

# Graphic novels: a sure bet for your library

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Provides a comprehensive review of the significance attributed to the usefulness, practicality and appropriateness of graphic novels in the school library media center with specific implications for collection development.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A careful review of recent literature provides the school media specialist with an overview of graphic novels including definitions, challenges, benefits, helpful resources, curricular connections and collection development issues. The sources reflect the recent trends in the increasing popularity of graphic novels and their use and benefit in school media centers.

**Findings** – Presents information on the definitions of graphic novels and the challenges and benefits specific to the school media center. Notes that while challenges exist, the benefits of including graphic novels in the school library media center are many, including engaging reluctant readers. Offers practical information for collection development and provides useful sources that serve many purposes.

**Practical implications** – Offers background information for the school library media specialist about graphic novels. Includes advice and practical strategies for building a graphic novel collection in the school media center.

**Originality/value** – This paper reflects recent trends toward increased interest in graphic novels and offers the school media specialist practical advice on how to best meet that growing interest by including graphic novels in the school media center.

**Keywords** Fiction, Collections management, School libraries, Print media, Comics

**Paper type** Literature review

Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new (John Milton, 1637 cited in Gardner and Dillon, 2004).

As so accurately acknowledged by Gardner and Dillon (2004), we have always loved libraries as treasure houses of books but today, perhaps more than ever, libraries can benefit from making new forms of expression and information available to patrons. The ultimate challenge is developing a population of literate people and finding innovative ways to encourage lifelong reading for all individuals. Yet, as Gardner and Dillon point out, we are often at odds in accomplishing such legitimate goals because we are competing with a culture that values “an entertainment industry that seems to actively erode the patience and self-reliance necessary to the good reader” (Gardner and Dillon, 2004, p. 2). The flashy sounds and visual effects of television, film, and videogames, all provide instant gratification and little, if any, reliance on the imagination (Gardner and Dillon, 2004). However, all is not lost. Thus, enter the exciting world of the graphic novel.

What is the graphic novel and what is its role as we progress through this technologically savvy twenty-first century? First, an accurate definition of the graphic novel is needed. Kan (2003, p. 15) defines a graphic novel in the following way, “In simplest terms, it’s a comic in book form; it fuses sequential art and text to tell a story”. Recently, Goldsmith (2005, p. 25) describes the graphic novel in the following way:

Unlike the cartoon, comic strip, or comic book, the graphic novel is complete within itself and provides a beginning, middle, and end to the story or information it places before the reader. However, it shares the earmarks of

sequential art that comic books incorporate: image and word are bound together in order for the narrative to unfold.

This definition has come a long way in a relatively short period of time. The term “graphic novel” is of recent origin and Will Eisner is credited with first defining this term in 1978 because comic book had undesirable connotations. Eisner talked about “sequential art” in describing the format of the graphic novel (Rothschild, 1995, p. xiii). A working definition is particularly important for the graphic novel since I suspect that one cannot fully understand the role of such a medium if one does not precisely define what indeed it is. An extensive review of the literature in the past five years shows that while there is a generally agreed upon definition of graphic novels, the significance attributed to the usefulness, practicality, and appropriateness in the library, especially the school media center, varies with respect to the benefits and challenges inherent in this rather new format.

First, in all fairness to those who have ever read, selected, or heard about graphic novels (that probably includes the vast majority of us) let’s explore some of the more widely spread and well documented challenges and issues that a librarian should be made aware of before making that leap to the graphic novel arena. A key idea to keep in mind is that graphic novels present the reader with not only ideas – as do text-only works – but also with images. While the graphic novel reader makes use of both, the graphic novel viewer usually skims through the text and images and disassociates the parts from the whole resulting in complaints about:

- depictions of or attention drawn to violence;
- depictions or discussions of sexuality;
- disrespect for women;
- disrespect for adults;

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- disrespect for persons of authority;
- ease of access by children; and
- crass treatment of a subject demanding sensitivity (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 86).

These issues speak to the broader community concerns with certain genre which involve horror and supernatural, crime, science fiction and fantasy, satire and dark humor, and realistic or autobiographical (Lavin, 2000).

