

## Graphic Novels in the School Library

### Using Graphic Novels to Encourage Reluctant Readers and Improve Literacy

by Joel Crowley

#### Introduction

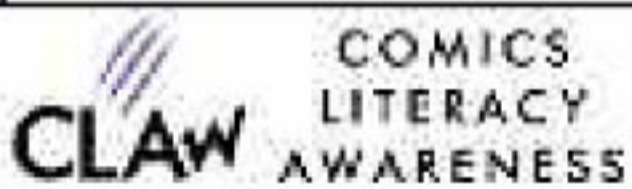
Over the last ten years there has been a shift in how comics are perceived in the UK. One reason for this is the rise in popularity of comic book characters, which has come with the development of the Marvel and DC filmic universes.

Photo: Bev Humphrey



Dave Gibbons

This shift is having an impact on approaches to youth and children's literacy. In 2014, the first Comics Laureate, Dave Gibbons, was selected by the charity CLAW (Comics Literacy Awareness). He is working to champion comics and 'their potential to improve literacy' (2014, CLAW).



This article will look at how the school librarian can support this work by using graphic novels to encourage reluctant readers and help students to improve their literacy. It will look at practical ways in which this medium can be used in order to meet these two aims. The term graphic novel is used broadly here in order to include different types of sequential art including comics and manga.



Many of these techniques have been used over the last three years at Burlington Danes Academy (BDA) in West London. Experiences of using these techniques, including their strengths and weakness, when implemented at BDA, will also be discussed.

#### Encouraging Reluctant Readers

In recent years there have been a number of studies that show a correlation between reading for pleasure and improvements in literacy. The Department of Education's *Reading: The Next Steps* report (2014) highlighted a number of these studies including the 2009 PISA survey. It showed that there was 'a difference in reading performance equivalent to just over a year's schooling' between young people that read for up to 30 minutes a day and those that never read for enjoyment (2009, OECD). Such studies show just how important it is for students to be regularly reading for pleasure.

Encouraging students to do this can be a challenge but graphic novels can be used to make this task easier. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, they can be less intimidating to a student than novels that do not have sequential art. This problem of being 'put-off' by novels is often exaggerated if the student has low literacy levels and struggles with large paragraphs of text. The artwork in graphic novels reduces the amount of reading the student has to do and enables them to follow the narrative at a quicker pace. The art can also provide visual prompts if they are unable to understand particular words.

Similarly, we have seen that graphic novels can appeal to students due to the fact that many comics are in popular genres and include characters that they know and love. Such graphic novels often fall into two categories. The first is manga and superhero comics. Students are keen to read the adventures of the Shonen Jump, Marvel and DC heroes that are in the anime, films and cartoons that they enjoy.

In the BDA library, this correlation is particularly evident for graphic novels that are linked to upcoming film releases. For example, both *Age of Ultron* and *Civil War* are crossover events that are the source material for new Marvel films. These books are regularly borrowed and are a good introduction to the rich and complex Marvel universe.

The second category is funny comics. *The Simpsons* comics have always been really popular in the library. Similarly, the comics of Jamie Smart, a contemporary British cartoonist

whose works include *Fish-Head Steve* and *Bunny versus Monkey*, are also loved by students.

There has been some research into proving this link between the use of graphic novels and students' reading for pleasure. Many of these studies have been carried out on a relatively small scale but nonetheless show the impact that graphic novels can have. For example, Bunn (2012) showed how graphic novels were used at Loughborough Grammar School to promote reading for pleasure amongst students.

There are fewer studies that show that graphic novels are a 'first step' that leads to students reading other forms of fiction. However, there are many individual examples of this at Burlington Danes Academy as there will be in school libraries across the country. For example, a number of students at BDA have taken the leap from reading high-action manga series to high-action novels such as *CHERUB*, *Gone* and *Skulduggery Pleasant*; often due to the encouragement of a school librarian.

### Collection Development

There are several challenges when looking to use graphic novels in libraries. For example, developing a collection that is both age appropriate and attractive to students can be difficult. This challenge is exaggerated by the twin problems of budget constraints and the serial nature of many graphic novels. This problem is particularly pronounced with manga. For example, there are currently seventy volumes of *Naruto* and it is not feasible to buy every book in a series of this length.

An alternative is to develop a collection that combines standalone graphic novels with the first five books of several series. This way, students will be able to enjoy both individual stories and be introduced to expansive worlds such as those in *Naruto*, *One Piece* and *Toriko*.

