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 Hones, 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 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 Pilgret finds that SSR provides “the same or better benefits for students in the areas of comprehension and motivation as traditional skills” (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


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


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


By Philip Crawford
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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Young Adult/Contemporary Fiction

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

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

Research shows that comic books are linguistically appropriate reading material, bearing no negative impact on school achievement or language acquisition.
Romance develops between Kira, a shy art student and Rei, a rebellious motorcycle racer. Grade 7 & Up

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


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

Science Fiction and Fantasy


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


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'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

WORKS CITED


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Look It Up

Circle each source of information from the list below. When you are finished, the words that are left will spell out a message.

R U S E A L M A N A C Y
A E T T H E A S E T R R
T H E S A U R U S A M O
L O N T F I K N N A D T
A S R O T X M O G A E C
S F E A E E I A O C M E
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Editor's Note: Each issue we will feature reproducible items that are designed for you to share with your school community. It might be a lesson plan, a worksheet, or game. Each carries permission for you to reproduce the material within the building in which you work.
A reluctant reader is anyone who does not show interest in reading. There is a wide range within the category of reluctant readers. A reluctant reader may simply be a child who needs to be coaxed into reading texts. She may also be the child who vehemently refuses to read. Before you can select which strategy you will use to support a reluctant reader you need to know why he or she is disengaged from reading. Observe the child when he is approaching a reading task. Does he avoid it all together or does he begin but become frustrated and abandon it? There are a number of excellent graphic novels and higher-level picture books that are designed to engage reluctant readers. While it may seem that these texts “dumb down” reading, they do not.