

CONVINCING THE NAYSAYER

THIS ARTICLE IS INTENDED FOR THOSE OF US WHO HAVE SAID, "GRAPHIC NOVELS AREN'T MY THING," OR WHO WORK WITH TEACHERS, PARENTS, OR ADMINISTRATORS WHO HAVE SAID SOMETHING LIKE: "GRAPHIC NOVELS ARE NICE BUT THEY'RE NOT REAL READING." AS SOMEONE WHO SPEAKS WITH SCHOOL LIBRARIANS, TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND ADMINISTRATORS ABOUT USING GRAPHIC NOVELS IN SCHOOLS, I HEAR VARIATIONS OF THESE TWO STATEMENTS QUITE OFTEN. THE AIM OF THIS ARTICLE IS NOT TO CONVINCE THE NAYSAYERS TO LOVE GRAPHIC NOVELS THEMSELVES, BUT TO DEMONSTRATE WHY GRAPHIC NOVELS ARE IMPORTANT TO LITERACY AND EDUCATION, AND TO GIVE EDUCATORS TOOLS TO DEFEND INCLUSION OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY CURRICULUM AND COLLECTION. IN OTHER WORDS, I'D LIKE TO HELP TURN THE NAYSAYERS INTO "YAYSAYERS."

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WHY GRAPHIC NOVELS DESERVE A PLACE IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY.

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Making an Argument for Graphic Novels

An important point to note at the outset of any discussion about the legitimacy of graphic novels (including manga) is that graphic novels are truly a format for literature, not a genre. Graphic novels include genre fiction such as romance, mystery, sports, etc., but also relay nonfiction information as well. Graphic novels are a format the same way that audiobooks are a format for literature.

Similarly, just as the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) have created the Odyssey Award for audiobooks, graphic novels have their own recognition in the form of the Great Graphic Novels for Teens booklist published

annually. In a presentation at ALA Annual Conference in June, Karen Gavigan (2012a) noted that the creation of the Great Graphic Novels for Teens booklist in 2007 followed on the heels of past significant graphic-novel triumphs, such as a special Pulitzer Prize being awarded in 1992 to Art Spiegelman for his book *Maus*. Other major awards being granted to graphic novels for youth in recent years include: National Book Award Finalist *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, Sibert Honor book *To Dance* by Siena Cherson Siegel and Mark Siegel, Scott O'Dell Award winner *Storm in the Barn* by Matt Phelan, and Coretta Scott King Author Honor winner *Yummy* by G. Neri. These books and others have also appeared on the book/media award lists published by YALSA and the Association for Library Services to Children.

Not only do critics consider some graphic novels appealing; sales records show that kids do too. *Publisher's Weekly* reported that sales of graphic novels in 2011 reached \$340 million and included a rapidly growing market of graphic novels for children. Additionally, the sales of digital graphic novels have doubled since 2010 (MacDonald and Reid 2011).

Intellectual Freedom and Graphic Novels

Comics and censorship have a long and storied history together. Unfortunately, the term "graphic" in graphic novels sometimes causes those unfamiliar with the format to think of notices from various media regulators that movies, music, etc. contain graphic language, sex, or violence. I was confronted with

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TURNING **NAYSAYERS**

*AS OUR STUDENTS TEXT, TWEET,
AND SEND PHOTOS OF THEM-
SELVES TO EACH OTHER, THEY
ARE USING BOTH TEXT AND
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THE WAY IN WHICH THESE DIF-
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TO CREATE MEANING IS VERY
SIMILAR TO THE WAY THAT
GRAPHIC NOVELS USE TEXT AND
IMAGE TO CONVEY MEANING.*

this unfortunate amalgamation of concepts when I began conducting research for my dissertation. I wanted to speak with high school students about a sample of graphic novels I had chosen from the Great Graphic Novels for Teens booklist. To be permitted to speak with the students, I needed to obtain approval from the school district's assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent denied my request, stating that graphic novels were too violent and explicit to show to high school students. I resubmitted my request and attached copies of sample pages from each of the graphic novels I would use, demonstrating that the only "graphic" aspects to these graphic novels were the illustrations. The administrator then approved my request.

That incident impressed upon me the need for school librarians to be able to talk with the school community about what graphic novels are, what role they hold in our students' pursuits of education and enjoyment, and why they deserve a place in our schools. Appearing at the end of the article is a list of online resources that focus on graphic novels and censorship. The first link listed is "Graphic Novels: Suggestions for Librarians," a brochure coauthored by the National Coalition Against Censorship, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) and ALA. This brochure gives suggestions about, among other things, where to shelve graphic novels and how to handle challenges. The CBLDF also

INTO "YAYSAYERS"

supports librarians by providing "legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education" to help protect our patrons' First Amendment rights (CBLDF 2012).

What Research Tells Us About Graphic Novels and Education

The inclusion and use of graphic novels in the school library and curriculum is no longer a matter of "if" but "how" (Gavigan 2012b). Researchers have demonstrated that graphic novels help make the curriculum more relevant for students by allowing them to connect with and explore popular culture (Alvermann and Xu 2003; Schwarz 2006; Xu, Sawyer, and Zunich 2005). Educators can also take advantage of the way in which children communicate with each other today. As our students text, tweet, and send photos of themselves to each other, they are using both text and images to create and process ideas and information. The way in which these different modes of presenting information work together to create meaning is very similar to the way that graphic novels use text and image to convey meaning. As AASL has noted, "Multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual, and technological, have now joined information literacy as crucial skills for this century" (2007, 3). The use of graphic novels in the curriculum can help us better prepare students for the literacy demands of their futures.

