

1. Alexander Turnbull Library, 'Interview with Russell Kerr', History and development of dance in Aotearoa/New Zealand, oral history project, ATL Ref. OHInt-0164/1.
2. Alexander Turnbull Library, 'Interview with Raymond Boyce', Arts Foundation of New Zealand Heritage oral history project, ATL Ref OHInt-0926-08
3. A restaging of a dance consists of repeating the same dance work at a later date. Recreating the same dance work would often involve some new input with mounting the work. Sometimes the latter is necessary if not enough documentation or memory exists from the work's premiere.
4. Reconstruction could be defined as a true a restaging as possible, but with some original material necessary to complete the work. Two such examples are Hodson and Archer's reconstruction of works by Vaslav Nijinsky: *Le Sacre du Printemps* (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-05-ca-2031-story.html>) and *Jeux* ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jeux-ballet\\_b\\_3080189](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jeux-ballet_b_3080189)).
5. American Dance Therapy Association, 'What is Dance / Movement Therapy?', n.d., available at <https://adta.memberclicks.net/what-is-dancemovement-therapy>, accessed 21 June 2024.
6. Dance & Arts Therapy NZ, 'Moving Creatively Together', n.d., available at <https://dancetherapy.co.nz/>, accessed 21 June 2024.

# COMICS, COMMUNITIES AND COMICFEST

By Sam Orchard

## INTRODUCTION

In Aotearoa we have an incredibly vibrant comics community, rich with diversity. The Alexander Turnbull Library's Cartoon and Comic Archive is one of the few archives in the world specialising in collecting cartoons and comics, playing a vital role in acknowledging the importance of this medium both as an important historical record that has unique reflections of the worlds in which we live, and as a way of demonstrating a diverse range of voices and stories.

There are currently not many national-based collecting institutions with specific cartoons and comics archives, perhaps due to a lack of understanding of how important cartoons and comics are as research tools, or because comics are something not easily definable, and people are often unsure how to categorise comics as artworks or literature. For example, there is currently debate as to whether independently produced comic zines meet the criteria of being 'published', and around how webcomics or comics with animations can be categorised.

Outside of the Archives, comics created by Kiwis have an enormous reach and popularity. For example, Avis Acres and Rita Angus are some of the early



pioneers of locally produced comics for children in Aotearoa,<sup>1</sup> while Kim Casali's *Love Is...* cartoons are, perhaps, some of the most widely read cartoons created by a New Zealander.<sup>2</sup> New Zealander Ben Stenbeck has also had enormous success producing *Hellboy* and has recently launched his own creator-owned series *Our Bones Dust*, leading change in mainstream comics industries in terms of owning his own work, while Ōtautahi based creator Rachel Smythe consistently tops the most read webcomic charts with *Lore Olympus*. Currently in its final season, it has won two Eisner awards, two Harvey awards and two Ringo awards, with 1.4 Billion views and 6.50 million subscribers in March 2024.<sup>3</sup> Other notable and recent comics achievements include Toby Morris and Siouxie Wiles' Covid-19 explainer graphics during 2020-22.<sup>4</sup> This drew heavily on comic-language and served as a touchpoint for many as the pandemic unfolded, ultimately becoming so successful that the World Health Organisation picked it up. A couple of years' later

Huia Publishers, an important publisher of Te Reo Māori comics (among other works) won the 2024 Bologna Prize for the Oceania Best Children's Publishers of the Year.

### CARTOONS AND COMICS IN THE CARTOON AND COMIC ARCHIVE

While comics have been added only recently (in 2019) the Cartoon and Comic Archive has been operating for over thirty years, playing an important role in cementing political cartoons as a uniquely important source for understanding our histories. These political cartoons reflect key political events in Aotearoa (and the world), discussions around those events, and contextual viewpoints, biases and / or social (mis)understandings. Because it's a combination of both visual and written (and good cartoons and comics elevate both elements) political cartoons give a really rich array of information about the topic in hand. That is, who's being depicted, how they're depicted, the setting, the clothing, the topic, and what the people are doing and saying – each adding to the layering of information researchers can use.

Comics can also do the same. When we look at comic strips like Murray Ball's *Footrot Flats* we get insight into humour, rural life, environmentalism, farming, masculinity and gender, not only from the language used, but from

the visuals depicted. When we zoom out and understand the impact of *Footrot Flats* on communities in New Zealand, we get a building sense of national identity. The fact that this strip was widely popular, both in New Zealand and internationally, tells us something about how we see ourselves. Researchers then can reflect on how that sense of identity continues today or is perhaps changing.

