics.”<sup>74</sup> Like Margulis, Hunter cited the Classics line of comic books as an inadequate substitute for its more literary surrogate. Hunter’s solution to the popularity of comic books was “[r]eally funny books.”<sup>75</sup> She went so far as to draft a “sure cure” list of funny books for comic book readers.<sup>76</sup> Not only was Hunter openly hostile to the comic book phenomenon, but she failed to acknowledge the variety of subject matter that was published in comic book form in the late 40s and early 50s. In fact, the most popular—and notorious—comic books of that era were crime and horror titles, comic books that were not funny at all. Hunter’s reductive analysis of the comic book industry suggests that she was not in tune

with publishing trends of her day, choosing to rely on published anecdotes than her own research. The tone of Hunter's article is unequivocally contemptuous of the popularity of comic books, suggesting that not all librarians at the time were willing to debate the possibilities and drawbacks of a legion of young comic book readers.

Some librarians used comments from public intellectuals other than Wertham to support their own arguments about comic books. Brady attributed the invention of the comic book in 1932 to Harry I. Wildenberg, who, she claimed, "is genuinely sorry about it, and would personally like to see comic books abolished."<sup>77</sup> This remark was not cited and could not be confirmed; however, that Brady chose to include it in the introduction suggests an underlying prejudice of comic books despite the pretension of objectivity.

Like many of her colleagues, Brady structured her article using the binary categories of pro and con. She invoked the line shared by Wertham, that "[t]he increase in violence in juvenile delinquency has gone hand in hand with the increase in the distribution of comic books."<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, Brady cited research that claims comic books retard reading ability and cultivates "lazy readers," but also argues that "[r]eading of comic books teaches concentration."<sup>79</sup> (Brady followed this comment with no explanation, so it proves difficult to reconcile the seeming contradiction of these statements.) She argued that comic books serve as gateways to other literature, including folk stories and classic literature. While Brady objected to the "wild fantasy" of some comic book titles, she acknowledged that an " 'escape from reality' ...all of us need at times."<sup>80</sup> Finally, Brady contended that comic books help build valuable social skills, such as sharing and kindness to animals.<sup>81</sup> Like many of her peers, Brady's verdict on comic books is complicated. She agreed with the majority of educational professionals

that “the comic medium has its place in our educational field.”<sup>82</sup> However, she feared that “[e]xcessive comic book reading may be a symptom of disturbance.”<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, however, Brady believed that comic books could be used by librarians to achieve greater aims.

Dieckhaus also regarded comic books as a gateway to better literature. While the potential harmful effects of comic book reading gave her pause, she ultimately embraced comic books as a tool for reluctant readers—“heretical as it may seem.”<sup>84</sup> Dieckhaus believed that comic books contained “readableness” and posed a “lack of challenge” to children.<sup>85</sup> Dieckhaus failed to assess comic books on their own terms, but she did hold out hope for the medium as a tool for reading development.

An article in the October 1951 issue of *Wilson Library Bulletin* took a different approach to the simmering topic of comics, interviewing fifty illustrators of children’s books for their opinions about their opinions of comic books. The resulting article was a series of anecdotes that ran the gamut of reactions, from acceptance to skepticism to condemnation. One participant admitted that she “can’t really be quoted as having an opinion. I don’t really read them...[though] I am told that they are a deadly influence.”<sup>86</sup> Many of the reactions among the illustrators hewed to the line adopted by most adults that all comic books held a pernicious influence on children. However, an illustrator named Bernard Garbutt provided a more sophisticated analysis of the comic book’s role in the culture of violence that was believed to saturate American culture in the 1950s:

I think the menace you are combating is not much a comic book menace as such, but a menace expressed in much journalism all over the country—a menace of prejudice and cruelty. As to the comic books, they are a very fine medium which has been almost completely ruined by their content.<sup>87</sup>

In the end, however, Garbutt's comment was the exception. Summarizing the participants' comments, the author concluded that "good literature and fine illustrations are just as important to a child's diet as vitamins."<sup>88</sup> Perhaps children's illustrators felt uniquely threatened by the popularity of comic books and their distinct artwork. Whatever the reason, most of those interviewed spoke about ways to fight the comic book problem: cheaper children's books, parental guidance, and collection development policies that promoted literature whose subject matter aligned with what was found in comic books of the area. Significantly, not one participant gave the title of a comic book that particularly exemplified their position. This leads one to believe that their attitude was that all comic books, regardless of content, were contributing their part of the problem.

