

ATTITUDES OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS TOWARD THE INCLUSION
OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

by
Ruffin Priest

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Introduction

Most school libraries have a two-part mission: to support the curriculum and to offer and encourage recreational reading. This study addresses the attitudes of school librarians as they make simulated collection development decisions about recreational reading materials, specifically, graphic novels.

Talking with five school librarians revealed their feelings that certain comic-books may have a place in the school library. Nevertheless, the interviewees' comments demonstrated that they consider comic-books as a type of children's literature and do not really understand them to be an entirely different format.

Terminology

Terminology in the field of comics is highly disputed. The differences between comic strips, comic books and graphic novels are really based in length and venue of publication. Comic strips are generally shorter and published in periodicals containing non-comics content, like newspapers. The Sunday 'Funnies' are composed of comic strips. Comic-books, on the other hand, are usually stapled pamphlets of 20-30 pages in length. Traditionally, comic-books are installments of a continuing narrative, issued periodically. Being bound and issued once, graphic novels are more like books. At one time, 'graphic novel' indicated a single, whole narrative; now the term can include reprinted material originally issued as comic-books. For the purposes of this paper, the

term ‘graphic novel’ refers to a bound work using both words and pictures, usually having 50 or more pages.

Comics historian and critic Harvey defines comics as “a hybrid form: words and pictures” (1). In discussing comics, the vocabulary of literary fiction works well because comics are narrative. But, Harvey writes,

This approach ignores the narrative function of the pictures in comics. In the best examples of the art of the comics, the pictures do not merely depict characters and events in a story: the pictures also add meaning – significance – to a story. The pictures are thus as much of the story as the plot line. (1)

Comics, Harvey argues, are a different format altogether than text-only books, and therefore need a unique critical approach. Goldsmith takes a similar position, “Graphic novels require active, critical participation by the reader, who must not only be able to decode text but also its flow and grasp essentials of narrative, mood, character, or plot through images. The reader must then be able to meld the parts into a unified whole” (1510). Gravett labels it “a different kind of reading” (141).

Historical Foundations¹

The comic strip or the ‘funnies’ have existed since the late 1800s. The first comic-books, pamphlets with 64 pages or fewer telling an original and complete story, were published in 1935. When Superman was introduced by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938 the medium really took off. Comic-books reached the Golden Age during World War II and the early fifties, but a scathing analysis by psychiatrist Fredric Wertham in

¹ The information in this section is gleaned from several sources: Harvey, Robert C. *The art of the comic book: a aesthetic history*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. 1996; Sabin, Roger. *Comics, comix and graphic novels*. London: Phaidon. 1996; Wright, Bradley. *Comic book nation: the transformation of youth culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; and Schodt, Frederik. *Manga! Manga! The world of Japanese comics*. New York: Kodansha International. 1986.

1954 brought the terrified and paranoid eyes of American culture to focus on the small pamphlets as cultural influences on children. Comic historian R.C. Harvey characterizes Wertham's book, *Seduction of the Innocent*: "Its science is extremely suspect, but its message is clear: crime comic-books glorified a life of crime" (42). Wertham concluded that this glorification led young boys, the primary audience, into a life of antisocial behavior and crime. The comic-book industry tumbled into a half-century struggle with its new identity as producers of a "corrupting influence" who endanger America's youth (Wertham 4). In reaction, by creating the Comics Code Authority, publishers made an effort to self-censor in order to recover the trust of American parents. It was but a tepid success: the Senate Subcommittee and the public ceased its pressure and scrutiny, but comic-books never regained the immense popularity and readership attained during World War II and the late 1940s.

The contemporary world of graphic novels began when Stan Lee created superheroes like Spider-man in the '60s. Compared to the imperturbable Superman, this new breed of characters had insecurities and seemed more human, more empathic to readers. By the 1970s artists like R. Crumb and Will Eisner began to push the conventions of the format. In an effort to make the format seem more literary (and thereby to sell more), Eisner invented the term 'graphic novel' to refer to longer works which used text and pictures, essentially comic-books with a book binding. Meanwhile, mainstream comics prices went up and up. In the early 1980s the comic-book industry underwent a revival, marketed through comic distributors to older male readers, between the ages of 20 and 35, who were collectors as well as readers. They could now afford the higher price tags on single issues and volumes of collected issues. Like the explosion in

baseball card collecting, buyers thought of the comics as investments, for some issues were selling for tremendous amounts. Additionally, new artists were manipulating the format with skill, writing and drawing stories that were more exciting and innovative than ever. One year, 1986, saw the publication of three seminal texts, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, Barry Marx and Dave Gibbons, *Crisis on infinite Earths* by Marv Wolfman and George Perez, and Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's *Batman: the dark knight returns*.

The collecting bubble evaporated in the early 1990s, serving to drive out the buyers, executives and creators who were drawn by the money. Today, the two largest publishers, DC and Marvel, are corporate possessions, and no longer depend on comic-book sales to sustain their bottom-line revenues. DC is owned by AOL-TimeWarner and Marvel Comics has become Marvel Entertainment Group. Both rely on licensing and merchandising for revenue. Founded in 1992, Image, a creator-owned company which published grittier imitations of DC and Marvel's standard fare, captured a large market share, blowing open the doors for a proliferation of smaller independent companies that ignored the standards of the Comics Code Authority.

Today, comic-books are essentially a niche market, although cross-over books like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Jimmy Corrigan* by Chris Ware have drawn critical and academic attention. Efforts at mainstream book distribution, however, are only beginning to take off.

