

Lights. Camera. Library!

Wham! Super Trends & Superheroes @ Winter Conference

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PHOTO CREDITS: Zipporah Films & Google Images

On an overcast February 14, our diverse group of library/archive professionals gathered in one of the conference rooms of the newly renovated Yeshiva University library, in Washington Heights. Donuts, coffee, fruit, and vegetables would keep us warm and energized throughout the afternoon.

We were further treated to NYMA's Winter Conference "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Keeping Libraries Current," a three-part presentation -- moderated by NYMA co-presidents Brian Katz and Rina Krautwirth -- all of them "thematically similar," as Rina explained. Each one dealt with the ways in which libraries keep abreast of technologies, trends, and tradition -- providing services and community links, while keeping an ear to the ground on changing cultural and idiosyncratic tastes.

True Democracy

The conference began long-distance with filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, who was in Paris. Over Skype he fielded questions about his acclaimed three-hour documentary on the New York Public Library, *Ex Libris* (Zipporah Films).



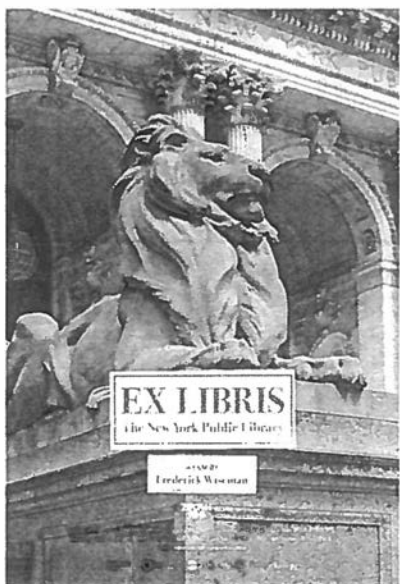
FREDERICK WISEMAN: The library is the most democratic of institutions.

What motivated him to create this film? Curiosity. He himself had not been to a library since law school days. After contacting NYPL president Anthony Marx, who allowed him access to everything except private matters, Mr. Wiseman spent a half day at the main branch on 42nd Street.

He let the camera be his guide. "Shooting is research," he said. "I didn't do anything." Relying on monthly bulletins for activities of interest, he went over to shoot and later look over the rushes.

The *cinema verité* style allowed him to be a "fly on the wall" -- observing meetings, interactions, and activities of the patrons who ranged in all ages, backgrounds, and educational and socioeconomic levels. "Narration interferes," he explained. Instead, the viewer is observer and judge. Events take place in a more authentic manner (albeit edited). In all, Mr. Wiseman covered 17 neighborhood branches and in three months ended up with 150 hours of material.

His "behind-the-scenes" film illuminates much that is far beyond the circulation stacks and reference desks -- digitization, after-school programs, advocacy and access to community services. "I had no idea," he said, "of the enormous effect on people."



Then he quoted author Toni Morrison: "The library is the most democratic of institutions." As part of his research included a half day at a 151st Street housing project in Harlem, the underprivileged neighborhoods awakened him to persistent inequities and grievances. At a Harlem library, patrons complained of racism: McGraw Hill, for example, characterized them as "slaves."

PAUL GLASSMAN: "The academic library sits at the center of the knowledge revolution – linking people with ideas."

Attempts at collective action, however, can be thwarted when services are being curtailed, furthering negligence of public facilities and outreach. To Mr. Wiseman, the library is the voice of social conscience, highlighting the plight of the vulnerable and needy.

Further information about the film can be found on the Zipporah Films website: www.zipporah.com.

Cosmic Shift

In "Walking the Labyrinth: The Library, Complexity, and Paths to Academic Leadership," the second presenter, Paul Glassman -- Director of Yeshiva University Libraries – discussed how academic librarians can better reach and interact with their patrons.

Paul began by explaining how the academic librarian must essentially multitask:

- Encouraging new students to seek help and understand access to library resources;
- Soliciting and reacting to the needs of all library users;
- Expanding and emphasizing what works;
- Transitioning through what does not.

Historically, libraries were viewed as unassailable. Accreditation standards assured basic support from the administration, and students had few alternate information sources.

"Essentially," Paul explained, "libraries were seen as mere repositories."

Not anymore.

"The academic library," Paul added, "sits at the center of the knowledge revolution – linking people with ideas."

This entails:

- Effective organization of web pages.
- Added links to catalog records.
- Expanded instruction programs.

