

Graphic Novels: A Brief History and Overview for Library Managers

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Abstract

Graphic novels have long fought to gain literary recognition; however, as the struggle has unfolded, graphic novels have not only achieved this, but have also been recognized for their uses and applications within other disciplines as well. These books have overcome the medium's criticisms of violence, sexual situations, and stereotypes of male power, and have earned their place in our society, and in libraries. As more libraries, both public and academic, integrate graphic novels into their collections, the potential for criticism and censorship attempts increases. Graphic novels deserve the same recognition and consideration for inclusion in libraries as other literary formats; therefore, library managers must have a basic understanding of the format in order to defend their inclusion in collections to critics.

Introduction

Twenty years ago Keith R.A. DeCandido, in his article "Picture This: Graphic Novels in Libraries," indicated that both libraries and *The American Heritage Dictionary* had yet to discover graphic novels.¹ Since then, graphic novels have not only appeared in libraries and bookstores, but have become an integral part of popular culture and a vital aspect of the literary community. After spending decades struggling for recognition, educators are now praising graphic novels, libraries are ordering them, and bookstores are selling them. Despite enduring criticism and scrutiny, graphic novels are finally being recognized not only for their potential, but also for their achievements. Although graphic novels have been blamed for contributing to juvenile delinquency, attacked for their depictions of violence, and overlooked due to claims of poor physical quality, they are now recognized as a valuable resource for educators, librarians, and other professionals.² Not only do graphic novels contain artwork and text, they contain meaningful themes and allow readers of all ages to develop critical thinking, learn visual literacy, and improve comprehension and literary interpretation skills. However, there will always be members of society who will wish to censor these materials based on the fact that they are graphic novels.

Librarians are champions of intellectual freedom and advocates for the rights of individuals to explore their own areas of curiosity. Much like the protagonists of graphic novels, librarians are literary superheroes who combat censorship and battle villains that use their cynicism and biases to restrict access to information. Library managers, who are often the first line of defense against these complaints and attempts at censorship, must be able to defend the inclusion of graphic novels in their collection. The integration of graphic novels into library collections is timely and relevant, and library

managers can easily address concerns regarding the medium by having a basic understanding of the history of the graphic novel, various genres within the medium, and the numerous applications of the format.

The Development of the Graphic Novel

When asked what a graphic novel is, many people would say a comic. While graphic novels are related to comics, they are not the same. Comics generally appear weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly in newspapers or online publications, and are contained in a strip.⁴ Comic strips can be combined and published in books, which can attempt to tell a story within an ongoing series.⁵ Graphic novels, on the other hand, are a relatively recent innovation in the comic industry. Graphic novels are like comics in that they include pictures accompanied by text; however, the graphic novel is “a self-contained story that uses a combination of text and art to articulate the plot.”⁶ Comic books can be bound together to form a complete story, which in turn makes it a graphic novel, but individual comic books are not graphic novels.⁷

The first mainstream American comic strip, *Hogan’s Alley*, featuring The Yellow Kid by Richard Outcault, was published in 1895. Later, in 1933, comic books began appearing when Max Gaines started collecting and binding together collections of comic strips and selling them.⁸ Although reading comic books quickly became a popular pastime, the graphic novel had very few appearances over the next fifty years. David Serchay ponders that the first iteration of the modern graphic novel is quite possibly *It Rhymes with Lust* by Arnold Drake and Leslie Waller in the 1950’s,⁹ which they referred to as a “picture novel.” Their intention, as described in *The Ten Cent Plague*, was to create a work in the comic format that would actually be recognized as literature.¹⁰ A small handful of original graphic novels appeared in the 1970’s. However, the most well-known of the early graphic novels, and considered by many to be the first true graphic novel is *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner, published in 1978. The novel is a narrative told with pictures and text, and is a story about the human condition, the struggle of people trying to get ahead, and the struggle of others to survive.¹¹ Eisner coined the term “graphic novel” while he was attempting to publish the book. Many publishers were turned off by the comic book-like appearance of his story and the term “graphic novel” helped to define his work and distinguish it from comic books.^{12 13}

While “graphic novel” is currently the most commonly used term, other suggested nomenclature includes graphic album, graphic installment, graphic narrative and sequential art. Graphic novels are also often referred to as a genre, but everyone in the comic industry and graphic novel fans will quickly correct this. Graphic novels are a medium and within the medium there are many different genres.

Graphic Novel Genres

As graphic novels are a literary medium, there are many themes, styles, and stories that can be communicated through them. There is a discrepancy between what the identified genres within the medium of graphic novels are. In 2002, Weiner identified six graphic novel genres: the Superhero Story, Manga, Nonfiction, Adaptations or Spinoffs, Human Interest and Satire.¹⁴ The identification of graphic novel genres seems to continue to evolve and develop as the medium grows. In 2007, Pawuk defined

nine genres within the medium of graphic novels: Super-heroes, Action and Adventure, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Crime and Mysteries, Horror, Contemporary Life, Humor, and Non-Fiction.¹⁵ Pawuk's expansion to nine may be a result of his inclusion of the genres Crime and Mysteries, and Horror, which have previously been eliminated due to limitations of these genres imposed by the Comics Code.

