*Lagniappe (lăn-yăp´, lăn´ yăp´) n. An extra or unexpected gift or benefit. [Louisiana French]

Comics Go to College:
The Murray Collection at Duke University

by *Megan Lewis*

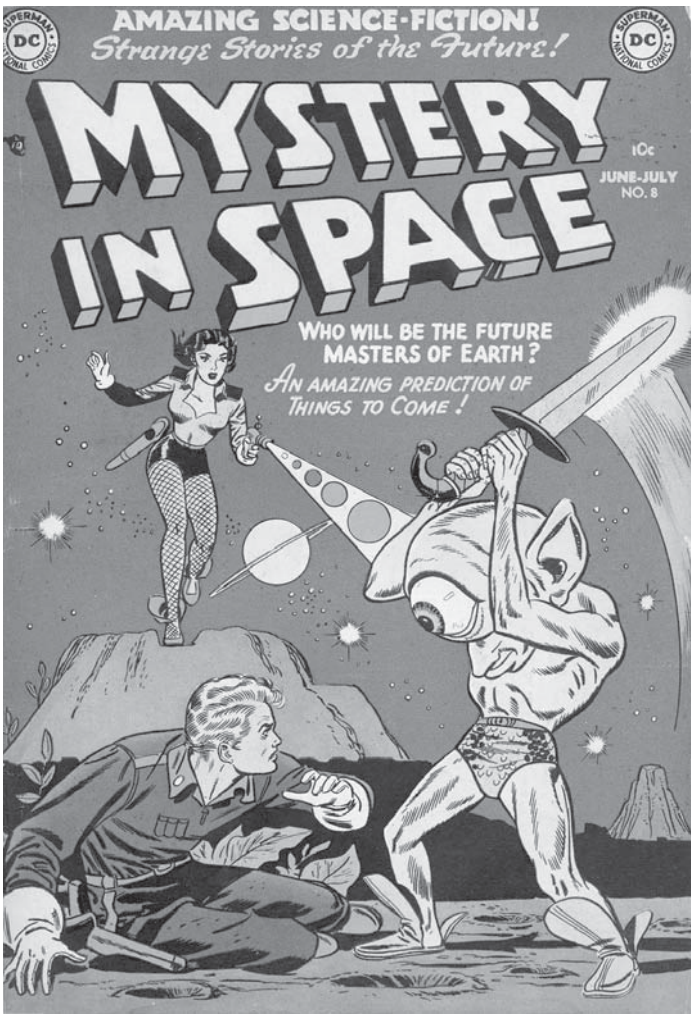
For many of us, reading comic books is a formative childhood experience. Indeed, we can "read" comics pictorially before we can actually read. Comics are often the first reading material we select for ourselves and buy with our own money. The small-town newsstand where my brother and I bought Archie comics in the mid-'70s is etched into a corner of my brain: the ring of the bell as we opened the wooden door, the mingled smells of newsprint and tobacco, and the furtive glances towards the counter while we read as many comics as possible just out of the proprietor's sight.
Since the 1930s, comics have been an integral part of the American scene. They have both influenced our collective imagination and reflected the eras in which they were published. From movies (*The Matrix*) to literature (Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*) to art (Roy Lichtenstein), the footprint of comics on the culture at large is a deep one. Themes ranging from World War II to racism to women's lib provide unintentional commentary on the topical preoccupations of changing times.
As the original readers and collectors of comic books—the silent generation and the baby boomers—continue to age, their collections will inevitably change hands. Some will be sold piecemeal to private collectors; some will find their way to libraries. Most will be lost. While these collections migrate, cultural studies continue to gain ground in academia. As a result, comics are gradually taking their place in academic libraries alongside other cultural documentation. This can be seen as evidence of the narrowing divide between high art and popular culture.

A recent gift to Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library (RBMSCL) has vaulted Duke into the company of major comics repositories and made it the home of the largest comics research collection in the Southeast. This extraordinary bequest came from brothers Edwin and Terry Murray, who have been collecting comics and related material for over forty years. The Murrays consider this collection their life's work. They are as pleased that it will bear their names in perpetuity as Duke is to be the beneficiary of their generosity.

