



Outside-of-the-Box Book Groups

By Susan Maguire

Book discussion groups are a library programming mainstay, but sometimes a straightforward read-and-discuss format doesn't meet patron needs. Two librarians took their book groups to the next level: Valentino Zullo, PhD (Cleveland Public Library), harnessed the academic and creative talents of his community to create a varied series of programs, and Kapil Vasudev (Ohio State University, formerly Charlotte Mecklenburg Library) turned his discussion group in to a comic-creating group. Susan Maguire spoke to Zullo and Vasudev about the why and how of their unique book groups.

Valentino Zullo

Maguire: *Tell us about the book group—who does it serve? What does a typical program look like?*

Zullo: Our biweekly book club for adults is part of the “Get Graphic” program at the Ohio Center for the Book at the Cleveland Public Library, which I have co-led since March 2014. We (Nick Durda, the senior subject department librarian, and I) identify a new theme for the discussions about every three months (I often think of them like semesters). We want to address distinct sociocultural topics; in the past, themes have been

“Memoirs of the Middle East,” “Comics and the Clinic,” and “Queer Comix.”

Our programs are set up like academic seminars, offering opportunities for those adults that have either never been to college or have not engaged with the study of literature since their liberal arts education to recognize the value of humanistic ideas in daily lives. Whether we are studying superhero comics or autobiographical comics, our purpose remains the cultivation of critical-thinking skills.

Maguire: *Has anything changed or evolved since you started the group? Was there anything you wish you had done differently from the beginning?*

Zullo: When we began the book club, the former senior subject librarian, Jean Collins, and I would pick the themes of the book discussions. After a short time, though, we began to informally survey our attendees. As a result, we started including lectures and workshops which offered alternative forms of critical engagement with comics. From this emerged many exciting partnerships including those with Rising Star Coffee Roasters, a local coffee shop, which hosts our comics-making workshop programming. We also host an all-day series of workshops (and lectures) at local

Carol and John’s Comic Shop on Free Comic Book Day.

Maguire: *What title or topic led to a really great discussion?*

Zullo: We have had so many wonderful book discussions. One of my favorite themes we explored was “Comics and the Clinic,” where we discussed graphic medicine. It is one of the few topics where every member brought personal experience to the discussion. One of my favorite specific meetings was a recent discussion of Lynda Barry’s *Making Comics* (2019). This was particularly fun because, in the book, Barry invites the reader to both think about comics theoretically and in practice, through drawing.

I have learned to rely on our members and the generativity that reading in a group creates. Thinking together has taken us many places that I do not think we would have gone alone.

Maguire: *Do you choose the topic first or find an interested speaker first? How do you find guest speakers/guest experts? What kind of guidance or instructions do you give them?*

Zullo: When we first began, we chose all the books, but we have since become more reliant on our attendees to offer suggestions for themes or books, like

violence in comics, which was our summer 2018 topic.

When we host speakers or workshop leaders, I invite them to speak about or lead a workshop on a topic of their choosing. For example, when I invited scholar and psychoanalyst Dr. Vera Camden, she spoke about the comics of Alison Bechdel and the uses of psychoanalysis in the study of comics, a topic based on her expertise. Some of our local comics professionals, including Nicole Boose, Derf Backderf, Tony Isabella, and Marc Sumerak, have each led workshops or lectures based on topics they chose.

We are lucky to have so many local comics scholars and creators in our region, which has always been a hub for comics going back to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and continuing with the likes of Brian Azzarello, Brian Michael Bendis, Brian K. Vaughan, and so many more. Our programming is a testament to that history and a hopeful look forward as we imagine where comics will go next.

Maguire: *What advice would you give to someone who wants to start something similar in their library?*

Zullo: We are working on tool kits for other libraries to lead their own book discussion based on our model, highlighting some of our favorite books for discussion. These will be available publicly around the time of the National Book Festival in September and afterward on the Ohio Center for the Book website (ohiocenterforthebook.org).

Kapil Vasudev

Maguire: *Tell us about the book group—who does it serve? What does a typical program look like?*

Vasudev: As children's specialists at the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, my colleagues and I planned on running a typical book club for preteens (ages 8–11). We would select a title each month to read and discuss, and we would include some snacks and activities in the meetings. At the initial session, however, I realized that the kids were more interested in making comics

than reading and talking about them. This fit with my personal interests and knowledge of comics, so I was able to quickly readjust.

The program—The Comic Book Club—became a monthly meeting (though we met biweekly during summer reading) focused on creating comics. I would discuss different elements of comics, and we would do activities related to these elements. Examples of topics we discussed were panels, visual shorthand, and storyboarding. We would end each program with free time for working on comics and sharing them with each other.

Maguire: *Has anything changed or evolved since you started the group? Was there anything you wish you had done differently from the beginning?*

Vasudev: The entire concept of the group changed pretty much after the first meeting. Even though I was well-suited to leading a group focused on creating comics, I had a lot of preparation to do to develop activities that would be fun and accessible for our preteen audience.

One thing I wish I had considered was preserving copies of the comics the kids created, either physically or digitally. Over the almost three years I led this group, the students created some excellent work that would have been great to compile into a book, post on a website, or use as displays and examples for other patrons.

Maguire: *What title or exercise led to a really great meeting?*

Vasudev: The kids always really enjoyed figure drawing. Comics are a great art form because they don't require formal artistic skills the way we typically think of them. Instead, a comic creator has to effectively communicate ideas, which can be done with stick figures. When we discussed figure drawing, we would play a game inspired by Pictionary. Two kids would go up to a whiteboard and have one minute to draw a picture, with prompts ranging from "cowboy" and "alien" to "fast" and "angry." The rest of the group would then try to guess what the pictures represented and

discuss what each artist did that worked well in communicating the idea. The competitive and timed elements made the game really exciting for the kids, and they really enjoyed being able to draw for their peers.

Maguire: *Did you get any pushback when you transitioned your book group to have more of a creating focus (rather than a reading focus)? If so, how did you get across the importance of visual literacy?*

Vasudev: Since I was creating the program entirely from scratch, I didn't receive any significant pushback about transitioning it to focus on creating comics. My colleagues and supervisors in the library were very accepting of my ideas, especially given the success the program had in attracting a consistent preteen audience. I did deliver a presentation at a children's services meeting for the entire system on the importance of visual literacy and how to run this type of program. In general, I found that it was helpful when talking to adults about the value of visual literacy to connect it to examples they encounter, like navigating websites, reading furniture-assembly directions, and interpreting signs.

Maguire: *What advice would you give to someone who wants to start something similar in their library?*

Vasudev: The main advice I would give to anyone interested in starting a Comic Book Club would be to be careful in balancing the teaching aspects of the program with the activities and free-creation time. It is easy to spend too much time lecturing, which definitely reduces the amount of fun. Also, your group will create some great work, so think of a plan to preserve as many of the comics being created as possible.