Since the early 1980s, Japanese art has been making inroads into American culture in the form of styles called *manga* and *anime*. Hugely popular, anime refers to animated film, and manga translates roughly as still pictures or comics. These have mostly targeted a younger audience, often elementary school age using afternoon

television shows, companion comic-books and paraphernalia. Consequently, the interest in comics is again rising in younger fans, and parents are for the most part following up to monitor their children's reading. Librarians are attentive as well. Manga is widespread in Japan; almost everyone reads it, from small children to white-collar businessmen. That Japan has a literacy rate over 98% may spark the idea in the minds of some librarians and educators that graphic novels can be collected and used effectively in education and literacy (CIA World Factbook).

Literature Review

Interest in graphic novels among librarians and scholars has been small but strong over the last decade. In 1985, *Publisher's Weekly* began writing about graphic novels. *Voice of Youth Advocates* has published a graphic novel review column by Katherine Kan for almost a decade. Libraries Unlimited published *Graphic novels: a bibliographic guide to book length comics* by Aviva Rothchild in 1995. Rothchild defines a graphic novel as "a sturdy, lengthy comic book that contains a single story or a set of interrelated stories using...sequential art" (viii).

GNLIB is a listserv active with requests and comments as librarians across the nation network about graphic novels and comic-books in their libraries. For the most part the members are public librarians serving young adults, but there is a strong contingent of school librarians. And comic scholarship in general has moved into academia and university programs, as an interdisciplinary study. For instance, Michigan State University Library has the largest public collection of comic-books in the U.S.; it is managed and directed by Special Collections Librarian and Comic Art Bibliographer

Randall Scott. A respected authority on comics librarianship, Scott has written five books on the subject.

Several sources are now striving to overcome the stereotypes of comic-book content and often their motto is “It’s a format, not a genre,” meaning that the text-picture combination does not necessarily limit comic-books to any one particular kind of story. Like film, it is a medium that can communicate many different kinds of information. Today, some of the most interesting material never uses or refers to superheroes. The content of graphic novels can be separated into many genres. Biographies of scientists and world leaders, non-fiction about bees and several “news documentary” books have all been told through the graphic novel format. For example, *Dignifying science* by Jim Ottaviani is a collected biography of female scientists.² Joe Kubert³, Joe Sacco⁴ and Ted Rall⁵ have all written moving accounts of war in Sarajevo, Bosnia, Palestine and Afganistan. Barron observes, “the content of graphic novels is as varied as any other art form” (49).

The tide of interest has been rising in 2002. *School Library Journal* has launched a new column reviewing graphic novels. The American Library Association’s Teen Read Week 2002 theme is “Getting Graphic @ Your Library.” The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) sponsored a pre-conference on this theme for the Annual meeting that was hugely successful, with over 150 attendees and enormous support from the publishing industry. Most significantly, *SLJ* published “Graphic novels, seriously”

² G.T. Labs, 2000.

³ Kubert, Joe. *Fax from Sarajevo*. Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse, 1998.

⁴ Sacco, Joe. *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–1995*. Fantagraphics Books, 2002, and Sacco, Joe. *Palestine*. Fantagraphics Books, 2002.

⁵ Rall, Ted. *To Afghanistan and Back: A Graphic Travelogue*. Comics Lit, 2002.

and “What teens want: thirty graphic novels you can’t live without” in August 2002 with a list of recommended titles for middle and high school collections.

All of these events have raised awareness in the minds of librarians to graphic novels. Further, they have been instrumental in breaking down pre-conceived ideas of the content and reading value of this format.

Four main arguments for including graphic novels in school library collections have emerged. First is the “bait” theory: that having these materials in the library will draw in students who would not otherwise use the library. Once physically present, they will be exposed to all the other resources in the library. Barron quotes a public children’s librarian who subscribes to this philosophy, “Having the materials that kids want and are attracted to near or shelved with other materials that we might consider ‘good’ literature will eventually persuade kids to reach further, intellectually and in reading level” (50).

Second, comic-books can be used as a resource for studying and teaching popular culture. Students can use these artifacts to study history, art history and contemporary issues, similar to having a collection of back issues of magazines. Public librarians have noticed, in a closely related phenomenon, that patrons’ interest in manga has also sparked an interest in Japanese culture, history and language (St Lifer, 9).

The third reason is that being able to read pictures and words together is a vital literacy, distinct from ‘word’ literacy. In an information-rich society, individuals need to know how to evaluate all kinds of media, including text, television, movies, and advertisements. Francisca Goldsmith introduces the Teen Read Week website, “Graphic novel readers have learned to understand not only print, but can also decode facial and

body expressions, the symbolic meanings of certain images and postures, metaphors and similes, and other social and literary nuances” (St Lifer, 9).

The fourth and most powerful reason, and the one investigated here, is that comic-books are materials that children pick up for voluntary recreational reading. If libraries make available favorite reading materials, patrons will feel that their needs are being recognized and that there is something in the library for them.

Jim Trelease endorses comic-books as a legitimate form of reading in his book *The read-aloud handbook* (133-135). In fact he writes, “On the basis of my personal experiences and the research available, I would go so far as to say that if you have a child who is struggling with reading, connect him or her with comics. If an interest appears, feed it with more comics” (134).

Stephen Krashen has long investigated comic-books as children’s preferred reading material and includes a section on comic-books as light reading in his text, *The power of reading*. Krashen’s forceful conclusions are that “comics are linguistically appropriate,” that “research shows that comics have no negative effect on language development and school achievement,” and that comic-book reading often leads to reading text-only books (60). In short, comic-books as light reading promote and enhance reading skills and engage and interest most young people. Since frequency of reading is positively and consistently correlated with reading ability and children who read comics “like reading more and read more,” a reasonable conclusion is that comic-book readers are actually better readers than non-comic-book readers among middle class and Chapter I middle school students (Ujiie and Krashen 54).

