Foreword

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Of Panels and Patrons

In 2005, James Turner created Rex Libris, a comic book series featuring the thrilling adventures of a public librarian with Coke-bottle glasses and an arsenal of high-tech weaponry. As revealed in the first issue, the comic chronicles "the tumultuous tales of the public library system and its unending battle against the forces of evil." But this isn’t mundane evil we’re talking about. As Turner puts it, Rex Libris’s struggle is “not just confined to our terrestrial sphere, but extends out into the furthest reaches of the cosmos ... and beyond!” Beginning his career in the original Library of Alexandria, Rex is over a thousand years old and a member of the Ordo Biblioteca, a secret international society of librarians. In his exploits he confronts dangers that every librarian must face, “patrons so terrible, so horrific, that they cannot be described ... without the risk of driving readers mad.” In Turner’s apt hands, career librarians are freed from their debilitating stereotypes (no uptightness or prissiness here) and are transformed into something hip and heroic. It’s like Billy Batson uttering the wizard’s name, “Shazam!” and turning into Captain Marvel.

There is a similar transformation taking place in our contemporary libraries. As one contributor to this volume asks, alluding to the power of nomenclature, “What’s in a name?” For many librarians, that name is graphic novels, and the answer to the question is becoming increasingly undeniable. No longer are teachers, researchers, and catalogers wrestling with the seriousness or value of comics—well, some still do, although I would guess that those unenlightened few aren’t thumbing through these pages—but instead, they have taken their prominence as a given and are moving on to more significant inquiries. Many of those questions, and the answers they provide, can be found in the book you now hold in your hands. What you are about to read is a series of conversations on the readership, the history, the categorization, the research, the promotion, and the organizational strategies surrounding graphic novels and their place in our libraries today. The authors initiating these conversations are all researchers and librarians, individuals keenly attuned to the tastes of the reading public, the needs of students, and the demands of a growing body of scholars who are making comics their critical focus. They understand the impact of graphic novels in our contemporary culture. What is more, these contributors are conversant in the language of comics—its use of images and words, the frames on the page, and the blank spaces or “gutters” that lie in-between. In the fullest sense of the word, what we have here is a full-fledged panel discussion.
And the significance of paneled narrative is what this book is all about. Robert G. Weiner has pulled together a variety of perspectives on graphic novel catalogs, and there is something here for librarians and educators of every stripe. Those with nascent graphic novel collections will find a wealth of information on how to develop and organize their holdings. Librarians at larger research institutions can uncover strategies for complementing the work of comics’ scholars. Archivists have in this book a series of dialogues on the benefits and costs of graphic collections. Educators will discover a number of revealing surveys and studies concerning the demographics and reading habits of student populations. Those in secondary education as well as public libraries can learn of methods for expanding youth-friendly environments. And researchers interested in the history of graphic novels will discover the undeniable role libraries have played in the medium’s success.

When it comes to comics and catalogers, Rob Weiner knows his stuff. Like Rex Libris, he has undertaken battles against menacing patrons whose ignorance of graphic novels extends well beyond the realm of the stacks. The author/editor of several books on popular culture (including Marvel Graphic Novels and Related Publications [2008] and Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero [2009]), Weiner understands the possibilities within the medium and the promise that they bring to libraries. His approach is inclusive. Unlike those found in other recent studies of graphic narrative, the contributors to this volume are not only interested in the impact of “literary” or non-generic comics ... you know, titles like Maus, Blankets, and Persepolis, the kind of comics that have come to define “the graphic novel” for so many educators. They are also concerned with the more popular genres (superhero, manga, crime, and horror comics) and how librarians take full advantage of readers’ expansive tastes. Weiner makes sure that his approach is democratic. What you will find in the pages that follow is nothing less than a transformation, a series of essays that can change the way you envision your online catalog. Read on, and you’ll see that lying behind the mild-mannered façade of our libraries is a graphic adventurer just waiting to get out. Oh Mighty Isis!