Graphic Novels in Libraries

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Abstract

Libraries house many forms of information, including graphic novels. A graphic novel is a long format comic book, a story told in both pictures and words. Comic books have been around since the early 20th century. Stocking graphic novels in libraries is a good way to draw children and teens into the library and encourage them to read, but not all graphic novels are meant for young adults; some are written for a mature audience. They come in as many genres as novels. Library staff should be aware of the intended age for different titles. There are several resources available regarding graphic novels in libraries, including lists of recommended titles, and tips on cataloging and displaying.

Introduction

Libraries have always been institutions "involved in the dissemination of information" (Rubin, 2004, p. 4); places where information is stored and accessed. Historically this was in the form of written documents and books. As information sources changed, libraries changed as well. Libraries came to offer newspapers and periodicals, and in more modern times, videos and music, and most recently, computers and other electronic forms of information. Comic books, usually in the form of graphic novels and trade paperbacks, also found their way into libraries, but not without bringing along their share of problems and controversy.

A comic book is a story told with both pictures and text, a method often called sequential art (Reference.com, 2005, ¶ 2). A graphic novel is a "sophisticated story told between two covers" (Weiner, 2002, Coming to terms section, ¶ 1), and is a self-contained story. Related to graphic novels is the trade paperback, which is "a collection of episodes in comic form that attempts to tell a complete story within the boundaries of the ongoing series" (Coming to terms section, ¶ 1). For the purposes of this paper, the term *graphic novel* will be used to refer to both graphic novels and trade paperbacks.

Telling stories with pictures has a long history, but comic books and graphic novels are relatively young, and have not gained the respect that other media have. In the United States, comic books are often associated with children and teenagers, especially teenage boys, and "have been viewed as a forum for male power fantasies" (Weiner, Collecting graphic novels section, ¶ 1). Comic books and graphic novels appeal to a much broader demographic than this view suggests, but their popularity with children and teens is

strong and they can be used effectively to bring young patrons into the library. However, not all graphic novels are intended for a young audience, and libraries have to decide which titles are going to be shelved in the young adult section, and which are going to be shelved in the adult section. The distinction isn't always clear, and is partly based on the standards of the local community (Raiteri, 2003, ¶ 3).

Comic books and graphic novels also present logistical problems, in addition to the problem of where they should be shelved. The monthly comic book publications are often too flimsy for libraries to stock. Graphic novels, while sturdier than monthly publications, are often paperbacks, and can wear out fast. They can also be a target for theft, which means the library has to decide whether or not they should be replaced. Libraries need to decide how best to display graphic novels, which tend to be browsed differently than books.

The resources available to libraries regarding graphic novels include mailing lists and Web sites, along with books. Libraries can find reviews and recommendations, as well as tips on how to display, catalog, and promote graphic novels.

History of Comic Books in America

Stories have been told through pictures since before the written word developed. Political cartoons have been around since the sixteenth century (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2005, ¶ 3). In America, the first political cartoon was published in 1754 by Benjamin Franklin. Comic books as they are known today can be traced back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first comic book, "The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck," was published in Switzerland in 1837, and later published in America in 1842. "Obadiah

Oldbuck" consisted of pictures with text written underneath. "Yellow Kid," first

published in 1895, is considered to be the first comic strip. Richard Outcault created

"Yellow Kid" for the New York City newspaper "The World." Although illustrations

and drawings that could be considered comic strips or comic books were published

before this, including "Obadiah Oldbuck," Outcault was the first to use the word balloon,

an outlined space within the picture where the speech of the characters was written. The

terms *comics* and *comic strip* came into popular usage around 1900 (About.com, 2005).

The first American comic books were reprints of newspaper comic strips. The first

attempt to sell original comics as a book was in 1929, and only lasted 36 issues. These

were still drawn and written in the style of the newspaper comics, as short gag strips.