School librarian Winifred Vaughn adopted an interesting strategy to wean children off of comic books: know your enemy. Vaughn bought five comic books and displayed them in her library as a means of finding common ground with her young patrons. "I believe," Vaughn wrote, "that children sometimes need to identify with a strong person who is on the winning side, when so much of their lives are controlled by people who are more powerful than they."<sup>89</sup> She wrote that she won one boy's trust because of her ability to comment knowledgeably about comic book characters. Disdain, she argued, is not the answer:

A boy may ask, 'Have you got *The Cisco Kid*?' If you reply in a tone of horror, 'I never head of it! It must be on television—or a COMIC!' you have not made a very good start toward sending him happily off with a book of greater value.<sup>90</sup>

Vaughn appeared to have taken a more mitigated position on comic books. While she considered them as stepping stones to better literature, she avoided preaching about the

demoralizing influence of comic books. Instead, she chose to acknowledge the variety of comic book titles published, even if she ignored variations in quality.

In 1952, *The Michigan Librarian* joined the list of library journals that were using their pages as a forum for comics-related debate, or, in the case of Martha Boaz's article "The Comics – An Attack," for vitriol. Boaz characterized comic book readers as "addicts who devote around 30,000,000 hours to comics every month and spend \$72,000,000 a month on them."<sup>91</sup> Boaz did not cite her sources for these staggering statistics, but she suggested that the undeniable popularity of comics was occupying time that could be spent better elsewhere. Boaz forwent the "pro/con" argument of comics in favor of a strict dressing down of the medium, arguing that comic books develop "lazy, uncritical mental habits," their plots contain "little or no originality," and the use of slang language is "excessive."<sup>92</sup> The antidote to this "poison," Boaz said, "can be found in any library or good bookstore."<sup>93</sup> One interesting comment that Boaz made was that critics of comic books need to "furnish books better and more attractive than comic books," suggesting both the narrative and visual appeal of comic books.<sup>94</sup> Comic books were a billion-dollar industry by 1952, and their growing threat to traditional literature and media centers—like libraries—had educational professionals rallying for an all out dogfight to save the lives of their children. Yet another academic came out unequivocally against comic books in 1952. Elinor C. Saltus, teacher of Library Science at Butler University in Indiana, took a subjective position in her article "The Comics Aren't Good Enough," writing as a parent "getting ready to do battle and to fight for a cause."<sup>95</sup> In response to the argument for the educational value of comic books, Saltus quipped, "True enough, I will agree, if all we want for our children is for them to grow up equipped to

read road signs, recipes, and price tags.”<sup>96</sup> Saltus also challenged the opinion that comic books appeal to “the retarded reader”: “Let us remember which group is going to run our country, to make our scientific discoveries, to mold our public opinion.”<sup>97</sup> Saltus refined her position towards the end of her article, stating,

As far as comic books during out-of-school hours are concerned, I have no wish to interfere in the way people enjoy themselves....But I do object to having professional educators use their influential and powerful positions to put in our schools the cheapest, most inartistic, worthless form of literature in existence today.<sup>98</sup>

Saltus revisited some of the same criticisms of comic books that were levied by her predecessors. However, it is somewhat disturbing that an academic would allow personal emotions to inform her position on such an important matter. She quoted none of the studies that refuted or supported the educational value of comics, nor did she provide specific examples of low-quality comic book titles. Saltus used a broad brush to paint comic books as a dangerous medium.

High School librarian Esther Baker avoided sermonizing in favor of an assessment of comic book’s educational value. She first cited the importance of such a study: “Sales are approximately 60,000,000 a month and show no signs of declining. It is obvious that whether or not its influence is good or bad, the comic book is here to stay.”<sup>99</sup> She attempted to define an average reading level—sixth grade—and listed the range of subject matter covered in comic books: “adventure, love, family life, animals, and mysteries.”<sup>100</sup> (Conspicuously absent from this list are crime and horror comic books, which were among the most widely-read genres at the time.) Baker cited the usual advantages of comic books as literacy tools for poor or reluctant readers.<sup>101</sup> However, she went into greater detail than her predecessors by commenting on *how* comic books

can help readers from these groups. First, the “simple and direct” dialogue of comic books help with the “mechanics of reading.”<sup>102</sup> Second, according to Baker comic books contain “uncomplicated plots” that can help build reading comprehension.<sup>103</sup> Finally, the range of quality inherent in comic books can help teach a reader how to discriminate between “good and bad, but also good and mediocre.”<sup>104</sup> Baker cited the Cincinnati group’s evaluation of comic books, mentioned above, as a tool weeding collections of inappropriate materials.<sup>105</sup> Baker’s comments are flawed because she failed to acknowledge the subjectivity of quality. However, her closing assertion that comic books could be used “as supplementary material in the classroom” suggests an understanding of comic books not as a problem but as an opportunity.

