Profile of Carol Tilley,
Associate Professor in the Graduate School of
Library and Information Science
at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and
32nd Annual NASIG Conference Vision Speaker

Dr. Carol Tilley is one of the three Vision Speakers for the upcoming NASIG Annual Conference in June 2017. She is a member of the faculty for the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where her areas of expertise include youth services, school libraries, information seeking and use, and media literacy. She is also an expert on the culture surrounding comic books, writing about their history and impact as well as serving on panels at conferences and conventions across the country. Her notable work includes research concerning Fredric Wertham, whose anti-comic crusade in the 1950s nearly shut down the entire industry.

My interview with Dr. Tilley was conducted by e-mail, and it was completed on April 10, 2017.

How did you become interested in comic books?

I was a comics reader as a kid: the newspaper funnies at first and then comic books. I spent a lot of my childhood Saturdays at my small town’s drug store, cross-legged on the floor in front of the comics rack. Although I’ve never been a big superhero comics reader, I adored the Wonder Woman and Shazam(Isis TV shows, and the Christopher Reeve Superman movies as a child. As I grew into adulthood, my comics reading habit stayed with me and expanded. Comics became part of my research during my doctoral program, and I’ve continued to place comics, readership, and libraries at the core of the work I do.

You participated on a panel about comic book censorship at New York Comic Con in 2013. How did you get that opportunity?

In the past few years, I’ve been extraordinarily fortunate to give talks and be part of panels at New York Comic Con, San Diego Comic Con, and C2E2 (the Chicago Comics and Entertainment Expo). The real spur for those talks was research I published on psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. He was the leading opponent of comics during the 1940s and 1950s in the US, believing that kids who read comics were susceptible to the depictions of violence in comic books. In examining his papers at the Library of Congress, I discovered that he falsified some of the clinical evidence he used to argue against comics in his 1954 book Seduction of the Innocent. The media was intrigued by my findings—my research was even featured in the New York Times—and the rest is history. One of the coolest results is that in 2016, I was one of the six judges for the Will Eisner...
Comics Industry Awards; the Eisners are like the Oscars of the comics world. It’s an experience I will always value.

Your career includes a turn as a high school librarian. What led you to working with young people in that capacity?

I was planning on a career as a high school English teacher. Fate had other plans for me. Right after I graduated from college, my high school librarian let me know about a fellowship opportunity at Indiana University (my alma mater for all three of my degrees) to become a youth services librarian. Although libraries had always been part of my life, I had never considered a career as a librarian, but I ended up applying, got the fellowship, and completed my MLS. Working as a high school librarian allowed me to teach AND be a librarian, and I found that I loved teaching in the library so much more than I did in the English classroom. It was great fun (and occasionally a challenge) to spend my days with teens. Twenty-some years later, I’m still in contact with some of my former students.

What brought you into teaching future librarians as a library school faculty member?

More serendipity! The opportunity arose for me to consider a PhD in library and information science, and I took it. Although I spent much too long in the PhD program, I also had the good fortune to start teaching future librarians almost immediately. Eventually I spent 6 years as a full-time lecturer and coordinator of distance education for the Indiana University library program at IUPUI. I taught and designed courses on reference, grant writing, children’s literature, and more. Since completely my PhD in 2007, I’ve been a faculty member at the University of Illinois’ School of Information Sciences. I was promoted to Associate Professor and awarded tenure a few years ago, so it looks like I’m here for the duration. Truly, though, it’s my honor to help instill a passion for community-focused service through libraries in the next generation of librarians.

What is one skill that librarians should have in the early twenty-first century?

Only one?! It’s perhaps not so much a skill as a disposition, but I’ll say, playfulness. For me, playfulness embodies a willingness to experiment, together with mental flexibility, creativity, and a drive for self-improvement by way of friendly competition. There’s also a sense of joy and engagement that goes along with playfulness. It’s extraordinarily easy to get caught up in rules, standards, and policies, or grow weary from budget hassles and changing resource and work environments. Playfulness helps us find our ways through the morass.

In today’s political and social climate, what is your view on the importance of media literacy?

Media literacy is extraordinarily important. I teach a class on media literacy that’s geared toward future youth services librarians. Part of what I emphasize is that media literacy is a stance as much as a set of skills: we must be willing to question and engage in critical reading/viewing/listening. That’s always been necessary, but as we move to a more expansive media environment where traditional notions of control and creation are growing less relevant, it’s an imperative.

Do you have any additional comments?

I’m really looking forward to my time at NASIG. I teach mostly folks who are going to be youth services librarians, although my comics reader’s advisory class draws students with more varied interests. Part of what I try to do with my students is help them see the connections between what they aspire to do and other aspects of librarianship. I hope along with inspiring conference attendees I can learn a few things along the way.