Further, in an interview with Rick Lowell (of Casablanca Comics in Maine), he discusses the challenges faced in working with school librarians, with respect to the graphic novel, which include: some librarians can't even understand why you would want to include graphic novels in the collection; the argument that no one will check them out; they will be stolen; and there is concern as to whether or not the books will hold up to repeated checkouts because, as a rule, they are paperbacks (Lyga and Lyga, 2004, p. 94).

Rory Root (of Comic Relief in Berkeley, CA) was also interviewed about his perspectives on the challenges faced in working with school librarians and graphic novels. He notes: administrators, some teachers, parents, and even fellow librarians look at comics as a lesser literature; some librarians are concerned about "one-circ" issues – the book is checked out once and never comes back; it is sometimes difficult to find age appropriate material; the comics that some might find personally thrilling or entertaining are beyond what is comfortable in a school library; and bindery issues – graphic novels are often bound with small gutters so that if you have them rebound (as schools often do), you can lose or pinch some of the art (Lyga and Lyga, 2004, pp. 100-101).

These challenges and issues are real and demand the attention of librarians and certainly School Media Specialists where highly controversial or sensitive material is subject to great scrutiny. Yet, as I reviewed the most recent literature (that of the past five years), it became overwhelmingly apparent that the many benefits of the graphic novel certainly outweigh any challenges or issues, which, by the way, should not be dismissed as unimportant. Consider the fact that in a report entitled, "US Graphic Novel Market Hits \$200 million", Milton shows that a staggering total estimated retail sales of graphic novels in the USA was between \$205 and \$220 million, which is a 35 percent increase from 2003. Table I illustrates this growing trend.

So, what makes the graphic novel so attractive to its readers? I have found that it is not just one thing, it is many.

First, Op de Beeck (2004) stresses that graphic picture books appeal to a range of artistry to all ages. Whereas older US generations are expected to outgrow picture books or comics and move on to more mature material, younger readers can now find a fascinating avenue in visual storytelling. MacDonald (2004a, b) suggests that the trend in graphic novels for 2005 includes publishers targeting

**Table I** Total US retail graphic novel sales 2002-2004 (in millions)

	2002	2003	2004
Bookstores	\$60	\$105	\$140
Comic Shops	\$50	\$60	\$60
Total	\$110	\$165	\$207

Source: ICV2.com (cited in *Publishers Weekly* (2005))

younger readers with such things as Jeff Smith's, *Bones*, and a new line of comic adaptations of the classic Nancy Drew. Mooney (2005) focuses on the use of graphic novels at the elementary level, but her argument readily applies to the middle school level as well. She provides a compelling argument for the use of graphic novels. Among the benefits are sequencing and showing dialogue between characters, and engaging reluctant readers so that they become interested and enthusiastic readers. Graphic novels assist with teaching literary appreciation and they are a fun and eye-catching way to lead a youngster down the path to lifelong reading. They also are excellent for students who love to read and are a good alternative for good readers as well. Since no individual reads at exactly the same level at all times, youngsters need a variety of levels to assist them to process information. In addition, providing students with nonfiction picture books written in the comic-book style may lead students to read other nonfiction books on the same subject matter. Graphic novels get youngsters reading and help them to read with confidence.

Audra Caplan, incoming president of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) in 2002 and currently serving as a board member, believes that graphic novels are "especially appealing to young people who have reading difficulties, or don't think they like to read" (cited in Beardsley, 2002).

Beardsley (2002) notes that "Graphic novels have been growing more varied and widely administered for several decades now ... There are titles that appeal significantly to girls and others that boys specifically like, and some that are not gender specific. Graphic novels really cover the gamut."

Interestingly, Neace (2005) cites many advantages of using graphic novels in the school library such as: energizes their collection, drives circulation, and increases student involvement in library clubs. Neace provides a very helpful annotated list to assist the Media Specialist in starting up a new collection, even given a small budget. For my type of library, which is the middle school media center, she suggests that a budget of \$500 is a reasonable amount. After you have established a small core collection, the circulation statistics will tell you where to focus your future spending. The categories she includes for graphic novels are: Superhero, Fantasy/Science Fiction, Adventure, Horror, Issues/True Life Stories, and Humor. Next, Crawford (2004, p. 26) states that graphic novels can help to improve language and literary development, including second language development. Also, the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative.

