

Importance of Incorporating Graphic Novels into Children's Library Collections & Programming

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Introduction

Graphic novels are something that I was introduced to later in life. Growing up, I envisioned graphic novels to be full of drawings of superheroes saving the day and telling stories of little value. But while in college, I had to read Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which, per Penguin Random House Books, "recounts the chilling experiences of the author's father during the Holocaust, with Jews drawn as wide-eyed mice and Nazis as menacing cats"¹². My experience reading *Maus* not only demonstrated to me the power that images can have in telling complex and deep stories, but it also made me realize that I knew very little about the graphic novel storytelling format. Thankfully, after reading Michael Sullivan's book, *Fundamentals of Children's Services*, I now have a better idea of what a graphic novel is.

³ Per Sullivan, graphic novels are "book-length works in comic book format, with text interspersed among the illustrations that dominate the layout"⁴. Moreover, graphic novels fit into the genre of sequential art, which per Sullivan, "encompasses several formats that share one quality: the pictures work with the words (if there are any) to tell the story. The illustrations do not add to the work, they are an integral part of the literary process"⁵. This sequential art genre, which tells its stories primarily through images with little text, also includes the comic book and manga formats⁶. Per Sullivan, comic books are "a cross between a fiction series and a limited-run magazine, so they cannot be treated exactly like a book or a magazine", and their main function is often "pure pleasure reading"⁷. On the other hand, the manga format consists of "serialized sequential art in the Japanese tradition, often read right to left. Where the graphic novel is like a book, either a stand-alone work or one in a definite series, manga is more like a magazine or

¹ "The Complete Maus by Art Spiegelman | PenguinRandomHouse.Com: Books." PenguinRandomhouse.com. Accessed December 6, 2018.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/171065/the-complete-maus-by-art-spiegelman/9780679406419>.

² Spiegelman, Art. 1986. *Maus: a survivor's tale*. New York: Pantheon Books.

³ Sullivan, Michael. 2013. *Fundamentals of children's services*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

comic book, usually printed on lower-quality paper and with lower-quality reproduction techniques and existing in long, indefinite series”⁸. While all of these sequential art formats have many similarities, for the purpose of this paper I will primarily be focusing on graphic novels.

Going back to the topic of graphic novels, specifically to the graphic novel *Maus*, I want to reiterate how much of an impression this graphic novel made on me. I was amazed by how Spiegelman was able to portray such a controversial and difficult topic as the Holocaust in such an engaging and meaningful way primarily through images⁹. Furthermore, after reading *Maus*, I was better able to understand how important graphic novels can be to the literary world and how much power they can wield. Fortunately, I am not alone in this thinking, as many librarians, who also see the value in graphic novels, now include graphic novels in their children’s library collections. However, this hasn’t always been the case. In the article “Graphic Novels in Libraries Supporting Teacher Education and Librarianship Programs”, Virginia Kay Williams and Damen V. Peterson discuss how about three decades ago, “graphic novels were virtually unknown to librarians and educators”¹⁰. But by 1994, “the Library of Congress Authority File included graphic novels as an authorized subject heading”¹¹. Moreover,

as librarians noticed that teenagers, traditionally a hard audience to reach, read graphic novels, the library literature began to feature lists of good graphic novels, tips on developing graphic novel collections, and anecdotes about teenagers’ insatiable demand for graphic novels. By 2005, several library journals had regular columns on graphic novels for young adult collections, and articles on using graphic novels in the classroom were appearing in education journals.¹²

⁸Sullivan, Michael. 2013. *Fundamentals of children's services*.

⁹ Spiegelman, Art. 1986. *Maus: a survivor's tale*. New York: Pantheon Books.

¹⁰ Williams, Virginia Kay, and Damen V. Peterson. “Graphic Novels in Libraries Supporting Teacher Education and Librarianship Programs.” *Library Resources & Technical Services* 53, no. 3 (July 1, 2009): 166–73. <https://doi.org/10.5860/lrts.53n3.166>.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

It may have taken some time, but many librarians have begun to see the value in and the demand for graphic novels in children's and teens' library collections, and as a result, graphic novels have even begun to regularly appear on recommended book lists¹³. Michael Sullivan has also observed children's librarians adding graphic novels to their collections, "especially now that many graphic novels are being produced for young readers and for the teen/young adult market¹⁴.

While many librarians may now see the value in incorporating graphic novels into their children's library collection and programming, some people, especially parents, may not. As such, in this paper, I will discuss the benefits of and the concerns around including graphic novels in children's library collections and programming. In doing so, I will demonstrate the value and importance of including graphic novels in library collections and programming. I will also provide a sample library program proposal that incorporates graphic novels.