In his many studies concerning research on youth literacy, Stephen

Krashen has found that comics and graphic novels offer 20 percent more rare vocabulary than traditional chapter books (2004). Krashen has also discovered that graphic novels are beneficial to the literacy development of English Language Learners (ELL) and low-level reading students (Ujiie and Krashen 1996), and that graphic novels help students develop a taste for reading and serve as a bridge to other types of literature (Krashen 2004; Ujiie and Krashen 1996). Writing independently, both Stephen Cary (2004) and Stephen Krashen (2004) found that boys often choose graphic novels when given the opportunity to select reading materials.

Concerning the way that graphic novels relate to gender, research indicates that males respond positively to the image/text combination of graphic novels because they are more visually/spatially oriented learners (Ontario Min. of Ed. 2004; Smith and Wilhelm 2002). Karen Gavigan (2011) found that those struggling male adolescent readers who engaged with graphic novels felt more confidence as readers, and were encouraged and motivated to read more often. I have found that male and female high school students enjoyed reading graphic novels, but to varying degrees, with male students expressing more enjoyment in understanding the author and illustrator's full intention through text and visuals, and female students conveying that they preferred to

switch their graphic novel reading with traditional novel reading to more fully exercise their imaginations (Moeller 2011).

Various other facets of individual students' learning needs have also been connected to reading graphic novels. Studies have shown that engagement with graphic novels has increased the reading interests among students with disabilities (Gavigan 2011; Smetana and Grisham 2012) and that the high-interest topics and visual support of graphic novels were beneficial to ELL students (Cary 2004; Chun 2009; Liu 2004; Ranker 2007). Finally, research in learning and brain activity shows that we engage both the back and frontal cortex functions of the brain as we create meaning with the use of visuals, making this type of learning highly brain-compatible (Zull 2011).

Graphic Novels and the Common Core Standards

Most of education today has turned its attention to how to help students fulfill the Common Core Standards. In addition to these standards, school librarians also need to look for opportunities to incorporate AASL's *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* <www.ala.org/aasl/standards> into student learning. "Understanding the importance that the AASL and the Common Core Standards Initiative place on graphic novels can help librarians and their stakeholders value the role that graphic novels

can play in supporting their school's curriculum" (Gavigan 2012a). Karen Gavigan has described a few examples of the Common Core Standards that could reflect the use of graphic novels:

Grade 2, Reading Standard 7: Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

Grade 5, Reading Standard 7: Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

Grades 6–12, Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading: Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels. (Gavigan 2012b, 21)

AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (2007) emphasize that the definition of "information literacy" has been transformed to include multiple literacies such as textual, digital, technological, and visual. This recognition of the importance of multiple literacies can be found throughout the standards. The following are a few examples:

1.1.6 Read, view, and listen for information presented in any format (e.g., textual, visual, media, digital) in order to make inferences and gather meaning.

2.1.6 Use the writing process, media and visual literacy, and technology skills to create products that express new understandings.

3.1.4 Use technology and other information tools [I would include such information skills as visual literacy] to organize and display knowledge and understanding in ways that others can view, use, and assess.

4.1.4 Seek information for personal learning in a variety of formats and genres. (2007, 4, 5, 6, 7)

As school librarians are concerned with both student learning and student access to information, it is important to keep in mind the valuable role that graphic novels can play in our curriculum and collections.

During a recent presentation, Josh Elder, founder of the organization Reading with Pictures, said, "by synthesizing words and pictures, comics convey information more efficiently than words alone" (Elder 2012). Essentially, graphic novels allow educators to do so much more and do things differently than using only traditional texts. With the support of research, awards, and curriculum connections, you can make "yaysayers" of graphic novel naysayers.

Graphic Novels Mentioned

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- Online Resources Focusing on Intellectual Freedom and Graphic Novels/Comics
- Graphic Novels: Suggestions for Librarians

<www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org/offices/files/content/oir/issues/graphicnovels_1.pdf>

"Dealing with Challenges to Graphic Novels." <www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=issues&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=130336>

Cooperative Children's Book Center's "What If? ... Library" <www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/whatif/archiveDetails.asp?idIFQuestions=67>

Selective Bibliography of Professional Resources

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Online Professional Resources for School Librarians and Teachers

Comics in Education
<www.humblecomics.com/comicsedu/index.html>

Comics in the Classroom
<comicsintheclassroom.blogspot.com>

Graphic Classroom <www.graphicclassroom.org>

Graphic Novel Reporter <www.graphicnovelreporter.com>

Graphic Novel Resources
<graphicnovelresources.blogspot.com>

Great Graphic Novels for Teens (YALSA) <www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt>

Librarian's Guide to Anime and Manga <www.koyagi.com/Libguide.html>

No Flying No Tights <www.noflyingnotights.com>

Reading with Pictures <www.readingwithpictures.org>



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