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Look! Up in the Sky! It's A ... Librarian?

Librarians in Comic Books

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Okay, I admit it. I'm a superhero junkie. I'm a big fan of truth and fair play, and the idea that a (relatively) normal person might have secret powers to help pursue these noble goals has always appealed to me. A big part of the costumed crusader mystique is the secret identity. Most of us know the biggies. Bruce (Batman) Wayne—a millionaire playboy who is secretly the world's greatest detective. Peter (Spider-Man) Parker—photojournalist turned Web-slinger. Clark (Superman) Kent—who takes off his cape, puts on his glasses, and reports news for the *Daily Planet*. The vast majority of the caped and masked are either scientists or socialites (or both, in the case of Tony (Iron Man) Stark), identities that lend themselves to flexible hours and personal fortunes. But where are the librarians? Surely information professionals deserve their place in the pursuit for truth and justice! And we are there, if in somewhat smaller numbers.

Certainly the most famous costumed librarian is Barbara Gordon. By day the librarian daughter of Gotham City's police commissioner, by night Barbara donned cape and cowl as Batgirl. Premiering in *Detective Comics* #359 in January 1967, Batgirl quickly became a popular member of the Batman family of characters. (She also moved quickly to television, portrayed in the third season of the Adam West series by Yvonne Craig.) While her uncostumed profession was not given significant press, her library training certainly contributed to her legendary problem-solving skills.

In 1988, Barbara Gordon, who had hung up her cowl to concentrate on her civilian identity, was shot by the Joker, crippling her. Over the next year, she set up a sophisticated (pre-Internet!) computer network and established her new secret identity: Oracle. She now serves as an information broker to the superhero community, finding answers and unlocking secrets

for her costumed colleagues. Barbara is a pioneer, arguably the first digital librarian. She's also a rare example of a disabled superhero, operating ably from a high-tech wheelchair, and coordinating the work of the all-female super-team, the Birds of Prey.



Barbara (Oracle) Gordon
at work
© DC Comics

Of course, the bad guys have to have equal time. Introduced in *Detective Comics* #463, September 1976, the Calculator was a two-bit supervillain who fought many of DC Comics' heroes. He ran around in a costume shaped like a big (you guessed it) calculator. In 2004, he (thank goodness!) abandoned the costume to operate an information network for villains not unlike the service provided by Oracle. In an interesting bit of social commentary, Oracle provides her information for free, while the Calculator charges \$1,000 per answer.

Over at Marvel Comics, another librarian lurks amongst the colorful costumes. Introduced in 1980, Xi'an "Shan" Coy Manh is a Vietnamese refugee and a mutant superhero. Originally a member of the unfortunately named "New Mutants" (effectively the junior X-Men), she has the power to seize control of other people's minds. As Karma, Shan was the first field leader of the New Mutants.



Xi'an "Shan" (Karma)
Coy Manh
© Marvel Comics

Shan suffered from a bad case of the superhero-

ine blues, an unfortunate tendency of the comics industry to run their female characters through excessive turmoil. She was possessed by disembodied telepath Amahl Farouk, ricocheted through space and time, became the protector of an imaginary child in a desert wasteland, and temporarily lost track of her younger brother and sister when their apartment was bombed.

After disappearing for a few years, Shan returned as a librarian at the University of Chicago, where she was also a student. She eventually returned to the Xavier Institute, a private school where mutants learn to use their powers. Professor Charles Xavier (a.k.a. Professor X), her mentor during her New Mutants days, hired her as an office administrator and librarian for the school. In her costumed time, she served as a field leader for a squad of young mutants at the school. After recent (and of course dramatic) events at the Institute, Shan is out of costume again working as the librarian and French teacher.

Another hero who displays a talent for reference skills, though not a trained librarian, is Blok, a member of the Legion of Super-Heroes. The Legion is a team of super-powered heroes operating in the 30th century, featuring twenty-plus heroes from dozens of planets. Blok is a silicon life form from the planet Dryad. He is apparently the last of his people, Dryad having been

destroyed when its sun went nova. He possesses great strength and endurance, effectively being a living rock.

