



## RIGHT TO READ

Teri S. **Lesesne**, editor

Karin **Perry** and James Bucky **Carter**



# Asking Questions, Seeking Answers, Challenging Assumptions

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**A**s a member of ALAN, I am blessed with colleagues who are passionate about books, reading, young adults, and literacy and literature. I asked two of my ALAN colleagues to add their voices to this column. Karin Perry is the ALAN Membership Secretary. She is also a colleague of mine in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University. Karin has personal experiences with fighting against censorship. Recently, she has been conducting research among teachers and librarians to determine how gatekeeping might affect purchasing decisions in the school library. She is joined in this issue by James Bucky Carter, another ALAN colleague. Bucky has served on the ALAN Board of Directors and chaired many ALAN committees. He is currently a member of the Anti-censorship Committee. Bucky's expertise includes comics and graphic novels, which comprise the focus for his contribution to the column. Thanks, Karin and Bucky, for your insights.

## Are You a Gatekeeper?

Karin Perry

Picture this. You're a school librarian who has just received your yearly book budget and is in the process of putting together your order. You've been reading review journals and using a vendor's online website

to help you choose your books. You've seen one title pop up over and over again in multiple journals and online from fellow librarians and book bloggers. All the sources say the same thing—the book is wonderful (it even has several starred reviews), but it has *a lot* of questionable language, talk of sex, and some underage drinking and smoking. You check the age-level recommendations and notice that the title is listed for readers in grades 9–12 and has a 16-year-old protagonist. You work in a high school. You wonder if people will complain about the language, sex, and smoking. You decide to leave the title off of your list just to be safe. You think, *if someone wants to read it badly enough, he/she can go get it from the public library*. You are guilty of self-censorship.

Self-censorship comes “in many seemingly innocuous forms like book labeling, parental control requirements, and restricted rooms and shelves” (Hill, 2010, p. 10). It is also embodied in the act of choosing not to purchase books based upon fear of controversial content or, in the worst case, because the content runs counter to the librarian's personal beliefs. While any type of censorship is a danger to readers' rights, self-censorship is especially hazardous. Self-censorship can be invisible.

Generally, school districts have selection policies to assist with book purchases and reconsideration policies to follow when materials are challenged. However, when self-censorship comes into play, these important policies tend to be ignored. Recently, I conducted a survey regarding the inclusion of controversial materials in library and/or classroom collections

(librarians: n = 299, teachers: n = 92). Findings reveal that 30% of teachers and librarians reported being unaware of the existence of these policies in their school

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districts. So in terms of warding off incidents of censorship, particularly self-censorship, a reasonable first step would be to educate teachers, librarians, and administrators as to the purpose and importance of having selection and reconsideration policies in place. Such documents provide guidelines for purchasing books and protection if someone lodges a complaint against

one in your collection; you can find samples on the ALAN SpeakLoudly resources page (<http://www.alanya.org/page/censorship-committee>).

Self-censorship stems from “fear that something might happen” (Hill, 2010). Teachers and librarians second-guess themselves and remove books to avoid complaints from parents, students, administrators, or members of the community. When asked if they ever had a parent complain about a book in their school or classroom library, 64% of the surveyed teachers and librarians responded yes; 22% of those actually removed the book because of the complaint. When asked whether or not they followed the procedure specified in the district’s reconsideration policy before they removed the book, 51% of respondents reported following policy, while 49% either stated they did not or did not answer the question. As a result, we know that 69 people out of the 140 who did answer removed the book from their collection without following the procedures of a policy. This may not seem like a lot, but 69 classrooms or libraries subsequently have one fewer book available for students.

We can even go a step further. What if the potentially challenged book is never purchased for the school or library in the first place? Avoiding the purchase of materials to avoid complaints is another form of self-censorship. After Barry Lyga’s *Boy Toy* (2007) was published in 2007, he anticipated trouble. *Boy Toy* is about a 12-year-old boy who engages in a

sexual relationship with his teacher. Lyga expected it “to spark letters to local papers, trigger complaints to the school board, and incite some parents to yank it from library shelves” (Whelan, 2009, p. 27). None of that happened. Why? Because bookstores placed *Boy Toy* in the adult section, if they carried it at all. Even more damaging, librarians weren’t recommending it or buying it “just in case someone complained” (Whelan, 2009, p. 27), even though the book received rave reviews from professional journals and major newspapers.