A recent acquisition to the Cartoon and Comic Archive has been Sarah Laing's *Let me be Frank* autobiographical comics. Not only does the original art tell us a lot about how these comics were made and her skills in combining ink and watercolour, but the content of each individual strip gives us rich information about Sarah's life, values, thoughts, and contemporary contexts. Sarah's work in *Mansfield and Me*, and as one of the creators of the *Three Words* anthology celebrating women's comics, are really important published pieces that speak back to the decentring of women in comics histories and literature, the importance of queer storytelling, and the ways in which traditional literature and comics interact with each other. There's so much in Sarah's oeuvre that researchers can and will delve into and it's exciting that Sarah's work is in our collection.

*Kia Mataara*, similarly, is a treasure trove of information for researchers. This resource, created by the *Kia Mōhio Kia Mārama Trust*, is a thirteen-part graphic novel drawn by Moana Maniapoto

as a way to explore Aotearoa's history of colonisation and its ongoing impact on Māori. It was disseminated nationally and used as an education tool for Māori communities, using mediums that work for Māori, and sat alongside a series of community-made resources. Such is the power of comics – they are useful tools in taking complex ideas, or scary topics, and breaking them down into something accessible, non-threatening and easy to understand. This resource is as relevant today as it was when it was created. *Kia Mataara* is not only a really important resource, but it's also something that has sprung from collective organising and is self-published.

Collective organising is a common thread that runs through comics creation in Aotearoa. This can be partly attributed to our comics history. The comics industry was beginning to establish itself in the 1930s in Aotearoa and was booming in the 1940s with both the popularity of American-style comic books and our own style beginning to emerge.<sup>5</sup> However, in 1954 the *Mazengarb Report* was released, which was an inquiry into 'juvenile delinquency'.<sup>6</sup> This inquiry was partly established after some high profile teen crimes in Aotearoa, but also reflected trends internationally with moral panics around youth. Comics were expressly identified in the report as something corrupting youth. As a result, our burgeoning comics

publishing industry was decimated.

Whilst cartoons in newspapers continued, comics began to find their place in counter-culture movements, challenging censorship laws. Strips was New Zealand's first comic magazine aimed at adults and emerged in 1977 out of the student underground movement.<sup>7</sup> *Razor* and *Jesus on a Stick* followed in the 1980s, these publications were often collectively driven, non-profit and independently published. Comics Collectives – like *Funtime Comics*, *Oats Collective*, and *Māpura Studios* remain as current independent community-driven publications. Comics collectives are part of our proactive priorities for the Archive<sup>8</sup> as they capture the important role that communities play in creating comics, as well as voices left out of mainstream publishing houses. In recent times new comics publishers, like *Earths End Press*, have begun to emerge, and there are a number of publishing houses in Aotearoa who are open to publishing comics.

Part of the work of the Contemporary Voices and Archives team is to critically engage in our collecting practices and to address the silences and gaps in current collections. Part of this is to examine things that sit in grey areas, and things that are not easily definable. In libraries we really value categorisation, we want to put things in the right place – so they're easily findable and useable – and that is an important value

set to have. If we didn't, we'd be in chaos. However, in putting things into neat little categories we can create gaps with things that don't easily fit. Comics are one of those things. The fact that as a collecting institution we are ensuring that there is a focus on them means that we are able to be responsive and flexible in making sure that these important forms, and the voices that create them, are not missed.

### COMICFEST

Starting in 2014, ComicFest is a festival that showcases and celebrates New Zealand cartoons and comics, their history, journey and value, and the people who created them. This involves holding a free public event (usually every two years) for a wide range of age groups that involves a variety of opportunities to engage with comics and comic artists through exhibitions, cosplay, panels, live-drawings, drawing competitions, and workshops.

