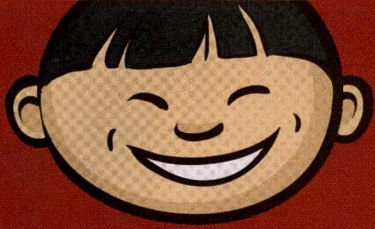


FEATURE



WHAT

EAGER READERS

Whenever someone asks me “What kind of kids read comics?” the old jingle for Armour Hot Dogs starts running through my mind: “Hot dogs, Armour hot dogs, what kinds of kids eat Armour hot dogs? Big kids, little kids, kids who climb on rocks, fat kids, skinny kids, even kids with chicken pox ...” My version goes something like: “Comics and graphic novels, what kinds of kids read graphic novels? Eager readers, kids who hate all books, gifted kids, struggling kids, kids who need a reading boost ...” Here are a few kids I’ve encountered in my career of promoting comics in libraries.

Eager Readers

We’ll start with myself. I started reading when I was about four years old; as a way to practice her English, my Japanese mother read to us kids when we were very young. I can’t even remember how I started; I just remember looking through books before I could read the words. And I started reading comic strips in the newspaper when I was in kindergarten. By first grade, we were living in Japan again (my father was in the Air Force), and

KINDS

KIDS WHO DON’T LIKE BOOKS



I started asking my parents to buy comic books on our weekly trips to the Base Exchange. That was the beginning, and I never stopped reading comics; they just became part of the reading mix in our house. I read just about anything—poetry, picture books, fiction, history books, mythology, magazines, newspapers—if it had text on it, I would read it. By fourth grade, I was on the honor roll at school; in high school I was taking AP classes (English, biology, French) by my junior year. I was one of those nerdy types before that word ever came into use. I did very well on standardized tests, mostly because I read so much, and even earned a National Merit Scholarship. I read literary classics, but I also read Tarzan, lots of science fiction, Sherlock Holmes and other mysteries, and of course comics. I was a DC Comics fangirl and loved Green Lantern, Hawkman, and Batgirl (Barbara Gordon, who was a librarian back then). There were several reasons I became a librarian, and Barbara Gordon’s civilian profession was one of them. Then,



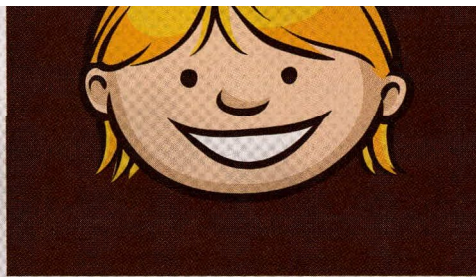
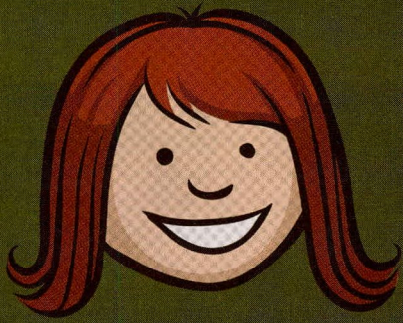
OF KIDS



as a librarian working with children and teens, I realized that I could use my love of comics in my job.

A Tale of Two Kids

My sons have grown up with comics in the house, and both of them are readers of comics. When my older son was in seventh grade, he read my copy of *Ranma ½*, a manga action comedy about a boy martial artist who, because of a curse, becomes a girl when splashed with cold water. My son loved this book so much that he took it to school with him one day. Apparently, he showed it to his friends in class, and soon just about everyone in his class had read it. My copy came back to me in pieces because it had been read so much. Because so many of the kids liked it, they went on to read more volumes of the series and then branched out to read other manga. Now, this all



COMICS?

READ

happened in a parochial school in Hawaii; while the school was run by the church, most of the students didn't go to church. In the public libraries, we were facing challenges and complaints about sexism and nudity in *Ranma ½*. When I asked my son about those and other aspects of the book, he said that he and his classmates knew it was all for fun, "and, Mom, it's all make-believe anyway!" I never heard a single complaint from any parent of a student in that seventh-grade class. My older son still loves manga and anime, and married a young woman who also loves manga and anime; their son is doomed.