The brothers began collecting comics in the '50s, when they were young boys with asthma and allergies who had to endure frequent shots. On the

way back from their doctor's appointment each week, they stopped by a neighborhood pharmacy where they would buy a few comics. The first one Edwin ever purchased was *Tarzan* No. 63, 1954, in line with his childhood goal of becoming a zookeeper. That first comic was so well-loved that it eventually fell apart and was replaced with another copy.

As the brothers grew up, their penchant for comics progressed from reading to collecting to active fandom. Edwin published his own fanzines, *Vertigo!* and *Trefoil*, from the late '60s though the early '80s, while Terry was the author of *Science Fiction Magazine Story Index, 1926-1995* (McFarland, 1999). The Murrays hosted "mini-cons," gatherings of like-minded fans, four times a year at their Durham home. As the decades passed, their collection grew exponentially and diversified to encompass role-playing games, science fiction magazines, buyer's guides, fanzines, and other materials. In the end, the collection sprawled through much of the space in their house, including their mother's bedroom. Loucile Murray not only tolerated the encroachment on her space, but supported her sons by feeding the one hundred or more fans that came to the mini-cons.



Courtesy of the "Edwin and Terry Murray Collection of Pulp Culture," Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

The Murray family has long-standing connections to Duke. Edwin graduated with a psychology degree in 1972, while Terry was a student in the engineering program for two years. Their father worked for the University for more than thirty years, and their uncle was the Duke football coach and stadium namesake, Wallace Wade. As Edwin puts it, the family "bleed[s] Duke blue," so the University was their first choice when the Murrays started thinking about a permanent home for their collection. They were advised to find a place with the infrastructure to house their materials properly and to make them available to the public in a timely fashion, suggestions they bore in mind when making their decision about a repository.

In 1988, the Murrays approached Duke Libraries for the first time about a potential donation. Then-curator of rare books, John Sharpe, was intrigued. Ultimately, however, Edwin and Terry were still too devoted to their materials and too actively engaged with their collecting work to part with it at that time. Fourteen years later, driven by changing priorities and a severe space crunch, the Murrays contacted the RBMSCL, this time ready to re-house their collection. Their offer was happily accepted.

Under the direction of former head of collection development Tim West, the materials were taken to their new home. It took five trips to the Murray's house with a small truck over a period of nine months to deliver the items to the RBMSCL. By this time, the collection had grown to more than 67,000 comic books; 5,000 pulp magazines; several thousand comics fanzines; 500 role-playing games; science fiction and fantasy fiction books and magazines; buyer's guides and magazines about comics; comics and movie posters; newspaper comic strip clippings; and original comics art. This trove of material is known at Duke as the "Edwin and Terry Murray Collection of Pulp Culture."

While some may question the place of popular materials in an academic setting, the Murray Collection has the potential to support a wide range of scholarly pursuits, from research in cultural anthropology to American

History to women's studies. As Randall Scott, curator of Michigan State University's Comic Arts Collection, puts it, "In the entertainment we all enjoy is embedded the information about our culture that we're going to want to study in the future."[1] The materials in this collection can be studied both as documentation of the culture from which they sprang and as works of art and literature to be analyzed from a traditional liberal-humanist perspective. Academic interest in comics has increased in recent years. Scott notes that three "solid" books on the topic appeared in the summer of 2002 alone. In fact, a search of the MLA bibliography reveals thirty-four works on the subject of comic books published in 2003.

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The Murray Collection dovetails nicely with other popular culture materials in the research centers within Duke's RBMSCL. The John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History includes material ranging from vintage advertising cookbooks to Pond's Cold Cream ads of the 1920s to photos of 1950s billboards. The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture holds comics by women artists and a large collection of contemporary 'zines on various topics by women and girls. On the enduring value of popular culture, syndicated comics columnist Andrew Smith says, "Comic books, like all pop culture, reflect who we are instead of who we say we are. They're a mirror, and even if we want to look away, we shouldn't."[2] These "mirrors" form an important part of our cultural heritage, so it makes sense for special collections repositories to collect them.

Astounding by virtue of its sheer breadth and depth, the collection has a nearly comprehensive run of everything produced by the two major publishing houses, DC and Marvel, from the 1960s though the turn of the new century. (Note that although they collected both publishers, the brothers were DC fans in an era when DC and Marvel were the Duke and Carolina of the comics world.) Superheroes were their favorite genre, and form the collection's core, which includes a near-complete run of *Superman* going back to the 1930s, many early Batman issues, and debuts of the *Incredible Hulk* and *Spider-Man*. Terry's specialty is science fiction, and there is a fine selection of sci-fi and surprisingly graphic DC horror comics published before the industry accepted the Comics Code of 1954 in order to stave off government censorship.

