

## **XXVI Annual Charleston Conference**

**Lively Lunch: Thursday 9 November 2006**

### **Collecting comic books at the University of Memphis: an ending?**

***Chris Matz, Collection Development Librarian, University of Memphis Libraries***

*Four years have passed since the University of Memphis Libraries began an organized acquisition of comic books as scholarly works. During that time, comic books become more accessible to academic libraries in general, thanks to increased production by publishers and innovations in cataloging. Faculty and student patrons along with librarians have responded affirmatively to the introduction of this resource into academic collections. So why is 2006 likely the end for comic books at the University of Memphis, and why does this case study have implications for collection trends in academic libraries?*

In 2002, the University of Memphis Libraries began a formal program of adding comic books. Prompted by the Department of English's faculty chair, the library organized its current holdings to support the chair's long-term goal of attracting Ph.D.-level research of comic books as literature, and then sought to grow the collection. The initiative was boosted with a funding stipend from the University's Friends of the Library group and attracted significant positive publicity, including a write-up in the Memphis *Commercial-Appeal*. A collection policy (included below) was drafted to inform selection and create future benchmarks. Departments apart from English were solicited for input to grow the collection's perspective. More than 200 titles were acquired in that first year, and while it was always understood that comic books would not sustain that kind of growth and attention in following years, a near-complete collapse of the initiative was not anticipated.

In 2006, however, those were the circumstances in our library. Efforts to collaborate with other departments were fruitless, and English dominated the selection process; we discovered quickly that the "best books" approach to collection building was finite once we made the decision to exclude superhero-themed titles. The funding supplement from the Friends was not offered after 2003, and then requests for comic books were stymied along with all book orders during an unprecedented (and ongoing) drought period with the library's materials budget. The procurement and processing of comic books that were part of a series or had multiple different (however similar) volumes came to a halt, while our technical services unit worked first on the items that could be acquired and cataloged more easily. Worse, the one

genuine innovation in comic books for this period in history – the booming popularity of *manga* – was mostly ignored by faculty and library selectors.

Obviously, until the library resolves its funding crisis, comic books will remain just as marginal at the University of Memphis as every other format and genre of new material. That is our library's burden, but academic libraries at large may wish to begin or continue collecting comic books as their enthusiasm allows. They are worthy choices, providing support for present (or anticipated) curriculum and creating a collection of culturally significant works. Comic books can also address the diminishing presence of books that may be read for pleasure, which not so long ago was still a concern for academic collections. Consideration must be given to how patrons will use a library's OPAC and other tools to find comic books, and whether or not they are meant to be found should be addressed before the first order card is submitted.

If funding is available, libraries are inclined to spend money on comic books because their patrons are generally eager to read them. American comic books in particular are (or should be, given how *manga* dominates best seller lists) desperate to find new audiences. Comic books and academic libraries may find that they need each other, but as with all relationships, balances must be struck.

**Chris Matz**

**Collection Development Librarian**

**University of Memphis Libraries**

**901.678.8244**

**[cmatz@memphis.edu](mailto:cmatz@memphis.edu)**

# UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS LIBRARIES

## Collection Development Policy Statement:

### *Comic Books*

#### I. Curriculum

The University of Memphis offers two educational courses designed explicitly to examine comic books as serious literature. "The Graphic Novel" (ENGL 4430) is taught as an undergraduate course each Fall semester. "Visual and Verbal Texts: The Graphic Novel" (ENGL 7473) is taught as a graduate course each Spring semester. Each course balances theory with analysis of significant works and creators, all towards effective presentation of comic books as a subject for study in secondary school and college.

#### II. Purpose and Scope of the Collection

The University Libraries currently support the curriculum of ENGL 4430 and ENGL 7473 by reserving course texts and other selected titles during the Fall and Spring semesters. At all other times during the year, titles containing primary work by creators are held in "permanent reserve" while titles devoted to study of the medium are returning to the general circulating collection.

Appropriate auxiliary materials in support of ENGL 4430 and ENGL 7473 are identified in consultation with the faculty chair of the Department of English and purchased as funding allows.

