

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Gibson, Mel (2023) Librarians, Agency, Young People, and Comics: Graphic Account and the Development of Graphic Novel Collections in Libraries in Britain in the 1990s. In: Comics and Agency. Comics Studies . De Gruyter, pp. 201-216. ISBN 9783110754407, 9783110754483

Published by: De Gruyter

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110754483-011>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110754483-011>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/51535/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

Mel Gibson

Librarians, Agency, Young People, and Comics

Graphic Account and the Development of Graphic Novel Collections in Libraries in Britain in the 1990s

In the mid to late twentieth century in Britain, the comics medium was often wrongly characterized as only aimed at and suitable for children and young people. Equally inaccurately, the medium was simultaneously seen by many adults, whether parents or professionals, as sometimes dangerous for that audience. When combined, these contradictory views created tensions around understandings of both childhood and comics. These tensions can be understood in various ways, but in this chapter the approach is to describe a series of interrelations and shifting networks of relationships between groups of actors, in line with actor-network theory as developed by Bruno Latour and others (Law and Moser 2002). These actors include people in various roles, objects (comics and graphic novels), institutions (whether government, the library, or the family), and concepts (childhood, morality, and literacy). Initially, agency was located with adult professionals in this evolving media configuration, but as the chapter explores, this becomes a network where “it is no longer easy to determine the locus of agency, to point to one place and say with certainty that action emerges from that point rather than from somewhere else” (Law and Moser 2002, 3). Both agency and network can be argued to have shifted in response to the various actors involved in the assemblage *Graphic Account* (Barker 1993), where the action emerged from a number of points, both human and textual.

In Britain, the initial distribution of agency around comics in general extended through the 1950s and onwards, as various actors, both individuals and groups of professional adults, sought to ban or censor comics. This included teachers and librarians arguing that the medium had a negative impact on literacy, including George Pumphrey (1954, 1955, 1964). There were also broader concerns about comics undermining the morality of young people through their form and content (a variant of media effects and moral panics incorporating what John Locke termed a “tabula rasa” or blank slate understanding of the young [Kehily 2015, 5]), and so in turn impacting upon a dominant cultural construction of childhood relating it to innocence (Kassem et al. 2010; Kehily 2015). Another key actor was the British Communist Party, which characterized comics from the USA as an aspect of American imperialism (Barker 1984). Finally, even home-grown humor comics actually

aimed at children, such as *The Beano* (D.C. Thomson 1938–), were criticized, mainly for their anti-authoritarian tendencies, although George Gale in an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* notably described the characters in them as “violent and deformed” (1971, 6).

Constructions of childhood and youth (and actual young people) are part of this interaction, along with comics, as the above suggests, but as elements typically seen as non-agentic, or as unable to be agentic without experiencing corruption (and so in need of protection). That agency is attached unproblematically to adults and seen as inappropriate for the child or young person may be read as being about resisting potentially challenging alternative readings of comics, as medium and as individual items, and resisting alternative understandings of childhood and youth. In this complex network of materials, activities, and persons, then, power is distributed across the “intersecting performance of multiple discourses and logics” (Law and Moser 2002, 6), yet there are voices and objects that are excluded.

Graphic Account: Contributors as Actors and Professional Agency

The discourses about comics outlined above, and the perspectives on childhood that were linked with them, were inherited by later professionals. However, as noted above, this chapter discusses a set of actors that challenged these dominant discourses and aimed to destabilize them. It may be read as an attempt to resist hegemonic meanings and readings of the comics medium in relation to childhood and youth. Edited by Keith Barker (1993) and published by the Youth Libraries Group, *Graphic Account: The Selection and Promotion of Graphic Novels in Libraries for Young People* (hereafter the title is shortened to *Graphic Account*) took a positive view of the newly developing trend for publishing graphic novels, seeing them as suitable for inclusion in the collections of both school and public libraries. It also served to produce subjects in complex ways and distributed power and agency differently. For instance, the contributors located themselves as engaged with the medium of comics, some as fans, thus crossing boundaries between professional and personal expertise and becoming a different kind of actor.

