

A Novel Approach:

Using Graphic Novels to Attract Reluctant Readers

Adding graphic novels to a school's library collection is an effective way to foster students' love of reading. Over the past few years I have conducted a variety of workshops on graphic novels and worked closely with a handful of school librarians in San Francisco, helping them develop collections of graphic novels. Student response to these materials has been overwhelmingly positive as Kay Honess, a librarian at John O'Connell High School attests, "My students love graphic novels. I display them near the periodicals and new books, grouping them with comics and drawing books, forming a magnet area for reluctant readers."

Graphic novels can also help improve language and literacy development, including second language learners; the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative. Elaine Moskowitz, a librarian and literacy specialist at James Denman Middle School says, "Graphic novels have generated a whole new energy in my patrons. I have been especially impressed with their popularity among our students with limited English proficiency."

Motivating Reluctant Readers

Addressing literacy has become a priority in schools; high-interest reading materials such as graphic novels can play an important factor in addressing this issue. In *The Power of Reading* (Libraries Unlimited, 1993), Stephen Krashen discusses the importance of popular fiction for young readers:

Perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is by exposing them to light reading, a kind of reading that



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schools pretend does not exist and a kind of reading that many children, for economic or ideological reasons, are deprived of. I suspect that light reading is the way that nearly all of us learned to read (pp. 47–48).

Young people enjoy reading a wide range of materials, including periodicals, series fiction, and comic books—materials some librarians have shunned. The prevailing opinion that comic books hinder literacy development is questionable. Research shows that comic books are linguistically appropriate reading material, bearing no negative impact on school achievement or language acquisition (Krashen, 1993). Comic books and graphic novels are typically written at a fourth to sixth grade reading level, comparable to *Time* magazine, young adult novels, and many adult best sellers. Graphic novels strongly appeal to teens and are an invaluable tool for motivating reluctant readers. Betsy Levine, the Teen Services Librarian at San Francisco Public Library says, "The most requested book for teens (both male and female patrons) is the graphic novel, *Ranma 1/2*."

Developing Language and Literacy Skills

Providing students with diverse reading materials promotes their transition into lifelong readers. Jeff McQuillan, in "*The Literacy Crisis*," describes the steps needed for this transition:

"...providing a rich supply of reading matter to children of all ages, as well as a place and time to read, is the first step to bridging the gap between poor and good readers." (p. 86)

Programs like "Sustained Silent Reading" (SSR) help to create a schoolwide environment where students can engage in free reading during the school day. In *The SSR Handbook* (2000), Janice Pilgreen finds that SSR provides "the same or better benefits for students in

the areas of comprehension and motivation as traditional skills" do. (p. 6). Schools that have implemented SSR report an increase in academic achievement and students who developed a love for reading. When programs like SSR are combined with a strong school library media program, students obtain the requisite materials, encouragement, and environment to help them develop lifelong reading habits.

Recommended Titles

This list is designed for school librarians adding graphic novels to their collection, as well as teachers seeking high-interest materials for their classroom libraries. Grade level suggestions have been provided to help librarians locate age appropriate materials. "All-ages" titles are appropriate for grades 3 through 12 and offer younger readers stories that are free of excessive violence, profanity, and adult situations. Materials for high school students that contain mature subject matter are indicated with an asterisk and should be previewed prior to circulation.

Humor

■ Fujishima, Kosuke. *Oh My Goddess!: The Fourth Goddess*. Translated by Dana Lewis and Toren Smith. Dark Horse Comics, 2001. No pagination. \$18.95 trade pbk. 1569715513.

Keiichi Morisato befriends three goddesses as they embark on a series of screwball adventures. Grade 8 & Up

■ Groening, Matt. *Simpsons Comics Royale*. By Matt Groening et al. HarperCollins, 2001. 159 pp. \$14.95 trade pbk. 006093378X.

Based on the popular TV show, this short story collection focuses on the humorous adventures of Bart, Lisa, & Homer. Grade 3 & Up

■ Hartman, Rachel. *Amy Unbounded: Belongweg Blossoming*. Pug House Press, 2002. 208 pp. \$16.95 trade pbk. 0971790000.

and Promote Literacy



Set during the Middle Ages, this coming-of-age story focuses on a summer in the life of 14-year-old Amy of Eddybrook Lodge. Grade 6 & Up

■ Smith, Jeff. *Bone, Volume 1: Out from Boneville*. Cartoon Books, 1995. 142 pp. \$12.95 trade pbk. 0963660993.

Humor and adventure are combined in this epic fantasy about Fone Bone and his cousins as they face strange and fantastic creatures. Grade 3 & Up

■ Takahashi, Rumiko. *Ranma 1/2, Volume 1*. Viz Communications, 1993. 300 pp. \$16.95 trade pbk. 092927993X.