The super-hero genre, likely the most popular and recognizable genre of graphic novels, contains a familiar super-hero character taken from comics and places him or her in a stand-alone story. Super-heroes such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman all have several graphic novels to their name. The super-hero genre can also include graphic novels that explore alternate timelines and universes, as well as stories of super-hero team-ups.

Action and adventure graphic novels can be set in a variety of locations, time periods, and worlds, feature characters of all walks of life, and tell their exciting stories. Graphic novels in this genre include stories of treasure hunting, as in *Captain Nemo* by Jason DeAngelis, combat and survival, like *Dragon Ball* or *Lone Wolf 2100* by Mike Kennedy, and danger and espionage, as in *SpyBoy* by Peter David or *James Bond 007* adapted from the popular novels of Ian Fleming.

Much like science fiction television shows, movies, and books, science fiction graphic novels explore everything from space travel to robots and aliens to the future of life on Earth. A great example is the iconic film series *Star Wars* and related animated series *The Clone Wars*, which have many graphic novel adaptations that explore various time periods and characters within both series.

The fantasy genre features stories set in magical worlds where dragons, trolls, other mystical creatures exist. This genre is diverse in the stories told; graphic novels such as *Loki* by Rob Rodi or *Fables* by Bill Willingham are based on mythology and folklore, while others like *Elf Quest* by Wendy and Richard Pini are set in fantasy realms. Even classic fantasy novels such as *The Hobbit* and *Beowulf* have been adapted into graphic novels.

Crime and mystery graphic novels can be either fictitious stories exploring criminal acts, investigations, the criminal underworld, or non-fiction true-crime stories. Fictional crime and mystery graphic novels usually follow investigations done by the police, as in *Kane* by Paul Grist, private or amateur investigators, as in *Heavy Liquid* by Paul Pope, or teen sleuths as in *Zachary Holmes* by Carlos Trillo. True-crime graphic novels explore the history, details, theories, and investigations surrounding real-life criminal acts, such as *From Hell* by Alan Moore which follows the infamous "Jack the Ripper" murders.

Horror graphic novels are similar to fantasy graphic novels in that they usually feature supernatural creatures such as vampires, ghosts, zombies, and other monsters. Although some horror graphic novels come from popular television shows, such as *Angel* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or are based on familiar stories and characters, like *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*, many in this genre are more appropriate for teens and older audiences.

Graphic novels about contemporary life tell real-life stories that readers can relate to. Contemporary life graphic novels follow characters in situations that happen in our daily lives, such as the coming-of-age

story of *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes, or the story of friendship and love in *Strangers in Paradise* by Terry Moore.

The humor genre follows in the footsteps of the comic strip and tells a funny story. Some of these graphic novels even come from classic comic strips and animation such as *Archie* and *Bugs Bunny and Looney Tunes*.

Finally, the non-fiction genre includes biographical, historical, educational, and instructional graphic novels. Graphic novels such as the acclaimed *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman fall within the realm of historical and biographical, while others like *Cartoon Guide to Chemistry* written by Larry Gonick and Craig Criddle are a blend of educational and instructional.¹⁶

As with all literature, many graphic novels do not fit snugly into one genre and are considered a subgenre or genreblend. Additionally, graphic novels include the Japanese manga, Korean manhwa, and Chinese manhua. While some may consider these a genre, manga, manhwa, and manhua really are a type of graphic novel. Within manga, manhwa, and manhua, the same genres of graphic novels can be applied. Due to their relation to popular animated television series, especially in the case of manga, these types of graphic novels are very popular with children, teens, and young adults.

So What's Wrong?

Although graphic novels encompass the same genres, themes, and styles as traditional novels, they have endured difficulties in being recognized as a valid literary form. Graphic novels have been criticized for many things including depicting violence and sexual themes, being a forum for male power fantasies, and contributing to the delinquency of American youth.^{17 18} Libraries specifically used the argument that they were of poor physical quality to justify keeping them out of collections.¹⁹ Graphic novels are a medium that has the ability to portray meaningful stories, ideas, and themes for a wide array of audiences, because of this graphic novels should be treated no differently than other literary formats in libraries.