Professional agency could be seen as being at stake in this context, something revealed in relation to the language used around an interest in the medium. For instance, John Wilkins, one of the contributors, said that an exhibition he was involved in had the result that “a number of members of library staff ‘came

out' as enthusiasts" (Barker 1993, 19). What the use of the term "came out" suggests is a professional view of engaging with comics as transgressive. Further, professional agency was also destabilized and decentralized in the way contributors positioned young readers as stakeholders and actors, potentially changing the complex circuits of exchange between adults and children. Thus, children and young adults might be agentic regarding collection development, rather than simply the beneficiaries of decisions made in their best interests by professionals. Services, as Wendy Stainton Rogers (2015, 101–119) states, that operate in the best interests of the child may not involve consultation, or notions of voice. This dismisses young people as agentic or as actors in the sense of entities that catalyze or cause chains of action.

In discussing reader engagement in a way resistant to media effects theory, the *Graphic Account* contributors also addressed the dominant discourse and social construction of childhood and youth as a time of vulnerability and inexperience. In a library context, children and young people are typically constrained as actors, for instance by only being allowed to borrow from the children's library, where stock considered suitable to the age group by adults is located. However, *Graphic Account* argued that they should be enabled to change that environment to better meet their aspirations rather than adjust their aspirations to the space, thus moving beyond "bounded agency" (Evans 2002, 262). The contributors argued that this could involve contributing expertise in selecting stock or driving change via the requests system. To request a book, one would fill in a form and pay a small fee, but this can involve groups of people consciously working together, indicating through the quantity of requests that there is a desire for specific titles, or media. The process would then be that library staff would decide if a book or other object might be purchased and then loaned to the individual, and then either put into stock, or sent to a central repository. Alternatively (with less impact) a requested book might be borrowed via Inter Library Loan.

Objects and Spaces as Actors

It can be argued that the development of graphic novel collections across British public library services was stimulated by *Graphic Account* as a catalyst causing chains of action (although other factors, such as changing government policies, also played a part). The use of advisory texts is especially important in relation to the possible inclusion of new stock and services, particularly those seen as potentially problematic, or troubling of previously existing systems. In

Graphic Account, the contributing authors, as part of that object as well as independent entities, advocated for the medium, trying to encourage and enthuse, so becoming entangled with other actors in the form of people, institutions, and texts. As one of the human actors involved, I hope to give some indication of what kind of interest and issues the publication stimulated.

I would add that a collection of object-actors may also function similarly to a single object as actor, or as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Creating a graphic novel collection in any kind of library may be the preserve of people, but I would argue that, once in situ, the collection itself has an impact on the distribution of power and agency. A collection of graphic novels in a library can be a catalyst in several ways, including through signage. This acts as an anchor, labelling and stating the existence of materials of a particular type. This notion of the assemblage can also be extended in the circulation of stock within library systems (with texts being moved to other public libraries across a county-wide service, for instance). This circulation, traditionally seen as extending the life of stock and refreshing collections, especially in smaller service points, might also enable different value systems to be shared about who readers are or might be, and what stock is appropriate in a library. The collection as actor can form an argument in those two fields. Circulation beyond the library is also significant, as the texts loaned out are consumed by individuals who themselves become actors in a wider community-based assemblage. Here, the individual texts are shared around friendship groups and appear in homes cementing the idea of a reading community.

To return to the library and the space within it, as the point about signage suggests, this may be a catalyst according to how it is laid out, what stock is available, and who, in a sense, it welcomes in. Thus, the examples in the following images, whilst both library spaces for young people, are institutional and spatial actors of very different kinds. The library in Figure 1 was specifically aimed at young people and was part of a public library. This space was redesigned in a collaborative project between library staff and young people. The artwork changed over time, amended according to the taste of the young people, as did the music played in the library. All of these elements were intended to create a sense of ownership through the agency afforded to young people.

