

Classics series is readily available through most large booksellers.

How to Make Your Graphic Novel Collection Accessible to Girls



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6 Reasons Why Teenage Girls Don't Read Comic Books and Graphic Novels

- The pervading perception that comics are written for boys and novels are written for girls
- Girls are afraid of being harassed by comic book store clerks
- Comics rarely portray women in a way that is compelling to girls; women characters tend to be weak or vapid
- Girls are afraid of looking stupid or unknowledgeable about comics in front of boys
- Girls tend to be turned off by the unrealistic, sexualized depictions of women in comics
 - Girls are not encouraged to read comics

If you're anything like me, you probably grew up thinking that Betty and Veronica pretty much represented women in comics. You were either Betty (shy, smart, sweet, and hopelessly bland) or Veronica (rich, mean, spoiled and popular). This certainly doesn't give a girl much choice. I often lamented this fact growing up with mostly boy friends. Whenever we played comic book heroes, my job was to be tied up and "rescued." Maybe they would have let *me* rescue *them* if there had been some tough comic book heroines around. Unfortunately, like most girls my age, I did not read comic books for all the reasons listed in the box above.

The situation has changed little today. Visit a comic book store or the graphic novel section of a library and you will find that the majority of comics are still written for, by and about men. No wonder girls prefer reading novels.

The lack of female comic readership cannot be blamed on any one group. It is something that has evolved over time, but it doesn't have to stay that way. Comic books can be entertaining, educational and enlightening. So why should boys have all the fun? Why should a girl have to read a decent boy comic, only to discover that the sole female character is the superhero's girlfriend? (And that she's likely to die in a gruesome way – see *Women in Refrigerators*).

As the rest of this Hotline makes apparent, comics and graphic novels are an important part of any YA collection. So how should librarians make them accessible to the other 50% of the population? The key is to start stocking the shelves with graphic novels that feature realistic women heroines. Girls already have magazines, TV, peers and family reminding them on a daily basis that they're not perfect. The last thing they need is to brave going to the graphic novel section of their library and find comics featuring airheaded bimbos whose physical perfections are unattainable.

However, developing a graphic novel section for girls is not as easy as stocking titles with women on the cover. There are several things to keep in mind. First, it may take a while for girls to become comfortable with checking out comics, especially if the person behind the desk is a male. If she's like me, she'll probably worry that the guy is going to berate her for not knowing the name of obscure character X in spin-off series #345.

Secondly, put the comics in a place where girls are likely to see them. I'm not suggesting you shelve them with the junior Harlequins, but hiding them behind your collection of Dragon Lance books is probably not a good idea. Finally, consider the content of the comics before you buy them. Do they feature female heroines in a realistic manner that girls will be able to identify with? Finding comics that fulfill these criteria is trickier than it sounds. Reading the comics first to determine the status of the women they portray is essential.

Below is a list of comics that can help you get started in building a solid graphic novel collection for girls. I've divided them into three sections: red, yellow and green lights, to show you which ones to get (green), which ones to consider (yellow), and which ones to send back to the Playboy mansion (red).

Red Light : Stop! Before you buy these comics for girls!

Characteristics of red light comics: heroine has exaggerated female body type (e.g., large breasts, ridiculously narrow waist); heroine exhibits outdated sex roles; comic is/was probably written for teenage boys

Catwoman. Bad Halle Berry movie aside, there isn't much to this character other than a large chest.

Emma Frost. The first series of this comic is practically pornographic, but it gets better later on.

Striperella. A comic book about a crime-fighting stripper. Need I say more?

Vampirella. Striperella with fangs.



(Striperella)

Yellow Light: Proceed with caution

Characteristics: heroine is brave but may have stereotypical body type; heroine may exhibit neurotic or silly behaviors; comic may feature excess violence

Alias. Sidney may be a tough crime-fighting chick, but we all know that the show is about the skimpy outfits.

Birds of Prey. I was skeptical about this one, but one of my (admittedly male) friends swore that this tale about two crime-fighting women was a positive read for girls.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I was never a fan of the show, but even I can't deny that Buffy has pizzazz, strength, and an (almost) realistic body type.

Promethea. I liked the historical aspect of these comics, but again, they lose points because of the sexualized body image.

Queen & Country. This is the story of a female James Bond, a heroine who works for the British Ministry of Intelligence. This comic was highly recommended for its strong female protagonist, but the violent stories may be appropriate only for older teens.

Sailor Moon. Girls love Sailor Moon's adventures, but her neurotic tendencies can be over the top.



(Sailor Moon)

Tank Girl. She's definitely not your average female heroine, but this comic is questionable for its gratuitous obscenities.

Green Light

Characteristics: heroine is usually depicted with realistic features; heroine is brave but not overly cruel; heroine is on equal footing with other male characters; comic is likely written by a woman

Courtney Crumrin. For all the girls who love Tim Burton films, mourn for *Daria* and collect Emily Strange products, here is the comic heroine to warm their angst-ridden hearts.

Go Girl! Created by the brilliant woman comic book creator Trina Robbins, *Go Girl!* features a teenage heroine that girls can really relate to.

Persepolis. This graphic novel is based on the real-life story of author Marjane Satrapi and her life as a teenage girl during the Iranian Revolution. Highly recommended.

(Persepolis)



Spider-Girl. She may be kind of bland, but she's picked up a huge female fan base and comes highly recommended.

Strangers in Paradise. A good comic for older teenage girls as it deals with controversial issues such as homosexuality.

Resources

LoFi Comics and Entertainment Magazine. Issue #4, March/April 2005. **Women in comics special issue.**

"Women in refrigerators"

<http://www.the-pantheon.net/wir/>

A look at how women are portrayed in comic books
Friends of Lulu

<http://www.friends-lulu.org/>

This is a site dedicated to encouraging girls to read comics

"Strong Women in Comics":

<http://home.comcast.net/~brons/Comics/Women1.html>

Robbins, Trina. "Women in Comics: An Introductory Guide"

<http://www.teachingcomics.org/docs/women.pdf>

Sequential Tart. **A webzine devoted to raising awareness of the influence of women in comics.**

<http://www.sequentialtart.com/home.shtml>

Walker, Elizabeth. "Suffragettes, Vigilantes and Superheros: One Girl's Guide to Chicks in Comics," in *Girls Who Bite Back*, ed. Emily Pohl-Weary. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2004.