#### III. Geographical Coverage

The United States is the primary focus but materials from other areas of the world are collected.

#### IV. Period Coverage/ Date of Publication Range

Primary emphasis is on contemporary materials, though attention is given to historically significant works from approximately 1900 to the present. The University Libraries seek to build this collection with comparatively inexpensive reprint materials whenever possible.

#### V. Languages

The primary language of the comic book collection is English. Materials in other languages are acquired selectively.

## VI. Types of Materials

### A. Monographs

Monographs, in the form of collected reprints (trade paperbacks) and original work (graphic novels) are primary to the collection. Studies of art and the medium, many of which are oversized, are also significant.

### B. Serials/Series

Due to severe cutbacks in scholarly journal budgets for all academic departments, the University Libraries does not at this time take subscriptions to any comic books or comics-related periodicals. *The Comics Journal* and other periodicals of comic book scholarship will be considered for inclusion at a later date.

### C. Electronic Resources

The University Libraries buy or subscribe to electronic indexes and full-text databases that offer research value. Links to free web sites are not actively collected, although links to web sites may be included in guides produced by the Reference Department.

At this time, the University Libraries offer no access to any comics-specific databases, though information on comic books can be found through *WorldCat*, *Library Literature*, *MLA*, and other electronic indexes related to study of the humanities. CD-ROM products compatible with the University of Memphis networked operating system will be considered for purchase.

### D. Microforms

Research collections in microforms are purchased when deemed relevant.

### E. Theses/Dissertations

Dissertations are acquired as needed or requested.

### F. Audio/Visual

Video and audio materials are acquired when relevant to the curriculum.

## VII. Location of Materials Collection

All comic books and comics-related materials are located in McWherter Library, the main facility on campus at the University of Memphis. Alternate locations, such as branch libraries, will be considered upon request. The bulk of this collection can be found on permanent reserve, though selected titles are circulating and accessible.

## IX. Special Collections

None specified.

## X. Subject Areas

D804.3	Holocaust survivors -- United States -- Biography -- Comic books, strips, etc.
DR1313.32.G67	Yugoslav War, 1991-1995 -- Bosnia and Herzegovina -- Gorazde -- Comic books, strips, etc.
DS119.7	Jewish-Arab relations -- Comic books, strips, etc.
E169.1	Popular culture -- United States.
PN6710	Comic books, strips, etc. -- History and criticism. Comic books, strips, etc. -- Technological innovations. Underground comic books, strips, etc. -- History.
PN6725	Comic books, strips, etc. -- United States -- History -- 20th century.
PN6747	Graphic novels.
PN6790	Comic books, strips, etc. -- Europe -- Translations into English.
PS3553.H15	Comic books, strips, etc. -- Authorship -- Fiction.

## XI. Gifts

Complimentary subscriptions for periodicals are requested only through the Periodicals Department and should be directed to the Head of the Periodicals Department for processing. The Periodicals Department is responsible for acknowledgement, checking-in, and claiming.

Solicitation of major gifts (Value: \$1,000 or more) is handled by the Director of University Development and the Dean of libraries (or designate), with the help of various other University officers.

In all instances the ultimate decision to accept or reject gift rests with the Libraries faculty, and, except as authority has been specifically delegated, no commitments should be made without consultation. All Librarians are encouraged when approached by a potential donor to pursue such a contact; however, if a gift is accepted, the donor's signature should be secured on a copy of the Gift Policy to show the donor's awareness of same.

## XIII. Cross-References to Other Collection Policies

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of subject matter of comic books, a number of related policy statements for academic departments should also be consulted:

Anthropology

English

Art

History

Center for Research On Women (CROW)

Political Science

Communications

Sociology

Education

University College

*The policy statement for Comic Books is next scheduled for review in **March 2007**.*

*The policy statement for Comic Books was revised and updated in **March 2005**.*

*Chris Matz, Collection Development Librarian, created the original policy statement for Comic Books in **March 2003**.*