Commercial success came after 1933, when another publisher distributed collections of

reprinted newspaper strips first as a giveaway, and then sold at newsstands for a price of

10 cents each. The 1930s also saw the birth of American comic books as they are known

today. National Allied Publications, later named DC Comics, set the standard. They

were the first to successfully publish all-new material in comic-book format, and also

created the first standard size for comic books, which lasted through the 1940s. In 1937,

National Allied Publications released "Detective Comics," which is still being published

today, and is the comic book title with the longest uninterrupted run. Rather than the

usual varied themes, "Detective Comics" concentrated on crime and suspense stories.

The superhero genre, the most popular genre in American comics, began in 1938 with

The Phantom, published in "Ace Comics No. 11," and Superman, first seen in "Action

Comics No. 1" (Santos, 2002).

The superhero genre is the most popular, but there are many other genres. The comedy theme of the first comic strips still endures in some comic book titles. Crime and adventure comics were some of the earliest genres and are still popular today. Horror and science fiction have a long history in comics as well, although they suffered in the mid-1950s because of the Comics Code Authority (Santos). Today there are as many genres in comic books and graphic novels as there are in books, including romance, non-fiction, history, and religion, as well as graphic novel adaptations of other works, such as movies or novels (Wikipedia, 2005).

Comics are for Children

Comic strips such as "Yellow Kid" may not have been intended for children, but the comedic nature of early comic strips and the later adventure and superhero themes of early comic books attracted children and teens. Despite the fact that in the early forties some of the most avid comic book readers were servicemen (Raiteri, ¶ 2), comics and comic books began to be seen as entertainment for children. Publishers geared many of their stories to children and teens, particularly boys. Superhero titles began including young characters, starting with the introduction of Batman's sidekick Robin in 1940. "Walt Disney's Comics and Stories" started in 1940, and contained stories about the already popular Disney characters (Santos). "Comics and Stories" is still being published today.

Because of their popularity with youth, along with a growing number of titles with horror or terror themes, there was a backlash against comic books in the 1940s and 1950s. The most prominent figure was a psychologist named Dr. Fredric Werthham, who

published a book called *Seduction of the Innocent*, which claimed that comic books were turning children into juvenile delinquents, as well giving children the wrong idea of physics, promoting homosexual thoughts, and giving girls the wrong idea about a woman's place in society (Coville). The Comics Code Authority was created as a way for the publishing companies to police themselves. The Comics Code Authority is an outline of what is and is not acceptable in comic books (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2005). Although there were underground comics that did not limit their contents by the Comics Code, mainstream comic books were greatly sanitized in order to meet the strict guidelines of the Code. The majority of horror and terror titles were canceled, and one publisher, EC Comics, nearly went out of business. EC Comics' only surviving title was "Mad Magazine," which, because of its status as a magazine instead of a comic book, did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Code. Many newsstands would not carry comic books that did not have the Comics Code Authority logo on the cover.

The idea that comic books are for children persists, despite the fact that the average age of the modern graphic novel reader is 29 (Weiner, Collecting graphic novels section, ¶ 2).

What This Means for Libraries

The impression that comic books are for children and teens is not wholly wrong, nor is it wholly bad. Many comic books and graphic novels are aimed at teenagers, including, but not limited to, most of the superhero genre. Graphic novels can be an effective draw to increase library usage by teens. Signings and workshops have been used successfully by a number of libraries, and some have offered workshops on creating

comics. For example, the comics convention run by the McHenry Public Library in Illinois has become so successful that it has outgrown the space in the library (MacDonald, 2004). A librarian at the Tampa Hill Borough Public Library Cooperative in Florida is quoted as saying "A lot of the teens had never utilized their local public library before and they were surprised at all of our resources and what we offer. I had a lot of parents come up and say, 'this is great—I can't believe my child wants to come to the library" (MacDonald, ¶ 3).