Advantages of Including Graphic Novels in Children's Library Collections

There are many benefits of including children's graphic novels in one's library collection and programming. To begin with, children are often drawn towards graphic novels and comics because they are not the typical book. Per Michael Sullivan, one such advantage of the graphic novel format is that "children identify these works with the materials teenagers are reading, and this appeals to them as being grown-up"¹⁵. As such, the children want to read them. Additionally, Sullivan discusses how "many readers, with learning styles and reading styles that differ from the more usual" may be attracted to books in the sequential art genre "even if they may not be attracted to any other kind of reading"¹⁶. If graphic novels can get children excited about reading, especially when these children may not be drawn to books with more text, this seems like a victory. Furthermore, the graphic novels may help children improve their literacy skills over time

¹³Williams, Virginia Kay, and Damen V. Peterson. "Graphic Novels in Libraries Supporting Teacher Education and Librarianship Programs." *Library Resources & Technical Services* 53, no. 3 (July 1, 2009): 166–73. <https://doi.org/10.5860/lrts.53n3.166>.

¹⁴ Sullivan, Michael. 2013. *Fundamentals of children's services*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and could potentially help build the children's confidence in taking on books with more textual-content in the long-run. In the article, "Graphic Novels in the School Library: Using Graphic Novels to Encourage Reluctant Readers and Improve Literacy", Joel Crowley states that "there have been a number of studies that show a correlation between reading for pleasure and improvements in literacy", and that graphic novels can make reading for pleasure on a regular basis to improve literacy more appealing¹⁷. Crowley continues on saying that graphic novels, 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.¹⁸

Crowley brings up some key benefits of encouraging children to read graphic novels, stating that graphic novels, which have less text and more art than a traditional novel, are less intimidating to read, especially for children who may have low literacy skills or who do not speak or read English well. Additionally, Crowley notes that the art in the graphic novels can help the reader to read at a slightly quicker pace and can help the reader to use the art to help them understand different words with which they may not be very familiar. Another added benefit that Crowley mentions is that because graphic novels often contain stories about popular characters that children already know, children are usually more excited to read these novels.

One more interesting advantage of encouraging children to read graphic novels and other forms of sequential art is the meaning-making process that it encourages between text and the

¹⁷ Crowley, Joel. "Graphic Novels in the School Library: Using Graphic Novels to Encourage Reluctant Readers and Improve Literacy." *School Librarian*, September 22, 2015.

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A431446127/AONE?sid=google scholar>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

image¹⁹. In the article, “The Case for Graphic Novels in Education: Use students’ visual vocabulary as a learning tool”, Jesse Karp discusses how graphic novels can be used to teach children how the medium of art can communicate²⁰. Karp states that,

sequential art combines words, which appeal to the intellect, and pictures, which appeal to the emotions, in a way no other art form does. Unlike picture books, the words and illustrations in sequential art coexist in one conceptual space (the panel) and are joined into a single piece, most commonly by word balloons...to process sequential art (comics and graphic novels), we use only our eyes and we absorb the material at our own speed.²¹

This concept that sequential art allows children to absorb information at their own speed but also in a way that traditional literary texts cannot, is important, especially in today’s technological world that communicates information in many different formats which often use visuals in addition to text. This idea also surfaces in Amy Carlton’s article, “Graphic Novel Friday Forum: Learning with comics and graphic novels”, in which Carlton highlights a talk given by Gene Yang, the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, about comics in the classroom at the American Library Association’s 2017 Annual Conference and Exhibition²². In the article, Carlton brings up an interesting point that Yang makes about how in the pre-computer era,

educators chose text as the primary method of communication because it was portable, easy to create, and easy to copy. However, computers have moved us into a multimedia world, where ideas are still portable, easy to create, and easy to copy, but can now

¹⁹ "It's Elementary! Graphic Novels for the K–6 Classroom", American Library Association, April 7, 2008. http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/resources/its_elementary_graphic_novels (Accessed December 6, 2018)
Document ID: e1c20ffa-b2ee-9514-29d2-becefab006c0.

²⁰ Karp, Jesse. “The Case for Graphic Novels in Education: Use students’ visual vocabulary as a learning tool.” American Libraries Magazine, August 1, 2011. Accessed December 5, 2018. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2011/08/01/the-case-for-graphic-novels-in-education/>.