It was intended to attract back those who had moved away from using library services, and word-of-mouth promotion amongst young people was key in re-engaging them. It incorporated a mixture of materials and book collections, including an extensive graphic novel one, a centerpiece to the service, co-selected by staff and young library users. Indeed, because of my involvement with *Graphic Account*, the team called on my support in relation to their purchasing and then enhancing of a graphic novel collection, so I became, in a sense, an assemblage,



Figure 1: Specialist youth library setting (copyright by the author).

part human, part book, and part of their network. I will return later in the chapter to this idea of myself as part of an assemblage, allowing for more than one element could achieve alone (Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

In contrast, the library as institutional actor in Figure 2 is one where tradition, the adult with agency, and the young person as problematic are all visible. It is a school library, but the difference between the two is not about the institution, as I know of school libraries that have much more in common with the kind of services offered in the library in Figure 1. Materialities such as the physical barrier between sections, the closed cabinet for more valued stock, and the exhortation for quiet painted on the wall create a space that suggest the young person is not welcome, despite it being theoretically a space for young people. Of course, in both cases, wider issues around funding, staffing, training, and community are also part of the overall network, but the difference between these settings in terms of how the young person and the book stock are seen (as manifested in the use of space) reflects ideologies and dominant discourses about both.

Education and Libraries in Britain in the 1990s

At the time Barker floated the idea of the *Graphic Account* project, massive changes had been underway for several years in both education and library services. Both are relevant here and flag up the role of government in relation to the networks of power and agency involved. In education, the first version of the



Figure 2: School library setting (copyright by the author).

National Curriculum had been introduced by the *Education Reform Act* (1988). Programs of study were published in 1998 and 1999, and the teaching of some elements began in September 1989. It was described by Richard Daugherty, for instance, as creating “radical changes to the education system” (quoted in Whitty 1993, 264). This was amongst the first steps in standardization and amounted to a large intervention in what was taught and how and so in turn had an impact on resources, including school libraries.

It has been argued that these changes (and the recording and documentation that accompanied them) made it more difficult for innovative teaching and learning to occur. For instance, whilst there were some early references to visual literacies in relation to reading, such as in the Cox Report (1989), *English for Ages 5 to 16*, these were not helpful regarding graphic novels or comics. Picture books were included, but the emphasis was more on image as support to word reading development than on images containing meaning in themselves. Further, although the Cox Report argued that pupils should “be guided so as to appreciate the significance of print and the fact that pictures and other visual media can also convey meaning” (1989, 27), it then went on to mention road signs and logos rather than comics or picture books.

The shifts in what was taught meant that a game of catch-up emerged as teachers implemented the changes and school libraries took the curriculum into account, which limited the funds that could be spent on additional wider reading materials. The overall thrust could be seen as moving towards teaching to the test, a model of young person as pupil rather than an agentic individual with their own interests and drivers, and a more traditional model of education.

In this context, materials like graphic novels were largely ignored unless as a support for what those who either struggled with reading or were “reluctant readers,” who had the skills to read but preferred not to (Chambers 1969). Additionally, there was some hostility towards graphic novels along with some other media forms, as outlined above. Finally, earlier attempts at including both comics and magazines in education, such as the English Centre’s *Comics and Magazines* (Hemming and Leggett 1984) teaching resource on gender, were forgotten.

In contrast, public libraries were subject to cuts rather than being reformed. Given the neo-liberal ideology of central government under the Conservatives between 1979 and 1997, they were perceived as inessential. The financial pressure from central government upon local government led to the loss of both funding and staff in an effort to protect other council services. In addition, it is worth noting that funding was weighted in relation to issues per book. This had various consequences, including a cull of less popular books, although they might have been significant or of interest to smaller numbers of readers, leading to several well publicized controversies about the disposal of stock that was not seen as “in tune with public need and demand” (Bowman 2006, 438). These cuts were, ironically, combined with demands that libraries widen their provision of other technologies, such as computers available for use by the public and materials like CDs and videos. Simultaneously, libraries were meant to fulfil their legal obligation to free book lending and offer new services that could be charged for. These shifting relationships drove libraries towards narrower collections consisting of popular titles and material that could bring in income. However, despite these drivers, a dominant discourse of libraries as outdated emerged.