Comic books and graphic novels have also seen success in school libraries. Alison Steinberg, a library media teacher, increased circulation by 50 percent by adding a collection of graphic novels to the school library where she works. Many children who would not visit the library to read novels now come to read the graphic novels. Many of these graphic novels have the complexity of young adult novels; others retell classic stories, stories that children often have trouble understanding as novels. Reading the graphic novel version can help them understand the story, and can give them an easier time reading the novel. Steinberg also takes advantage of the popularity of the graphic novels by introducing children to books in the same genre (Language Artisans, 2004).

However, the reality is that not all comic books and graphic novels are intended for children. A child or teen browsing for a new title to read may not notice that a title is intended for adult readers, and may come across titles that have mature content. Unlike prose, images are taken in all at once and often don't require interpretation, and in the case of explicit material a child could be exposed as soon as he or she opens the graphic novel. In one instance, a parent, Maria Mancinas, requested that the City of Mesa Library remove a series of comic books called "El Libro Vaquero" from its shelves,

because she considered them "pornographic and degrading to women and Latinos" (Goldberg, 2002, ¶ 2). The library rejected the request, pointing out that the series is shelved in the adult section. The placement did not prevent her 12-year-old son from finding and reading the comics, and Mancinas is quoted as saying "it happened to my son and it could happen to anybody" (Goldberg, ¶ 2). Library staff may not be able to prevent children and teens from browsing in the adult section, but they should be aware of the target audience for the titles the library carries and be able to direct patrons to age-appropriate graphic novels.

The Mature Side of Comics

The underground comics that started in the 1960s, known as comix, "dealt with social and political subjects like sex, rock music and anti-war protest" (Lambiek, 2001, ¶ 1). Many of the comix published were a reaction to the Comics Code Authority, and often skirted the line of legality for obscene literature (Lambiek, 2001). Perhaps because of comix, the term *adult comic* has often been associated with pornographic materials (Weiner, Collecting graphic novels section, ¶ 2). However, the material found in comix is only a small subset of comic books intended for mature readers. The two largest comic book publishers in the United States, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, both have lines dedicated to mature titles. DC's Vertigo line was launched in 1993, and includes the well-known "Sandman" comics (DC Comics, 2003). Along with their mainstream titles, Marvel has long published titles that did not meet the standards of the Comics Code, and their MAX line for adult readers started in 2001 (Wikipedia, 2005). These comics do not

contain explicit adult material, but are "written with adults in mind and may not hold much appeal for younger people" (Raiteri, ¶ 1).

Given the average age of graphic novel readers, the increasing popularity of comic books aimed at mature audiences is only to be expected. Even in the superhero genre, a genre usually associated with children and teens, some stories have become increasingly mature. Some of the titles in Marvel's Ultimate line deal with adult issues such as an abusive husband or the ethics of war, and some stories have themes of ambiguous morality, which would never have made it past the Comics Code Authority as it was originally written. However, mature, sophisticated storylines are not new; in 1986, Pantheon published "Maus," a holocaust survival story, and DC published both "Watchmen" and "Batman: The Dark Knight Returns," all graphic novels aimed at adult readers (Weiner, ¶ 1).

What This Means for Libraries

Not all graphic novels should be shelved in the young adult section. Some contain explicit material that would be inappropriate for younger patrons. Others may have "philosophical and emotional content aimed at adult and mature teens" (Weiner, Collecting graphic novels section, ¶ 1). Adults and older teens looking for the mature graphic novel titles may be uncomfortable browsing the young adult section, and parents may not want their children and young teens coming across adult titles by accident.

Deciding which titles to put in which section is not always easy. While the target age of some titles is obvious, others are ambiguous, or appeal to a broad range of ages. DC's Vertigo line is aimed at adults, but some of its titles, such as "Sandman," are read by

teens as well. The "Sandman" graphic novels are shelved in the young adult section in some libraries, and in the adult section in others (Raiteri, ¶ 2-3).

