Bringing Graphic Novels into a School's Curriculum

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Many young adults enjoy graphic novels because the genre differs so dramatically from the books that educators traditionally have encouraged adolescents to read. Growing up with television and video games, contemporary young adults look for print media that contain the same visual impact and pared-down writing style and contribute to their enthusiasm for visual rather than written literacy. For many young adults, graphic novels represent a welcome move away from what they consider traditional "school" reading. This enthusiasm is reflected in the increase in sales of graphic novels from $75 million in 2001 to $120 million in 2003 (Raiteri 2003). To help educators adjust to this new reality, this article looks at the various types of graphic novels, the reasons for using them, the characteristics of quality graphic novels, and suggestions for using graphic novels in middle and secondary classrooms.

Graphic Novels

Graphic novels represent one of the most popular and fastest-growing types of young adult literature. The genre began in 1978 when cartoonist Will Eisner created *A Contract with God*, a collection of stories about a poor, crowded Jewish Bronx neighborhood, and coined the term "graphic novel" to describe a complex story told in comic book format in 64 to 179 pages. As a visual medium, graphic novels are engaging and often written for a mature audience. *Maus I*, a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman, won the Pulitzer Prize (this was later combined with *Maus II* and reissued as *The Complete Maus* [1997]), and *'Nam* (1987), a graphic novel by Doug Murray, won the Best Media of the Vietnam War Award given by Bravo Organization, a veterans group. In 2002, the American Library Association

(ALA) annual conference featured a preconference workshop on graphic novels, and the ALA 2002 Teen Read Week theme was "Getting Graphic @ Your Library."

A graphic novel is a "dynamic format of image and word that delivers meaning and enjoyment" (Simmons 2003, 12). Like a comic book, a graphic novel comprises boxed pictures and text and may have several boxes per page. As in a picture book, the illustrations enrich and extend the text. However, in a graphic novel, readers must not only decode the words and the illustrations but must also identify events between the visual sequences (Simmons 2003). Diamond Comics, a major U.S. distributor, distinguishes a graphic novel from a comic book by noting that a graphic novel is longer and tells a complete stand-alone story, unlike comics often issued in successive parts. In addition, many graphic novels are more complex than the superheroes found in comic books and address many of the same issues and concerns found in more traditional types of literature.

Although traditional book publishers reluctantly have recognized the success of graphic novels, comic book publishers have embraced the medium, issuing graphic novels by outstanding artists such as Art Spiegelman, Neil Gaiman, Jeff Smith, and Coleen Doran. Publishers usually issue graphic novels in hard cover and issue paperbacks as trade paperbacks. Table 1 lists selected publishers of graphic novels.

Types of Graphic Novels

Because young adults should be encouraged to read what interests them, graphic novels belong in every school library. They also should, when appropriate, be incorporated into the school curriculum. However, this

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TABLE 1. Selected Graphic Novel Publishers

Abstract Studio, Inc.	http://www.strangersinparadise.com/
Active Synapse	http://www.activesynapse.com/
CrossGeneration	http://www.crossgen.com/
DC Comics	http://www.dccomics.com/
Fantagraphics	http://www.fantagraphics.com/
Image Comics	http://www.imagecomics.com/
NBM Publishing (Nantier Beall Minoustchine)	http://www.nbmpub.com/
SLG Publishing	http://www.slavelabor.com/
Tokyopop	http://www.tokyopop.com/
Top Shelf Productions	http://www.topshelfcomix.com/

means that, as with any other formats or genres of literature, educators need to know about graphic novels and how to select quality examples for young adults—items that readers appreciate, as well as items that will contribute to adolescents' education.

Despite their popularity, some people consider graphic novels to be nothing more than adventure stories. There are, however, a number of different types of graphic novels, including superhero tales; realistic stories; science fiction and fantasy novels; future, contemporary, and historical adventure stories; and *manga* (Japanese) tales, as well as humorous works, political satires, and adaptations of classics. Although fiction remains the most popular part of the genre (Weiner 2001a), the scope of graphic novels has widened to include more sophisticated subject matter, including nonfiction, biography, and autobiography. No matter whether fiction or nonfiction, the term "graphic novel" remains the same.

Even graphic novels that focus on the traditional superhero cannot be written off as mere fluff. Weiner (2001a) argues that the superhero tale serves as an allegory to modern life and provides an escape for readers. Others believe that the superheroes can be compared to the heroic figures in classical mythology.

