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  |  
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A LIFE IN COMICS

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GREEN, WHO GROW 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.

“I’ll have brocoli, dear.”

“I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it.”

WHEN GREEN WAS TEN, HER MOM ANNOUNCED:

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.
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 SPENT 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 SPEAK DIRECTLY TO FEELINGS HIGH SCHOOL EVOKED.

SHE MADE IT TO COLLEGE IN 1978, BUT DROPPED OUT AFTER ONE SEMESTER AND STARTED BARTENDING, WHICH SHE WOULD DO FOR THE NEXT 15 YEARS.

DURING THIS TIME, GREEN CHASED MANY DIFFERENT DREAMS TRYING TO FIND HER WAY.

IN 1988 SHE WENT TO MASSAGE THERAPY SCHOOL.

BARTENDING TAUGHT HER HOW TO WORK WITH AND TALK TO DIFFICULT PEOPLE AND GRIN LIKE A CHESHIRE CAT WHEN SHE WASN'T "FEELING SMILY."
Nick Sousanis '14TC

Read more from Nick Sousanis '14TC