Moreover, Sanderson (2004) contends that although graphic novels are traditionally thought of in the domain of larger-than-life fantasy, for many years these novels have also had an educational purpose. Thus, they both entertain and educate. Lavalley-Welch (2005) remarks that many public and school libraries are well aware of the popularity of graphic novels and the need for them in the collection. I liked the idea that in order to get youngsters in schools excited about graphic novels, MacDonald (2004) suggests setting up a program. The Graphic Novel mailing list at [www.angelfire.com](http://www.angelfire.com) is a list that has a great deal of information on programs or events that people have previously put on so one does not have to reinvent the wheel. She also suggests that an "indispensable source" for information about programs or events is <http://csls.diamondcomics.com> or call 1-800-COMIC-BOOK.

Next, an age group that is often mentioned in the literature is teens.

Snowball (2005) offers a rather comprehensive review that demonstrates that graphic novels motivate teenage reluctant readers and are less likely to intimidate a reluctant reader. Since Snowball remarks that research shows that recreational reading decreases as students progress through school, the graphic novel is an excellent means to get youngsters reading and find true enjoyment in reading. Notably, Leckbee (2005, p. 30) asserts that graphic novels, already popular with teens, “act as bridge allowing them to transcend the apathy usually felt toward reading assignments”. Further, Leckbee (2005, p. 31) offers some very inspiring thoughts about the use and place of graphic novels for students:

The graphic novel is uniquely poised to tap student’s enthusiasm and further their learning. Why shouldn’t educators use the power of the graphic novel to help students become better readers and writers? . . . Exploring the visual world of graphic novels will heighten your student’s interest in reading and expand intellectual possibilities rather than contract them . . . Therefore, teaching graphic novels provides educators another way to engage the minds of our students. Not unlike the use of film and music in English classrooms, graphic novels should be acknowledged as a valuable learning tool. Sometimes you just have to see it to believe it.

To further support the significance of graphic novels for teens, Gardner and Dillon (2004) maintain that a key aspect of graphic novels is that the correlation of pictures and text helps encourage the reluctant teen reader to engage with text in order to gain more understanding of the story. In addition, Fallis (2005) claims that graphic novels offer a visual and comprehensible format by contributing both images and concepts and as a result, creates a learning environment for the modern teen that is both simple and fun. The key point is that the graphic novel captures a student’s attention in an alluring format.

I was particularly impressed by the insights offered by Ireland (2004). She claims that there is a place for graphic novels in a junior high library. The graphic novel delivers a very visual story at a rapid pace, comparable to other forms of visual entertainment popular today. Furthermore, graphic novels are not only fun but are useful in looking at the normal story elements such as plot, setting, characterization, theme, and conflict. A convincing argument for graphic novels is that they can be used to develop inference skills which are a higher level of thinking in Bloom’s taxonomy. When selecting graphic novels, personal recommendations from teachers and students can assist in deciding what to purchase. The selection guides such as *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Horn Book Magazine*, and *Publishers Weekly* review graphic novels. Also, *VOYA* (*Voice of Youth Advocates*) includes bi-monthly reviews. I was surprised and encouraged to learn that even the mainstream magazine, *Entertainment Weekly*, has monthly, unbiased reviews. When choosing graphic novels for the School Media Center, Ireland suggests that consideration of the students’ ages and interests are considered. Since student achievement is a priority, reading skills must be enhanced. Simply stated, graphic novels must support the curriculum and fall within the Collection Development Policy (CDP) that relate to selection criteria. Of particular significance, graphic novels have a place in school libraries since they offer an alternative to the traditional novel. They can capture the interest of unenthusiastic readers while motivating the more experienced reader. They are not only entertaining, but they deal with current issues that students can understand. As Ireland, states, Why include graphic novels? Include them because junior high students will read them.