Like manga (Japanese) comics, manga graphic novels and anime (Japanese animation) are popular with teenagers because of the "dynamic, eccentric, and very often sexy illustrations in combination with fast-paced science fiction, adventure, fantasy and martial arts stories" (Reid 2003, 56), usually with teens as the main characters. In fact, the growth of English-language manga graphic novels has been phenomenal (Reid 2002), spurred in part by the release of related anime on television and in video or DVD format. Even a small manga publisher such as ComicsOne, which publishes the manga version of the hit movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, issued nearly one hundred titles in 2002 (Reid 2002). Like manga comics, manga graphic novels, with their diverse subject matter, are more popular with females than males (Reid 2003).

Reasons for Using and Teaching with Graphic Novels

Too often educators exclude graphic novels solely because of the format or the erroneous impression that all graphic novels focus on supernatural horror stories or are expressions of the male power fantasy. However, graphic novels actually fuse text and art, which offers value, variety, and a new medium for literacy. Because graphic novels appeal to young people, educators can use them to offer alternatives to traditional texts and mass media and to introduce young adults to literature that they might otherwise never encounter. In fact, some educators use graphic novels to teach literary terms and techniques such as dialogue, to serve as a bridge to other classics, and as the basis for writing assignments. Although some educators worry that reading graphic novels will discourage adolescents from reading other genres of literature, others believe that graphic novels may require young adults to use more complex cognitive skills than reading text alone (Schwartz 2002).

Characteristics of Graphic Novels for Young Adults

Tabitha Simmons maintains that

[g]raphic novel readers have learned to understand print, but can also decode facial and body expressions, the symbolic meanings of certain images and postures, metaphors and similes, and other social and literary nuances teenagers are mastering as they move from childhood to mat.urity. (2003, 12)

Therefore, it is important to look for graphic novels that have visual impact and that showcase their creators' artistic abilities while presenting a balance of text and art. This correlation of words and illustrations is crucial because the art as well as the text must be "read." Although black and white illustrations can be effective, color also may add to a graphic novel. Many libraries have found that when collections include graphic novels, teens readily check them out. However, in addition to appealing to young adults, graphic novels that are selected for use in schools must represent the best qualities of the literature genre (that is, biog-

raphy, fantasy, etc.) and must be appropriate for adolescents. Educators need to select books carefully, preview them when possible, and ensure that they are content and age appropriate. A number of popular graphic novels deal with controversial themes or have a content better suited for adult readers, although adolescents also may read them. Thus, Gorman (2002a) advises educators to examine the genre, target audience, quality, and artistic merit as well as the reputation and style of the author and illustrator when evaluating graphic novels.

Graphic Novels for Young Adults

Graphic novels reflect many genres of traditional literature, from fantasy and science fiction to adventure and nonfiction. In some books, including many by the award-winning Neil Gaiman, authors depict theme situations for mature young adults or for adult audiences. Therefore, we again mention the importance of previewing graphic novels before using them and recommending them to adolescents.

Despite this precaution, a number of graphic novels can be successfully integrated into the curriculum. While Larry Gonick has written the *Cartoon History of the Universe* (1997), which contains facts as well as enough trivia to keep readers interested, several authors of graphic novels have looked at specific historical events for their subjects. For example, in *300* (1999), Frank Miller and Lynn Varley combine fact and fantasy to retell the story of the Spartans and the Battle of Thermopylae, and in the Age of Bronze series, which begins with *A Thousand Ships* (2001), Eric Shanower writes of the Trojan War. Looking at more recent history, Art Spiegelman examines the Holocaust in *The Complete Maus* (1997), which combines his Pulitzer Prize–winning *Maus I* with the sequel *Maus II*.

Several graphic novels present interesting biographies. *Streetwise* (Cooke and Morrow 2000) is a collection of autobiographies of people in the comic book industry. In addition, *Dignifying Science* (Ottaviani 2000) provides a look at famous women in science, while *Two-Fisted Science* (Ottaviani 2001) presents stories of scientists such as Newton, Einstein, and Galileo.

Graphic novelists also have successfully adapted some classics. Some examples include David Wenzel's graphic novel version of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (2001), a translation of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (Heuet 2001), Peter Kuper's rendition of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (2003), and P. Craig Russell's adaptation of *The Ring of the Nibelung* (2002). Will Eisner retold an African legend in *Sundiata: A Legend of Africa* (2002) and gave a new perspective to Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* in *Fagin the Jew* (2003).

