Graphic Novels and the Internet Generation

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Abstract:

The technological advances of the last two decades have caused profound social transformations. The traditional library is not immune to these socio-technological changes. The fact that today’s population, youth in particular, are proficient in the interactive and connective technologies of a hyperlinked environment has fundamentally changed the way in which young adults read and connect with linear text-only books. The traditional written format no longer fuels avid interest among young adult readers. In recognizing this shift, librarians are encouraged to “think outside the book” and provide a variety of literary formats and alternative materials that will energize the teen library collection. The graphic novel has been identified as a tool to stimulate literacy and connect the traditional library with the Internet generation: those born between 1977 and 1997. Although most libraries have embraced graphic novels, some continue to object to their use and do not perceive the graphic novel to be a viable literary medium. This article discusses the reasons why and how graphic novels can effectively respond to modern technological proliferation, promote youth literacy, and revitalize the library environment.

The last two decades have seen an explosion of technological advances causing profound social transformation (Dresang, 1999; Yamazaki, 2007). The traditional library has not been immune to these socio-technological changes (Yamazaki, 2007). It has been suggested that the proficiency in a hyperlinked environment displayed by the majority of today’s population, youth in particular, and the expanding use of the connective qualities of
interactive media technology to communicate has in turn fundamentally changed the way in which young adults read and connect with linear text-only books (Dresang, 1999). Dresang states that the traditional written format no longer fuels interest among young adult readers. In recognizing this shift, Nichols (2004) encourages librarians to “think outside the book” (p. xxv) and provide a variety of literary formats and alternative materials that will energize the teen library collection. She emphasizes that new formats are necessary to draw teenagers into the library; otherwise, libraries risk losing their patronage to the internet explosion and potentially, hasten their demise as a viable information source.

This article will identify the graphic novel (GN) not only as a tool to stimulate literacy but also as a bridge connecting the traditional library with the Internet generation. It will provide a brief history of the GN and discuss its relevance to the children’s and young adult collections of today’s library. Finally, the article will explore objections to the GN and discuss proposed solutions. Rather than delving into the various administrative aspects of collection development, bibliographic control, purchasing, or promotion of GNs this article will discuss the GN as a viable literary medium that can effectively respond to today’s technological proliferation, satisfy and benefit the youth of today, and revitalize the library environment.

In the last ten years, GNs have enjoyed wide acceptance in the public library (Serchay, 2004). Their success is evident as GNs now constitute a large segment of the teen literary collection and are among the highest circulating resource in the public library (Serchay, 2004). Moreover, for the first time last year, the Young Adult Library Services Association recognized the GN by introducing a new annual award for the most outstanding GN for teens (Letcher, 2008). In 2007, American Born Chinese, a GN, won the Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature and was also nominated for the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature (Letcher, 2008).

This new respectability for what was once a much criticized format is for good reason. Studies have recognized the format as one “that covers a variety of genres, addresses current and relative issues for teens, stimulates the young people’s imagination, and engages reluctant readers” (Gorman, 2003, p. xi). GNs have the potential to satisfy young readers while gaining the approval of parents, teachers, and librarians alike (Gorman, 2003). Many believe that a second golden age for comics is dawning (Serchay, 2008). Whatever the case may be, it is evident that GNs are not only significant and influential but are also here to stay (Serchay, 2008).

So, what is a GN? Although the GN is a derivative of the comic book, the two are nonetheless distinct. The main difference is in the length and quality (Serchay, 2004). Comic books are usually short, averaging less than fifty pages, while GNs are longer and can take days to read (Serchay, 2004). Comic books are usually a type of serial fiction published in short, individual chapters and published on a monthly
basis. GNs are typically single-bound, full-length, complete narratives that use sequential art to tell the story. The term “graphic novel” usually connotes genres that deal with mature themes not commonly associated with comic books. It is often applied to works that are not as juvenile or comical and implies that the work is more serious or literary (The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature, 2009). That said, a strict definition for the term “GN” remains elusive. Simply put, the GN is “a fusion of images and words that form a cohesive narrative told in a frame-by-frame format” (Gorman, 2003, p. 1). Alternatively, GNs are “bound books, fiction and non-fiction which are created in the comic book format and are issued an ISBN” (de Vos, 2005).