In addition to the varied sources that provide support for graphic novels in terms of the many benefits they provide, Lyga and Lyga (2004) offer a comprehensive and practical look at graphic novels with their engaging book, *Graphic Novels in Your Media Center: A Definitive Guide*. This book pulls together a great deal of information that is immediately helpful to the School Media Specialist. What I found most convincing was the information on “why” include graphic novels as part of the collection? A thorough approach is taken to address this issue and is summarized below:

- 1 *Multiple intelligences and graphic novels*. Graphic novels have a direct connection to linguistic, spatial, and interpersonal intelligence.
- 2 *Visual literary and reluctant readers* (Traits of Readers and the Graphic Novels Connection):
  - Students incapable of visualization. Graphic novels help the student who cannot visualize by providing visual cues that not only balance the text but also assist the student interpret it.
  - Reluctant readers. Graphic novels assist the reluctant reader by way of the marriage between pictures and text which makes the idea of reading less threatening.
  - Visually dependent students. Graphic novels go beyond the presented graphics and look at messages, meanings, and motivation behind a visual image.
- 3 *Curricular connections*. Graphic novels can be an end or a means for teachers. They can generate class discussion and lead to broader topics. Media Specialists are the information specialists and literature specialists in their school buildings. By enlightening teachers about the connections graphic novels have to content areas, we expand their teaching possibilities and give students what they want; learning that is fun and enjoyable. And of course, effective.
- 4 *High interest and pop culture*. Graphic novels get the attention of youngsters, especially by virtue of remaining on the cutting edge of pop culture. They react to social change and cultural changes swiftly, often in advance of other media. For example, in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11), for the comic book industry, the response came in less than a month. Two days after the attack, Marvel Comics announced its intention to publish *Heroes*; a commemorative magazine from which all profits would go to the families of firefighters killed that day. Pop culture and comic books move quickly, making them a timely and important addition to your collection. Graphic novels help in making connections to a student’s life outside of school and acknowledge what is hip and cool, making the collection itself all the more attractive (Lyga and Lyga, 2004, pp. 3-14).

Certainly, I can say that the benefits of the graphic novel are reason enough to start thinking about how best to fit graphic novels into your collection. Graphic novels are reasonable in price. Gorman (2002) notes that most graphic novels range from about \$10 to \$20 per title. Some important things to consider when purchasing graphic novels are genre, target audience, quality, artistic merit, and the reputation and style of the author and illustrator. Fletcher-Spear and Jenson-Benjamin (2005) provide an interesting article on getting animated in your library. The authors offer quite a comprehensive recommended reading list that includes a

variety of genre including action, comedy, drama and realistic fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, and superheroes.

If we are to effectively use graphic novels in our libraries, (for me, the Middle School Library) we must not overlook the critical nature of our CDP. With graphic novels, as with other materials, we must be clear about their intended use, their evaluated worth to intended users, the prescriptions and limits of our budgets, and the relevance of weeding and replacement to the ongoing health of the collection as a whole (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 27). When including graphic novels in the collection, it is critical to identify and address all the basic questions as you would with any new collection. Because the term graphic novel refers only to format, it does not define the age, literary tastes, or aesthetic interests of the prospective target audience (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 28). A needs assessment seems very useful here. Goldsmith suggests that if you plan to add graphic novels to an established collection that is broader in scope i.e. teen fiction collection, you need to decide whether the materials budget should be revised to identify graphic novels as a line item (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 28). While many CDPs are intentionally broad enough to permit the acquisition of new formats, such as the graphic novel, others may describe collection methods in format-specific ways and need revision and rewriting when this new format is added.

Specifically, this new format poses some concern for collection development with respect to cataloging. One of the liveliest topics on the listserves for librarians interested in graphic novels centers on classification strategies. The use of the Dewey number 741.5 as the proper place for graphic novels is highly debated. In general, it seems too broad a classification and it recognizes only some attributes that such materials share. The format specific, GN, like the format specific DVD may be useful in communicating format only when the size of the collection warrants it and when full cataloging provides further analytical detail, through specific call numbers and subject heading, to place materials within a multifaceted graphic novel collection (Goldsmith, 2005, pp. 55-6).