In other areas of the curriculum, science educators can use *Clan Apis* (Hosler 2000) to study the life of the honeybee, *The Sandwalk Adventures* (Hosler 2003) to

look at Darwin's theory of natural selection, or *Fallout* (Ottaviani 2001) to examine the scientific and social aspects of the development of the atomic bomb. For social studies educators, Joe Kubert takes readers to the Balkans in *Fax from Sarajevo: A Story of Survival* (1998), while Joe Sacco reports on his experiences in the Middle East in *Palestine* (2002), and Ted Rall recounts his travels in *To Afghanistan and Back: A Graphic Travelogue* (2002).

Several graphic novels explore social issues. Two such examples are Judd Winnick's look at AIDS in *Pedro and Me* (2000) and Katherine Arnoldi's exploration of rape and pregnancy in *Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (1998). For mature readers is the powerful story of sexual abuse in Bryan Talbot's *The Tale of One Bad Rat* (1995). Other powerful graphic novels include collections of stories that look back at the September 11, 2001, attacks, including *9-11: September 11, 2001 (Stories to Remember, Vol. 1)* (2002) and *9-11: September 11, 2001 (Stories to Remember, Vol. 2)* (2002).

Within the genre of graphic novels are many fantasy and science fiction books based on comics that feature the same characters. For example, the X-Men series moves from *X-Men: The Ultimate Guide* (2003), by Peter Sanderson, to graphic novels with *The Dark Phoenix Saga* (2003), by Chris Claremont and John Byrne. In *Legion of Super-Heroes: The Beginning of Tomorrow* (1999), Tom McCraw tells the stories of teenage superheroes in the thirty-first century, while in the three volumes of the *Daredevil: Visionaries* series (2000–2001), Frank Miller looks at another superhero. Similarly, Brian Bendis and Mark Bagley take a fresh look at another well-known character in *Ultimate Spider-Man: Power and Responsibility* (2002).

A number of graphic novels that reflect young adults' love of mystery and horror appeal especially to girls. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Origin* (Golden 1999) and *Leave It to Chance: Shaman's Rain* (Robinson 2000) are two books in series that feature female protagonists. Older teens will enjoy the mature subjects in Neil Gaiman's classics *The Sandman* (1993), *Death: The High Cost of Living* (1994), and *Black Orchid* (1996).

Like manga comics, manga graphic novels remain popular. *Rumic Theater* (1996) and *Rumic Theater: One or Double* (1998) are excellent collections of the works of Rumiko Takahashi, the popular female artist of the Ranma series. Other popular manga novels and series include *Oh My Goddess!* by Kosuke Fujishima (2003), stories of Usagi Yojimbo by Stan Sakai (2000), and the *Dragonball* series by Akira Toriyama (2002). There is even a wordless graphic novel called *Gon* (2000) by Masashi Tanaka. Other popular manga series feature characters such as Astro Boy, Fushigi Yugi, Marmalade Boy, and Peach Girl. Table 2 provides the names of some suggested graphic novel series, and table 3 lists some Web sites that review graphic novels.

Suggestions for Selecting and Using Graphic Novels

Graphic novels have just begun to achieve a level of acceptance by the publishing industry, and professional publications are beginning to include reviews of graphic novels. Some graphic novels even show up on the annual best books lists. *School Library Journal* now includes a "Graphic Novel Roundup" section, and Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA) recently added a graphic novel column written by Kat Kan in each issue. Several writers, including Philip Crawford (2003) and Michele Gorman (2002a, 2002b), have developed lists of recommended graphic novels. In addition to Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (2001), there are several publications on selecting graphic novels including Joss O'Kelly's *Son of Invisible Art: Graphic Novels for Libraries* (2001), and Stephen Weiner's *101 Best Graphic Novels* (2001b). To learn more about graphic novels and to keep informed of trends and new offerings, educators should develop a relationship with a local bookshop or a book store that carries graphic novels.