Simultaneously, the need for libraries to be relevant to all in any given community created a tension, in that attracting new users often meant having to take risks purchasing book and other stock that might not prove popular, so potentially increasing pressure on limited funding. One of the groups that were often implicated here were young people, especially boys and young men, who were seen as using libraries less than older people. However, some groups of users who had a sense of ownership of the services were unhappy about any influx of less traditional users. Indeed, in one library I worked in, stock like magazines and graphic novels were unwelcome, as they “attracted the kind of people into libraries that you wouldn’t want to see there.”¹ After a little further

¹ Interviews with library users about the services they were offered took place across Northumberland Libraries in autumn 1992, as part of a county-wide project on service development. All the contributions were anonymized. Interview by author.

questioning, these “unwanted people” turned out to be the young, exemplifying the tensions in offering services to the whole community, and the ways that including young people might have an impact on how power and agency may be distributed across an organization.

Finally, revealing further tensions across both the education and library sectors, there was a perceived crisis in boys’ reading. In the 1990s, reading was increasingly seen as feminized in the school context, something used by government as a way of criticizing education and labelling it as failing boys. Although some, like Debbie Epstein and colleagues (1998), argued that the debates were too simplified, that several complex factors were at play, and that the gender of teachers was not relevant, the notion of crisis remained in place. Similar arguments were made about libraries. In a sense, these areas and types of work were in upheaval, with a shift in ideology emerging over what libraries and education were, and who they were for.

Looking More Closely at *Graphic Account*

In this section, I analyze what the publication offered, but before that, I want to make some points about the cover as a part of the work’s paratext, because it too expresses aspects of the overall assemblage, whilst also flagging up tensions around how the publication was understood (see Figure 3).

The main reference point on the cover is *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1986). The illustration (which does not mimic the imagery of the graphic novel, but does give a sense of urban unrest) and the quotation from it refers to a scene in which the character of the Comedian says to Nite Owl: “My government contacts tell me some new act is being herded through. Until then, we’re society’s only protection. We keep it up as long as we have to.” Nite Owl responds in sheer disbelief: “Protection? Who are we protecting them from?” (Moore and Gibbons 1986, 2). In this context, the image is a direct reference to the fears some library staff had about the content of graphic novels, which the text addresses. The cover-as-paratext operates, as Gerard Genette argued, as “a threshold [. . .] that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (1997, 2). However, it was not solely into *Graphic Account* that the reader would be stepping, but into an engagement with another medium, one explicitly referenced on the cover by the speech balloon, even if the reference is one that the reader was unfamiliar with. The central quotation is recontextualized to make a point about protectionist discourses around childhood innocence and vulnerability. It also acts as a question about the social

