Graphic Novels for School Libraries

Why chose graphic novels for a school library? Studies have shown that graphic novels tap into students' multiple intelligences. There are many reasons why a school library should have a graphic novel collection. Listed below are a few aspects that should be considered:

Audience: Graphic novels cover a wide range of subjects, fiction and non-fiction, and have great visual appeal. They are an especially attractive format for poor readers, ESL readers, reluctant readers, exceptional readers, budding artists and visual learners.

Visual Learning: Young adults of today are comfortable using non-text visual media. Graphic novels, in a way, are a cinematic approach to storytelling and can help students visualize a story. Sure, a new reader might find that it takes time to train the eye to absorb the artwork and, in a lot of cases, read right to left, but the overall value of graphic novels cannot be ignored. For the struggling reader this approach helps to expand their vocabulary, introduces to them the ideas of plot, pacing and sequence, and develops their visual skills and a critical eye for different art styles.

Appeal of Graphic Novels: A graphic novel is basically a long comic—an instant plus for teens. These novels, either in black-and-white or color, usually have awesome artwork. They are jam-packed with action, powerful images, engaging themes and modern mythology. Teens seem to love them. A lot of teens will have already tried their hand at drawing comics so they will be more likely to be interested in reading a graphic novel. Further, a graphic novel reading group can help build a sense of belonging for a reading-challenged teen. Interestingly, many novelists, screenwriters, directors, illustrators and actors have admitted to being comic fans when they were young.

Building Your Collection

Selecting Appropriate Materials

The first thing to consider when selecting materials is your user group. What are the demographics of your school community? A school Media Specialist or Teacher Librarian should be aware of their school's diversity and should take that into account when ordering materials. Secondly, it would be ideal to choose a range of titles that could appeal to the interests and abilities of as many students as possible. Thirdly, along with ordering graphic novels for "pleasure reading" select titles that support your school's curriculum. There are graphic novels that address history, literature and science to name a few subjects. This task is a "must do" in that you need teacher support for your collection to circulate at its best. Fourth, carefully choose your selection guides! You do not have to be a graphic novel expert to select a good collection. Talk with other librarians about graphic novel titles as well as with the teens in your school. Find out what's "in" and what's "out." Fifth, publishers label their novels for a certain age range. Advice from "Robin D." on the PUBYAC Listserv in March of 2005 is to "add two years to the publisher's recommended age range." Apparently nudity is more acceptable in Japan than in North America. Check out the graphic novel *Chobits* before you buy it. It's rated age 13+ but seems to be really an adult novel according to Robin. Sixth, please be aware of and concerned about the unstable reader (often male) who is or should be considered clinically ill. There is a growing concern, a moral and social responsibility, to choose graphic novel materials that do not focus on or glamorize such topics as suicide and pleasure killing. Seventhly, consider the following points: 1) popularity of a particular graphic novel 2) TV, movie, video game and toy tie-ins 3) writing quality 4) artistic quality and style 5) writer, artist and publisher's reputations 6) recognition and awards received. Lastly, try not to be overwhelmed with the rage of titles, styles and substance of what you will find. Graphic novels are super hot right now. Realize that there are probably people around you who will be happy to give you advice and make title suggestions.

Review Sources

Reference Books

Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and sequential art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press. ISBN 0961472812 $13.57 US

This text was published over twenty years ago, but is considered necessary for reference work. It was cited often.

Gorman, M. (2003). *Getting graphic: Using graphic novels to promote literacy with preteens and teens*. Worthington, OH: Linworth Publishing. ISBN 1586830899 $36.95 US

This guide was designed for Teacher Librarians and Media Specialists. It has professional reviews, suggested titles, literary devices lesson plans, a glossary of terms and sample collection development policies.

Lyga, A.A.W. (2004). *Graphic novels in your media center: A definitive guide*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
ISBN 1591581427 $35.00 US

This is a comprehensive guide to using graphic novels in a school setting. It is full of supported research developments, suggested lists for elementary, middle and high school collections, review sources, book jobbers, binderies, tips on how to build a relationship between the school library media center and local comic book store owners and sample lesson plans on how to incorporate specific graphic novels into a school's curriculum.

Websites

The Diamond Bookshelf (http://bookshelf.diamondcomics.com)
Diamond Bookshelf is the largest distributor of English-language comic books and graphic novels. On this website are: reviews and review archives, lists of titles for particular audiences, lesson plans, cataloguing tools, searchable catalogue and a 25% discount on orders from libraries.