²¹*Ibid.*

²² Carlton, Amy. “Graphic Novel Friday Forum: Learning with comics and graphic novels.” American Libraries Magazine. June 24, 2017. Accessed December 5, 2018. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/graphic-novel-friday-forum/>.

include sound, images, and video in addition to text. Comics, by their very structure, are multimedia and teach students to think in a 21st-century way.²³

Much like comics and the sequential art genre, graphic novels are also multimedia in their structure, and as such, they prepare children to think in the 21st-century way.

In her article, Carlton also briefly notes that “comics can also be used to explain social-justice issues in the classroom”²⁴. This is evident by many graphic novels that are about historical events, such as *Maus* that discusses the Holocaust²⁵. Jesse Karp also discusses the ability of graphic novels to portray complex topics and historical events in her article “The Case for Graphic Novels in Education: Use students’ visual vocabulary as a learning tool”²⁶. In the article, Karp discusses how the historical and political issues brought up in graphic novels are “deepened through visual art” and can create “a layered experience that affords the opportunity to expand the emotional understanding of the subject and inspire empathy—something most history texts don’t—or *can’t*—do”²⁷. Karp makes the case that graphic novels are able to portray historical events in a more complex light as they not only provide information about historical events, but they also inspire emotion and empathy for the subjects in the stories. This potentially allows people reading graphic novels to have a more diverse perspective on historical events. This is just one more advantage and benefit to add to the list for encouraging children to read graphic novels and for incorporating graphic novels into children’s library collections and programming.

²³ Carlton, Amy. “Graphic Novel Friday Forum: Learning with comics and graphic novels.” American Libraries Magazine. June 24, 2017. Accessed December 5, 2018.

<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/graphic-novel-friday-forum/>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Spiegelman, Art. 1986. *Maus: a survivor's tale*. New York: Pantheon Books.

²⁶ Karp, Jesse. “The Case for Graphic Novels in Education: Use students’ visual vocabulary as a learning tool.” American Libraries Magazine, August 1, 2011. Accessed December 5, 2018.

<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2011/08/01/the-case-for-graphic-novels-in-education/>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Concerns with Bringing Graphic Novels into the Children’s Library Collection

While there are many reasons to include graphic novels in children’s library collections and programming, some library patrons may be hesitant about allowing children’s graphic novels into the library. One such reason may be that parents think the content of graphic novels are not appropriate for children. Per Michael Sullivan, parents may “fear either that the younger graphic novels are as violent and risque as the older ones are believed to be or that starting on graphic novels leads too quickly to their children reading the older versions”²⁸. For librarians, this concern from parents may also be amplified by the fact that it can be hard to choose age-appropriate graphic novels as there is often limited information in reviews of graphic novels. Per Sullivan,

Graphic novels often come with suggested audience levels, but there is no national standard, so using these levels to place books in separate collections is problematic.

These fears and challenges need to be overcome, because the format appeals to those comic book readers and helps transition them into longer stretches of text and more complex story lines.²⁹

As Sullivan states, it can be hard to figure out what age-level a graphic novel may be appropriate for because of the lack of national standard in this regard. However, it is important to resolve this problem so that young readers can enjoy these graphic novels, and so that parents can feel confident in allowing their children to read graphic novels that are age-appropriate. One example of a way to resolve this issue (without having to read every graphic novel in one’s library collection) could be by including the Lexile Reading Level Score and any available reviews of the graphic novels, such as those from the *School Library Journal* which often state the grade levels for which it feels the graphic novel is appropriate, in the catalog listing^{30, 31}. (I saw that the

²⁸ Sullivan, Michael. 2013. *Fundamentals of children's services*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “The Lexile Framework for Reading.” Lexile. Accessed December 6, 2018. <https://lexile.com/>.

³¹ “School Library Journal.” Accessed December 6, 2018. <https://www.slj.com/>.

Santa Monica Public Library's catalog has done this, and it is very helpful³²). By doing so, it allows the parents and child to have a better idea of if particular graphic novels are suitable for the child's age.

Another concern that may come up in regards to having graphic novels in the library is whether or not children will be able to understand the grammar of these novels. The article "It's Elementary! Graphic Novels for the K-6 Classroom" discusses how reading graphic novels are, different from reading either a chapter book or even a picture book. Thus, it may be necessary to help children learn how to understand the "grammar" of the panels in a graphic novel. Also, although the pictures in a graphic novel tell much of the story, the language level of the text of many graphic novels includes vocabulary that stretches the reader beyond what may at first appear to be the level of difficulty³³.

Thus, these issues that graphic novels contain different grammar and potentially more advanced vocabulary than the traditional book is something of which librarians should be aware. But librarians can address these problems by holding educational programs and by providing tutorials on how to read graphic novels.