When ordering graphic novels for a school library or a classroom collection of materials, it may be more practical to order the trade paperback rather than the hard copy version. Gorman (2002a) recommends taping spines and edges of trade paperbacks with clear, plastic tape and marking all copies with a neon library sticker or writing the school name on the cover to encourage students to read and return rather than collect the graphic novels. Other resources about graphic novels, such as publishers' Web sites, discussion groups (for example, http://www.topica.com/lists/GNLIB-L),

TABLE 2. Graphic Novel Series

Series/Character	Author	Publisher
Akiko	Mark Crilley	Sirius
Astro Boy	Osamu Tezuka	Dark Horse Comics
AstroCity	Kurt Busiek	Homage Comics
Black Panther	Stan Lee and Christopher Priest	Marvel Comics
Bone	Jeff Smith	Cartoon Books
Call Me Princess	Tomoko Taniguchi	CPM
Electric Girl	Michael Brennan	Mighty Gremlin
Elfquest	Wendy and Richard Pini	Wolfrider Books
Fushigi Yugi	Yu Watase	Viz
Groo	Sergio Aragones	Dark Horse Comics
Meridian	Barbara Kesel and Steve McNiven	CrossGen Comics
Nausciaa of the Valley of Wind	Hayao Miyazaki	Viz
Peach Girl	Miwa Ueda	Tokyopop
Ramna 1/2	Rumiko Takahashi	Viz Communications
Simpsons	Matt Groening	HarperPerennial
SpyBoy	Peter David	Dark Horse Comics
Tenchi Masaki	Hitoshi Okuda	Viz
Usagi Yojimbo	Stan Sakai	Fantagraphics and Dark Horse

TABLE 3. Selected Web Sites that Review Graphic Novels

No Flying, No Tights. http://www.noflyingnotights.com/index2.html
   Created by Robin Brenner of the Cary Memorial Library in Lexington, MA, the Web site provides brief, informative reviews of graphic novels, as well as information on the books and their creation.
The Lair. http://lair.noflyingnotights.com/
   This Web site is a companion site to No Flying, No Tights and covers graphic novels that "walk the line between teen appeal and more adult content."
Graphic Novels and Comic Trade Paperbacks. http://www.geocities.com/dawnanik/grnovels.htm
   This site is an annotated list compiled by Dawn Imada of the San Jose (CA) Public Library System.
Recommended Graphic Novels for Public Libraries. http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri
   A list by Steve Raiteri, librarian at the Greene County Public Library in Zenia, OH.

and reputable sites with information on recommended graphic novels, are available on the Internet. Working with library media specialists, teachers should review all graphic novels for content, language, sexist and cultural stereotypes, and overall appropriateness for the particular class.

Graphic novels can contribute to interdisciplinary thematic units or can serve as an introduction to a specific content area. For example, in the social studies, they can help students develop an understanding of history and/or an appreciation of differing cultures. In the sciences, they can help adolescents explore complex and sometimes confusing topics. In addition, graphic novels offer subject matter and viewpoints that students might not otherwise consider. For example, by providing an account of his parents' lives in England, Raymond Briggs' *Ethel and Ernest* (1998) shows how ordinary individuals reacted to major events such as World War II (Schwartz 2002).

Educators can use graphic novels to give new voices to minorities and people with diverse viewpoints. In H. F. Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1999), young adults can examine the lives of four Japanese immigrants in San Francisco from 1904 to 1924. In *Still I Rise* (Laird, Laird, and Bey 1997), they can examine the history of African Americans (Schwartz 2002).

Crawford (2003) suggests that some graphic novels can be used with mature adolescents to address the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) Standards, which deal with individual development and identity, power, authority, and governance. *A Jew In Communist Prague* (Giardino 1997) chronicles a young Jew's coming of age in an era of communism and anti-Semitism, and *Stuck Rubber Baby* (Cruse 1995) examines racism and homophobia in the American South in the 1960s. According to Crawford (2003), to provide insight into the conflicts and power struggles of the twentieth century, educators can use graphic novels such as *The Complete Maus* (Spiegelman 1997), *Palestine* (Sacco 2002), and *Fax from Sarajevo* (Kubert 1998).

Summary

Adolescent readers have demonstrated considerable interest in graphic novels during the past several years. Increased sales, readers' preferences, and worn copies attest to the popularity of this genre. Educators can take advantage of this popularity by selecting graphic novels for collection centers, as well as incorporating appropriate novels throughout the middle and secondary school curriculum. An essential key is careful selection to ensure that the text is age and content appropriate. Although some educators are reluctant to promote and use graphic novels, others effectively use this genre to promote reading for enjoyment and learning across the curriculum.