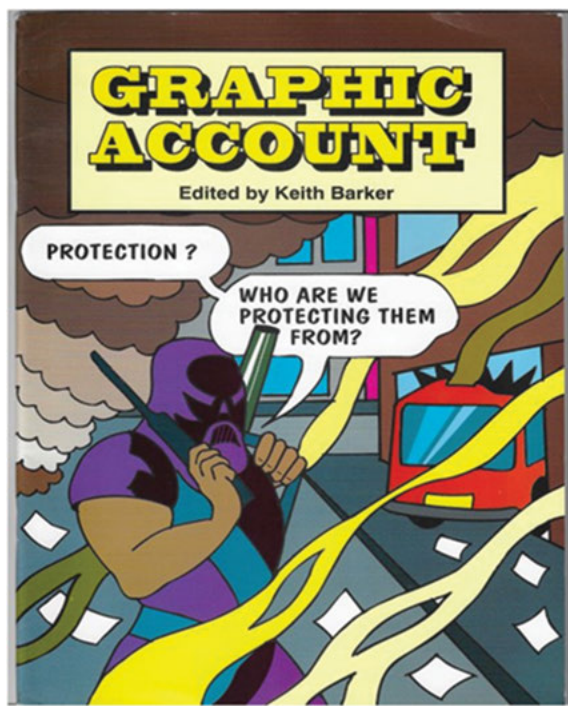


Figure 3: Cover image for *Graphic Account* (copyright held by the contributors, including the author).

role of the librarian, and the power and agency such a role might contain. The quotation is also repurposed to flag up that young people do not need protection from graphic novels and those who make them, and further, that they do not need protecting from their desire to read works in that medium. Thus, it was included to make a point about both the intended audience for graphic novel collections and the books themselves, reflecting and critiquing British perspectives on library stock and users. However, the cover design was double-edged, as it was also possible to read it as simply an evocation of violence, one of the issues that made some librarians unwilling to stock graphic novels in the first place.

Graphic Account included three essays, of which two were by librarians. Wilkins had surveyed comics and magazines for Camden library services in 1988, taking a feminist and anti-racist approach, so he had a long-term engagement with comics. His essay focused on stock selection and his recent collaboration with Paul Gravett. Gravett had curated *Strip Search*, the largest exhibition on comics to appear in the country at that point, which was launched alongside a

collection in the library it was initially displayed in. The other piece was by myself, in my role as librarian in charge of a dual use service point in Northumberland, meaning it was both a school and public library. I talked about how and why I had developed a small collection working with school pupils as well as with both education and library staff. This idea of involving readers in stock selection and the way that it could develop a sense of ownership of both collection and library was also considered a non-mainstream approach. The final piece, in contrast, talked about the grammar of comics, how they and graphic novels have been received and the significance of the medium. It was written by internationally renowned author Philip Pullman whose inclusion was significant because he was seen as someone with authority by librarians, and his support for comics might convince some of those otherwise skeptical about their validity in a library context.

These essays were accompanied by an annotated bibliography of titles created by Andy Sawyer, who was working for Wirral Libraries at that time. Sawyer began by flagging up key issues around selection, content, and the location of collections, supporting points made in the essays. The listing contained books largely published in the late 1980s and onwards, but also included some earlier work. Sawyer flagged up that there were creators typically thought of as picture book makers who engaged with comics, citing Shirley Hughes's *Up and Up* (1979) as an example. However, as he explained, most librarians had some confidence with picture books, and so the bibliography was intended to support a broader understanding of the comparatively new form of the graphic novel. The bibliography was international in scope and included non-fiction as well as fiction. This too was a claim about the medium intended to counter the commonly held notion of the time that comics were a genre. It also incorporated titles that were intended to shift thinking about pre-existing library stock, recategorizing some books considered to be picture books as graphic novels. These included the *Asterix* and *Tintin* series and some of Raymond Briggs's work including *Fungus the Bogeyman* (1977), *When the Wind Blows* (1982), and *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* (1984).

Graphic Account acted as a catalyst in relation to political and professional contexts. Given the publisher, librarians generally assumed that the focus was on collections for younger people in public libraries and in the secondary school sector. However, this publication argued that the texts chosen would fit in collections in both child and adult sections of public libraries, straddling the divide between them. This was intended to provoke discussion, just as the cover was, as most library authorities in Britain were divided in terms of both staff and funding into separate adult and children's services. The age at which one could borrow from adult library collections varied from 12 to 18 years,

depending on any given library authority's policy, whether there was a clause that allowed a younger person to borrow from an adult collection with permission from their parents or carers, or even at the behest of individual librarians, depending on their views about childhood and youth.