Evidence suggests that reading comics will move readers forward. Worthy, Moorman and Turner implemented an extensive study on the reading interests of middle school students. One of their conclusions was that “transition from light materials to more complex texts can be hastened by providing popular materials...for free-choice reading, thus satisfying students’ initial preferences while using more sophisticated works on similar topics for instruction and read-alouds” (24).

Studies indicate that having comic-books gives the patrons a positive perception of the library. Dorrell and Carroll conducted a study at a junior high school library in which students’ voluntary library visits and circulation were compared when comic-books were not part of the collection and when comic-books were added for browsing. The daily average in circulation rose by 30%. Library traffic increased by a stunning 82%. Students’ perceptions of the library changed significantly as Dorrell and Carroll describe, “Comic books signaled students that there was something in the library for them; that the library was open and comfortable” (19). As an indirect effect, student behavior in the library improved markedly: fewer students were asked to leave and historically disruptive students altered their actions in order to earn visits. Interestingly, the staff of the library and school received only “positive statements” about the comic-books from parents and students; strong support was shown by the teaching staff.

Methodology

Five public school librarians were interviewed in this study in order to ascertain their feelings about selecting graphic novels for recreational reading. Two work in elementary schools, one in a middle school and two in high schools. Beryl and Elizabeth

were the most recent graduates of library programs (2002 and 2000). In their cases, they had spent all of their time as professionals at their present schools. Cathy, Doris and Annabelle had had their degrees between 15 and 22 years. Little correlation could be drawn between age of MLS and the librarian's philosophy of selecting graphic novels. Only the relationship between attitude and the answers to the demographic questions was obvious in that Elizabeth as the youngest had the most knowledge of graphic novels as a format. She was the only one to mention that she had ever read any for pleasure.

All wanted the interviewer to know that they were not 'typical' librarians. Beryl answered, laughing, "I should probably figure out what kind of librarian I am!" She continued, describing herself as relaxed. She has few restrictions in her library, actually, only one rule at all. "I want to offer many choices within the framework of curriculum support," she said. Elizabeth emphasized her youth "compared to average librarians." Doris also referred to the stereotype of librarianship, saying, "I try not to be like that. We do a lot of fun things for kids and adults." Making patrons feel "differently," feel comfortable, was important to her. Cathy felt closely connected to her fellow educators; in her opinion, networking was one of the keys to a school's success with its students.

The interviewees were presented with a selection of 13 graphic novels (see Appendix A). The interviewer then asked each informant to sort them into three categories: (1) books that the librarian *would* include in the school collection; (2) books which she would *not* include in the school collection and (3) books of which she is uncertain.

Participants were asked the following questions about each book:

1. Why did you place this book in this category?

2. In what ways is this title appropriate or inappropriate for the students you serve now? Or, why are you uncertain about the work?
3. Does the book have specific, strong characteristics which compelled you to make the decision that you made?
4. Would you revise any of your choices now, after this conversation?
Why?

Results and Discussion

Librarians responded very positively to including graphic novels in their collections. Each librarian placed at least two of the exemplary books in the ‘yes’ category. The patterns in their actions and in their concerns lie quite distinctly along the ages of the children that they serve: the elementary and middle school librarians in general looked for very different qualities than the high school librarians. The elementary school librarians, Annabelle and Beryl, warned the interviewer that they knew “nothing about comic-books.” The high school librarians, Cathy and Doris, on the other hand, sought out information about graphic novels in libraries prior to the interview, and the three upper level librarians all mentioned the article in *SLJ*, “What teens want,” as a point of reference. Doris stated that she had never read a graphic novel, but that she knew the good authors through reviews.

Elizabeth, the middle school librarian, indicated the most familiarity of all with the format. She was the only one of the librarians interviewed who had read a graphic novel. During the course of the interview, she mentioned several already in her

collection. She recognized the names of publishers and expressed judgments about the typical quality of their material.

The middle and high schools already have items which fit under the Subject heading for “Comic books, strips, etc.” Doris’s library has about 38 collections of cartoons and comic strips, gathered in 741.5. Comic-strip authors such as Gary Larson, Gary Trudeau, Matt Groening, Jim Davis, and Berke Breathed were all represented. Only three could be considered graphic novels: an anthology called *Mind riot: coming of age in comix*; *Maus* by Art Spiegelman; and *Batman in the sixties* by Bob Kane. While the high school where Cathy worked possessed only ten titles under that subject heading, the collection is creatively more diverse. *Black Jack* is the only book in either school whose catalog record includes the subject heading “Graphic Novel.” This manga tale by Osamu Tezuka has circulated four times in the last year.

All of the interviewees used the “Maybe” category liberally, often echoing the way their colleague phrased it: “I know I can’t read everything in my collection, but I would really want to read the whole thing before putting it on the shelves.”

What they looked at

Elizabeth and Beryl both chose to pull the whole sample from the bag before looking at any one title. This action seemed to indicate that they considered the selection as a set and that they were prepared to make judgments on a relative basis.

Cover, front and back: All the interviewees looked at the front cover and often read aloud the title and the author’s name. Three (Annabelle, Beryl and Cathy) carefully

read all the information on the back cover, including quotations for interviews and the plot summaries.

Pages: Only one, Beryl, closely read several pages in order, and they were usually at the beginning of the book. Elizabeth read the pages of most of the books backwards. Others flipped through with a fanning motion or occasionally stopped to study a two-page spread more closely. The spreads chosen were usually the most eye-catching, with the largest panels. They all commented on the various page layouts, such as number and sequence of panels.

This practice may reflect how they review any book in hand for the collection. However, with graphic novels, the fanning approach has definite drawbacks. One cannot develop an accurate idea of how the artwork and the words are used together to tell the story. The most stunning spreads and frames may not be representative of the work as a whole. One needs a context in which to fit those images.