To see how common this issue is, the survey included a question about purchases. When asked if they avoided purchasing a book because of a potential complaint, 53% of respondents answered yes. Further, when asked if they remembered what they chose not to purchase, respondents listed both specific titles and general subjects they hadn’t and wouldn’t purchase for their libraries/classrooms. Attempts to justify these decisions often centered on age appropriateness (23.97% of the responses), which is a valid reason for not including a book in a collection. For instance, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson is not intended for an elementary-aged audience. The conceits and concepts of the text require readers who have had sufficient experience reading science fiction and are acquainted with the world of advertising and how goods are “sold” to unsuspecting consumers. Additionally, the main characters are much older than the typical elementary school student.

Other statements of justification (3%) indicated that administrators requested a book be removed from the collection. Administrators must also follow school policy, so teachers and librarians should have the materials for reconsideration at their fingertips in case administrators request a book be removed without following proper procedures. The most startling responses, however, were those that reflected the personal opinions of teachers and librarians. For example, 70.25% of respondents stated that they avoided the purchase of books because they included sex, drugs or drinking, LGBTQ characters, or religious topics.

The last question I asked in the survey was inspired by a conversation I had with a librarian at a workshop where I book-talked new young adult literature. The issue of strong language in some books came up at the end of the session, so we had an

impromptu discussion. I articulated the purpose of the language in the story—authenticity of the situation—as well as the point about following the selection policy. It shocked me when one of the workshop attendees spoke up to say that she used a black marker to cover the offensive words so the book could stay in circulation. She is not alone in her behavior; when asked, 11% of survey respondents admitted to covering up possibly offensive words or passages in books. While this isn't a large number of people, it is too many for a group of educators who should be devoted to providing children with an information-rich environment filled with multiple points of views.

So, what do you do to prevent self-censorship? Unfortunately, there isn't much you can do if you aren't willing to be objective about the books you put in your collection. Teachers and librarians need to closely examine both their collections and selection patterns. They must determine “whether they are positive selectors or negative censors. Do they seek reasons to keep a book, as a selector would do, or do they look for reasons to reject it, as censors do?” (Asheim, 1953). Teachers and librarians need to recognize their personal biases and make every attempt to struggle against them in order to provide a wide range of reading choices for students (Coley, 2002).

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*Karin Perry is an assistant professor of Library Science at Sam Houston State University. You can keep up with her reading on Twitter @kperry, <http://www.goodreads.com/kperry>, or on her blog at <http://www.karinsbooknook.com>.*

## Holy Hegemony!: Comics, Race, and Challenging Assumptions about the Readership and Affordances of the Democratic Medium

James Bucky Carter

In 2008, I asserted that not integrating comics and other visual texts into classrooms equated to elitism, classism, and even racism (Carter, 2008). With specific regard to comics, that might seem an overblown assertion, especially if one assumes Whiteness among comics' readership. But can we assume Whiteness? If not, is there more credence to my claim? Does making room for comics in the classroom afford students multicultural casts and diversities of diversities? Could comics be a force of equity fostering inclusion and culturally responsive curricula? And just what *does* the average comic reader look like, anyway?

These questions merit scholarly research, though educators must embrace the fact that some demographic information will necessarily come from market research. Currently, the average American comics reader is considered to be a male between 18 and 40 years old with disposable income. However, “the [comics reading] demographic that seems to be growing the fastest is young women, aged 17–33” (Pantozzi, 2014). Schenker (2014) suggests young women account for 46.67% of the market share. Other studies suggest a readership closer to 20% (I Like Comics Too, 2014), but the numbers are increasing. Comics reading wasn't always considered a boy's domain, of course. Tilley (2014) informs us that comics reading was essentially ubiquitous among all young people in the 1940s and 1950s. As the superhero genre regained a foothold in the 1960s, so too did the male reading majority. We may still assume the average comics reader is male, but female readership is an historic and contemporary force not to ignore.