Writing for *The Horn Book* in 1953, Robert Lewis Shayon expanded the competition of new media and literature to include television as well as comic books. Shayon argued that, rather than thinking of books as competing with new media such as television, “there *can be* an interlocking relationship between the book and the television screen.”<sup>106</sup> He held up as example of his theory the simultaneous popularity of television and comic books. “With all the rumor and outcry about television’s cutting into children’s reading,” Shayon wrote, “I think I have nowhere heard or read that the reading of Comics has decreased.”<sup>107</sup> Shayon attributed the growth in popularity of comic books to titles created around themes and characters “which had their origin exclusively on television; and those Comics which were originally Comics and were translated to television have inspired imitations.”<sup>108</sup> Shayon’s analysis predates the study of cross promotion by years. He also soundly endorsed comic book reading as actual reading, a position that we have not seen heretofore in library literature. Shayon seems to consider



quality independent of medium, directing parents to watch television with their children and encouraging parents “to guide children to a TV show.”<sup>109</sup> While Shayon’s progressivism was not normal in the 1950s, it is encouraging to encounter a more sophisticated position on new media in library literature.

In 1954, with the Senate hearings on media and juvenile delinquency taking shape, comic books were thrust into the spotlight and the most recognizable popular cultural form at the moment. Despite this increased attention on comic books on the national scene, much of the library literature of the period did not mention the comic book issue at all. However, a more general look at librarians’ shifting attitudes concerning young readers suggested an acknowledgement of the diversity of reading interests. Perhaps librarians felt that, with the imposition of the Comics Code, the comic book problem had been resolved. Whatever the reason, children’s librarianship at the time seems to have adopted a more liberal attitude toward children’s reading interests.

*Illinois Libraries* continued its coverage of comic books in American culture by publishing in 1955 of a radio transcription of school librarians, teachers, and academics discussing Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*. The editor reported that during the roundtable, Marie M. Hostetter, a professor of Library Science, “stressed the importance of this book to all adults interested in the reading of boys and girls and in their general welfare.”<sup>110</sup> The panel leader claimed that “*Booklist* recommends [*Seduction of the Innocent*] as a book for all who are genuinely interested in children and young people.”<sup>111</sup> He went on to argue that “the problem of suitability of comics...is not a new one,” citing the arrival of *Action Comic*’s debut of Superman in 1938 as the beginning not just of a new genre—dominated by superheroes—but of a cultural debate.<sup>112</sup> A high school

librarian said of comic book reading, “At best children waste money.”<sup>113</sup> One schoolteacher on the panel appeared to be won over by *Seduction of the Innocent*, agreeing with Wertham that “[i]ndeed, then are the *crime* comic books not actually *blueprints* for crime resulting in juvenile delinquency?”<sup>114</sup>

A *Junior Bookshelf* article felt compelled to ask, “in view of the baleful influence of the ‘Horror Comics,’ ... What should our children read?”<sup>115</sup> The answer, not surprisingly was literature that children disdainfully called, “a book with such small print and no pictures.”<sup>116</sup> On the mind of the author and her colleagues, again, was how to generate youth interest in traditional literature.

*Top of the News* asked “The Comics—What approach?” in a 1955 issue. The author reported on the Minnesota Public Library’s exhibition called “Rx for Comics,” in which comic books were displayed alongside traditional books.<sup>117</sup> Neither the specifics nor the success of the exhibition were discussed, but one of the librarians said of the overall message of the exhibition, “The cure lies not in isolation but rather in exposure to good books.”<sup>118</sup> The article also reported on a library in Akron, OH that sponsored Charles F. Murphy, chief enforcer of the Comics Code, to come speak as part of an event called “The impact of Comic Books on our Children.” Murphy encouraged attendees “to take individual responsibility for the successful enforcing of the code.”<sup>119</sup> The Cincinnati Committee’s *Evaluation of Comic Books* continued to be distributed widely into the mid-50s, with a report of one library in Texas implementing it to develop a rated list of comic books.<sup>120</sup> Many librarians saw the comic book controversy as an opportunity to promote their own comic-free collections. One librarian argued that the library was the perfect antidote to comic book reading: “If parents will just bring their

children in and let us work with them, I think they (children) will lose interest in comics.”<sup>121</sup>