Many publishers mark their titles with suggested ages, or put suggested ages in the catalogs. Marvel, for example, rates its comics both on the back cover and in the catalog, with the ratings of all ages (8+), PG (12+), PG+ (15+), and MAX (18+). These guidelines are useful, but the placement of graphic novels is still based on the local community standards, and varies from library to library (Reiteri). It is up to library staff to know their community and make judgment calls on the placement of graphic novels.

With the growing popularity of Japanese comic books, called Manga, the problem intensifies. Publishers such as Tokyo-pop and Viz mark their titles with suggested ages or reader groups, but the standards of acceptable material in Japan are different from those in the United States. A story intended for a young audience may contain elements considered unacceptable for that age group by American standards. In Japan, "in both boys' and girls' magazines, stories regularly offer kissing, nudity, lovers in bed, homosexuality, and scatology," as well as sometimes graphic violence, and "only graphic depictions of the actual act of sex is missing" (Schodt, 1983, p. 125). Even in tame stories aimed at preteens, mild nudity, such as depictions of characters bathing, is not uncommon. In some titles, as the characters mature, so do the stories, and the age recommendation may increase in mid-series (Raiteri, ¶ 7). If this happens, the library staff need to decide whether or not the later storylines are still appropriate for the young adult section; and if not, whether to split the series or move it entirely to the adult section.

Children and young teens often become interested in a Manga title from watching the same title as an Anime. *Anime* refers to animation made in Japan, and, like Manga, is

made with a different set of standards than its American counterpart. The more graphic

elements are often toned down when a title makes the transition from print to animation,

and toned down further or eliminated altogether when shown on American television.

For American television, nude bodies are covered, and particularly violent or suggestive

scenes are cut. The American broadcast of an Anime title might be considered

appropriate for young viewers, but the same title as a Manga might not. In such instances

the decision of where to place the title is a tough one. It has elements that might be

considered by American standards to be inappropriate for the young adult section, but the

story is one that would appeal more to teens than adults. If it is placed in the adult

section, teens and preteens will search for it there, which could be seen as defeating the

purpose of having two separate sections.

   Logistics

   Libraries stock monthly periodicals, but the monthly publications of comic books are

almost never seen. Although the quality has increased over the years, comic books are

printed on inexpensive paper, and the cover is normally only marginally thicker than the

inside paper. While this may be true for magazines as well, comic books tend to get

rougher treatment, due to both their popularity and the age of many of the readers.

Comic books, unlike most magazines, have a tendency to increase in resale value, and

some become collectors items. This makes them prime targets for theft. As a result,

libraries stock only the graphic novels, not monthly publications. These are more

durable, and don't have the same frantic readership as monthly comics. They also stay in

print longer, and so do not gain the same status as collectors items. Also, unlike periodicals, graphic novels can be checked out and taken home.

However, many graphic novels are only available in paperback. Because of their popularity they can wear out fast, and often need replacement. Some libraries reinforce or actually rebind the books prior to circulation (Weiner, When you've got them section, ¶ 2).

Even if they're not as coveted by collectors as monthly publications, the popularity of graphic novels can make them a target for theft. A librarian at the Livermore Public Library told this author that their graphic novel section may not see much legitimate traffic, but graphic novels disappear from the shelves with greater frequency than books in other sections of the library. The library doesn't have the budget to replace every book that goes missing, and as a result a graphic novel series can often end up with gaps. The librarian said this also happened with the library's copies of "Animerica," the only comics-related monthly publication the library received. "Animerica" disappeared with enough frequency that the library stopped carrying it.