Reviews: Elizabeth, Cathy and Doris asked for reviews. Elizabeth said that she would want to have reviews from respected school library sources in order to back up her choices in case of a challenge. For Cathy and Doris, such requests are probably a reflection of how they build their collections: secondary librarians depend more on reviews, while the librarians for the younger age groups usually can review the items personally. Cathy read the backs for this reason and, noting that *Castle Waiting* had been reviewed in *Publisher's Weekly*, took it as a good sign of its quality. Cathy was the only one who looked at the information on the title-page verso.

Fortunately, reviews on graphic novels are becoming more abundant and more readily available; indeed, often they are written specifically for librarians, as in Kan's column in *VOYA* and for Diamond Comics Distributors.

The interviewees expressed three main concerns during their perusal of the graphic novels: violence, inappropriate language, and the depiction of females.

Violence: Annabelle said that “they get enough violence elsewhere; they don't need to see it [in the library], too.” She added that it was difficult for her to separate superheroes and violence. Elizabeth said that it was hard to gauge what is violent, especially as compared to other mediums. She pointed out that there were novels already in the collection that were equally as violent as *Batman*, *The Flash* and *Spyboy*. On the other hand, Cathy was unfazed by the violence in *Batman*, probably because she serves older students.

As in television and film, the objection is usually that violence in graphic novels is pictured, not left to the reader's imagination. Beryl stated that she would let her daughters read anything, but she exercises careful control over what they watch. The idea is that what is seen is more powerful and makes a greater impression – usually for the worse – than the same action of scene described in words. Wertham's attack was based on this premise. Goldsmith identifies it as the root of the hesitation of many librarians to get graphic novels. “It's more visceral than the unadorned printed word: a pictorial representation of violence...is more immediate than a verbal description,” she writes (1510).

Depictions of females: This was a point of concern mainly for the elementary and middle school librarians and came up in particular with a character in *Spyboy*. One said outright, “Whoa! Too much booby!” This issue is a long-standing one in the comic-book industry, but still a valid concern. As more women have become more involved in the industry, the range of representation has widened; comic-books are still part of modern popular culture, though, and the unrealistic images of women still sell. Again, the high school librarians did not express this concern, a position perhaps the more surprising because of worries about the body images among teenagers.

Inappropriate Language: “Swearwords,” like “damn” and “bitch” for Beryl, led to automatic elimination. Annabelle pointed out that most graphic novels were made to appeal to older children, meaning elementary intermediate age, and the pictures would make them attractive to the younger students. All of the students in the school came and used the library. She felt that even if a title was appropriate for the third–fifth grade kids, having it in the collection meant that any child in pre-kindergarten-second grade could read it too. “I have to think of the school population as a whole,” she explained. This apprehension could, in fact, be easily addressed on the elementary school level by placement and marketing. By studying flow of traffic in the library, a graphic novel collection could be placed in an area frequented more by the older students, away from the “Everybody” or “Easy” sections. Furthermore, access to graphic novels could be ‘marketed’ as a privilege of the upper grades, much as higher checkout limits are.

These three concerns are all applicable to text-only books as well. They may reinforce the idea that graphic novels are simply another genre within children’s literature.

Each librarian identified different main qualities they were seeking in a graphic novel. The lists included features that would be important in any print resource in the library, such as originality, subject matter, durability and audience. The quality of the artwork and the page layout were two elements mentioned that may not have direct counterparts in text-only books.

Original story: The presence of two *Classics Illustrated* versions of text-only stories seemed to awaken a sensitivity to this aspect. Elizabeth expressed her own and her colleagues experience when she said that usually students only check out these versions when they have been told to read a classic. They all felt it should not be a replacement for reading the original. Furthermore, Annabelle noted that the language was not altered significantly and would not be easier to read than the original version. “Just because it has pictures doesn’t make it appropriate for less skilled readers,” she said. Beryl, the other elementary school librarian, was less bothered by the idea, though she disliked the representatives in the sample. Her husband had read *Classics Illustrated* as a child and she felt that it had whetted his appetite for the original books.

Age of character: All felt that the age of the character would determine the interest level in their students. Therefore since *Akiko* is about a fourth-grade girl, it would not circulate among high-schoolers, and since *Spyboy* is about 16 years old, the younger children could not relate to him enough to enjoy the book. The librarians speak out of experience: children have displayed a willingness to read about a protagonist who is older than themselves, but rarely one who is younger.

Audience: Annabelle hoped that collecting graphic novels, particularly manga, would attract her Asian student population. All mentioned reluctant readers, specifically boys, as the main target for this format. Indeed, conventional library wisdom indicates that girls are more adaptable readers, willing to read books in which the protagonist is a male, while boys are generally more selective about the genre, subject and sex of the central character. Nevertheless, Beryl, Annabelle, Cathy, and Elizabeth all expressed excitement and interest to see that the main character of *Leave it to Chance* is a young girl. The same ironic issue was raised by librarians at the YALSA Pre-Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in June, 2002: though collecting graphic novels was calculated to bring boys into regular readership and library patronage, librarians wanted to know how the young female audience was being addressed. Annabelle continued to be concerned about the range of ages in her school's population and needing to keep all of them in mind as she made decisions. The pictures, or "graphics," would draw the attention of the younger students, even if the work is more suitable for older readers. Age suitability was the most common reason for placing an item in the "Would Not Collect" stack.

Size: All noted that non-standard sizes might cause students to attach some sort of stigma to reading them. For instance, all three upper level media specialists said that *Scary Godmother* would not circulate among their clientele because it looked too much like a picturebook. *Leave it to Chance* might be checked out from a display, Elizabeth speculated, but almost certainly not from the shelf.

Use of Text: Sentence structure, sentence fluency and vocabulary that children of a certain age group would understand were important factors. In looking at *Bone*, Doris commented, "The dialogue looks simple. That would probably be the deciding factor."

