

Super Higher Education: The role of academics in comic books, 1938-2015. (0277)

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Higher education plays a prominent role in comic book narratives from 1938 (Reynolds, forthcoming). In these stories, numerous superheroes go to college under the cover of their secret identities (e.g. Superman, Supergirl, and Spiderman), young people treat university as an inevitable next step after high school, and even popular heroic animals find themselves saving the day in some way on campus including Lassie and Yogi Bear (Reynolds). Although Kelly (2009) and Harrison (2009) both analyze aspects of higher education in comic strips, little work uses the unique and ubiquitous medium of comic books to further examine fictional higher education representations.

Entertainment media and fictional narratives influence the attitudes, values and behaviors of its consumers (e.g. Kellner, 2009). Indeed, just one viewing of seventies hit *Animal House* negatively impacted college students value of academic work (Wasyliw & Currie, 2012). As cultivation theory suggests, exposure to repeated images, over time, contributes to individual's ways of knowing about the world and influences expectations (Gerbner, 1999). More so than TV shows, which is intimately linked with cultivation theory, comic books provide stories with characters who remain relevant throughout decades not merely tv seasons -Superman may have flown through the pages of Action Comics starting in 1938 but the same character and his alter ego Clark Kent remain culturally relevant today. As masses of young people have consumed repeated messages about higher education from comic books since the 1930s, this qualitative study determines the depiction of academics in comic book narratives from 1938-2015. Academics act as a symbol for higher education in popular culture (Tobolowsky, 2006; Reynolds, 2014) but nothing is known about the portrayal of them in comic books and the subsequent expectations generated for college students or society at large. Therefore, our broad, exploratory research questions include: How are academics represented in comic books? Who are comic book academics? What role do they assume in narratives? Does their portrayal remain consistent across time?

Recent research about comic books focuses on the power of medium, especially its influence on readers regarding literacy and identity. As comics are multi-modal texts, one of the ways they develop the literacy of readers is through engagement in complex narrative environments, which improve comprehension and literacy and provide multiple ways of reinforcing or sophisticating messages (Jacobs, 2013). Consumption of comic books throughout the cognitive and emotional development of growing up imparts an enduring relationship between readers and superheroes (Fujioka, 1999). In fact, Damico & Quay (2006) discovered that college student identities were linked with their emotional attachment to childhood heroes. In career counseling Savickas (2011) even explores his clients' professional identity by facilitating self-reflection about childhood heroes. Therefore, the relationship between comic book heroes and academics could lead to specific expectations and subsequent behaviors regarding actual academics.

This paper qualitatively analyses the portrayal of academics as main or support characters in over 150 comic books.¹ As there is no comprehensive database for comic books, online keyword searches developed a database of over 700 comic including the setting and characters of higher education from 1938-2015. The presence of professorial characters and availability of the comics determined the purposeful sample of over 150 comics for this paper. Our analysis consisted of combining in-depth readings of the narratives, coding the visual and textual elements of the stories, and memo-ing interpretative comments to build themes (Carspecken, 1996).

Three dominant themes emerged in our preliminary analysis of academics in this sample of comic book narratives: the importance of expertise, the dominance of STEM, and the absent or grotesque. This paper provides a brief outline of these themes.

Expertise emerges as the predominant rationale for the purpose of professors, both as characters and as a part of higher education. Professors are established as the characters that innovate, discover, and create both cutting edge technology and bold scientific experiments that are often needed to save the day. For example, Ironman seeks an artifact from a professor to defeat aliens (e.g. *The Defenders*, 1973). Only rarely do professors deliberately work for nefarious purposes (e.g. *Captain Aero*, #3, 1944). Sometimes their work threatens others, but usually because something unexpected occurs or evil-doers covet their work (*Amazing Mystery Funnies*, #20, 1939). In comic books, professors work is valued and of use providing impetus for plots and solutions for problems, “super” or otherwise.

STEM fields dominate the depictions of discipline in higher education comics. Professors work in laboratories, on scientific research, surrounded by technological and chemical apparatus where their work consists of experiments rather than writing. Scientific work and principles support superheroes through the development of new devices or provides guidance with problem-solving. Unlike other media where professors’ work is portrayed as impractical and worthless (Tobolowsky, forthcoming), comic book professors are vital to the business of superheroes and indeed become superheroes themselves (e.g. *The Atom*).

Women and minorities academics are minimized in comic book higher education. They are either absent or grotesquely portrayed in some way with white, presumably heterosexual, men serving as the scientific experts. For example, in *Supergirl* a female professor blinded by an accident in space lashes out at the super hero in sustained, exaggerated, and irrational fury (*Action Comics*: #375 & #376, 1968). There are so few portrayals of female academics and here a two-issue story arc focuses on unreasonable female anger. Alternatively in *Captain Aero* (#3, 1944) racist depictions of a Japanese professor contribute to, or explain, his villainy.

Comic book academics are white male scientists who do important work. However, these homogenous portrayals could lead to gendered expectations of role. Worryingly, comic book characters who differ from this uniform portrayal are deficient in ways that align with sexist and racist messaging. These portrayals have possible

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percussions for the validity of an inclusive profession and non-differentiated expectations of students, or others, based on gender, race, and discipline.

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