Graphic novels make a difference

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Bam! Pow! Zap! Graphic novels are making an impact in public and educational libraries across the globe, but what are they, why their recent revival and what is their significance for Australian libraries?

The name, to the uninitiated, seems rather suggestive — however far from being some euphemism for soft porn, graphic novels are simply comics that have been collected into a book format which tell a complete story. The comic genre's unique combination of illustration and dialogue to tell a story in sequential panels attracts readers from a young age, if the popularity and longevity of Sunday newspaper comic strips is anything to go by. Graphic novels take comics one step further by extending and expanding the stories. There are a myriad of genres — from fantasy to super-heroes and autobiography. Library collection standards — *Asterix* and *Tintin* — are two European examples of the graphic novel that have been around for decades and still attract repeated reads from generations of patrons.

Comics have been around since the late–1800s, and graphic novels since the late–1970s, but it is only in the last few years that they have been embraced as literacy aids and used as a means of attracting young readers to libraries. So why this sudden interest in graphic novels? Apart from the fact that stories seem to be getting more complex and interesting, movies such as *Spider-Man, X-Men* and *The road to perdition* have brought comics and graphic novels out of the back-alley comic stores and into the hands and imaginations of readers young and old. There have been film adaptations of comics in the past, but it is only the most recent ones that have taken the medium seriously for their story-telling capacity rather than their action potential or their slap-stick humour. Since 1992 when *Maus*, (a graphic novel about the Holocaust) by Art Speigelman, won a Pulitzer Prize, comics have emerged from decades of disregard and are being used to tell stories of both fact and fiction, combining words with illustration to increase the impact of the narrative.

Most of the present focus on graphic novels in relation to libraries highlights their unique ability to encourage reluctant readers to pick up the written word. Graphic novels make 'a bridge between words and ideas, pictures and stories' (*101 best graphic novels* by Stephen Weiner, p10). Rather than being faced with a page filled with unfamiliar words the hesitant reader is exposed to pictures that help tell a story and connections are made between those pictures and the abstract concepts that words can tell. Much of the available literature on the subject points to the benefits of including graphic novels in junior and young adult fiction areas of a library to encourage reluctant readers into the library at first and then later to expand their reading into other, more prose-focused areas. That is not to say that graphic novels are only of value as stepping-stones to more 'mature' forms of literature, they are a unique and valuable asset to any library's collection in their own right.

Graphic novels are a universal medium and appeal to a varying demographic. Undoubtedly a large proportion of graphic novels and comics produced in the United States and Europe are aimed at a teenage to early-adult male audience. The super-hero genre — Batman, Spider-Man and Superman, for example — in particular seems to attract a predominantly male audience. Yet there are a number of independent publishers who have broadened the appeal of graphic novels to include female readers. Newer publishing companies such as Crossgen and Dark Horse have moved away from the super-hero as the core stock of their titles with the aim of attracting all ages and all genders. Overseas, the Japanese have long understood that comics appeal to female readers and much of the success of their comics industry, known as manga, is with female readers, particularly in romantic storylines. The popularity of Japanese anime (animation) and manga in western culture presently is being driven as much by female as male audiences. The availability of translated Japanese manga has never been higher and the contrast in writing styles between East and West makes fascinating reading.

There are a number of Australian libraries that have seen the benefits of including graphic novels in their collection, either as a separate collection or integrated into established junior fiction and young adult fiction areas. Methods for encouraging teenagers (who can be reluctant readers) into the library range from video games to CD/DVD collections — graphic novels are just part of this contemporary push. The Gold Coast City Council Library Service in Queensland has had graphic novels in their collection for almost ten years and currently holds more than 3000 volumes. The collection is in demand from readers who generally do not read traditional library resources and there seems to be a correlation between those who read graphic novels and those who use other non-book resources. Importantly this makes it a highly-valued and valid part of the collection as it attracts patrons who might not have otherwise used the library. This also leads to some challenges in keeping such popular materials in a collection — they tend to 'walk' more frequently than other titles. It does depend on the demographic of the library but graphic novels may need to be treated with the same considerations as CDs, DVDs and other popular items. It would be a shame to simply discount these items because of their popularity and therefore their potential to be stolen.

Another challenge faced by libraries is information. There are many graphic novels out there and booksellers are increasingly offering titles, but how does a library choose the most appropriate? There are a number of useful resources for those libraries who are interested in starting a collection or who have an established collection they wish to broaden in an informed and balanced way. *Understanding comics* by Scott McCloud is a philosophical introduction to the medium and a wonderful overview of what makes graphic novels so unique. *101 best graphic novels* by Stephen Weiner is an introduction to a diverse collection of graphic novels by a librarian and teacher. On the web, Friends of Lulu [http://www.friends-lulu.org] is an organisation committed to encouraging female participation in comics — both as readers and authors. They have a list of titles recommend for their strong female roles. There is a discussion list devoted to graphic novels in libraries [http://www.angelfire.com/comics/gnlib/] and this is a great place to ask other librarians about their experiences and suggestions. Lastly Sealight Books [http://www.sealight.com.au] is an Australian business that specialises in selling graphic novels to libraries and offers a comprehensive range of titles and information resources to help libraries start and expand their collection. The most important thing to remember is that graphic novels are just another creative way of telling a story — and it is all about the story.

Inger Fountain is a librarian who left full-time work in 2000 to pursue motherhood, and has ended up pursuing her young son for most of her life since then. In 2001 with the help of her husband, she formed Sealight Books, a business that aims to inform libraries and patrons of the wonders of graphic novels and to provide a reliable and friendly location to purchase them from. Sealight Books sells comics and graphic novels to public and educational libraries all over Australia and to individual customers on the internet. Inger can be contacted at Sealight Books info@sealight.com.au.