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But what about assumed Whiteness? While demographics based on race are hard to find in comics scholarship and market research, the concept of assumed Whiteness among comics readers is strong enough that groups have organized to combat it. We Are Comics (<http://wearecomics.tumblr.com/>) joins organizations like The Nerds of Color “to look at nerd/geek fandom with a culturally critical eye” (<http://thenerdsofcolor.org/about/>) and challenge assumed White, male, and even heteronormative hegemony. The mission statement for We Are Comics reads:

We Are Comics[. . .] And we are a lot more diverse than you might think. We Are Comics is a campaign to show—and celebrate—the faces of our community, our industry, and our culture; to promote the visibility of marginalized members of our population; and to stand in solidarity against harassment and abuse.

All comics readers are encouraged to post photos and their comics-reading history to the organization’s social media pages to

promote a comics fandom that is diverse in as many iterations as “diverse” can take.

Further, while recent education policies like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) might force a new cultural literacy approach and canon upon teachers, even as other stakeholders favor approaches privileging local texts or texts mirroring individual class’s cultures and ethnicities, teachers should be hesitant to accept

a United States of America-centric sense of the average comics reader, just as they should resist narrowed notions of curriculum. Given strong readerships in France, Belgium, Japan, India, Mexico, Italy, China, and South Korea and the cross-importation of these comics in the global market, assuming the average Earthling comics reader is Anglo may be inaccurate. Most likely, he/she is not a citizen of the US, either, nor is he/she Caucasian.

With the issue of assumed demography suitably challenged, it is worth noting that most American

comics, certainly most super-hero comics, are produced by White people. However, publishers are making concerted efforts to offer increasingly diverse casts. Indeed, while many diversity advocates have asked where the epic heroes of color are in young adult literature, they seem to have overlooked a great place to find them: American super-hero comics.

Marvel team book series like Young Avengers, Avengers Academy, Runaways, and the X-Men have for decades made diversity of import regarding gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The latest iteration of Ms. Marvel is Kamala Khan, a Muslim American teenager; Ultimate Spider-Man is Miles Morales, a Black Latino teen. Ava Ayala, the latest White Tiger, is a Latina teen. Excepting Ayala, each carries eponymous titles. Characters like Amadeus Cho, Hazmat, and Nico Minoru are Asian American heroes strong enough to lead teams in the Marvel universe, or, in the case of Cho, to make the Hulk his sidekick!

DC, the other established leader of superhero comics, also has increased efforts to offer more diverse heroes, but perhaps with less fanfare because many of their non-White heroes aren’t young adults, as is the case with every Marvel hero mentioned herein. A noteworthy exception for DC is Jaime Reyes, a teen from El Paso, Texas, who has starred in two ongoing series as the Blue Beetle. The adventures of all of these YA teen heroes of color are found easily in trade paperback via a good online bookstore or a conversation with a knowledgeable comic store owner.

Having challenged possible stereotypical hermeneutics of comics readers, I hope teachers might consider comics as multicultural literature and see their presence in the classroom as one that supports equity, social justice, and culturally responsive learning opportunities. Consider the similarities between rap/hip-hop and comics (especially superhero comics) revealed by Ed Piskor in *Hip Hop Family Tree: Two-In-One* (2014), a book in which he reveals that many pioneers of rap were also inspired by comics. Both rap/hip-hop and comics:

1. are American art forms;
2. have been cultural pariahs;
3. feature urban landscapes;
4. regularly have major figures debut on/in someone else’s song/title;
5. embrace alter egos and costumes;
6. offer epic battles;

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7. use iconic group representation; and
8. support team-ups/collaborations and cross-overs.

If we're willing to accept rap and hip-hop into our classes—and are eager to show how we're meeting youths where they are by being so culturally attuned—why sidestep a form with clear parallels and from which those urban poets gained inspiration?

Comics are not a certain race's domain, nor a certain gender's or sexuality's. Indeed, many comic scholars, creators, and teachers see comics as the ultimate democratic medium. Sure, we need more demographic research on comics readers, but it is precisely because comics are or can be *anyone's—everyone's*—domain that educators must not overlook their affordances regarding cultural access, diversity, literacy, equity, and social justice.

**James Bucky Carter** studies the intersections of comics and literacy. He earned his doctorate in English Education from the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia and has taught English language arts classes at

the University of Southern Mississippi, the University of Texas at El Paso, and Washington State University.

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