Castle Waiting on the other hand, “seems to have dialogue that is sophisticated enough for high school students.” These comments highlight two issues of text in comic-books: first, that the text used is not that simple; second, that text is only one part of reading comics.

Comic-books often have high reading levels and sophisticated vocabulary, studies show. Wright presents a table of the readability levels of 19 popular comic-books; they average between 1.8 to 6.4 grade level. He makes a further distinction: “Humorous and funny animal comics tend to have lower readability levels than superhero comics” (160). Krashen reproduces the data to support his thesis that comic-books are “linguistically appropriate” (60).

As the visual and the verbal are interdependent in the work itself, readers must use a both visual and verbal literacies to decode it. The librarians concentrate solely on the skill and knowledge required to read the verbal, exactly as they would in evaluating a text-only book. They have no idea that such a schema is inadequate in this format.

This aspect discloses one of the fundamental traits of this group’s attitude, that the format is not unique. The desire for higher word-to-picture ratios revealed that they saw comics almost as a corruption and that the books would have more value if they had more words.

Complexity versus comprehensibility: These professionals were seeking a plot that was complex enough to challenge the reader. However, too much complexity would only confuse the young readers, they said. “I couldn’t even follow this story line!” Elizabeth exclaimed while looking at *Sailor Moon*. Beryl found *Clan Apis* very

appealing, but was worried that her students would not be able to sustain attention through such a long book.

Curriculum relevance: Although this study addressed collecting comic-books for recreational reading only, Cathy in particular was intrigued by *Clan Apis* and how it could be used in the classroom. Given that supporting the curriculum is the main purpose of school libraries, that librarians would attempt to find a way to integrate the two missions is unsurprising. Doris expressed a wish to see “something that would educate” the students.

Subject matter: Annabelle was wary of any book with elements of magic. She noted that the presence of magic tends to draw as many challenges as language. However, Annabelle’s library has many books about or using magic, by authors such as Rowling, Bellairs, Lewis, and Tolkein. These books circulate extremely actively.

On the other hand, fantasy and samurais hold a high place of interest among her students, so Cathy laid *Usagi Yojimbo* with the titles that she would like to know more about.

Quality of binding: Annabelle and Elizabeth looked specifically for the durability of the book as a whole. “They are too expensive to fall apart” after only 3 check-outs, said Elizabeth. Indeed, sturdiness has long been a quality librarians desire in their collection and it is a well-founded concern with graphic novels.

Page layout: Cathy said that *Leave it to Chance* felt “less crowded”; Beryl sought a happy medium of a creative panel structure that was still easy to follow. *Treasure Island* was her counter-example: “the layout is essentially the same on every page,” she explained. “But,” she went on, picking up *Usagi Yojimbo*, “they would have a hard time

[reading the panel order] with this one.” Ironically, panel order is one of the few skills that children have no trouble mastering. According to the anecdotal evidence of librarians around the US, kids are amazingly adaptable to unconventional page layouts. For instance, Japanese is read from right to left and books are structured likewise. What an American reader would consider to be the back cover of the book is actually the front cover. Therefore, manga published for an American audience is usually translated and “flipped”: the pages are photographically reversed so that they read from left to right. Recently some companies, notably Tokyopop in their “100% Authentic” series, have been leaving the pages “unflipped.” Attendees at the YALSA Pre-Conference reported that, while the librarians were confused and struggled to remember to start in the top right hand corner and move left, the children seemed to read them as easily as conventional comic-books.

Quality of artwork: Elizabeth mentioned this as a criterion for selection. Beryl said that whether “I like the pictures” would have an effect on her decision. In fact, her reason for placing *Treasure Island* in the ‘No’ category was that she did not find the illustrations appealing.

Cathy likened comic-books to the Internet: both use graphics and words together and both have a “lack of depth.” “There’s some true information,” she went on, “but it has less insight,” compared to a book on the same subject. She labeled both “quick fixes.” Cathy clearly espoused the “bait” theory: that comic-books are good for readers with short attention spans and that reading comic-books might lead them to more traditional literature. Knowing comic-books “are a very popular art form” (though she had not

received many requests for them), Cathy wanted to address that need in her students. She thought, however, that it might be fulfilled in other ways, such as a comic-book swap club sponsored by the library.

Beryl alone specifically stated her philosophy of selection: “I ask myself, ‘Would I buy a fiction book with a story like this?’ Why change my standards for a different format?” She went on to make a small list of desirable qualities: having a lighter subject; clear but creative layout of the panels on the page; “if I like the pictures;” the kids can relate to the subject matter and the main character. She noted, specifically in reference to *Scary Godmother*, that connection to a holiday would make it extremely popular

Broadly speaking, the librarians based their decisions on appropriateness for the age-group they serve. Therefore, little could be done, short of changing the content of the books themselves, to make certain titles more suitable for their collection according to these professionals.

Analysis and Implications for Practice

Publicity has brought the attention of school librarians to graphic novels as recreational reading materials. These articles often focus on graphic novels as appropriate for middle and high school students. But third, fourth and fifth graders are avid readers of comic-books. A list of recommended titles for this age group should be developed as well.

A graphic novel collection’s impact on the library should be studied at all grade levels. Not just visitation statistics should be tracked, both before and after the introduction of graphic novels, but also students’ perception of the library. The

circulation of other materials, before and after, should be recorded and compared. If the collection of graphic novels does not circulate, use of materials in-house should be tracked as well.