Violence and Sexual Exploitation

Graphic novels, like traditional novels, are a medium used to communicate stories to all ages and reading levels. While there are some graphic novels that contain violence and sexual situations, there are a myriad of graphic novel selections available that contain neither of these aspects. Graphic novels that do contain violence or sexual content are generally labeled as “adult,” and as Weiner cites, using the term “adult” in relation to graphic novels is often taken to mean the novel contains pornographic content. While some graphic novels do contain sexual content, the label “adult” does not mean pornographic, it may be in reference to philosophical and emotional content that targets a more mature audience.²⁰

Graphic novels depict varying degrees of violence and sexual themes because they are created for a variety of readers. While one graphic novel may be appropriate for children, another may not. Just as content in traditional novels is assessed for age appropriateness, the same should be done with graphic

novels.²¹ The medium of graphic novels should not be generalized as violent and highly sexualized due to the content of some titles and rather should be treated as any other form of literature would.

Male Power

Graphic novels have undergone further attacks that they serve as a male power fantasy. While male figures may be the first graphic novel characters that come to mind they are certainly not the only. Females appear in powerful roles time and time again, as both villains and heroines, throughout graphic novels. The Birds of Prey, Batman villains Catwoman and Poison Ivy, Susan Storm of the Fantastic Four, several members of the X-Men, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Lara Croft of Tomb Raider are all recognizable, powerful, major female characters within graphic novels.²² It is also important for critics to remember that graphic novels are not only of the superhero genre; superhero stories are only one form the graphic novel takes.

Contributors to Delinquency

In 1950, state senator Estes Kefauver was selected as chair for the Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce to explore racketeering and its effects. Over the next year the committee held public hearings in various major cities across the United States. During the public hearings in Washington, several days were dedicated to juvenile delinquency and comic books; this included testimony from witnesses, public officials, and experts, including one of the comic industry's first major critics, Fredric Wertham.²³ Despite testimonies criticizing certain comics, the Kefauver committee issued its juvenile delinquency and comics report on November 11, 1950, with no substantive findings linking comics to juvenile delinquency.²⁴ The *New York Times* published the committee's findings on November 14, 1950 under the title "Crime and The Comics." This article identified that the majority opinion of the committee was "that there is no direct connection between the comic books dealing with crime and juvenile delinquency."²⁵ This victory was short lived for the comic industry and quickly forgotten by the public.

Near the end of 1952 public tension related to comic books was again on the rise. Through 1953 sporadic newspaper and magazine articles made claims that comic books were dangerous for children, while radio personalities, such as Barry Gray, delivered monologues that attacked the comic industry and elevated public concerns further.²⁶ During this time Fredric Wertham was very vocal about his concerns and ascertained that comic books were major contributors to the delinquency of American youth. He determined that comic books threatened the mental and behavioral health of children, concluded that an increase in violence and juvenile delinquency was directly related to an increase in comic book sales. In 1954, Fredric Wertham published all of his findings in his 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which was widely advertised in ladies magazines, displayed on billboards, and appeared in newspapers across the nation. Although Wertham's work was lacking of significant research and drew correlation between comics and juvenile delinquency that was absent of concrete evidence linking the two, it still gained recognition and support from the mainstream public.²⁷ From within the comic industry and to those familiar with the medium, it was apparent that Wertham's work overlooked the

literary intent of the stories, misinterpreted ideas, and failed to distinguish between comics written for children and those written for adults.²⁸

In April and June of 1954, following the release of *Seduction of the Innocent*, the United States Senate held a series of juvenile delinquency hearings devoted to the relationship between comics and juvenile delinquency.²⁹ The committee, although chaired by Senator Robert Hendrickson, was often referred to as the Kefauver subcommittee due to the involvement of Senator Estes Kefauver who had gained popularity after his 1950 investigation on racketeering. After the subcommittee concluded its hearings, the Kefauver report was released identifying that the burden of self-regulation was the responsibility of the comic book industry.³⁰

In September of 1954 the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) was established to create and enforce a code for comic books. The code contained 41 regulations in seven categories and placed restrictions on the way crime, horror, dialogue, costume, religion, sex and marriage, and advertising were depicted.³¹ The code has since been changed, revised, and by some disregarded, and Wertham has been widely discredited for his relation of comics to the delinquency of youths.³²

Physical Quality

The next issue, which relates more to collection management, is the physical quality of graphic novels. Oftentimes opposition to graphic novels in library collections actually comes from library staff.³³ One claim against graphic novels in the collection is that they are of poor quality and made with flimsy materials, such as newsprint. While this may be the case with comic books, it is not the case with graphic novels. Graphic novels are generally paperbacks; bound books made with quality materials. In fact, they are no poorer in quality than other paperback books in a collection.³⁴ As such, graphic novels should be treated as other paperback items within a collection and have their binding reinforced or repairs made as damage is incurred.