Connecting with communities of creators and readers is a key part of ensuring that the Cartoon and Comic Archive is keeping up to date with what is happening. Since 2015 ComicFest has become a cornerstone event for celebrating and promoting the Archive, helping the Archive to foster and elevate important voices and works that are coming out of the cartoon and comics communities. While it relies on the hard work and dedication of staff from both Wellington Libraries and the

Alexander Turnbull Library, this work and dedication has resulted in a collaborative approach that staff have found to be an enriching experience, and one that raises the profile of comics and cartoons as being more than just entertainment. Involvement in ComicFest has also developed long term relationships between Wellington Libraries and the Alexander Turnbull Library, the Wellington comic store *Graphic*, and the *Read NZ/Te Pou Muramura* (formerly the New Zealand Book Council) and attracted a wide variety of sponsors including NZ Armageddon, Ministry of Education, Weta Digital, Pukeko pictures, Creative New Zealand, Unity Books, and Gecko Press. ComicFest also creates opportunities to raise the profile of comic archives. For example, ComicFest 2024 deliberately aligned with Victoria University of Wellington's inaugural *Comics Studies Symposium* and Wellington Zinefest's *Comics Makers Market* to help support the various comics communities.

### COMICFEST BEGINNINGS (2014)

The first ComicFest occurred in 2014. Running over two days, it was founded by Monty Masseurs, Wellington City Libraries' Collection Development Specialist. The intention was to highlight the existing collections at Wellington City library, encourage more readership of comics, and highlight the talent that exists within Aotearoa – which can often be overlooked, or

not included, in literary festivals. This first event generated core elements that have existed in every festival since, such as ensuring that it is a free public event, it has a family-focused, and it is inclusive and diverse. It also includes free comics. In his 2021 LIANZA conference panel, *How to save a ComicFest*,<sup>9</sup> Monty talked about how ComicFest has used free comics as a way to bring people in, using that opportunity to represent Aotearoa's comic creators through displays, panels, workshops, comic sales and more. The inaugural 2014 ComicFest included a panel discussion and display by Weta Workshop artists Greg Broadmore and Paul Tobin, workshops by Ant Sang and Gavin Mouldey (who was also responsible for the original ComicFest poster), and author panel with Ant Sang, Robyn Kenealy and Grant Buist. These panels were all recorded and can be found on the Wellington City Libraries blog and MixCloud accounts.<sup>10</sup>

### COMICFEST ESTABLISHED (2015-2017)

Building on the success of the inaugural event, ComicFest was put on again in 2015, this time expanding the programme over four days. This included exhibitions, a film screening, panels, workshops, a delightful children's cosplay event and the continuation of free comic give-aways. It also featured talent from across the motu, including

Sarah Laing, Tim Gibson, Matt Emery, Rae Joyce, Jonathan King, Sharon Murdoch, Toby Morris, Cory Mathis, Tim Bollinger, Indira Neville and Chris Guise. A particular highlight was the exhibition that Matt Emery put together about Noel Cool. Noel Cook (Ngāti Toa) was a pioneer of science fiction comics; *Roving Peter* was an instant hit,<sup>11</sup> and *Planet of Fear*, *Adrift in Space* and *Cosmic Calamity* reached international audiences. ComicFest 2015 also heralded the involvement of the Alexander Turnbull Library for the first time, with then-cartoon Librarian Melinda Johnston hosting the panel *From Cartoons to Comics* with award-winning cartoonists Sharon Murdoch, Toby Morris, and Cory Mathis, and comic writer and historian Tim Bollinger.

Whilst ComicFest 2015 was a success, it was decided that it would become a biennial event to ensure the festival's longevity and sustainability. ComicFest therefore returned in 2017 and featured Dylan Horrocks, Ant Sang, Andrew Burdan, Jem Yoshioka, Giselle Clarkson, Sally Bollinger Robyn Kenealy, Toby Morris and Sarah Laing. Hannah Benbow (the then Cartoons Research Librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library) hosted *From Where We Started: Reading New Zealand's Comic History*, which highlighted New Zealand cartoons in the collection. In this, Hannah shared early newspaper strips and children's

annuals through to contemporary graphic novels and zines and discussed how the Cartoon and Comic Archive worked to preserve these materials. Hannah's work on the role of women in early children's comics remains an important part of New Zealand cartoons and comics history.<sup>12</sup> There was also a panel on the importance of the *New Zealand School Journal* as a site for New Zealand Cartoons and Comics, and how this journal gives us many insights into the rich and diverse history of comics in Aotearoa. The *New Zealand School Journal* still uses comic artists each year in its publication and is ripe with opportunities for further research.

#### A DRAMATIC SHIFT (2019)

ComicFest 2019 came with plans for the biggest festival yet; seventeen events across three days with twelve guests from across Aotearoa, and a very special guest from London, Roger Langridge, whose work includes *The Muppet Show Comic Book*, *Thor: The Mighty Avenger* and his own self-published *Fred The Clown*, which was nominated for Eisner, Harvey, Ignatz and Reuben awards.