In our postmodern intellectual climate, linear thinking has been rejected for knowledge fragmentation. Paul amusingly got his point across on information overload by showing a classic clip from *I Love Lucy*, where a hapless Lucy and Ethel tackle a speeding assembly line in a candy factory. Sixty years later, "Lucy and Ethel" is the college student, who is bombarded.



MORE THAN THEY CAN CHEW? Students face serious information overload.

Today, administrators question the need for print sources over e-books and other media, whose growing dominance has resulted in endless service: students arrive with demand for instant, 24-hour access to information. The self-image of students as customers has grown; they, not the librarians, now call the shots.

With a nod to his business background, Paul stressed getting in touch with our inner entrepreneur. The library must serve as a “town square” – a communal place and source of instruction, a place that will attract, not just service, patrons.

How can we library workers become strong advocates?

- Serve on university-wide committees.
- Nurture informal interaction in lunchrooms and campus gathering places.
- Capitalize on general good will. (Society and students, in particular, feel positive toward libraries.)
- Employ curricular language.

Suggested PR methods involve campus websites, TV, radio, publications, or social media. Additional outreach avenues are new student orientations, cooperation with new student support services, and online links to subject guides and tutorials. Open access can be supported by an institutional repository showcasing scholarly, creative and research output to the wider community.

Paul, who is also an architect, stressed aesthetics: a beautiful physical plant will attract students and make the library a viable destination on campus. After the conference, he gave a tour of the YU library.

Pow! Blam!

Inside every Judaica librarian is a Clark Kent waiting to save the world.

The final speaker was **Deborah Schranz** – Public Services Librarian, Jewish Theological Seminary -- and comic book enthusiast. In her “The Jewish History of Comics and Integrating Graphic Novels into a Library Collection” she provided -- live from Gotham! -- an adventurous story line.

Who knew that most of the early creators of comic books were Jews? Who knew that so many superheroes – e.g. Batman, Spiderman -- were



Nice Jewish boy?

overtly Jewish or had a character profile that reflected themes of Jewish history?

Some of those themes include:

- Feelings of being an outsider;
- Feelings of being disempowered or misunderstood;
- Finding the inner strength to stand up for social justice;
- Fighting for the underdog.

Superman was the “firstborn” (*bechor*) – having risen in the 1930s during the rise of Hitler and totalitarianism. During World War II, the Man of Steel devoted part of his time to fighting Nazis. Soon other superheroes followed.

The Golden Age of comic books lasted until the 1950s and the enactment of censorship laws. Deborah discussed our current Silver Age, and the rivalry between comic book companies DC and Marvel. “Marvel superheroes are gods trying to be human.” she explained. “DC is for humans trying to be gods.”

So how then do we mortals integrate graphic novels or comic books into our regular collections?

Deborah suggested two must-haves: Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*; and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. Other Jewish-themed graphic
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(Winter Conference, cont'd)



novels or comics might be *Hereville*, by Barry Deutsch, about an eleven-year-old Hassidic girl who fights trolls and has other fantastical adventures. More information can be found at hereville.com.

Sabra (left), Seraph, Magneto, Kitty Pryde of the X-Men – these are a few of

the characters with Jewish-specific story lines now found in mainstream comics. Even the ultra-Orthodox world of Bnei Brak has brought about their own “kosher” comic book characters.

At first glance, such material might be to a librarian what Kryptonite is to Superman. However, far from reducing readership of regular books, graphic novels may offer benefits:

- Greater literacy for children (or adults) with learning disabilities and other obstacles that may have discouraged the reading of a text-only book.
- Tools for readers, helping them transition into more confident library patrons and students.

Graphic novels (and less academic-sounding but equally worthwhile comic books) may offer a window into the future of library collections and literacy outreach.

Deborah later made available a chart of recommended titles on different themes (i.e. Holocaust, Bible, Israel), as well as a list of recommended YA Jewish graphic novels from the website *Bookreads*.

Holy call numbers! What are we -- Jewish geeks or Caped Crusaders?

In some ways, we know that all of the trends and traditions above are in lockstep with the values libraries may have had for quite some time. Looking back: making information available to as wide an audience as possible. Looking forward: introducing computer/technology literacy to library users at a younger age, providing and promoting services, and making material available in digital formats for portable/online use.

As we continue our fight for “truth, justice, and the American way,” let us say a big “Shazam!” to Brian and Rina for a “super” conference! ■

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