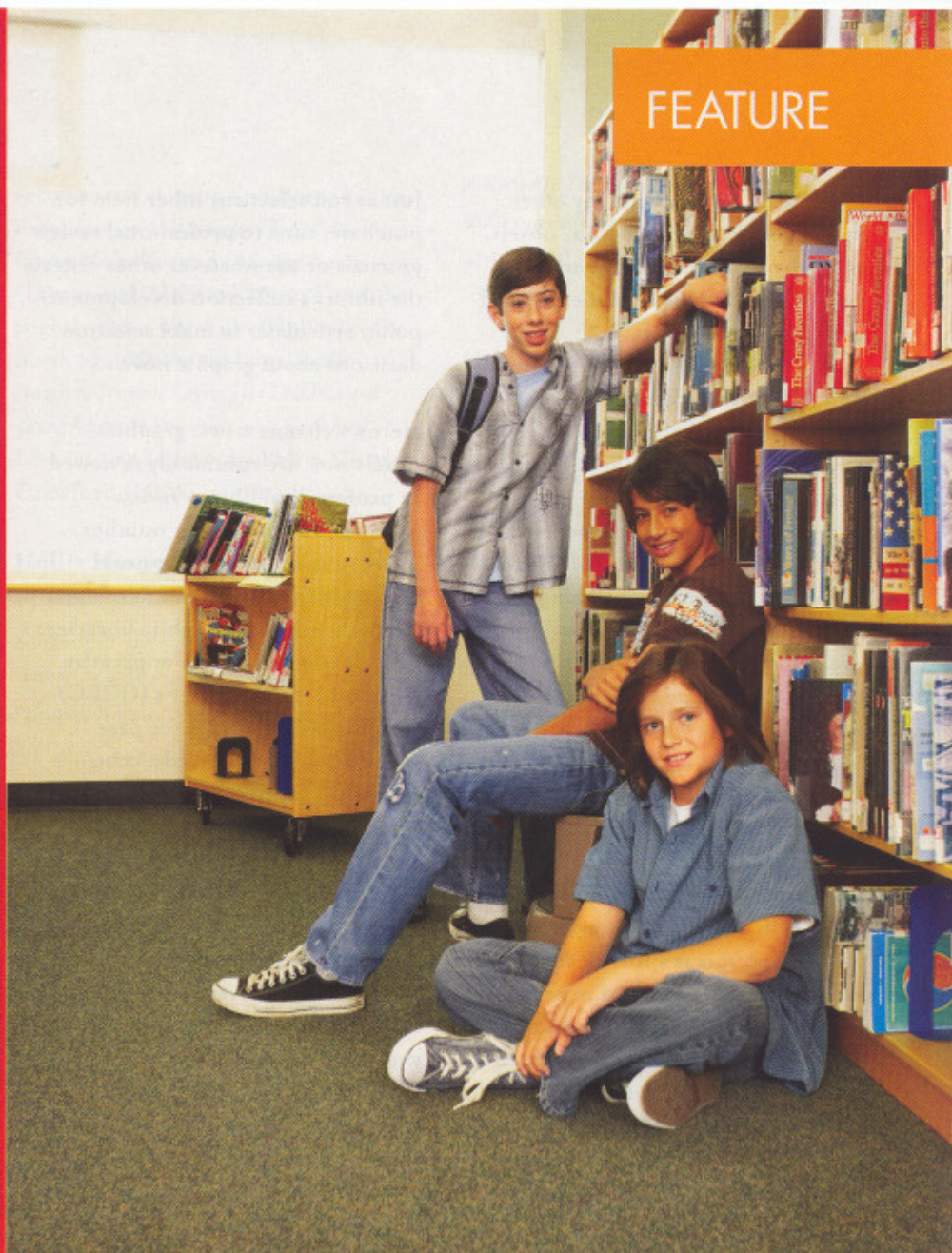


Graphic Novels and School Libraries

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School libraries serving children and teenagers today should be committed to collecting graphic novels to the extent that their budgets allow. But the term “graphic novel” is enough to make some librarians—not to mention administrators and parents—pause.

“You’re collecting *what* in the school library?”

Understanding the Format

The first step in building a useful, appealing collection of graphic novels

is to understand the format. Graphic novels are simply book-length comics. They can be works of fiction or nonfiction, and their content parallels the wide range of literature that librarians already collect in other forms, including biographies, poetry, and novels.

