

Graphic experiment pays dividends

Robin Tonks, library manager, Singleton Council

If you are keen to boost teen usage of your library, graphic novels may be the key. Graphic novels have been popular in Japan and Europe for decades and more recently have been gaining popularity in the United States and Australia. In search of ways to keep our library relevant and attractive to teens, I researched the use of graphic novels in libraries, obtained a NSW Library Council grant and developed a small collection for Singleton Public Library. That small collection of 150 titles generated 130 to 166 loans per month in the first few months and teens eagerly await new titles. The collection has attracted new users and is also popular with teens who were already avid readers. Some adults also use the collection.

Singleton Public Library's collection has increased awareness of the genre, and at a recent local teacher-librarian's meeting the librarians from both the primary and secondary schools reported that they were being pressured by students to purchase graphic novels for their collections.

Manga, a Japanese version of the genre, is the most popular with our teens and appeals to both males and females. When discussing our collection with Toby Burgess (aged 18 years) and Zeeanne Lawson (aged 12 years), both cited *Ranma½* by Rumiko Takahashi as one of their favourite series. Toby discovered an internet site where

chapters of *Ranma* are contributed. He now comes in every day to read them online as well as to borrow books. Zeeanne also likes the *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* series by Akira Toriyama. She does some voluntary work at the library and waits anxiously for the new titles that she spots to be ready for loan.

Toby and Zeeanne were both avid readers before they were introduced to graphic novels. When asked what the appeal of the genre was for them, both said they had storyline and visual appeal. Toby's response was: 'They give a visual connection to the book. You can't always explain the story in words ... I am also interested in the artwork.' Zeeanne said: 'I think they are great. I like the adventure and it is easier to follow the story. You get a real picture of the character. They are also easier to get through.'

Toby and Zeeanne's comments bear out the findings of my research. Teenagers of today are much more visually-orientated and there are many things competing for their time. Graphic novels address these issues. They are appealing even to teens who do not think that they like to read and are also used for teens and adults with reading difficulties. An article in *VOANews.com* quotes Beth Platte, a 17-year-old avid reader who loves classics and serves on a library teen advisory board, as saying she sees a link

between the time-honoured classics and graphic novels. 'They do have that feel about them, because they're epic — that feeling of good versus evil.'

While super-heroes and fantasy are a mainstay of the genre, graphic novels have a vast scope ranging from fantasy, adventure, comedy and science-fiction to titles based on historical fact, biographies and non-fiction. Some explore social issues and concerns that relate to teens: for example, there are titles which examine the 11 September 2001 bombings of the Twin Towers, and Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus*, is about the Holocaust.

To promote the collection, we purchased the American Library Association 'Get graphic @ your library' posters from Southern Scene and displayed them in the local high school libraries and youth centre, as well as in our library. Their bright purple and orange colours are eye-catching and have teenage appeal. We also had a radio interview and media releases. The collection is shelved separately in a bay at the end of the Young Adult Fiction with the majority of titles displayed face out. There is always plenty of space for this — most of the titles are on loan!

You do not have to be an expert in graphic novels to develop a collection. There are numerous websites with reviews and core collections both by and for librarians [see sidebar for some pointers]. While we are opposed to censoring, be aware that some graphic novels might be considered more appropriate for adult collections. Some critically-acclaimed graphic novels on horror, dark humour, satire and the supernatural are examples. Some publisher imprints, such as Vertigo and Fantagraphics Publishing Company produce graphic novels that have more controversial themes or mature content.

There was some concern in the beginning that the paperback format of the majority of graphic novels would not stand up to heavy use. These fears have proved to be groundless in the six months our collection has been operating. Other challenges that we expected have never eventuated. This is possibly because we promoted graphic novels positively and highlighted their successes in other libraries. All feedback that we have received from teens, adults and teachers has been extremely positive. The local youth centre borrows from our collection to use them with teens and as the high school librarian said, graphic novels: '...are relevant across the curriculum. As well as demand from teens I am getting requests from the art, English, history and social studies teachers since your collection was developed.' ■

Some places to start...

Recommended graphic novels for public libraries

<http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/graphicnovels.htm>

Links to comics and graphic novel sites

<http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/comicslinks.htm>

Graphic novel starter kit <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/listmania/list-browse/-/NWA3GFZIEFU/ref%3Dcm%5Fflm%5Fdp%5F%5F3/002-1762210-8349640>

Graphic novels and comic trade paperbacks

<http://www.geocities.com/dawnanik/grnovels.htm>

'Graphic novels gain popularity with American teenagers'

<http://www.voanews.com/article.cfm?objectID=98EDEF8B-C27B-4F9E-B8C1F0D516752029#>

Anime Web Turnpike <http://anipike.com/>

Artbomb.net <http://www.artbomb.net/home.jsp>

Comic books for young adults <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/lml/comics/pages/>

Grovel.Org.UK <http://www.grovel.org.uk/>

The librarian's guide to Anime and Manga <http://www.koyagi.com/Libguide.html>

No flying no tights <http://noflyingnotights.com>

Marvelous visions of wonder <http://graphicnovels.homestead.com>

Comics worth reading <http://www.comicsworthreading.com>

Mangamaniacs <http://www.mangamaniacs.org>

Diamond Bookshelf <http://bookshelf.diamondcomics.com>

Graphic novel reviews <http://www.rationalmagic.com/Comics/Comics.html>

Graphic novels <http://leep.lis.uiuc.edu/seworkspace/aspisak/Home.htm>