In the early 1990s I worked as a young adult librarian at the Aiea Public Library, a branch of the Hawaii State Public Library System. I started getting superhero comics into the collection because I wanted to attract more of the teen boys into the library and into reading. This strategy worked very well, but I also ended up helping a middle school girl. She loved superhero comics, especially Excalibur comics (about a British superhero team similar to the X-Men). Her older brother



worked at a local comics shop, and he told her something to the effect that "girls don't read superhero comics." She came into my library after school one day to find me at the reference desk, surrounded by teen boys looking through the new graphic novels I had brought in: X-Men, Batman, Spider-Man, and others. And when she found out that I liked superhero comics, she went home and told her brother, "Girls DO read superhero comics; my librarian reads them!" She was so happy to find an adult woman who liked the same kinds of comics that she did. She came in almost every school day, and we'd talk comics in between my helping people with reference questions.

ESL and Comics

When I worked in Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the late 1990s, our Young Adults' Department carried

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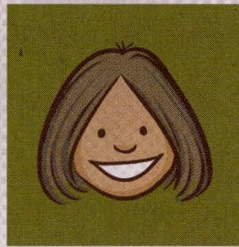
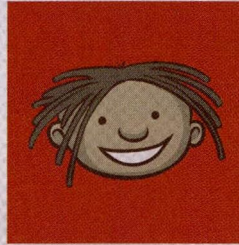
STRUGGLING KIDS

lots of graphic novels and manga. The town was the new home for many immigrants from Malaysia, Burma, Vietnam, and Korea. The children and teens from those immigrant families used our library a lot, and they borrowed lots of the manga. One of the teens told me she loved the manga because the books made it easy for her to understand what was going on, and so she was learning more English.

A few years later, my younger son started attending St. John Catholic School in Panama City, Florida, and one of his fifth-grade classmates was another new boy, whose family had just moved from Mexico. This boy was struggling to learn English, and during that first year at the school, he had a tutor who stayed with him for the whole school day. The teacher wanted the boy to do a book report along with the rest of the class, and the school librarian gave him a graphic-novel biography that I had donated to the library. The boy was able to complete the book report, and went on to read more of the graphic novels that I had donated. By eighth grade, he was reading English rather fluently, even tackling *Eragon*.



Figure 1.
A subset of the graphic novels and graphic nonfiction in the author's school library—many are checked out!



before his freshman year of high school, I gave him the new graphic-novel adaptation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (from Hill and Wang, an authorized adaptation). He read it, and he came into the kitchen that evening, asking me the kinds of questions any English teacher would want students to ask. He connected to the story in all the right ways, but he did so with the graphic-novel version. In his junior year he read the original novel for his language arts class, and he said it was easier than usual to read it after having read the graphic novel. Ever since kindergarten, I have asked him to read for an hour a day; during the summer, he reads an hour of required reading, then reads at least another hour for fun. This is a reluctant reader?

All Kinds of Kids Read Comics

I've been the librarian at St. John Catholic School for the past five years, and for three years I've run Lunch Time Book Club for grades 3 to 5 and for middle school. We meet twice a month during lunch time. It's very informal; the students aren't required to read particular books. I share new books I've received from publishers because of my main job with Brodart Books & Library Services; I receive advance-reading copies and review copies of fiction, nonfiction, and lots of graphic novels. Until they started coming to Lunch Time Book Club, most of the students in the group had not read comics, other than the newspaper comic strips and various comic-strip collections in the library.

The students, both boys and girls, who come to book club range from struggling readers to eager, gifted readers, and they all grab the comics before anything else. They respond to great stories; they love the art, and some of them even try their own hand at drawing their favorite

What kinds of kids read comics? ALL KINDS OF KIDS READ COMICS.

Struggling Kids

The niece of James, my local comics-shop owner, is developmentally disabled and has had to attend special education classes; she wants desperately to join her friends in "regular" middle school, but reading has been an obstacle. She had struggled so much with reading, she had come to hate it. Then James said he gave her a comic-book adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, the one published by Marvel Comics, for a Christmas present in 2011. At first she wouldn't open it because it was a book, but, eventually, she ventured a look at it and realized it wasn't like the other books at home—it was a comic book! She ended up finishing the graphic novel over Christmas break, and then asked her uncle for more. Encouraged by her success at finishing the graphic novel, she decided she would practice more reading, and now is up to fourth-grade level—and she accomplished all this in seven months. He told me

she is now reading the DC Super-Pets chapter books, among others.