The progression of comic strips into GNs began in 1978 with the publication of A Contract with God and Other Stories of Tenement Life by Will Eisner (Gorman, 2003). It was Eisner who first coined the term “GN” to describe his lengthy drama depicted through comic art (Gorman, 2003). In 1987, Art Spiegelman published Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, a family memoir of the Holocaust in comic book format that won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Both works introduced diversity into the comic strip format and proved that comic art was not limited to the funnies or the “junk literature” of the past (Sercay, 2004), but was capable of tackling issues with emotional depth and sophisticated storylines (Gorman, 2003). Beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s, GNs and comic art continued to evolve through the introduction of Japanese anime (animation) and manga (comics). The popularity of Japanese anime and manga was a phenomenon. Not only did it draw young children to Japanese cartoons but it also cultivated groups of adult manga readers (Gorman, 2003).

It has been suggested that by the late 1990s, publishing houses recognized the power of the GN format and had begun actively selling their own brands (Miller, 2005). Library journals and educators alike began to show professional interest in the format by applauding the positive impacts of GNs (Miller, 2005). In the year 2000, the GN finally gained legitimacy when the American Heritage Dictionary added the previously unknown term “Graphic Novel” to its lexicon (Miller, 2005).

Despite the momentum and general acceptance of GNs into mainstream culture, some libraries continue to question the relevance of the format (Sercay, 2008). Experts in the publishing industry have provided a multitude of reasons why GNs belong in the library. The increasing awareness on the part of educators and child psychologists of different learning styles (Gurian, 2001) and the prevalence of visual learning has highlighted GNs as a potentially influential tool, especially in today’s intensely digital and graphical environment. In her groundbreaking novel, Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age, Dresang (1999) emphasizes this point by stating that today’s youth interact with information in diverse ways. They navigate hyperlinked visual media comfortably intermingling words and text with ease (Gorman, 2003). In this digital environment, reading incorporates
“characteristics reflecting the interactivity, connectivity, and access of the digital world” (Dresang, 1999, p. xv) and is no longer limited to the more linear format of text on a page. Instead, reading is an increasingly graphic activity: one that co-mingles words with pictures.

It is in this context that GNs are now being heralded as a “reading intermediary from the computer or television screen to the printed page” and “recognized for [their] contribution to the development of both visual and verbal literacy” (Gorman, 2003, p. 9). It is expected that this type of visual literacy will increase in importance as modern society becomes more reliant on the computer as their main form of communication (Gorman, 2003).

Another excellent reason to incorporate GNs into the library catalogue is the recognition of this format as an educational tool (Serchay, 2008). It has been argued that this format, with its combination of text and graphics, is a good entrance into literacy for reluctant readers or those with low reading levels (Serchay, 2008). The visual format is less intimidating than pure text and the appealing content inspires continued reading (Serchay, 2008). Research has shown that persistent and repeated amounts of casual reading can serve to enhance literacy levels and improve vocabulary (Serchay, 2008). Trelease (2001) reveals that a child reading the Tintin GN actually reads 8,000 words without being aware of it. Educators have also discovered that GNs, which often use nonstandard and/or uncommon words, can prove advantageous for higher level readers by aiding in vocabulary expansion (Krashen, 2004). For example, Tommysaurus Rex incorporates the words “excruciating,” “prehistoric,” and “melodrama.” Likewise, the GN Zorro includes words such as “beau” and “appalled” (Serchay, 2008).

Furthermore, the Kids and Family Reading Report surveyed 1000 children and found that the “fun factor” was pivotal in motivating kids to read (Allen, 2007). Cary (2004) points out that the greater the emotional appeal, the more likely the educational benefit. Given that kids often mention comics as “fun to read” (Serchay, 2008, p. 58), the GN as an extension of the comic book can prove to be an effective educational instrument (Cary, 2004). Cary also notes that the “fun factor” in GNs can be beneficial for students for whom English is a second language. The GN with its series of paneled words and pictures is less threatening than the standard linear book format and has the added benefit of providing visual clues through its illustrations (Cary, 2004). Visual clues not only help boost reading ability but can also increase comprehension levels (Cary, 2004). Of course, experts and educators alike do not suggest that GNs are the only educational tool to boost reading levels. Rather, they encourage the use of GNs in combination with other forms of literature. As Serchay writes “they should supplement the other readings, not supplant them” (Serchay, 2008, p. 62).