When teenage Ranma Saotome comes into contact with water, he transforms into a girl. Martial arts and hijinx blend in this madcap gender-bending comedy. Note: Contains brief nudity. Grade 8 & Up

■ Torres, J. *Alison Dare, Little Miss Adventures*. Oni Press, 2002. 104 pp. \$8.95 trade pbk. 1929998201. The St. Joan of Arc Academy for Girls provides the setting for the adventures of Alison and her best friends, Wendy and Dot. The trio encounter genies, bank robbers, and an evil baron. Grade 3 & Up

Superheroes

■ Brubaker, Ed and Mike Allred. *Catwoman: The Dark End of the Street*. DC Comics, 2002. 136 pp. \$12.95 trade pbk. 1563899086.

Selina Kyle returns to her childhood home and becomes a defender for Gotham City's lost and discarded citizens. Grade 7 & Up

■ Dini, Paul and Alex Ross. *Wonder Woman: The Spirit of Truth*. DC Comics, 2001. 64 pp. \$9.95 trade pbk. 1563898616.

Wonder Woman embarks on a journey of self-discovery to seek the true meaning of heroism. This story explores society's perceptions of heroism, power and politics. Grade 4 & Up

■ Dixon, Charles and Scott Beatty.

Robin: Year One.

New York: DC Comics, 2002. 200 pp. \$14.95 trade pbk. 1563898055.

The earliest days of Robin's crime fighting career are explored as he seeks to solve a series of bizarre crimes. Grade 5 & Up

■ Jemas, Bill and Joe Quesada. *Origin: The True Story of Wolverine*. Marvel Books, 2002. 160 pp. \$14.99 trade pbk. 078510965X.

Logan's childhood and early adulthood are explored in an origin story that reveals the events that transformed him into Wolverine. Grade 7 & Up

■ Loeb, Jeph and Tim Sale. *Daredevil Legends, Volume 1:*

Daredevil: Yellow.

Marvel Books, 2002. 144 pp. \$14.99 trade pbk. 0785109692.

Daredevil's father and girlfriend, Karen Page, figure prominently in a story about the earliest days of his career. Grade 6 & Up

■ Morrison, Grant and Frank Quitely. *X-Men: E is for Extinction*. Marvel Books, 2001. 144 pp. \$12.95 trade pbk. 0785108114.

The X-Men must stop Cassandra Nova as she attempts to create a new world completely devoid of homo sapiens. Grade 8 & Up

■ Morrison, Grant and Jae Lee. *Fantastic Four 1234*. Marvel Books, 2002. 96 pp. \$9.95 trade pbk. 0785110402.

Romantic tensions between the Sub-mariner and the Invisible Woman and Reed Richard's compulsive nature are explored in a story that focuses on the inner lives of the Fantastic Four. Grade 9 & Up

■ Robbins, Trina and Anne Timmons. *Go Girl*. Dark Horse Comics, 2002. 136 pp. \$15.95 trade pbk. 1569717982.

Lindsay's life changes dramatically when she discovers she has the ability to fly & becomes the superhero, Go-Girl. Grade 5 & Up

■ Smith, Kevin and Phil Hester. *Green Arrow: Quiver*. DC Comics, 2002. 232 pp. \$17.95 trade pbk. 1563899655

Presumed long dead, Oliver Queen reappears after ten years of absence in a story that explores Green Arrow's history and origin. Grade 9 & Up

“Research shows that comic books are linguistically appropriate reading material, bearing no negative impact on school achievement or language acquisition.”

Young Adult/Contemporary Fiction

■ *Clowes, Daniel. *Ghost World*. Fantagraphics Books, 1998. 80 pp. \$9.95 trade paperback. 1560974273.

Set during the last summer of their adolescence, this coming-of-age story focuses on the strained, but tender relationship between two young women, Enid and Rebecca. Note: Contains adult subject matter. Mature Readers/Grade 10 & Up

■ *Moore, Terry. *Stranger in Paradise: High School!* Abstract Studio, Inc., 1998. 80 pp. \$8.95 trade pbk. 1892597071.

This humorous story explores how Francine and Katchoo became best friends in high school. Mature Readers/Grade 10 & Up

■ Soryo, Fuyumi. *Mars #1*. Tokyopop, 2002. 192 pp. \$9.99 trade pbk. 1591821320.

Romance develops between Kira, a shy art student and Rei, a rebellious motorcycle racer. Grade 7 & Up

■ Torres, J. and Takeshi Miyazawa. *Sidekicks: The Transfer Student*. Oni Press, 2002. 96 pp. \$8.95 trade pbk. 1929998406.

When Terry Highland transfers to Shuster Academy, a school for superhero sidekicks, she is unaware that the school's focus is on academics and students are forbidden to use their superpowers. Grade 6 & Up

■ Van Meter, Jan. *Hopeless Savages*. Oni Press, 2002. 128 pp. \$13.95 trade pbk. 1929998244.

Teenage Rat Hopeless takes a normal 9-to-5 job as a means to rebel against his unconventional punk rock parents. Grade 8 & Up

■ *Watson, Andi. *Dumped*. Oni Press, 2002. 56 pp. \$5.95 trade pbk. 1929998414.