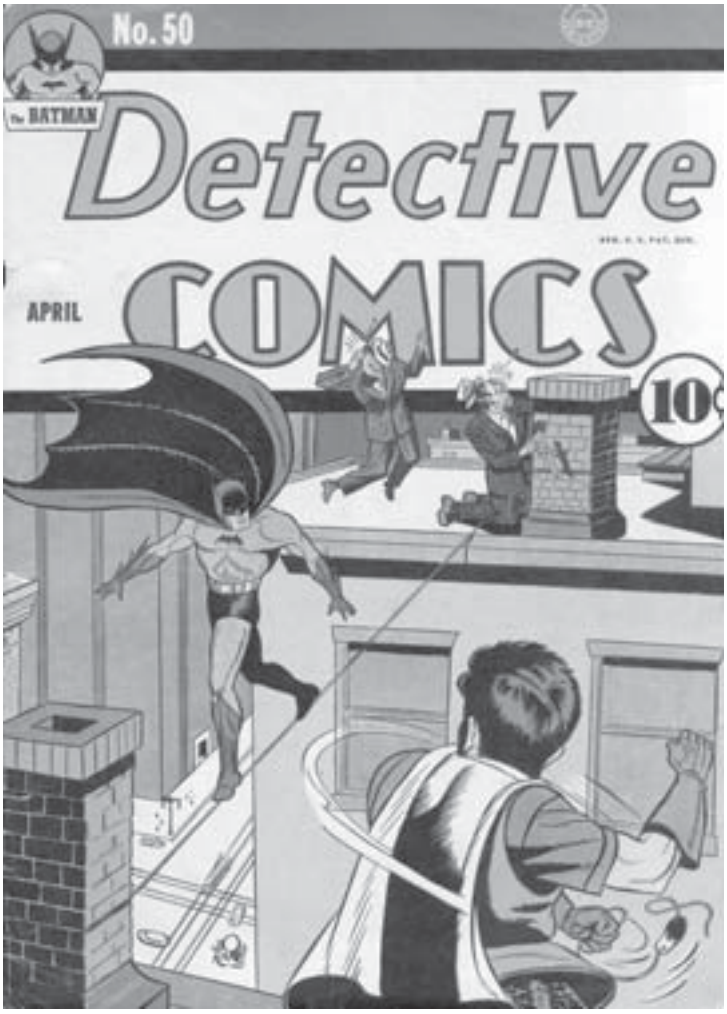
Another outstanding feature of the collection is its wide range of early comics. Coupled with the holdings spanning 1970 to 2001, researchers are afforded an excellent perspective on the entire history of the modern American comic book. Approximately one-third of the comics date from the Golden (1938-1945), the Atom (1946-1956), and the Silver (1956-1969) Ages of comics.[3] Virtually every major American genre is represented. Besides the aforementioned superhero, sci-fi and horror, the collection includes funny animals, westerns, fantasy, crime, humor, biography, romance, and war comics. There is also a sampling of alternative "comix" from the late '60s and early '70s, penned by R. Crumb and his ilk, known for their explicit depictions of sex and drugs.

Further distinguishing the Murray Collection are its materials documenting the passionate and tightly knit subculture of comics fandom. These include fanzines, personal correspondence, and material related to the

Murrays' mini-cons. Edwin was at the center of comics fandom in the '60s and '70s, and his collection of fanzines is unparalleled. One such fanzine, *Comics Review*, contains the extremely rare first story published by Stephen King (credited as "Steve King") from 1965, "I Was a Teenage Grave Robber."

Role-playing games are a relatively uncharted collecting area for academic libraries. The Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy at the Toronto Public Library has a significant collection of role-playing games, and even provides rooms where patrons can gather to play them. However, the only other collection in an academic library this author is aware of is the J. Lloyd Eaton Collection of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, and Utopia at the University of California–Riverside, which includes a small number of games. When the publishers of the well-known role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* heard of the Murray Collection, they were interested in donating material to round out the holdings, leaving the door open for future Duke acquisitions in that area.