Comic Book Resources (http://www.comicbookresources.com) This resource reports daily news, author and illustrator interviews, e-mail discussion list and a comic book store locator (cool, eh?).

Recommended Graphic Novels for Public Libraries (http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/graphicnovels.htm)
This is a site put together by Steve Raiteri, a Young Adult librarian and graphic novel reviewer for *Library Journal*. It has lists of recommended titles, a sample of what an opening day collection might look like and links to graphic novel websites.

Newtype USA (http://www.newtype-usa.com) This is an English-language version of a Japanese periodical highlighting news and reviews of manga and anime.

No Flying, No Tights: (http://www.noflyingnotights.com) This site has different sections for kids, teens and teens & adults that contain has a core list of titles.

Journals
School Library Journal – in its March 2005 edition it was announced that it had expanded its coverage of graphic novels.
VOYA
Booklist
Library Journal
Publishers Weekly
Entertainment Weekly
Video Librarian

Objections to Graphic Novels

Many objections to graphic novels come from places other than parents. Librarians themselves and school administrators object more often than parents. Even so, library literature suggests that negative feedback is very low. When fellow staff members are brought on board to the success that a graphic novel collection can bring to students, then the opposite actually happens—your collection will bring excitement and good buzz to your school library.

One regular objection to a graphic novel collection is the assumption that they are more prone to fall apart and to be stolen—money wasted. Well, first of all, one can reinforce the spine, gutters and covers with two-inch-wide clear book tape. Some libraries have gone as far as putting them into plastic binders. Secondly, most graphic novels cost between eight and twenty dollars, so depending on the title, the circulation might turn out to be excellent for the price of the novel. If graphic novels are stolen then it proves there is some value concerning them, which should be interpreted as a plus not a minus. Someone somewhere is probably reading it and spreading the news that graphic novels are cool! Often other items are stolen from the library as well. It might be helpful to examine how graphic novels fit into the statistics comparatively. You might find that it is not much different from other "new" stolen items. To help prevent theft consider doing the following: mark the novel to distinguish it as a library item—some libraries clip a corner or punch a hole in a corner (a librarian in Texas slips a ring through the punched hole and calls them "pierced novels"), use a neon library sticker on the cover and seal wrapped around the spine and stamp the inside and page edges with the name of the library.

Certain genres of graphic novels are more often targeted for objections. These genres are: horror, the supernatural, crime and punishment, satire and dark humor. Keep this in mind when you are considering for your collection critically acclaimed graphic novels from these genres.

There is also strong objection to the portrayal of women. Some dispute the credibility of novels where some female characters may be dressed in sexy outfits and sometimes behave in conformist, sexist and stereotyping ways. When dealing with nudity, remember that adult graphic novels should be labeled "adult" and that Japanese tolerance for nudity is lower than that of North America.

Keep in mind that it is possible to build a great graphic novel collection that does not revolve around violence and sexual exploitation. All collections could be challenged at any time. Do not be surprised when and if this happens to yours. Just make sure you have included graphic novels into your collection policy so that you have a procedure in place to deal with possible challenges.

Policy Sample

Teacher Librarians and School Media Specialists should have in place a collection policy for graphic novels even before they collect their materials. This policy will be a valuable tool for both building your collection and, just in case, a guide if challenges arise. The following is a sample of a basic policy from the Central Junior High School Library Media Center in Lawerence, Kansas:

Selection Criteria for Graphic Novels

Graphic novels are an important tool in the mission of the School Library Media center to attract reluctant readers and to build life-long reading habits. The specialized format of graphic novels requires that some aspects of the general Selection Criteria be emphasized and expanded upon.
- Preview all titles, whenever possible.
- Do not assume that a graphic novel is appropriate even if the author's texts are already part of the general collection.
- Be aware that themes that may be appropriate in a text format may be too explicit or sensational in a graphic novel format.
- Use trustworthy review sites and retain hardcopies of favorable reviews of potentially challengeable material.
- Be aware of publishers with a reputation for controversial materials.
- Be aware of authors known for using mature themes and language.
- In case of challenges, be familiar with:
  - American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom (http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/)
  - Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (http://www.cbldf.org/)

References

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School Library Journal. The Book Review: Graphic Novels. March 2005