Set against a backdrop of vintage Mary Quant dresses and old Jackie Collins novels, a vintage clothing store owner, Deb, falls in love with Binny, a collector of rare books. Mature Readers/Grade 10 & Up

Social Issues

■ Kubert, Joe. *Fax from Sarajevo*. Dark Horse Comics, 1998. 224 pp. \$16.95 trade pbk. 1569713464

As Ervin tries to escape war-torn Sarajevo, his only means of communication is a fax machine. Kubert reconstructs these fax messages to tell a compelling war story. Grade 8 & Up

■ Talbot, Brian. *The Tale of One Bad Rat*. Dark Horse, 1995. 124 pp. \$14.95 trade pbk. 1569710775.

A teenage runaway, Helen Potter, is haunted by memories of sexual abuse as she travels the English countryside in search of redemption. Grade 8 & Up

■ Winick, Judd. *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned*. Henry Holt & Company,

2000. 187 pp. \$14.95 trade pbk. 0805064036.

Winick's story is a loving and poignant homage to the memory of his MTV's Real World housemate and friend, Pedro Zamora, who died of AIDS. Grade 8 & Up

Horror/Supernatural Fiction

■ *Gaiman, Neil and Dave McKean. *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr. Punch: A Romance*. DC Comics, 1995. 96 pp. \$17.95 trade pbk. 1563892464.

After visiting a Punch and Judy show, a young boy's memories of family violence and abuse begin to surface. Mature Readers/Grade 10 & Up

■ Naifeh, Ted. *Courtney Crumrin and the Night Things*. Oni Press, 2002.

Courtney hates her new home and school until she discovers her great uncle's secret world of goblins, ghost, and ghouls. Grade 3 & Up

■ *Rieber, John Ney, et al. *The Books of Magic: Reckonings*. DC Comics, 1997. 110 pp. \$12.95 trade. 1563893215.

Timothy Hunter is a lonely, awkward teenager who embarks on a journey to become the world's greatest magician. Mature Readers/Grade 9 & Up

Science Fiction and Fantasy

■ Doran, Colleen. *A Distant Soil, Volume 1*. Image Comics, 1997. Unpaged. \$19.95 trade pbk. 1887279512.

Psionic powers are a curse and a blessing for 15 year-old Liana as she attempts to escape a government facility and the scientists who want to use her for their own experiments. Grade 7 & Up

■ Miller, Frank and Dave Gibbons. *Martha Washington Saves the World*. Dark Horse Comics, 1999. Unpaged. \$12.95 trade pbk. 1569713847.

One of the few graphic novels to feature an African-American protagonist, Martha Washington travels into space to save the Earth from Venus, a global computer intelligence. Grade 6 & Up

■ *Otomo, Katsuhiro. *Akira*. Translated by Yoko Umezawa, Linda M. York, and Jo Duffy. Dark Horse Comics, 2000. 359 pp. \$19.95 trade pbk. 1569714983

Set in a violent, post-apocalyptic Neo-Tokyo, two boys, Tetsuo and Kaneda develop an enduring friendship. Note: Contains graphic violence. Mature Readers/Grade 9 & Up

■ Moore, Alan and J.H. Williams. *Promethea*. DC Comics, 2000. 176 pp. \$14.95 trade pbk. 563896672. Sophie Bangs's life changes forever when the subject of her research project, the mythological Promethea, literally, comes to life. Note: Contains mature subject matter. Mature Readers/Grade 10 & Up

■ Tezuka, Osamu. *Astro Boy, Vol. 1*. Translated by Frederik L. Schodt. Dark Horse Comics, 2002. 222 pp. \$9.95 trade pbk. 1569716765.

In this charming tale, Dr. Tezuma creates a robot, Astro Boy, to serve as a substitute for his late son. Grade 3 & Up

■ Russell, P. Craig. *The Ring of Nibelung, Vol. 1: The Rhinegold and The Valkyrie*. Dark Horse Comics, 2002.

This beautifully illustrated adaptation provides an excellent introduction to Richard Wagner's "Ring Cycle" opera. Grade 8 & Up

WORKS CITED

Krashen, Stephen. *The Power of Reading*. Englewood: Libraries Unlimited, Inc. 1993.

McQuillan, Jeff. *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998.

Pilgreen, Janice L. *The SSR handbook: How to Organize and Manage a Sustained Silent Reading Program*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000. ■

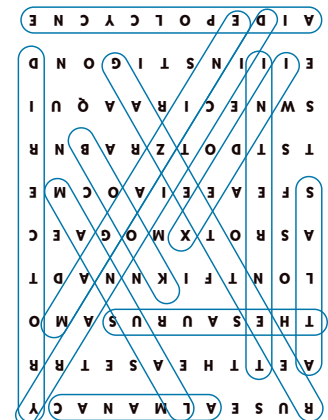
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Look It Up

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Graphic novels powerfully attract and motivate kids to read. Many librarians have built up graphic novel collections and have seen circulation figures soar. School librarians and educators have reported outstanding success getting kids to read with graphic novels, citing particularly their popularity with reluctant readers, especially boys—a group traditionally difficult to reach. At the same time, graphic novels with rich, complex plots and narrative structures can also be satisfying to advanced readers. Reluctant readers. Graphic novels can be a way in for students who are difficult to reach through traditional texts. Even those deemed poor readers willingly and enthusiastically gravitate toward these books.