A Life in Comics: The Graphic Adventures of Karen Green

How a Butler librarian became Columbia’s first curator for comics and cartoons.

By Nick Sousanis '14TC | Summer 2017
Comics, once marginalized, have taken their rightful place in this venerable repository of knowledge.

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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 life 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.

Her parents tried to get her to play outside, but she'd take her book and keep reading.

And it helped her cultivate a strong independent attitude and a fascination for the city she would soon call home.

“I see the willow, and I see the willow with it.”
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.
As Green settled in at Columbia, she wondered what was happening in comics.

She bought a copy of Paul Hornschemeier'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.

The collection started to take shape.

Then, in 2010, out of the blue, legendary X-Men author Chris Claremont contacted Green to offer up his archives.

Others followed.

This burgeoning catalogue includes manuscripts, sketches, original art, correspondence, contracts, and other materials.

From comics icons like Mad's Al Jaffee, Howard Cruse, the father of gay comics; early Batman contributor Jerry Robinson; Elfquest creators Wendy and Richard Pini; Kitchen Sink Press; and cartoonist Mort Gerberg.

*And that collection of three? Now over 14,000 volumes!*