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Selecting Graphic Novels for the Public Library

The public librarian of today needs to know about graphic novels. The popularity of this format has increased exponentially in the last ten years, particularly with teen patrons. More evidence, both anecdotal and research-based, is being put forth to support the use of graphic items with struggling and reluctant readers. The quality of graphic novels and non-fiction has also become increasingly sophisticated, attracting fans of art and literature. For a library that strives to meet the entertainment, educational, and literary interests of its public, graphic novels are essential to the collection.

Yet finding tools to assist in building a graphic novel collection can be daunting for a librarian. The fact is that most graphic novels come in and go out of print relatively quickly. The origin of the graphic novel lies in the comic book publishing realm where an artificial scarcity of supply is built in, thus making the items more collectible. Because of this, in the time it takes a standard bibliographic source to be published, many items on the list will likely become unavailable. Another issue is whether standard review sources will write about a title. One category of graphic novel is the independent, a sequentially story contained in one volume, much like a standard novel. Examples would be *Blankets* by Thomson and *Persepolis* by Satrapi. For these types, reviews are often readily available because it is easier for the reviewer to write about the entire scope of the work. Yet it is often the serialized stories, from the U.S. and Asian nations, which are most in demand by patrons and for which an authoritative review can be difficult to find.

As the teen contact for a small branch within a medium-size library system, I have developed an interest in and appreciation for the graphic novel format. I have followed its trends

in the library world for some time, but this assignment afforded me the opportunity to take a closer look at the graphic novel selection process. I spent some time working with the librarian who selects graphic novels for my library system, Kathleen Fernandes. Kathleen has been a long time advocate of graphic novels since working as a middle school librarian. In addition to the issues mentioned above, she pointed out that one of the most important tasks in selecting graphic novels is deciding where in the collection they belong. There is currently no industry standard for rating graphic novels, so many companies have developed their own system, which may or may not coincide with the libraries collection age ranges. She also acknowledged that many libraries have a difficult time committing the money necessary to build a strong graphic collection. The bindings of these items are notoriously bad, resulting in frequent replacement orders. Also, many Manga series go on for numerous volumes. The library must decide if it will be worthwhile to purchase all 40 volumes of one story series.

Based on my own knowledge and information from Kathleen, I examined many selection tools relevant to building a graphic novel collection. I selected five that I believe will be particularly useful in designing an opening day collection for the medium sized library I have envisioned. Before I begin a discussion of these five items, here are the other tools I examined in relation to graphic novels.*

Baker & Taylor distributor catalog. Retrieved from <http://www.btol.com>

Booklist. (Published twice monthly). Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

\$85.95/year.

Comics 4 Libraries Wiki. Retrieved from <http://wiki.tangognat.com/HomePage>.

Ingram Book Group distributor catalog. Retrieved from <http://ipage.ingram.com>.

Library Journal. (Published twenty times a year). New York, NY: Reed Business Information. \$141/year.

No Flying, No Tights for teens, Sidekicks for kids, The Lair for teens and adults.

Retrieved from <http://www.noflyingnotights.com>.

Raiteri, S. *Recommended graphic novels for public libraries*. Retrieved from <http://my.voyager.net/~sraiteri/graphicnovels.htm>.

School Library Journal. (Published monthly). New York, NY: Reed Business Information. \$124/year.

Title Tales: Book Wholesalers Incorporated vendor catalog. Retrieved from <http://www.bwibooks.com>.

TOKYOPOP publisher's catalog. Retrieved from <http://www.tokyopop.com>

Video Librarian. (Published bi-monthly). Seabeck, WA: Video Librarian. \$64/year.

VIZ publisher's catalog. Retrieved from <http://www.viz.com>

Young Adult Library Services. (Published twice yearly). Chicago, IL: American Library Association. \$40/year.

I will now detail five selection tools. They are presented in the order that makes the most sense to me when considering an opening day collection.