The term “graphic” in “graphic novel” means highly visual. It does *not* mean mature or violent content. Do some graphic novels have content, situations, and images that some might find upsetting or offensive?

Absolutely, just as some novels have dialogue, violence, or sexual situations that may be upsetting; some picture books have images that may be distressing; and some nonfiction contains information that may be shocking.

The truth is that many if not all of the materials found on the shelves of school libraries have the potential to offend someone. As with any material in any library, it’s important to look at the work as a whole and not take individual components out

of context. And, as with any other kind of book—picture books, novels, nonfiction—graphic novels must be evaluated individually, not embraced or rejected as a whole.

It's All in the Policy

While it is true that some people do have preconceived notions about, and even prejudices against, comics and graphic novels, it's important to maintain perspective. For school librarians, that means thinking about what graphic novels to collect in order to meet the needs and interests of the children and teens that the school library serves.

In other words, how do graphic novels fit into the collection development policy? It's a sure bet that graphic novels fit into existing policies in a number of ways. Remember, this is a format that embodies a wide range of material already being collected in school libraries, from biographies and other nonfiction, to adventure, fantasy, science fiction, contemporary realism, and historical fiction. As with other resources, they fulfill a variety of roles, from supporting the curriculum, to meeting students' need for leisure reading.

Some graphic novels will be purchased as "popular materials," others as books of information, and still others because of their literary merit. (These reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive.) Whatever the reason, as long as collection development guidelines are followed, decisions can be made with confidence.

As with any publication, graphic novels vary widely in quality and content. Some are mediocre, and others are literary masterpieces.

Just as you select any other item for purchase, turn to professional review journals or use whatever other criteria the library's collection development policy articulates to make selection decisions about graphic novels.

Here's welcome news: graphic novels now are commonly reviewed in professional library review journals. An increasing number of recommended graphic novel bibliographies have been developed for both school and public libraries. For a listing, visit the Cooperative Children's Book Center's (CCBC) Graphic Novel's Resource page <www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/graphicnovels.asp>.

Cataloging and Shelving

Now that you've decided to purchase graphic novels, the next step is deciding where to put them. Because graphic novels cover a wide range of subjects, some librarians choose to shelve titles by topic. For example, *Clan Apis* by Jay Hosler (Active Synapse, 2000) could be shelved in the science section, while *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2003), could be placed with biographies.

Other librarians choose to catalog and shelve graphic novels based on their format, placing them all together. At the CCBC, for example, they are all shelved under 741.5, the Dewey number for comic books and graphic novels. While each method has merit, more librarians are choosing the latter. It creates a focal point for readers who might not be regular users of the library but are drawn in by graphic novel collections. While students cannot browse them by topic, the subject headings still enable readers to locate relevant titles to meet specific interests.

Promotion and Education

If community members (including administrators, teachers, parents, students, and others) understand the benefits of graphic novels, they are less likely to challenge them due to misconceptions about the format or fears of the unknown. Consider holding a graphic novel discussion with students, staff, and parents. One useful question to pose is whether—and why—some people find visual images more problematic than words.

Look for opportunities to explain how graphic novels help the library meet its goal to support teaching and learning as well as the diverse needs and interests of the children and teens it serves. Create an attractive display that will allow individuals coming into the library to see the many kinds of storytelling and information to be found in the highly visual, or "graphic," format.

One librarian we know has a binder sitting beneath her display in which she has collected articles from many disciplines supporting graphic novels in education. Viewing the professional literature alongside the display, colleagues will begin to think about how they can capitalize on students' interest in graphic novels to further curricular goals related to visual literacy, media criticism, and nontextual information, as well as their potential for use with nontraditional learners, including students with some types of cognitive disabilities and those learning English. Ask for time during a staff in-service, or invite subject-area teachers to the library and map out how graphic novels may address their state standards in both content and skill areas.

In short, be proactive in articulating the value of graphic novels to the school community.

And what if a complaint does arise, or a challenge does occur? Graphic novels are no different than any other resource in the library. Follow the procedures outlined in the school's collection development policy for informal and formal resolution of complaints about library materials—with confidence.

For additional ideas and information on collecting and using graphic novels in school libraries, we

recommend Allison and Barry Lyga's excellent *Graphic Novels in Your School Library Media Center: A Definitive Guide* (Libraries Unlimited, 2004) and the slightly older but still valuable *Graphic Novels 101: Selecting and Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy for Children and Young Adults: A Resource Guide for School Librarians and Educators* by Philip Charles Crawford (Hi Willow, 2003).

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