Key words: graphic novels, literacy, reading

APPENDIX

Recommended Graphic Novels

9-11: September 11, 2001 (Stories to remember, vol. 1). 2002. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

9-11: September 11, 2001 (Stories to remember, vol. 2). 2002. New York: DC Comics.

Arnoldi, K. 1998. *Amazing "true" story of a teenage single mom.* New York: Hyperion.

Bendis, B., and M. Bagley. 2002. *Ultimate Spider-Man: Power and responsibility.* New York: Marvel Comics.

Briggs, R. 1998. *Ethel and Ernest.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Claremont, C., and J. Byrne. 2003. *The dark phoenix saga.* New York: Marvel Enterprises.

Cooke, J. B., and J. Morrow, eds. 2000. *Streetwise: Autobiographical stories by comic book professionals.* Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing.

Cruse, H. 1995. *Stuck rubber baby.* New York: Paradox.

Eisner, W. 1978. *A contract with God.* New York: DC Comics.

———. 2002. *Sundiata: A legend of Africa.* New York: NBM.

———. 2003. *Fagin the Jew.* New York: Doubleday. (This is *Oliver Twist* from a different perspective.)

Fujishima, K. 2003. *Oh my goddess! Mystery child.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Gaiman, N. 1993. *The Sandman: A game of you.* New York: DC Comics.

———. 1994. *Death: The high cost of living.* New York: DC Comics.

———. 1996. *Black orchid.* New York: DC Comics.

Giardino, V. 1997. *A Jew in communist Prague, 1: Loss of innocence.* New York: NBM.

Golden, C. 1999. *Buffy the vampire slayer: Origin.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Gonick, L. 1997. *Cartoon history of the universe.* New York: Broadway Books.

Heuet, S. 2001. *Remembrance of things past.* New York: NBM.

Hosler, J. 2000. *Clan Apis.* Columbus, OH: Active Synapse.

———. 2003. *The sandwalk adventures: An adventure in evolution told in five chapters.* Columbus, OH: Active Synapse.

Kiyama, H. F. 1999. *The four immigrants manga.* Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press.

Kubert, J. 1998. *Fax from Sarajevo: A story of survival.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Kuper, P. 2003. *The metamorphosis.* New York: Crown.

Laird, R. O., T. N. Laird, and E. Bey. 1997. *Still I rise: A cartoon history of African Americans.* New York: Norton.

McCraw, T. 1999. *Legion of super-heroes: The beginning of tomorrow.* New York: DC Comics.

Miller, F. 2000–2001. *Daredevil: Visionaries.* New York: Marvel Comics.

Miller, F., and L. Varley. 1999. *300.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Murray, D. 1987. *'Nam.* New York: Marvel.

Ottaviani, J. 2000. *Dignifying science.* Ann Arbor, MI: G. T. Labs.

———. 2001. *Fallout.* Ann Arbor, MI: G. T. Labs.

———. 2001. *Two-fisted science: Stories about scientists.* Ann Arbor, MI: G. T. Labs.

Rall, T. 2002. *To Afghanistan and back: A graphic travelogue.* New York: NBM Publishing.

Robinson, J. 2000. *Leave it to chance: Shaman's rain.* New York: DC Comics.

Russell, P. C. 2002. *The ring of Nibelung.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Sacco, J. 2002. *Palestine.* Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books.

Sakai, S. 2000. *Usagi Yojimbo: Grasscutter.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Sanderson, P. 2003. *X-Men: The ultimate guide.* New York: DK.

Shanower, E. 2001. *A thousand ships.* Orange, CA: Image Comics.

Spiegelman, A. 1997. *The complete Maus.* New York: Pantheon.

Takahashi, R. 1996. *Rumic theater.* San Francisco: Viz Comics.

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Talbot, B. 1995. *The tale of one bad rat.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics.

Tanaka, M. 2000. *Gon.* New York: DC Comics.

Toriyama, A. 2002. *Dragonball Z.* San Francisco: Viz Comics.

Wenzel, D. 2001. *The hobbit: An illustrated edition of the fantasy classic.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Winnick, J. 2000. *Pedro and me: Friendship, loss, and what I learned.* New York: Henry Holt.

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Simmons, T. 2003. Comic books in my library? *PNLA Quarterly* 67:12, 20. http://www.geocities.com/Athens/8580/kefauver.html.

Weiner, R. 2001a. Graphic novels in libraries. *Texas Library Journal* 77:130–35.

———. 2001b. *101 best graphic novels.* New York: NBM.