COMICS, ONCE MARGINALIZED, HAVE TAKEN THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE IN THIS VENERABLE REPOSITORY OF KNOWLEDGE.

THANKS TO THE VISION AND PERSISTENCE OF LIBRARIAN KAREN GREEN, WHO RECENTLY BECAME THE FIRST CURATOR FOR COMICS AND CARTOONS IN COLUMBIA’S RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY.

A LIFE IN COMICS

The Graphic Adventures of Karen Green ’97GSAS

How a Butler Librarian Became Columbia’s First Curator for Comics and Cartoons

by Nick Sousanis ’14TC

GREEN, WHO GREW UP IN MICHIGAN, WAS A SOLITARY KID WHO LOVED BOOKS.

ONE BOOK, ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND, SENT HER DOWN A RABBIT HOLE THAT LED TO A LIFELONG PASSION FOR PICTURE STORIES.

AS ALICE ASKED, “WHAT IS THE USE OF A BOOK WITHOUT PICTURES OR CONVERSATIONS?”

AT AGE 6 SHE DISCOVERED HER PARENTS’ NEW YORKER 25TH ANNIVERSARY CARTOON ALBUM (1925-1950). SHE WAS OBSESSED.

THIS WAS HER INTRODUCTION TO UNDERSTANDING HISTORY.

AND IT HELPED HER CULTIVATE A STRONG INDEPENDENT ATTITUDE AND A FASCINATION FOR THE CITY SHE WOULD SOON CALL HOME.

“IT’S BROCCOLI, DEAR.”
“I SAY IT’S SPINACH, AND I SAY THE HELL WITH IT.”

COLUMBIA SUMMER 2017
When Green was ten, her mom announced: "We're moving to New York City." Her parents wanted to give her and her two siblings exposure to culture.

As a teen, Green was coming into Manhattan regularly, as she recalls, the city "was dirty and covered in graffiti. It was great. I miss it."

The Greens lived near a drug store that had spinner racks of classic MAD magazine reprints— which she devoured.

In high school, Green frequently walked across the George Washington Bridge to explore The Cloisters Museum.

"I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life."

The visual storytelling on display in artifacts from the Middle Ages resonated with what she saw in comics.
Comics seemed to follow her everywhere.

Back when Green was 11, she got braces. To her delight, her orthodontist had stacks of Archie comics.

She ended up staying for hours after her appointments reading...

“I loved those comics. I thought that's what high school was going to be like. I was mistaken.”

High school proved to be a difficult and troubled time for Green.

It's there she discovered underground comics and the comics magazine Heavy Metal.

- Which blew her mind with its slate of European cartoonists.

- As well as American Charles Burns, whose work took her breath away and spoke directly to feelings high school evoked.

She made it to college in 1976, but dropped out after one semester and started bartending, which she would do for the next 15 years.

Bartending taught her how to work with and talk to difficult people and grin like a Cheshire cat when she wasn't "feeling smiley."
During this time, Green chased many different dreams trying to find her way.

In 1989 she went to massage therapy school.

While she earned her certificate, she decided she didn’t want to practice.

But her scores in physiology and anatomy made her consider becoming a doctor.

First, she needed a B.A., so she went to NYU. She ended up studying medieval history.

Her father, however, had always wanted her to go into sales.

You’re smart, you’re attractive, you’re personable, and you’d do so well.

But I want a job that makes me happy!

This made him really angry.

A job’s not supposed to make you happy; a job’s supposed to make you enough money so you can do what makes you happy in your free time.

“I’ve done a lot of trying and abandoning things in my life. It was hard on my parents, who thought I was a quitter. But I just wanted to figure out what was right for me.”

In 1993, Green came to Columbia and got a master’s in history.

She wanted to stay at Columbia, so she began working as the supervisor of Butler Reserves, and in 2000, she went to Rutgers for library science in order to apply to be Columbia’s medieval-history librarian.

In 2002 she got the job.
AS GREEN SETTLED IN AT COLUMBIA, SHE WONDERED WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN COMICS.

SHE BOUGHT A COPY OF PAUL HORNSCHEMBLER’S MOTHER, COME HOME.

- ITS DEPICTION OF FAMILY AND LOSS OPENED GREEN’S EYES TO WHAT COMICS COULD BE AND SPARKED AN IDEA.

THE LIBRARY’S HOLDINGS INCLUDED JUST THREE GRAPHIC NOVELS: MAUS, PERSEPOLIS, AND PALESTINE — “WORKS THAT HAD RECEIVED ENOUGH ATTENTION TO NOT BE CONSIDERED COMICS.”

RECOGNIZING THAT THE STUDY OF COMICS OF ALL SORTS WAS ON THE RISE, IN 2005 GREEN MADE THE CASE THAT THE LIBRARY GET AHEAD OF THE CURVE.

IN 2008 GREEN CREATED AN EXHIBITION AT BUTLER, “COMICS IN THE CURRICULUM,” DEMONSTRATING WAYS THAT THEMES FROM COMICS COULD BE TAUGHT IN COURSES.

AND FROM THERE, SHE BEGAN BUILDING A COLLECTION.

FACULTY IN ENGLISH, NARRATIVE MEDICINE, AND AMERICAN AND EAST ASIAN STUDIES GOT INTERESTED AND NUMEROUS CLASSES HAVE SINCE BEEN OFFERED ACROSS CAMPUS.

AND FROM THERE, SHE BEGAN BUILDING A COLLECTION.

THE COLLECTION STARTED TO TAKE SHAPE.

THEN, IN 2010, OUT OF THE BLUE, LEGENDARY X-MEN AUTHOR CHRIS CLAREMOND CONTRACTED GREEN TO OFFER UP HIS ARCHIVES.

OTHERS FOLLOWED.

BAMF

THIS BURGEONING CATALOGUE INCLUDES MANUSCRIPTS, SKETCHES, ORIGINAL ART, CORRESPONDENCE, CONTRACTS, AND OTHER MATERIALS.

FROM COMICS ICONS LIKE MAO’S AL JAFFEI; HOWARD CRUSE, THE FATHER OF GAY COMICS; EARLY BATMAN CONTRIBUTOR JERRY ROBINSON; ELFQUEST CREATORS WENDY AND RICHARD Pini; KITCHEN SINK PRESS; AND CARTOONIST MORT GERNERG.
WHAT LESSON CAN WE DRAW FROM KAREN’S ADVENTURES?

HERE WE GO WITH AN HOMAGE TO AL JAFFEE’S MAD FOLD-IN

Help Karen navigate the twists and turns of her seemingly chaotic path by folding the page.

NOW GROWN ATTENDS COMIC CONVENTIONS WORLDWIDE.

MODERATES PANELS.

TEACHES, ORGANIZES FESTIVALS, CO-PRODUCED A DOCUMENTARY FILM.

JUDGED THE EISNER AWARDS AND PULITZER PRIZE IN EDITORIAL CARTOONING, AND

HANGS OUT WITH HER CARTOONIST HEROES LIKE JULIES FEIFFER, DREW FRIEDMAN, AND AL JAFFEE.

“WHAT IS GOING ON WITH MY LIFE?!?”

YOU NEVER KNOW YOU’RE FOLLOWING A PATH WHILE ON IT. LOOKING BACK, YOU SEE HOW IT ALL CAME TOGETHER. FOR HER CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER LED TO THE UNIVERSITY.

Nick Sousanis ’14TC is the author of Unfattening, originally his doctoral dissertation written and drawn entirely in comics form, published by Harvard University Press in 2015. He is an assistant professor at San Francisco State U, where he’s developing an interdisciplinary program in comics studies. See more at www.spinweaveandcut.com.