Graphic novels usually have thin spines, which makes them difficult to browse. Because of this and because of their visual nature, some libraries display graphic novels face out. Other libraries have permanent displays dedicated to graphic novels (Weiner, When you've got them section, ¶ 3). These options make browsing easier and are good for advertising the graphic novels, but both take up space. Library staff also have to decide whether or not to distinguish between graphic novels and comic strip collections. Some libraries shelve them together, but some separate them. Some libraries shelve graphic novels with books, in the appropriate fiction or non-fiction sections (Weiner,

When you've got them section, ¶ 1). This can introduce them to people who otherwise might not think to look at them, but it scatters them and makes browsing difficult for graphic novel fans.

Resources

There are several resources available for libraries looking to create, expand, or capitalize on a graphic novel collection. Steve Raiteri keeps a list of recommended graphic novels for public libraries at http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/graphicnovels.htm. The titles he recommends are all ones he feels are appropriate for the young adult section. He includes the title, the ISBN, the price, and a short review.

In his article "Beyond Superheroes: comics get serious" for Library Journal, Stephen Weiner includes a bibliography of graphic novels intended for adult and academic collections, which he says would fall into the PG-13/R range if they were movies. He includes full bibliographic information as well as a short review for each title.

There is also a graphic novel mailing list for libraries, GNLIB-L, which can be joined by e-mailing GNLIB-L-Subscribe@topica.com or by visiting www.topica.com. In a short article, Weiner states that mailing list discussions "range from specific titles and movie tie-ins, to cataloging and shelving issues, and even comic-book trivia." Members include librarians from public, school, and academic libraries, graphic novel publishers, and other members of the book industry (2004, ¶ 1).

There are also books that focus on the subject of graphic novels and libraries. *Graphic Novels Now: Building, Managing, and Marketing a Dynamic Collection* by Francisca Goldsmith deals with developing, maintaining, and promoting a collection,

ways to classify and catalog titles, as well as the politics of graphic novels. *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: a Definitive Guide* by Allyson Lyga and Barry Lyga is a resource guide for school libraries, which includes definitions of terms, vendors, and recommended titles, as well as lesson plans designed for grades K-12. For targeting teens, there's *Developing and Promoting Graphic Novel Collections* by Steve Miller. Along with sections on selecting, purchasing, cataloging, and maintaining graphic novels, Miller also talks about why graphic novels belong in libraries, and has suggestions on shelf location.

For libraries looking to promote their collection, MacDonald recommends the Graphic Novel Library mailing list at http://www.angelfire.com/comics/gnlib, which has information about different programs libraries have done. She also recommends contacting the local comics shop or talking to vendors and organizers at a local comic book convention (2004).

Conclusion

Just as newspapers and periodicals found their way into libraries, graphic novels are also seen on the shelves. Comic books and graphic novels have a history of being considered to be for children and teens, but in reality they appeal to all age groups and their popularity has been growing, especially among adult readers.

Many titles of graphic novels are aimed at young readers, especially within the popular superhero genre. Comic books were once thought to turn children into juvenile delinquents, but instead of a detriment, graphic novels and comic books should be viewed as an asset, one which can be used to encourage children and teens to read. The

popularity of graphic novels among children and teens can be used to draw young patrons into the library and introduce them to the library's services, as well as to other books.

However, not all graphic novels are intended for a young audience, and libraries need to consider this when shelving them. Some material is explicit, but some is merely intended for a mature audience. Parents might not want their children and teens to come across adult titles, and adults might not want to have to brows the young adult section. Unfortunately, the distinction between adult and young adult titles is not always clear. Some titles appeal to both groups. Foreign comics, such as Japanese Manga, are created with different social standards, and so might not seem appropriate for the intended age group. Library staff will need to make judgment calls based on the local community standards.

The popularity of graphic novels can also present problems. Graphic novels are often paperback, and can wear out quickly. They can also be targets for theft, and the benefit of carrying them will have to be weighed against the budget for the library to decide whether or not to replace missing titles.

Libraries are places to store and access information, but they are also places to store and access pop culture, of which comic books and graphic novels are a part. Using the resources available both on the Web and in print, libraries can create strong graphic novel collections that appeal to both teens and adults.

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