Graphic Novels in the Library

As noted above, graphic novels have been attacked for many reasons; however, rather than undergoing attacks, they should be receiving praise. Graphic novels are an untapped resource that can serve many purposes. Graphic novels are a medium that allow a variety of subjects, themes, and ideas to be explored. With graphic novels that are appropriate for a variety of readers, they are the perfect tool to encourage literacy, foster critical thinking, support visual literacy, and teach literary interpretation skills, and should be a welcome addition to library collections.

Public Library Applications

Books and reading have severe competition in getting the attention of younger audiences. Between video games, television, computers, and smart phones, young adults are bombarded by flashy images, quick scene changes, and other visual stimuli that demand their attention. Why not turn these visual captivators into tools for getting young people to read? The graphic novel provides children and teens

with images of action that they are looking for, while the text that accompanies the pictures brings the story of a graphic novel to life.³⁵

Many people think the idea of having graphic novels in the library is absurd, but let's look at other popular forms of media. Some of the most popular shows on television for children and teens are *Naruto* and *Pokemon*, which are animated. Other popular television shows, such as *The Walking Dead*, are drawn from favorite comic book characters. Recent box office hits such as *Spiderman*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Avengers* brought popular graphic novel and comic characters to life on the big screen. With such a connection to popular culture, is it really surprising that the graphic novel is popular? Libraries should take advantage of this popularity and use graphic novels as a tool to get children and teens reading.

Kerry Ireland indicates that getting reluctant readers to read will result in a sort of domino effect. If teens begin to enjoy what they read, they will find reading pleasurable. This pleasure they find from reading comics and graphic novels will equip these teens with a willingness to keep reading which is practice. This practicing of reading will develop better literacy skills, which will foster other crucial learning skills and lead to achievement in other areas.³⁶

Graphic novels can do so much more than simply getting children and teens to read. According to Stephen Wiener, reading comics and graphic novels is an acquired skill that takes practice. Unlike traditional English reading that is sequenced from left to right, a graphic novel's "panels" do not necessarily follow this same sequence. The reading of a graphic novel is a process that is guided by the illustrations. Active participation by the reader is required to decode the text in combination with the pictures, helping readers to develop visual literacy and critical thinking skills.³⁷ Graphic novels also contain a plot, setting, conflict, and characters; the same defining attributes of a novel.³⁸ Reading graphic novels allows children and teens to develop the skills to identify and interpret these elements of stories. In addition to this, graphic novels help children and teens visualize abstract ideas that are often found in classical masterpieces, such as foreshadowing and flashbacks. Many children and teens benefit from the visual cues provided by the pairing of pictures and text; while not being able to picture the story in their head, the drawings allow them to see the story unfold.³⁹ While these applications tend to focus on the development of skills in children, teens, and reluctant readers, these are skills that will aid in developing a life-long love of reading and learning, and thus are also important for students at an academic institution.

Academic Library Applications

In addition to developing and fostering important learning skills, graphic novels have uses and applications in higher education and can supplement the collections of academic libraries as well. Lorena O'English outlines four primary reasons for the inclusion of graphic novels within academic libraries: "as a subject of study in themselves, to support the curriculum across subject boundaries (including foreign language study), on a "how-to" basis for personal and professional development, and for leisure reading."⁴⁰ While much of the literature asserts that graphic novel collections should be incorporated into academic libraries to support teacher education and librarianship curriculum, an

exploration of discipline-specific literature provides insight into the their applications within various discipline's curricula.

Some graphic novelists are professionals in other disciplines and create graphic novels to support their area of expertise. For example, Jay Hosler, an evolutionary biologist, publishes graphic novels that focus on various facets of evolutionary biology.⁴¹ Thomas Juneau and Mira Sucharov argue that graphic novels are an effective pedagogical tool for teaching international relations and political science. They employ the use of three graphic novels, *Palestine*, by Joe Sacco, *Exit Wounds*, by Rutu Modan, and *Waltz with Bashir*, by Ari Folman and David Polansky, to supplement the traditional textbook in their course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴² A well-known scholar in the field of social history, Howard Zinn, has even converted his book *A People's History of the United States* into a graphic novel,⁴³ *A People's History of American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation* along with historian Paul Buhle and cartoonist Mike Konopacki. These are just a few examples from select disciplines, but the applications are endless and include ethnic studies, humanities, sciences, arts, and business. The topics, philosophies, ideas, and commentaries represented in the medium are so diverse that the selection and inclusion of graphic novels should be no different than the selection and inclusion of all other literature in the academic library collection.

Conclusion

Graphic novels continue to evolve as a medium and their prevalence within different disciplines is quickly increasing. While children and teens are a large user group within the public library, the uses and applications for adult populations as well as for academic libraries and scholarly purposes should not be overlooked. After all of the obstacles the graphic novel has overcome in its existence it is imperative that librarians give this medium the same opportunities for consideration and success within their collections as other literature. With a basic understanding of this dynamic medium, library managers will be able to better support their collections, their librarians, their institutions, and their community.

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