

Challenges to Graphic Novels in Public Libraries

The increase in popularity of comic books and graphic novels in public library is certain to attract one thing—an increase in challenges to this format. Talking with Lara McAllister, librarian at the Bedford Branch of Halifax Public Library, and responsible for selection of graphic novel for the entire Halifax Public Library System, she believes that it is their “visual nature combined with a lack of general knowledge” about the format that leaves them open to challenges. She has seen the number of challenges to graphic novels increase in her branch along with interest in the format. One problem is that graphic novels are often misunderstood by parents. They believe that comics are only kids’ stuff, while in reality, the form has evolved into a platform to deal with a range of topics meant for more mature teens and adults. Sometimes parents will let their younger kids pick comic form the young adult section, thinking that all comics are innocuous, and are shocked with what they find inside.

There are ratings systems in place for some comics, the Comics Code Authority is still being used by DC comics for some titles, and Archie Comics, manga usually come with a recommended age range, and starting in the summer of 2005, Marvel are rolling out a new rating system, similar to the advisories used by manga. But are these systems a good guide for librarians and parents?



McAllister states they can be useful to someone making selections, but she sometimes finds things in publications that she does not find suitable for the age range, and “not all parents will agree that their 13 year old should be reading a manga labeled as Ages 13+. The ratings may give a false sense of security to some parents, depending on what they deem acceptable for their child.” She has also found that some All Ages material may be better suited to the YA collection. Not all comics and graphic novels come with ratings either. She suggests that, as much as possible, a “hands on” approach is “a must” in selection and determining where in your collection graphic novels and comics should be placed.

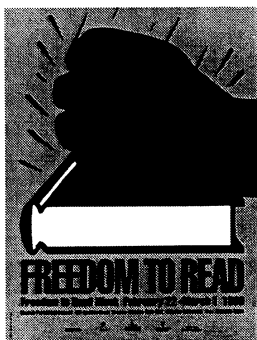
Another issue that often leads to challenges is that parents expect the library to be a safe place, and that librarians will monitor what their child is reading and checking out. Many libraries will put disclaimers about this on permission slips that parents must sign in order for their child to get a library card, but often, they go unnoticed. Most challengers, in McAllister’s experience, are parents concerned with what their children are reading. Parents have to be reminded that it is not the librarian’s responsibility to monitor their child’s reading, but their own. “Parents usually understand this once explained to them, and want power to be the ones to make decisions on what their child can and can not read,” says McAllister.

One way to deal with challenges is to educate your patrons and fellow staff about graphic novels and comic books before challenges occur. Make book displays of your popular titles, or of awarding winning comics. Hold programming to introduce adults to the world of manga. Make posters or pamphlets that explain the ratings on manga titles. (But always with the caveat, that a parent is the best judge of what’s appropriate for their children.) Informed parents will be in the best position to guide their child’s reading, and won’t be so shocked by the modern graphic novel.

So what can a library do when confronted with a challenge to a graphic novel or comic? Essentially the process to defend a comic or graphic novel is the same as with any other material that might be challenged in a public library. However, some of the sources used may be different.

The first step defending a challenge is to be prepared. A selection policy that clearly states your aims and goals is your best defense. Also, abide by the CLA or ALA statements on intellectual freedom. Those guiding principals can help you while under pressure to remove an item. Discuss with the challenger their concerns about the item, and really listen to what they have to say. In turn, explain your rationale for carrying the graphic novel and try to express its value as part of your library's collection.

Review the item yourself. Ratings and reviews are not always a reliable guide to age appropriateness, so "mistakes can happen" McAllister says, when placing a title in the YA collection. McAllister has never actually removed a title from the collection due to a challenge, but she has, after review, moved a title from the YA collection and placed with the adult collection.



Positive reviews of a title from trusted sources and recommended lists of titles can help prove literary, artistic or social value. However, reviews for some comics can be hard to find. Fortunately the increase in interest in the form has caused publications such as VOYA, School Libraries and Publishers Weekly to increase their coverage. Also, look to comics sites like *Ninth Art*, *Flying Without Tights*, *Comics Worth Reading*, and industry publications like *Comic Book Journal* for reviews.

The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund was formed in 1986 and is a defender against censorship attempts and a source for news and resources on challenges and censorship. Another source of support during a can be the Graphic Novels in Libraries listserv. Members may provide you with reviews for a challenged work, provide examples from their own experiences on how to defend a challenge, and offer moral support.

While comics and graphic novels may be more vulnerable to challenges that text only literature, they can be a valuable resource for reluctant readers, ESL students, and visual learners, and are worth having in your young adult collection.

The Comics Code: The comics industry has attempted to monitor itself, by provide ratings and suggested age ranges for their comics. In 1954 the Comics Code Authority was set up by the comic book industry in the US to ensure "good taste and decency," after years of criticism about sex and violence in comics. The Code's directives covered everything from suitable advertisers to comics, that women should be drawn realistically and not salaciously, to the appearance of the word crime in the title of a comic (never appreciably greater than the other words contained in the title.) For years comics all followed the code, but in the late 1980's the code itself relaxed, and with the advent of direct marketing, many publishers abandoned the code. Today, only DC and Archie follow the Comics Code. Marvel has recently adopted a new ratings system similar to the type that manga publishers use.

Lara McAllister's Ten Favourite Comics and Graphic Novels for Teens

Librarian, Bedford Branch of the Halifax Public Library

In no particular order:

The Hobbit - Illustrated by David Wenzel
Ranma ½ - Rumiko Takahashi
Thieves and Kings - Mark Oakley
The Complete Maus - Art Spiegelman
Persepolis - Marjane Satrapi
Bone (series) - Jeff Smith
Fables: Legend's in Exile - Bill Willingham (for mature readers – good for older teens)
The Cartoon History of the Universe - Larry Gonick
Sandman: Dream Country - Neil Gaiman
Rose - Jeff Smith & Charles Vess