Additionally, the reality of production problems is a concern for collection development. The cost and time involved to alleviate such problems in the School Media Center is problematic since Media Specialists are often constrained by time and budget. Some of the physical limitations of many graphic novels include (but are not limited to) extremes in volume dimensions, prevalence in paper covers over original hardback options, substandard gluing of pages to spine, preponderance of narrow spines that cannot support legible labels, and minimal gutters that preclude rebinding without the loss of content (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 45). Solutions to production problems do exist and the School Media Specialist should implement measures that involve lamination, prebinding, strengthening the spine, tipping in loose pages, repairing bindings, and building up covers (Goldsmith, p. 46).

Another key issue for the collection of graphic novels involves shelving issues. Many graphic novels fall outside the standard dimensions for mainstream book publishing. Some graphic novels are folio sized but quite slim, while others are thick but diminutive in surface area. Despite these difficulties, many approaches to shelving issues are used today. Some important questions that will assist with shelving concerns might include: Where will the collection fit?, Is there space and facility for shelving the collection face out and, if so, can

enough order be maintained to enable users to find specific titles? Solutions to shelving problems include using display shelving rather than standard shelving and arranging the collection, if small, in plastic crates through which browsers can flip, and place crates on tables (Goldsmith, 2005, pp. 48-9). These are feasible solutions that I believe would work well in a Middle School Library.

While some specific solutions are needed and are provided for the problems that graphic novels present in collection development, Goldsmith (2005, pp. 41-2) emphasizes that the CDP for graphic novels should address the following general concerns:

- To which demographic group (s) is the materials targeted?
- Are selections based on specific aesthetic or pedagogical criteria?
- Who selects the collection?
- Will the collection be composed of professionally selected materials only, or will any and all gifts be accepted?
- Must materials meet specific standards of physical condition to be added or maintained in the collection?
- Is balance among subjects or genres a consideration for the graphic novel collection as a whole?
- Are materials liable to be deaccessioned if they fail to circulate at a prescribed level?
- How will users be able to find materials added to the collection?

Each librarian will respond to these concerns based upon the CDP that is established for their library.

Finally, one last, (but absolutely not least) issue that needs attention is how to be prepared to respond to outside criticism and protect the library from any challenges when adding graphic novels to the School Media Center collection. As Goldsmith (2005, p. 85) argues, "The less effectively any expressive art is integrated into popular acceptance and perception, the more its legitimacy is likely to be challenged". This is key for Media Specialists to realize and understand as graphic novels are built into the collection. Extreme care with reviewing, selecting, placing, and promoting the graphic novel collection will help to ensure that any challenges to an item will be both taken seriously and limited to that specific item. Challenges must be specific in terms of both the title and the grounds for complaint. Again the CDP should provide direction for accepting and responding to a challenge (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 87).

Importantly, librarians and School Media Specialists should know that support and assistance is available to libraries and communities facing challenges. Assistance is available through the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom at [www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/](http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/), the ALA Freedom to Read Foundation or the American Civil Liberties Union. With graphic novels, a specific resource to consider is the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) at [www.cblddf.org/](http://www.cblddf.org/) This nonprofit organization works on several legal fronts where comics, cartoonists, and access issues are concerned (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 89).

All in all, we are fortunate that as librarians we have access to a rich variety of graphic novels that can be used to promote student achievement, encourage a love of reading, and appeal to diverse learners. There is a growing body of literature that exists that addresses the graphic novel, including Lyga and Lyga's lesson plans (2004) for use with graphic novels. Goldsmith (2005, p. 91) asserts that the graphic novel is not a fad but "by its very essence the graphic novel is a diversity of

experiences". He also reminds us that today many schools have seen the value in the graphic novel in supporting specific curricula and the key roles they play in promoting literacy, art, and critical thinking. Despite some of the challenges or the specific collection issues that may arise with the graphic novel, I am confident in making the statement that graphic novels must find a place in each and every library. We must meet the needs of our users and provide current material that reflects twenty-first century trends and ideas. This is not an easy task but I am of the firm belief that when a CDP is carefully written to include those essential components related to graphic novels, each person benefits in some way from the effort and expertise involved in such an endeavor. The time is now for librarians to thoughtfully decide the most effective way to include graphic novels in their collection. Without hesitation, I must say that graphic novels are a sure bet for your library.

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