An article in *Montana Libraries* did not mention comic books, but its author railed against the culture of science in the Cold War era. Rita McDonald argued that “creative imagination is the essential element in the intellectual equipment of the true scientist, and that fairy tales are the childhood stimulus to the quality.”<sup>122</sup> Speaking specifically about reading materials for children, “[W]e must bear in mind that the budding scientist needs not only books of science—he also needs fairy tales and a large variety of imaginative literature.”<sup>123</sup> McDonald was specifically making the case for science fiction and fantasy, its own historically-denigrated genre. However, her comments are useful because they give shape to an era in which utility was prized over creativity.. It is no surprise that comic books were dismissed as trash.

Writing about the children’s book publishing industry in *Library Journal*, Mary Eakin supported McDonald’s claim that in the 50s increasing attention was paid toward science books. Eakin put a positive spin on the trend however, pointing out that, following World War II, “[c]hildren whose interest had been aroused in jet propulsion, atomic energy, space travel...and other twentieth century subjects were now able to find books written at their own levels of comprehension and reading ability.”<sup>124</sup> An increasing diversity of books were made available to younger audiences following the postwar publishing, only further emphasizing comic books’ hold on children in that era.

## **Conclusion**

An analysis of the preceding comments suggests that librarians of the period of 1949-1955 were confused and divided over the value of comic books. Many supported

comic books as literacy tools for reluctant and poor readers, as catalysts for traditional literature, as healthy conduits for fantasy and escape from reality, and even as enablers of social skills like sharing. Just as many, however, criticized comic books for containing crude artwork, lurid plotlines, poor grammar, and other weaknesses that at best impaired children's reading ability and at worst contributed to delinquency. Many responded to comic books in both ways. Despite their outward opinion, there remained an underlying derision regarding comic books from both supporters and detractors. Many of the comments revealed an unfamiliarity with the comic book medium, an ignorance that contributed to the suspicion directed towards comic books. Almost all of the comic book proponents did not consider comic books to rival the quality of traditional literature. Still more approached instances of obscenity without regard for the diversity of storylines published in the early 1950s. As one librarian in the minority pointed out, comic books published in a range of genres, including crime, horror, romance, adventure, westerns, science fiction, nonfiction, historical, and superhero. To approach the issue of obscenity the same way for each series oversimplified the matter.

In keeping with their fundamental objection to censorship, none of the librarians surveyed from this period endorsed censorship as a means of conquering comic books. Generally speaking, however, librarians did devise ways to curb comic book-reading among children. Most of these librarians advocated the promotion of alternative literature that contained plots and characters similar to those found in comic book series. Still others argued for collection policies that solicited feedback from children and sought to involve children more in the day-to-day operations of the library. A less common but successful solution was the effort to read and understand comic books as a way of

reaching out to children with similar reading material. It is clear that many librarians viewed the comic book “problem” as an opportunity to promote library usage to concerned parents and educators. While some libraries sought to include a selection of comic books in their collection development policies, even more saw the library as a unique service that provided edifying reading material in a comics-free environment. The importance of the library in the fight against comic books was noticed even by Wertham, who sought to include libraries in his arsenal.

The issue of comic books occupied an energetic space within library literature of the period. However, the fact remains that most of the discourse among librarians from 1949 to 1955 ignored the controversy over comic books. The absence is conspicuous and suggests that many librarians either saw comic books as a minor, passing problem or ignored their popularity altogether. This is particularly interesting, given that the graphic novel is arguably the topic of choice among children’s librarians today. Perhaps comic books, which were cheaply printed and poorly bound, posed a practical collection issue for librarians. Probably more likely is that comic books were not seen worth collecting or discussing because their content was considered unfit for a library.

Librarians have historically struggled to reconcile two competing roles as cultural arbiter and cultural emissary. This survey is in keeping with this tension and can be taken as a microcosm of the field of librarianship. A service-oriented profession, librarianship strives to respond to its users’ beliefs. However, those users also look to libraries as trend-setters on particularly divisive issues. The librarians from 1949-1955 had as much trouble and success in negotiating these opposing roles as their predecessors and their followers. Thus, regarding the issue of comic books, librarians clearly

contributed to the culture that led to the establishment of the Comics Code in 1954. In many ways they were merely part of a larger social force that changed the course of history in the 1950s. However, their unease with their roles both as followers and leaders lends insight into the nature of librarianship in the postwar era, information that can help us better understand not just our own practices but the reasons why we enact them.

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## Notes

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