Six weeks before the event, the ComicFest team got word that the Wellington Central Library, the home of ComicFest since its inception, would be closing immediately due to concerns about the building's structural safety. The organising team had to

choose whether to cancel the event and risk the future of ComicFest or work extremely hard and think creatively about how to make it work. The team chose to make it work by arranging spaces for the event at the National Library of New Zealand, and putting together a plan that enabled the festival to still happen in largely the same way as intended. ComicFest 2019 ended up with 2,300 people coming to the three-day event at the National Library building - a 78% increase on 2017. Neil Johnstone noted the commitment by staff to continue with the event, saying "we never wavered in our task to make the best ComicFest ever, and it was almost more important that we make the event successful, because if it failed, what could this mean for what happened next?"

#### PLANNING A FESTIVAL IN A PANDEMIC (2021-2022)

In 2020 plans began for ComicFest 2021, with a commitment to continue the partnership between Wellington City Libraries and the National Library of New Zealand. In addition, in 2021 the role of the Assistant Curator for Cartoons and Comics was established, and I was lucky enough to get that role. In my very first week on the job, I headed off to a meeting to discuss the programme that had been put together for ComicFest in August 2021.

However, just four days before the start of the Festival, Aotearoa had

its first community transmission of the Delta strand of Covid, and its first community-transmitted case in six months. As a result, the government announced a nationwide lockdown, and ComicFest had to be postponed. While public events had to be held very lightly during these times and the chance of a snap lockdown meant that any event was at risk, it was pretty devastating to go into lockdown mere days before the event. However, just as the 2019 Central Library closure presented a new opportunity for a deeper collaboration between Wellington City Libraries and the National Library, the lockdown became an opportunity to further develop ComicFest a different way. In the end ComicFest became an online festival, held in 2022. The programme was pared down so that one event could be screened at a time, and some sessions prerecorded in case the artists were unwell on the day. The issue of getting 2000 free comics out to people was solved by putting together ComicFest packs that were delivered to all Wellington City Library branches. Each branch got involved and made displays, and had opportunities to contribute to the Festival's drawing competition.

Going online provided the opportunity to break down geographical barriers - travelling to Wellington was no longer a requirement for attending ComicFest. Thanks to a

phenomenal tech team, the National Library's auditorium was transformed into a live stream studio for the day, delivering eight hours of non-stop comic content for anyone to tune into from across the world. People engaged not just from New Zealand but also from Germany, Hawai'i, and beyond. People were also able to text their questions to artists, watch Michel Mulipola draw *Moon Knight*, chat about superheroes and Samoan comics, listen to Jem Yoshioka teach about creating webcomics, watch Kay O'Neill create *Tea Dragons* and creatures, and hear Giselle Clarkson talk through the process of creating commissioned art. All of this was recorded so that it can be watched by anyone who missed it or re-watched.<sup>13</sup>

#### EMBEDDING LEARNINGS (2024)

2024 heralded the tenth anniversary of the festival, which was held on International Free Comic Book Day, Saturday May 4th. This festival offered those involved a chance to reflect on how far things have come, what was learned along the way, and to think to the future. Organisers were excited to return to an in-person event at the National Library of New Zealand and to create an energetic and open space for people to immerse themselves in the world of comics through in person workshops, live drawing, free comics, and spaces to draw. The day also featured a range

of comic artists including Poet Laureate Selina Tusitala Marsh (whose graphic series *Mophead* is not to be missed), current Arts Foundation Laureate Giselle Clarkson, and Daniel Vernon who is changing the face of political cartoons in Aotearoa. Selina Tusitala Marsh also did the keynote address, *Dr Mophead*, which was skilful and beautiful as she wove together her approach to art and storytelling, emphasising the importance of being vulnerable and powerful. New features were also integrated into the event, such as a digital slideshow highlighting some of the cartoons and comics held at the Alexander Turnbull Library's Cartoon and Comic Archive. Increased access to the event was aided by livestreaming all panels and the keynote address, and a new quiet reading space was created with services to schools comics for those needing a bit of low-sensory time.