Knowing what books to buy is also a challenge to the school librarian, especially when considering that a number of graphic novels and manga will not be suitable for a secondary school audience. There are many graphic novel reading lists available online but often these lists suggest the same books. Titles such as *Maus* and the *Manga Shakespeare* series are great for a school library and have many merits but there are a number of titles that are more likely to appeal to reluctant readers. Finding these books can be a challenge.

### Stan Lee Excelsior Award

One fantastic way to discover these titles is the Stan Lee Excelsior Award. Every year, students in school libraries across the country read and review a shortlist of graphic novels in order to find the best book of the year. It is an effective way of encouraging reading for pleasure as well as an easy way of developing a graphic novel collection on a budget.

Eight titles are shortlisted for the main award as well as six for the junior award. The shortlist covers a diverse range of genres and will appeal to both reluctant readers and students that would normally avoid graphic novels. For example, this year's list covers everything from the World War One epic *Red Baron* to the best contemporary superhero collections, including the excellent new *Ms Marvel* (2015, Stan Lee Excelsior Award).



## Graphic novels in library lessons

Once graphic novels have been brought into the library, the challenge is to find the best way of introducing students to them. Library lessons are an easy way of doing this as they allow the librarian to work with students that do not regularly use the library outside of lessons.

At Burlington Danes Academy students are placed in classes based on attainment. In lessons for some lower ability classes, graphic novels are regularly used. Many of the titles in our collection are part of the Accelerated Reader scheme therefore students can read and quiz on these books in the lesson. They also have the additional motivation and incentives that we provide as part of the scheme.

Students in these classes are also encouraged to take part in the Stan Lee Excelsior Award in lesson. In these lessons, graphic novels are an effective way of engaging students in the class. They are reading something they enjoy, which will also improve their literacy.

## Extracurricular clubs

Another strength of graphic novels is that they are a two-way medium with students wanting to draw and write them as much as they want to read. This is why they can be a great focus for extra-curricular activities. At Burlington Danes Academy, the library runs a Super Hero Club and a Manga Club. These clubs have a number of strengths and add value to the school library. For example, they are a way of supporting the work students are doing in library lessons in an informal, positive environment.

In both clubs, students discuss graphic novels they have read, design characters and make their own comics. School visits to a comic book store and other similar events have been used at BDA in order to provide additional incentives. These clubs are another way of taking any fear or stigma out of reading and show the link between literacy and students' areas of interest.

## What next?

Once reluctant readers are reading graphic novels, the challenge of how to encourage students to read a variety of fiction often emerges. The big step is getting students to read anything for pleasure but the next step is moving students towards reading a greater variety of fiction. One way of doing this is to know possible routes from graphic novels to novels with a high reading age.

One such route is from the popular martial arts manga series *Naruto* to Chris Bradford's *Ninja* series, published by Barrington Stokes, to Bradford's *Young Samurai* series. These types of routes are a useful consideration when suggesting books to students. They help blur the boundaries between 'fun books with pictures' and 'more challenging fiction.'

## Evidence

The final challenge when using graphic novels is proving that they are being used to meet the twin aims of encouraging students to read for pleasure and improving literacy. Often the evidence to prove this is anecdotal in nature. It is individual students who get hooked on a book, devour the series and then move on to the next one.



However, there are other methods of proving this link. If the school uses a scheme like Accelerated Reader, changes in reading age over a year can be compared to book borrowing records and quizzes taken for graphic novels to see if there is a relationship between reading graphic novels and an increased reading age.

Another way of showing the value of graphic novels in improving literacy and reading for pleasure is to use reading surveys. There are a number of examples online that can be used to gauge what students read and want to read. Repeating these surveys at the beginning and end of the school year can be a useful way of generating quantitative and qualitative data to prove that the investment in graphic novels in the library has been worthwhile.

## Conclusion

Graphic novels can be an invaluable tool for school libraries when attempting to engage reluctant readers and increase literacy and reading for pleasure in the school. With the selection of a small well-chosen collection and its use in lessons and extracurricular clubs, they can add value to any school library.

## References

- Bunn, V. 'Researching the Tintin Effect'. (2012) *The School Librarian*. 60 (2). p. 74-76.
- Comics Literacy Awareness. (2014). *Comics Laureate*. Retrieved from <http://www.claw.org.uk/laureate.html>
- Department for Education. (2015, March). *Reading: The Next Steps*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reading-supporting-higher-standards-in-schools>
- OECD. (2009). *PISA 2009 Results: Learning to Learn*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/48852630.pdf>
- Stan Lee Excelsior Award. (2015, February 3). *Welcome To The Website Of The Stan Lee Excelsior Award*. Retrieved from <http://www.excelsioraward.co.uk/>

■ Joel Crowley is Librarian at Burlington Danes Academy in London.