



The Secret Life of Comics

Graphic literature's dual
identity as an educational
supertool

By Sallie Smith

Program G-2: “Unmasking a Marvel of an Idea in D.C.: How Graphic Literature Can Be Supertools for Law Librarians”

Presenters: **Kerry Skinner**, coordinator and moderator, Arizona State University; **Arnold Blumberg**, University of Maryland Baltimore County, and Geppi’s Entertainment Museum, Baltimore; **W. Robert Farmer**, Faulkner University Jones School of Law; **Deborah Ginsberg**, Chicago-Kent College of Law; and **Hollie C. White**, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Monday afternoon I escaped the buzz of conference activity and entered a parallel universe populated by superheroes and crime-fighting comic characters. My hosts for this tour into the world of graphic literature were the Two-Gun Kid (a.k.a. Robert Farmer); tee-shirt-clad comic and pop culture historian Arnold Blumberg; outside-the-box thinker Hollie C. White; and comic collector Debbie Ginsberg. Moderating this eclectic mix of presenters was Kerry Skinner, acquisitions/serials librarian at Arizona State University Ross-Blakley Law Library. After pausing a moment for a reality check—was I actually still at a professional law librarian conference?—I settled in to explore the varied ways graphic literature can relate to law librarianship.

The Serious Side of Comics

Arnold Blumberg opened the session as a guest speaker from outside the library profession. An instructor in comic book and time travel literature and curator at Geppi’s Entertainment Museum of American pop culture, he cautioned us not to view graphic literature solely as a leisure time activity. He suggested we reflect on how the literature and characters of our childhood had significance in shaping our country, our culture, and ourselves as a people. Graphic literature is a rich reflection of the history of our country, providing many examples of the law at work, and can be used to our benefit.

Comics are gaining credibility in education as people turn a more critical eye toward what messages they convey, characters they portray, and stories they tell. Blumberg cited an encouraging movement in Maryland as an example of integrating comics into the curriculum to encourage literacy and to teach across subjects. He advocates harnessing graphic literature’s power of illustrating real world topics to supplement educational and professional programs.

Graphic literature’s applicability to legal education was effectively demonstrated by Robert Farmer, instructional services/research librarian at Faulkner University Jones School of Law. Dressed as the Two-Gun Kid (the fictional comic character of a Harvard-educated lawyer turned gun-toting western crime fighter), Farmer displayed numerous examples for using comics as a non-traditional tool when teaching advanced legal research. Comics provide eye-catching images and interject an aspect of fun into instructional sessions, facilitating retention of legal concepts.

Farmer’s examples included the lengthy comments of Judge Posner of the Seventh Circuit regarding a copyright suit over the comic character Spawn (*Gaiman v. McFarlane*, 360 F.3d 644), and the *National Comics Publications v. Fawcett Publications* (191 F.2d 594) lawsuit—a copyright infringement battle over the comic characters Captain Marvel and Superman—in which the notable legal character Judge Learned Hand played a role.

As comics become more sophisticated, their content also reflects more refined information. The National Center for State Courts has created *Justice Case Files*, a graphic novel series with accompanying lesson plans, to educate the public about the courts. The Duke University School of Law Center for the Study of the Public Domain has issued a graphic novel titled *Tales of the Public Domain: Bound by Law?* to explore the impacts of intellectual property on creativity. These tools are useful for educating traditional students as well as English as a second language students and the general public.

Possibilities for Participation and Outreach

Presenting remotely from Chicago was Debbie Ginsberg, educational technology librarian at the Chicago-Kent College of Law. A comic hobbyist with a sizeable collection, she views comics with their power of identification as a tool to encourage appreciation for diversity. Ginsberg is active in Friends of Lulu, a collaborative group that encourages women to participate as readers and creators in the comic book industry. The organization’s resources and recommended reading list provide many examples of small press publications that can be used to teach diversity.

Taking an entirely different approach to graphic literature, Hollie C. White, Metadata Research Center doctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, boldly suggested that law librarians consider outreach and recruitment activities at comic book and popular arts conventions. Just as graphic literature stereotypes of librarians may be unrealistic, so too are librarians’ conceptions of comic and graphic literature devotees. White contrasted the tousle-haired, militaristic book soldiers of the *Library Wars*, an anime series in which librarian special agents stand against the government’s abuse of power, with the audience’s perception of comic convention attendees (young, indoors-loving computer geeks). Asking who will

replace law librarians as they retire from the workforce, our speaker suggested that comic conventions attract people with the characteristics and library-related skills needed to enhance our profession.

White noted that comic book conventions are extremely popular events, even in difficult economic times, with an average demographic of 22- to 39-year-old males. She suggested that people interested in video gaming are also adept at utilizing technology; zombie fans display a high degree of creativity; pop culture collectors are interested in preservation, description, and access of their books and related collectibles; and graphic artists and creators are concerned with copyright, intellectual property, and contract terms. Besides being fertile ground for recruitment, comic-related gatherings at the community or national level provide opportunities for law librarian outreach activities on such topics as preservation techniques, copyright considerations, and contract issues.

Overall, the program satisfied the conference theme as a truly innovative idea in law librarianship. An enthusiastic audience volunteered additional resources during the following question and answer period and indicated with a positive show of hands that they would consider using graphic literature in legal instruction.

A bonus handout for session attendees was a complimentary copy of *The History of Comic Characters: The early years 1840s-1940s* (Gemstone Publishing Inc., 2003), from Geppi’s Entertainment Museum. Resource lists for much of the referenced graphic literature are posted on AALL’s Computing Services Special Interest Section site (<http://cssis.org/ripsaall2009>).

The audio recording will unfortunately lack the colorful graphics displayed during the session, and the remote presentation by Ginsberg may not have the clarity of the on-site speakers. Despite these drawbacks, however, the recording should provide a thought-provoking introduction to the use of graphic literature in law librarianship. ■

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For More Information:

Purchase an audio recording of this session online at AALL2go: www.softconference.com/aall/default.asp.