The workshops were thoroughly enjoyed, so much so that Sarah Howell from *Squish Studios* in Melbourne hosted an extra impromptu workshop on the day to meet demand which, like the rest quickly hit capacity. The cosplay costume competition had record numbers and was an absolute crowd-pleaser, with tamariki as young as two entering. Many of the visitors had never been to the Library before, making the event a wonderful way to manaaki them and give them an exceptional experience.<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The New Zealand Cartoon and Comic Archive is a national collection, developed to preserve, record and provide access to this country's rich and diverse culture of comic-making and cartooning. The Archive has led the way collecting our cartoon history, as well as using them to document our wider social and political histories in various publications and exhibitions. With over 60,000 cartoons in the archive, it is the largest collection of its kind in the country. In 2019 the scope of the Archive was expanded to include comics to capture the diversity of voices, perspectives and art created by cartoonists and comic creators in Aotearoa. The change in scope also allows us to evolve as cartoons and comics do.<sup>15</sup>

ComicFest is a wonderful opportunity to share the work the Alexander Turnbull Library's Cartoon and Comic Archive is doing, both to promote the expanded scope of the Cartoon and Comic Archive, and to create meaningful relationships with potential donors and researchers alike. It has also been a fabulous opportunity to partner with other information organisations such as Wellington City Libraries and provide opportunities for collaboration within the GLAM community. We are excited to see where ComicFest takes us over the next ten years.

## ENDNOTES

- Hannah Benbow, 'Early New Zealand Comics for Children', The Sapling, 2020. Available at <https://www.thesapling.co.nz/2020-06-09-early-nz-comics-for-children/>, accessed July 4, 2024.
- Kjell Knudde, 'Kim Casali', Lambiek Comiclopedia, 2023, available at [https://www.lambiek.net/artists/c/casali\\_kim.htm](https://www.lambiek.net/artists/c/casali_kim.htm). Knudde's work is certainly the only New Zealand cartoon to be referenced in an episode of the Simpsons (Season 8, Ep. 6, 'A Milhouse Divided', 1996).
- Rachel Smyth, 'Lore Olympus', Webtoons, 2018-2024, available at [https://www.webtoons.com/en/romance/lore-olympus/list?title\\_no=1320](https://www.webtoons.com/en/romance/lore-olympus/list?title_no=1320), accessed July 4, 2024.
- See examples at: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/media/07-09-2021/the-great-toby-morris-siouxie-wiles-covid-19-omnibus>.
- Tim Bollinger, 'Comics and graphic novels', in Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, 2014, available at <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/comics-and-graphic-novels/print>, accessed 4 July 2024.
- Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 'New Zealand History: Mazengarb report released: 20 September 1954', 2024, available at <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/the-mazengarb-report-on-juvenile-moral-delinquency-is-released>.
- Tim Bollinger, 'Comics and graphic novels', in Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, available at <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/comics-and-graphic-novels/print>, accessed 4 July 2024.
- National Library of New Zealand, 'Cartoons and comics | Waituhi whakakata me ngā pukawaituhi collecting plan', n.d., available at <https://natlib.govt.nz/about-us/strategy-and-policy/collections-policy/cartoons-and-comics-or-waituhi-whakakata-me-nga-pukawaituhi-collecting-plan#proactive-priorities>, accessed 4 July 2024.
- Monty Masseurs, Stephen Clothier, Neil Johnstone, Ligia Horta, and Samuel Orchard, 'How to save a ComicFest' *LIANZA Conference Presentation*, 2021.
- See Wellington City Libraries Blog, <https://www.wcl.govt.nz/blog/index.php/category/comicfest/comicfest-2014/>, and Wellington City Libraries MixCloud, <https://www.mixcloud.com/wellingtontcitylibraries/>, accessed July 4, 2024.
- Matt Emery, 'Adrift in Space: Noel Cook Part One', Pikitia Press, 2012, available at <http://pikitiapress.blogspot.com/2012/05/adrift-in-space-noel-cook-part-one-of.html>, accessed April 17, 2023.
- Hannah Benbow, 'Early New Zealand Comics for Children'.
- Wellington City Libraries, 'ComicFest 2022 Playlist', YouTube, 2022, available at [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwXHoIE-2TKaF\\_2OqRelx-96Ea6tvu68Q](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwXHoIE-2TKaF_2OqRelx-96Ea6tvu68Q), accessed July 4, 2024.
- If you didn't get a chance to join the 2024 Comic-Fest in-person, you can watch the talks and panels in their entirety over on Wellington City Libraries YouTube channel. See <https://www.youtube.com/live/8q8naXKrz0A?si=yFoajAOxoVT3hlI>.
- The evolution of webcomics and gaming comics are but one example of the ever-changing landscape.