After a series of misadventures, Blok joined the Legion. He was initially confused by his carbon-based teammates, and as a result spent a great

deal of time in the Legion archives, learning the team's history. From his extensive research, Blok eventually had a more comprehensive picture of the team than any of his fellow heroes. He provides useful insight to his colleagues, assisting them in solving mysteries and defeating villains. Blok is also a personal favorite of mine—he pursued his research in the comic archives while I pursued my degrees.

Librarians have made a number of other minor appearances in comics. A fairly comprehensive bibliography by Steven M. Bergson can be found at the Libraries FAQ Homepage, <http://www.ibiblio.org/librariesfaq/combks/combks.htm>.

There are two other manifestations of the hero-librarian that are worth noting. The costumed hero is such an iconic image that many libraries use it for promotional campaigns. A particularly robust example of this is the Super Librarian campaign launched by the New Jersey State Library in 2003. The Super Librarian, bespectacled and caped, appeared in a 30-second promotional video aired on cable channels, encouraging viewers to visit their local libraries. The promotion has been enormously successful, spawning a Web site, a one-shot comic book, and a number of contests. The Super Librarian can be found at <http://www.njlibraries.org>.

Finally, in April 1990, Preservation Graphics released a sampler comic featuring the Adventures of the Incredible Librarian. Focusing on preservation rather than reference, the cover of the comic features a grim Batman saying, "Outrageous! Brittle, deteriorating paper! A most deadly threat to all of us!" The five-page story inside has our heroine emerge from her secret identity, librarian Maria Norlander-Martinez, to capture a vandal who rips pages from library books. The project was ambitious in scope, including substantial text with library tidbits and

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Blok
© DC Comics

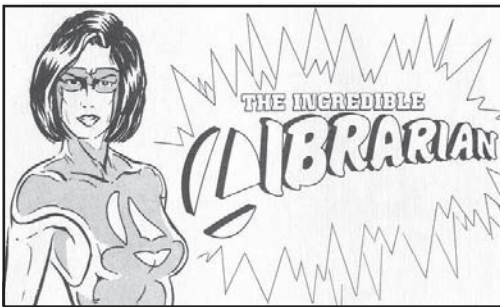


Americans make decisions by what they believe, by what they know in their hearts. They don't need Mr. Webster to tell them what's what! Reading the facts just encourages people to question, and questioning is very unpatriotic. We're watching you.

6. **Librarians purportedly promote “freedom of choice.”** Freedom is not free, baby! Choice is bad. It creates false hopes and just fills peoples' heads with dangerous ideas. It leads to anarchy and plants the seeds of terrorism. Well, are you with us or against us? Libraries are a code RED on this Patriot's warning system! 🌿

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preservation information. It was also bilingual—you can flip it over and read the same material in Spanish. Unfortunately, despite promises of full issues to come, the Incredible Librarian only appeared on a lavender T-shirt and this tantalizing sample issue.

The pages of comic books reflect the world around them. Over the past decade, costumed heroes have increasingly used online resources and sophisticated research skills nearly as much as muscles and utility belts to defeat injustice and tyranny. The Justice Society, the world's first superhero team, hired an archivist to manage their more-than-60-year history for them. With her vast information and communication network, Oracle may well be the most influential hero in the DC Universe. Who knows where the next costumed librarian may show up, fighting for truth, justice and a meaningful reference interview! 🌿

We're Content Creators Too

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Final Thoughts

If they did nothing else (and they do), blogs would be valuable for one simple reason: they allow librarians (and libraries) to shape their identities in the eyes of patrons. Visions of Katherine Hepburn and Shirley Jones—or even a “shush-action” Nancy Pearl—may be hard to shake, but blogs give librarians a new way to communicate their true value and expertise, along with the depth of library resources and the importance of library-related issues.

By utilizing a platform that is only increasing in popularity and visibility, library staff can share ideas with each other, collaborate on innovative new services, and further convince patrons of what we already know—libraries (and librarians) are relevant, current, accurate and authoritative. And kind of cool, too. 🌿

References

- ¹“It's the links, stupid.” *The Economist* 379(8474), Special Section: 5-8.