In *Graphic Account*, Wilkins said that in his library authority, Camden, "all libraries have teenage collections sited in the adult library, aimed at older teenagers, with small 'taster' collections of material for younger teenagers in children's libraries" (Barker 1993, 22). This could also be seen as easing the transition from child to adult library in a way that would mean teen readers maintained a reading habit. However, whilst it may not sound radical, this example, and the proposal that other library services follow suit in starting to dissolve the boundaries between adult and child services was largely resisted by library authorities, again possibly to maintain the production of readers as subjects in particular ways.

In part, this was about the practice of separate funding, a question of who would pay for this potentially unpopular type of stock. Despite the essays by Wilkins and Gibson both stating that issues of graphic novels were comparable with other popular stock categories, the fear of being criticized for wasting public money was a dominant element of the discourse in the profession. However, there was also the ideological divide in relation to constructions of youth and childhood to contend with, where the content of much of the adult library was assumed to be problematic for younger readers. To ensure there were no complaints from the wider adult public about what young readers might access, physical boundaries between the child and adult collections were added to the financial ones for stock. Again, the essays addressed this with Wilkins stating that there had been no complaints or protests about either exhibition or collection (Barker 1993, 22). However, graphic novels collections, in attracting younger readers into the adult library, were seen as potentially undermining these structural divides. Even more radically, Wilkins argued that age related sections should be phased out and integrated collections developed including material for all ages (Barker 1993, 22). In effect, graphic novels were actors in relation to potentially changing the overall structure of library services and funding. However, this was largely resisted and library services in Britain continue to have separate sections divided by age today.

Discussing and highlighting material aimed at young people, a group theoretically included in both services' provision, but often in neither, was deliberate on the part of the editor, Keith Barker, who could be seen as another key aspect of the assemblage. Underlying the argument about the medium, then, was one that this age group was liminal and tended to fall between services, thus needing to be better addressed and supported. Teenagers, in addition,

were often “othered” (Jones 2009, 36–37) by library services and seen as problematic, whether through not using libraries or from being seen as disruptive presences when inside them. I would add that this was also a gendered liminality, in that it was specifically boys and young men who were seen as difficult to reach, and sometimes, simply difficult.

Simultaneously, the graphic novel, a term now frequently seen as a marketing tool to promote book-length works in the comics format, was also considered liminal in the library context. The term was an attempt to move away from comics’ connotations given their history in Britain, especially in relation to young people and moral panics regarding media effects, as noted earlier. The longer graphic novels, whilst more acceptably book-like in format, were still seen as a challenge in terms of content, especially given assumptions about the accessibility of images, an inheritance from this earlier discourse around comics and childhood.

Graphic Account both worked with and critiqued the connection made between younger readers and comics. The tendency to see comics as a medium for younger children is quite an embedded one in Britain, possibly due to the long-standing dominance of children’s humor titles like *The Beano* and *The Dandy* (published by D.C. Thomson 1937–2013). This perceived connection meant that some gatekeepers found graphic novels shocking, and considered the perception that they addressed themes and issues more commonly associated with adult audiences to be troubling. The bibliography was intended to change understandings of what the comics medium was capable of and broaden ideas of audience, but was in tension with this construction of comics as texts of childhood.

There was also another issue involved, that of saying that collections of graphic novels would appeal to young adults, especially males. On the one hand, this was a positive driver to help make the argument for collections in libraries. Once in place, they were usually found by several potential audiences, but the concerns around the perceived crisis in boy’s reading could be persuasive to both front-line staff and the management who controlled funding. On the other hand, however, this could result in the stereotyping of both graphic novels and their readers. Hence, *Graphic Account* unintentionally reinforced that these books were for predominantly younger male readers, which meant that the graphic novel could sometimes be understood as a problematic medium for problematic people.