None of the librarians interviewed here expressed concerns about creating catalog records for these items, but how to classify graphic novels is a recurring question among professionals who already have them. Diamond Distributors offers cataloging information that includes the title, Dewey classification, subject headings and Diamond's internal item code. Minimal requirements for school library catalog records for graphic novels are title, series (if applicable), writer(s) and illustrator(s), volume number (if applicable), Dewey classification and subject headings. Call number and location would naturally be dictated by local protocols. Having records prepared ensures that library staff can process the items quickly and efficiently and preempts any objections that graphic novels absorb far more work time compared to other materials.

Librarians are still hesitant to collect graphic novels because they are often poorly bound and expensive. Complaints about the bindings and the cost of rebinding should be directed to the publishers, as they have the power to bring about a change. If libraries make up a larger market share, publishers and distributors will listen more closely to libraries' needs. Objections that they are too expensive, though, could be an equally strong reason *for* collection: the children cannot afford to buy them themselves. So the library would be providing an essential service in making the format available.

As Worth, Moorman and Turner point out, "Limited availability of preferred materials in school leave students with three choices: reading something outside their interests, obtaining preferred materials themselves, or not reading at all" (23). The

economic status of their population is a factor of consideration when building collections because “students who cannot afford at by their preferred materials are more dependent on school sources and, thus, their choices are even more limited.” This may help explain why many children with fewer economic resources are not readers: their interests are not met in the school library, and they select the last option, to read not at all.

Many librarians still have much to learn about the format. Librarians need to be educated about the format in order to make the best collection development decisions for their clientele. The comments from these interviews revealed that some misconceptions about comic-books and comic-book readers remain. Standards used to judge other formats will not be as effective in judging this one. As a unique format, evaluating graphic novels and comic-books must take into account the level of interdependence between the visual and the verbal. More, detailed research on the skills needed to read the format needs to be undertaken and the results made available through the popular library press. Such studies would be interdisciplinary, pulling from work in semiotics, art history, film theory, visual perception, and literacy. The conventions, signs and symbols need to be decoded for adults who do not habitually read comic-books, so they will understand that comic-books are not merely children’s literature with more pictures, but in fact an entirely different format.

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Appendices

Appendix A

List of graphic novels

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Appendix B

Choices of each librarian:

Participant 1 “Annabelle”: Elementary School

Yes	Maybe	No
Scary Godmother	Bone	Huckleberry Finn
Akiko	Leave it to Chance	The Flash
	Castle Waiting	Spyboy
	Usagi Yojimbo	Batman
		Clan Apis
		Sailor Moon
		Treasure Island

Participant 2 “Beryl” : Elementary School

Yes	Maybe	No
Scary Godmother	Bone	Castle Waiting
Huckleberry Finn	Akiko	Leave it to Chance
	Clan Apis	Spyboy
	Sailor Moon	Batman
	Treasure Island	The Flash
		Usagi Yojimbo

Participant 3 “Cathy”: High School

Yes	Maybe	No
Clan Apis	Huckleberry Finn	Akiko
Batman	Sailor Moon	The Flash
Castle Waiting	Treasure Island	Scary Godmother
Bone	Usagi Yojimbo	
	Spyboy	
	Leave it to Chance	

Participant 4 “Doris” : High School

Yes	Maybe	No
Leave it to Chance	Sailor Moon	Akiko
Batman	Bone	Scary Godmother
Clan Apis		Treasure Island
Spyboy		Huckleberry Finn
Usagi Yojimbo		The Flash
Castle Waiting		

Participant 5 “Elizabeth” : Middle School

Yes	Maybe	No
The Flash	Spyboy	Scary Godmother

Akiko	Batman	Huckleberry Finn
Bone		Sailor Moon
Usagi Yojimbo		Treasure Island
Leave it to Chance		
Clan Apis		
Castle Waiting		

Appendix C: Descriptions of Interviews

Participant 1 “Annabelle”

Annabelle has been media specialist at this elementary school for four years; previously, she has lived and worked in several school systems in the Eastern United States, always as a media specialist. She has had her MLS for 20 years.

She removed the books from the bag in stacks of three or four and sorted them into piles from her lap. She looked at the front cover and read the back cover. Then she would open the book and flip through the pages using her right hand. She commented on each item, saying, “I’m just thinking aloud here.”

Annabelle said that she wanted to reach the Asian students in her school, since she knows that comic-books are a format with which they are familiar. Several students in the school are from South Korea and Japan and have little or no English yet. She also said she knew that a lot of the fourth and fifth grade boys read comic-books regularly.

First she looked at *Scary Godmother* and expressed excitement about it: “Oh, I like this!” She mentioned that it would be “great” as a high interest-low ability text. “It’s colorful and easy to follow,” she gestured to indicate the order of the panels, “and it’s Halloween-related.” *Akiko* was a favorite with her, too: “This looks fun, going into outer space, very imaginative.”

“These have visual appeal.” She went on, “I know that for adults they’re hard to follow, but the kids can read them for information.” The graphics, however, would attract the younger students, for whom the content was not always appropriate, and might make

the older students think it was “babyish.” Annabelle emphasized that she has to think of the whole school when she made decisions about these.

“I know these, they’ve been around a *long* time,” greeted *Huckleberry Finn* and *Treasure Island*. “These are abridged, but they didn’t really change the text, did they? If a child can’t read the original, then they aren’t going to be able to read this. Just because it has pictures doesn’t make it necessarily easier or more appropriate. No, they can just tackle the original.”

Magic tends to draw challenges to material, she said as she looked through *Leave it to Chance*. “This might get comments from parents.” “I like that [Chance, the main character] is a girl, but there seems to be a lot of violence in this one,” and she placed it in the “Maybe” pile. Violence was her objection to *SpyBoy* and *The Flash* and both ended up in the “No” category almost immediately; “I have a real hard time separating superheroes and violence.” Annabelle assessed that *Batman* and *Clan Apis* were “just too high for these kids. They look very grown up.” Displaying a page from *Clan Apis* depicting the growth of a bee larva, she said, “That’s really cool, and it shows them what is going on, but it’s just too much for even the really high fifth graders.” *Sailor Moon* Annabelle deemed too old, “It’s all boyfriend and girlfriend, and look, here they’re kissing! No, not for this age group, even if it is popular. Besides,” she said, scrutinizing the binding, “this wouldn’t last two weeks in their little hands.”