Weiner, S. (2001). *The 101 best graphic novels*. New York: NY: NBM Publishing. \$14.95.

As quickly as the world of graphic novels moves, this book is already dated. In bold print at the beginning of the list is a warning that the choices were made on what was available at the time. Yet, the list remains a good starting point because it covers many titles that are considered

classics for the format, such as Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and Tezuka's *Adolf: A Tale of the Twentieth Century*.

Mr. Weiner is the director of a public library in Massachusetts and a life-long fan of comics. Each review is approximately a paragraph and includes a three-level age rating of the material. One weakness is the variation of details per review. Some are a few sentences that merely describe the plot. Others highlight the features that make the book a must-have for libraries. Mr. Weiner is at his best when reviewing superhero titles. I believe this book is useful for selecting enduring independent graphic titles when starting a new collection. This is why I would turn to it first when planning my opening day collection.

Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA). (Published bi-monthly). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Incorporated. \$45/year.

Of all the publications written for librarians, this has my favorite graphic novel reviews. That is because most are written by the incomparable Katherine Kan. Just this year, she became the first librarian to serve on the Will Eisner Award Committee, the major award for graphic novels. She has worked in a variety of libraries as a teen advocate and currently freelances as a young adult services consultant. She is a frequent contributor to GN-LIB, a listserv which discusses graphic novels and anime in the library setting. As a member of this listserv, I have found her posts to be most valuable because of her matchless knowledge of the graphic novels and library culture.

In each VOYA issue, Ms. Kan writes a two page section titled "Graphically Speaking" which has graphic novel reviews, often around a common theme such as horror or all-ages titles. Occasionally, Ms. Kan includes an interview or brief report in the section. Ms. Kan's reviews are about two paragraphs in length and describe the plot and special features that make

the book or series appealing. She is particularly adept at describing what age group the item is best suited for and what specifically makes it so. She also recommends if a title belongs in a middle or high school library and why.

In addition to Ms. Kan's section, *VOYA*, "the library magazine serving those who serve young adults," includes reviews of graphic novels in their regular review sections, which are organized by genre. Most useful, these reviews are giving a special symbol to alert the reader that it is about a graphic novel. This makes it easy for the graphic novel selector to scan through the genres and find items written in the graphic format. About 80 graphics are well-reviewed per year in *VOYA*, making it a valuable selection tool. The excellent detail and focus on library needs makes it my one of my top choices for building an opening day collection.

Animerica: Anime & Manga Monthly. (Published monthly). San Francisco, CA: VIZ, LLC. \$29.95/year.

Written for fans and followers of the industry, this is the best print publication for current reviews of manga titles. With about 12 reviews per month, this magazine covers about 150 titles per year when feature articles are included. Each review is between three to five paragraphs in length and full of fan attitude. But the writers back up their tastes with a full plot description and a solid analysis of what makes the book work or not work. Included is a quality rating of one to five stars and an age rating with a sentence suggesting why it is for that age group.

Since the target audience is the industry savvy, an uninitiated librarian would have trouble understanding the references within the review. But with a little knowledge of manga, I found these reviews to be well-written and useful in making decisions about my planned collection. The magazine itself is well formatted and contains worthwhile articles. I believe regular reading of this publication could greatly benefit teen librarians in particular.

Wizard: the Comics Magazine. (Published monthly). Congers, NY: Gareb Shamus Enterprises, Incorporated. \$29.95/year.

This could be considered the counterpart to Animerica. While it does occasionally include manga or anime, the editorial focus is on the world of superheroes with some coverage of independent graphic novels. To understand the publication, one must know some things about the culture of comic books. For instance, most of the superheroes have stories and legends that date back decades. What makes a new graphic novel interesting is how the spin is put on that legend, something frequently discussed in this magazine. In relation to this, it is important to realize that artists and writers have a unique style for which the good ones develop a fan following. This publication does nice work in the area of interviews and covering industry trends.