On Becoming a Catalyst/Assemblage/Actor

As a result of contributing to *Graphic Account*, I became positioned as an aspect of it within the evolving media configuration of graphic novels. For instance, I was asked to run training for the various branches of the Youth Libraries Groups around Britain, as well as continuing to work directly with young people. Many of the staff involved found that an outside voice was an effective catalyst for change and new collection development. This led, in turn, to work with the branches of the School Libraries Association and School Libraries Group, alongside book and educational organizations in Ireland, so I became entangled with various networks as a nodal point of complex discourses and practices.

As my work continued, I became entangled with other institutional actors and their changing views of comics, including literacy charities such as The Reading Agency² and The National Literacy Trust,³ in addition to art galleries, museums, and The British Library.⁴ In these cases, I was involved in supporting exhibition and collection creation and developing staff knowledge, reading lists, and school resources. This was at a step away from working directly with agentic young people in relation to institutions, but underlying most of these initiatives was an attempt to engage with younger audiences, to be seen as relevant. These actors were responding to the increasing seriousness with which the medium was taken, sometimes combined with an educational slant where comics supported (rather than undermined) the development of a range of literacy skills, another shift. This meant that the links between children, young adults, and comics continued, but with a more positive charge.

One event, for example, involved me as a kind of picture interpreter positioned by some of the works of William Hogarth in the Tate Britain,⁵ talking about the relationship between them and the comics I had taken with me. There was no formal talk involved, but rather, it was a day long drop-in during which I would chat with visitors. On that occasion, the Tate staff member accompanying me commented that the vast majority of the visitors who engaged were young, knowledgeable, and wanted to share their expertise rather than passively listen.

To run events or training such as this one, I usually had a collection of around 70 graphic novels with me, in addition to having access to whatever

² See <https://readingagency.org.uk> (acc. 8 January 2022).

³ See <https://literacytrust.org.uk> (acc. 8 January 2022).

⁴ See <https://www.bl.uk> (acc. 8 January 2022).

⁵ See <https://www.tate.org.uk> (acc. 8 January 2022).

was already stocked by any given institution. The content I carried varied according to the brief, for what I nicknamed my big bag of books sessions. In a sense I became part of an assemblage, the books supplementing me, with us collectively achieving more than I could alone (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). I could also be understood as a collection of actors in that I was always accompanied by multiple texts as well as by my evolving knowledge of the medium. Adding to this assemblage or collection, I also created other texts, including two bibliographies, and wrote for a diverse range of publications, including *Inis* (published by Children’s Books Ireland) and the professional journal of the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE), *NATE Classroom*.

Finally, my involvement became increasingly international, in that I contributed to websites and discussion groups, especially the women and comics groups Friends of Lulu (1993–2011) and *Sequential Tart*.⁶ Here I joined other actors/catalysts, for as Kimberly DeVries states about *Sequential Tart*, “[b]ecause at the time these women felt that breaking into the established discourse in either fan communities or the industry itself was impossible, they decided to create their own space” (DeVries 2010, 72). In contributing to this space, I authored articles on how British librarians and teachers were using comics as classroom resources, thus sharing experience and best practice whilst seeking to discover what worked best elsewhere. I also discussed my approach to what is called *booktalking* (discussing books with an audience) and working with gatekeepers. This was both an expression of agency and an opportunity for me to get feedback from peers beyond the librarianship.

Conclusion

In summary, the publication of *Graphic Account* in 1993 was a moment where a range of actors of various kinds came into contact and functioned as catalysts for complex change and the reconfiguration of how graphic novels were understood, leading to more physical collections and to a shifting understanding of comics as a medium in various professions and institutions. As one of the actors involved, I found the experience personally transformative, as well as experiencing the assemblage’s potential, in conjunction with constructions of childhood and youth, to disrupt and trouble institutions, professions, and adult agency. This was accompanied, for some, by an embracing of the expertise of younger readers, via encouragement to find out who the experts were in their

⁶ See <http://sequentialtart.com> (acc. 8 January 2022).

settings and seek their advice. I was very conscious that many pupils and younger readers would know more than the adults and argued that the adults had to become part of a reading community, not lead it, thus letting go of a little power and agency in order to acknowledge young people's voices.