The benefits of GNs extend beyond improving reading skills (Serchay, 2008). Wright (2009) explains that the GNs of today increasingly lend themselves to the depiction of
non-fiction, biographical, and often mature subject matters. For example, Palestine is a graphical journalistic account of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Other storylines include contemporary and emotionally complex social issues, such as the account of the 1994 Rwandan genocide portrayed in the GN Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda. Historical fiction or historical documentary is also a growing GN subject area, as seen in Persepolis, a coming-of-age autobiography set during the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution (Serchay, 2008). The fact that GNs are no longer genre-specific and can adopt a broad range of subject matter allows young adults the opportunity to explore challenging non-fiction topics in unprecedented ways (Serchay, 2008). Certainly, GNs can no longer be perceived as just “kid’s stuff” (Wright, 2009, p. 5).

Lastly, GNs do not only benefit young adult readers; they also benefit the library institution (Nichols, 2004). Various reports have consistently shown that the addition of GNs to library collections not only energize those collections but also increase circulation and encourage the addition of new adult patrons (Serchay, 2008). Serchay (2008) points out that the average age of the GN reader is, in fact, between twenty and thirty, and many of these readers were devoted fans as teenagers. Therefore GNs sophisticated yet accessible style not only speaks to young adults but is also attracting adult readers to use the library on a regular basis (Nichols, 2004).

Due to the highly visual nature of this format and in part, to its name, some people assume that GNs are sexually explicit novels (Miller, 2005). Although there are GNs that include sexually explicit illustrations, particularly with exploitative or derogatory portrayals of women, it would be a mistake to group all GNs in the same category. Growing emphasis on female inclusion has inspired the development of more positive depictions of women and girls in GNs (Goldsmith, 2005), to the extent that entire GN series have been developed for young women. For example, The Courageous Princess is a five volume series about a princess who, after being kidnapped by a dragon, must courageously and intelligently face dangers and find her own way to escape without the aid of a handsome prince. Of course, GNs are also well known for the strong and independent female super-heroines previously found in comic books, characters such as Wonder Woman and Supergirl. Today, these female super characters are joined by The Amazing Spider-Girl, the daughter of the original Spiderman, and Go Girl about a superhero mom and her superhero daughter (Goldsmith, 2005; Serchay, 2008).

However, the broad range of topics covered by GNs, as well as their appeal for older audiences, indicates that not all GNs are advisable for young children. To quote Miller, “[n]ot all GNs are explicit, and not all comics are funny” (2005, p. 4). Since GNs have a text-image dependency, violent or sexualized subject matter can be captured vividly through the illustrations: a fact that adds a precautionary dimension to this format (Goldsmith, 2005; Serchay, 2008). Even titles that are deemed appropriate for young adults such as Eightball
Supreme Power Superheroes may incorporate some brief nudity and foul language.

While actual challenges against GNs are surprisingly low in cases where GN collections are shelved together without any delineation between child-friendly genres and adult-oriented material it is understandable that parents may legitimately object to their children having access to age-inappropriate titles (Serchay, 2008). Miller (2003) advises that libraries can prepare for the possible challenges of incorporating GNs into their collection by incorporating comprehensive selection criteria into their collection development policy. As part of their evaluation, librarians need to look at the style of the illustration, its originality, how it communicates with the text, its visual appeal, and age-appropriateness, depending on the age group that the GN is intended for (Goldsmith, 2005). It is important to evaluate the images as part of the whole work and not just a small facet of it (Goldsmith, 2005). In addition, Miller (2005) advises shelving stories with explicit sexual imagery and items containing mature adult content in the adult section rather than the young adult or children’s section.

Beyond these suggestions, librarians can also access a nine page document titled Graphic Novels: Suggestions for Librarians (2006) specifically created by the National Coalition Against Censorship, The American Library Association, and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund which provide recommendations in dealing with GN challenges. Most librarians and library associations recommend handling GN complaints in much the same way as challenges to other library materials: on an individual basis, with reflection on the incumbent community and through the support of strong policy guidelines and authoritative evaluations (Miller, 2005; Serchay, 2008). Serchay (2008) concludes that whatever the difficulties and challenges against GNs, the advantages and benefits of GNs far outweigh the potential problems.

Today’s society is a quagmire of technological and social transformation, and libraries have the potential to play an important role in the changing landscape. In order to do so, libraries need to view the changes brought on by the digital explosion, and, in particular, its effects on young adults, as opportunities rather than as threats (Dresang, 1999). The recognition of GNs as a valuable alternative to standard library materials and their inclusion in library collections effectively responds to today’s progressive Internet generation and assists in stimulating the digitally proficient young adult. In doing so, libraries not only signal a desire to meet community needs but also for institutional change and growth. It is a recommended and appropriate shift in establishing the library as an effective part of today’s interactive and digital world (Nichols, 2004).
References