Reviews are organized into sections titled "Picks," "New Releases," "Rated MR (mature readers)," "Indie Buzz," and "Book Shelf." This last section contains information on the graphic novels and trade books that libraries typically collect. Reviews of individual comic issues can be useful in monitoring trends and predicting the popularity of future trade books. Most reviews are a paragraph or two, but there are longer reviews in sections such as "Spotlight on..." and "Secret Stash: Comic's Hidden Gems." With something like 700 reviews a year, this publication is obviously a solid source of information on comics. Combined with the articles, this magazine can assist a librarian in developing a timely and popular collection of superhero and independent graphic novels. I find *Wizard* to be an effective tool for developing my knowledge in this area as well as a guide for collection development.

Sno-Isle Libraries online catalog. Retrieved from <http://www.sno-isle.org>.

At first glance, Sno-Isle might seem an odd choice for the exemplary library collection, considering its wealthier and more famous neighbors, Seattle Public Library and King County Library System. But with the approval of Collection Development Manager Nancy Messenger and the zeal of selector librarian Kathleen Fernandes, Sno-Isle's graphic novel collection outpaces many libraries the same size and larger. In 2004, Sno-Isle spent over \$90 thousand on graphic novels. Kathleen estimates that 70% of that went toward the extremely hot manga format, much of which was driven by patron requests. While Sno-Isle strives to keep up the interests and demands of the community, it also holds to a well-defined policy that defines graphic novels and what criteria an item must meet to enter the collection.

With almost 3000 titles listed as graphic novels, there is a wide variety of materials that Sno-Isle has collected. The current catalog includes cover images of titles, which can help both in locating items and with determining the artistic style of a book. Most of the item records include an annotation summary. When available, reviews of the item in sources such as *Publisher's Weekly* and *School Library Journal* are included. Because Sno-Isle has such a commitment to the graphic novel format and a variety of materials, the catalog is a valuable resource for other libraries desiring to build such a collection. Since I am focusing on a collection for one medium-sized library, I will not have the same volume of titles. But by reviewing what Sno-Isle has collected, I can get a sense of what works in a library collection.

These five items discussed were selected from my examinations because of their complimentary nature, giving them a strong collective value. The first item, *The 101 Best Graphic Novels*, gives me a core list of recommended titles for public libraries to start with. Then by examining back issues of *VOYA*, I can fill in more current titles as well as a wider variety of

genres. A great advantage of this selection tool is the knowledge of the reviewer and details concerning the area to which an item should be assigned. The next two selection tools, *Animerica* and *Wizard*, inform me about publishing trends and the newest product in the two largest graphic novel genres, superheroes and manga. My last selection tool, Sno-Isle's library catalog, is one I consider to be a kind of check and balance. It gives me an idea about what a typical public library collects and also broadens my view to titles I may not have previously encountered. Taken together, I believe these five selection tools will be extremely effective for developing an opening day graphic novel collection.

* A note about the selection tools I examined:

Since some items are probably not accessed by the typical library school student, I wanted to explain a few of them. The website catalogs for Ingram, Baker & Taylor, and BWI's TitleTales are accessible through my worksite, so I took advantage of the opportunity to view them. The publication *Video Librarian* might seem an odd choice when collecting books, but it can sometimes be a timely way to get information on forthcoming manga titles. Many manga titles were either created as anime first or have had anime created based on the story. If the anime is released in the U.S. first, a review in *Video Librarian* can give the librarian clues about the content of the manga likely to be released at a later date.

While I regularly view several publisher's catalogs on graphic novels, I only included two, TOKYOPOP and VIZ, for this assignment. Besides making the list too lengthy, I decided to only include these two since they have proven the most valuable when researching titles that patrons are demanding. Lastly, the *Comics for Libraries Wiki* is a new online resource with great potential. Using the wiki technology, reviews on graphic novels are being collected and posted online with links to the original source, where possible. This could become an amazing one-stop-shopping place for the librarian researching graphic novels.