The brothers were well-organized collectors who kept good records. Their materials contain fascinating documentation of the history of the collection itself. These include clippings from a spate of newspaper articles in the late '60 and early '70s featuring photos of the youthful brothers. According to these articles, their comic books numbered 6,700 at that time — approximately one-tenth of the final count. There is also a poster from 1971 advertising "The Murray Bros. Comic Books Display," held at Durham's Northgate Mall.



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Although the universe of comics research libraries is still young and expanding, the Murray Collection places Duke among a number of well-established and important repositories. Michigan State University's Comic Art Collection, with over 150,000 items, is the largest research library of comic books in the country, but it has been amassed by the institution since 1970, rather than acquired in one fell swoop as Duke's was. The Library of Congress holds over 100,000 comics on copyright deposit, while Brown University's 60,000-item Ciaraldi Collection is similar in size to Duke's, and was also acquired as a single gift. It differs, however, in that its strength is alternative and independent comics and is international in scope, whereas the Murrays concentrated on mainstream American comics. Ohio State University and Bowling Green State University also have significant collections. Most recently, in the summer of 2003, a major gift to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was announced. The donor was a former comic store owner whose shop the Murrays patronized. His collection of 25,000 comics dates primarily from the past twenty years.

Public access to the collection is provided in several ways. There is an overarching, collection-level MARC record in the public catalog, as well as a collection-level record representing solely the comic books. In addition to the MARC records, the comics are described in a Web-accessible, EAD-encoded finding aid. Also, non-comic serials with significant runs are in the process of being

cataloged separately into Duke's OPAC. The rest of the non-comics portion of the collection is accessible through a box list available from RBMSCL's Research Services.

The EAD-encoded finding aid is unique because it applies a method of description designed for manuscript collections to a collection of published serials. Traditional cataloging of the comics as serials on OCLC would have provided the item-level access lacking in the EAD finding aid, but would have delayed, possibly by years, the availability of the materials to the public. The finding aid is broken down by publisher; DC and Marvel each have their own section, while the smaller publishers are grouped together. Rearrangements by both title and decade are provided, and the finding aid is fully searchable.

The wildly fluctuating nature of comic book titles and publishers presented a distinct organizational challenge to the processing staff. The difficulties faced by serials catalogers on a routine basis were writ large in this collection of 3,200 separate titles housed in 461 boxes. For example, each comic book had both a cover title and an indicia (inside the book) title, which often differed. The decision was made to record both cover and indicia titles in the finding aid only when there was significant discrepancy between the two, or when there were multiple cover titles under one indicia title housed in the same box. Categorization by publisher was also tricky because titles frequently jumped publishers, and because small publishers were bought out by larger houses over the years. A well-thumbed copy of the *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, considered the industry bible, was the definitive source for answers to questions about titles, publishers, and dates.

Use of the Murray Collection promises to be brisk and diverse. Inquiries from fans and students of pulp culture have been rolling in since word of the acquisition began to spread. These include a former Marvel employee volunteering to help catalog the comics, a library-science student interested in studying the role-playing games, a local artist seeking inspiration for his own work in the fanzines, and a patron looking for a 1943 issue of *Captain Marvel* in which his name was announced as a war-bond-slogan contest winner. Ample opportunity for library collaboration with academic departments is provided by the collection. A reading group of graduate students in English focused recently on comics, while professors in various disciplines have expressed interest in using the materials as teaching tools for their courses. And Duke Libraries, in conjunction with the English Department, is planning a symposium on recent comics scholarship for the spring of 2005. A concurrent exhibit will draw heavily upon the Murray Collection. Thanks to the Murray brothers, Duke is now positioned at the forefront of what has been termed "the new scholarship of comics."[4]

References

[1] Zoë Ingalls, "Holy Pop Culture!" *Duke Magazine* 89 (Sept.-Oct. 2003): 29.

[2] Hunter Lewis, "Good Gravy! Brothers Give Priceless Comic Book Collection to Duke," *(Durham) Herald-Sun*, 2 July 2003, Sunday Life section.

[3] Robert M. Overstreet, ed., *Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*, 32nd ed. (Timonium, MD: Gemstone Publications, 2002), 926-28.

[4] Paul Buhle, "The New Scholarship of Comics," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 36 (2003): B7.