One additional issue that may arise in graphic novels are potential gender issues. Per the article "It's Elementary! Graphic Novels for the K-6 Classroom", historically the trend of graphic novel readers and buyers has been male, and so typically graphic novels are geared towards males audiences³⁴. However, this article goes on to state that this trend is changing, "as series such as *Babymouse* and the *Baby-Sitters Club*...feature female protagonists and cater more toward a female readership"³⁵. Thus, there appears to be more graphic novels coming out geared

³² "Santa Monica Public Library - Books, Music, Movies." Accessed December 6, 2018.

https://smpl.org/Books_Music_Movies.aspx.

³³ "It's Elementary! Graphic Novels for the K-6 Classroom", American Library Association, April 7, 2008. http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/resources/its_elementary_graphic_novels (Accessed December 6, 2018) Document ID: e1c20ffa-b2ee-9514-29d2-becefab006c0.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ "It's Elementary! Graphic Novels for the K-6 Classroom", American Library Association, April 7, 2008. http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/resources/its_elementary_graphic_novels (Accessed December 6, 2018) Document ID: e1c20ffa-b2ee-9514-29d2-becefab006c0.

towards female audiences as well. But regardless, librarians should be aware of this issue and make it a point to acquire graphic novels in their library collections that feature both male and female protagonists.

While there may be some potential issues with bringing graphic novels into one's library collection, these issues appear to be relatively fixable. But the biggest issue that librarians may face will likely be parents who are vehemently against bringing children's graphic novels into the library. If librarians run into patrons like this, one helpful tool they can utilize is the ALA article titled "Dealing with Challenges to Graphic Novels".³⁶ The article provides some sample patron questions that librarians might encounter and some good librarian answers that reinforce the ideas that the library collection serves the community as a whole, that the library supports the freedom of choice for all of its patrons to choose what they want to read, and that ultimately it is the parents' responsibility to supervise what their children can or cannot read.³⁷

Overall, the concerns about incorporating graphic novels into children's library collections do not outweigh the benefits of bringing graphic novels into the collections. Moreover, most of the concerns are solvable, especially through educating the public about the benefits of graphic novels. And what better way to educate the public about graphic novels than by creating library programs that incorporate graphic novels.

Incorporating Graphic Novels into Children's Library Programming

In the past few years, some libraries have begun to incorporate graphic novels into their children's library programs. EBSCO has created a webpage with a few different ideas for incorporating graphic novels into library programming, including doing graphic novel book talks to pitch books to patrons, doing workshops for people to make their own comics or to make artwork using comic-book pages, putting on a mini comic convention, or doing costume play

³⁶ "ALA | Graphic Novels: Dealing with Challenges to Graphic Novels." Accessed December 5, 2018. <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=ifissues&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=130336>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

where children can dress up as or create their own costumes of their favorite graphic novel characters³⁸. Another article titled “Graphic Novel Programming for All-Ages and All Budgets”, discusses more ideas for how to incorporate graphic novels into children’s library programs, including putting up graphic novel displays, doing graphic novel book swaps where children can swap their favorite graphic novels with one another, or even doing graphic novel book discussions to discuss the stories.³⁹ As you can see there are a lot of creative ways to incorporate graphic novels into children’s library programs that are fun and educational. Attached to this paper is a children’s library program proposal that I created, which incorporates graphic novels in an exciting manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, graphic novels are very valuable assets to have in children’s library collections and programming. Graphic novels are not only appealing to young readers, but they are often less intimidating to children who may not be the best readers. Moreover, graphic novels allow children to read at their own pace and to make meaning out of images and words, which is important nowadays as information is often communicated via visuals and text. Additionally, graphic novels can tell stories about complex events in ways that traditional text-based novels may not be able to. While there may be some concerns around bringing graphic novels into children’s library collections, these concerns appear to have potential solutions. Furthermore, by incorporating graphic novels into children’s library programming, librarians may be able to allow the most skeptical patrons to see the great benefits of allowing children access to graphic novels.

³⁸ Doyle, Gemma and Kendal Spire. Inc, EBSCO Information Services. “Five Ideas for Graphic Novel-Centered Library Programs.” EBSCOpost Blog. Accessed December 6, 2018.

<https://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/five-ideas-for-graphic-novel-centered-library-programs>.

³⁹ Wildsmith, Snow. “Graphic Novel Programming for All-Ages and All Budgets.” Accessed December 6, 2018. <http://www.diamondcomics.com/Home/1/1/3/325?articleID=93746>.

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