Kids Who Don't Like Books

My younger son likes to read, but he doesn't like fiction. He struggled with AR programs in school because they all focused on fiction, although he liked to write his own stories. However, he enjoyed reading all kinds of nonfiction books, and he has always loved comics. As I did, he started reading comics in kindergarten because our house contained so many comics. He would do the required summer reading for school, and then he'd pick up some comics for fun. He's done this for years, and as a high school senior (2012–2013), he appears ready to continue the practice. Some teachers have considered him to be a reluctant reader because he doesn't care for prose fiction, yet he does well in language arts classes. The summer

characters from the books when they write letters to the creators. (They write the letters for fun, not for grades.) They're reading such books as adaptations of Rudyard Kipling's *Just-So Stories*, *Super Dinosaur* by Robert Kirkman, *Resistance* and its sequels by Carla Jablonski, the *Jinx* series from Archie Comics, the *Dance Class* series from Papercutz, *Mal and Chad* by Stephen McCranie, *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier (this was a HUGE hit and went "viral" through the school in 2010), *Meanwhile* by Jason Shiga (another huge hit—I had to buy two copies), the new *Mameshiba* series from Viz Media, and many more (see Figure 1).

In the spring of 2012 the new second-grade teacher at St. John discovered the small collection of graphic novels for primary grades; they are intershelfed with the easy nonfiction. She pulled out a couple of the books and then decided the library should display them; she pulled all the books off the shelf and showed them face-out on top of the shelves (see Figure 2). When she did so, the second-grade students started borrowing them, and the books went out on constant rotation for the rest of the school year. I plan to expand the "easy graphic novels" collection over the next school year (and will continue to display some on top of the shelf).

Conclusion

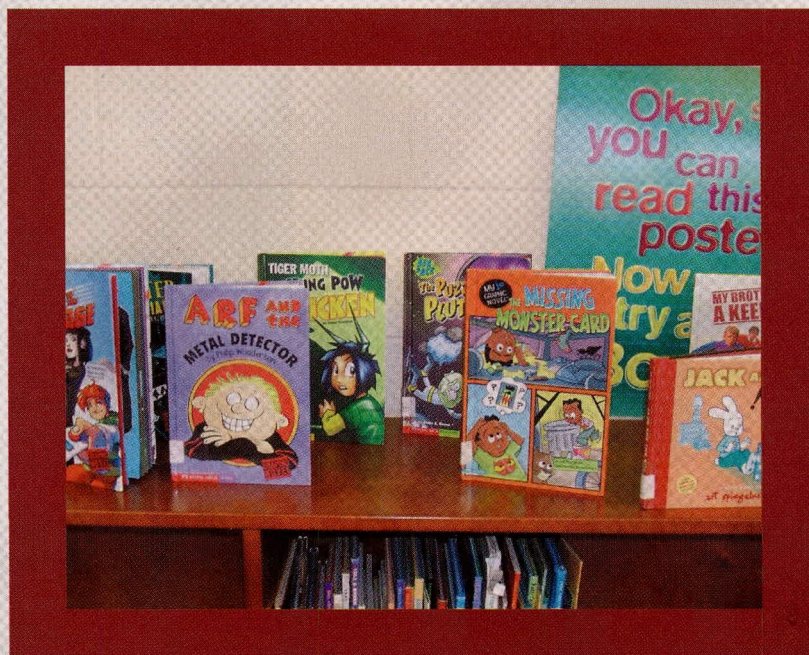
What kinds of kids read comics? All kinds of kids read comics. The format won't appeal to everyone, but so many different genres of comics are available that school librarians should be able to find something to appeal to almost anyone. Just remember to look beyond superheroes and find the wonderful books being published by independent publishers, trade publishers, and even educational publishers. Whether kids are attracted by the colorful art, the nonthreatening look of fewer words on the page, or great stories, comics present another format that will promote reading—especially reading for fun.



Kat Kan started reading comics when she was five years old and never stopped. She earned her MLS

in 1981 from the (then) School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Hawaii-Manoa. She worked in the Hawaii State Public Library System from 1983 as a children's and young adult librarian, and she managed the Young Adult Section for the Hawaii State Library until leaving in 1997; she worked in the Young Adults' Services Department at the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, from 1997 through 2002. She has worked in the Collection Development Department for Brodart Books & Library Services as the collection development librarian/graphic novel specialist since 2003, and has worked for St. John Catholic School in Panama City, Florida, since 2007. Kat has written the "Graphically Speaking" graphic novel column for *Voice of Youth Advocates* since 1994, and she also reviews graphic novels for *Booklist*.

Figure 2. Graphic novels for primary grades are popular, too.



Whether kids are attracted by the colorful art, the nonthreatening look of fewer words on the page, or great stories, **COMICS PRESENT ANOTHER FORMAT THAT WILL PROMOTE READING—ESPECIALLY READING FOR FUN.**

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