Usagi Yojimbo had too many weapons and lots of fight scenes. She identified an Asian influence, but said that the text was too hard. She read aloud some examples, as if testing how they sounded in an elementary school library. “No, no,” she said, placing it

eventually with the others she would not collect, “I know they see a lot of violence, but they don’t need it here [at school and in the library], too.”

In the end, Annabelle said that she was looking for an original story (compared to the *Classics Illustrated* books), whether it would appeal to all her students and a minimum of violence. She picked up *Akiko* to illustrate this last point. “See,” she said, “this is great, and without all the fighting.”

Participant 2 “Beryl”

Beryl just graduated with her MLS five months ago, and began her job as librarian in an elementary school a bare two months previous to the interview. She had spent three years as a classroom teacher over a decade ago, before her own children were born.

She decided to pull out and look at the covers of all twelve books before examining each one in detail. Beryl then laid them all in a stack and began to go through it, one by one, commenting and assigning them categories. She warned, “This might take awhile,” and, indeed, she looked at each book silently and carefully before making her decision. Often she read several pages from the beginning of the book.

Leave it to Chance provoked the exclamation, “Oh, it’s a girl! I thought from the cover it was a boy.” “And this is a girl, too,” she said, as she searched for *Akiko*, “but it has a much gentler feeling. It seems more like an adventure,” than *Leave it to Chance*.

Bone recalled Asterix and Obelix for her and, noting that it was the first of several volumes, thought that maybe her older students could sustain the attention necessary.

That one of the characters was smoking stopped her instantly, “He’s smoking a cigar!

And here he's littering!" She was disturbed that such behavior would be presented to children, and although she placed it in the "Maybe" pile, grave doubts about its appropriateness still bothered her. She set *Castle Waiting* with the ones she would not collect because the main character is an unwed mother.

She asked about *Clan Apis* as she read through several pages at the beginning. Although Beryl was impressed, especially with the graphic format as a way of presenting the information about the life cycles of bees, "I think it would be beyond the attention span [the students] are capable of."

"I think [*Spyboy*] is too old, because the character's a teenager, right? Whoa!" she exclaimed as she turned to a spread with the main villainess, "Too much booby! Why do they have to draw female characters like that?" Inappropriate language meant that *Batman* and *The Flash* did not belong in her library. While looking at these, and at *Usagi Yojimbo* she commented, "I can't follow this," meaning the order of the panels on the page was confusing for her. *The Flash*, in particular, "feels too busy."

Beryl said that *Sailor Moon* looked like a "formula story. But it's easier to follow than [*Batman* and *The Flash*]. I can see what she is thinking in these little aside boxes." She conceded about its quality, "It's not great literature, but then, a lot of what's in the library isn't, either."

Picking up *Treasure Island* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the simplified panel order caught her notice, compared to the titles she had just laid down. "We read these as kids," she said, and noted that they could be a "springboard" to reading the original. The illustrations in *Treasure Island* had more detail, and Beryl did not like them as much. Liking the illustrations was an important aspect in her consideration, she explained. She

also wanted to see “a lighter subject,” a page layout she could read easily, and “something the kids could relate to.”

Participant 3 “Cathy”

Cathy earned her MLS almost ten years ago, but she had worked in high school libraries for almost twenty years. She had been working in her present high school media center for 15 years, and she saw the students as her first responsibility.

At the very beginning of the interview, she asked if the sample titles had been selected for high schools. She pulled the books out of the bag two or three at a time; she looked at the front and back of each title, then, if she had not made a decision, she read the information on the title page verso and a few pages.

Huckleberry Finn and *Treasure Island*, she said, might work for reluctant readers, “but how would the teachers feel about it?” Later, she asked, “How much of the meaning of the original are you actually getting?” She felt that the librarian “can’t just work in isolation, we’re part of a team.” *Akiko* and *Scary Godmother* were too young for her students, but in *SpyBoy*, “the hero is age appropriate. That’s one of the things I’m looking for here,” she said. The ages of the characters were important, as well as the subject matter and the complexity of the language. “I’d really like a review. Like here,” she turned over *Bone*, “this one has been reviewed by *Publisher’s Weekly* and I would take that as a good sign. Plus, it looks like something the kids would enjoy.”

The students’ strong interest in fantasy led her to name *Castle Waiting* as one she would definitely buy. *Batman: the dark knight returns* “would be a good way to tell about Batman” as a cultural icon. But *The Flash* was too violent, in her opinion. Cathy wanted

more information about *Usagi Yojimbo*: “Samurais interest the kids, but what is the slant? Is it accurate?” *Clan Apis* also intrigued her and she asked about it. “It’s non-fiction! So its purpose is to provide information? What an interesting way to do it! I really like that, and you could use it as part of the curriculum.”

Leave it to Chance, in contrast to *Clan Apis*, laid more emphasis on the visual; “there are fewer words, and I don’t feel like the panels are crowded. I love that the hero is a girl.” She wondered if it was maybe too young for her population, but reasoned that even if Chance was younger than her students, “she’s in an adult world, though.”

At the end of the interview, she pulled out the article in *SLJ* “Thirty graphic novels you can’t live without,” and made notes about the titles listed there that she had examined as part of the sample. “I haven’t had much demand from the students,” she concluded, “and I think there are other approaches for supporting this in the library” like sponsoring comic-book swap clubs. “But it’s certainly a very popular art form,” she said. “I need to think outside the box” and resist having a closed mind on the topic.