The chain of effects could reach beyond comics when the child or young adult was integral to the discussion. As noted earlier, the idea of graphic novel collections as part of young adult services was significant in flagging up issues around institutional policies and structures. For example, one training day with Birmingham library services proved transformational. What started as training about comics and manga became an acknowledgement and recognition of issues around all services to young adults, especially around funding stock and locating materials. The proposal carried forward from the day was that all funding and services needed revisiting to ensure parity for young people.

However, despite the impact of the publication and the practical support I came to offer as an extension of *Graphic Account*, wider cultural shifts meant that these changes were not necessarily permanent given the ongoing context of service cuts and the impact of the national curriculum.

References

- Barker, Keith. 1993. *Graphic Account: The Selection and Promotion of Graphic Novels in Libraries for Young People*. London: The Library Association Youth Libraries Group.
- Barker, Martin. 1984. *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bowman, J. H. 2006. *British Librarianship and Information Work 1991–2000*. London: Routledge.
- Briggs, Raymond. 1977. *Fungus the Bogeyman*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Briggs, Raymond. 1982. *When the Wind Blows*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Briggs, Raymond. 1984. *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Chambers, Aidan. 1969. *The Reluctant Reader*. London: Pergamon Press.
- The Cox Report. 1989. *English for Ages 5 to 16*. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/cox1989/cox89.html#02/>. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office (acc. 28 June 2021).
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Transl. Brian Massumi. London: Athlone.
- DeVries, Kimberly. 2010. "Writing Wonder Women: How Playful Resistance Leads to Sustained Authorial Participation at *Sequential Tart*." In *Writing and the Digital Generation: Essays on New Media Rhetoric*, edited by Heather Urbanski, 70–82. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Education Reform Act*. 1988. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/1988-education-reform-act.html> (acc. 11 February 2022).

- Epstein, Debbie, Jannette Elwood, Valerie Hey, and Janet Maw, eds. 1998. *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Underachievement*. Buckingham: Open UP.
- Evans, Karen. 2002. "Taking Control of Their Lives? Agency in Young Adult Transitions in England and Germany." *Journal of Youth Studies* 5.3: 245–269.
- Gale, George. 1971. "Violent and Deformed: The Prosecution Case." *TES*, 5 February.
- Genette, Gerard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Transl. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: U of Cambridge P.
- Hemming, Judith, and Jane Leggett. 1984. *Comics and Magazines*. London: The English Centre.
- James, Allison, and Alan Prout, ed. 1997. *Constructing & Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Falmer Press.
- Jones, Phil. 2009. *Rethinking Childhood: Attitudes in Contemporary Society*. London: Continuum.
- Kassem, Derek, Lisa Murphy, and Elizabeth Taylor, eds. 2010. *Key Issues in Childhood and Youth Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Kehily, Mary Jane, ed. 2015. *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*. Maidenhead: Open UP.
- Law, John, and Ingunn Moser. 2002. *Managing, Subjectivities and Desires*. Lancaster: Centre for Science Studies, University of Lancaster.
- Moore, Alan (wri), and Dave Gibbons (art). 1986. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics.
- Pumphrey, George H. 1954. *Comics and Your Children*. London: Comics Campaign Council.
- Pumphrey, George H. 1955. *Children's Comics: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*. London: The Epworth Press.
- Pumphrey, George H. 1964. *What Children Think of Their Comics*. London: The Epworth Press.
- Stainton Rogers, Wendy. 2015. "Promoting Better Childhoods: Constructions of Child Concern." In *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*, edited by Mary Jane Kehily, 101–119. Maidenhead: Open UP.
- Whitty, Geoff. 1993. "Education Reform and Teacher Education in England in the 1990s." *Journal of Education for Teaching, International Research and Pedagogy* 19.4: 263–275.
- Wilkins, John. 1988. *Survey of Comics and Magazines for Children and Young People*. London: Camden Libraries and Arts.