Participant 4 “Doris”

Doris had spent her whole professional career in high school libraries, a period totaling 22 years. She came to the present site when it was built seven years ago. She stated that she tried hard to be different from the stereotype of a librarian. At the moment, the school-wide theme was “Latin American Month” so the library had put up relevant displays and hosted a couple of events; the students reported that the media center were

“the only ones who were doing anything like that. It’s the little things,” she said. “We do fun and silly stuff, we’re not afraid of that.”

“I read the *SLJ* article [“Thirty graphic novels you can’t live without”],” she began as she removed all of the books from the bag. “So it made me consider these [graphic novels] seriously and we are concentrating on recreational reading. These are not new to me. I haven’t spent a lot of time on it, but I’ve learned a lot about it recently. I’ve read the reviews so I know the good authors. I look at the items carefully when they arrive to verify. I have mixed feelings, you know: we have a big section of comic strips, and those get checked out. I would put them in if the kids would read them. I just don’t want to spend a big part of my budget on them.”

Doris sorted them swiftly, using the ‘Maybe’ category as a holding place for the ones she was not sure about on her first pass. As she flipped through the pages of *Leave it to Chance*, she said, “He [*sic*] seems young. I’m thinking about the research that says that kids won’t ready about characters who are younger than they are.” Notwithstanding, she placed it in the ‘Yes’ stack and *Batman* soon joined it. Doris looked at the front and the back of *Clan Apis*, and laid it with *Batman* and *Chance*. “I’m looking for something that would educate the kids,” she said.

She liked that *SpyBoy* was the same age as her students. After reading the back, and flipping through several pages, she decided to place it in the ‘Yes’ stack, “The kids would probably like this.” “One of our autistic students really loves *Sailor Moon*,” but because Bunny was in eighth grade, she put it aside for the moment; eventually it remained in the ‘Maybe’ pile with *Bone*. “I know the least about this one. The children

would probably like this too, but the dialogue seems simple. That would probably be the deciding factor.”

Although *Huckleberry Finn* is part of the curriculum at her school, Doris said, “I would rather not go that way on a classic. We have materials for students who are low readers.” *Treasure Island* fit in the same category, but seemed more appropriate for middle school. She decided she would not collect either.

Picking up *Usagi Yojimbo*, Doris said, “I know also that manga and anime are popular. There was even a club where they watched movies and the library hosted one of their meetings. They would like that.” *Castle Waiting* had dialogue that looked “sophisticated enough for high school students.” Furthermore, she said that they like fantasy and medieval times. But what the students would like could not always guide her decisions, when it came to the violence of *The Flash*. “Even though the kids like violence, I don’t think they need more of it.” She concluded, “I wouldn’t get it on those grounds.”

At the end of the interview, she summed up, “I would like to see less violence in the format, and something, instead, that would educate the children.”

Participant 5 “Elizabeth”

Elizabeth has worked in the same middle school since she graduated with a Master’s in Library Science two years ago. She laughed that she was much younger than the “average librarian” so she did not conform to the stereotype.

She wanted to know first and foremost how her library was to pay for the hypothetical collection: “If [the books] are donated, that’s one thing, but buying them? I

don't know, they're expensive." With all the books out of the table, she decided that *Scary Godmother* would not fit in her library. "The size makes it look like a storybook. We have some of those, but they only get checked out for assigned projects." Elizabeth praised the illustrations in *The Flash* and examined the binding. "This one looks like it was put together pretty well," she pronounced, "but some of them, the pages start falling out after three circulations." *Akiko* and some *Classics Illustrated* were already in the collection. Holding *Huckleberry Finn* and *Treasure Island*, she mentioned that the 'Crooked Classics' were more popular. If the *Classics Illustrated* were ever checked out, it was because the student had been told to get a classic.

"I can't even follow this. These aren't even complete sentences," she exclaimed about *Sailor Moon*. It would not support the curriculum, it would not entice the older students to read and it was not a complex storyline that could be reported on, so Elizabeth said she would not put it in the collection.

Usagi Yojimbo, *Castle Waiting*, *Clan Apis* and *Bone* she said she liked. She flipped backwards through the pages of *SpyBoy* and said, "I like the plot and the drawings, but I really dislike the way the females are portrayed. I think it's ok, but I would probably pick something else over this. And I would probably have to read the whole thing first, so I'm putting it down as a 'Maybe.'" Noting that Dark Horse published it, she said that she would be more confident in a title published by DC to be appropriate for middle school students. Still, she hesitated over *Batman* and finally said, "I would get it if I had the money for it."

The size of *Leave it to Chance* might turn off readers and would make it less likely to circulate. She would include it and like that it was longer and more traditional. She wondered if it would help to place it on display.

“I’m not really comfortable just picking [graphic novels] like this,” she said as she placed them all back in the bag. “I would want reviews to back my decisions and in case of a complaint.” She added that a challenge was unlikely, except perhaps for inappropriate language, but that she would like to be prepared with strong reasons for each title.

Ruffin Priest. Attitudes of School Librarians toward the Inclusion of Graphic Novels in School Library Collections. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. November, 2002. 42 pages. Advisor: David Carr.

This study describes the responses in interviews of five school librarians toward including graphic novels in their school's library. Each was presented with a set of 12 graphic novels and asked to determine if she would collect them, would not collect them, or was not certain.

The librarians were willing overall to have graphic novels in school libraries. Their decisions were based on the age group of students that they served. However, their comments suggested unfamiliarity with the visual-verbal format and criteria for evaluation. Further research on visual-verbal literacy needs to be completed and publicized, and librarians need to be educated about the skills necessary to read words and pictures together.

Headings:

Graphic novels

Comic books

K-12 libraries

Collection development